

A Severed Sense of Time: Diasporic Double Consciousness and Alternative History in
Ling Ma's *Severance*

by

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ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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Abstract

Ling Ma's novel *Severance* details Chinese-American narrator Candace Chen's experiences of an imaginary fungal virus's initial spread and the aftermath of its devastation. Causing its victims to mindlessly repeat actions as their bodies decay, *Shen Fever* represents the endless labour and distractions necessary for the continuation of capitalism and its short-term bias. Key to understanding the time we live in is understanding our perception of time and the forces that manipulate it. Analyzing Candace's unique sense of temporality through the lens of double consciousness and alongside the concepts of alternate history and slow violence, I argue that Candace's position as a pregnant woman and member of the Chinese diaspora places her in a space of multiple temporalities that are already severed, allowing the novel to function as a pseudo-alternate history that reveals how the warped temporality of capitalism negates possibilities for change.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Published in 2018, Ling Ma's novel *Severance* has received significant public and academic attention for its remarkable prescience, becoming "ridiculously relatable just a year after the novel was first published" due to the COVID-19 pandemic (McManus 7). Interweaving chapters detailing Chinese-American narrator Candace Chen's experiences of an infection's initial spread and the aftermath of its devastation, the novel utilizes an imaginary fungal virus (dubbed Shen Fever after its origin in the factory zone of Shenzhen, China) to sharply critique late-stage global capitalism and the invisible, alienated, repetitive, and often racialized labour it necessitates. Much of the scholarly writing on the novel focuses on these elements and Candace's vulnerable position as a pregnant racialized woman. While her place as a member of a diaspora has been recognized, her experience has yet to be linked directly to the concept of double consciousness. The term, originally coined by W. E. B. Du Bois to describe African-American experiences, is extended by Qun Wang to address Asian-American perspectives. Wang argues that Asian-American literature similarly displays characters struggling with the "psychological confusion" of an internal "clash of two cultures" (89, 88). While Wang does not discuss *Severance* directly, he provides a valuable frame through which to consider the novel. Additionally, while the initial setting of New York has been analyzed in depth by Burcu Kayışcı Akkoyun, the significance of the novel's divergence from reality in 2011 amidst the Occupy Wall Street movement has been repeatedly remarked on but not deeply explored.

Time and temporality are central to the novel; Shen Fever causes its victims to mindlessly repeat actions as their bodies decay, and Candace finds herself in a similar

state, immersed in her memories while fighting to ensure a future for her unborn child. First a young immigrant, then a wealthy orphan roaming New York, then a Bible publishing coordinator, Candace's experiences make her intimately familiar with the problems of capitalism and with its inescapability. Her resulting complacency becomes apparent when, despite the virus spreading rapidly, she continues to diligently go to the office long after there is no work left. When she finally leaves the city, she joins a group of survivors who raid homes for familiar products and eventually seek shelter in a shopping mall, falling into consumerist habits and slowly becoming fevered themselves, prompting Candace alone to escape and head towards the city of Chicago. I argue that her status as a pregnant woman and member of the Chinese diaspora positions her in a space of multiple temporalities that are already severed, allowing the novel to function as a pseudo-alternate history that reveals how the warped temporality of capitalism negates possibilities for change.

First, by analyzing the novel's point of departure from history in 2011, I consider it in relation to Charles M. Tung's argument that alternate history narratives, particularly those that interweave different timelines, can function as an "angel" that can reveal and play with notions of time, history, and politics (551). While, as I will show, *Severance* deviates from the conventions of the genre in many ways, this allows it to operate as an alternative rather than alternate history, in which the novel's changes serve to reveal reality. The novel's setting in the recent past is key to this, and focusing on the spatiotemporal elements of the novel allows me to explain how it reveals the workings of "slow violence" as articulated by Rob Nixon. Slow violence, representing dangers such as climate change which are "incremental and accretive" and often largely invisible

(Nixon 2), is briefly mentioned by Claire Gullander-Drolet and Jordi Serrano-Muñoz in their articles on *Severance* but is worth further analysis given the novel's attention to labour conditions and the fact that a hurricane accelerates the spread of Shen Fever throughout New York. Shen Fever itself is both a symptom and symbol of slow violence as a force of inattention and routine, and as a critique it potentially provides some inoculation against its real-world equivalents.

Following this, I further my discussion of temporality by analyzing Candace's specific relationship to it. While purity politics are used to squash anti-capitalist movements, they are also used to cement racial divides. Candace's position as a Chinese-American woman makes her deeply vulnerable, even though she occupies a relatively privileged economic position. By approaching Candace's understanding of the world, and specifically of temporality, through the lens of double consciousness, it is apparent that her sense of time has already been severed, along with her sense of identity. This section is cemented in writing about Asian-American experiences via erin Khuê Ninh's *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, published before *Severance*'s release but highly relevant to placing the text in literary tradition. I further consider the novel's context by incorporating Serrano-Muñoz's argument that it is Candace's distance from the objects of her nostalgia that prevents her from contracting Shen Fever, even as her behaviour mimics its symptoms (1353-4).

With the lenses of alternate history and diasporic double consciousness established, I then revisit the novel's depiction of capitalism's downfall via Shen Fever, drawing on scholarly work surrounding the text to show the critical importance of Candace's already severed temporality to this critique. While its existence has been

recognized, its operation through these modes has yet to be explored. Like Candace, Shen Fever comes from China to America because of global capitalism and distorts temporality as a result; and as a member of the Chinese diaspora, Candace reveals and attempts to reconcile the severed senses of temporality created by diaspora itself and the demands of capitalist culture. Her perspective allows the novel to step outside of capitalism's "eternal present" (Tung 551) and "interrogate[] the possibility of severance from unlivable structures, both pre- and post-apocalyptic," eliding certainty by ending "in the suspension between a desolated past and uncertain future" (Waples 121, 132). Even though Candace's unique position exposes problems and possibilities, there is no guarantee she can escape a predestined fate. The novel's inconclusive ending amplifies the questions and complications that surround Candace and resonate in the real-world future, itself full of uncertainty.

Chapter 2: Alternate History, Slow Violence, and Temporal Bias

Although the world *Shen Fever* emerges from bears remarkable similarity to that of the real 2011, its existence causes a plausible but unreal divergence along the vein of the alternate history novel. However, *Severance* deviates significantly from the standard conventions of the genre. Writing specifically about acclaimed modern and largely American texts, whose authors are an “overwhelmingly white, male group,” Matthew Schneider-Mayerson suggests that “[t]he two bedrock features of the alternate history are its emphasis on military and physical force as the prime movers of history and, counterintuitively, a deep-seated distrust of centralized government, even extending to the military itself” (78, 72), and yet both the government and military are almost entirely absent in *Severance*, something I address in detail in my fourth chapter. Further, Schneider-Mayerson notes that alternate history texts “tend to focus on the turning points or junctures of history” and are often set after the “point of departure” (68, 74), trends also noted by Catherine Gallagher in her study of the genre. While in its prologue *Severance* technically starts after *Shen Fever* has reached its peak, the following first chapter details the early days of its spread, and some later chapters describe the time before its discovery. Further, the first chapter’s opening resists the idea of a distinct juncture: “The End begins before you are ever aware of it. It passes as ordinary” (9). In doing so, the novel foregrounds its interest in the representation of slow violence and of capitalism’s reliance on inattention.

