Affective Boundaries: Death, Mediation, and Virtual Space in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011)

Wesley Moore

ABSTRACT: In the following article, I examine contemporary conceptions of authenticity in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011). I focus on how virtual and material encounters with death affect the protagonist, Adam Gordon and discuss what these encounters communicate regarding the relationship between experience and mediation. Turning to the writings of Andreas Reckwitz, Fredric Jameson, and Manuel Castells, I investigate death's virtual expressions and pervasiveness in contemporary postindustrial societies versus its more rare and affective presence in material space. Through this context, I argue that *Atocha Station* privileges literature that foregrounds its own form as a medium, over eliciting affect in readers. Nevertheless, I conclude that the novel does leave space for affect by narrating an encounter with death through the aesthetic of a chat log.

KEYWORDS: death, virtuality, art, affect, mediation, terrorism, material, space, communications media

> Insofar as I was interested in the arts, I was interested in the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf; the closest I'd come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity.
>
> (Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* 9)

Introduction

In a sphere of surplus provided by neoliberal systems, opportunities and possessions often come easily for the educated classes in the United States. Though far from the most harmful repercussion of Late Capitalism, the ubiquity of identical objects has had consequences on the concept of value in Western society. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Walter Benjamin notes, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (169). That is to say, the original piece of art is not only more valuable than the reproduction, but its existence in a historical context is "a prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin 170). The concept of authenticity, of course, extends beyond art. According to Andreas Reckwitz, starting around the 1970s and 1980s, the social logic of privileged society has placed an increased value on singular objects and experiences, which are synonymous with the idea of authenticity (4-5). As international travel has become more widespread and affordable to the middle class, many tourists focus on what they consider authentic travel, privileging unique cultural experiences they deem appropriately foreign. Reckwitz writes:

> [T]he travel of the late-modern educated class, even though it relies extensively on the global infrastructure for tourism, is often expressly anti-touristic: travelers do not want to be tourists who passively consume their vacations. Instead, they actively pursue what is different, exciting, interesting, and challenging. […] The singularization achieved by late-modern travel is thus, at its heart, a singularization of space and time: familiar spaces are left behind for unique places, and routines are set aside for unique moments. (232-33)

Or, to use Benjamin's language, the unique travel experience is a prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. That is to say, the most authentic travel experience is one that has never been encountered before. In this article, I investigate how Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) grapples with conceptualizations of authenticity in contexts of singular and unmediated experience on both diegetic and aesthetic levels. Lerner's novel, a work of autofiction, follows young US-American poet Adam Gordon, as he searches for authentic experience and grapples with feelings of fraudulence.[1] Adam, a young US poet on a poetry fellowship in Madrid during the post-9/11 Bush administration, begins his first-person narration identifying his struggle to locate his conceptualization of the authentic in globalized Spain. Defining authentic Spain as "an American-free space" and his expatriate experience as "another of late empire's packaged tours," Adam craves foreign, unique encounters and laments his relative ordinary position as an expatriate in Madrid (48, 49). Markers of the US follow him throughout his stay in Spain. Adam notes the countryside of Spain "look[s] a lot like Kansas," a Spanish host dons a Hard Rock Café Houston sweatshirt, and he even spends a night at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, that is, the American multinational chain (99). As hard as he tries, Adam cannot locate the singular in Spain, so he spends time searching online, where he engages with manifestations of violence and death through coverage of the on-going Iraq War. This highlights the fact that although encounters with death and violence are rare in the physical spaces of Western society—and, therefore, seemingly authentic—they are common in virtual spheres.

Relatedly, virtual mediation complicates notions of authenticity, as it moderates reality. Lerner uses expressions of death in *Atocha Station* and the characters' affective responses to comment on the hypermediated nature of twenty-first century existence. Through the affective responses of Lerner's characters, *Atocha Station* demonstrates material experiences with death as foreign or singular encounters, when occurring in physical space and familiar or ordinary, when occurring virtually. This supports Peter Boxall's claim that "the invention of electronic communication, the dawning of an era of instantaneity, the emergence of a global context for all our interactions: all of these developments have transformed our relations with the world, with one another, and with our own bodies, *but they have not made our material*

[1] Lerner, like Adam Gordon, lived in Spain from 2003-2004 on a Fulbright poetry fellowship (though Adam's scholarship remains unnamed). That the work is autofiction is one example how Lerner plays with the definition of authenticity.

environments disappear" (9; emphasis added). Nevertheless, Lerner highlights the fact that the reader's encounter with *Atocha Station* is itself virtual. Through metafictional references, his multimedia aesthetic, and his protagonist's language barrier, Lerner suggests the mediated quality of all communication: oral, artistic, written, *and* digital.[2] I argue that through Adam Gordon's comments on art and literature, as well as the structure of the novel itself, *Leaving the Atocha Station* celebrates creative productions that address the space between their own virtuality and the observer's material world, instead of literature and art that solely strive to elicit affect in the reader.

