Longing to Belong: Disease, Nostalgia, and Exile in Ling Ma's *Severance*

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Abstract The word nostalgia originally referred to a literal disease: a lethargic condition experienced by soldiers and seamen, thought to be caused by homesickness. These days, nostalgia is more often used in a broader sense of a sustained attachment to the past, whether real or mythical, individual or communal. Because the past is always by definition beyond retrieval, nostalgia is often considered a harmful, even self-delusional condition: No longer a literal disease, nostalgia has instead become a cultural malaise whose primary symptom is a wistful but futile yearning for a long-lost past. Reading Ling Ma's pandemic-themed 2018 novel *Severance,* this article finds a different kind of nostalgia, which looks not to the past but to the future: For the novel's linguistically and culturally exiled Chinese American protagonist, nostalgia comes to express a longing to belong, which has the potential to root her in the place she claims as her future home.

Keywords Asian American Literature, Belonging, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Outbreak Narrative, Pandemic Fiction.

Cited Names Ling Ma

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1 In contemporary cultural and political discourse, nostalgia has something of a bad rap: Because the word has come to denote a wistful attachment to a glorified past, nostalgia has in recent years been identified as key mechanism for evoking populist fantasies of the kind captured by Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan. As political scientist Michael Kenny writes, nostalgia has been "depicted as a virus" and "as an incubus for illiberal fantasies and political desires" (257). The viral metaphor is apt for reasons that lie beyond the immediate interests of a political scientist: As Jean Starobinski explains in his 1966 essay "The Idea of Nostalgia," the word nostalgia was coined by a seventeenth-century Swiss doctor, who proposed it as a medical diagnosis for the kind of listless, lethargic condition that seemed to overtake seamen and soldiers who reside in foreign lands (84). The invention of the word nostalgia thus coincides with the invention of a pathological form of feeling, specifically the feeling of homesickness, "*Heimweh*" (Starobinski 84). These days, however, nostalgia is more often used in the broader sense of a sustained attachment to the past. This attachment can be to a real or mythical past, just as it can be cultivated by an individual or a community of individuals. Yet, even in this extended definition of nostalgia, the idea of disease has not been completely lost. Because the past is always by definition beyond retrieval, nostalgia is often considered harmful, even self-delusional: No longer a literal disease, nostalgia has instead become a cultural malaise, whose primary symptom is a wistful but futile yearning for a long-lost past—this is the kind of nostalgia political scientists identify in M.A.G.A. From the onset, however, the diagnostic definition of nostalgia played with two meanings, a negative and a positive one: In its negative form, nostalgia denotes homesickness, *Heimweh*, a pain caused by not being at home. Starobinski unearths another diagnostic description of nostalgia besides *Heimweh*, however: "*desiderium patriae*" (84). In its negative configuration as *Heimweh*, nostalgia denotes distance from the longed-for home, whose absence creates a lack in the faraway individual and configures her as a romantic, borderline pathetic figure. As *desiderium patriae*, by contrast, nostalgia becomes a positive force capable of propelling the exiled individual toward her desired home(land), which may turn out to lie not in the past but in the future.

2 Ling Ma's pandemic-themed novel *Severance* (2018) provides an excellent opportunity for exploring these different meanings of nostalgia. Published two years before the reports of a new coronavirus began spreading from Wuhan, *Severance* depicted a pandemic caused by "Shen Fever," so named after the city of Shenzhen where it was first detected. Even though the setting initially bears an eerie resemblance to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, it becomes clear almost immediately that Shen Fever is *not* COVID-19, nor any other disease known to science: Despite beginning mundanely with nothing

more serious than a sore throat and other flulike symptoms, in its final stages the disease causes its carriers to fall into a near-comatose state, in which they repeat the gestures and habits they have accumulated over a lifetime, until their bodies finally perish from malnutrition. From the first-person narrator, a millennial office worker named Candace Chen, readers eventually learn that Shen Fever is only the tip of the iceberg—in reality, the "fever of repetition," which Candace thinks has "something to do with nostalgia" (Ma 143), affects a much larger part of the population—possibly everyone. Tracing this endemic form of nostalgia through its various manifestations reveals the condition to be not only more widespread but also much less detrimental than an initial medical and cultural diagnostics would lead one to presume: For Candace, the novel's linguistically and culturally exiled Chinese American protagonist, I argue, nostalgia comes to express a "longing to belong," which has the potential to root her in the place she claims as her future home.

