Colliding Forms in Postapocalyptic Novels of Migration

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Abstract

In this paper, I offer a comparison between the forms of migration fiction and postapocalyptic fiction. I argue that the form of "binary time" (Kaup 2021) typical of postapocalyptic narratives and that of the loop are both to be found in migration narratives too, where the narration moves back and forth to the time before and after the journey to the new country. This correspondence can be observed through Ling Ma's 2018 work *Severance*. The novel foregrounds loop and binary time also by showcasing the intergenerational dialogue at play between the protagonist and her parents who migrated from China to the United States, between the young survivors and the older leader in the post-pandemic world that *Severance* stages. Loops and binary time are only disrupted through its ending in which the novel envisions new futurities to navigate the uncertainties that migrating in our present time entails.

Keywords: New Formalism, loop narratives, postapocalyptic fiction, migration, *Severance*

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'Crisis' and Intergenerational Dialogue in Postapocalyptic Fiction and Fictions of Migration

In the last few years, postapocalyptic fiction has known an unprecedented popularity, possibly due to the current anxieties related to climate change, and more recently, to the Covid-19 pandemic. Think about Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, which was adapted into a successful tv series; Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which was also turned into a film; or *The Last of Us*, the TV series that stems from the popular eponymous videogame. These stories follow a more or less stable template. The protagonists are a group, often simply just a handful of protagonists who venture into the newly metamorphized and threatening world. Often, the reader is provided with a series of analepses which offer a glimpse into the characters' previous lives; in other cases, we are given limited information about the world as it was before or even about the apocalyptic event itself. The narrative proceeds as a journey, a movement from one place that has become unsafe to a possibly better, more welcoming one. Another characteristic of these narratives is that the protagonists are often generations apart, often parent and child. This dynamic offers multiple perspectives on how to face inhospitable and dangerous times and spaces. Moreover, it succeeds in accommodating and teasing out our unspoken fears of extinction as it forces us to expand our view of time after us and imagine what Kathleen Woodward calls 'generational time' (Woodward 2020: 54). Generational time is a way of thinking of the future as a time that includes the lives of multiple generations after ours; embracing this temporality is a means of understanding the urgency of taking action against climate change.

Migration too is connected to discourses around intergenerational dialogue: observing the complex relationships between first- and second-generation migrants is crucial to our understanding of what it means to relocate and belong to more than one country. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed considers how, in representations of migration, the first generation's desires are associated with the culture of origin and the second generation's with the culture of destination

(Ahmed 2010: 149). This tension is at the center of many narratives of migration and generational time is also a productive concept to be applied in this context.

This essay connects postapocalyptic fiction and fictions of migration by focusing on a specific point of convergence between these two corpora: fictions of migration and postapocalyptic fictions often show the same form, namely binary time. Binary time is exemplified by the distinction between time before and after the catastrophe, before and after the journey to the new country. When postapocalyptic fiction encounters stories of migration, they generate what Caroline Levine calls a 'collision' (Levine 2015: 18) between the binary time and the loop. Apart from fostering discussions on intergenerational dialogues, these two corpora share other convergences that can be best observed in Ling Ma's debut novel *Severance* which brings a postapocalyptic narrative into conversation with a narrative of migration. After an overview of the common formal and thematic patterns of postapocalyptic fiction and fictions of migration, I will illustrate the two formal templates (loops and binary times) at work in postapocalyptic fictions of migration; finally I will move on to the analysis of the novel. This essay seeks to demonstrate how the encounter between postapocalyptic fiction and fictions of migration can both foster different ways to envision future communities and shed light on what it means to migrate in the present century.

Convergences in Postapocalyptic Fiction and Fictions of Migration

In this essay, I use the term speculative fiction (SF) to indicate fictions set in a possible, alternative world, that allow us to reflect on our present situation, and make use of what Darko Suvin famously called 'cognitive estrangement' (1988: 45). By having the readers distance themselves from reality, SF manages to make them question it and observe it from a critical perspective (Nodelman 1981: 24). Similarly, when analyzing SF from a critical posthumanist perspective, Stefan Herbrechter urges critical theorists to take SF as a 'mode of awareness' (Csicsery-Ronay qtd. in Herbrechter 2013: 123) that can help us on two different levels. On the one hand, it allows us to acknowledge how science and technology are already changing our reality and our embodied experience; on the other, it helps us keep track of the changes in 'moralities, taboos, and values' (Herbrechter 2013: 125) which are ongoing in our present society. As a particular kind of SF, postapocalyptic fiction is particularly well suited to raise ethical questions and 'invite readers/viewers to speculate on their own moral choices' (Gymnich 2019: 68). Similarly, in his essay 'The Great Displacement', Ben De Bruyn considers how migration is becoming one of the thematic focal points of postapocalyptic fictions which in his view 'encourage readers to consider climate and migration crises as democratic

challenges rather than savage spectacles (the great displacement, not the migration apocalypse)' (2020: 4).