The ability of capitalism to dominate even highly visible forces that threaten it is highlighted in the novel through references to the Occupy Wall Street movement. As Eva Cherniavsky explains, the movement “is just getting underway as the plague spreads

across the globe. In the alternate history of *Severance*, the protests in Zuccotti Park peter out within a week,” emphasizing “[t]he intractability of capitalist realities” (61). Aside from the looming presence of Shen Fever in the background, this is one of the novel’s first significant divergences from reality; but rather than altering a “turning point or juncture of history” (Schneider-Mayerson 68), *Severance* takes a failed turning point and makes it even more of a failure. Candace describes the Occupy movement as creating “a strange, hopeful atmosphere” that “lost its glow pretty quickly” and was ultimately squashed due to fears of Shen Fever (241). This is not so different from reality. Craig Calhoun describes Occupy as “a thrilling protest that briefly dominated media attention and reshaped American public life” and was arguably more of a moment in time than a movement (26). Luke Winslow suggests it “represented a potential tipping point” and opened conversations without leading to real change (278). The failure of such a visible movement serves as a reminder of the power of dominant forces and pre-empts the failure of even Shen Fever to alter capitalist society, a point I return to throughout.

As in the novel, fears around sanitation and disease ultimately ended the occupation. Winslow argues that the demonstrators “hygienic deviance” triggered “an aesthetic of disgust,” a concept grounded in instinctual survival mechanisms that cause an aversion to the unclean which is frequently and problematically utilized to enforce “class position, status, and material hierarchies of power” (281). Winslow links the obsession with sanitation to the rise of industrial capitalism because reliable labour necessitates minimizing disease and injury. While this started in factories, it is now more prevalent in office culture as signifying “competence, professionalism, and purity” (284). However, as *Severance* reveals, this is often performative and profit-motivated, especially when job

precarity makes the tolerance of negative conditions necessary; the novel describes unpleasant conditions faced by factory and office workers alike, and it makes clear that profit reigns supreme. An outbreak of pneumoconiosis in a factory Candace is working with parallels the emergence of Shen Fever in a factory setting, highlighting some of the dangerous conditions workers face. And while touring a different Chinese factory, she notes “workers in jumpsuits, who wore earplugs and safety goggles. The air was thick with paper dust” and yet masks are notably not mentioned (86). Elsewhere, Candace is “mesmerized” by the “rote, mechanical movement” a worker does “over and over again, on a loop” in order to create boxes for shipping. Though not unsafe, such work, mirroring Shen Fever, may be as undesirable and unpleasant as it is efficient (89).

At her office, Candace struggles with interpersonal politics and trying to fit in. During the pandemic, she continues to work in unsafe conditions after being abandoned by management. Measures put in place to maintain the appearance of safety from the virus fail, as workers fall ill and others flee. But looming threats of financial insecurity and job precarity keep Candace and others working, partly by enforcing hierarchies through purity discourses whose victims, as Matthew Bolton et al. write, are generally those who “refuse or are unable to participate in the global market economy” (860). Racial links, particularly to anti-Asian sentiments, are also highly prevalent in discourses of disease and cleanliness. In the novel, swift travel bans placed against Asia (predicting real-life reactions to COVID-19) and discourse around the virus, including that used by Candace’s boyfriend Jonathan, highlight the perpetuation of racial biases.

Ma thus draws on links between “bodily disease” and “social disease” in the way that the Occupy movement did (Bolton et al. 867). Demonstrators made signs announcing

that they were going to clean both the park and political process and were themselves described as a “virus from the outside” (868). In *Severance*, the virus threat becomes literal, but it does not represent protestors or those of low socioeconomic status. No one seems to be safe from Shen Fever – even members of the survivor group eventually succumb. The virus is seemingly everywhere, in everyone. Writing about Occupy protests in London and America, Tavia Nyong’o notes the use of the zombie figure by protestors as well as their distorted sense of time. Aanchal Saraf describes Nyong’o as “seem[ing] to predict the alternate temporalities” of *Severance* (21), in which “the fevered make us feel labor time” since labour “is no longer abstract” or obscured but instead “performed constantly, inefficiently, and locally” (21). Further, there is no longer any “dead” or wasted time (Nyong’o 139), because the fevered labour unceasingly despite their bodies decaying. The repetitions of Shen Fever, the inability to move forward from systems of the past or to admit to the consequences of one’s actions in the past, present, and future, and the ceaseless yet ultimately unsustainable capitalist drive of labour and growth are the dangers the virus represents. Drawing on the legacy of purity discourses, everyone is exposed as unclean. Shen Fever and capitalist reality are as inescapable as the air one breathes, and it is already long tainted.

Thus, rather than *Telling it Like it Wasn't* as in the title of Gallagher’s work on alternate and counterfactual histories, *Severance* tells it like it was, like it is. While the novel may have an “if clause” (Gallagher 2) involving Shen Fever, its events do not read as a “what-if” or an “almost-was” (Schneider-Mayerson 71). Instead, *Severance*’s deviations from reality enable the hyper-visibility of ongoing conditions, rather than a speculation of alternatives. It functions closer to Paul K. Saint-Amour’s description of the

genre, which recognizes its ability to “warn about the fragility of this-worldly equilibriums and to expose inequities in our timeline through contrast or analogy” (1138). *Severance* plays up the trend Gallagher notes of how “social, cultural, technological, psychological, and emotional totalities that result from the alterations” aren’t much different from what one would expect to occur in reality (3), because in *Severance*’s case the changes simply amplify and make visible the workings of real systems. As Saraf writes, “Even at the end of the world, there is no ethical outside; capitalism structures choice, rendering itself an inevitability” (18). The fevered work away in their routine lives until they die. Survivors cling to consumerism for comfort. Candace seeks to make a new life for herself in the familiar space of a city. Change seems impossible.

Part of *Severance*’s work is to expose this reality. Drawing on Rebecca Solnit’s description of an “Angel of Alternate History,” in turn an adaptation of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, Tung proposes an angel who does not just “face backward” at what was or was not (548), but instead is “an angel of heterochrony” that “might speak of a differential concept and tactics of time, according to which we might slow or accelerate certain timelines in relation to other timelines, or rethink the timescales on which we are operating” (549). To do so involves a recognition that history and time are not one fluid, constant, consistent stream, and this works most clearly in texts featuring “side-by-side” but “desynchronize[d]” timelines (550), which allows for the perception of “the catastrophic processes—social, political, and environmental—currently ticking away at different rates and on different scales” (565). While *Severance* may be less of an extreme case than his examples, its widened perception enables such a line of thought by

juxtaposing Candace's memories against the post-apocalyptic present she has found herself in.

The perspective of Tung's angel allows for an awareness outside of the "eternal present born of the uneven expansion of capitalism," a description informed by "Marx's insight about the 'annihilation of space by time' in a synchronizing global market" and Neil Smith's argument that "'capitalism will continually produce and require unequal terrain and differential temporalities at every scale—globe, nation, region, city, neighborhood'" (551-2, 552). Though set entirely in the past, *Severance* represents such an eternal present through Shen Fever, in which repetitive labour perpetuates its own downfall without allowing those infected any awareness that it is occurring.