Waning Affect and Adam's Experience at the Atocha Station Bombings

In the twenty-first century, the constant barrage of images, information, and misinformation has led to a diminishment in the lasting effect of emotional reactions. Even in the twentieth century, before the internet's omnipresence, Fredric Jameson notes in his work *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that recent artistic production lacks the emotional depth of earlier eras, the aforementioned phenomenon he labels "the waning of affect" (10).[3] Using Warhol as an example of this phenomenon, he writes, "The waning of affect is, however, perhaps best initially approached by way of the human figure, and it is obvious that what we have said about the commodification of objects holds as strongly for Warhol's human subjects: stars—like Marilyn Monroe—who are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images" (11). To understand this phenomenon, one could also look at Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series from the 1960s, where Warhol reproduced newspaper photographs of violent events in an artistic context: silkscreens of electric chairs, plane crashes, and police brutality being among his works that reduce actual acts of violent death and injury into a two-dimensional aesthetic. Warhol himself commented on the series, stating, "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect" (Sherwood). This phenomenon is present on the aesthetic level of *Atocha Station*, especially where Lerner embeds a photograph of the aftermath of the Guernica bombings into the text, removing its affective dimension by its decontextualization. Manuel Castells explores death's contexts in the twenty-first century, arguing that scientific and technological achievements have led to the obscurity of our mortality. He claims:

[2] Though virtuality is often equated with digital technologies, any tool that can transmit information beyond material boundaries of time and space can be considered virtual. Paul C. Adams claims, "A form of virtuality is as old as the spoken word" (241), and cites Christian Callisen and Barbara Adkins, who write, "Having a conversation with someone using a webcam or via e-mail is fundamentally no different from having a conversation using a telephone or via hand-written letter. The same information can be shared, the same assumptions made, and techniques of virtuality can be employed to compensate for a lack of audile, visual, or tactile connection" (69).

[3] Lauren Berlant writes that Jameson uses "affect" not as a technical term but as a general term referring to feeling and emotion (65). I am using affect in a similar fashion in this paper.

> The dominant trend in our societies, as an expression of our technological ambition, and in line with our celebration of the ephemeral, is to erase death from life, or *to make it meaningless by its repeated representation in the media*, always as the other's death, so that our own is met with the surprise of the unexpected. By separating death from life, and by creating the technological system to make this belief last long enough, we construct eternity in our life span. (Castells 484; emphasis added)

In other words, in contemporary late-modern societies, death is almost exclusively encountered in digital spaces, where its high frequency has led to its waning of affect. While Castells is perhaps hyperbolic in his claim that we "construct eternity in our life span," encounters with death in material reality, especially among young adults, is a rare experience in high-tech populations. A personal experience with death—or at least danger—can, therefore, constitute a foreign, singular, or even authentic encounter in the context of Reckwitz.[4]

Adam's fascination with death, present early in *Atocha Station*, is an expression of his desire to be in contact with a so-called authentic encounter. Reckwitz claims that in the twenty-first century, "[L]ife is not simply lived; it is *curated.* From one situation to the next, the late-modern subject *performs* his or her particular self to others, who become an audience, and this self will not be found attractive unless it seems authentic" (3). Ironically, for Adam, this performance, this desire to be seen as having had an authentic or singular experience, leads to his lying to his Spanish friends about his mother being dead and plagiarizing his friend Cyrus's story about failing to save a drowning woman.[5] That is to say, he strives to appear authentic through inauthentic gestures. Adam is also drawn to Teresa and Isabel, two women who have lived through actual experiences with death: Isabel's brother and Teresa's father have died. Though perhaps lacking a meaningful, material encounter with death, Adam confronts death frequently online in the form of news reports on the Iraq War, "where it was always the deadliest day since the invasion began," as well as digital videos of beheadings and civilian murders from the conflict (64-65). Yet, Adam reports these events without much emotion. In fact, the only mention of affect regarding Adam's online consumption is the lack of emotions he feels after altering his dosage of prescribed medication. He writes, "I now felt nothing, my affect a flat spectrum over a defined band; I could watch videos of beheadings or contractors firing on Iraqi civilians or the Fox News commentators without a reaction and I did" (103). For Adam, virtual encounters of death, be it through oral productions or online media do not transfer a significant amount of affect.

