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Fictions of Distance in Recent American Literature

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(Guest Editors)

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Content

Intimacy, Detachment, and the (Post-)Postmodern Novel: Imagining Distance in Contemporary American Fiction

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Introduction

1 Most large-scale historical changes unfold slowly over long periods of time; only rarely are they permanent and immediate. In March 2020, we—meaning both the editors of this issue and most of us in Europe and North America—saw one such momentous shift take shape almost overnight: One day we were going about our daily lives, meeting in restaurants and on campus, shaking hands and sneezing in public, in short, taking for granted the numerous points of contact between ourselves and other people. The next, we were not. Even if many of the restrictions imposed then have since been relaxed (and then reimposed, only to be relaxed again, in the by now all-too-familiar merry-go-round), this awareness of our proximity to other people has not yet left us—perhaps it never will. When we responded to a call for proposals for *AmLit—American Literatures* with an outline for a pandemic-themed special issue two years ago, nobody knew how far-reaching these changes would turn out to be. Caught in what appeared to be an historic event yet to reveal its full magnitude, and stuck in our respective homes, we felt moved to do something but unsure of what might constitute a proper response. We were not alone in worrying about this: The editor of *The Quarantine Files*, an early collection of reflections on the pandemic by leading academics and public intellectuals put together for LARB, remarks on the equivocality of undertaking such a project in the first place: "What was the point of saying anything right now? Should we not spend more time reflecting on the significance? Might we not simply reaffirm our own privileged positions? Worse still, might our interventions come across as parasitic to the virus?" (Evans 5) These same questions on our minds, we (too) concluded that the lesser of two evils would be to 'intervene'

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in our own modest way. With no leading critical theorists on our speed dials, we set on a different course and asked instead how literature might help us think about the questions of proximity and distance that were accentuated by the pandemic. What does contemporary literature know about distance? Almost immediately, we discovered that even though we had proposed an examination of "fictions of distance," this term implies—in a sense, demands—a dialectics between distance, alienation, disengagement, and disconnect on the one hand and proximity, intimacy, engagement, and connection on the other. The remainder of this introduction will seek to unpack this dialectic of intimacy and distance by first looking at detachment as a critical practice and then turning to examine literature as a connecting medium.

Critical Detachment

2 Before asking what literature knows about distance, we can begin by asking what criticism knows. Questions of distance are a standard feature of epistemological debates, and, indeed, belong integrally to the project of philosophy itself. From the shadows cast on the wall of Plato's cave to the dawn of modern, critical thought during the Enlightenment, first critical distance, and then self-distance in the form of reflexivity have been considered intellectual virtues of the first order. Although certain nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century schools of thought have sought ways of knowing that challenged the ubiquity of detachment—phenomenology comes to mind—the veneration of distance as a critical ideal has received its most damning criticism after the 1970s, when critics began questioning the possibility, and the desirability, of scientific objectivity in earnest. "All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility," wrote Donna Haraway in her seminal 1988 essay "Situated Knowledges." Seeking to expose the "disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively" of the Enlightenment ideal of scientific objectivity, Haraway called for a more engaged, more "situated" way of knowing: "Passionate detachment" (583-85). Yet, as literary critic Amanda Anderson explains in *The Powers of Distance*, by seeking to expose how claims to objective knowledge are not made outside the force fields of power, and showing that seekers of knowledge are subject to the same biases as the rest of society, critics did not overcome distance. Instead, they exchanged an unquestioned veneration of distance for an increasingly self-reflexive—and therefore self-distanced—practice of critical detachment (23-25).

3 More recently, Anglophone literary and cultural criticism has witnessed another flare-up of debates over critical distance. In the so-called "method wars" (Anker and Felski 2) that have erupted in literary and cultural criticism

in the past few decades, various attempts have been made for overcoming exactly the kind of self-reflexive detachment practiced by critics in the seventies and eighties. As Rita Felski, one of the most influential proponents of "postcritique," explains, *their* critical practices ("symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism") demand "an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (*suspicion*)" and equate a pose of disinterested disengagement with intellectual rigor (3; emphasis in original). Drawing on theories of affect, the postcritical movement implies that critique has learned nothing from its own criticism of Enlightenment ideals but still thinks that aloofness equals intellectual adeptness. Hence, the need to move beyond critique itself and become *post*critical. Yet, by taking critique as the object of its criticism, postcritique may not be so much overcoming distance as once more extending the critical project, taking not merely critical methods but the very person of the critic—affects, feelings, attitudes, and all—into its fold. Self-evidently, such an attack on critical detachment and "suspicion" as the prevailing "mood and method" (Felski 1) of the twentieth century downplays the crucial role distance has played in the formation of the modern intellect more generally: If we believe Hannah Arendt, modernity was ushered in by Galileo, who used a telescope—a technology of distance, if there ever was one—to demonstrate that, contrary to sensory perception and common belief, the earth and its inhabitants are not the center of the universe. "The immediate philosophic reaction to this reality was not exultation but Cartesian doubt," Arendt writes, "by which modern philosophy—that 'school of suspicion' as Nietzsche once called it—was founded" (260). If distance, and by extension, suspicion (primarily the suspicion of oneself), is understood as the prevailing ethos of modern, post-Enlightenment thought, overcoming it by a simple tuning of one's "mood," as Felski suggests, seems unlikely and ultimately undesirable.

4 The way out of this critical impasse is indicated by Anderson. Lamenting what she takes to be "incoherence on the subject of detachment in contemporary theory," Anderson calls for a more nuanced understanding of distance as a distinctly modern intellectual practice. In her view—and the above overview seems to support this claim—"contemporary thinkers generate false oppositions and exclusions in their consideration of differing modes and practices of detachment," which results in "truncated forms of theory" (24). Instead of assuming that distance is both a constant and constantly good or bad, Anderson argues that being able to "imagine critical distance as a temporary vantage," and "disengagement" as a "'stance' . . . among others," allows us to see the value of detachment as "an aspiration more than a certainty" (32–33):

> The cultivation of detachment involves an attempt to transcend partiality, interests, and contexts: it is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity. The norms through which that aspiration finds expression may be situated, the aspiration may always be articulated through historically available forms, but as an aspiration it cannot be reduced to a simple form of illusion, or a mere psychological mechanism. There are practitioners of detachment who are . . . certain of their achievement . . . , but there are also practitioners of detachment who are ambivalent, hesitant, uneasy, and sometimes quite thoughtfully engaged in a complex process of self-interrogation and social critique. (33)

Like Enlightenment itself, which Anderson considers in Habermasian fashion not a "tainted" but merely "an unfinished project" (26), the cultivation of distance "is always an ongoing, partial project" (180). Ideally, Anderson concludes, critique advances by means of a "reflexive interrogation of its own practices" (180)—that is, through the cultivation of a critical distance to its own methods and accepted truths.

Theoretical Intimations

5 By focusing solely on distance, detachment, and disengagement with comparatively little attention paid to the corresponding notions of proximity, intimacy, and engagement, critical examinations of distance have frequently neglected the dialectic nature of these concepts. To a certain degree, this is true even of Anderson's otherwise excellent *Powers of Distance*, which attempts to redeem distance as a "distinctive topos" of Victorian literature, and modern thought more broadly, by examining detachment as an "aesthetic" and a form of "intellectual practice" (5). Against such intellectual and literary aesthetics of detachment, it is worth inquiring into a corresponding notion, which we propose to discuss as an aesthetics of *intimacy*.

6 Unlike distance—debates over which erupt here and there but rarely address the concept itself—intimacy has in recent years been subject to several inquiries, even though remarkably few have made any headway as to describing its exact nature. One of the more lucid accounts is literary critic Nancy Yousef's *Romantic Intimacy*. Derived from the Latin word "*intimus*," denoting "the 'most inner,'" Yousef explains, intimacy refers both to that which is most intimate and personal within us and to that which we share with our intimate others (1). For Yousef, the difference between intimacy, understood as "the feeling or sense of closeness," and "mere proximity" is that, whereas proximity is "without content," intimacy is endowed with significance and meaning (3). In this unbreachable gap between an undisclosable inner world and the profound need to find communion with others with equally unreachable depths, Yousef locates a condition of "being-alone-together," which she refers to as "the paradox of intimacy" (4). Intimacy, one could say, is thus not a measure of distance between objects in space but rather refers

to the potential for significant togetherness toward which human beings may aspire in their interactions with each other—a togetherness, however, which paradoxically consists of a communion between separate, distinct beings. According to affect theorist Lauren Berlant, on the other hand, intimacy is even less real than this; rather, intimacy denotes a "utopian" vision which operates in the interstices between fantasy and reality (282). For Berlant, intimacy does not constitute a feeling or specific kind of emotional attachment, as it does for Yousef, but "an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachments" (285).

7 If intimacy is rarely instantiated in reality—"virtually no one knows how to do intimacy," claims Berlant (282)—most critics seem to think that it is even less likely to find expression in virtual spaces. In *Alone Together*, psychologist and social scientist Sherry Turkle claims that digital technology has become "the architect of our intimacies," to the detriment of the real thing: "Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other," and instead of actual intimate connections, we settle for "our new intimacy with machines," which are by definition unable to hold up their end of the bargain by sustaining the sense of significant togetherness we crave (1-3). Whereas Berlant and Yousef emphasize the constructed, linguistically-mediated nature of all intimacy, Turkle draws a sharp distinction between "authentic" intimate bonds between human beings and the "inauthentic," simulated intimacies that occur in technologically-mediated environments, especially those that take place between human and non-human actors: For her study, Turkle interviewed hundreds of people whose desire for intimacy was not directed at other people, or even at pets or other non-human animals, but at sociable robots, such as Paro, the Japanese robot in the shape of a baby seal marketed as a companion for elderly people. Turkle's pessimism seems both reasonable and out of place: On the one hand, there is no question that the lonely and the isolated deserve more than battery-operated toys to keep them company; on the other, human beings have always relied on technology where actual face-to-face interaction is either undesirable or impossible. More broadly, Turkle's nostalgic yearning for a golden age of intimacy recalls deep-seated anxieties about technology and its capability to erode "authentic" human contact.

8 Such lamentations over a lost art of intimacy are especially compelling in the ongoing pandemic—and not entirely without cause, given the alarming spikes in reported loneliness and feelings of isolation after its onset. One way to gain some critical distance from these anxieties about intimacy in the digitally-mediated world is to examine an older, analogue form of mediated intimacy—one that predates social media, video conferences, and artificial intelligence: literature. If what makes digital technologies "seductive," in Turkle's opinion, is their ability to provide an "illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (3), then this is no less true about the allure of reading. Would

Turkle think that readers of literature also "navigate intimacy by skirting it" altogether (10)? Unpacking these prejudices serves as an exercise in critical (self-)distancing. Let us consider the young woman who tells Turkle that she would exchange her human boyfriend for a robot one in a heartbeat were such technology available. For Turkle, it comes as a genuine shock that certain people would find engaging in such "inauthentic" intimacies "preferable . . . to . . . the sometimes messy, often frustrating, and always complex" kind of intimacy found in the "real" world (7). Evidently, in Turkle's view, not only are there "authentic" and "inauthentic" kinds of intimacy, people might be unknowingly seeking illusory intimacies, the true nature of which it is the critic's job to expose. Were she less certain of her own objectivity, and more prone to the kind of hesitant, self-reflexive detachment called for by Anderson, Turkle might have noted the biases that underlie her questioning—at the very least by placing her inquiry in an historical context of similar anxieties concerning various new media. As literary critics, we suggest contextualizing such anxieties by examining the paradoxes of intimacy instantiated by the novel.