As a widespread force of inattention and harm, Shen Fever represents a type of slow violence, as described by Nixon. Resulting from a politics of memory and visibility reliant on "consequential forgettings," slow violence "occurs gradually and out of sight . . . is dispersed across time and space. . . neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (8, 2). A large part of Nixon's work is considering how such violence can be represented and confronted. Although he largely discusses examples from before the current "Chinamerican age" of "turbo-capitalism" driven by the two global superpowers (43, 4), the distorted senses of time, speed, and scale he considers are if anything only more distorted at the time of his text's publication (which coincides with *Severance*'s setting of 2011) and now. Injustices of slow violence are continually obscured by "media bias" and the interests of "turbo-capitalism" that determine what and who are worth showing and preserving, creating "forces of temporal inattention that

compound injustices of class, gender, race, and region” (30). Such forces, and the consequences of them, play out across the novel.

Shen Fever’s initially slow spread is worsened by such biases and their effects; not only is its severity initially dismissed, but the climate disaster of hurricane Mathilde (fictional but patterned after the real Hurricane Sandy) greatly accelerates its spread throughout New York. The mind-numbing daily routines Shen Fever imitates also reflect patterns that allow such slow violence to be ignored and/or downplayed. Because Shen Fever mimics the way that living under late-stage global capitalism means falling into routines and toiling away in the face of seemingly insurmountable issues, *Severance* functions less as alternate history and more as a dramatization of reality that makes slow violence visible; rather than alternate history, it is “alternative history” (Tung 550).

Candace’s earliest encounter with a fevered person is a woman who sits down in front of her TV, flipping through channels and laughing absently at each one, be it a report on the “widening income gap,” an ad for “[t]he latest MacBook,” or a doctor discussing how “cases of Shen Fever must be underreported because there were many who lived alone,” literally laughing at her own demise (156-7). In the media landscape, it all blurs together, and disaster becomes routine and commodified; Netflix co-opts the hurricane for a PR scheme and “The Death Knell, as we called the *Times* homepage [Shen Fever] victim count” becomes immensely and morbidly popular (214). Although Candace describes Shen Fever as “a disease of remembering,” it is a specific kind of memory in which those who suffer from it are “trapped indefinitely” (160). Their days “continue in an infinite loop” of routine, and they remain ignorant of everything except the tasks they repeat from rote memory, not even acknowledging the decay of their own

bodies (160). While not all are engaged in productive labour, the fevered's suspension in time and inattention make them ideal subjects ignorant even of the slow violence that affects them.

Slow violence is shown in the novel through the initial downplaying of Shen Fever's severity and in a pervasive awareness of the damage caused by capitalist culture, particularly due to its reliance on foreign labour and "outsourced suffering" (Nixon 22). In the first chapter, Candace is confronted with this reality when the slow violence of poor factory conditions has become visible: a "gemstone supplier . . . had unexpectedly closed. Several of their workers had developed various forms of lung diseases" (23). Candace "Googled *pneumoconiosis*" and describes "lungs shriveled up into morel mushrooms," creating a clear parallel to the fungal Shen Fever's origin in a similarly hazardous factory setting, despite the fact the conditions are technically "unrelated" (24). She then calls "the production editor at New Gate Publishing," for whose books the gems were meant, to "explain[] the situation" (24). "I don't want to sound like we don't care," the lady tells Candace, but pushes her to find a supplier that is still operating despite the issue (24). Their conversation displays "the calm voice of global managerial reasoning" Nixon describes in the opening of his text (1), another way of obscuring and justifying the results of slow violence. The appearance of morality, wielded by corporations, governments, and religious authorities alike, is a powerful guise, and one that is important to see past.

Gullander-Drolet writes that "[t]his exchange demonstrates the ease with which the inequities of global capitalism—which turn increasingly on the violent exploitation of workers in East and Southeast Asia—are folded into the rhythms of everyday life in the

US,” in which people seek “distance . . . from systems of violent exploitation in which we ourselves are embedded” (103-4). Though only briefly, she earlier acknowledges the novel’s representation of slow violence as key to this distancing and the upkeep of capitalism’s eternal present and short-term bias: “*Severance* mourns not the disappearance of an entire culture or linguistic system but rather the environmental slow violence that our system of global capitalism exercises on the bodies and communities of ‘the global poor’” (96). These aspects are also emphasized in Kayışcı Akkoyun’s discussion of New York in the novel and acknowledgement of the focus on “short-term solutions” in American cities, of which New York is the archetype (2). Candace being pregnant further emphasizes the dangers of thinking only in the short-term, drawing on legacies of reproductive futurism and desires to make the world better for future generations despite the fact that slow violence often means “externalized risks are outsourced to the unborn” via health problems and other delayed effects (Nixon 35).

That one of slow violence’s key forms is in exposure and health issues, and that purity politics crush movements like Occupy Wall Street, lend weight to representing the violence of capitalistic labour as a fungal virus that warps temporality. Further, the failure of the Occupy movement to cause change exposes the paradox created by the juxtaposition of the myth of progress on which capitalism relies and the eternal present it creates, which is interesting when considering “Mark Fisher’s claim, via Jameson and Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world th[a]n it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Gullander-Drolet 104). While the world as she knew it may seem to end around Candace, the programming of capitalist culture persists in her and others.

As noted, the novel begins with a prologue in which Candace details the early days of a group of survivors fleeing New York while gathering supplies and information, chocked full of sentences about what “we” did. But the prologue’s end reveals that Candace is relating events she was not present for, presumably based on what she has been told. Later in the novel, she similarly relates her parents’ memories as early immigrants and memories of her own early childhood which she admits that she should not be able to remember. These and even her more recent memories are often rendered in impossible detail, with rare acknowledgements of unsurety to remind readers her narration can’t be trusted. Along with setting up Candace’s self-conscious unreliability, the prologue pre-empts the shift to present tense that will occur later in the novel in its last passage: “The truth is, I had stayed in the city as long as I possibly could. The whole time, I had been half waiting for myself to turn, to become fevered like everyone else. Nothing happened. I waited and waited. I still wait” (7). The novel slips back into past tense for the first chapter but then moves back into present tense at the start of chapter nineteen, which opens “The days begin like this” and details the routine the survivors follow at the shopping mall they have laid claim to (220). Pregnant and forcibly confined, Candace describes “not working [as] maddening . . . The hours pass and pass and pass. Your mind goes into free fall, untethered from a routine. Time bends. You start remembering things. Past and present become indistinguishable” (222). The narrative to this point has thus been Candace’s reflections while confined, a jumble of recent and more distant memories she considers while reckoning with her past, present, and future. While the novel continues to dip into passages and whole chapters of memory that are written in past-tense, the present-tense plot line continues through to its end, where

Candace escapes the mall and, after running out of gas, walks towards the city of Chicago.