3 The article begins with a section comparing *Severance* to Priscilla Wald's "outbreak narratives" to demonstrate their different concerns and ask what, if not a literal pandemic, underlies the representation of disease in *Severance*. The following sections then consider Candace's own hypothesis that the condition has "something to do with nostalgia": I first examine nostalgia in light of what Marxist critic Mark Fisher has termed "capitalist realism" and ask how *Severance* yearns for a past in which a revolution still seemed possible, if only for a moment. I then propose a more open-ended approach to nostalgia based on philosopher Barbara Cassin's suggestion that "nostalgia is not simply homesickness and the return home" but "a chosen fiction that constantly gives clues so as to be taken for what it is" (2). By analyzing how the novel's focus shifts from *retrospective* to *prospective* nostalgia—from the futile yearning to finally return home captured by *Heimweh* to the decision to establish a new one made possible by *desiderium patriae*—I argue that *Severance* attunes its readers to nostalgia's potential to root us in the place we choose to call home. In this way, the article contributes to a largely neglected aspect of nostalgia's potential: its capability to root the uprooted—which, given the advanced stage of globalization which underpins both our reality and *Severance*'s, may well be most of us.

Breaking Out of the Outbreak Narrative

4 The simple-sounding idea that fictional stories about infectious diseases might help us understand real-world diseases is at first sight both self-evident and entirely preposterous. It is as if there was some protective barrier between works of fiction and real life that ought to stop the bits and pieces of fiction which circulate in one system from getting mixed up with the bits and pieces of facts which circulate in the other. At the same time, one reason

we even bother reading works of fiction is that they teach us something—not necessarily facts—about life. In her book *Contagious*, Priscilla Wald argues that narrative, specifically what she terms the "outbreak narrative," provides the missing link between the fictive and the non-fictive representations of disease—in other words that narrative is the agent of transmission that enables "contagion" between the fictive and the real. Looking at a range of "scientific, journalistic, and fictional" accounts of infectious disease, Wald traces the contours of outbreak narratives across the apparently permeable border that separates fact from fiction (2).

5 This idea of "outbreak narratives" as a cross-over genre between the factual and the fictional has also been evoked in analyses of *Severance*. In "What to Expect When You're Expecting an Epidemic," Emily Waples approaches *Severance* and another recent novel, Karen Thompson Walker's *The Dreamers* (2019), as "feminist reassessments of the epidemiological plots that have tended to dominate both fictional and non-fictional accounts of infectious disease" (120). While Waples admits that "investment in the kind of 'epidemiological work'"—which Wald considers definitive to outbreak narratives[1] —is "conspicuously absent" from both novels, Waples does not pause to think about the implications of this absence, but simply assumes that the lacking epidemiological focus has to do with the "feminist reconfigurations of the outbreak narrative" in the novels (123). The more likely conclusion is that the reason why the definitive feature of the outbreak narrative is absent from *Severance* is simply that Ma's novel is not an outbreak narrative, at least not in the epidemiological sense intended by Wald. Ma—as novelists sometimes infuriatingly do—uses an outbreak as a means of investigating a wholly different set of problems than those traced by Wald in *Contagious*. If *Severance* is not actually "about" an outbreak, in the same sense that Camus's *The Plague* is not "about" a literal plague, this only begs another question, however: What is *Severance* about?

6 Epidemiology is central to the outbreak narrative because it transforms the search for a cure into an "epidemiological quest," to use Waples's own phrase (119). *Severance*, by contrast, does not adhere formally to this scientific quest narrative, but more importantly, by suggesting fanciful alternatives to the scientific theory of disease, the novel distances itself from the scientific doctrine itself. According to the authorities, Shen Fever is "a fungal infection" that begins with flu-like symptoms but quickly begins eroding brain tissue, which eventually leads to "a fatal loss of consciousness" (19). The reality turns out to be more gruesome than this, however: During the final stages of the disease, which drag over weeks or even months, the diseased lurch around as shells of their former selves, their minds devoid of conscious thought but their bodies still running on fumes. As bodies without souls, the diseased bear an obvious resemblance to zombies, but Candace herself is vehemently against

this interpretation and insists that "the fevered aren't zombies" (29). She is right, at least in the sense that the fevered are not like any of the zombies that have recently infected mass culture: "For the most part, from what we had seen, the fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures they must have inhabited for years," Candace explains early on: "They could operate the mouse of a dead PC, they could drive stick in a jacked sedan, they could run an empty dishwasher, they could water dead houseplants" (28). If these are zombies, they are the most boring ones we have seen in a while. Initially, *Severance* shows Candace struggling between the official theory of the disease, which holds that the repetition of gestures has a physiological explanation ("patterns" of behavior "had worn grooves inside their brains"), and her own observations, which suggest that far from random, the fevered are drawn to repeating "nostalgic" experiences, like listening to old records, flipping through photo albums, and setting the table with heirloom china (28). The longer Candace observes the fevered, the less convinced she becomes of the official theory. Watching a fevered family caught in a "cycle of endless dinners" (70), she asserts an alternative hypothesis: "It's a fever of repetition, of routine" (62). Later in the novel, and in the epidemic, Candace witnesses another character become fevered while visiting her own childhood home, which strikes her as a "strange" coincidence and rather constitutes further proof that "nostalgia has something to do with it" (143). Toward the end of the novel, Candace formulates her own theory of the illness: "Memories beget memories. Shen Fever being a disease of remembering, the fevered are trapped indefinitely in their memories" (160).