9 On the one hand, the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century coincides with what Jürgen Habermas has discussed as the demarcation of *Intimsphäre*, the intimate, private sphere of the bourgeois home, from *Öffentlichkeit*, the public sphere. Concomitant with this "transformation of the public sphere," Habermas argues, the relations between "author, work, and public . . . became intimate mutual relationships between privatized individuals," and especially the "author and the reader became actors who 'talked heart to heart'" (50). According to Habermas, the modern "psychological novel fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for his own, to use the relationships between the figures, between the author, the characters, and the reader, as a substitute for reality" (51)—or as a substitute for 'real' intimacy. The novel, according to this view, is from the start an art of the intimate, which affords readers an unprecedented familiarity with the intimate inner lives of (fictional) others, but also has the potential of entrapping them in a false, in Turkle's words "inauthentic," form of intimacy. Yet, Habermas argues, only between such psychologically self-distanced, self-reflexive individuals could "the public sphere of a rational-critical debate" emerge (51), proving that even "inauthentic" intimacy can have a potentially transformative effect on society.

10 On the other hand, the novel has been criticized exactly for the opposite reason—for a failure to sustain any form of intimacy. Thinking about the novel as an art of isolation could begin with Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller," which is rendered throughout in a language of intimacy and distance. Regardless whether or not one agrees with Benjamin's claim that "the

rise of the novel" brought about a corresponding "decline of storytelling" (364), Benjamin certainly makes a compelling case for thinking of the modern novel as an art of isolation. Embedded deeply in the social fabric of his community, the archetypal "storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers"—counsel which, "woven into the fabric of real life," becomes that rarest of things, "wisdom" (364). (Perhaps, were Benjamin to have stepped a little closer to these epic storytellers of yore, he might have noticed the gender disparity—many an ancient storyteller, perhaps even most of them, were women.) The modern novelist stands in contrast to the artisanal storyweaver, according to Benjamin: "The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others" (364). While "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (367), the novel is, at most, "like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play" (372). Similarly, the "man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller," even when the storytelling itself is mediated by writing, whereas the "reader of a novel . . . is isolated" (372).

11 Once more we find ourselves at a theoretical impasse. According to Habermas, the modern novel creates an unprecedented intimacy between readers and writer. Benjamin, by contrast, thinks that oral storytelling provides the most intimate form of connection, after which comes the epic, the romance, and other pre-modern literary genres, followed finally by the modern novel, with distance increasing—and intimacy decreasing—every step of the way. Despite their opposing views, neither Habermas nor Benjamin is able to render the novel solely in terms of either distance or intimacy; instead, what we find at the heart of both accounts is a dialectic of presence and absence, of proximity and distance, of connection and disconnection.

12 Deconstructing these oppositions was one of the great achievements of poststructuralist thought and provides a suitable conclusion to this theoretical overview. This final detour is also necessary for another reason: In contrast to the modern novel discussed by Habermas and Benjamin, the postmodern and post-postmodern novels discussed in the remainder of this issue are acutely aware, not just of distance and intimacy, but of the theoretical intimations we have been mapping thus far: The contemporary novel is, in Judith Ryan's phrase, the "novel after theory" in the sense that it can "be said to 'know about' literary and cultural theory" (1). Put another way, we began by asking what fiction knows about distance, but this question might be rightfully amended so as to also ask what fiction knows about *theories* of distance.

13 One of the most influential works in this regard is Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*, which argues that we falsely understand writing as a substitute

for the connection established through speech. "Writing," philosopher Barbara Johnson explains in her frequently-cited introduction to *Dissemination*, is considered "a second-rate activity that tries to overcome distance by making use of it: the writer puts his thought on paper, distancing it from himself, transforming it into something that can be read by someone far away, even after the writer's death" (ix). What Derrida aims at with his grammatology, an objective science of writing, is to show that our trust in the immediacy and self-evidence of the spoken word—what Derrida calls logocentrism—is itself misguided: The spoken word is constructed as immediate and intimate only in relation to the written word, so in fact, it is the "difference and distance," or *différance*, between these two terms which is significant to our understanding of both (cf. Johnson ix). Put another way, Derrida is suggesting that our belief in the immediacy and intimacy of spoken language is itself little more than a fiction: a fiction of presence. In a Derridean poststructuralist perspective, Turkle's longing for authentic, unmediated intimacy, and Benjamin's nostalgia for the present premodern storyteller, appear naïve: Whether spoken or written, language always mediates our experience of intimacy—including the physical, non-verbal kind, which remains at the level of "mere proximity" until it is elevated to the significant togetherness of intimacy by language, which alone is capable of signifying something. Unless we learn to merge distinct human beings into one body and soul—perhaps in the manner imagined in Plato's *Symposium*—there simply is no escape from these paradoxes of intimacy and distance.

14 As a conclusion to this overview, we can begin undoing some of the distance afforded by theoretical abstractions. Unheeded by Benjamin's worry about the hopelessness of finding communion—let alone intimacy—in modern literature, writers have kept on writing and readers have kept on reading throughout the violent upheavals of the twentieth century, just as they have persisted in writing and reading throughout the digital revolution of the twenty-first century. Even a brief glance at postwar literary debates proves that far from naïve or ignorant of the paradoxical nature of distance and intimacy, literature after World War II has, if anything, become more aware of the need for its connecting abilities without forgetting about the fraught basis on which such a communion is erected. While Theodor Adorno was wondering about the barbarous nature of writing poetry after Auschwitz, Paul Celan not only kept writing but insisted that he "cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem" (26).[1] This puzzling analogy has been read in a variety of different ways. In Emmanuel Lévinas's interpretation, by comparing a poem to a handshake, Celan is transferring language from the metaphysical to the physical, effectively claiming in poetry an "elementary communication" comparable to the mutual, tactile correspondence of a handshake, that

"moment of pure touch, of pure contact, of that grasping, that pressing which is, perhaps a way of giving even to the hand that gives" (Lévinas 16-17). Instead of constituting a mere theoretical abstraction, Celan's analogy suggests that poetry, literature, connects real people—whether it does so well or badly depends largely on the writers and readers who make up the poetic encounter: "Only truthful hands write true poems," Celan himself adds (26). Debating the possibility of a transcendent "language of and for proximity"—Lévinas's term for Celan's poetic vision (17)—is not necessary for drawing the unavoidable conclusion that, for better or for worse, we human beings are dependent on language as a means of seeking intimacy across the distances between us, faulty as this medium may be.

The Intimate Poetics of Postmodern Fiction

15 The paradoxes of intimacy are brought front and center in the postmodern novel, the quintessential form of which is metafiction. In the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut, elaborate metafictional plots and self-referential language discourage readerly identification with fictive characters. Such "fiction about fiction" assumes a self-reflexive, in Linda Hutcheon's terms "narcissistic," form of "textual self-awareness" (1). As these terms imply, even defendants of postmodern poetics (such as Hutcheon) frequently end up accusing postmodernism of solipsistic navel-gazing. On the other hand, such accounts imply that distance from, and disengagement with, the world must coincide with aesthetic self-absorption and narcissistic self-love—solipsistic, solitary intimacies. Yet, metafiction's apparent disengagement and dis-immersion with the fictive world is not gratuitous: Metafictional distance merely redirects readers to engage differently, by demanding that they grapple seriously with the idea of fiction itself. In this sense, the contrived metafictional plots of postmodern novels act as reminders of the original meaning of the word *fiction*, from the Latin *fingere*, to "form" or "contrive." The poetics of postmodernism, far from overly detached and disengaged, are revealed to be the very opposite of this: By seeking to represent the tactile act of crafting that is involved in the making of all fictions, postmodern fiction is a testament to the idea that the art of poetics is an inherently intimate one.

16 Beyond its intimate poetics, postmodern fiction also demonstrates a deep, if ambivalent, engagement with the idea of intimacy on the level of content. A comprehensive study of intimacy in postmodern fiction has so far not been undertaken, but our own ongoing research indicates potential avenues for conducting such a survey. Many classics of postmodern literature are doubtful or suspicious about the possibility of intimacy. Frequently, when the potential for intimacy emerges within the postmodern novel—whether between fictional characters or between the reader and the implied author—it assumes the

sinister form of complicity, coercion, or outright violence: A reader of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) who is too easily taken in by Humbert Humbert's intimations risks falling prey to the same manipulative tricks the narrator uses in coercing consent from his teenage victim. A similarly high degree of detachment would be advisable to readers of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), whose psychotic narrator is either unable or unwilling to differentiate between his homicidal and erotic impulses, or between real and imagined encounters. Instead of identifying with Patrick Bateman, readers of Ellis's novel thus find themselves in a position where they must learn to discern between various kinds of intimate violations—whether imaginary or frightfully real is never quite clear—the exact nature of which most would rather not contemplate at all. As these examples demonstrate, even those postmodern novels that have frequently been accused of encouraging detachment, even indifference toward the transgressions they depict, are deeply invested in paradoxes of intimacy and the ethics of intimate encounter. If anything, by forcing novel readers to become newly aware of the often uncomfortably intimate act of reading, postmodernism's intimate poetics can serve to attenuate the need to remain vigilant—as in self-critical and self-reflexive—about the distance between ourselves and fictive and real others.

Aesthetics of Intimacy in Post-9/11 Fiction

17 Around the millennium, following the attacks on September 11, several critics have argued that postmodernism has exhausted itself. On par with the waning of a postmodern aesthetic of detachment, a notably more optimistic perspective on intimacy began to be articulated in the works of a new generation of fiction writers. In contrast to a postmodern suspicion of intimacy and a poststructuralist skepticism about language as a medium, novelists such as Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Dave Eggers have turned to explore the possibility of intersubjective communication, both within their fictions and as a means of connecting with readers. In recent literary scholarship, this shift has been traced back to David Foster Wallace, who is seen as the forerunner of what has come to be called "The New Sincerity" in American fiction, and is thus cast as a key figure in the self-reevaluation of literature in the wake of postmodernism. In Adam Kelly's assertion, in New Sincerity writing, both author and reader "really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time" (206; emphasis in original). Through an emphatic acknowledgment of readers as present within their texts, the writers in question employ a rhetoric of sincerity to come out of 'hiding' and expose themselves with all

their anxieties and vulnerabilities. Intimacy is here neither undercut by ironic distance, nor does it signify a trap for the reader. Instead, it is rendered as an attempt at genuine communion between author and reader.