In Chapter 3 of his 2021 book, *Speculative Epistemologies*, John Rieder reports how indigenous fiction has frequently been read as SF and offers an analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, an indigenous novel that has entered the SF canon. In a similar fashion, I want to argue that contemporary novels of migration show thematic and formal patterns that are analogous to postapocalyptic fiction. Firstly, we can consider the setting: while fictions of migration are set in multiple locations, given the displacement or relocation of the protagonists, in postapocalyptic fictions the location can ontologically be the same but has undergone a radical change due to the catastrophic event that has reshaped it. It follows that, from the perspective of the migrant/survivor, a complete readjustment to the new environment is required, and the same can be said for the main character in a novel of migration.

Thematically too, fictions of migration and postapocalyptic fiction have aspects in common: there is the urgency, in both cases, to recreate a sense of community lost after the departure from one's own country, or from the loss of the people closer to us because of humanity's quasi extinction. There is also a need to resort to memory as well as to the imagination, to find new strategies for survival, new lifestyles that can make one feel part of the new world one is inhabiting. Intergenerational discourse is also present in both corpora. In fictions of migration, the decision to leave is often taken to grant children a better future than the one available in the country of origin. As mentioned earlier (Ahmed 2010), first-generation migrants often represent the past, the cultural traditions and roots from the country of origin, whereas second-generation migrants often represent the future, with their gradual assimilation in the culture of the country of arrival. In postapocalyptic fiction, the older generation tries to keep the memories of the past world alive for the younger generation, which displays little or no memory of it.[1] Further, in both postapocalyptic and fictions of migration, parenthood is also a frequent issue related to the intergenerational discourse.[2]

One of the concerns raised by scholars working on climate change and the Anthropocene is that preoccupation with the future of the younger generations tends to be linked to a sort of ancestral (and seemingly inevitable) interest in perpetuating one's own lineage. Adeline Johns-Putra sees it as one of the limits of parental care ethics, contending that

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[1] See Adeline Johns-Putra's analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in her *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (2019: 56-81).
[2] In my PhD thesis, I also discuss the postapocalyptic novel of migration, *The Wall*, by John Lanchester (2019) in the same analytical framework presented here for *Severance*.

parental care ethics is translatable into a limited position of concern that, interestingly, resembles the biological argument for posterity – that is, the perpetuation of genes. When expressed as a paternalistic attitude to the future as a version of the needs of the present and as a parochial concern with the future as lineage, parental care ethics approximates genetic survivalism. (2019: 59-60)

On the other hand, Kathleen Woodward admits that '[a]t this point in time, when the survival of the human species is at stake, we need to imagine a future in terms of biological reproduction' (2020: 55). Combining reflections on fictions of migration and postapocalyptic fiction can be a productive way to think of these tensions. For instance, it is true that most people on the move choose to leave in order to grant a better future to their own children—and this is also one of the central themes of *Severance*—and hence think in terms of parental care. However, migration can generate different kinds of dynamics that affect the way people on the move are able to think of younger and future generations. In her study on Chinese care workers in France, Winnie Lem investigates the paradox of migrant women leaving their own children to the cares of grandparents, to go work as nannies for children in the host countries. '[M]any migrant mothers […] lamented their inability to devote this time of life to raising their children' (2018: 198) observes Lem, and this often results in a disrupted perception of space and time as the commodified care of being a nanny requires different rhythms than the attempt of being 'present' as mothers from afar (2018: 201). In cases like this, migrant mothers transfer their parental care to children who are not their own, still caring for younger generations but not biologically related.

In a study on transpacific migration, Anne-Christine Trémon examines migrant families' trajectories in their relocations across countries in the attempt to benefit from the country of arrival's economic and social opportunities. In this context, she speaks of 'flexible kinship' to refer to a way to look at kinship 'as a resource that can be mobilized in larger social fields' (2018: 89). In her words:

flexible kinship draws attention to the specific uses that are made of kinship in the context of migration and diaspora: the adjustment to cultural, political and legal borders that lead to changes in family forms and in the relations between kin. The form the family takes and the nature of the relation between its members are the product of these adjustments. (2018: 99)

If, in the context of migration, the concept of flexible kinship is useful to observe how people on the move embrace flexible family relations in order to benefit from advantages in different socio-political environments, the same concept could be applied in combination with Woodward's generational time: being able to conceive of kinship as something that can be extended to non-biologically related persons makes it easy to think about future generations regardless of our blood relation to them. Similarly, thinking about caring for non-biologically related children, as is the case of the Chinese care workers in France, allows us to conceive taking care of and caring about the next generations' future, and hence the planet today. This dynamic can be observed in many postapocalyptic fictions where non-biologically related survivors all come together to protect and care for a member of the younger generation, not without controversial outcomes.[3] Both fictions of migration and postapocalyptic fiction can then foster creative ways to rethink our relationship to future generations.