7 Candace's theory might have "something to do" with the fact that her mother had Alzheimer's disease—another "disease of remembering"—but dismissing her interpretation as the delusions of a grieving child would be unjust. Admittedly, Candace's claim that simply experiencing a feeling—the feeling of nostalgia—could trigger a rapidly progressing neurodegenerative disease seems wholly and entirely unscientific. Such a view of disease would be rather reminiscent of a pre-Enlightenment world, where diseases were caused by things like imperceptible fumes or evil spirits—a world of magic and mythology that is strictly opposed to the scientific theory of disease (although, as "COVID-skeptics" have recently demonstrated, far from having disappeared from our modern world, superstitions may well be on the rise). Upon closer inspection, however, Candace's theory of Shen Fever as a disease of remembering is more compatible with the scientific theory of disease than it first seems: After a male companion denounces her hypothesis, she admits that fungal spores are the physical agent of transmission but suggests that what makes people vulnerable to the disease might be more complicated than that: "I'm not saying it's the cause. I'm saying, what if nostalgia triggers

it?" (144) Candace appears to be neither a conspiracy theorist nor a science denier—but, from Candace's perspective, epidemiology alone cannot explain why certain people get sick when others do not, nor is it enough to explain why certain diseases become endemic in certain populations. Moreover, while epidemiological methods like contact tracing can help identify outbreak patterns and transmission routes, they cannot explain why people engage in behaviors that put their health at risk—statistical methods can never hope to penetrate the desires and fears underlying the supposedly rational decisions humans make. Returning to *Severance*, had the diseased woman known that entering her childhood home increases her risk of contracting Shen Fever, she might have decided not to go, or to take protective measures—or she might have come to the opposite conclusion, that her need to see whether her parents were alive or dead (or something in between) overrides any regard for her personal safety. Had she known that she was putting others at risk by her decision, she might have again reconsidered. Epidemiology can tell us very little about such deliberations, which belong to the domain of the human sciences.

8 Were Candace an epidemiologist, she would obviously not be a very good one. As an anthropologist, a scholar of human cultures and beliefs, however, she is not performing all that badly. Her heuristic method might not be perfect but it does the job: the new observations she makes support her original hypothesis, and through repeated observations, she is eventually able to formulate a more substantial theory of the illness, its symptoms, and its underlying causes. Attempting to reconcile Candace's theory of Shen Fever with a scientific theory of disease can only lead to denouncing the former. Such an interpretation would not do the novel justice, however: Like the heroic epidemiologists who populate outbreak narratives, Candace, too, is looking for answers. Instead of trying to develop a vaccine—a task she would be wholly unequipped to undertake—her search for answers assumes a different form: it becomes a quest for *meaning*. It is this quest for meaning, a quest pursued through methods of observation and interpretation, which drives *Severance*'s narrative. Contrary to Waples's claim, then, *Severance* does not offer a feminist but a *humanist* reconfiguration of the outbreak narrative.

Nostalgia in Capitalism's Ruins

9 Unlike Priscilla Wald's scientific outbreak narratives, *Severance* is constantly forcing readers to assume that the disease stands for something else, for some other condition, and to interpret the novel for signs as to what this other condition may be. "But what is the difference between the fevered and us?" Candace asks directly after she has suggested her own theory of the disease: "Because I remember too, I remember perfectly. My memories replay,

unprompted, on repeat. And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop" (160). By evoking the first-person plural, Candace suggests that Shen Fever, the "disease of remembering" that has "something to do with nostalgia," affects not just "them," meaning the fevered, but "us." Shen Fever thus begins to stand for some other state of being, a much less tangible condition: not a literal disease but a cultural malaise. In a recent analysis of *Severance*, Aanchal Saraf pursues exactly this line of argument. Drawing on Camille Fojas's suggestion that the "zombie narrative contains our outrage, fear, and anxiety about capitalism in crisis," Saraf argues that *Severance* depicts the racialization of Asian Americans as a "zombified" labor force (14). There is one obvious problem with this interpretation—as Candace points out above, the fevered are "us." Whichever malaise underlies *Severance*'s depiction of disease, it is clearly not one that only affects the Asian American community, so reducing the novel to an allegory about racism seems unjust. Were one to seek an allegorical reading of the novel, a more likely ideological culprit than racism would be capitalism, or, alternately, the crisis of (post- or late-) modernity, which causes "our days" to "continue in an infinite loop" (160).