18 But what is new about The New Sincerity? Whereas Lionel Trilling's seminal *Sincerity and Authenticity* of 1972 still conceived of sincerity as a correspondence between two stable entities, "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2), New Sincerity writers are aware of the powerful poststructuralist critique of such simplified views of subject formation. Moreover, they explicitly draw attention to the precarity of their own literary endeavors: Instead of taking the veracity of their authorial voice for granted and expecting their audience to follow suit, they invite readers to judge for themselves. Such gestures reflect the insight that an informed conception of sincerity—similar to Yousef's "paradox of intimacy"—entails at least one double bind: Literature cannot escape the dilemma of, on the one hand, disavowing manipulative rhetoric through an endorsement of sincerity and, on the other, embracing the necessarily self-reflexive rhetoric of self-disclosure (Tolksdorf 17-24). Observing how some contemporary writers employ postmodern techniques toward different ends—for example through what Lee Konstantinou calls "post-irony"—, several scholars have commented on the dialectical relationship between this writing style and its postmodern predecessor. In *Succeeding Postmodernism*, Mary K. Holland observes that contemporary literature is cognizant of poststructuralist's skepticism about language as a connecting medium but nevertheless chooses to approach it as a tool for overcoming distance rather than as an obstacle in the achievement of intimacy. Rather than a regression to the naïveté of 'pre-postmodern' literary modes, Holland argues, this shows that 'post-postmodern' literature has learned from poststructuralism and now challenges some of its core tenets as it revisits these same questions of intimacy and distance (6). In her summary, the apparent paradox of "language as solution to the problem of language" is an accurate account of the corresponding authors' literary endeavor (3).

19 Even though neither intimacy nor sincerity, its rhetorical cousin, are any less fraught now than they were at the height of postmodernism, recent fiction seems more committed to both the possibility and the necessity of seeking connection. In the contrarian rationale of New Sincerity writers, artistic success depends on the courage that sincerity demands precisely because such an attitude appears unfeasible. These authors' trust in literature's ability to connect sets them apart from postmodern novelists' complicit depictions of intimacy. Against the postmodern aesthetics of detachment, their aesthetics of intimacy entail emphatic negotiations of proximity among individuals and institutions, including readers and authors, which gain their intensity and appeal through the reciprocal recognition and trust among those involved.

Whether this relational longing is fulfilled remains to be seen in each individual case, but the very desire for intimacy in environments that appear averse to it is itself notable. After all, as much of today's communication is perceived as corrupted by commercial or personal interests, 'true' intimacy—which, as Berlant noted, may well be a utopia in the first place—appears impossible.

20 As this brief overview of fictions of distance in contemporary American fiction demonstrates, the possibility of linguistic and literary communion should not be taken for granted, nor should a desire for intimacy be treated as naïve or even dangerous. Instead, in both life and in literature, intimacy becomes a question with no easy answer.

Imagining Distance in a Time of Crisis

21 The writers in this issue continue investigating the dialectic of intimacy and distance through essays on three novels, each of which 'knows' a great deal more about the paradoxes described above than it lets on. At first sight, the trio of essays seems to revolve around three unusually alienated and emotionally detached figures—three young women captured at three distinct moments of historic upheaval: In Maxime McKenna's essay on Joan Didion's breakthrough novel *Play It as It Lays* (1970), the sexual revolution and sixties' counterculture provide the backdrop for a Hollywood actress's private turmoil; in Marlene Dirschauer's essay on Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), the terrorist attacks of 9/11 loom at the horizon of the protagonist's drug-infused attempt to sleep through the year 2000; and in Sonja Pyykkö's essay on Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), a fictional pandemic displaces Occupy Wall Street as the instigator of a global cataclysm that leaves the protagonist, and the rest of the world, grasping for meaning. Yet, like the clichéd forest comprised of individual trees, when seen from the correct distance, something which would otherwise remain elusive suddenly becomes visible. Fiction provides a distancing effect in these novels, which offer new perspectives to the derisive cultural politics of the postwar U.S., the war on terror, and the financial crisis of 2008, respectively. That the characters in these novels themselves fail to grasp the significance of the events in which they are embroiled—much like we are now struggling to grasp the magnitude of what is unfolding around us—does not make these events any less pertinent to the readers of these novels.

22 Moreover, even if critics have tended to juxtapose detachment with intimacy, these essays demonstrate that fiction recognizes no such partition but finds a careful counterbalance between depictions of distance and of intimacy: McKenna examines how infrastructure—of the prosaic and easily-overlooked variety of highways and plumbing—provides a "fix," a means of connection, where social interaction fails, Dirschauer finds that art finally redeems and

connects the self- and world-alienated individual, and Pyykkö argues that nostalgia, as a form of sustained attachment with the idea of homecoming, has the potential of rooting the uprooted. The issue's title, *Fictions of Distance*, thus assumes a dual meaning, denoting both fiction's ability to provide distance and the fictive nature of distance itself. For better or for worse, it is part of the human condition, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, that we are never truly alone—even if we are never *not* alone, either. From the moment we enter this world, we are always already *alone together*. Setting out to ask not what contemporary literature knows about pandemics but what it knows about distance, we thus found ourselves back with the pandemic's paradigmatic ethos of social distancing. Perhaps this is an unavoidable consequence of an investigation born so clearly out of present concerns; in any case, the circular route demonstrates that literature knows a great deal about the subtle paradoxes inherent in the human condition, even if it does not always know what it knows.

Notes

[1] In a letter to Hans Bender dated May 18, 1960, Celan writes: "Craft means handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to *one* person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness. Only truthful hands write true poems. I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem" (26; emphasis in original).

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The Freeway Fix: Infrastructure, Affect, and the Politics and Aesthetics of Distance in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*

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Abstract This essay reconsiders the many scenes of freeway driving in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970) through the critical lens of infrastructure to argue that the novel finds in the built environment a model for its own distanced narrative style. The novel's engagements with everyday infrastructure like the freeway encourage us to imagine a personal "affective fix" operating alongside David Harvey's theory of the "spatial fix," which describes how large-scale mid-century infrastructure projects both manage and replicate capitalism's crisis tendencies. The fix that Maria gets while driving on the freeway is a dynamic process of performing radical self-reliance amidst society's connective and constraining structures. The text itself strives for a similar fix in its form, which can be said to be infrastructural in the way that it maintains its various levels of textual distance to enact a profound impersonality.

Keywords Affect, Automobility, Distance, Self-Reliance, Infrastructure.

Cited Names Joan Didion, David Harvey, Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Introduction

1 What can we learn about everyday infrastructure—freeways, pipes, electric grids, broadcast networks—from a novel, like Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*, that is obsessed with it? In turn, what might this particular novel's obsession have to teach us about literature?

2 Critics of the "infrastructural turn" have focused on textual representations of infrastructure to theorize literary form alongside expansive systems and flows of capital, people, and meaning.[1] Patricia Yaeger has written that literature is uniquely positioned to interrogate how infrastructure operates because of the complex topographies that define the literary in the first place. But how might we read a resistance to this textual and textural richness as being nevertheless an infrastructural quality? This is exactly the kind of question that *Play It as It Lays* begs. Didion's novel appears to find in everyday infrastructure the aesthetic potential for its own cold and distant narrative style.

3 First published in 1970, *Play It as It Lays* offers a bleak vision of American life in the postwar period via a character study of a Hollywood actress undergoing a personality crisis. Over nearly ninety hyper-short and often fragmentary chapters, Didion relates the events leading up to Maria Wyeth's assistance (or failure to intervene) in the suicide of her friend BZ, a closeted gay film producer. While suspicious of the prosperity emblematized in its mid-century Southern Californian setting, the novel is neither an outright condemnation of bourgeois society nor a countercultural rejection of the system. Protagonist Maria makes her way through a life that fails to add up by practicing her own version of detached Hollywood cool that marks her as distant and even unstable in the eyes of her peers. She has a habit of repeating back to people what they say—"You think you'll buy a Camaro," or "this is a bad day for you" (79, 101)—an off-putting neutrality that leads her ex-husband Carter to claim that he should have predicted her involvement in BZ's death. Likewise, in her depictions of Maria's thoroughly modern milieu, Didion eschews colorful detail, instead portraying the Los Angeles metropolitan area as a stark wilderness where one has no choice but to rely on one's pluck and wits. The only joy Maria gets comes from the miles of asphalt that she navigates every day as an Angelina: the massive infrastructure project of the Southern California freeway.

4 *Play It as It Lays* sets itself apart from the hotbed political years during which it was written. In the novel, Didion foregoes any comment on the issues and social movements that defined the late 1960s. Moreover, she resists a clear-cut interpretation of Maria and her troubling circumstances. At the end of the story, Maria—"pronounced Mar-*eye*-ah" (4)—winds up in a psychiatric institution following BZ's death, and rather than integrate the novel's many short scenes into an account that either redeems or implicates her heroine, Didion lets them stand, unsettlingly, on their own. As at least one critic has

argued, Didion's deployment of the "Hemingway style" "renders the moral starvation of a society that has dispensed almost entirely with the freight of ethical intention" (Wolff 483). A more recent reappraisal in *The New Yorker* sees in Didion's terse, masculine, modernist prose a rejection of "the postwar idea that women writers were obliged to be either mini Virginia Woolfs, mincing abstractions from the parlor, or Shulamith Firestones, raging for liberation" (Heller). I argue that the style of *Play It as It Lays* is not merely a poetics of social ills nor can it be reduced to a self-distinguishing gesture. Rather, Didion's apparently aloof style can be understood as part of a dynamic process of engaging with and disengaging from one's circumstances, a process that the text means to model. In order to grasp this possibility in the levels of spatial and affective distance that the novel is intent on maintaining (between Maria and her peers, narrative and reader, Didion and her sociopolitical context) we have to examine the charged spaces that the text returns to again and again—namely, those of infrastructure.

5 Geographer David Harvey has argued that infrastructure can be thought of as part of a "spatial fix"—that is, as part of capitalism's strategy to resolve its inherent crisis tendencies of overaccumulation by opening new markets, tapping new labor sources, and so forth. For Harvey, the word "fix" in the term "spatial fix" has an equally useful meaning to that of an addict's "fix," and it is this added connotation that I want to focus on. The idea that infrastructure might supply temporary-yet-intensifying relief of a craving begs an interrogation of what other needs infrastructure satisfies, beyond consumer cravings for commodities and capitalism's need to perpetuate itself. Infrastructure, specifically automobile infrastructure, certainly supplies a "fix" for Didion's protagonist Maria. At the beginning of the novel, Maria has separated from her husband Carter, who has placed their young daughter, Kate, in an institution, against Maria's wishes. To cope, Maria spends hours each morning driving the freeways of the greater Los Angeles area, going wherever they lead her and rarely anywhere in particular. Although she has nowhere to be, she hurries through her morning routine as if she were a commuter, because, Didion tells us, "it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o'clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum" (15). This strict regimen that Maria holds herself to shares in the circular, compulsive logic of anxiety: Maria is neither headed anywhere nor consciously fleeing anything. Nevertheless, in just one month, she puts seven thousand miles on her Corvette.

