Listening Closely: Narrative Sensitivity and Thematic Apperception in Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School*

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ABSTRACT: This article offers Ben Lerner's 2019 novel *The Topeka School* as a case study to argue that even literary texts that are steeped in Theory or feature "diagnostic" narrators (Dames) do not interpret themselves but require active readers to do so. By modeling the novel's narrative structure on the psychological Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), the narrator obliges the reader to listen to his stories as if she were a psychologist interpreting a patient's test results. I suggest that, for *The Topeka School*, adopting the same attitude of "narrative sensitivity" that psychologists bring to the evaluation of the TAT proves a productive reading strategy (Cramer 28). Especially the idea of listening closely to the text yields profound insights into its form and politics due to its central interest in the nexus of voice and masculinity. Careful attention to narrative perspective, voice, and style reveals that the novel makes powerful political claims through its form alone. It figures male violence as a structural, not an individual problem and links it to the existence of a form of collective voice of white male US-America that can speak through a liberal-minded writer just as well as through a Trump-voter or even Donald Trump himself.

KEYWORDS: Ben Lerner; *The Topeka School* (2019); narrative voice; masculinity; Thematic Apperception Test (TAT); New Criticism; New Formalism; close reading

> "Crazy Joe Biden is trying to act like a tough guy. Actually, he is weak, both mentally and physically, and yet he threatens me, for the second time, with physical assault. He doesn't know me, but he would go down fast and hard, crying all the way. Don't threaten people Joe!"
>
> (@realDonaldTrump)

> "The pressure of passing himself off as a real man, of staying true to type—the constant weight lifting, the verbal combat—would eventually reduce him to a child again, calling out for his mother from his bed."
>
> (Lerner, *The Topeka School* 31)

The "Theory Generation"

Ben Lerner is one of many contemporary writers who have come on to the literary scene equally as fluent in the language of Critical Theory and modern philosophical thought as many literary scholars. His three novels, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), *10:04* (2015), and *The Topeka School* (2019), exhibit influences from thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Friedrich

Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Gilles Deleuze, to name but a few, and draw on discourses from psychoanalytic theory, Marxist criticism, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and postcolonial studies. Nicholas Dames called this cluster of writers, among which he counts Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, Teju Cole, and Jeffrey Eugenides, "The Theory Generation" in an article in *n+1 magazine* in 2012. They each have been trained in "Theory"—structuralist, poststructuralist, Marxist, feminist, etc.—in college and respond to this experience in and with their fiction. This engagement can take different shapes and forms. In (neo-)realist novels like Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) or Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), it takes place most visibly on the level of *story*. The novels feature characters that are either lecturers teaching or students encountering said theories in the liberal-arts-college classroom and the novels track their characters' reactions to them. Here, the novel as form is mainly mimetic in that it represents and comments on a real-world development, the canonization of a set of theoretical texts that have become a set piece of curricula in the humanities across North American universities since the 1980s/1990s.

Lerner's prose fiction presents a somewhat different case. His first two novels feature autodiegetic narrators who have digested these theories and who rely heavily on them to make sense of the world around them. When visiting an art gallery, the narrator of *10:04* ponders on the economic entanglements of the work of art in late capitalism and on the possibility of what he calls a "utopian readymade" (Lerner 134), drawing on Marcel Duchamp's modernist notion of the readymade as well as on Frankfurt-School vocabulary. When discussing politics with his Spanish friends in Madrid, the narrator of *Leaving the Atocha Station* makes far-reaching claims about the relationship between finance capitalism and fascism, echoing a common twentieth-century leftist conviction that has come to be known as the Dimitroff thesis (Lerner 50; 141). These narrator-protagonists are, as Dames aptly puts it, "fundamentally *diagnostic*" in their assessment of the world around them. The difference between Franzen's heterodiegetic and Lerner's autodiegetic narrator(s) is the double function as character and narrator of the latter, which extends the influence of theory from *story* to *discourse*. In other words, the narrator not only relates how characters in the story engage with theory but uses it himself in order to interpret the story world.

In a way, it seems that these diagnostic and theory-savvy narrator-protagonists are doing what was once considered the literary scholar's job: They bring theory to the text. They read the world as text, they read their own stories as text, and they use theory to interpret both. What does it mean for us as literary scholars if the role of (critical) 'reader' or 'interpreter' is already occupied? If the novel 'reads itself' by already delivering its own interpretation along with the story? The good news is: There is still plenty left to do. As I will demonstrate with the example of *The Topeka School*, the inclusion of theory in the novel and of a diagnostic attitude on the part of the narrator does not necessarily change the role of the literary scholar all that much. Narrators and characters—no matter how intellectually clever and well-read—are, after all, still that: narrators and characters, and thus fictional entities within a text. If our primary

object of study is the text, then the fact that an intratextual narrator is interpreting the (story-)world through "Theory" might simply serve to remind us that we are second-order observers.

The Topeka School illustrates precisely this need for second-order observation or, in other words, interpretation. The novel, I argue, is modelled on the psychological Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which can be divided into two phases: one in which test subjects respond to stimuli by making up stories and a second in which psychologists interpret these stories. Within this model, the novel presents only the test subject's stories but not their subsequent interpretation, which is deliberately left open or relegated to the reader. In the following, I will first outline how the novel plays with the structure of the Thematic Apperception Test and explain why the idea of "narrative sensitivity" (Cramer 28) is common to psychologists' as well as literary scholars' interpretive methods. I will then proceed with a close reading of the novel under the header of such narrative sensitivity, viewing the narrator as test subject and the different chapters of *The Topeka School* as 'TAT stories.' Since reading practices are at the heart of this special issue, in this article I aim to make transparent the process of reading and the gradually shifting perspectives and insights into a text this can generate. Owing to this premise, the essay's structure sometimes diverges from the usual format of prominently fronting one's findings and instead follows a more inductive structure, working its way from a detailed analysis of textual features towards an increasing level of abstraction.