Her sense of time being distorted is apparent at this stage, but it is not a new, post-pandemic phenomenon. In a memory of leaving for work she relates in the first chapter, she explains how “[f]or a moment I wondered if I hadn’t just slept for months. Maybe I’d Rip-Van-Winkled my way out of a job. I would arrive to find someone else sitting in my office, my belongings in a box. I would return to my studio and find someone else living there. I would start over” (16). Another cultural reference similarly nods to fascinations with time later on, when Candace sees a young fevered girl flipping the pages of *A Wrinkle in Time* while holding the book upside down. *Severance* is keenly attuned to how culture shapes perceptions, shown in characters’ discussions of “collective memory (enshrined in movies, books, magazines, blogs, shopping catalogs)” and claims like “[w]hen you wake up in a fictitious world, your only frame of reference is fiction” (163, 29). Though seemingly innocuous, such statements emphasize the effectiveness of media and ingrained messaging and biases on one’s understanding of the world. Even in an age of widespread and high-speed internet access that should ensure issues greater visibility and recognition, the direction of attention and thinking elsewhere allows slow violence to perpetuate. The internet is described as “collective memory” and later as “the flattening of time” (114), echoing Nixon’s concerns around “accelerated connectivity” and “perpetual distraction” in the “age of onrushing turbo-capitalism, wherein the present feels more abbreviated than it used to—at least for the world’s privileged classes who live surrounded by technological time-savers that often compound the sensation of not having enough time” (12, 12, 8). Never having enough time is a struggle Candace and those

around her continually face, unlike the fevered with their lack of “dead” time. Instead, Candace in an American office and workers in Chinese factories alike become trapped in cycles of work, brief but insufficient respite, repeat, that seem equally inescapable.

Chapter 3: Double Consciousness, Vertical Transmission, and Lunar Possibilities

The novel focuses largely on America, and Candace notes her “quick, almost effortless assimilation” after joining her parents in the country (181). She appears to be largely disconnected from her Chinese heritage, especially after the early deaths of her parents. This disconnection is made particularly apparent during a business trip to a factory in China, where she is told her real name is reminiscent of the “very famous” poem “Thoughts in Night Quiet” by Li Bai, which is studied by “[a]ll the students in China” (88). An English translation of the poem is given both to Candace and in-text for readers, but her name is never revealed. Even when the survival group lists their “full birth certificate names” as part of a ritual, she gives hers as “Candace Chen,” clearly incorrect and standing out as the only one without a middle name (60). Before telling her “Chinese name” to Balthasar, the man who leads her on a tour of the printing factory she visits in Shenzhen and who later sends her the poem, she asks how he and his co-worker Edgar got their names. He clarifies that “[t]hey are not our real names . . . They are just our business names, when we work with Western clients” (88). As I will explain, Candace’s Chinese-American immigrant upbringing has molded her into a “good, capitalist subject” constantly in business mode (Ninh 2), dealing with her Westernized parents, self, and country, making the use of an English “business name” apt. While she may seem to have undergone a “severance from China” like her father (188), its influence, and the influence of the alleged severing, continue to loom over her and affect her senses of identity and temporality.

Though alienated from her heritage, Candace does maintain some connections to it. She describes her understanding of Mandarin as “regressive, simplistic. I used idioms

that only small children would use; my language was frozen in time” (86). Her tie is not severed but frozen, in stasis. Candace’s desire for stasis is emphasized throughout her Mandarin conversation with Balthasar. She struggles to keep up, substituting words and truths when needed: “My father is a . . . doctor, I said, because I didn’t know the words for housing loans risk analyst” (87). When Balthasar asks her if she speaks Chinese with her parents, she answers “[y]es, I speak Mandarin with my parents . . . thankful that the language does not require tenses distinguishing past, present, and future” (87). Mandarin allows her to create a sense of temporal stasis, eliding the reality of their deaths without having to lie. This is a choice she makes; the word “require” is key, as Chinese languages including Mandarin do have ways to situate actions in time, even though they are “without tense morphology” (Lin 1). There are words and markers that can be added when context will be insufficient for determining the time period in question (Lin 1-2), although linguists are still trying to determine the exact semantics of these markers as their uses seem to be fluid (Lin 13). The ability to elide the passing of time in Mandarin more so than in English is thus true but not inevitable.

Candace’s use of Chinese to evade both lying and telling the truth, and to distort the flow of time, parallels the way in which businesses (such as the company she works for) exploit foreign labour (in places such as the factory in which the conversation is held) by not valuing or appropriately paying for the time of workers and by ignoring the consequences of unsafe practices that reduce costs and/or production time. Such an outsourcing of labour is another way to hide the effects of slow violence, the consequences of which are emphasized in the gemstone bible fiasco and Shen Fever’s emergence. Facilitating this process is precisely the work of Spectra, the company

Candace works for, which acts as an intermediary between domestic companies and foreign producers, creating plausible deniability and allowing companies to maintain the appearance that they “care” while ensuring that things get made as quickly and cheaply as possible regardless of human or environmental risks. China, as with the Chinese language, is used to work around and/or ignore realities of time and responsibility.

Candace’s status as a bilingual speaker of Mandarin and English is further useful in articulating how the systems governing one’s reality alter one’s perception of time. In English, time is generally described as linear and horizontal, but in Mandarin, metaphors surrounding time can be vertical, with the past being upwards and the future being downwards (Miles et al. 598). In a study, Lynden K. Miles et al. found that sociolinguistic factors shaped the way monolingual English and bilingual Mandarin-English speakers organized pictures into timelines. In tests where they were given sequential images of people aging, one Chinese and one American, and asked to organize them, bilingual speakers often chose the culturally relevant format (602). They were able to envision time on two different axes in a way that was lost on monolinguals.

A notable extension of this research is that how one perceives of time has “the capacity to shape cognition and behavior” (602). As Albert Einstein posited, “Time and space are modes by which we think and not conditions in which we live” (qtd. in Miles et al. 598). Even if they are not conditions, and are perceptions society creates, these perceptions shape one’s experiences. Miles et al.’s research suggests that an internalized, culturally created sense of time subconsciously shapes how one thinks and acts. By extension, the normalization of language that stresses the comfort of routine, of essentially being frozen in time by repeating a pattern, could limit one’s ability to move

forward and to question the systems that enforce this norm, allowing capitalism to maintain its “eternal present.” As will be explored further, Candace inherited her reliance on routines from her mother and repeatedly emphasizes her attachment to them as a normal part of surviving the day-to-day demands of capitalist society.

The metaphorical conception of time as moving on a vertical axis is particularly notable given that the term “vertical transmission” is used medically to discuss movement from a pregnant mother to her child, which Emily Waples argues “widens the conceptual and temporal scopes” of *Severance* (133-4). The idea of “vertical transmission” can be extended beyond the physical and medical to movement of ideas between a parent and child, between one generation and the next, between the past and the future. Waples suggests that *Severance* “direct[s] attention [to] the socially and culturally directed experiences of pregnant people . . . who have been overwhelmingly represented in dystopian fiction—as in our society more broadly—as mere vehicles for the production and preservation of a certain social order” (133). Though there is little of society left, the novel’s ending leaves it unclear whether or not Candace (and her child) will perpetuate this trend. Bob, the leader of the group of survivors who confine her, certainly hopes she will, describing her pregnancy as “miraculous” for the group (167). He earlier muses on “the ensuing offspring created by [the group’s] diverse ethnic offerings” (5). That they will reproduce and persist is, in his mind, an inevitability.

Candace is linked to the future by her unborn child, and to the past by her mother, who urges her to create a future for them. While confined in the shopping mall, it is her mother that incites her to escape. She describes her first appearance thus: “in a visitation too lucid to be a dream, my mother comes in and sits next to me. The bed compresses

under her weight” (242). Similar descriptions reinforce the apparent reality of later visits, and yet Candace harbours some doubts: “It’s just strange now, how you speak in perfect English” (269). Her mother retorts that “I can’t communicate with you in your terrible Chinese,” before telling her that if she does “manage to escape, then it will be a long time before I see you” (269), suggesting that whatever is causing this connection will be severed when Candace is free. Regardless of whether her mother’s appearance is the result of Candace hallucinating or is a sort of haunting or ancestral connection is unclear and ultimately unimportant. That it shows the endurance of her connection to her mother is apparent, as is the strength of her mother’s influence in giving a hesitant Candace the push she needs.