During the climax of Lerner's novel, however, Adam encounters the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Atocha Station terrorist bombings, an attack carried out in trains in Madrid,

---

[4] The existence of extreme tourism, a subcategory of travel where tourists visit a dangerous environment or participate in a perilous event, highlights this phenomenon. Some examples of extreme tourism have included mountain biking on the dangerous "Road of Death" in Bolivia, climbing Mount Everest, and visiting the ruins of Chernobyl.

[5] I analyze Cyrus's story later in the article.

presumably by Al Qaeda in response to Spain's involvement in the Iraq War. Here, Adam finally encounters an expression of death and disaster in physical space, one related to the coverage he has frequently accessed online. He writes:

> I arrived at what they call a scene of mayhem. It was cloudy. There were police and medical workers and other people everywhere, many of them weeping and/or screaming, and as I got closer to the station, more and more confusion. People streamed from the various exits, some of them wounded, lightly I guess, and emergency workers rushing in. I saw, I might have seen, a dazed teenager with blood all over his face and a paramedic who took his arm and sat him down and gave him something that looked like an ice pack, instructing him to hold it to his head. There was an odor of burnt plastic. Someone asked me what had happened. Helicopters beat the air overhead. I wandered around for a few minutes, found a wall to sit against, shut my eyes, and listened. (Lerner 117-18; emphasis added)

Adam's narration of the event is imprecise: the people are wounded, lightly, he guesses, he describes the sound of people "weeping *and/or* screaming," and the teenager holds "something that *looked* like an icepack." With his visual comprehension of the event obscured, Adam relies on sounds and smells to narrate the event—that is, the "odor of burnt plastic," the sounds of helicopters, and the stranger's question—adding layers of sensory depth to his narrative, beyond the capabilities of visual representation. Despite Adam's unclear description of the event and though he neglects to narrate the affective consequences of the experience, the aftermath of this event at the Atocha Station is ultimately the singular or foreign encounter Adam had seemed to hope for at the beginning of his fellowship: an authentic travel experience. Adam has encountered violent disaster in the material realm for the first time.

Later, through a digital video on the internet, Adam sees a clearer, more graphic picture of the Atocha bombings that was obscured to him in the disarray of the aftermath; however, its familiarity as another virtual record of horrific violence ultimately fails to move Adam meaningfully. He writes, "When I woke I read about the emerging link to Al Qaeda, although the government still claimed it was ETA, and I watched a terrible video online of Atocha's security camera footage, *or was that many months later*: an orange fireball bursting from a train, engulfing commuters with smoke, leaving the platform littered with bodies and stained with blood" (120; emphasis added). Whereas Adam records his disorienting experience at the physical scene with uncertain language but complete sentences, here Adam reduces the video recording to three succinct fragments preceded by a colon, reducing and simplifying the event to a dependent clause. This succinct record and Adam's temporal uncertainty suggest his detachment from the visual record in relationship to his more detailed account of his material experience.[6]

[6] While failing to integrate traumatic memories into one's biography is a symptom of trauma, Allen Meek claims, "Exposure to media alone is not a sufficient cause of traumatization," and that "it would appear most people have learned to live with representations of extreme violence without suffering obvious psychological effects" (Introduction). Indeed, Adam seems emotionally unaffected