10 While the experience of boredom might provide useful for investigating this modern malaise, we might as well follow Candace's own hypothesis that the disease has "something to do with nostalgia" (Ma 143). Whereas Saraf addresses nostalgia only briefly in the tradition of Marxist criticism, as "an affective condition" that occurs "in the wake of capitalism's created losses" (21), another recent essay by Claire Gullander-Drolet examines the novel's depiction of nostalgia more extensively: Drawing on anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's idea of "imperialist nostalgia," Gullander-Drolet approaches nostalgia as an "affect and attachment" that can shed light on the experiences of the "diasporic Chinese American with economic and personal ties to both her country of origin and residence" (96).[2] Despite this open-ended description, Gullander-Drolet adopts Rosaldo's thesis that there is something deceptive, even dangerous, about this feeling: In Gullander-Drolet's opinion, Candace's nostalgic attachment to 1980s-style American consumer capitalism "obscures" her awareness how she herself is implicated in processes of capitalist exploitation, gentrification particularly. Such claims can be traced back to Marx's idea of a "false consciousness," wherein Paul Ricoeur famously identified the contours of an "hermeneutics of suspicion," a distinctly modern mode of critical thought which uses interpretation to expose illusions of consciousness (34). As Ricoeur suggests, "post-critical" thought cannot simply revert from suspicion to a pre-critical faith, but rather "the willingness to suspect" must now take turns with "the willingness to listen" (27). In this vein, I suggest listening closely to how Ma evokes the feeling of nostalgia in *Severance*. What kind of "fictive distance," in Gullander-Drolet's phrase (94), does nostalgia facilitate in the novel?

11 In the novel's first chapter, which is set in the recent past of the early 2010s, Candace and her boyfriend Jonathan are watching *Manhattan*, a 1979 film by Woody Allen that opens with an extended montage of black-and-white images of the city. Seeing New York not through her own window but captured through Allen's lens, which renders it "romantic, shabby, not totally gentrified" makes Candace feel "wistful for the illusion of New York more than for its actuality, having lived there for five years" (9). Whereas this choice of words might indicate that Candace is feeling nostalgia—specifically the kind of "nostalgia with a past beyond all but aesthetic retrieval," which Fredric Jameson derided in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (19)—a closer examination reveals that Ma's intertextual allusion should not be read as nostalgic but as ironic. Readers who have seen Allen's film might recall that its opening scene is accompanied by a rather insistent voiceover: The voice of the movie's protagonist, Isaac Davis, played by Allen himself, reading aloud different variations of the opening lines to his novel, which tells the story of yet another man, also living in New York City. After a few minutes of false starts and abandoned lines, the voiceover concludes with the words that effectively double as the opening lines to Allen's movie and Davis's fictive novel: "New York is his town," Allen/Davis proclaims to the magnificent soundtrack of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), "and it always would be." Candace's own comments about a New York that is "romantic, shabby, not totally gentrified" might thus appear to be signs of nostalgia, but upon closer inspection, this scene is revealed not as nostalgic but ironic in intent: The closest Candace can get to experiencing what she takes to be the authentic Manhattan is not by going out and experiencing it firsthand but by watching a fictional film by a notoriously "creepy" (Ma 9) director, in which yet another fictional character proclaims his love for "his town." Such proximity is highly uncomfortable for Candace who, like most today, would rather not identify too closely with Allen. While this opening scene is certainly about the idea of nostalgia, it is not a nostalgic scene. Rather, Ma maintains a carefully constructed critical distance to the idea of nostalgia, which is problematized by rendering it through various layers of irony and mediation.

12 The first chapter must be contrasted with a strikingly similar depiction of mediated nostalgia from the novel's final chapter. Following various developments which take Candace on an aimless road trip through a largely deserted Midwestern landscape with a band of other survivors, we learn that Candace is pregnant with a child; a secret that she has been keeping from her travel companions, and rightly so, given their decision to imprison her to stop her from leaving as soon as they learn of her pregnancy. Eventually, Candace resolves to escape. She slips from her guards and starts driving toward the nearest city, which happens to be Chicago—a practical choice instead of a