The necessity and damage of obedience to one’s parents is a prominent theme in Asian-American literature, given its intense reality for the children of immigrant families. In her text on the subject, Ninh describes “the [Asian] immigrant nuclear family as a special form of capitalist enterprise,” “as a production unit . . . for a particular brand of good, capitalist subject” (2). This begins with placing children, and especially daughters, in a state of never-ending debt to their parents. Because one’s own success can be accredited to their parents, “whatever she makes or achieves *compounds* her debt,” for which “obedience is the first term of repayment” (34, 35). Using examples from biographies and literature, Ninh notes “very repetitious days” and “rigid temporal structuring” (22, 40), which can be seen in Candace’s descriptions of her own childhood and the “constancy” of the routine she followed with her mother (Ma 183). Ninh also notes “vertically transmitted trauma” from mother to daughter, with a warning that “the model of inherited trauma stops us short” because it is impossible to distinguish

inheritance from other harm and there is risk in reading a daughter as only an extension of her mother's failures (63). However, that this is a perpetuating, inherited, and traumatic cycle is clear.

Unlike many of those in the texts Ninh explores, Candace does not need to sever herself from such a system. Her parents are already deceased, and the rest of her family is far out of reach. Moreover, her childhood was generally less extreme. While her relatives and mother were strict, and she was sheltered as a child, her father was her "permissive parent," even allowing her to go to art school rather than pursue a more economically valued career (Ma 186). Candace seems to have entirely elided internalizing any duty to chastity, one of the most prominent forms of control Ninh describes (17). However, she does have a sense of duty to her parents and returns to care for her mother after her father's death. When her mother also passes, she at first elides her admonition to "be of use" (Ma 19), but eventually, though forced largely by necessity, gets a job and remains duty-bound to it even as the world collapses around her. Though she does not "do better or just as well as" her father (190), she does make herself of use within the capitalist system.

Drawing on the work of Lisa Park and Christine So, Ninh writes that "it is through economic registers that the Asian American subject finds expression in language and the Western nation-state" (6). The effects of this are most apparent on Candace's parents, especially her mother. As Justine Trinh writes, "Not only does she not want to assimilate, but she actively refuses to, as shown through her unwillingness to learn English. However, she slowly comes around to the idea through consumerism" (n.p.). Trinh quotes the novel: "her homesickness eased in department stores, supermarkets,

wholesale clubs, places of unparalleled abundance” (Ma 177). The continuation of this paragraph is also notable: “The solution was shopping, Zhigang [Candace’s father] observed. He was not trying to be reductive” (177). This behaviour is perpetuated within the family, as he encourages his wife’s consumerist habits, and Candace herself gleefully embraces American cuisine and products. To be American, it seems, is to be avidly consumerist.

The wider immigrant community also plays an important role in their adjustment, as Ruifang (Candace’s mother) finds a sense of belonging in the “Chinese Christian Community Church” which eventually leads to her fervent conversion (178). Although Candace does not convert to Christianity and prays only to appease her mother, the effects of encouraged consumerism take hold of her. Trinh writes that “she knows what clothes to wear and how to fit in . . . Yet, despite consuming the correct items, Candace cannot truly belong and remains foreign” in “her workplace” and in public, such as when “she is told to ‘go back to where [she] came from’ by an older man.” Largely, her exclusion is subtle, such as her unfulfilled desperation “to be an ‘art girl’” rather than work in bible production (Trinh). And yet she has a pervasive sense of being “alone,” even pre-pandemic, and seems unable to make stable connections or truly fit in anywhere (Ma 129). She describes herself as “rootless,” having “been an orphan for so long . . . searching for something that will never settle me” (287). She “want[s] something different for” her child, who “will be born untethered from all family except me, without a hometown or a place of origin” (287). Her child will not have a sense of exclusion from either culture, given that they no longer exist. All she will have is what she vertically inherits from her mother, a potential blessing and curse.

The stasis of Candace's ties to her heritage, weak but not entirely severed, influence her and cause her to subtly exhibit double consciousness in her liminal state. The term double consciousness was originally used by Du Bois to describe African-American experiences but has been extended to address Asian-American perspectives as well. Wang argues that Asian-American literature displays characters struggling with the "psychological confusion" of an internal "clash of two cultures" (89). For Candace, this manifests most apparently in her primary source of nostalgia, what she terms "Fuzhou Nighttime Feeling" (98). Though this feeling originated in her childhood wandering the streets of Fuzhou, it becomes distorted "because TV mixes with [her] dreams mixes with [her] memories" and she "misremember[s] everything" (97). She thus exhibits the "peculiar sensation" of "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" that Du Bois describes (9), as the American perspective of travel shows distorts her firsthand memories of China. But Candace seems to experience less of Du Bois's "twoness" of "warring ideals" (9) and more an extreme version of the "psychological confusion, emotional frustration, and cultural alienation" Wang describes (89). This manifests in her pervasive detachment from her surroundings and other people, but also in the Americanness of her most nostalgic memories, which taste like "ice-cold Pepsi" and feature "old-men in wife-beaters and plastic sandals, the teenagers in fake American Eagle. Senior citizen ladies . . . in pajama pants printed with SpongeBob or fake Chanel logos" (98, 97). Discussing this section, Gullander-Drolet writes that "the very personal nostalgia that Candace feels for Fuzhou is bound up, in certain ways, with broader networks of commodity capitalism that disrupt our sense of place, time, and even home" (102). As for her parents, who were constantly "performing their Americanness, perfecting it to a

gleaming hard veneer to shield over their Chinese inner selves” (Ma 187), consumerism acts as a comfort mechanism, a buffer, for those caught in-between and doomed to never quite fit.

Even more than her parents, Candace is caught in what Gullander-Drolet calls a “liminal position as a second-generation Chinese American” who “is never fully at home in either of the linguistic or national contexts she inhabits” (101, 96). This uncomfortable balance leads to the “psychological confusion” Wang describes, as Candace is drawn to aspects of both cultures but can never fully embrace them. Gullander-Drolet notes frequent nostalgic references in the novel to the “1980s, a decade that saw both a sharp increase in US economic involvement in East Asia and the concomitant emergence of a racialized ‘rising Asia’ discourse” (94), and thus an attachment to the past. This is cemented from the begging, with the “nostalgia-yellow” taxi Candace is found in by the other survivors, seeming “as if [she’d] driven a broken time machine right out of the eighties” (Ma 7). Gullander-Drolet also notes Candace’s nostalgia for and attachment to New York, “driven largely by a fantasy of the city that is shaped and overwritten by media depictions” (97); Candace explicitly states that she is drawn to “the illusion of New York more than . . . its actuality,” and yet it still compels her (Ma 9). This could possibly account for her remaining in the city so long, and yet her inability to completely accept or be accepted by it persists. She is aware of its myth, and unimpressed by its reality, priced out of an apartment once and knowing she will be again, and yet she stays long after its reasonably safe to be there. Given that Shen Fever is seemingly triggered by nostalgia, Serrano-Muñoz argues that “Candace’s particular identity dislocation apparently protects her from the sickness, but the price to pay for this is a distance from

her memories and affective ties” (1353-4). Perhaps because her identity is not fully grounded in any one place or even in reality, because she is rootless, Shen Fever cannot entirely take root in her.