Adam's one-word description assessing the video is also reductive. Though Adam describes the video as "terrible," the use of "terrible" proves a generic term to describe the horrific scene. "Terrible" is also the adjective Adam uses to describe the awful videos he watches at the beginning of the novel, when he writes," I spent a good amount of time online […] looking at videos of terrible things," and here, he is again referencing "videos of beheadings or contractors firing on Iraqi citizens or the Fox News commentators" (19, 103). "Terrible" is also the same word Adam later uses to describe language proficiency, when he writes, "I had assumed he read with Teresa's help as his English was terrible," and, "I could have maintained to Isabel that she had misunderstood my terrible Spanish in the first place" (33, 61). It's the adjective Adam uses to describe the cuisine of Madrid, as Adam tries to convince himself: "You don't like Madrid, with its tourists and dust and heat and innumerable Pietàs and terrible food" (178). It's also the one-word descriptor he uses for his old dorm room, as Adam pictures all the places he has lived, writing, "I began to imagine my apartment in Madrid. […] Then my other rooms: Brighton Street, mattress on the floor, Hope Street, with its little drafting table, the dorms, which were terrible" (56). And Adam uses "terrible," at one point of his narration, to describe Teresa's breath; he writes, "Her breath smelled terrible and I told myself to commit that fact to memory" (154). Like Jameson's example of Warhol's art flattening affect, using "terrible" to describe a wide range of experiences, reduces its impact. By using "terrible" to describe the violent injuries and fatalities of hundreds of human beings, as well as one person's bad breath, through his narration, that is, his mediated account of watching the attacks online, Adam diminishes the event of the Atocha Station bombings, at least the influence its virtual media coverage has on his experience in Spain.

Ultimately, Adam places his experience witnessing the aftermath of the bombings as the focal point to his time in Spain, implicitly proving its impact. Toward the end of the novel Adam says—in remembering his time in Madrid—that he would "recall a blur of hash and sun and maybe that kid with blood streaming down his face; everything else would be excised" (170). Despite the fact the bloody teen lacks the theatrics of the exploding train, the image of the teen's injury remains, according to Adam's claim, the most concretely memorable episode of living abroad in Spain. This is because it is Adam's closest encounter with death, something outside Castells's digital death of the other. It is ultimately this image of the teen that is meaningful to Adam in Spain, the foreign encounter he has been searching for. It is more important for him than the bombings and their politics. While his friends protest the Spanish government's backing of George W. Bush during the Iraq War, Adam does not participate in the political protests, despite judging anonymous American tourists earlier in the novel for "supporting the [Iraq War], of treating people and the relations between people like things, of being the lemmings of a murderous and spectacular empire" (48). After waiting in line to donate blood, Adam abandons the idea when it is his turn. Instead, Adam relegates his

by witnessing the video, suggested in his narration when he notes: "In post-March 11 Madrid, […] I would watch the planes making their way to Barajas and the sun would catch them briefly and I would believe for a second, with less fear than excitement, that they were aflame" (149-50).

participation in the days following the bombings to reading international media online, leaning into, as Alexander Manshel suggests, "the transnational assemblage of perspectives"; Adam chooses to read *The New York Times*, *El País*, and *The Guardian* instead of returning to the Atocha Station aftermath. Adam sums up his involvement succinctly when he writes, "While Spain was voting I was checking e-mail" (137). He elects to focus his efforts and attention on the global context, where he is a passive observer, rather than engaging politically and personally on the local level.

Nevertheless, Adam's engagement with the virtual coverage does not overpower his experience in the material space of the Atocha attacks, and Lerner reveals this through Adam's emotional response. The impact of witnessing the aftermath leads Adam to almost immediately call his parents to inform them, not only about the terrorist attack, but to confess that he has lied to multiple friends about his mother being dead, an expression of guilt betraying emotion. After the event, he no longer fabricates stories about dead relatives to his Spanish friends or mentions his experience at the bombings' aftermath to them.[7] Death has, for Adam, become somewhat less abstract, even if he escapes encountering the bodies of the deceased in material space.[8] Despite his aloof claim of "maybe" remembering the injured teenager, his confession to his mom and simply recalling the image of the injured teen implicitly reveal the impact the event had on him. Adam's unmediated—if less graphic—experience at the Atocha aftermath proves more meaningful to him than the virtual record of the bombings. In the context of the novel, however, Adam's encounter is mediated through the form of narrative prose that avoids directly sharing his emotional experience.

Adam's Affect Skepticism in Art and Literature

Lerner uses the Atocha attacks as a way to comment on the nature of mediation and human existence. Gayle Rogers claims that *Atocha Station*'s "external plot […] is more a setting for the bigger concerns the novel takes up, which are the relationships among language, experience, art, mediation, authorship, and the spectacle of violence" (220). Adam privileges art's mediative qualities over transformative affective experience through creative production, eyeing the affective experience of art with skepticism. *Atocha Station* opens with Adam visiting the *Museo del Prado*, watching a man weep in front of Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, that causes him to question art's ability to cause profound emotional experiences and leads him to challenge claims of the authenticity of these reactions. Though the painting depicts something indeed tragic—the weeping of Jesus's loved ones as his lifeless body is removed from the cross—the man's response to a frequently reproduced, nearly

[7] Adam is, however, sharing the account to the reader.