In addition, the representation of temporality has common traits in both fictions: postapocalyptic fiction, follows a 'script of binary time' (Keller qtd. in Kaup 2021: 7): 'the present world is coming to a catastrophic end, which clears the way for the emergence of another world that is radically dissimilar' (Kaup 2021: 7).[4] Hence, we are faced with a time before the catastrophe, which in most cases corresponds to the world as we know it, and a world after the apocalypse, in which little or nothing is left of the world as we know it, or as the main characters in the novel know it. Fictions of migration also often present a script of binary time: there is a world before the journey, what is commonly referred to as country of origin, and a world after the journey, the country of arrival, that requires a whole new set of skills and a series of adjustments and survival strategies from the protagonists.

At this point, an important clarification needs to be made. Although the script of binary time is indeed a temporal feature that presupposes a 'time before' and 'after', that distinction does not imply that the plot needs to be temporally linear. More often than not, in fact, the narratives unfold in nonlinear fashion also by employing flashbacks and flashforwards. An example of this in postapocalyptic fiction, for instance, can be found in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, where the time before the zombie apocalypse is often recalled by the protagonist in flashbacks, and in stories of the life 'before' that the characters tell each other. In fictions of migration, *Open City* by Teju Cole and *I, The Divine* by Rabih Alameddine are examples of clear distinctions between 'time before' and 'after' that follow nonlinear patterns. In the first, memories of the narrator's past in Nigeria emerge

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[3] See Aimee Bhang's analysis of *Children of Men* in her work *Migrant Futures* but also my analysis in the next pages of the way Candace's pregnancy is welcomed by Bob in *Severance*.

[4] Keller is not the only scholar to observe the binary form of postapocalyptic fiction. Lubomír Doležel employs the phrase 'dyadic worlds' in his 1998 work on possible worlds theory, *Heterocosmica*.

through dreams and fleeting digressions from the main narrative as proper flashbacks. In the second, chapters alternate randomly between the protagonist's time in Lebanon and the United States.

As we are about to see in the case study, when postapocalyptic fictions deal with migration, as in the case of the novels of 'great displacement' observed by De Bruyn, binary time is not the only temporal characteristic that emerges in the narrative. Loops become prominent not only in the perception and understanding of time in the narrative but also in the way the narrative itself is constructed.

Forms of Time

In recent years, literary analysis is shifting its attention back to the concept of form through New Formalism. New Formalism seeks to demonstrate how formal analysis (such as the methodology of close reading can be) can reveal specific historical and political conditions. In Caroline Levine's words 'forms matter… because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in given context' (2015: 5). Levine's seminal work, *Forms*, defines the concept as 'all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference' (2015: 3). Levine gives herself the task of 'enrich[ing] and deep[ening] new formalism' by paying attention to forms' 'portability across time and space' (13). Forms' portability is also crucial here because forms' ability to 'migrate across contexts' (13) allow us to smoothly slide back and forth between literary and political discourses. To look for forms is 'to look for principles of organizations' (13), and despite the daring and often boundless nature of postapocalyptic narratives, they too present patterns, such as the script of binary time that has been mentioned in the previous section.

Levine also introduces the phenomenon of 'collision' defined as 'the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology' (18). The script of binary time introduced earlier is a form that pertains to both postapocalyptic fiction and fictions of migration. When postapocalyptic fiction deals with migration – as in the novels of the great displacement examined by De Bruyn – binary time collides with another form, that of the loop. The collision between binary time and loop, as we are about to see, redirects the focus of the narrative towards the difficulties of moving in a hostile environment, or adapting to a new environment. In *Severance*, loops also trace analogies between the experience of difficult movement of the older and the younger generations.

In his 2021 work *Narrating the Mesh*, Marco Caracciolo investigates forms of narration in the Anthropocene and distinguishes between linear and nonlinear forms. Nonlinear forms seem to

counter our basic understanding of narration since, '[a]t a basic level, narrative establishes connections between events in temporal, causal, and thematic terms. These connections are at the heart of narrative sequentiality' (33). The loop, alongside discontinuous progression, the network— also investigated by Levine—and the rhizome, is mentioned among the nonlinear forms that can be found in contemporary narratives on the Anthropocene (Caracciolo 2021). The loop can be observed in postapocalyptic narratives of migration: the journey of the migrant/survivor is characterized by the repetitiveness of the travel experience, of finding a seemingly safe place to settle in, only to discover its hostility and having to move again, thus starting the quest for a new home from scratch.