sentimental one, although one that turns out to be a little more serendipitous than at first appears. When Candace begins approaching Chicago, she is suddenly hit by an uncanny, inexplicable feeling of nostalgia. Initially she attributes this to "a secondhand familiarity" (286) triggered by memories of her boyfriend Jonathan describing his childhood in Chicago, which makes her feel as if she has "been here in another lifetime" (286). Exactly as in New York, Candace becomes infected, in a manner of speaking, with a case of mediated nostalgia through an exposure to somebody else's fond memories. She even goes so far as to recreate the city soundscape as she remembers Jonathan remembering it ("the owl-service buses that stopped below his window, the fire trucks with their blaring horns, gunshots from warring gangs . . ., the panicky shriek of ambulances" [286])—sounds that she has never heard in person. Nor would she have a chance to hear them upon her arrival to Chicago now, given the total annihilation of the form of life to which they testify. More importantly, the city to which these sounds belonged had been lost already before "the End": Chicago had been Jonathan's "real home," Candace relates, before he moved to New York but the "tacquerías he used to frequent" had long since "disappeared," and the wailing sirens had been retreating "west until, over the years, he couldn't hear them at all" (286). Like Allen's "not totally gentrified" Manhattan of the 1970s, which was irretrievably lost to Candace when she was watching Manhattan in the early 2010s, (and Gershwin's Manhattan of the Roaring Twenties, which was equally lost to Allen when he was filming Manhattan in the early 1970s) by the time Candace first hears of Jonathan's Chicago, it is already gone. Both these scenes evoke the feeling of nostalgia through a combination of sounds and images but whereas the former does so ironically, drawing attention to the unattainability, even undesirability, of attaching oneself to Allen's New York, the latter is more sincere: Candace's nostalgic yearning is genuine, but it is not Chicago she is here feeling nostalgic about. Rather, at the center of her reminiscence are the long nights she spent curled up in bed with her boyfriend, sharing childhood stories. In other words, Candace is mourning for Jonathan, not for Chicago.

13 Not every attachment to the past is a sign nostalgia, and critics would do well to distinguish between the nostalgic and ironic modes of representation: When Candace and her roommates host 1980s-themed parties, in which they serve shark fin soup and "ball[s] of pimiento cheese in the shape of Trump's hair" (Ma 45), this is not an example of nostalgia, as Gullander-Drolet implies (most were not even born in the eighties, let alone old enough to remember them) but of kitsch—an ironic appreciation of things known to showcase poor taste. Equally untrue is Gullander-Drolet's claim that the novel is based on a "nostalgic engagement with the 1980s" (94). While there is a faint undertone of nostalgic yearning in Ma's treatment of the past, this is not for the 1980s but

for the early 2010s—a time in which a different future seemed possible: The novel is set in the years following the 2008 financial crisis, when toppling the capitalist world order seemed, if not exactly likely, then at least conceivable. This bittersweet nostalgia is especially pertinent in one passing remark by Candace midway through the novel, when she mentions that Occupy Wall Street brought with it "a few elated days" of "a strange hopeful, charged atmosphere around New York," but this quickly sizzled out with the outbreak of Shen Fever, which made the movement seem "decadent and out of touch" (214). There was, in other words, a fleeting moment of utopian optimism in the air, but this is now definitively in the past. Exactly as in the novel, the financial crisis did not lead to the kind of broader reforms that the protesters were demanding, but in reality, of course, we had no pandemic to blame for this failure, which again reveals the ironic tinge in *Severance*'s treatment of nostalgia. If this is indeed nostalgia, it is of a bittersweet, even cynical kind. This brings the novel's depiction of nostalgia rather close to the sentiment Mark Fisher has termed "'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2). By setting its apocalypse not in the near future, as is customary in postapocalyptic fiction, but in the recent past, *Severance* expresses a bittersweet nostalgia for a time in which change still appeared possible, if only for a "few elated days."

Nostalgia as a Longing to Belong

14 A more subtle (and less suspicious) understanding of nostalgia is offered by philosopher and philologist Barbara Cassin. Rather than understand nostalgia only as an affect (or feeling or emotion) experienced by fictional characters, Cassin's study approaches nostalgia as an idea—an idea which literary works examine both thematically, as literary motifs, and formally, by inscribing it deep in the subterranean structures of their narrative. Homer's *Odyssey*, Cassin argues, is "the very poem" of nostalgia, because reading it, we almost "believe that time bends like the horizon and that one will return after a long journey, a cycle, an odyssey" (5): "Time as linear, time as cyclical—that is one of the keys to nostalgia" (Cassin 11). Aside from depicting nostalgia as a motif literalized in the "fever of repetition," and as a feeling experienced by Candace, *Severance* demonstrates a similar formal attachment to the idea of nostalgia as found by Cassin in the Odyssey, albeit one multiplied several times over in the repeated departures and returns of Ma's novel—the "severances" which accumulate throughout *Severance*. Through these cyclical returns, I argue, *Severance* gradually transforms nostalgia from a futile yearning for an illusory past into a political force capable of rooting Candace in Chicago, the city she finally claims as her home.