Thematic Apperception and Narrative Sensitivity

Initially, *The Topeka School* seems to showcase a "diagnostic" narrator as described by Dames. The narrator of the novel, Adam Gordon, is a white, male, middle-aged poet and writer who lives in New York with his wife and two daughters in the late 2010s.[1] Imagine the basic set-up of the novel as follows: Adam wants to write a book about the political climate in the age of Donald Trump, the origins of his own voice as a writer, and what one has to do with the other. As an entryway to his story, he thinks of two contrasting scenes of political protest. One locates Adam at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in New York, protesting Trump's immigration policy. The second places his former classmate Darren Eberheart in the midst of an alt-right crowd in their hometown of Topeka, Kansas, wearing "the red baseball cap" (Lerner, *The Topeka School* 275)[2] and protesting before one of Adam's poetry readings. The question, somewhat crudely put, is: How did they land on opposite sides? How does one become an anti-Trump protester, the other a pro-Trump protester wearing a MAGA hat? This is the novel's degree zero, anchored in its eighth and last chapter. Adam then starts to assemble material, which he retells from alternating points of view in the first seven chapters:

[1] The book was published in 2019 and since some events in the last chapter take place during the Trump administration, it must be set sometime between 2017 and 2019.

[2] Hereafter abbreviated to *Topeka* for in-text citations.

his own memories of formative childhood events, particularly of his career as a policy debater in high school and of a violent incident at a school party, and the family histories of his parents Jane and Jonathan Gordon. The text demarcates its separation into two sections—chapters one through seven (part one) and chapter eight (part two)—not blatantly but still noticeably. For one, the two sections are separated by a reprinted fragment of Duccio's *Madonna and Child*, a painting which is referenced repeatedly throughout the book.[3] More significantly, autodiegetic narrator Adam only refers to himself in the first person in chapter eight, the starting point of the inquiry into his family's prehistory, but in the third person in the first part, whenever he recalls events from his childhood and youth. That Adam-as-narrator distances himself grammatically from Adam-as-character emphasizes the distinction between narrating and experiencing self, and configures the narrator's attempt to establish an observatory stance towards the character. The narrator complements this analytical approach with an extensive diagnostic vocabulary from a diverse range of twentieth-century theories. He borrows "the man-child" from C. G. Jung (*Topeka* 117-18), "genealogy" from Nietzsche/Foucault (143), "surplus" from Marxist theory (117), and "the empire's privileged subject" from post-colonial theory (118) to make sense of the entanglement of masculinity, language, and violence in contemporary US culture.[4] In that sense, Claudia Rankine is certainly right when she blurbs on the back cover that *The Topeka School* is "part diagnosis of [the US's] ongoing national violence."

There are, however, two other textual features in chapter eight that, albeit easy to overlook, are extremely important in so far as they complicate Adam's status as diagnostician. The first noteworthy feature is the chapter's title, "Thematic Apperception." The second feature is a text passage which opens with the words "Now I am going to show you a picture […]" (275), linking it directly to another text passage in the first chapter which starts with the exact same words:

> Now I am going to show you a picture and I'd like you to make up a story about it. We call this the Thematic Apperception Test, or TAT. A story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. […] What are these people in this picture thinking? Feeling? Start by telling me what led up to this scene. (26)

The wording of this passage closely echoes the instructions of the Thematic Apperception Test which was developed in the 1930s by Henry A. Murray and Christiana D. Morgan. This projective personality test is based on the assumption that by showing test subjects various pictures of human interactions (cf. Fig. 1) and asking them to make up stories about them,

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[3] The page with the fragment features no caption but the "Acknowledgments" page reads: "Duccio's *Madonna and Child* is a real painting with a fictional parapet, enclosed by a burnt frame, although the Met didn't acquire it until 2004. Its anachronistic appearance throughout *The Topeka School* can stand for the unstable mixture of fact and fiction."

[4] I deliberately use the vague phrasing "entanglement of masculinity, language, and violence in contemporary US culture" here because the novel's rhizomatic structure defies all attempts at pinpointing it any further than that.

psychologists could gain insights into "the dominant drives, emotions, sentiments, complexes and conflicts of a personality" (Murray 1). The interlocutor of this passage, it seems, is conducting such a Thematic Apperception Test by using two photographs as stimulus cards. One of the photographs, represented not visually but ekphrastically in the text, shows Darren Eberheart at a public protest; the other Adam Gordon at the award ceremony of a debate tournament.

Fig. 1. Exemplary stimulus card from Murray's 1943 version of the TAT (Murray).[5]

The question is: Who is testing whom? In both text passages, the use of second-person address ("Now I am going to show you") in the present tense is at odds with the flow of the narration, which in the surrounding text is rendered in past tense/first person or past tense/third person, respectively. One way of reading these passages is that Adam's narration is interrupted by an (imaginary) voice—his own? a psychologist's?—addressing him in the second person. In this case, the stories that Adam relates would be his responses to the stimulus cards, i.e., the pictures that are shown to him, rendering him the test subject or diagnosed client. Yet, because the referent of the pronoun "you" remains ambiguous, it also brings a metaleptic quality into the text, inviting (implied) readers to feel directly addressed by the narrator. The crux of the matter is that both ways of reading emphasize the unfinished nature of the text as raw material still in need of interpretation, which offers up the position of interpreter to readers, if they wish to fill it.

Since the TAT is based on storytelling, evaluating its results bears striking resemblance to the work of literary scholarship. In her book *Storytelling, Narrative, and the Thematic Apperception Test* (1996), Phebe Cramer writes that "in addition to describing the procedure

[5] The appendix with the stimulus cards is unnumbered in this edition, but the preceding numbered manual includes a list of the pictures. This is picture 4 of the First Series, described as follows: "A woman is clutching the shoulders of a man whose face and body are averted as if he were trying to pull away from her" (Murray 19).

as a test of creative imagination, the instructions for the first version told subjects that the TAT was *a test of* '*literary imagination*,' thus stressing intellectual or esthetic factors" (10; emphasis added). Remarkable is also that, while the subjects are told beforehand that there is no right or wrong story, they are asked to keep to the basic narrative tenet that the story have a beginning, a middle, and an ending ("Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)"). Further, the language used by Murray to interpret the test is in large parts identical to the vocabulary employed by literary scholars in the analysis of narrative. Key terms mentioned in Murray's manual for the interpretation of TAT stories are, for instance, plot, theme, and motif (13); the instruction to evaluate "*intensity, duration, frequency* and *general significance [of certain elements] in the plot*," is strongly evocative of Gérard Genette's narratological terminology (Murray 11).