That her mind may simultaneously conceive of time along different axes, complicating the repetitive and cyclical structures underlying the fever, is another possible explanation. However, Candace’s love for routine is frequently cemented. She relies on it as a comfort mechanism, including as a way to ignore the fact that she is pregnant. And yet these are not the routines that she remembers or longs for; Gullander-Drolet writes that “[t]hough Candace’s transition to an American identity is in some ways more seamless than that of her parents—she learns the language and cultural quirks more quickly—it is this sense of having consistency, routine, and familiarity ripped away that contributes to a feeling of perpetual homelessness” (100). Though she may find comfort in other routines, she can never feel properly grounded in them; they can only ever act as temporary buffers, rather than completely enthralling her. She longs for the past, but it is inaccessible, and she cannot find a permanently satisfying present or future.

It is a constant search for something to “settle” her, this feeling of being “rootless,” that she wants to protect her unborn child from, a child who she believes to be a girl, who she has named “Luna for her nocturnal habits” (226). It is in this name that one possible way forward presents itself in connections to the moon, lunar cycles, and alternate ways of timekeeping. Candace notes how “pregnancy messes up your sleep cycles” (279), information she relies on to obscure her escape attempt and proof that her unborn daughter is already altering her routines. Moreover, references to the moon and night surround Candace; it is a “Nighttime Feeling” that is her main source of nostalgia,

the company she visits in China is Phoenix Sun & Moon, and it is implied her real name may have something to do with it, given its connection to “Thoughts in Night Quiet,” which as given reads thus: “Seeing moonlight here at my bed / and thinking it’s frost on the ground, / I look up, gaze at the mountain moon, / then back, dreaming of my old home” (92). Interestingly, the origin of the name Candace is linked to a matrilineal succession tradition in Africa and also to meanings of purity/whiteness (see for example “Candace,” “Candace (given name),” Lawler). This lends further symbolic weight to the power/danger of vertical transmission, as it calls attention to what Candace has inherited from her mother and what she may pass to her daughter.

Nocturnal habits reject the nine to five schedule common to capitalist labour, and ties to the moon recall the Chinese lunar calendar and the importance placed on the Lunar New Year in Chinese culture. The moon thus offers the potential of a more natural conception of time that would both link Candace (and her child) to their heritage, pulling it out of stasis, and allowing them to break from the damaging capitalist conceptions of time they seem otherwise doomed to follow. But even this is dangerous, given that the Lunar New Year becomes a mandated break in the routine. As Candace learns while touring the factory, the workers live on-site “[e]xcept when they return to their hometowns for Chinese New Year. The printer shuts down for two weeks. Big holiday” (85-6). Asked if she celebrates, Candace replies “I’ll eat a moon cake,” being “purposely evasive” (86), once again eliding her pseudo-severance from her family and heritage. The mass-homecoming of the celebration is raised much later in the novel as a threat, given the risk of spreading Shen Fever that it poses (210); the routine break in routine that helps make it bearable becomes a way to ensure one is trapped in the routine forever.

Other references to the holiday, poised as foreign in the way it is referred to as “Chinese New Year,” take the form of nostalgic but distorted memories of her parents. For her father, the holiday evoked the height of bliss, the luxury of eating “two eggs” which was later eclipsed by the American realization that “[f]ried chicken is better” (188). For her mother, the recollection of eating eggs is part of a misremembering in which she believes “it was she who had grown up in the countryside . . . as if she had absorbed her husband’s memories as her own” and adopted his more stereotypical immigrant success story in place of her own story of moving from a well-paying stable job in China to scrounging for work in America to relying on her husband and then daughter (189). The holiday also offers some slight connection between Candace and her relatives abroad, who typically send her a card for the occasion, the information from which she uses to attempt to contact them amidst the pandemic to no avail (213). It seems her attempts at connection have come too late.

Perhaps any chance at hope left open at the novel’s conclusion comes not from the uncertainty of Candace once again returning to a city, but in the possibility that she could embrace the complexities and confusions of her temporal perceptions for Luna’s sake. Like her mother and the eggs, she mis-remembers Chicago through what she’s been told of it by Jonathan, Luna’s father, only to realize she visited once with her mother. There, Ruifang envisioned a future for the two of them, in which Candace would “stay at home” to “cook and clean” while she would “go to work” (289). But such a future is no longer possible, nor would it ever be desirable as something that perpetuates legacies of constricting routines and harm. Better would be a future in which two eggs, fried chicken, and time to visit home are not luxuries reserved for holidays, are not simply mandated

breaks from routine, but part of a more natural cycle where wellbeing is appreciated. But whether Candace, caught in the liminal space of her own memory, can prevent a vertical transmission of the systems she has inherited is dubious at best.

Chapter 4: Regulation, Routine, and Romanticization

Even though Candace leaves behind the repressive structures of the group that confined her, it seems unlikely she will be able to escape the influences of capitalist culture and embrace alternatives, given their influence over her. An affinity for mind-numbing routines, integral to obscuring and enforcing elusive slow violence, is central to her character, and the effective and pervasive nature of routine in distorting one's sense of time is clear both in her characterization and that of others. As Candace explains of the hurricane, "it took a force of nature to interrupt our routines" even briefly, promising workers the reprieve and free time they crave: "And even if we didn't get around to it on that day, our free day, maybe it was enough just to feel the possibility that we could if we wanted to" (199). The promise of something better in an unreachable future makes the eternal and repetitive present more bearable, as does romanticizing the past.

Chapter fourteen consists of loosely tied together memories punctuated by the refrain of "I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine" (150; see also 151, 159). It begins with the line "[f]ive years pass working for the same company," emphasizing the ease with which Candace, once an artistic wanderer of New York, has adapted to a labour-centric lifestyle (150). This routine allows her to ignore anything unpleasant, including the realities of the workers her company helps exploit, her fear after contact with a fevered woman, and her surprise pregnancy. The repeated phrase "I got up. I went to work in the morning" appears also when Candace continues to work despite the city devolving into "an impossible place to live" (210; see also 211). Later on, the phrase appears at the beginning of chapter twenty-two, when Candace gets temporarily stuck in the office elevator, prompting her eventual

decision to move in and continue to carry out her contract duties, despite there being no actual work to do.

Terrified after escaping, Candace calls 911 and “a woman with a tired voice” answers (250). Despite the fact that no one is “hurt or in danger at the moment” she says she will “send someone to check it out,” but “[w]e’re short staffed . . . The city is curtailing all its services” (250). As noted in thesis chapter two, the government is generally a prominent source of concern in alternate history texts, but it is almost entirely absent in *Severance*. Rather than distrusting the government, Candace is just mad she cannot rely on it: “The city should do its job, I said, suddenly angry, frustrated” (250). Given the 911 operator’s concern about there being no oversight in the building, Candace calls her boss but gets no response. This should be unsurprising; in an earlier incident, her coworkers Blythe and Delilah try to convince her to leave for the countryside with them, citing how their bosses are absent and the social safety net is crumbling: “[w]e wait an hour for the shuttle bus already. The hospitals are short-staffed” and there is “a problem with city employees leaving” as people flee the city en masse “for the safe pastures of the countryside” because they had “seen it done in the movies, though no one could say which one exactly” (238, 3, 3). They are driven by media and cultural influences rather than duty or actual guidance.