15 Nostalgia, Cassin begins, "is not exactly what one believes it to be"—despite sounding "perfectly Greek, made up of *nostos*, 'return,' and *algos*, 'pain,' 'suffering,'" the word nostalgia is not of ancient origin but was developed in seventeenth-century Switzerland to describe the inexplicable illness experienced by soldiers who would miraculously recover as soon as they were allowed to return home from the front (Cassin 5). The literal translation of nostalgia would thus be "homesickness," "*Heimweh*," but this can be a misleadingly simple formulation, as Cassin points out: By evoking the concept of home, the idea of nostalgia designates a complex relationship that one has with an "origin," where one yearns to return. Often the home one feels nostalgic for is no longer in existence—if it existed at all, at least in the way it is remembered—as when one feels nostalgic about one's childhood home (3). Consequently, Cassin argues, nostalgia, "like every origin," constitutes "a chosen fiction . . . an adorable, human fiction, a cultural fact" (3).

16 Before one can feel homesick, moreover, one must know what home feels like: "Rootedness and uprootedness: that is nostalgia," in Cassin's words (7). The literary archetype for this paradoxical condition, as Cassin so elegantly demonstrates, is Odysseus, who yearns to be back in Ithaca with all the power of his being; not only or even primarily because he is "from" Ithaca, whether understood as national origin or place of birth, but because Ithaca is where he *chooses* to belong: Ithaca is where Odysseus made his home—made a home, moreover, by building his house around an olive tree, one of whose branches he carved into a bed for himself and his wife. When Odysseus yearns for *nostos*—which Cassin describes as a yearning not simply in spatial terms as a yearning for his "home" but in spatiotemporal ones as longing for "the day of his homecoming" (10)—this is where he pictures himself: not in some long-lost childhood home but in bed with his wife, where he belongs.

17 Instead of assuming that nostalgia functions as "literalized homesickness" in the novel, as Gullander-Drolet does (95), we must be prepared to ask if we really know—if Candace really knows—where "home" is. Unlike Odysseus, who knows exactly where home is if only he could get there, Candace seems to have no idea about where "home" is even supposed to be: her parents, like their parents before them, were "from" Fuzhou, spoke Fujianese, felt strongly that they belonged there, and often longed to be back in Fuzhou (her mother's "homesickness eased in department stores" [177], Candace's father once told her). Candace herself was born in Fuzhou, grew up in Salt Lake City, and moved to New York to go to college after her parents died—and with them, whatever connection she had to either Utah or Fuzhou was severed. Where is *nostos* for Candace? Where is her home?

18 One recognizes one's home, argues Cassin, because one is "recognized" there—"because one has one's identity there" (15). But when Candace travels

to China—not to visit family but on a business trip—she feels and behaves like an American tourist, and the only sight that triggers any kind of recognition from her is a poster of the Hollywood actor Claire Danes on a factory wall. Similarly, when Candace is introduced to a man from Fuzhou who tries to strike up a conversation about common acquaintances, she realizes that she does not even know the proper names of her relatives, only the common nouns—"the first uncle, the second aunt, my grandma" (91)—which designate their relation to her. How is Candace to recognize her home? How is she to be recognized, identified, by her relations, if she does not even know their names? Candace bears no scar, like Odysseus does, that would mark her to her kin. In China she feels like an alien, whereas in the United States, she is misrecognized both by Chinese immigrants, who compliment her English without realizing that she grew up speaking it (87), and by other Americans, who tell her to "[g]o back to" wherever she came from—but when she asks where that might be, the response is "Korea, Vietnam. I don't give a shit. You don't belong here. You don't know us" (135). What can too easily be taken as a snide comment intended to demonstrate that America is where she belongs—Candace replies "politely" and even addresses the racist as "sir" (135)—in fact betrays a deeper hurt: If Candace does not "belong here," in Utah where she grew up, she belongs nowhere.

19 Underlying the physical uprooting lies an even deeper wound, caused by Candace's severance from Chinese culture and language. "Exile," as Cassin writes, "forces one to abandon one's mother tongue. Land of the fathers, language of the mothers: it is with the language of the other that one makes a new fatherland for oneself" (34). The clearest (non-)articulation of this cultural severance is the omission of Candace's given name from the story: "What is your Chinese name?" asks a Chinese business associate who calls himself Balthasar for the convenience of American visitors: "I told him," Candace remarks (88), but without disclosing the name to readers. Instead of the name, readers receive a poem, "Thoughts in Night Quiet" by eighth-century Tang-dynasty poet Li Bai, which "Balthasar" was reminded of when hearing Candace's name and which he proceeded to email to Candace. The email that contained the original, Chinese text of the poem does not display correctly on Candace's American laptop, which only shows "gibberish in place of Chinese characters" (91), but at the bottom of the email, Candace finds that "Balthasar" had also attached a PDF file containing a scan of an English translation of the poem, which she proceeds to read aloud to herself: "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). Candace's Chinese name we will never learn, but the poem, together with the name she chooses for her own daughter—"Luna" (287)—give some indication

of what Candace might have once been called by her own mother. Naming the baby Luna—a name which, through its resemblance of Candace's Chinese name connects the child to an ancestral culture but also claims a Western heritage—should not be taken as an act of erasure but as one of affirmation: In a Confucian philosophy of language, "naming is the way to make a certain reality 'proper,' that is, to make it real," as Rey Chow points out in *Writing Diaspora*, which is "why it is so important to have the right name and the right language" (105).