That is why, in this particular case study, I will model my interpretive practice on the way psychologists evaluate TAT stories, with two important caveats. For psychologists using the TAT as a personality test, Cramer stresses "narrative sensitivity" as an attitude in the hermeneutic process, which she describes as "going beyond the material given—beyond the surface arrangement of words, phrases, pauses, starts, and stops—to find story lines that are repeated in various forms and with different content but are used to express the storyteller's unique way of organizing experience" (28). As literary scholars, however, we should keep in mind that the 'test subject' here is still Adam Gordon as narrator, i.e., a fictional entity which, despite many patently obvious and much discussed parallels to the book's author Ben Lerner, is not him.[6] So we are not trying to retrieve biographical or personal information about Lerner but, if anything, about Adam. Further, that Adam is a poet and writer himself makes his use of the TAT quite literally a "test of [his] literary imagination" and his use of language vital for his "unique way of organizing experience" (Cramer 10, 28). Hence, rather than looking for meaning beyond "the surface arrangement of words, phrases, pauses, starts, and stops" (28), I suggest paying utmost attention to exactly those aspects. In the following, I want to exemplarily discuss two of the novel's central concerns—voice and masculinity—and illustrate that engaging with the formal specificities of the text already yields profound insights into the text's politics regarding these themes.

[6] While an autofictional dimension has been noticed in all three of Lerner's novels (see, for instance, Effe, Battaglia, Fehrenbacher, O'Gorman and Eaglestone, Schmitt, and countless others), *The Topeka School* offers the most striking parallels between fictional and real-life characters and events. Adam's fictional parents Jane and Jonathan Gordon resemble Ben Lerner's parents Harriet and Steve Lerner in many ways. The Gordons are psychoanalysts, like the Lerners; they work at "the Foundation," a fictionalized version of the actual Menninger Clinic in Topeka; one can watch an extratextual equivalent or inspiration for the short film which Jonathan Gordon produces in the novel on Steve Lerner's website (Steve Lerner, "A Man by the Name of Ziegler"); and parts of the novel are based on an essay by Harriet Lerner previously published elsewhere (Lerner, *Topeka*, "Acknowledgments"). Alex Houen writes that "the novel is rooted in autobiography" and that "the main character, Adam Gordon, is based on Lerner" (1040); Barry Sheils, who reflects on the question how author and narrator merge through style, once denotes this dual identity simply as "Lerner-Adam" (536).

Listening Closely: All about the Voice

The Collective Voice of White Male US-America

Each of the book's chapters contains three sections or individual 'TAT stories.' One of the stories that Adam's mother Jane tells him in chapter three is how she became the target of violent male backlash after she had published a bestselling book on the psychology of anger and encouraged female readers to express their anger more openly. Anonymous men then started making phone calls to Jane. They directed tirades at her, saying that "[she] was a cunt who ruined their marriage, *or* that cunts like [her] were the problem with women today, a bunch of feminazi cunts, *or* that [she] should shut [her] cunt mouth (stop writing)" (*Topeka* 90; emphasis added). Yet more seriously, Jane is repeatedly threatened with sexualized physical violence, with "variations on the theme of rape: I'm going to rape you; Somebody should rape you; You were probably raped; If you weren't so ugly, you'd get raped" (90). Stylistically conspicuous in both quotations is the heavy use of parataxis, repetition of individual words ("cunt," "rape") and the polysyndeton ("or"), which marks the exchangeability of the abuses. The voices of the individual callers cannot be sufficiently distinguished because they all use the same sexist language. A similar paratactic exchangeability describes Adam's male peers whenever they bully their classmate Darren Eberheart, the school's social outcast. It does not matter whether the insults come from "Nowak *or* Davis *or* Dad," whether Darren is attacked by "Carter *or* Nowak *or* Davis *or* Gordon types," because to him they are all the same (70, 111; emphasis added). In these quotations, the polysyndetic arrangement of the names equalizes the individuals by emptying them of their individuality. This is reinforced by the use of the word "types," which calls up the type/token distinction. Darren's peers are not even granted the status of independent occurrences (tokens), they are reduced to the same type. In a parallel move, the callers in Jane's story simply become "the Men"—capital 'M'—in the chapter title and throughout the book, from now on designating broadly a category of men that exhibit sexist, violent, or racist behaviors.[7]

One central premise the text articulates, then, is the existence of a collective voice of a deeply sexist, violent, white male US-America. The novel frames 'toxic masculinity' not as an individual but as a structural problem and thus mirrors the constructivist sociological assumption that subject positions are always also shaped and pre-structured by questions of race, class, and gender. By doing so, the text comments on and positions itself towards highly political issues of our time. As a *literary* text, however, it does not put forward this claim as a proposition, but primarily through a number of formal, poetic choices. As a literary text, the

[7] Becoming one of "the Men" is a source of constant worry for Adam and his father Jonathan, who resolves: "I will never, not for an instant, begrudge Jane her success. I will not become one of the Men, won't let him [Adam] become one" (*Topeka* 173). Adam is plagued by the sense that his father and grandfather's patriarchal voices continue to speak through him and hopes that the influence of his mother can help him "overwhelm the Men, however briefly" in his head (242).

novel can also take artistic liberties to exaggerate the claim. The use of the signifier 'the Men' in the text does not configure individuals as merely influenced by their subject position, it reduces them to nothing *but* their subject position. Thus, even minor deviances from regular language use like the calculated capitalization of the word 'men' in specific contexts or the use of parataxis can point to larger socio-political questions.