At this point, it is important to clarify what I intend with 'loop'. The most straightforward definition of loop is what is commonly known as time loop. A time loop is the kind of 'groundhog day' narrative in which a protagonist lives a day, or a set period of time, all over again for a certain amount of repetitions, until they manage to break out of the loop. As Wibke Schniedermann (2023) observes, these kinds of time loops, which she defines as 'involuntary time loops' or 'ITL' are rooted in an idea of self-improvement:

> Reliving the past holds the wholesome, therapeutic promise of correction
> and improvement. Time loops make all of this possible in fiction, but they
> do more than that. […] The ITL hero does not simply get the proverbial
> second chance, she gets a potentially infinite number of chances, as many
> as it takes to get it right. Witnessing all the ups and downs and failed
> attempts provides emotional relief for the audience while the temporal
> anomaly answers another wish that remains unfulfillable in the audience's
> reality: to get the self-improvement over with without having to spend years
> or decades of one's life on it. (Schniedermann 2023: 292)

Involuntary time loops imply an experience of time travel for the protagonist who, in most cases, has something to gain from the repetition of the same day just as readers gain emotional relief from the breakdown of the loop and also a possible closure.

The loop form that I examine in *Severance* does not envision time travel. Time progresses through a more or less linear sequence of events which are different from one another, but in which the structure of the events remains the same. In *Severance*, the protagonist Candace perceives every day as the same day, although her story evolves. She makes no attempt at self-improvement, and has no intuition that, if she improves her behavior or changes something in the way she faces

the everyday, she can gain from it. In the narrative, this 'systemic' loop is indicated through formulaic sentences (such as 'I woke up. I went to work in the morning', of which I speak more extensively in the section dedicated to the novel), and it is a marker of the capitalist system (Martin 2019) that resists the pandemic, and that Candace keeps on experiencing even after the pandemic kills most of the human beings on the planet. The only way for Candace to break out of the loop is to break out of the community of survivors she belongs to, and even then, as I will discuss later on, the narrative will not grant the reader closure.

The collision of binary time and the loop exacerbates the constraints that they both display as form. While binarism prevents an openness to multiplicity and fluidity, loops tie temporal logics to a claustrophobic repetitiveness that entrenches hopes and creative futurities. As we are about to see in *Severance*, the collision of these two forms, apart from seemingly denying readers any relief from their reading experience, also emphasizes a connection between the migrant-parents' experience in the past and the survivor-daughter's experience in the present.

Nevertheless, the ending of *Severance*, by breaking through the loops, offers the chance to reflect on SF's ability to change our perspective on our socio-political reality. As Ciarán Kavanagh in his work on SF explains: '[d]istancing the familiar through such fabulations allows us to experience it with fresh eyes, thereby creating a powerful catalyst for de-automatizing our perceptions' (2020: 5). The 'familiar' in the case of migration would be represented by policies regarding migration that either hinder free movement of people across borders or exploit migrant care workers—like the women interviewed by Lem—to accommodate the needs of the capitalist system. These policies are so common in the current Western socio-political debate that we have become almost de-sensitized to it. Reading SF novels such as *Severance* and attuning our reading ears to their colliding forms, helps us look at those socio-political discourses 'with fresh eyes'.

Severance: Loops and Binary Time

After Covid-19 hit, Ma's novel has often been mentioned among the prophetic novels we should have read more carefully to prepare ourselves for the Covid-pandemic.[5] If, however, we shift the focus away from the pandemic for a moment, we can notice how *Severance* provides us with new productive connections between migration and post-apocalyptic fiction. While in the prologue Candace situates the story after Shen Fever has already hit the world as we know it, the novel develops several storylines alternating between the protagonist's parents' past, her past, and her

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[5] In her essay on time loops, Schniedermann also ties the recent surge in loop narrative to the experience of the pandemic lockdown between 2020 and 2021 (2023: 291).

postapocalyptic present. The presence of the intergenerational discourse happening 'at a distance' is what makes this a peculiar example of postapocalyptic novel: Candace's parents do not experience the apocalypse brought about by the pandemic—they die before the pandemic even starts. However, the structure of the alternating storylines of Candace and her parents allows the reader to draw comparisons and confront the two generations back to back. The protagonist and autodiegetic narrator of *Severance*, Candace Chen, is a young Chinese-American woman working in a publishing house in New York. Her job is to manage the production of fine-art Bibles. This implies frequent visits to the factory where the Bibles are produced, in Shenzen, China. The chapters are juxtaposed without following a chronological order and alternating between three temporal frames: those dedicated to her life in New York before the pandemic, in which her existence is preoccupied with the consequences of climate change and absorbed by the consumerist logic of capitalist time; the chapters in which her parents' and her past life in China take center stage; and the chapters after the apocalypse, narrated in present tense, where she is part of a group of survivors.