20 The question of belonging is a politically charged one, as is the vocabulary one uses for its discussion. How we choose to frame Candace's experiences of rootlessness, uprootedness, and belonging is therefore something worth questioning. Despite Gullander-Drolet's claim, Candace is not what I would consider a "diasporic subject" (95). Following anthropologist William Safran, a "diaspora community" is one which cultivates an ongoing attachment to a (mythical or real) homeland, where it yearns to return (83). As this formulation reveals, what Safran calls "diaspora consciousness" is not unrelated to the attachment Cassin calls nostalgia. While some "Chinese expatriate communities . . . constitute genuine diasporas," Safran continues, claiming that *all* Chinese Americans manifest such a "diaspora consciousness" is simply untrue (89)—not to mention deeply offensive to such Americans of Chinese heritage as Candace, whose only homeland is and ever was in the United States. Despite her inability to return to China, Candace is not exactly an exiled subject either, in the sense that Aeneas is, because exile is not caused by a banishment from her homeland but is rather the inadvertent result of her belonging someplace else, in the American culture she grew up with and in the English language which mediates her experience of the world.

21 The original Chinese poem has become irretrievable to Candace not because she herself would be unable to read the Chinese characters, but because her computer lacks the software that would be able to decrypt them, which causes them to display as unreadable "gibberish" on the screen. A common enough phenomenon, but in this case the failed encryption becomes emblematic of a broader difficulty in passing down culture: Candace knows the language but has never even heard of the poet, while "Balthasar," who was raised in China surrounded by Chinese culture and literature, is immediately reminded of the poem upon hearing Candace's Chinese name. What separates Candace from Chinese culture is therefore something bigger and less tangible than the technical proficiency that allows her to read and speak Chinese fluently—which she can, albeit with some difficulty and an outmoded and curtailed vocabulary—something, in other words, than can only be passed down by parents who themselves received the same gift of culture from their parents, and so on, in an unsevered chain of generations. As Gullander-Drolet points

out, all Candace needed to do was download the software and she would have been able to view the original text. That she chooses not to do this and instead settles for the English translation is certainly proof of her "impatience" (Gullander-Drolet 101), but it also signals a deeper alienation from the language and culture of her parents: Not only does Candace not see any value in reading the original Chinese text, the simple fact that she does not have the encryption program installed on her computer proves that she has never needed one. Candace does not communicate in Chinese; she communicates in English.

22 What the lacking software reveals to us about Candace's ties to Chinese language and culture is their complete and utter absence—her total and irrevocable severance from the culture in which her parents were raised. Like the erroneous encryption that made the Chinese poem irretrievable to Candace despite her technical ability to read Chinese writing, Candace herself has been removed from the cultural context in which the poem belongs, and no amount of translation or encryption can close the gap left by these formative years. In China, Candace is American; in America, she is Chinese, or Chinese American. Despite a technical grasp of Fujianese and Mandarin, English is her native tongue, the only language in which she feels comfortable expressing herself. By naming her daughter Luna, after the Roman goddess of the moon, Candace releases herself from the claim to Chinese culture that persisted mainly through her parents and instead claims a new heritage for herself as a Westerner, just as, by claiming Chicago as her home, she claims America as her homeland. This new foundation does not erase her ties to China, which will always be the country of her ancestors—just as Aeneas will always be Trojan-born, even as he is the mythical founder of Rome. But a person must belong somewhere, and Candace has chosen to belong in Chicago.