In place of shuttle buses, Candace takes a taxi to get to work. The protection of property, meanwhile, has been taken over by a private company, and soon “Sentinel guards” are the only people Candace sees, serving as a reminder, as her taxi driver puts it, “That there’s still civilization” (261). But this does not last, and soon even the guards are gone; yet Candace remains until she accidentally locks herself out of the office and

discovers it is the day her contract expires anyway. Even before the pandemic, corporations and media have seemingly taken the government's place as regulatory authorities, though government power is brought up on occasion, such as during the anniversary of 9/11 when Candace listens to President Barack Obama's speech and remembers "how, after it had happened, President Bush told us all to go shopping" (212). This further emphasizes the link between capitalist enterprise and government. And even when corporations are no longer, habit and routine perpetuate the capitalist system and the self-policing of behaviour continues. Candace still goes to work, creating meaning and duties for herself by running her blog NY Ghost.

Although originally an artistic project, her blog becomes a significant source of candid information in the later stages of the pandemic, righting earlier wrongs. As Candace explains: "By late October, all major media outlets, including the *Times*, had stopped publishing. Visitors trickled into NY Ghost. Overwhelmingly, they were from Kihnu, Iceland, Bornholm, and other cold-climate islands I had never heard of, where the fever had not reached" (256-7). Earlier in the novel, survivor Janelle suggests that she'd "rather move to Scandinavia if [she's] going to live in the cold," with the group noting that "Finland and Iceland were still baseline functioning, at least the last that we had heard . . . They had also been among the first countries to cut off all imports from Asia, had imposed a travel ban" (109). While this largely emphasizes their geographic and environmental advantages given the belief the fever spreads slower in cold climates, the social-democratic aspects of the so-called "Nordic model" of government are also notable when considering these countries' potential survival. According to A. Midttun and N. Witoszek, these aspects are rooted in "cultural and religious norms and values" that

embrace both collaborative and more capitalist competition-based methodologies, allowing for “resilience under stress” (882, 882). With more robust social safety nets and healthcare systems, Nordic countries stand a better chance than many of surviving the pandemic, but the practicality of any country being self-sufficient under global capitalism is dubious. Still, these countries remain a far-distant beacon of hope, but one that is quickly forgotten given the impossibility of accessing them.

Despite the relative absence of government in the novel, politics arise in the spreading and policing of information. Early in the novel, Candace is given “a handout, printed on Spectra letterhead, labeled ‘Shen Fever FAQ’” (18-9), two paragraphs of which are given in text. The entire document follows later, making up the two-page entirety of chapter thirteen, ending with “[s]ee cdc.gov for more details” (149). But information is a controlled resource. After the hurricane greatly exacerbates the diseases spread, America starts to take Shen Fever seriously, and the government proposes a “travel ban of visitors from Asian countries” that passes and goes “into effect immediately” (215). Meanwhile, “the *New York Times* homepage listed a count of U.S. Victims” but it doesn’t last, “pulled at the request of government officials . . . By the end of August, it was difficult to get an accurate victim count . . . The last public count had been at 237,561. It had become so obscure and shrouded in controversy that journalists filed FOIA requests” (210, 214). Whether these requests are fulfilled is uncommented on, as Candace seems more interested in the morbid drama of “The Death Knell” than in collecting facts at this point, and she expresses little concern at the government’s meddling (214). These governmental failings also mirror corporate ones, as corporations amass more power; Spectra management similarly obscures information and fails to

provide adequate support, though they do enforce some regulations, such as mandatory masking and eventually allowing most staff to work from home.

Fears of information control and inaccuracy are initially raised against China by Jonathan, who tells Candace that “[s]ome are saying more than a third of the population of China are fevered,” insisting that “[t]he state media in China controls the optics . . . Maybe they don’t want to incite mass panic, but I’ll bet it’s also because they don’t want foreign investors to pull out of their economy” (200). This language is notably mirrored by Spectra’s later decision to keep some staff in the office at the height of the pandemic for better “optics” (217). At the time, Candace thinks that Jonathan is paranoid but admits she is uninformed. Though she never asks after or verifies his sources, she later gains insider information of her own when she reaches out to Balthasar for work, and he informs her that “[s]eventy-one percent of [Phoenix Sun and Moon Ltd.’s] workforce has become fevered” (239). His own daughter ill, he says “[l]eave. Spend time with your family” (240), but Candace has none she can reach. She does, however, have her unborn child to consider, and decides to try and make a future for her, leading her to leave the city only to later return to one.

Even when society has almost entirely crumbled, traditional structures and behaviours live on, perpetuated personally and socially. When the group goes into buildings to gather resources, the men go first to check for bodies, and Candace describes their roles thus: “The men hunted, and the women gathered” (64). The system they have adopted reproduces stereotypical notions that, despite their historical inaccuracy (see, for example, Anderson et al.), have been used to enforce gender norms and heteropatriarchy. Candace never questions this, describing her “trance” state while sorting through supplies

as “the feeling [she] like[s] best about working” (65). Their days “continue in an infinite loop” of travel, and once they reach the mall it continues similarly: “Adhering to the typical workweek schedule, however ridiculous, feels strangely comforting” (160, 221). Although they are stealing rather than buying, and their work is less traditional, they fall back on familiar ideals and consumer habits.

The “facility” of the mall is in itself an important symbol. Of course, it pays homage to classic links between zombies, capitalism, and consumerism as in *Dawn of the Dead* (see Kayışcı Akkoyun; Saraf). But it also highlights the lingering attachment to old structures and systems. Bob insists on going to the mall in which he invested, and Candace questions if “he think[s] owning this place still mattered?” (164). He also has a personal and nostalgic link that motivates his desire to settle there: he calls it the place he spent “more time [at] as a kid than anywhere else” in order to avoid his parents fighting (246), emphasizing how this routine was a comforting and distracting mechanism for him. This perhaps partly explains why they go to the mall despite its long-term impracticality, which mirrors capitalist thinking that focuses on maximizing short-term profit and ignores long-term effects like those of slow violence such as pneumoconiosis and climate change.

Giving into nostalgia comes at a cost, as Bob starts to develop symptoms that are or at least mimic Shen Fever, wandering the mall at night in a trance-like state and waking up entirely unaware of having done so. A similar fever-related drive towards the nostalgic leads group member Ashley to her demise, when they camp out near her parents’ home and she sneaks off with a small group to retrieve “a whole ounce” of weed “in pristine condition” (119). Instead, Ashley ends up fevered, trying on clothes and

“rehears[ing] her sexuality, informed by the most obvious movies and women’s magazines” (125). They find the weed, “a tiny nugget riddled with twigs and seeds,” a far cry from what she promised (127). These examples illustrate the corrupting influence of a romanticized, nostalgic view of the past, useful for maintaining the status quo but dangerous when it causes other important factors and the truth to be ignored or dismissed. As Nixon writes, “displacements smooth the way for amnesia,” be they “temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and[or] technological” (7). With distance, the past becomes distorted and the potential for future change can be stunted, allowing slow violence to continue unhindered. When that distance is closed, reality can be too much to bear, and routine coping mechanisms become necessary.