The title of the novel branches out in various possible meanings that apply to each of the trajectories the narrative takes. The word 'severance' only appears once, in Chapter 16—a crucial chapter to understand Candace's relationship to the previous generation and her home country—to designate the choice of Candace's father who accepted a new job in the United States: '[M]y father rarely spoke of the past, and perhaps it was only after having officialized his severance from China that he felt free to speak openly of his life there' (Ma 2018: 188). 'Severance' is the clear cut between past and present, between home country and country of arrival, between the old world order and the new one. But most importantly, it is Candace's separation from the capitalist system in which she has been living passively before and after the pandemic. As we will see in the ending, by leaving the group of survivors, she also ushers in a new time, which cannot be traced back to time before and after the pandemic.

The first storyline, the one right before the apocalypse, follows Candace as she is going through a slow breakup with her partner Jonathan, since he has decided that he wants to leave New York. Unlike Candace, he works sporadically, taking on intermittent gigs, trying to fulfill his dream of becoming a published author. Jonathan's growing impatience with the expensive, fast-paced, consumeristic life in the big city has reached a peak, and he has decided to move. In addition to that, Jonathan is conscious of the impact of climate change on New York, and seems to be more aware of the risks deriving from it. Candace, on the other hand, is attached to New York and to its rhythms and would never leave. She only sees herself in New York before the pandemic hits and her attitude towards her life exudes passivity both at her workplace and in her relationship. She

also shows this passivity when she finds out she is pregnant and never informs Jonathan about it. Before the pandemic, Candace does not seem invested in the pregnancy or in the possibility of building a family with Jonathan, so much so that she does not even tell him before he moves out of New York. In the time before the apocalypse, Candace displays no real intention of thinking about the future of her child. After the apocalypse, however, she will show increased preoccupation with her future child, and by the end of the novel she starts planning a life for her, a life that does not envision migration anymore: 'I want something different for Luna, the child of two rootless people. She will be born untethered from all family except me, without a hometown or a place of origin' (Ma 2018: 287).

Candace accepts the daily routine her job and the metropolis have imposed on her life. 'I woke up, I went to work in the morning' is the formulaic sentence that opens many chapters in this trajectory, making her work life the main, most evident loop in the novel. By contrast, her partner Jonathan is more aware of the rapid changes society is undergoing, of the possible effects of climate change, and tries to warn Candace before leaving New York (Ma 2018: 13). Jonathan and Candace possess, to borrow Aimee Bhang's terminology, two different 'stories of the future' (2018: 3). Jonathan is aware of the financial disparities and speculations which are only going to worsen in time, and envisions a future full of exacerbations of these disparities. His futurity is to build a life outside of the competitive and toxic environment of the big city. On the contrary, Candace is showing she is completely embedded in the neoliberal system of 'chronobiopolitics' where the subject's time is appropriated and molded into what the needs of financial and economic actants are (cf. Bhang 2018: 19). Candace's futurity is simply not in sight. She just focuses on keeping her life as it is.

Another sharp opposition between the two is their approach to climate change, which Jonathan sees and perceives as a threat, while Candace clearly has a hard time picturing it as something that is actually happening. When hurricane Mathilde, the hurricane that devastates New York before the epidemic kills most of the human population, is about to hit, Candace is not even aware of its coming (Ma 2018: 17) until she first gets to work and her colleagues inform her. The sudden awareness that the storm is approaching means for Candace an unexpected day off work, a sudden disruption of her routine: 'A day off meant we could do things we'd always meant to do […] it took a force of nature to interrupt our routines. […] we just wanted to feel flush with time to do things of no quantifiable value, our hopeful side pursuits like writing or drawing or something, something other than what we did for money' (Ma 2018: 199).

Time outside the capitalist loop is dreamt of but also seen as an exception, as something that she cannot envision as permanent. Indeed, in the same chapter, she also reflects on her

differences from Jonathan. She criticizes his life choices which are resistant to the neoliberal, consumeristic form embraced by Candace. She imagines herself telling him 'You live your life idealistically. You think it's possible to opt out of the system. […] opting out is not a real choice' (Ma 2018: 205-6).

In chapter 5 of his work, *Contemporary Drift*, Martin reflects on the representation of work in postapocalyptic novels and speaks of routine as the system that capitalism imposes. He writes:

> Routine is what defines it as work in the first place. It does so by providing a rhetorical and narrative form for the temporal realities of work: the time that governs both the tasks we are continually required to perform and the value that is routinely extracted from them. Capitalism, of course, is what it means for time to be money. Routine, in turn, shows us what it means for capitalism to become synonymous with our time. As a figure for representing the most basic repetitions of the capitalist system—the ceaseless transformation of time into value—routine is not a contingent quality or a subjective experience. It is another name for the system itself. (Martin 2017: 190-1)

Severance envisions the routine of the capitalist system as a loop that is exemplified by the daily repetition of the same actions. At the same time, though, in *Severance*, the loop remains a subjective experience of the protagonist which is often contrasted by the position that other characters start to have through the acknowledgment that the capitalist model is collapsing on itself since multiple crises—high rents, climate change, health system disruption—merge and act simultaneously. This is also true for Candace's mother as a migrant in the USA, because her life in the new country forces her to adjust to a different loop-based system.