Lerner already starts thinking about questions of collectivity and language in his earlier novel *10:04*, initially because he observes so-called joke cycles in the aftermath of the Challenger disaster in 1986. The narrator in *10:04*, another fictionalized version of Lerner, wonders

> if we can think of them [the Challenger jokes] as bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility: prosody and grammar as the stuff out of which we build a social world, a way of organizing meaning and time that belongs to nobody in particular but courses through us all. (*10:04* 116)

The Topeka School continues to think about these "bad forms of collectivity." If "prosody and grammar [are] the stuff out of which we build the social world," it seems to ask, what can we learn about Trump's America by looking at the language that created it?

Echoes of Trump

Although Donald Trump is only mentioned twice by name,[8] he is a constant shadow figure in the novel. The text alludes to his administration's tax policy (*Topeka* 143) and migration policy, which Adam, his wife Natalia, and their daughters protest in the last chapter (279). More curious than these sparse factual references, however, are the echoes of Trump's voice that reverberate in the text. Listen to the sarcastic iteration of MAGA rhetoric as Adam retells a moment at the protest when a confrontation with the security personnel seemed imminent: "I sensed that even as seasoned a protester as Natalia wasn't sure what the rules were, what the agents of the state were capable of, now that *America was great again*" (279; emphasis added). It is half-sentences and phrases like these that at once reference Trump's time in office as the relevant political background against which to read the novel but that, at the same time, are so fleeting that they are just as easily forgotten a page later. Here, the narrative voice is still recognizable as Adam's, who playfully alters Trump's original campaign slogan "Make America great again" from the status of future promise to political reality come true.

In two other scenes, the text integrates (near) word-by-word quotes and tweets from Donald Trump but without flagging them as such and in a manner that makes Trump's voice almost indistinguishable from Adam's. The first quotation is quite easily recognizable because it mentions the name Ivanka. In one of the book's many scenes of male violence, adult Adam finds himself confronting another father on a playground over the behavior of his son. Inserted in parentheses into their fight are the following lines:

[8] The name "Trump" is mentioned on p. 88 and on p. 143.

> (I helped create her, Ivanka, my daughter, Ivanka, she's six feet tall, she's got the best body, she made a lot of money. Because when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. You have the authority. A moon or dead star infinitely dense suspended in the basement firmament.) (270)

Trump originally said on the Howard Stern Show: "And I helped create her. Ivanka. My daughter, Ivanka. She's six feet tall, she's got the best body. She made a lot of money as a model—a tremendous amount" (Crocket). What is striking here is that it is unclear who speaks. Up to the bracket, the dialogic exchange between Adam and the other father is marked with *verba dicendi* ("the bad father […] *responded*"; "No, *I said*, it's not okay"; *Topeka* 270; emphasis added). The first words in the brackets are Trump's but the voice gradually transitions into that of Adam-as-narrator, ending with a commentary that only he could make. The moon in the basement is one of the novel's leitmotifs and a metaphor for male violence that was always already there, like the moon in the firmament.[9] The transition from Trump's to Adam's voice comes via phonic equivalence: 'star' as celebrity and 'star' as celestial object are homonyms. Such associative connections based on sound are a very typical compositional strategy of Lerner[10] who, after all, started out as a poet and likes to stress that his poetry resembles prose and his prose poetry. This is one of the novel's many examples of free indirect discourse, one in which Trump's voice is almost seamlessly incorporated into Adam's. Alex Houen, who has written on inner voice and free indirect speech in *The Topeka School*, argues that the novel's creative use of this technique formally reproduces its political dimension, i.e., that individual voices are always suffused by a multiplicity of other voices. Houen borrows the description, from Denise Riley, that "inner speech is no limpid stream of consciousness […] but a sludgy thing, thickened with reiterated quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard" (Riley qtd. in Houen 1038). This is precisely what happens here: Adam's inner voice is "thickened with reiterated quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard," picking up on Trump's very distinct diction and integrating it into his own speech.

The second Trump quotation is less obviously identifiable as such. In chapter four, Adam visits an old family friend who is dying in a hospice. Klaus is unconscious but Adam fantasizes that he can hear his voice, that Klaus can "speak through the channel Adam had opened with his mind" (*Topeka* 145). In the trance-like sequence that follows, Adam first hears Klaus, a Holocaust survivor, talk about the World Ice Theory, a propagandistic, anti-Semitic alternative world view concocted by the Nazis to discredit established scientific findings—today one might call this fake news. Then, still in a dream-like manner, the scene suddenly switches to a debate in which Adam discusses climate change and says: "*we must recognize that the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing*

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[9] Compare, for instance, pp. 4, 229, 258, or 270.

[10] Perhaps the most remarkable association that the text establishes via homophony is that between the word 'ice,' as in frozen water, and 'ICE,' Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This purely phonetic resemblance is then used to establish an associative link between the Nazi's World Ice Theory and Trump's climate change denialism, implicitly arguing that they are comparable (see 148, 279).

noncompetitive" (148). Initially I was going to argue that this sentence merges Trump's world view and vocabulary with Adam's debate-style diction but then I discovered, almost by coincidence, that this is in fact a word-by-word tweet of Donald Trump's (Wong). With regard to reading practices, it means that chance can play a meaningful role in interpretation so long as our reading practices remain open to it. In *The Topeka School*, as in Lerner's other works, the relevance of chance is above all due to the texts' excessive nature—excessive in metaphors, allusions, intra- and intertextual references, stylistic variation, word play, etc. Even careful and repeated study cannot possibly uncover all of these relations, so the question of which elements stand out most or attract the reader's attention first matters. In the context of this scene, it means that the text merges Trump's and Adam's voices beyond recognition or that Adam "channel[s]" (145) Trump's voice, just like he channels the voice of unconscious Klaus. Conspicuously, in the playground scene in which the other Trump quotation breaks into Adam's speech, he is also trying to "channel [his] own father's voice" in order to deescalate the situation, attempting to emulate his father's soothing, psychotherapeutic voice which he used to counter Adam's youthful outbursts of anger (268). What this suggests is that in channeling other male voices, Adam is never fully in control over which voices or aspects of the collective male voice will filter through. More drastically put, the collective voice of white male America can speak through Donald Trump just as well as through the liberal, highly educated poet.