6 It might seem that the freeway is simply what Maria's anxiety has latched onto. The novel is filled with characters seeking their next fix: gamblers, housewives

hooked on overprescribed barbiturates, bored adulterers, pill users, alcoholics, even psychiatrists, who appear in Maria's mind to be addicted in their own way to cause-and-effect explanations for their patients' problems. Somewhat more innocently, Maria has persistent cravings for Coca-Cola. However, in *Play It as It Lays*, infrastructure offers more than another fix for addictive personalities. The specific fix that infrastructure stands to offer Maria (but, as we shall see, Didion as well) is a way to keep pace with an existence that has been "precariously imposed."

7 In this essay, I argue that infrastructure emerges over the course of *Play It as It Lays* as a dynamic site where individuality gets reasserted amidst the social. The novel encourages us to imagine an "affective fix"—a combination of fixing oneself and getting one's fix—operating beside the "spatial fix" provided by the new, impersonal public spaces that proliferated in the postwar period. I begin by situating Harvey's notion of the "spatial fix" within other accounts of infrastructure to argue that capitalism's corrective interventions in the built environment draw subjects into a dynamic geography of constantly shifting personal crises and solutions. I then reconsider the many depictions of driving in Didion's novel as instances of a "freeway fix" that offers its protagonist a more durable (and exhilarating) fix within this turbulent environment than the other fixes available to her, namely games of chance and chemical sedation. Finally, I read the novel's form alongside its engagements with infrastructure to argue that, through its careful maintenance of various levels of textual distance, *Play It as It Lays* strives to become *infrastructural*, making the novel itself a formal enactment of the affective fix that Maria seeks throughout. Indeed, Didion's novel transforms the intense impersonality of infrastructure into something radically personal and, as such, helps us to think through what Dominic Boyer calls the "epistemic infrastructure" (235) that has brought us to the brink of ecological catastrophe.

Infrastructural Fixes

8 In his work on the geography of capital, David Harvey frequently examines how the contradictions inherent in capital accumulation have manifested in the production of space. As capitalism seeks to open up new markets and cheaper sources of labor, it resorts to ever-grander and now-global spatial strategies, which Harvey terms "spatial fixes." These fixes are not durable means of overcoming problems of accumulation and circulation; rather, they avert crises by expanding and restructuring the coordinates of capital flow, in the process replicating capitalism's self-destructive tendencies on a new scale. This dynamic is captured by the two distinct and opposed meanings of the word "fix" in "spatial fix." The first, "fixity," refers to the fixing in place of certain quantities of capital—in the form of machinery but also highways,

railways, airports, shipping ports, and other infrastructure projects—that allow other quantities to circulate freely. The other meaning of "fix" is "solution," as in a fix to the dilemma of having later to overcome that same fixity in order to enable even faster and more abstract circulation. With this second meaning, Harvey also means to invoke an addict's "fix,"

> in which it is the burning desire to relieve a chronic or pervasive problem that is the focus of meaning. Once the 'fix' is found or achieved then the problem is resolved and the desire evaporates. But, as in the case of the drug addict, it is implied that the resolution is temporary rather than permanent, since the craving soon returns. ("Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix'" 24)

9 For Harvey, the government intervention and technological progress characteristic of the postwar period are crucial forces in the development of this chronic need for fixes. Following World War II, governments in the West pursued large-scale renewal projects that fixed massive amounts of capital in the built environment. In the United States, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 led to the creation of the American Interstate Highway System, the largest infrastructure project in American history, which supported the mass suburbanization that helped reabsorb surpluses of previously city-bound labor and capital. Subsequent fixes further increased the pressure on capital "[to shift] rapidly (and often with considerable volatility) from one location to another," all while requiring that "massive amounts of capital and labor [be] invested in the sorts of immobile fixed capital we see in airports, commercial centers, office complexes, highways, suburbs, container terminals, and the like" ("Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix'" 28). The globally intertwined infrastructural situation that we find ourselves in in the present results from this slew of fixes undertaken to reschedule capitalism's self-destruction indefinitely; meanwhile, the exponential demand for mobility makes the neoliberal state reluctant to commit to more fixity. The much-debated trillion-dollar infrastructure bill passed in November 2021, which has been held up as a central achievement of Joe Biden's first-year agenda as president, is intended to address the persistent underfunding of decades-old infrastructure (while also ostensibly setting aside money for modernizing carbon infrastructure, which is necessary to avert climate catastrophe). The controversy surrounding its legislation illustrates infrastructure's slippery status as capital. Infrastructure in its very nature is "as yet incompletely commodified" (Robbins 26): Despite being profitable in the sense of allowing other forms of capital to circulate, infrastructure itself is rarely profitable to construct.

10 This present, contradictory situation is also maintained by a deep-seated ideology propagated by infrastructure itself. According to Dominic Boyer, infrastructure not only organizes our built environment; it also organizes how we think of the built environment. By "reinforcing the naturalness and inevitability of carbon infrastructure," Boyer argues, postwar infrastructural networks

of electrification and transport serve to legitimize and maintain the status quo—an operation Boyer terms "epistemic infrastructure" (235-36). Lauren Berlant has expressed similar misgivings about infrastructure's epistemic force, writing that "in the situation tragedy of the present, . . . [m]id-twentieth century forms of expansive world building toward the good life have little or unreliable traction" (409). Indeed, the version of the "good life" that first-world infrastructure both enables and represents cannot be separated from the late-capitalist world system that requires such networks in the first place. To expand existing forms of infrastructure even toward utopian ends is ultimately to extend capitalistic, petrocultural logic. In concrete terms, an infrastructure project like the interstate might come to serve the common good only if it were not entangled with problems of automobility, accessibility, and fossil fuel extraction—in other words, if it were nothing like a highway network at all.

11 A concept like epistemic infrastructure demonstrates how the fixes that infrastructure provides capitalism in its expansion and self-preservation also operate on the level of ideology and perhaps even imagination and affect. The ideological and affective underpinnings of infrastructure become especially apparent when considering the infrastructural networks of mass media. Fredric Jameson and other Marxist scholars have described mass media's manifestation of "social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed" (Jameson 141). Because of the unique experiential dimensions of driving a car, roads are a compelling example for thinking about this mediatic function of infrastructure. In fact, early planners of the Interstate Highway System imagined superhighway driving as being an activity akin to watching television: "The driving experience can now be described as being a sequence played to the eyes of a captive, somewhat fearful, but partially inattentive audience, whose vision is filtered and directed forward," states one study published in 1964 by urbanists at MIT (Appleyard et al. 5). Similarly, pop media theorist Marshall McLuhan also likened modern, automobile infrastructure to television, both of which he viewed as "cooling" media that would rein in the "hotter" cultural forces that predominated in the years leading up to World War II.[2] Here, McLuhan's notoriously clunky hot-cool schema helps illuminate the corrective ideological function of both media and infrastructure alike: The "hot" experience of power and speed that one might get behind the wheel offers a potent mirage within a rigid system of ramps and exits that, through a combination of political and engineering decisions, always dictates where you can go and when.

12 To an extent, *Play It as It Lays* addresses these illusions at the heart of the mid-twentieth-century "good life." The freeway, the ultimate infrastructural symbol

of postwar prosperity, feeds Maria promises of escape that remain all too persuasive even after being revealed to be false. Maria's affective attachment to the freeway might be said to result from epistemic infrastructure, and as we will see, Didion's own investment in the freeway as a technology of modern-day individualism carries its own ideological freight. But, I argue, the novel does more than unmask one ideology only to fall prey to another. Reading *Play It as It Lays* alongside Harvey's theory of the spatial fix illuminates a different commitment to infrastructure: Infrastructure in Didion's novel becomes a propulsive site where one can fix oneself and get one's fix at the same time. Didion's vision of infrastructure in *Play It as It Lays* is far from utopian, nor does it advocate for acquiescence to social (infra)structures that individuals are powerless to overcome. Rather, in a society on the verge of crisis, Didion turns to the built environment for a model of radical and dynamic impersonality; a form of affective and spatial distancing necessary to survive, and thrive, in a perilous world.

The Secular Communion of the Freeway: The Political is Personal

13 Throughout *Play It as It Lays*, Didion pays special attention to the infrastructures that monumentalize American prosperity: the freeways of Southern California; the Hoover Dam; the air-conditioning that makes the desert habitable; and even more primitive technologies like indoor plumbing. A good deal has been written about automobility in *Play It as It Lays* (see Seiler; Carver; and Alworth), and while the freeway is the most prominent infrastructural site in the text, I want to insist that viewing the many scenes of driving through a wider lens of infrastructure—instead of merely thinking of the novel as a road narrative—gets us closer to the novel's concerns. Maria's version of the road isn't *open*: it is a closed circuit that brings her from and back to familiar locations, all within the same metropolitan area. The freeway in *Play It as It Lays* shares in "the inherent boringness of infrastructure" (Rubenstein et al. 576), and the mechanics of driving that so thrill Maria—merging, exiting, changing lanes—do so because of how rote they have become. Didion's pessimism about life in the sixties notwithstanding, infrastructure in *Play It as It Lays* is never a simple stand-in for what is "structurally" wrong with American society. Didion is interested in the dysfunction of a society whose systems, institutions, and infrastructures function as intended, and it is within those functional systems that she finds the potential for a profound personal fix.

14 A few years before the publication of *Play It as It Lays*, Didion had likened the late 1960s to the end-times in her famous essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Written about her time among the hippies in San Francisco in the spring of 1967, in the months leading up to the Summer of Love, the essay opens with a sweeping indictment of American life. The hippies, in Didion's

analysis, were "children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held the society together" (84). "Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves," she adds later (123). This breakdown was most evident in the gulf between national fortune and individual fulfillment. Despite the "brave hopes" and "national promise" of a steady stock market and high GDP, American society was headed toward catastrophe: "All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job" (84-85).

15 Didion's diagnosis of the sixties in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" foreshadows the political concerns that also subtly underpin *Play It as It Lays*. In the novel, the essay's metaphorical references to games and abortions become literalized as events in Maria's life. In the opening chapter, Maria addresses the reader in the first-person mode from within the psychiatric institution, where she has been consigned. She tells us that she spends her days answering doctors' questions, "trying again to be an agreeable player of the game" (4). Of course, what she's really doing is playing along, providing just enough information so that she might one day be released and reunited with her young daughter Kate, who has also been institutionalized for reasons that are never made quite clear. The significance of Maria's self-description as an "agreeable player of the game" becomes evident toward the end of the novel, in the events immediately preceding the book's nonchronological introduction. Right before he overdoses on Seconal, BZ tells Maria, "You're still playing . . . Someday you'll wake up and you just won't feel like playing anymore" (212). Both Maria and BZ belong to that generation, identified in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," that "had stopped believing in the rules" ("Slouching" 123). Each has come to realize in their own way that the ideal of the "good life" does not make them happy. But whereas BZ quits the "game" (or *rat-race*, or *daily-grind*, or life under late capitalism), Maria never stops "playing." In fact, she becomes a different kind of player, approaching the social game with the sang-froid of a seasoned craps player. Maria divests from her emotional attachment by rejecting cause-and-effect explanation. Both the psychiatrists in the institution and Maria's friends and family outside all want to know *why* BZ killed himself, *why* Maria didn't stop him, and ultimately how such an act is possible among wealthy people in sunny California. But Maria prefers facts, and facts, she implies, are isolated events like dice rolls: No matter how much compulsive gamblers, like her deceased father, want to believe that the next roll has to "be better than what went out on the last" (5), each is independent of the other. When we first encounter her in the institution, Maria is not interested in recouping the bad things that have happened to her into any kind of explanation; instead, she has come around to *playing the odds as they lay*.