[8] I do not wish to suggest that Adam is completely transformed by his experience at the aftermath, as he continues to articulate a desire to encounter singular experiences. After the attack, he imagines directly experiencing an attack with "excitement" and his friends' "amazement and maybe envy" if he were to die in a terrorist strike (150).

ubiquitous image in Christian art is unusual to say the least. Adam contemplates: "Was he, I wondered, facing the wall to hide his face as he dealt with whatever grief he'd brought into the museum? Or was he having a *profound experience of art*?" (8). As the man continues to "totally [lose] his shit" in front of painting after painting, Adam questions the man's sanity and his authenticity, wondering if he is a performance artist (9). Instead of feeling affect from the art, Adam is more interested in the scene. As the security guards wordlessly try to decide what to do, Adam states their "mute performance" is "more moving than any *Pietà*, *Deposition*, or *Annunciation*," again highlighting material space's affective potentials over art's (10). Similarly, at a poetry reading, Adam narrates his scorn for the Spanish poet Tomás's inauthentic postures as a serious, tortured poet. He writes, "Tomás looked less like he was going to read poetry and more like he was going to sing flamenco or weep […]. To my surprise [his] poem was totally intelligible to me, an Esperanto of clichés: waves, heart, pain, moon, breasts, beach, emptiness, etc.; the delivery was so cloying the thought crossed my mind that his apparent earnestness might be parody" (37). The inauthenticity of these expressions of affect through visual art and poetic performance feeds into Adam's general skepticism of experiencing affect through media.

Adam sees literature's highest function as not transcending the material present through affective experience but rather enhancing the reader's awareness of it. While reading an English translation of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* on a train, Adam has perhaps his most important literary encounter in the narrative. He writes:

> I flipped through the Tolstoy for a half-remembered passage about a train, but couldn't find it. It didn't matter; every sentence, regardless of its subject, became mimetic of the action in the train, and the train mimetic of the sentence, and I felt suddenly coeval with its syntax. Because the sentences of Tolstoy, or rather Constance Garnett's translation of Tolstoy, were in perfect harmony with the motion of the Talgo, real time and the time of prose began to merge, and reading, instead of removing me from the world, intensified my experience of the present. (89)

Adam encounters a different type of international constellation: reading English translations of a Russian writer in a Talgo train in Spain, a train that has departed from, as Dan Katz notes, the Atocha Station (7). The international element, as well as the setting of trains suggest a parallelism between Adam's experience reading the novella in the Talgo and his presence at the aftermath of the Atocha Station bombings, even if the events could not be more different in their content. Most importantly, instead of being drawn away from the event through literature, the gap between mediation and reality has shrunk, and Adam experiences an intensification of his present. The feeling of mimesis—"this strange experience of reading, [where there is] the sense of harmony between the rhythms of a reproduction and the real"—also occurs for him through the poetry of John Ashbery (90). Adam describes Ashbery's poems' effects, writing:

> The best Ashbery poems, I thought, although not in these words, describe what it's like to read an Ashbery poem; his poem refers to how their reference evanesces. And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced

> immediately. It is as though the actual Ashbery poem were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, and you only saw the reflection of your reading. But by reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. (91)

Adam makes a metareference to his own narrative's constructedness when he writes, "I thought, although not in these words," reminding the reader that *Atocha Station* is an example of a medium, distanced from reality, while also highlighting Adam's interpretation of Ashbery's importance. Ashbery's poetry, and perhaps Lerner's passage, allows the reader to simultaneously engage in the process of experiencing a form of narrative mediation, while being aware of their existence in physical space. Unlike the virtual representations of death, that is, the Atocha Station news coverage, or even van der Weyden's *Descent*, Adam claims his engagement with the Tolstoy translations and Ashbery's poetry heightens his awareness of his physical present. Literature is specifically well suited for this phenomenon, as it requires the reader's collaboration to produce meaning. Wolfgang Iser writes, "The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written" (279). Unlike watching a video of the Atocha bombings, Adam's own material experience is interacting with the Tolstoy translations and vice versa. While Iser correctly labels the process of reading, "the virtual dimension of the text," it is this dimension which "endows [a literary text] with its *reality*" (279; emphasis added). Iser's use of the term "reality" evokes the material and the authentic, while suggesting an existing connection between literary and physical realms, despite literature's virtual dimension. Reading is at its best, according to Adam, when the virtual and material spaces interact, narrowing the gap between the two.