Voice and Representation

I have stated earlier that Adam is the narrator of the TAT stories and on one level that is true. On another, however, it is not or only partly true. What do you notice if you listen, quite literally, to the voice that tells these different stories? Is it really just one voice talking or are there several? And what do they sound like? The text offers very contradictory indications in this regard. On the one hand, its use of grammatical person, the narrating "I," seems to suggest multiple narrators, as it alternatingly refers to Jane, Jonathan, and Adam in different chapters. On the other hand, the narrative voices that articulate themselves through this grammatical "I" often conspicuously resemble each other in style and diction, as if they originated from the same, rather than from different narrating instances. On the one hand, the novel's table of contents seems to indicate the focalizing character for each chapter (cf. Fig. 2, p. 11). On the other hand, chapters with the same focalizing character (Adam) are sometimes narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator (chapter one, four, and seven) and sometimes by an autodiegetic narrator (chapter eight). The text is so variable and inconsistent in its combination of aspects—such as grammatical person, voice, and mood—that it defies, I fear, any easy classification in the terminology of Gérard Genette or other narrative theorists, or at least one that would enhance rather than diminish an understanding of its poetics.

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Fig. 2. Reproduction of the "Contents" page (chapter numbers [left] and bold type added for clarity; based on Lerner, *Topeka*)

Nevertheless, it is possible to arrive at a better understanding of the text's poetics and politics by working with a flexible, selective application of narratological vocabulary. First of all, I would like to reify the claim that the adult Adam Gordon of the last chapter is the primary narrator in the novel in the sense that he responds to the cue "Now I am going to show you a picture and I'd like you to make up a story about it," which sets the whole novel in motion (*Topeka* 26). The all-important addendum here is that he does not only respond with stories from his own experience but also re-tells stories that other characters have previously shared with him. When he responds to the cue with stories based on his own experience and in the recent past, he relates them in the first person. Whenever he relates his own experiences from the more distant past, he talks about himself in the third person, splitting himself into narrator-observer and character-observed. And whenever he relates the experiences of other characters, he adapts the level of mediation according to the degree of authority that he feels he has in representing this voice, by which I do not mean the "voice" in Genette's terms but the voice as a political and gendered medium.

Chapter three, for instance, illustrates how Adam treats his mother's voice. The entire chapter renders Jane Gordon's stories in direct speech and without apparent narrative mediation; Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel call this dramatic mode ("dramatischer Modus") (52). What further distinguishes this chapter from the other chapters is its style. The diction is conversational, the register more colloquial, and the sentences are longer, often containing multiple sub- and coordinated elements:

> But I felt this low-level unease about them, or retrospectively I know I felt it, as if, just beneath the threshold of consciousness, or something rising to consciousness and then sinking back down again, I suspected that I'd never bought the things, that I'd only meant to, then remembered falsely I had. (*Topeka* 78)

The effect of this presentation is that Jane's chapter reads like the transcript of a conversation between her and Adam or rather like a long monologue by Jane that is only interrupted ever so often by Adam with questions of clarification. Abstaining from—or pretending to abstain from—any narrative mediation in this chapter about Jane signifies Adam's reluctance to represent female voices. Thinking back on his teen relationship with his then-girlfriend Amber, the adult Adam once remarks that hers is "a voice [he] couldn't represent" (273). This unwillingness to appropriate female voices makes perfect sense in a novel that is interested in structures of verbal dominance and the distribution of power through verbal activity.[11] That men either talk over women or do not address them at all is, after all, a recurring trope in the novel and a habit of which Adam-as-narrator wishes to rid himself.

Compare this to the opening sentence of chapter two, told by Adam's father Jonathan Gordon:

> I first read 'A Man by the Name of Ziegler' on the 4 train, lights flickering in the shaking, almost-empty car; I was on my way back from seeing Jane, one of the first times we'd slept together; I'd leave Rachel for her within a year. (*Topeka* 41)

Although both chapters employ the first person to let the characters speak, Jonathan's story is a more formalized narrative, indicated by the past tense, descriptions like the "flickering" lights and the "shaking, almost-empty car," and the prolepsis in the last sentence. Retelling Jonathan's story through his own idiomatic voice as narrator is less problematic for Adam, not just because he is also male, but because Adam believes that he has inherited much of his way of speaking from his father. The notion that male voices are transmitted inter-generationally, that each new generation of men merely echoes their fathers' and grandfathers' sexist speech and verbal violence is another major line of argument in the novel. For Adam, this is a constant fear: "How do you rid yourself of a voice, keep it from becoming part of yours?," he wonders, afraid that "if he opened his mouth […], his grandfather's voice [would come] out" (*Topeka* 241). This also ties in with the notion of a collective male voice that was put forward earlier, showing that this collective voice does not only function synchronically (as Adam's voice merges with Trump's) but also diachronically (as he reiterates his father's or grandfather's speech). Once again the text negotiates political concerns aesthetically. Modulating the degree of narrative mediation and the extent to which narrative voice and character consciousness merge with regard to gender relations is a tentative, literary response to the political question of who can tell whose story.