16 Most of the novel is told in third-person mode, as if Didion were taking over for Maria in establishing the "facts." One crucial fact is Maria's botched abortion. Since the abortion was performed illegally, Maria is left with few avenues for redressing her physical pain and emotional distress. Although *Play It as It Lays* is deliberately not a second-wave feminist novel, as I discuss below, the topic of abortion is an important one for Didion, who sees in abortion legislation a fundamental problem of personal liberty. In "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," she describes a society doomed to "butcher" itself amidst its arbitrary rules about what it means to prosper. By contrast, in *Play It as It Lays*, Didion imagines an emancipatory process of self-abortion. In a late chapter, told again in the first-person from inside the asylum, Maria talks about how annoyed she is with Carter and Helene, BZ's widow, paying her visits only to pry for more details as to why she let BZ kill himself. "Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life," Maria recalls. "Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work" (203). This idea of becoming a radical surgeon of one's own life points to a desire for absolute autonomy, a shedding of all reliance on others, who are fated to "butcher the job." As I will show in the remainder of this section, this self-reliance is exactly what Maria achieves aboard the freeway.

17 Both *playing it as it lays* and the fantasy of self-abortion are acts of abstracting oneself from society's mores and laws. Maria is constrained by the gender trappings of her time—and, unfortunately, of ours. She is relegated to dull film roles because of her age, while her eventual ex-husband Carter is set to attain auteur status in middle age; her only resources for dealing with her pregnancy are the pushy Carter, a backroom abortionist, and other doctors who refuse to take her pain seriously; and her way of *playing it cool* in Hollywood marks her in the eyes of others as frigid and unstable. But the novel puts the lie to any notion that Maria is the victim of a system. In fact, she does manage to excise herself from her surroundings, and not just by adopting an aggressive indifference to the "game." Throughout the novel, Maria exercises surprising and complex forms of agency—from behind the wheel.

18 The freeway offers Maria a space in which to be radically self-reliant in the Emersonian sense, and as she drives around the Los Angeles area, she learns to withdraw from society spiritually if not physically. When the third-person narrative begins, Maria is fully enthralled in her freeway fix. Separated from both Carter and Kate, she has taken to driving the freeway every morning, and this peculiar ritual is the first "fact" Didion gives us in the account of the events leading up to BZ's death. Unlike the other motorists hitting the freeway in the morning, Maria has nowhere to be. The gratification she gets by driving the freeway comes not from getting somewhere in particular but from going wherever it leads. "She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more

attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, *Normandie 1/4 Vermont 3/4 Harbor Fwy 1*" (16). She is particularly attracted to the dangerous lane maneuver required to change from the Hollywood branch to the Harbor and returns to it again and again on her drives. "On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly," Didion writes (16). A move that countless drivers execute flawlessly every day is for Maria an exhilarating, life-threatening event. At the wheel of her private automobile—"the organism which absorbed all her reflexes, all her attention" (17)—Maria holds her own fate in her hands. While it is other motorists who pose the greatest danger to her, they hardly register in her awareness, traffic having become a force like a current rather than the sum of discrete actions by thousands of other individuals.

19 With its riverlike wildness, the freeway exists apart from the rest of the city as a kind of post–Manifest Destiny natural frontier, situated not at the edges of the continent but running through it. Its ecology of lanes, interchanges, and signifiers enchants because of how precisely unenchanting it is meant to be. The names and numbers printed on the great signs shake off their semantic meaning in Maria's dreams, and the destinations and distances that they signify are mere "facts" that do not add up to any greater truth. Meanwhile, the constant risk of injury or death becomes a test of one's mettle in a world that has been made all too safe. Like any pastoral wilderness, the space of the freeway in *Play It as It Lays* is constantly under threat. Even in her car, Maria cannot outrun the expectations put on her as an actress, and she keeps a hardboiled egg on the passenger seat, which she shells and eats at seventy miles an hour: "Crack it on the steering wheel, never mind salt, salt bloats, no matter what happened she remembered her body" (17). One day, she drives all the way to Baker, within the range of the radio stations broadcasting from Las Vegas, where Carter is making a movie, and she is thrown into a dilemma over whether or not to call him from a payphone. Although she tells herself it is a coincidence, the freeway has brought her closer to the source of her woe. "[T]o clear her head of Carter and what Carter would say" (32), she swallows two tablets of the headache medicine Fiorinal and heads back to L.A. She finds the freeway dismal: "the traffic was heavy and the hot wind blew sand through the windows and the radio got on her nerves and after that Maria did not go back to the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere" (33). The sudden corruption of the freeway reveals the problem that was there all along: the intrusion of other people into Maria's own private automobile Eden.

20 Despite being thoroughly infiltrated by society's trappings, the space of the freeway continues to hold empowering potential for Maria, who eventually cultivates an imaginative relationship to the freeway. As I will describe in the next section, Maria starts to fantasize about driving right when other fixes come up short, the roadways in her head more idyllic, closer to what she wants the road to be. Ann Brigham has observed how female-centered road narratives of the Cold War reflect the growing awareness in the sixties and seventies that the "personal is political." In these post-Friedan narratives, "there is a textual ambivalence about the road, which materializes when a character has a revelatory experience" about the forms of power that limit their lives (112), usually following a moment when domesticity has pursued them out onto the "open road." But another way of thinking through Brigham's claims about the personal being political is to think of the collapse between public and private spheres as an occasion for radical individuality. Unlike other road narratives, especially those in the tradition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), *Play It as It Lays* does not offer a vision of merry sociality out on the road; in fact, it is free of any redeeming vision of human sociality at all, as David Alworth observes. The space of the road in *Play It as It Lays* "provides an opportunity to be antisocial," and "[p]art of Didion's ambition, in painting such a bleak picture of late-1960s Hollywood, is to depict a sort of autophilia, to envisage a compensatory, even redemptive, love between one woman and her car" (Alworth 75).

21 Indeed, Didion's politics in *Play It as It Lays* are profoundly, defiantly personal. Albeit a kind of social critique, the novel is reluctant to identify its main character with any political group. Didion herself was a skeptic of the Women's Movement, writing in the July 30, 1972, issue of *The New York Times* that Second Wave Feminism was "Maoist" and "Stalinist" in its insistence that middle-class women "play the proletariat" ("Why I Write" 1). Didion's political views earned her harsh criticism from peers, who likewise identified an aesthetics of self-interestedness and quietism in the face of injustice in Didion's fiction. Barbara Grizzutti Harrison accused Didion of being a reactionary "who lives somewhere in Ayn Rand country" and detected a disturbing lack of empathy in Didion's penchant for disconnected narratives and "aimless revelation." "To pretend to carry no mental baggage at all makes one a voyeur at the party, a detached onlooker at the execution," she wrote (online). Today, Didion's readiness to distance herself from political affiliation and condemnation alike might be understood as a form of privilege rather than as a lack of empathy, which remains a problem only insofar as we insist on reading a novel like *Play It as It Lays* as feminist or anti-capitalist, which it is decidedly not (Didion passed away in December 2021, although many writers have been reappraising her complex body of work, especially her nonfiction, since well before her

death). To better understand the novel's political project, we need to approach it as a text that attempts to clear out that supposed "mental baggage" and not necessarily as a text that has as its origins an already-assumed pose of detachment.

22 For Didion, power derives from a practice of self-reliance, of being able to move about and think for one's own, and modern superhighway infrastructure offers a far more meaningful empowerment than identification with an underclass. In an essay published in *Esquire* in 1976, Didion calls driving on the freeway "the only secular communion Los Angeles has" ("The Diamond Lane Slowdown" 36). In the essay, Didion distinguishes between those "commuters" who just use the freeway and the "participants" who experience it. "Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway," she writes. "The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over" (36). As an example, she points to a particularly difficult exit off the Santa Monica Freeway, which requires crossing two very dicey lanes and effectively entrusting your life to your own ability to find your way through the swirling mass of drivers. "The moment is dangerous," Didion writes, before adding, in a turn of phrase that aligns her unmistakably with Maria: "The exhilaration is in doing it" (36). For Didion, as for Maria, the freeway is a site of struggle for personal liberty. That this struggle takes place in a space produced through public policy and government investment is of no consequence. Architect Reyner Banham, a contemporary of Didion's, described driving on the Los Angeles freeway as a "willing acquiescence in an incredibly demanding man/machine system" that functions thanks to citizens' "approved mixture of enlightened self-interest and public spirit" (199). Cultural critic Cotton Seiler reads Didion's moment of freeway rapture through the lens of this idealized American liberal subject, which, he argues, gets increasingly molded by postwar institutions, like the freeway, that deliberately make possible "the symbolic and spectacular performance of individual will and choice . . . [through] practices that are unlikely to transform established arrangements of power" (131). Seiler argues that Didion's representations of rapturous driving, in both her fiction and nonfiction, are indicative of an ideal of self-abstraction prominent in what Christopher Newfield terms the "Emerson effect" in the discourse of twentieth-century liberalism. "[T]he great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude," Emerson wrote (9-10). In the second half of the twentieth century, this intense withdrawal from the public in the midst of the public becomes a way of maintaining an illusion of liberty despite a growing awareness of one's entanglements with others. In other words, self-reliance becomes the perception of "freedom as an uncontrollable system's flexibility" (Newfield qtd. in Seiler 141).

23 It is clear that Didion sees the freeway as a system that can be repurposed like this. Whether the freeway is "flexible" for others is irrelevant, and it is telling that other motorists figure in her literary engagements with the freeway only as hypothetical "commuters" and "users." Reconsidering Didion's secular communion of the freeway as an affective fix, we can see how highway infrastructure serves two fixing functions for her: first, to fix herself as a distinct, autonomous individual in a flow of other individuals, while secondly providing a narcotic, self-annihilating "fix" in the form of a "total surrender" to the collective, emergent rhythms of a system that exceeds individual comprehension. At the same time, we might side with Seiler and say that this affective fix is part of an illusory performance of individualism that the freeway not only provides for but encourages as part of its corrective ideological function, its epistemic infrastructure. The space of the freeway reabsorbs surplus affect—"hotness," as McLuhan called it—before it becomes disruptive. While such criticisms get at crucial aspects of Didion's project, they do not quite account for the complex operations of *Play It as It Lays*, which, as I will show in the remainder of this essay, strives to be *infrastructural*.