Death in Conversation, Death in the Chat Room

Adam, with his skepticism of affective experience through media, mostly avoids addressing when he feels strong emotions in his narrative. Despite his sensory descriptions of sounds and smells, Adam's account of the aftermath of the Atocha attacks is both uncertain and neglects explicitly mentioning any emotional component to his narrative. *Atocha Station* focuses on mediation and the flattening of narrative affect—for example, through Adam's descriptions of watching beheadings and civilian murders online, as well as the photograph of the Guernica bombings, which Lerner inserts into the novel. This phenomenon extends to oral production, primarily through Adam's narration of Isabel and Teresa's stories of loss. The experiences are not only mediated versions of material events, but the conversations are also mediated versions of dialogue, due to Adam's language barrier.

Adam's imperfect Spanish and use of reported speech calls attention to the unreliable nature of Adam's narrative, that is, its distance from expressing the mimesis of authentic experience. Through the narratives of Isabel and Teresa, his inability to understand and his explicit

narration of his lack of understanding negates the stories' affective potentials in the reader. As Isabel relates the story of her brother's death, Adam "form[s] several possibilities out of her speech," creating fictions out of the words he does understand, listing, "the names of streets and months; a list of things I thought were books or songs; hard times or hard weather, epoch, uncle, change, an analogy involving summer, something about buying and/or crashing a red car" (14). In Isabel's case, the uncertainty of what happened—if "[h]er uncle had died in a car crash a year ago today" or if her parents "were having their home foreclosed upon"—lacks the precise detail to register affect for the reader (14). When Teresa reveals the circumstances around her father's death, Adam understands the general event but its context and how it has affected her are unclear. He writes, "She described the death of her father when she was a little girl, or how the death of her father turns her back into a little girl whenever she thinks of it; he had been young when he died but seemed old to her now, or had been old when he died but in her memories grew younger" (29-30). Here, the death is transparent but its effect on Teresa is not understood, hampering her story's affective potential. Through the language barrier, Lerner emphasizes the mediated nature of oral production, even in the context of conversation.

Again, Adam reveals an affective experience in material reality when Teresa *does* communicate in English, sensing Adam does not understand. However, it is not the actual English speech she gives, but rather the pause between Spanish and English that causes Adam to feel a jolt of surprise. He writes, "Then without a transition or with a transition I missed she was talking about her travels in Europe and then I heard her say New York and college and she paused and as she paused my breath caught because I realized what was coming" (30). This passage relates to Teresa Brennan's claim that affects are "physiological things" that have an "energetic dimension" that require no words, tying affect to material spaces (6). Teresa tells Adam, in English, how, near the first anniversary of her father's death she called her mother from New York from a pay phone and wept, realizing the "full reality" of the loss of her father (30).[9] Interestingly, Adam chooses to relate this scene through indirect speech, again diluting the affecting impact for the reader, foregrounding his narrative as a virtual medium, that is, distinct from material experience.

In addition, before the encounter at the Atocha Station aftermath, Adam appropriates a chat log he has with his friend Cyrus, an aesthetic choice that more closely resembles fragmented communication encountered in daily life and *feels* more direct, in contrast to Isabel and Teresa's conversations about death that more obviously appear mediated, due to Adam's imperfect Spanish.[10] In the chat log, Cyrus, who lives in Mexico, describes his failure to save a drowning woman, leading to—as with Adam at the Atocha aftermath—a foreign feeling,

[9] Curiously, after experiencing the Atocha aftermath, Adam confesses to his mother via pay phone, an encounter that resembles Teresa's story, where she calls her mother in Spain from a pay phone in New York after feeling the weight of her father's death.

[10] The chat log is, of course, a fictitious exchange written by Lerner.

resulting in uncontrollably chattering teeth despite hot weather and a "taste" in his mouth (77). Adam recounts:

> CYRUS: We laid her on the bank and I gave her or tried to give her mouth to mouth. She didn't seem, I can't really say what I mean by this, given that she wasn't breathing, but she didn't seem dead. Her white
> ME: jesus, man
> ME: i don't even know how to give cpr
> CYRUS: shirt, her undershirt, was pulled up over her head. I had to pull it back down over her breasts. Which was somehow embarrassing. She was cut up pretty bad
> CYRUS: Neither do I, really. I tried. She kind of, I don't know, threw up in my mouth
> ME: you mean was revived—spit out water—so she was alive
> CYRUS: No. There was vomit in her mouth I guess. And then I threw up on the bank. She was dead
> ME: jesus. i am so sorry you
> CYRUS: I tried again. I didn't know what I was doing. Our teeth, I can't get this out of my mind, I accidentally clicked my teeth against her teeth at some point, like
> CYRUS: like in a clumsy kiss or something. Prom. And I kept thinking that she had only got in the water because I had got in the water
> ME: no way to blame yourself for any of this (73-74)