Voice, Focalization, and Identity

Tuning in to the different voices which sound in the novel has shown, so far, that male voices exhibit a structural commonality, that Adam's voice sometimes merges with the voices of other men, including that of Donald Trump, and that as a narrator he is comfortable with

[11] Another reason why the representation of Jane's voice in chapter three is treated with particular sensitivity may well be that Jane tells Adam how she was sexually abused by her father as a child, making this story especially difficult to tell in anyone else's voice, including Adam's (male) voice.

representing male voices but careful not to appropriate female ones. Yet the most radical change in the reception of the novel results, I suggest, from listening to the voice of Darren Eberheart. Darren is Adam's former classmate from high school and perhaps the novel's most enigmatic character. His presence in the novel is somewhat of a riddle because he is at once relegated to the background and marked as central. On the one hand, his storyline is limited to the brief interludes or "inter-chapters," as Barry Sheils calls them, in between the chapters proper (538). These inter-chapters are much shorter and their titles on the contents page are merely reiterations of their respective opening line. On the other hand, the typographical mark-up in square brackets and italics (cf. Fig. 2, p. 11) performs an ambiguous movement of subordinating and simultaneously emphasizing them. Further, Darren's presence in one of the two photographs that frame the novel as stimulus cards in the Thematic Apperception Test marks him as Adam's complement and gives way to the novel's implicit guiding question of how Adam and Darren developed so differently, the former becoming a lauded poet with a leftist political agenda and the latter a Trump-supporter with a MAGA hat and homophobic views.

One function that Darren's storyline fulfills is as a narrative hook in the novel's opening and as a driving force of suspense in an otherwise rather plotless novel. A prolepsis on the novel's first pages places Darren at a police station where he is being held for questioning—for what we do not know. The subsequent inter-chapters loosely trace events in his life that led up to whatever it is he is being questioned for, twisting a *whodunit* into a *what-did-he-do*. Since his character is presented as a clichéd version of a high school loner, constantly excluded and bullied by his peers, and since references to computer games, guns, and Columbine abound, reader expectations are built up to fear a mass shooting with Darren at the center. And the novel does, at least partly, meet the expectation of male violence at the climax of his storyline: At a high school party, an intoxicated and provoked Darren grabs a cue ball from the adjacent pool table and throws it at his classmate Mandy Owen, breaking her jaw and landing him in temporary custody at the police station.

But while Darren's storyline makes sense as a driving force of suspense, the representation of his character, specifically his voice, seems irritating to some readers. Sheils, for instance, finds:

> Lerner doesn't know what to do formally with Darren. He is held apart in separate inter-chapters, his voice italicized, and his language forced into a generic outsider idiom […] we are told that Darren remembers '*in the first and third person simultaneously*' […] The suggestion is psychopathological (is Darren paranoid?), but also literary, insinuating the novelistic accomplishment of free indirect discourse while also marking its impossibility at the very edge of the novel's authority. (538)

Sheils's perception of Darren as a "generic outsider" is correct, but it is not founded on his idiomatic speech. "[I]n the first and third person" is, in fact, a signature phrase of Lerner which, in *The Topeka School*, appears in sections told from the perspectives of Adam, Jonathan, and

Jane.[12] Across Lerner's three novels, it is possible to trace how he develops the notion that, when someone experiences something in the present, it feels as if they are experiencing it 'in the first person,' but when they remember their own experience in the past, it feels as if they are watching themselves experience it 'in the third person.' In *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the narrator switches pronouns mid-sentence to describe a past experience with which he feels at once identical and non-identical: "*He* would take *my* siesta then" (17; emphasis added). In *10:04*, the narrator describes how the distancing from the self gradually occurs over time: "by the time I arrived in Brooklyn […], I was starting to misremember crossing in the third person, as if I had somehow watched myself walking beneath the Brooklyn Bridge's Aeolian cables" (135). In *The Topeka School*, Lerner uses the phrase "in the first and third person" frequently to distinguish between memories one actively inhabits (first person) and memories that feel less like one's own and more like those of others because they have been relayed by other people (third person).

So while Sheils's irritation is understandable, I would argue that 'in the first and third person' as an idiomatic phrase with a specific meaning in Lerner's writing makes his tentative diagnosis that Darren may be paranoid less plausible. Focusing more closely on the dimension of voice and focalization offers a different perspective of understanding his identity and function in the novel. Intimate familiarity with Lerner's writing style in fact shows that the language of the inter-chapters bears striking resemblance to both Adam's style in *The Topeka School* and those of narrators in Lerner's other novels in more than one way: Darren once thinks that "he perceive[s] […] the glimmer of community" (*Topeka* 150), echoing the narrator in *10:04* who muses on the "utopian glimmer of fiction" (*10:04* 54) and "the glimmer […] of the world to come" (109); the poetic quality of a phrase like "break his fast on nontoxic autumnal berries" (*Topeka* 150) sounds much more like the idiom of aspiring poet Adam than "generic outsider idiom;" also, the same metaphor is used in the sections retelling Darren's and Adam's experiences.[13] These stylistic similarities support the thesis that the inter-chapters about Darren are also told by Adam-as-narrator, that the narrating voice is actually not as categorically different as Sheils implies.

While he is correct to describe the passages' narrative mode as free indirect discourse which merges the narrative voice of Adam with the consciousness of the focalizing character Darren, Sheils's intuition that Darren seems to be "at the very edge of the novel's authority" (538) is not so much tied to narration as it is to focalization. How does Adam know about incidents in Darren's life that he has not witnessed? How does he know so much about Darren's most

[12] Jonathan: "I remember the next several hours of the Episode in both the first and third person, probably because I've depended heavily on Jane's account" (*Topeka* 49); Jane to Adam: "You've been told most of what happened next, must remember it in the third person." (97); Adam-as-narrator: "The senator, who often refers to himself in the third person, […]" (27).

[13] I already referred to the moon metaphor in the section "Echoes of Trump." Compare for instance *Topeka* pp. 4, 229, 258, or 270.

private feelings and thoughts? That Adam-as-narrator can relate the thoughts and feelings of his parents is readily understandable if we assume that he has simply asked them—as in the conversation showcased in chapter three—and now rephrases or, as Houen puts it, "ventriloquises" their answers (1040). Yet Darren and Adam are not close friends and it seems highly unlikely Darren would have divulged any of the things we read about to Adam.