Survivors' Time—Migrants' Time

'The End begins before you are even aware of it. It passes as ordinary' (Ma 2018: 9): so tells us Candace in the very first sentence of the novel. She, as many other people around her in NY, did not see the End—always capitalized in the novel—coming. Nor did they see the hurricane Mathilde approaching New York before. The End comes in the form of a deadly pandemic. The pandemic is caused by an illness coming from China called Shen Fever, and it originates in the Shenzen region, the region where Candace has been many times for her work. Shen Fever is an infection

spreading through the spores of a fungus. The illness slowly turns the patient into an inoffensive zombie, what characters in the novel call 'fevered': the person infected, the 'fevered', remains stuck in the repetition of one last action he or she was performing before the fever reached its final stage. Slowly, Candace sees all the people around her disappear: the first, falling ill, and the last abandoning their work lives to hopefully spend their last days with their loved ones. If people around her are infected and repeat the same action until they perish, Candace is not infected but still stubbornly and carelessly clings to her daily life, neglecting her pregnancy, too: 'I didn't know what to do, so I pushed [the pregnancy] to the farthest corner of my mind. I went to sleep. Then I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine' (Ma 2018: 150). At one point, she moves in the office permanently, and decides to live there, since public transportation in New York has stopped working.

But Candace is not the only survivor: she is rescued by a group of eight people who become her new, sort of imposed, family, made up of corporate office-workers in their thirties led by Bob, the oldest member of the group who imposes strict rules and a cult-like regime to the others. Their main goal is to hoard goods and supplies and to drive towards a location chosen by Bob that he has been keeping secret and that he calls 'the Facility'. Their hunts are called stalks and involve a ritual of prayers before they enter the place they want to loot, the search in a house or a shop where they collect everything that might be useful for them, and the killing of any fevered (all those hit by Shen fever) that they might find on their way: 'No, we don't kill them, we release them […] Rather than having them cycle throughout the same routines, during which they degenerate, we put them out of their misery right away' (Ma 2018: 70). The role of Bob as leader makes him the keeper of forms: he manages the forms of constraints acting on the group, as the ritualistic prayers done in circles before the stalks. He is also the one who dictates the group's schedule and recreates the capitalist loop inside the Facility in order to work and reconstruct a community based on the same structures of the world before the pandemic. As Levine reminds us, paying attention to how forms operate in literary texts also 'points to a new understanding of how power works' (2015: 8). Observing Bob's function in the novel sheds light on power structure dynamics in complex situations such as that of a group of survivors in a postapocalyptic setting can be. Bob is also 'slightly older' (Ma 2018: 4) than the rest of the group and was 'especially adept at directing others to his will'. His position as the eldest of the group grants him decisional power when it comes to choosing how and where to move.

Further, Bob also simultaneously demands from his group that they let go of the past, operating a severance from the time before the apocalypse and thus also being in charge of preserving binary time: '[b]eing online is equivalent to living in the past. And, while we can agree

that the internet has many uses, one of its significant side effects is that we all live too much in the past. But […] this loss of the internet presents an opportunity. We are more free to live in the present, and more free to envision our future' (Ma 2018: 115). Bob's futurity is to start a new life in the Facility. He directs everyone towards it, taking control of the whole group's 'story of the future'. He imposes on the group that they move towards this designated place. The survivor's journey towards the facility is also a loop, as Candace notices: 'And our days […] continue in an infinite loop. We drive, we sleep, we drive some more' (Ma 2018: 161).

The other survivors, however, picture different stories of the future for themselves, a divergence which will become one of the main breakage points of the group, and designates the tensions between the older leader of the survivors and the younger generation he is commanding. Let us consider this passage in which some of the survivors, away from Bob's controlling ears and unconvinced by his plan of turning the mall into their new home, speculate about a possible future for themselves, where they are free to choose where to go:

> If I could live anywhere, I'd just go home, Ashley said. I'd live in my own house. Of all of us, Ashley was the most homesick. An only child, she spoke often of her parents, gazing delicately off in the distance. If I could live anywhere, Janelle said, I'd go somewhere completely new. I'd rather head south, toward the equator. I'd like to live near a beach […] I'd rather move to Scandinavia if I'm going to live in the cold, Janelle said. Yeah good luck getting through their customs, Evan dismissed. Good luck learning how to sail a boat across the ocean, Ashley added. (Ma 2018: 109)

Stripped of its postapocalyptic setting, this dialogue shares features of aspirations and daydreams common to realist novels of migration, in which the characters often plan or fantasize about their possible future lives in a new country.[6]