Though Adam's account of the Atocha bombings implicitly reveal his emotional reaction, Cyrus explicitly reveals affect. He recounts the confusing emotions he feels as he fails to save the woman: embarrassment from pulling her shirt down to cover her breasts, the anxiety he continues to feel from the clicking of their teeth, and the aforementioned "taste" in his mouth. Cyrus's encounter with death does not only occur in material space, but through physical touch and the sharing of bodily fluids. These markers connect Cyrus's experience to the material more directly, and the impact it has on him is more profound than Adam's adjacent contact with death in material space. The narrative, though fragmented through Cyrus's spontaneous expression of his experience and Adam's interjections, ultimately paints a clearer picture of relating his experience of this event, compared to Adam's report at the Atocha Station aftermath.

The tension between the fragmented format of the chat log and the emotionally-charged content of Cyrus's narrative provides a juxtaposition between an unfamiliar, authentic, or singular encounter with death and a common communications medium accessed in daily life. The chat log format is familiar to anyone who texts with a mobile phone, while the experience of clicking teeth with a deceased woman is almost assuredly unfamiliar. This tension between the unfamiliar and familiar leads to a potentially foreign reading experience, a jolting shock. Likewise, Cyrus compares the unique experience of "clicking teeth" with a deceased woman during CPR to a clumsy teenage kiss, that is, a relatable human experience. The chat log works in a similar fashion to the Tolstoy translations that bridge the gap between the virtual space of reading and Adam's material present; though here, it also allows space for affect. Lerner's chat log bridges the gap between an exotic encounter with death and the reader's own

familiar life, remaining authentic in its aesthetics, rather than relying on clichéd postures, as in Tomás's poetry reading.[11]

Furthermore, the chat log brings the focus on the reader's own reading process and awareness of their engagement with fiction. In *Contemporary Fictions of Attention* (2018), Alice Bennet notes a trend in contemporary fiction that "turns the reading experience out to include the reader's own affective engagement" and claims generally that "Lerner's work leaves open a space for readers to note—by way of inward attention—their own affective or absorbed responses" (8, 141). Similarly, Rebecca L. Walkowitz notes, "[R]eaders are asked to think of themselves as objects of the novel's attention, or at least as objects of Adam's attention" (42). The fragmented nature of the chat log brings attention to its aesthetic, an example of communication's general mediation of experience. The reader feels the immediacy of the chat, while noting it is a reproduction in a work of fiction. Lerner makes the choice to construct the chat log using names and colons, instead of attempting to copy the digital aesthetics of an actual instant messaging service. As a result, inside the text, the chat log recalls a screenplay or theater script, albeit a fragmented one without stage directions. The result ties the (constructed) report to the realm of fiction and away from material experience, even as it more closely resembles actual dialogue than Adam's recollections of conversations or his indirect reports of them.

Instead of presenting an approximation of Cyrus's and Adam's chat log, editing their conversation to help its flow, Adam inserts the record of their communication. Lauren Berlant writes, "In general, conversation is a key genre of the present: when a conversation ends, its singular time ends, and then it becomes like all other episodes, something mainly forgotten, distorted, and half-remembered" (57). The authentic dialogue from the chat log is interrupted, fragmented, bringing attention to the mediated nature of everyday conversation and our faulty memory of it. However, Lerner again reminds the reader that the chat log is fiction, through Cyrus's disparaging comment to his girlfriend Jane:

> CYRUS: She was shaken up in her way. She said she wished she'd never gone into the water. But she also seemed excited. Like we had had a "real" experience
> ME: i guess you had
> CYRUS: Yeah but I had this sense—this sense that the whole point of the trip for her—to Mexico—was for something like this, something this "real" to happen. I don't really believe that, but I felt it, and I said something about how she had got some good material for her novel
> ME: is she writing a novel
> CYRUS: Who knows
> ME: and she responded how
> CYRUS: She's probably writing a novel now (77)

[11] That is not to say a narrative of a foreigner experiencing the tragic death of the exotic other is exactly novel either.