Another tool of repression and distraction is religion, closely tied to capitalist culture. Candace works in Bible production, “the purest form of product packaging, the same content repackaged a million times over, in new combinations ad infinitum” (23). While to her the Bible is an object she sees as “varied, assorted offal” that she helps coordinate the assembly of (23), its influence is hard to understate, as is its status as a symbol of consumption, emphasized in such descriptions. Emrah Atasoy and Thomas Horan note that the “feverishly repetitive cycle” of repackaging the Bible exists in tension “with the popular notion that the free market perpetually produces fresh innovations” (246). Moreover, it is notable that, as Anna Muenchrath writes, “the U.S. has outsourced even its most fetishized emblem of civilization – the mass production of the written word (and the Word) – to China, which is where it originated anyway” (190). American independence proves itself to be anything but, and yet an obsession with cost-reduction and the need to distance themselves from the slow violence involved makes

outsourcing even the “manufacture [of] the emblematic text” of “Christian Euro-American ideologies” worthwhile (Ma 83).

Christianity is easily implicated in the justification and perpetuation of capitalism. Atasoy and Horan, drawing on the Marxist-informed work of Jeremy Cartette and Richard King, explain how “the displacement of religion by capitalism is a modern tendency” and “the faith-based reasoning appropriate to religious practice has become an integral component of corporate capitalism” (236). Atasoy and Horan argue that characters in the novel face “destructive patterns” endemic to “religion, capitalism, and Shen Fever” and display “a strong inclination to succumb to all three” (250). Though Ruifang dies before the fever spreads, Candace documents her mother’s descent into both consumerism and Christianity, as “need transforms into belief” and she makes “prayers [that] began as requests, sometimes bargains” (180). Candace describes prayer as “an important ritual [to her mother], the one routine that granted her a sense of control” (180). The social environment surrounding organized religion, so vital to her mother, also encourages consumerism, as she seeks to keep up appearances. Religion later becomes a tool Bob wields over the group of survivors as justification for their actions and consumerism, claiming that they are “chosen” survivors and Candace’s baby is “miraculous” (32, 167). Ultimately Christianity is one of many influences that surround Candace without having a real hold on her; she may help produce Bibles, and flip through them occasionally, but for her they are a means to an end of survival on a practical, capitalist level and nothing more. She has other routines to rely on for comfort and to distract her from reality, and she has a job to do.

Chapter 5, Conclusion: Candace, Luna, and the End of the World

Near the end of the novel, Candace explains how she once tried to quit working at Spectra because she could not “see [herself] here forever,” but after examining high-end products she assumes to be artisanal and finding them labelled “Made in China . . . Bangladesh . . . Pakistan,” she realizes that “[n]o matter where you go, you can’t escape the realities of the world” and returns to her position (275-6). The forces of short-term profit and endless consumerist drives are impossibly oppressive. Even when the world seemingly ends, the survivor group tries to uphold the status quo. Ultimately, then, the novel seems to be “[a]s much immigration story as it is a post-apocalyptic confirmation that we’d sooner believe the end of the world than the end of capitalism” because “[e]ven at the end of the world, there is no ethical outside; capitalism structures choice, rendering itself an inevitability” (Saraf 12, 18). Gullander-Drolet also notes this connection as quoted earlier (104), and Cherniavsky similarly writes that “[t]he final severance [the novel] envisions—the break with capitalist sociality, as the human population succumbs to the fever, infrastructure collapses, cities empty, commodities go to waste— turns out, yet again, to be no real severance at all” (61). However, there is room left for interpretation; Muenchrath describes the novel as having a “radically open ending” (199), and Waples writes that “[e]ntering a city evacuated of these schedules, these rhythms, these systems, Candace seems on the cusp of a narrative without a template. Provocatively, this is where Ma chooses to end. In so doing, she hands the task of imagining an alternative future over to us” (128). Although more is not given, “Ma’s novel imagines the possibility of radical severance from a past world, with the swift

dissolution of our ‘impossible systems’” (Waples 128); and yet Candace never actually achieves this, leaving its feasibility questionable.

In sharply exposing the damaging consequences of capitalistic consumerism and the pervasive mentality of repetitively working oneself to death, and by bringing attention to the outsourced and obscured consequences of labour that companies such as Spectra rely on, *Severance* is a prescient and relatable novel far beyond the ways in which it predicted the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Filtered through a Chinese-American narrator, caught between the countries that dominate the “Chinamerican age” of “entangled rivalry, mutual dependence, and mutual mistrust” in which “the very conditions of life” are compromised and exploited (Nixon 43), the novel makes slow violence visible. Though complicit in its spread, Candace remains aware of the way global capitalism works and continues to question it even as she submits, including when she questions Bob’s continued attachment to his own property rights but not those of others. Through continued and varied critiques, the novel provides its audience with some inoculation against the system Shen Fever represents by exposing slow violence and exploring its effects. Nixon writes that “[a] major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effect” (3). It is by taking advantage of Candace’s perspective that the novel achieves this.

As an Asian-American product of the Chinese diaspora, influenced by her double consciousnesses and her inability to truly belong anywhere or attach herself to anything, and as a pregnant woman desiring better for her child, Candace feels the full effects of capitalism’s overpowering forces. She is caught in an “eternal present” where the future

seems impossible to reach and the past is romanticized in stasis so as to make ongoing conditions seem enduring, but her sources of nostalgia are out of reach and partly fictional, and her senses of time and identity are fractured. As Saraf writes, “*Severance* provides as many critiques as it does openings” and exposes how “[c]apitalism’s foundational racialization and coloniality are inherently spatiotemporal, and our solutions must come from new spacetimes, new understandings of place and how we move through it and build kinship within it” (22). Candace’s hyper-awareness of how the world works, of her own nostalgia and distance from it, and her senses of identity and temporality leave an uncertainty that is impossible to ignore as she walks towards the city and muses on what cities mean, driven by her memories and her mother (who helped indoctrinate her in the first place) and yearning to create a future for her own daughter.

Perhaps Luna, with “nocturnal habits” that disrupt her mother, is enough to help Candace escape the Shen Fever-esque capitalist cycle she has lived in thus far and make a new one. She has the chance to finally create something of value; unlike in her position at Spectra, where she was aiding in the production of something ultimately meaningless to her, Candace is literally creating a new life, and has the potential to make that life a better one. Luna presents a potential catalyst for Candace to end her stasis and move forward into the future, now that all ties have been severed and it is up to her to create something so that they are not entirely rootless. Maybe this is pointless optimism, and Candace would be ultimately unable to embrace complexities and “psychological confusion,” unable to escape her routines and the eternal present to move forward/downward into the future. Maybe her belief in capitalism’s inescapability is too strong a self-fulfilling prophecy. The ending is left open, and thus Candace’s fate does not really matter; it is

what one makes of the questions that remain that does. After all, as a not-so-alternate history taking place in the past, we are now living the future left open. Stylized with spores on the cover, title page, and making up the numbers for each chapter, *Severance* suggests readers are already infected with Shen Fever or rather what it represents; but in drawing attention to the disease, the novel has the potential to provide some aid or resistance, if not a cure. But can Candace, or anyone, only imagine the end of the world, and not of capitalism? Can we only imagine the end of capitalism as the end of the world? Can we imagine a different future, even if it still takes place in a city? Or is humanity too stuck in Shen Fever-esque loops, unable to stop or even properly acknowledge the decay surrounding us? Is severance possible?

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