"White Space. Empty Space.": Literary Infrastructure and Infrastructural Literature

24 The "secular communion of the freeway" explored above provides a compelling way for thinking about Didion's craft. The ability to enter dangerous situations, and safely extract herself from them, also describes Didion's journalistic methodology and the New Journalism more broadly. As Louis Menand has observed, Didion "gave readers the sense that she was putting herself at risk by reporting" the story that became "Slouching Towards Bethlehem"—"that she might get sucked into the Haight abyss and become a lost soul, too" (Menand online). The many scenes of freeway driving throughout *Play It as It Lays*, more of which will be discussed below, encourage us to negotiate the rapid succession of short, disjointed chapters the way a driver negotiates perilous traffic, jarring lane changes, and confounding interchanges aboard the freeway. Furthermore, Didion's engagements with other infrastructures outside of the freeway suggest a fascination with an infrastructural aesthetics that comes to be reflected in the novel's form.

25 In *Play It as It Lays*, Didion tells Maria's story in a series of fragments and scenes, and the more the story progresses, the more Didion and Maria come to resemble one another in their commitment to disjointed "facts," even as author and protagonist diverge in key ways, such as in their ability to be self-reliant. In the second half of the novel, the action jumps regularly between L.A., Las Vegas, and the desert in between, with Maria's reason for going from one place to the other unexplained. Much about her character is left to

the reader to infer, the inferences not always positive: for example, we have no evidence that Maria is not a *bad* actress, despite the temptation to read into her character a tragedy of being misunderstood. This elusiveness of the novel's topography is what makes it an auspicious case study for tackling the problems motivating the "infrastructural turn" in the humanities. Patricia Yaeger sees a number of theoretically rich overlaps between literature and infrastructure: "The intertwining of codes; the habit of overdetermination; the multiple mapping that accompanies condensation and displacement; the layering that comes with the use of compound plots, points of view, tonality, atmosphere, and meter; and the dense range of figurative speech" (21). In the case of *Play It as It Lays*, I would qualify Yaeger's claim to insist that Didion's novel strategically deploys these various *infra* literary spaces to affect a kind of blank, infrastructural impersonality. Despite its protagonist's frequently flat affect, the novel itself is not stylistically "flat" in the way that postmodern fiction is sometimes said to be, as when writers, in one critic's words, "withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence and . . . bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is" (Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 350). Rather, representations of infrastructure in *Play It as It Lays* are closer to those of earlier modernist literature, in which, as another scholar has argued, "public utilities are often figures for a desired political minimalism" (Robbins 31). And yet, as we have seen, *Play It as It Lays* seeks out those moments of bold, individual action that are still possible within "vast, intractable" systems, and, as I will go on to show, the novel's distinct form can be understood as a similar act. Indeed, *Play It as It Lays* rebukes what some have called "depth hermeneutics" (Love 375) in the way that it functions as a kind of infrastructure that manages, remediates, and harnesses meaning and affect. Instead of dwelling in deep significance or plumbing psychic depths, Didion relegates events and emotions to nonnarrative space in pursuit of a powerful, individual fix.

26 Didion wrote that she began *Play It as It Lays* with no ideas about its plot or characters, only an image in mind of "white space. Empty space" ("Why I Write"). From there, she set out "to write a novel so elliptical and fast that it would be over before you noticed it, a novel so fast that it would scarcely exist on the page at all" ("Why I Write"). To an extent, Didion's statement invites readers to reconstruct what exists off the page, the chapters standing as glimpses into a world of relations that is the real subject of the novel. But Didion goes on to state that her intention was to write "a 'white' book to which the reader would have to bring his or her own bad dreams" ("Why I Write"). With this oblique analogy to a Rorschach test, Didion makes clear that she meant to discourage readers from approaching the text convinced that she

had suppressed and ironized the most important information. More pointedly, this blankness Didion aspired to is not at odds with the fact that the majority of the action in the published text would be related through the novel's central character, Maria. Maria is hardly an everywoman in whom readers might see something of themselves, and Didion's tightlippedness around many of the specifics of Maria's life actively interposes the textual distance that ultimately turns *Play It as It Lays* into a "'white' book." More than a formalization of Maria's distanced demeanor, the white empty space of the novel describes the poetics of the affective fix that both Didion and her heroine derive from infrastructure, in which "[t]he mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over" ("Diamond Lane Slowdown" 36).

27 Throughout the novel, Maria has plenty of fixes at her disposal, none of which prove as durable as those she procures for herself. Nothing in this milieu is to be taken too seriously, not even the institutionalization of one's daughter, and the emotional control necessary to succeed in Hollywood can be chemically induced when the posture of cool is not enough. Over the course of *Play It as It Lays*, Didion name-checks Seconal (which kills BZ), Nembutal, Dexedrine, Edrisal, Darvon, Fiorinal, Librium, and Sodium Pentothal, as well as a number of unbranded substances like methylphenidate hydrochloride, aspirin, and marijuana. Drugs crop up everywhere except where they would be most useful, such as in the abortion scene, which forms a turning point. At Carter's insistence, Maria makes an appointment with a doctor in Encino who performs abortions illegally (the novel being set in the pre-Roe sixties). As he is preparing Maria for the procedure, the doctor tells her that it is best not to think about what is happening because that only makes the pain worse. He opts only to use a little local anesthetic. "[A]naesthetics are where we run into trouble," he tells her before commanding her to "*relax*" (82). Here, chemical sedation gets cast aside. The doctor, a figure of authority and a pharmaceutical gatekeeper, implies that physical sensation can be managed through emotional control—i.e. relax now or you will only make it worse for yourself. Maria does not exactly follow his instruction. Although she manages to "relax" enough to undergo the procedure, she does so by thinking about the pain. In her mind, what is being done to her is a series of discrete events, more facts that are prevented from adding up to something greater: "No moment more or less important than any other moment, all the same: the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on television in the living room of this house in Encino" (82). Mentally breaking up the steps of the procedure, in the way she thinks of dice rolls at the craps table, she recedes into a dissociated intellectual space.

28 During the abortion, the doctor admonishes Maria more than once not to scream: "I said don't make any noise, Maria" (83). Like Maria herself, Didion

also leaves Maria's body behind on the table to react on its own, refraining from reintroducing into the narrative the details of the physical pain Maria experiences. Those details get consigned to the narrative's *infra* space, present and absent at the same time and *signifying nothing beyond themselves*. This active shedding of signification, which is the task of the astute gambler, is also already present in the very workings of infrastructure—in fact, I would say that that quality defines infrastructure. Didion resists ascribing traditional psychological depth to Maria, and often what lies in the pockets of her protagonist's psychic infrastructure is infrastructure itself. After the abortion, Maria starts having nightmares about the pipes in her house stopping up with "hacked pieces of human flesh" (97). Whereas the specific fear of body parts subsides, the mere thought of pipes becomes unbearable, as if the "unspeakable peril, in the everyday" (100) were circulating all around her like water. She flees her house in Beverly Hills for an apartment on Fountain Avenue, and when Carter calls to ask why she has moved, she allows herself to be distracted by a joint and a news report about a house on the verge of sliding into the Tujunga Wash. She hangs up the phone and continues to watch TV, where news about the landslide is followed by a report of a small earthquake centered near Joshua Tree and an interview with a preacher who predicts that the earthquake is the beginning of the end of the world. "The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect . . ., suggested an instant in which all anxieties would be abruptly gratified," Didion writes (104). And indeed, by the end of the news report, Maria feels calm. However, the next morning, "when the shower seemed slow to drain she threw up in the toilet, and after she had stopped trembling packed the few things she had brought to Fountain Avenue and, in the driving rain, drove back to the house in Beverly Hills. There would be plumbing anywhere she went" (104).

29 The various forms of sedation at play in the passage cited here—marijuana, television, even "general devastation"—are temporary fixes powerless against the peril that Maria feels is pursuing her in the form of sewer infrastructure. Pipes and sewers manage human waste, and in performing this function in *infra* spaces, such as inside walls and under the streets, they manage our feelings about waste, too. To be disturbed by sewers is to be disturbed by the convenience they offer by design. Kate Marshall has argued that the motif of blocked pipes in literary fiction tends to "suggest a nightmarish quality to functioning communication, but their inverse, unblocked flows and unbounded connectivities, often appear threatening as well, as they too reveal the infrastructural workings of communication" (105). While I find Marshall's method persuasive—reading the eruption of infrastructure in literature as moments of textual self-reflexivity—I believe that the "always-on" (Marshall 105) property of sewers in *Play It as It Lays* indicates more than an anxiety

about the novel form's status in the modern media ecology. The nightmarish quality of this omnipresent infrastructure stems from the impersonality with which it steadily executes its purpose. In many ways, this is also what Didion's novel seeks to do. As we will see below, Maria's fear of pipes temporarily turns into awe toward the end of the novel, when she visits the Hoover Dam and finds there the ultimate model for being in the world.

30 None of the forms of narcosis that Maria undergoes over the course of the novel approach the narcotic rapture of the freeway, and automobile infrastructure returns in the narrative just as other fixes fail, even sometimes in place of other therapies. Maria begins seeing a hypnotist, who, during one of their sessions, attempts to get a hypnotized Maria to recall when her mother bathed her as a baby. But Maria only regresses as far as a moment in the not-too-distant past when she was driving on Sunset Boulevard. Not long after the episode with the hypnotist, Maria has a one-night-stand with an actor, whose Ferrari she steals and drives not toward her home in Beverly Hills "but toward the Valley, and the freeway" (153). She drives until dawn, into the desert of Nevada, with no destination in mind, just as she does at the beginning of the novel. She is eventually stopped for speeding, and the highway patrol discovers that the Ferrari has been reported stolen. Maria's agent flies out in a jet to do damage control, and on the flight home to L.A., he tells her, "I mean there's something in your behavior, Maria, I would almost go so far as to call it . . . Almost go so far as to call it a very self-destructive personality structure" (156). Maria prepares a retort but instead just falls asleep. Didion's mistrust of deep psychological meanings is on full parodic display in these sequences. The agent's armchair analysis touches on a truth about Maria—that she is addicted to the feeling of self-annihilation that she gets while driving—but what he fails to lay hold of is the full workings of Maria's affective fix, the way in which temporary self-annihilation is actually a means to a radical reassertion of the self.

31 What Maria soon comes to understand is that the fix she gets on the freeway is not limited to the physical space of the infrastructure. The affective management she performs behind the wheel can be self-induced, off the road, and here we come to see both how the freeway is a training ground for radical self-reliance and how its affective fix can be translated to other, imaginative forms. After witnessing a violent row between BZ and Helene, Maria tries to block out the memory by imagining "a needle dripping sodium pentothal into her arm." "When that failed she imagined herself driving, conceived audacious lane changes, strategic shifts of gear, the Hollywood to the San Bernardino and straight on out, past Barstow, past Baker, driving straight on into the hard white empty core of the world. She slept and did not dream" (162). This scene of Maria's "audacious" driving—happening entirely in her head—displaces what Maria has seen and is trying to forget: the possibility that BZ assaulted

Helene the night before when they got back to the house. Maria is not actually on the freeway: her moves are not improvised in response to real dangers (although it could be said that, by being in the same house as the possible abuser BZ, she is at risk), but rather are cognitive "changes" and "shifts." The nightmarish out-of-sight-out-of-mind quality that earlier defined plumbing meets its inverse in Maria's fantasizing of the freeway—an out-in-the-open infrastructure that becomes a private means of keeping unpleasant truths out of mind, and thus out of sight.