Of course the freedom of the literary imagination allows for several possibilities here. Darren might either occupy the same ontological status within the fictional universe as Jane and Jonathan Gordon, meaning that he exists as a character in the story world—with the caveat that Adam fills in what he does not know about Darren ad libitum, or he might entirely be an invention of Adam, i.e., he might not even exist as a fictional character like Jane and Jonathan. Both readings could explain why Darren's storyline often resorts to clichés about the violence-prone loner figure, computer games, and guns: Adam does not *know* what makes Darren tick but he *imagines* what this archetypal outsider could think, feel, and do. This interpretation could also make sense of the typographical mark-up in italics and square brackets, if these editorial decisions are taken to signify the precarious nature of Adam's knowledge about Darren. In this sense, Sheils's observation that Darren seems to be "at the very edge of the novel's authority" (538) is spot-on. Much in the same way that Adam shows reluctance in appropriating his mother Jane's stories, the text would signal that its rendition of Darren is speculative rather than authoritative. This is also in line with Houen's claim that free indirect discourse in *The Topeka School* is a means of negotiating sameness and Otherness. Houen refers back to Fredric Jameson's criticism that certain uses of free indirect style frame the representation of other subjectivities as all-too-easy and counters it by arguing that the novel, rather than giving in to the fiction of accessing other minds and voices easily, draws attention to the problems and limitations inherent in this endeavor (1054). The treatment of Darren does precisely that, it formally sets his perspective apart from the treatment of other characters to maintain the character's alterity.

In addition, I would like to suggest one alternative—less exclusive than complementary—way of reading Darren's character. Recalling, once more, the image of a psychologist listening attentively to their client while conducting the TAT, one might suddenly notice striking parallels between Adam and Darren. They are both obsessed with tornadoes and they are both in therapy for having uncontrollable outbursts of aggression, to name but a few. One might wonder if Adam is perhaps making all of this up, the way people occasionally describe things as having happened 'to a friend' to obscure their own involvement in embarrassing or otherwise incriminating events. Zooming in closer, one might listen to the following scene, in which Darren's mother meets him at his therapist's office and he has difficulty controlling his anger towards her:

> What requires Darren to slow his breathing deliberately is how her voice goes very high-pitched, almost a squeal, animal in pain, right before she starts crying, then goes deep again: I don't know how much / More of this I / can take. (*Topeka* 70)

The passage is an example of free indirect speech, which can be described as "commingling first- and third-person voices or perspectives" (Houen 1038). In the first sentence up to the colon, the *narrator* presents Darren from a third-person perspective, whereas the *character* Darren speaks or rather silently thinks to himself in the first-person in the second sentence. The most striking feature of the latter is that Darren's thoughts are rendered in verse form. Thinking in verse is highly idiomatic not of Darren, but of Adam, who is constantly rhyming and making up poetry in his head, for instance here in the supermarket: "*Hypersmart / I make hyperart / while your mother mops at Hypermart*" (*Topeka* 128). While the novel continuously merges narrator Adam's voice and perspective with the voices and perspectives of other characters, it never does so more radically than in this instance: The most direct expression of character subjectivity, unflagged direct speech in the first person, clashes with the most highly idiomatic style of expression associated with the narrator. In other words, "I don't know how much / More of this I / can take" sounds like something Adam and only Adam could say—but here the sentence is put into Darren's mouth. Here is what I propose: The reason Adam knows so much about Darren is that he *is* Darren. Darren is Adam's alter ego, a figment of his imagination, whom he has, intentionally or not, in this particular instance invested with the same youthful fondness of rhyming that is so unique to him.

When I consulted Murray's original 1943 manual on the TAT in the process of researching this paper, I was positively surprised that it seemed to corroborate my finding that Darren could be read as Adam's alter ego of sorts. The manual does not only give instructions for the execution of the test but also for the interpretation of the test results. Of particular relevance is the following section about identifying the hero of a story:

> *i. The hero*. The first step in analyzing a story is to distinguish the character with whom the subject has identified himself […], the character in whom the story-teller was apparently most interested, whose point of view was adopted, whose feelings and motives have been most intimately portrayed. This character […] is usually […] the person (or one of the persons) depicted in the picture. (Murray 6-7)

The manual continues to explain that while stories usually only feature one hero, occasionally

> [t]wo forces of the subject's personality may be represented by two different characters, for example, an antisocial drive by a criminal and conscience by a law-enforcing agent. Here we could speak of an *endopsychic thema* (internal dramatic situation) with two *component heroes*. (7)

Murray's manual, it seems, can be used as an interpretive key to unlocking the riddles of the novel. The subject/story-teller is Adam Gordon (as narrator), the hero is also Adam Gordon (as character), and he has projected his "antisocial drive" onto Darren, his component hero. This also explains why Adam, during a mental breakdown, tells Jonathan he believes that he is being punished: "Punished for what?," Jonathan asks, "For Darren Eberheart. For Mandy," Adam replies, "sob[bing]" (*Topeka* 182)—it was Adam who threw the cue ball at Mandy all along, but he projects this "criminal" aspect of his personality onto Darren. Consulting the TAT manual can also explain why the titles of chapters focusing on Adam, Jane, and Jonathan all feature the characters' respective name in brackets but Darren's inter-chapters do not. The

manual states that it is common to ask the subject to identify the sources of their stories—were they drawn from the subject's own experience, that of their friends or relatives, or from books and movies (Murray 5)? Applied to the novel, this could mean that Adam is simply stating his sources by indicating them in brackets (cf. Fig. 2, p. 11). For Darren, there is no source because he does not exist and Adam presumably does not want to reveal that he himself is the source. Like the Trump tweet, this discovery was both chance and not chance. Certainly it was no accident that I had researched the TAT, its origins, history, and reception while working on this article, but it was chance that I consulted Murray's original manual only days before the submission. Yet the crucial take-away for interpretive practices is not, I think, that it should be left up to chance but rather that in-depth reflection on what perhaps seem to be minor questions—What does Darren's voice sound like? How can the internal focalization of his character be explained?—can yield profound insights. After all, the conclusion that Darren must be Adam's alter ego primarily stems from a close reading of the text and has been corroborated by consulting Murray's manual after the fact.