While Jane feels excitement for having experienced an encounter with death, the authentic travel experience of late modernity that Reckwitz described, Cyrus immediately inverses Jane's label of the "real" experience by sarcastically suggesting she write a novel, a marker of the make believe. Ironically, Adam—who cannot resist adding the chat log to *his* narrative about his time in Spain, placing it in the context of written fiction—is doing exactly what Cyrus accuses Jane of attempting. While Lerner shows self-awareness here with this metareferential wink, it also serves as another reminder that *all* communication is a form of mediation, further supported when Adam appropriates Cyrus's story, claiming later that it happened to him to impress Isabel. In that instance, Adam turns Cyrus's authentic experience into fiction, albeit through an oral anecdote. Thus, *Atocha Station* reminds us that while events in physical space may produce more affect than their digital counterparts, the expressions of these experiences—be it oral, written, or artistic—are, like digital encounters, examples of mediation.

Conclusion

According to Andreas Reckwitz, in twenty-first century post-industrial societies living a unique life and accruing authentic, singular experiences are regarded as valuable. This approach proves problematic in part because the term authentic is nebulous, seen partly through my connections of authenticity to concepts of realness and foreignness, whose meanings are themselves debatable. Curiously, authenticity is also something that is performed, and the term 'performance' contains connotations of the inauthentic. In Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam Gordon, ironically, attempts to appear authentic through relating fabricated singular experiences to his friends, while incongruously expressing his skepticism of art's affective potentials. Lerner uses authenticity to investigate the relationship between physical and virtual space, often through Adam's encounters with death, encounters whose relationship to materiality can be measured through expressions of affect. Adam remains mostly unmoved by his virtual confrontations with death, whether encountered online or in conversations with friends. Lerner transfers Adam's tempered affect to the reader by inserting an uncontextualized photograph of the Guernica bombings and relating Adam's conversations with his Spanish friends about death through his language barrier. This material/virtual dichotomy culminates with the Atocha Station terrorist attacks. Though Adam has a clearer, more graphic encounter with the train bombings online and despite only witnessing lightly injured victims during the aftermath, he implicitly reveals the emotional impact his experience at the presence of the bombings had. Lerner uses this event to engage with the meaning of art and mediation. Unlike many artists and audiences, Adam privileges creative productions that focus on their own mediative relation to material reality, rather than their potential to induce profound affective experiences. Interestingly, Lerner's decision to narrate Cyrus's encounter with death through the aesthetic of a chat log, suggests its constructedness, while also being mimetic to a familiar form of communication. The tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar experience *does* allow space for an affective experience in the reader, that is, a

virtual affective encounter, one that occurs even as Lerner foregrounds *Atocha Station*'s fictionality.

Works Cited

Adams, Paul C. "Communication in Virtual Worlds." *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality*, edited by Mark Grimshaw, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 239-253.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, e-book ed., Mariner, 2019, pp. 166-195.

Bennett, Alice. *Contemporary Fictions of Attention*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

Boxall, Peter. *Twenty-first Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction.* Cambridge UP, 2013.

Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Cornell UP, 2004.

Callisen, Christian and Barbara Adkins. "Pre-digital Virtuality: Early Modern Scholars and the Republic of Letters." *The Long History of New Media: Technology, Historiography, and Contextualizing Newness*, edited by David W. Park, Nicholas W. Jankowski, and Steve Jones, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 55-72.

Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Culture Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1997.

Katz, Daniel. "'I Did Not Walk Here All the Way from Prose': Ben Lerner's Virtual Poetics." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 315-37.

Lerner, Ben. *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Granta, 2011.

Lerner, Ben and Gayle Rogers. "An Interview with Ben Lerner." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2013, pp. 218-38.

Manshel, Alexander. "The Rise of the Recent Historical Novel." *Post45*, 29 Sept. 2017, www.post45.org/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-recent-historical-novel/. Accessed 25 May 2024.

Meek, Allen. *Trauma and Media*. E-book ed., Routledge, 2011.

Reckwitz, Andreas. *The Society of Singularities*. E-book ed., Polity, 2020.

Sherwood, Harriet. "Andy Warhol work not seen in public for 15 years could fetch $80m at auction." *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2022, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/oct/28/andy-warhol-white-disaster-white-car-crash-19-times-auction. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Born Translated*. E-book ed., Columbia UP, 2015.