The survivors' arrival at the Facility also mostly mirrors Candace's parents' storyline as they settle in the United States. Zhigang and Ruifang leave China and move to Salt Lake City for Zhigang's new job. They relocate from a remote region of China, Fuzhou, to the United States in the late 80s, in search of a better, more comfortable future for them and their only child. Chapter 16 of the novel represents one of the main passages of focus on the Chens' migration in the USA and reproduces in the span of a chapter the postapocalyptic binary time. The chapter opens with a

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[6] I am thinking here, for instance, about Laila Lalami's novels *The Other Americans* and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. Lalami has her migrant characters often speculate about their futures in a foreign country or think back to their failed expectations.

retelling of the foundational myth of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) as they move across the Mississippi river and settle in Utah, in the Salt Lake Valley (Ma 2018: 169-70). 'This is the place' (Ma 2018: 170) says Brigham Young, the leader of the Latter Day Saints. 'This must be the place' (Ma 2018: 170) echoes Candace's father Zhigang a few lines later, as they are landing at the airport in Salt Lake City. A few pages earlier, in Chapter 15, the reader has also just read about the survivors' arrival to the Facility (Ma 2018: 161). It is worth analyzing the two chapters against each other in order to show how they present similar patterns.

The Chens' first night in Salt Lake City is exemplified by a visit to the nearest supermarket: 'in their effort to find something to eat, they walked to the nearby grocery store, about a mile away. Their breath came out like fog in the cold, obscuring their vision, so that when the supermarket first appeared, it seemed like a mirage: enormous, lit up like a sports stadium, surrounded by a vast parking lot' (Ma 2018: 171). In the previous chapter, the survivors have just arrived at the Facility. The nature of the Facility is only revealed when the group reaches its destination and finds itself in front of nothing other but a mall. They park the cars and start stalking. In both chapters, 'the glass doors […] slid open' (Ma 2018: 171), 'the glass doors […] cracked open' (Ma 2018: 162) to let either the migrant couple or the survivors in. The surprise to find themselves in front of the building belongs to both too, whether it results from having never seen such a place, as in the case of Candace's parents, or from not having expected the Facility to be a Mall.

Similarly to the survivors, who, through Bob, rely on repetitive religious rites to survive in the postapocalyptic world, the Chens take part in the meetings of the Chinese Christian Community Church to survive in the new country. Especially Candace's mother, Ruifang, relies on religious practices and on her Bible study group to fight the isolation and feeling of displacement brought about by the relocation. In one of the sermons the Chens hear in Church, migration is defined as a difficult, but valuable 'second chance' (Ma 2018: 179). The idea of a second chance, and of keeping faith is common to Bob's practices too, who, as I mentioned earlier in the section, acts as religious leader, often imposing moments of prayer and religious aggregation on the survivors. When Candace is still relatively new to the group, Bob explains he has recently found comfort in the Bible which has convinced him that he and the other survivors are 'selected', in the sense of 'divine selection' (Ma 2018: 31) and that is why they did not contract the Shen fever. This idea of the divine selection also brings us back to the reference to the Latter Day Saints Church and their belief in being the people selected by God, with Brigham Young, their leader, as an 'American Moses' (Ma 2018: 169).

Loops reappear in the postapocalyptic life at the Facility: 'The days begin like this: They wake up in the morning. They wash and dress and descend to the first floor, in the atrium in the

middle of the mall' (Ma 2018: 220). As Martin observes, '[W]hile post-apocalyptic survival has certainly made it more necessary to work, it has not made work anymore affectively necessary, any more fulfilling or affirming' (Martin 2017: 176).

Ruifang's narrative is also heavily constrained by loops in her new life in Salt Lake City. Apart from the Bible study group she joins with the Chinese Christian Church, she also takes up a job as a wig maker at home, in order to save more money and pay Candace's trip to the US: 'She began every morning with renewed vigor to hook hair, every strand bringing her closer to saving the airfare money to bring their child to America' (Ma 2018: 174). In the introduction to their edited volume *Migration, Temporality, and Capitalism*, Barber and Lem observe how the manipulation of time and space operated by capitalism also influences and troubles the temporalities of people on the move. Ruifang's difficult experience in the United States exemplifies what Barber and Lem call 'conditions of impossibility', whereby '[s]patial displacement also means temporal displacement' (Barber and Lem 2018: 11). What is more, Candace's mother will die before the pandemic of Alzheimer's disease, a sort of pre-pandemic illness of repetition that reconfirms the pervasiveness of loops in the novel. In an episode that clearly foregrounds intergenerational relations, Candace takes care of her mother and often participates in never-ending praying sessions with her, and in her stories about the past, about Candace's father who also died previously in an accident.