This close reading of *The Topeka School* was framed by two questions, one interested in politics, the other in poetics. The first, posed by the novel's narrator to himself and its readers, was: How did Adam Gordon become a renowned poet and Darren Eberheart a Trump voter? The second, raised by myself to address the issue of how we read in American Studies, was: What can we learn about a text if we engage closely with its poetic form, if we take seriously the organizing principles that the text itself offers? The fundamental finding in this article is that the answer to the latter is simultaneously also the answer to the former. In other words, attending 'only' to the poetics of the text already produced profound insights into its politics: Adam and Darren are not two diametrically opposed individuals, they are versions of the same type of white, male, US-American subject that is socialized under similar conditions. That Adam landed on one side and Darren on the other side of the political spectrum is more contingency than necessity. I arrived at this insight by identifying the Thematic Apperception Test as an organizing principle and interpretive key to reading the novel, by borrowing the metaphor of "narrative sensitivity" (Cramer) from psychologists' interpretive practice, and by listening closely to the quality of the text's narrative voices, their similarities and differences.

Reading *The Topeka School*

Like all interpretations, the interpretation of *The Topeka School* that I have put forward here neither claims to be an absolute nor the only valid reading. One of the reasons why interpretations differ is their dialogic nature, the fact that "the narrative of the storyteller is informed by the narrative of the interpreter and vice versa" (Cramer 26). As a reader, I have brought certain interests, expectations, and limitations to the text, and so will every other reader. I do believe, however, that staying close to the text remains a touchstone of good interpretive practice in the vast majority of cases. Murray warns psychologists against "interpretations *in vacuo*," and continues to explain that "TAT stories offer boundless

opportunities for the projection of one's own complexes or one's pet theories" (6). Personally, I would forego the wording "pet theories," but I do think that Murray's point about projection is right and that literary texts can become projection spaces for the literary scholar's research interests. What Henry Ivry, for instance, hears above all in Lerner's writing, including in *The Topeka School*, is "ambient" sound. He suggests that Adam pursues an "ambient poetics [which] is about the movement between scales" (Ivry 133) and that this movement between scales—human and nonhuman, temporal and special, etc.—critically reflects on humanity's relation to the world in the Anthropocene. I take issue not with the author's specific reading of Lerner's poetics, but with the justification of his engagement with the novel from an "ambient" perspective. He admits that he is following only "breadcrumbs" in Lerner's works, yet he hopes to "add ambience to that list of new critical paradigms" (Ivry 124; 133). What strikes me here is the apparent dissonance of how important ambient sound is in the text and to the critic. The essay ends on a telling remark: "Ambience […] is just another way of listening to the Anthropocene and another site for thinking about the role of literature against the backdrop of a world on the brink of extinction" (Ivry 134). It appears as though the critic is first of all listening to the Anthropocene and bringing that to the text, rather than listening to the text first like I have suggested in this article.

Daniel Katz has made a similar comment, lamenting that Lerner's prose fiction "is largely read according to two protocols" by scholars, one of which is 'autofiction' (316). Although *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04* are heavily suffused with poetry and references to poetry, scholars rarely engage with the poetry itself, Katz rightly observes, but only with the fact that Lerner's narrators are poets like the author, reading this as proof of the text's autofictional quality (316).[14] In other words, while the text may be deeply concerned with poetry, its readers may be more interested in autofiction, thus bringing their interests to the text more than letting the text speak for itself. Compared to Ivry, I find readings like those by Katz and Houen more sensitive to the text proper, as both decidedly start with the literary text and work their way outward from what they encounter—the prominence of poetry and free indirect style, respectively. Moreover, Houen's argument that the use of free indirect style is ultimately a formal means of engaging with questions of sameness and Otherness underscores that a productive engagement with form does not ignore a text's political or social implications but instead explores how the two are related.

It will not have been lost on the attentive reader that this article's concern with theory on the one and close reading on the other hand is broadly situated in a larger conversation that has been happening in American Studies over some years now, the ongoing debate whether theory or close reading is the preferable method for reading, interpreting, and teaching

[14] Katz problematizes the fact that although Lerner's novels prominently reference and directly integrate poetry, scholarship has so far neglected this dimension. That Lerner's narrators are themselves poets, for instance, usually leads scholars to investigate parallels between narrator and real-life author (the 'autofiction' protocol) or it is regarded as a "detail—the kind of thing a novelist needs to flesh out the back-story of a 'character'" (the 'realism' protocol) but not as an incentive to actively engage with the poetry itself (Katz 318).

literary texts (Devereux 220). I have intentionally bracketed this debate until now, not only because I feel that the debate has somewhat exhausted its productive potential, but also because I would not know with which 'school' of methodology to align myself. I embrace Marjorie Levinson's definition of "[r]eading […] in traditional terms as multilayered and integrative responsiveness to every element of the textual dimension" (560), but I also subscribe to Cecily Devereux's suggestions on reviving "Close Reading after the New Criticism." Does that make me a New Formalist or a (new) New Critic? And which of the two strands of New Formalists that Levinson identifies? And how important is it for my daily interpretive practice?

As for the 'politics vs. form' or 'theory vs. form' debates, I have deliberately chosen *The Topeka School* as a text which dissolves theory into form and form into politics, undoing the oft-conjured up oppositions. For one, the novel literally turns 'theory' (psychoanalytic interpretation) into 'form' (literary interpretation) through its use of the Thematic Apperception Test. Two, the novel's form is fundamentally political, for instance, as this article has shown, in the way it links political questions of gender, voice, and representation to aspects of narrative voice. The main criticism launched against the historical New Criticism, Devereux writes, is that it "provided no strategies for assessing the social and political determinants in the production of language in specific contexts at specific times" (219). Lerner's novel, however, provides exactly that, a literary assessment of those questions. So perhaps we can conceive of the 'theory novel,' at least in this case, as allowing us to focus again on the formal complexity and 'literariness' of the text without the fear of ignoring its manifold social and political implications.

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