23 Through Candace's rootlessness, *Severance* brings to question the very possibility of homesickness in a situation where all one has is algos, a nameless suffering, with no corresponding notion of *nostos*, and therefore not even a hypothetical possibility of "the day of return, *nostimon ēmar*" (Cassin 10). The novel, like its title *Severance*, thus seems to mark the opposite of nostalgia: a rupture without the possibility of return. In its very last pages, however, *Severance* finally overcomes the irony that has so far tinged its representations of nostalgia, and depicts a straight-faced version of Candace's yearning to belong, which is now transformed into a yearning to establish a new home for herself and her unborn child:

> I have been an orphan so long I am tired of it, walking and driving and searching for something that will never settle me. 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. I want us to stay in one place. Maybe Chicago, the city her father loved, in which he once lived, could be the place. (287)

After a fruitless search for a place to call home that has taken her from Fuzhou to Salt Lake City to New York—and finally to Chicago, Candace settles for the city loved by someone she loved. The deliberate way Candace chooses to put down roots in Chicago, not for her own sake but for the sake of her unborn child, recalls Cassin's argument that every origin is "a chosen fiction" (2). Rather than Odysseus's nostalgic yearning to return home where he belongs, however, Candace's struggle to find the place where she belongs rather resembles Cassin's other example, Virgil's *Aeneid*, whose exiled protagonist Aeneas becomes the mythical founder of Rome. "When uprootedness occurs without any hope of return," writes Cassin, "the central figure becomes the one who has been exiled," and, consequently, the aim of the narrative also changes: the principal force driving the protagonist and her narrative is "no longer return and the home (*oikade*) but a founding" (29).

24 But *Severance* does not simply shift from retrospective to prospective nostalgia—or from the desire to finally return home captured in *Heimweh* to the decision to establish a new one through *desiderium patriae*—it fuses these two perspectives into one. When Candace finally catches a sight of the Chicago skyline, she "realize[s]" that it was not only "secondhand familiarity" she was feeling—she has "actually been in Chicago before" (288). Before Candace's parents emigrated permanently to escape the Cultural Revolution (another nostalgic theme that would require another essay to get to the bottom of), she and her mother had accompanied her father on his business trips to the United States: "We had gone to New York this way, but Chicago must have been before that," Candace now recalls (288). The memory itself is not nostalgic or even pleasant—instead of a feeling of belonging, Candace recalls being turned out from a hotel lobby by a condescendingly racist receptionist—but despite the overt hostility, something had started shifting in Candace's mother's mind during this trip, as demonstrated by the question she poses to her child: "What do you think it would be like if we lived here? she wondered, reverting back to Chinese. I would work, and then what would you do?" (289) Even though Candace refuses to interpret this memory for readers, its placement in the very final chapter seems to reclaim the city of Chicago as a place of origin—"a chosen fiction" in Cassin's terms (3)—for Candace herself: It is the first American city she remembers visiting, but it is also the city where her mother first thought up the possibility of leaving China and, in so doing, instigating the "severance," the moment of uprooting, which the novel has been mutely circling. Chicago is thus not the origin of Candace's rootedness, as Ithaca is for Odysseus, but the origin of her root*less*ness—but in the absence of a better alternative, it will have to do.

25 Earlier in the essay, I asked what *Severance* is about if it is not about a literal disease. The answer to this question seems to be nostalgia, although, as we

have seen—and as Cassin argued—nostalgia itself is rarely what one presumes it to be but instead "constantly gives clues so as to be taken for what it is" (3). Reading these clues, nostalgia turned out to be quite a shapeshifter: As the "fever of repetition," nostalgia first transformed from a literal disease into a metaphorical malaise, capable of reducing not just the "fevered" but all of "us" into zombie-like soulless bodies, mutely repeating mundane tasks on a 9-to-5 schedule. As a mediated affect, nostalgia seemed equally mendacious, if somewhat less tangible, in its capacity to form unconscious attachments to places one has never visited—places which are no longer even in existence—with dire consequences. Yet by paying close attention to how *Severance* evokes nostalgia not only as an affect experienced by its protagonist but as an organizing principle of its narrative form, nostalgia lost some of its deviousness and began looking like a rather valuable resource, at least for someone seeking to establish a home. If nostalgia is, as Cassin argues, "an adorable human fiction" (3), it is a necessary, even crucial one in a world in which uprootedness is not only an unfortunate reality but a governing ideology—I am speaking of globalization, or more specifically of "market globalism," which political scientist Manfred Steger even calls "[t]he dominant ideology of our time" (113). Nostalgia need not mislead us into seeking a long-lost, irretrievable home in capitalism's ruins, *Severance* demonstrates, but can equally be transformed into a powerful tool for rooting individuals in the place they choose to call home: Nostalgia, *Severance* confirms, is about the need to belong someplace. If this is a disease, there can be no cure—nor should there be one.

Notes

[1] Wald defines the outbreak narrative as one which "follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging fiction, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment" (2).

[2] Neither is very clear in their usage of this term: Saraf writes that Candace's feeling "exceeds the notion of return, instead longing for an affective condition that could suggest another way of being" (21) without clarifying what this other way of being might be, whereas Gullander-Drolet interprets Rosaldo's idea of "mourning for what one has destroyed" (Rosaldo 107) rather broadly as "an affective condition that colors how individuals view their own implication within the destructive systems they critique" (Gullander-Drolet 96).

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Biography

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