Breaking the Loop

Nevertheless, the ending of *Severance* opens up to the possibility of breaking through the loop, and thus to the possibility of changing one's condition. This happens by way of two events which are causally linked. The first is Candace's pregnancy. Just as she keeps it from the baby's father, Jonathan, she does the same with all the members of the group. At some point, she tells it to one of the survivors, who ends up revealing the secret to Bob. Bob welcomes the news as a religious sign, as 'a blessing' (Ma 2018: 167), but at the same time he admits that, for this very reason, he fears her leaving the Facility and decides to keep her locked in one of the mall's shops, to prevent any escape attempt. In a way, Bob's decision to control Candace's pregnancy and preserve the possibility of their group of 'selected' to survive is a form of flexible kinship in which Bob invites everyone in the Facility to take turns and make sure Candace is provided for. However, as Rachel, a member of the group, points out to her, 'As long as you carry this baby, he's interested in making sure nothing happens to you' (Ma 2018: 243). Bob's kinship and care towards Candace is exclusively tied to the child, and not to Candace herself, as part of the group. It is, once again, Bob's display of his power and control on the group as the eldest, the provider, and the keeper of forms. In

Chapter 3 of *Migrant Futures*, Bhang focuses on the issue of reproduction and on how it affects questions of futurity by taking into consideration the procedure of surrogacy through the analysis of the postapocalyptic 2006 film *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Bhang claims that surrogacy is itself a form of speculation in that it is 'an enunciation of a future acting in place of' (2018: 85). Thus, to paraphrase from Bhang's analysis of pregnancy (Bhang 2018: 91-100) in SF, by locking Candace up in the Facility, Bob is giving her a surrogate mother position, meaning surrogate to both the whole group of survivors, and the entire human race. Similarly to what happens in Cuaron's movie, Bob projects 'his hopes and visions for the future across the body of a woman of color' (Bhang 2018: 98).

Candace's imprisonment does not last long. She manages to escape during the night, discovering that Bob is also fevered and will most certainly soon die, too. The others do not follow her and Candace is able to free herself from the surrogate mother position, and from the expectations that the pregnancy implies. She drives aimlessly first, and then once she feels far away enough from the facility, she understands she is subconsciously driving to Chicago. There, observing the city in front of her, she thinks 'In another life, in my mother's alternate life, I would take the 56 bus directly downtown […] I would go work in the morning. I would return home in the evening.' (Ma 2018: 290). This passage juxtaposes mother and daughter, migrant and survivor, in a final confrontation between possible outcomes of living a life within a loop. This is, however, only a speculation: Chicago is empty, she does not have to answer to a boss, or attend specific tasks, she can just 'get out and start walking' (Ma 2018: 291).

The ending of *Severance* opens up to a future where the idea of the post-apocalyptic community has been abandoned. In both pre and post-apocalyptic life in community, Candace accepted constraints with passivity. In abandoning the survivors and deciding to start a life in solitude, the novel resists the idea common to both Kaup's analysis of Saramago's *Blindness* and Marion Gymnich's concept of 'narrative of survival': both scholars indicate the tendency of postapocalyptic fiction to hint at new forms of 'collective identities, at the (re)discovery of new forms of community' (Gymnich 2019: 70, Kaup 2021). Candace's choice seems thus individualistic and incomprehensible at first. What kind of story of the future does *Severance* leave us with? Debra Benita Shaw's reflections on the concept of home seem to give us the answer: 'It is possible to imagine that nomads and vagabonds, squatters and tent citizens exempted from full human status by their lack of a formal home might re-form the landscapes of planet Earth through creative interventions' (Shaw 2022: 15). While on the one hand, *Severance* leaves us without a satisfying closure to cling to—what happens to Candace? How will she face the last period of her pregnancy on her own? How does a newborn survive with his mother only?—it also grants us the freedom to

imagine a world in which being on the move gives birth to yet unthought forms of existence, an existence where mother and (future) child are free to reconstruct a world out of the loop. The final 'severance' is thus Candace's breakaway from imposed forms of order and constraint.

Conclusion

This essay investigates the formal and thematic analogies of postapocalyptic fiction and fictions of migration. Fictions of migration often display points of convergence in themes and form to postapocalyptic fiction. Thematically, both fictions deal with displacement, relocation, and intergenerational tensions generated by the anxiety of presenting younger generations with better— or worse—versions of the future world. Further, the two fictions employ the forms of loop and binary time in a process that Caroline Levine calls 'collision'. This collision is particularly visible in postapocalyptic novels of migration such as *Severance*, where loops function as a poignant reminder of the seemingly inescapable constraints to which migrants and survivors are subject. At the same time, though, as I hope to have shown through the analysis of *Severance*, postapocalyptic fiction asks readers to reconsider their assumptions about what it means to relocate and start living in a new country, but also to consider migration as a phenomenon embedded in and affected by the logics of a capitalist system.

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