32 The imagined relationship to the freeway that Maria comes to cultivate in the final third of the novel offers a much more durable fix than the one she pursues on the freeway in the novel's opening chapters. At last, Maria has for herself a freeway that leads directly to "the hard white empty core of the world" (*Play* 162). This sublime blank mental landscape, more potent than Sodium Pentothal, resembles what Jean Baudrillard called "astral America": a vanishing point of signification present in, among other places, "the America of empty, absolute freedom of the freeways" and "the marvelously affectless succession of signs, images, faces, and ritual acts on the road" (50). "Astral America" starts to rephrase in aesthetic terms the sociopolitical dynamics of Emersonian self-abstraction discussed above, and the exhilaration that *Play It as It Lays* locates in the freeway once again becomes inseparable from a political project of distancing the self from society. Historian Eric Avila has tracked a trend in mid-century photographic and visual engagements with the freeway, such as those of Ansel Adams, in which highway structures like cloverleaves and overpasses get depicted from a "soaring angle, unhinged from the landscape of daily life, divorced from the social context of homes, streets, markets, sidewalks, pedestrians and even cars" (135), a point-of-view that Avila juxtaposes with the on-the-ground perspective adopted by Chicano artists and other artists of color from the barrio of East Los Angeles, which was carved up by freeway construction in the 1950s and 1960s. Like those photographers and painters who assume the top-down, planners' perspective, Didion too revels in the impersonality of the infrastructure she portrays throughout *Play It as It Lays*, seeing in it the possibility for radical self-abstraction. In this context, the "whiteness" of Didion's "'white' book" takes on an additionally complex racial connotation.

33 However, I do want to put forward the possibility that *Play It as It Lays* sees its political-aesthetic project to be more generous than is suggested either by Maria's solipsistic retreat to her imaginary freeway or by these very important criticisms of privilege. Indeed, toward the end, the novel offers another infrastructure project that it asks to be compared against: the Hoover Dam. While in Las Vegas, Maria takes a tour of the dam, the mother of all infrastructure projects, which she feels nearly compelled to do:

> She began to feel the pressure of the Hoover Dam there on the desert, began to feel the pressure and pull of the water. When the pressure got great enough she drove out there. All that day she felt the power surging through her own body. All day she was faint with vertigo, sunk in a world where great power grids converged, throbbing lines plunged finally into the shallow canyon below the dam's face, elevators like coffins dropped into the bowels of the earth itself. With a guide and a handful of children Maria walked through the chambers, stared at the turbines in the vast glittering gallery, at the deep still water with the hidden intakes sucking all the while, even as she watched; clung to the railings, leaned out, stood finally on a platform over the pipe that carried the river beneath the dam. The platform quivered. Her ears roared. She wanted to stay in the dam, lie on the great pipe itself, but reticence saved her from asking. (171–72)

Even before she arrives there, Maria resonates in sympathy with the dam's electric throbbing, sucking, and quivering. The dam attracts her almost as intently as the freeway and commandeers her senses in much the same way, overwhelming her with its vast gallery of turbines and roaring machinery. Her fear of plumbing evaporates as she confronts the sublimity of the infrastructure, and she finds herself longing to lay "on the great pipe itself" and go on vibrating with its power. After being institutionalized, Maria admits, "I try not to think of dead things and plumbing" (10); but in this moment at the Hoover Dam, the great pipes promise a whole new fix that she finds uncannily arresting.

34 The Hoover Dam, often understood as a triumph of labor and ingenuity in the harsh terrain of the American desert, suggests a different infrastructural aesthetics than the freeway. Its crucial powering and watering function, which makes the region habitable, is not readily evident but instead subsumed within the massive, blank edifice, which stands at the center of a convergence of connections that plunge underground and stretch out across the land. Its monumentality registers as a presence of the systems that it exists within and that it enables rather than as any kind of negation. Despite the ideal of self-abstraction I have been tracking in the novel's scenes of freeway driving, I would argue that this robust presence, in the end, is the challenge that Didion sets for herself in writing *Play It as It Lays*. The novel's blank, distanced structure is not a retreat from, but an assembling of, the systems that constrain its protagonist. Like the Hoover Dam, *Play It as It Lays* is forbidding, but it demands to be approached, entered, and resonated with.

Conclusion: Radical Distance

35 In its many engagements with infrastructure, and in its own infrastructural form, *Play It as It Lays* imagines how the negative affects of everyday life, from pain to terror, might be managed through head-on confrontations with danger, at least those pockets of danger that have persisted in a society intent on suppressing them. While playing craps provides one such confrontation,

the risk inherent in gambling is not as edifying as the potentially-fatal freeway, which exhilarates and soothes more than any drug. Literature, while rarely fatal, can also open up similarly instructive pockets of danger, precisely by asserting itself against a reader's need for narrative. The novel does not set out to expose the truths propping up American life from the twentieth century into the twenty-first, nor does it advance an unequivocally redemptive vision of agency within the structures that constrain us. While the book's celebration of self-reliance and its accompanying narrative distance can read as politically disengaged, it also cannot be denied that Didion's book is a document of desperation borne from social circumstances.

36 At the risk of foisting on the novel the kind of feminist reading it resists, I want to suggest another way of understanding its preoccupation with infrastructure—that is, as a fascination with systems operating more or less as intended, and more or less in public view. Our infrastructural situation has changed drastically since 1970, and today, the massive infrastructures that defined American life in the first half of the twentieth century are crumbling, and bold replacements are a political pipe dream. But in other political realms, we have come full circle. More than fifty years after the publication of *Play It as It Lays*, the United States feels as close as it has ever been to overturning Roe and recriminalizing abortion. This fact does not validate Didion's skepticism about the efficacy of the Women's Movement, but it does call attention to how disturbingly intractable a force like misogyny is. Self-reliance does not square well with the kind of collective organizing on which progress undoubtedly depends, but this does not mean that distance cannot be deployed to radical ends. If *Play It as It Lays* proposes any kind of solution, it is in the form of the novel itself: a practice of intense scrutiny and self-scrutiny that regards the world with suspicion and seeks out opportunities where it can be made to work otherwise.

Notes

[1] In an essay from 2018, Dominic Boyer provides an overview of the "infrastructural turn," a term used to describe a growing interest in infrastructure in the last fifteen years among humanists and social scientists, which he sees as part of a larger "anti-anthropocentric" turn in the academy that includes theoretical interests in posthumanism, actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology. Founding statements in the field of literary studies include Yaeger (2007) and Robbins (2007).

[2] In 1964's *Understanding Media*, McLuhan wrote explicitly about cars and TV, arguing that the private automobile was emblematic of a phase of modernity that was being supplanted by a new techno-social regime whose primary medium would be television, or television-like. For McLuhan, television was the "cool" counterpart to the "hot" experience of automobile driving: whereas the car "had become the ultimate expression of Gutenberg technology" (220)—that is, of a modernist linearity—the television promised a social organization that was lateral, or as we might say now, networked. Thanks to the advent of television, mass media in the late twentieth century would cease to amplify passions, as it had leading up to the Second World War, and become instead a tool for a peaceful, productive society of nuclear families and polite neighbors. The car, once the symbol of an earlier, reckless modernity, would likewise "cool off," and in some ways, McLuhan's prophesied hot-cool stabilization depends on the reabsorption of "hot" automobiles into new, "cool" transportation and communication networks, the infrastructure of the suburban ethos.

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Biography

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Sleep as Action? World Alienation, Distance, and Loneliness in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

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Abstract This article explores how Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* portrays the relationship between the self and the world against the backdrop of the 9/11 terror attacks. It shows that distance emerges as the central component of the narrator's world alienation, which also crucially informed Hannah Arendt's critique of modernity as developed in her seminal work, *The Human Condition*. By revisiting some of the philosopher's key ideas in light of more recent events, the article discusses how the novel's depiction of sleep as action reflects on the individual's sense of participation, freedom, and self-worth in late-capitalist society. Finally, the article situates the novel's epiphanic ending in twenty-first-century debates on the aesthetics of terror, by which the novel not only negotiates the viability of its narrator's project but also subtly reveals the continuities between its setting in 2001 and its publication date in 2018.

Keywords Art, Distance, Loneliness, World Alienation, 9/11.

Cited Names Hannah Arendt, Ottessa Moshfegh

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1 When Ottessa Moshfegh's second book, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, was published in 2018, it immediately gained the status of a cult novel. Two years later, when loneliness, isolation, and the social necessity to 'do nothing' upended countless lives around the world in an unexpected and unprecedented way, Moshfegh was hailed as the "unofficial laureate of lockdown" (Allardice par. 1). During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the narrative of an unnamed young woman choosing to self-isolate for a year felt strangely resonant, if not foretelling; in the author's own words, it read "like a prophecy gone wrong" (Moshfegh "Lockdown should be easy for me," par. 7). The dullness of her narrator's indoor existence seemed relatable enough to those facing the monotony of life under lockdown: "Days slipped by obliquely, with little to remember. . . . Nothing seemed really real. Sleeping, waking, it all collided into one grey, monotonous plane ride through the clouds" (Moshfegh 84).

2 The novel's prophetic power is all the more remarkable as the plot is set in 2000–01 New York City, rather than in the more recent past. In this context, it is intriguing to follow Ariel Saramandi's assessment of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as a "a double novel, a comment and analysis of both the late '90s and of 2016–2018—the same way Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* functions as a critique of the Bush administration through its portrayal of Charles Lindbergh, and the way Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* criticizes McCarthyism through the portrayal of the witch trials" (par. 2). Saramandi argues that "Moshfegh uses the late '90s to look at the evolution of late capitalism; her characters hold up disturbing mirrors in which we see ourselves only too clearly in 2018" (par. 2).

3 The novel's timeliness, thus, operates on two different levels and also unfolds on a sociopolitical scale. The narrator's project to withdraw from the world and do nothing is contingent on her privilege of not having to worry about money. Recently orphaned, the narrator informs the reader right at the beginning that she "had investments" and "plenty of money in my savings account, too—enough to live on for a few years as long as I didn't do anything spectacular" (Moshfegh 3). Her solipsism is therefore intimately entwined with the "luxury" of her financial freedom (Moshfegh 12). This correlation situates the novel in a wider debate on how capitalism has fueled loneliness and the devaluation of human interaction and solidarity. As the sociologist Laura Wynne observes, "Existential crises in literature are nothing new, but a new wave of novels by millennial women—including Moshfegh . . . foreground capitalism as the cause of our lost footing" (par. 3). I would like to suggest that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* readdresses the philosophically charged question of how processes of alienation—self-alienation for Karl Marx, world alienation for Hannah Arendt—affect the individual's sense of participation, freedom, and self-worth in late-capitalist society. The novel's elevation of sleep as (narrative) action—

which not only resists common ideas about plot but also constitutes a kind of non-, or even anti-, action from the philosopher's point of view—evokes and updates Arendt's critique of the modern subject's increasing distance from the realm of politics and human interaction, which she formulates in her central philosophical work, *The Human Condition*. Arendt identifies world alienation as the "hallmark of modernity" (254) and argues that "the deprivation of 'objective' relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them" has caused "the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed its most extreme and antihuman form" (59).

4 Deliberately depriving herself of these relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them, the narrator in Moshfegh's novel embodies an even more radical form of loneliness. By means of her "self-preservational hibernation" (Moshfegh 7), the narrator's ultimate goal is to "sleep [her] self into a new life" (260). To reach this aim, she relies on a combination of sedatives and sleeping pills to action her plan, and her "favourite days" are the ones that "barely registered." "I'd catch myself not breathing," she reflects in her trademark bland tone, "I'd remember that I was alive for a second, then fade back out" (Moshfegh 71). In annihilating the most basic rhythms of human existence—waking and sleeping—the novel establishes nonaction and apathy as the narrator's preferred state of mind.

5 Just as the novel's eerie resemblance to life under lockdown enhanced the public reception of Moshfegh's book, so too have the proliferation of illiberal strongmen politics and the unpredictable actions of individual political leaders prompted a considerable resurgence of interest in Arendt's works in the last decade. Shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017, Arendt's *The Human Condition*—though published nearly sixty years prior—climbed the *New York Times* bestseller list; the enduring relevance of Arendt's visionary ideas reverberates in recent studies that turn to her philosophy to address current political and societal issues. For instance, Richard J. Bernstein, in his recently published *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, emphasizes that "many of [the themes Arendt was remarkably perceptive about] have not disappeared" but "have become more intense and more dangerous" (1). Bernstein sees Arendt as an "illumination," because she "helps us to gain critical perspective on our current political problems and complexities" (2–3). In a way, Arendt herself invites such a rereading: instead of offering a political theory of fixed definitions, *The Human Condition* provides "a reconsideration of the human condition" from the "vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears" (Arendt 5)—her arguments are based upon a vantage point that can and must be continually updated.

6 Thus, both *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Human Condition*, albeit in different ways, strike a chord in a time that to many seems particularly dark and

worrying. As temporally and generically disparate as Arendt's philosophical analysis, on the one hand, and Moshfegh's fictional narrative, on the other, may seem, the two works intersect in their exploration of how an increased detachment from the world of political action and human interaction affects an individual's sense of being in the world. Of course, they explore this phenomenon in ways so different that any comparison of the two authors must necessarily operate primarily through the *tertium comparationis*—which in the case of this article will be the alienation of the subject from the world as well as from herself.

7 Indeed, in Moshfegh's novel, the narrator's escapism into sleep displays a form of world alienation that catapults Arendt's critique of modernity into the actuality of twenty-first-century capitalism and the specific forms of antihuman loneliness it has generated. Moshfegh equips her narrator with an inheritance that makes work financially obsolete, with technical devices that feign closeness and participation when needed, and with an indifference that surpasses Arendt's most pessimistic visions of human disinterestedness. The novel's representation of alienation, in which, as will be shown, Arendt's philosophical reflections on action and the role of the *vita activa* subtly reverberate, at the same time captures a specific historical moment shaped by the ascendance of rentier capitalism and the technologization of the home, the workplace, and human interaction that has been emerging in the past decades. These newer developments demarcate the distance as well as the difference between Moshfegh's and Arendt's respective vantage points.

8 If Arendt discusses the values that make us human—drawing attention to the dangers of an automatized mass society, in which labor presides over work and the private sphere dedicated to the satisfaction of individual needs has replaced the public sphere of action and plurality—then Moshfegh's narrator introduces a whole new level: vegetating in her Manhattan apartment, she seems to resist even the parameters that define her humanity (which, over the course of the novel, becomes an increasingly shaky concept, giving both her project and the novel itself an "antihumanist" coloring (Greenberg 196)). Yet, the novel's ending leaves unredeemed the hope for renewal that initiates and drives the young woman's desire to spend a whole year sleeping; instead, the plot progresses toward the final catastrophe that throws the permeability between the private and the public realm into sharp relief, and offers a reflection on what, according to Michael Rothberg, is a distinctive theme in 9/11 literature: the question of "how individual lives intersect with powerful and destructive historical forces beyond their control" (133).

9 Because of the recentness of Moshfegh's fiction, scholarly work on her writing has only just started to emerge. So far, the only published scholarly article is the one by Jonathan Greenberg quoted earlier, "Losing Track of Time." Taking the

author's unusual handling of time as a starting point, Greenberg situates *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in the Anglo-American tradition of novel writing to show how the book's "curtailment of action" and its consequent "disavowal of plot" can ultimately be read as a meta-comment on its own generic status: "[I]n *resisting* what novels do, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* shows us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be another way of being a novel. In seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time" (Greenberg 199, emphasis in original). As Greenberg argues, the novel's contradictory position is reflected in the kind of "intrapsychic war [that] erupts between the forces of action and those of inaction"—it is the narrator's unconscious, her involuntary action during her sleep, that ultimately "enlivens the plot" and "constitutes a reentry into time" (198). Stating that "the narrator provides us enough in the way of a life history for us to discern, on a psychological level, the sources of her desire to lose track of time," Greenberg makes his narratological focus productive to discussing the sources of the narrator's desire to escape reality (194). But given how deliberately easy it is to decipher the psychology behind the narrator's project—as if Moshfegh's satire on today's wellness culture must necessarily be complemented by an appropriate biographical crisis in her narrator's life—I would argue that the narrative's point of interest may in fact lie elsewhere. My article proposes to focus on Moshfegh's portrayal of the relationship between the self and the world against the backdrop of a late-capitalist American society steering toward crisis.

10 After introducing Moshfegh's novel in more detail and laying the groundwork for putting it into dialogue with Arendt's ideas, the first part of my paper concentrates on Moshfegh's depiction of sleep as (narrative) action and links the centrality of processes of alienation in Moshfegh's novel to Arendt's philosophical concept of *world alienation*. The focus then shifts to the novel's assessment of the state-of-the-art world at the beginning of the twenty-first century; as I argue, the narrator's dismissal of art as commodity clashes productively with Arendt's idealizing insistence on the permanence of artworks. Thirdly, I shall reference Arendt's optimistic idea of *natality* in my discussion of the narrator's desire to emerge from her year of rest and relaxation "as a whole new person" (Moshfegh 51)—a desire that stands in conflict with her morbid propensity for and the novel's preoccupation with death. Finally, by grounding Moshfegh's narrative more firmly in the present moment, I discuss the novel's epiphanic ending in the context of recent debates on the aesthetics of terror, through which the novel not only negotiates the viability of its narrator's project but also subtly reveals the continuities between 2001 and 2018.

The Alienated Subject

11 At the beginning of the narrator's year of rest and relaxation, everything seems to go according to plan. She spends most of her time asleep, untroubled by any dreams that would confront her with herself. Her waking hours consist of watching movies, eating animal crackers, and taking "trazodone and Ambien and Nembutal"—the first a mood stabilizer with antidepressant and antianxiety properties, the second a commonly used sleeping pill, and the third an anesthetic of the barbiturate family—until she "[falls] asleep again" (Moshfegh 1). Days, weeks, and months go by in this way, with little to disrupt the narrator's torpor, except the occasional trips she makes from her Upper East Side apartment to the bodega downstairs to buy coffee and food, or to renew her prescriptions with her psychiatrist—the eccentric (and somewhat amoral) Dr. Tuttle. Her best friend, Reva, visits her occasionally, tells her of her unhappy affair with a married colleague, and gets drunk while the narrator falls asleep.

12 A few weeks into the project, however, "the carefree tranquility of sleep gave way to a startling subliminal rebellion—I started to do things while I was unconscious" (Moshfegh 85). Despite her longing for "a deep, boring, inert sleep" (Moshfegh 191), the narrator finds herself becoming curiously active in her sleep. She starts exchanging pornographic messages in online chats and sending intimate pictures of herself to strangers. She wakes up to deliveries of lingerie and designer jeans, which she orders online during her medicated blackouts:

> Sleepwalking, sleeptalking, sleep-online-chatting, sleepeating—that was to be expected, especially on Ambien. I'd already done a fair amount of sleepshopping . . . I'd sleepordered Chinese delivery. I'd sleepsmoked. I'd sleeptexted and sleeptelephoned. This was nothing new. (Moshfegh 115)

But when she starts taking a more powerful sleeping pill—the fictitious and ominously named Infermiterol (115)—her sleep-activity reaches a new level. Around New Year's Eve, she wakes up aboard a train headed toward the childhood home of her friend Reva to attend the funeral of Reva's mother. In January, she calls her ex-boyfriend and invites him to her place to have sex with her; a few days later, she comes to her senses but remains indifferent to whatever occurred while she was blacked out. Perturbed, if not exactly alarmed, the narrator enlists the help of an acquaintance: Ping Xi, a performance artist she knows from an art gallery she used to work at. With his help, she is able to impose a strict lockdown on her Manhattan apartment and so isolate herself completely from the world. In return, she offers to serve as an object for his art project. Their arrangement allows her to sleep through most of February, March, April, and May 2001. The summer months at first seem to mark a new beginning and suggest that her plan might have been successful, and she

indeed will wake up "renewed" (Moshfegh 51); but 9/11, which has loomed at the end of the timeline since the novel's beginning, shatters her newly found sense of self-contained happiness: her friend Reva, who had just been offered her dream job in the Twin Towers, dies in the attack, and the novel ends with the narrator watching and then rewatching a videotape recording of a woman jumping to her death from the window of a crumbling tower.

13 As the title already indicates, the plot spans roughly one year. Despite the sense of temporal disorientation that accompanies the narrator's excessive sleeping, the reader is given exact dates throughout the novel, which allows them to stay on top of the narrative timeline. As Greenberg points out, "the prehibernation memories and the actual hibernation time itself are narrated from a temporal point *after* the year of rest and relaxation has concluded" (194). This also means that Moshfegh's orchestration of time acutely raises the reader's awareness of what is ahead. With the experiment beginning in June 2000, the temporal setting suggests a coincidence between the novel's ending—the end of the narrator's year of rest and relaxation —and the terror attacks of 9/11. While moving toward a future moment deeply engrained in most readers' memory, the narrative at the same time slowly unfolds the narrator's past. Her retrospectives shine a light on the difficult relationship she had with her mother, her toxic relationship with her ex-boyfriend, and both of her parents' deaths. While we learn about her past as the narrative progresses, her drug-induced blackouts at the same time make her a highly unreliable narrator of her own story, create various gaps in the text, and frustrate the reader's attempts to make sense of someone whose withdrawal from herself and from the world allows her to constantly slip from their grasp. Thus, instead of seeking to understand the psychological underpinnings of the narrator's desire for oblivion, I ask how the novel's depiction of sleep challenges the common dichotomy of activity/inactivity, and how this reflects on the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Depictions of sleep and inaction are far from uncommon in literature—in fact, boredom, numbness, and lethargy are distinctive themes in modernist literature. Insofar as the narrator's renunciation of any form of active life is not a retreat into what philosophically has been regarded as its opposite sphere, the *vita contemplativa*, a realm of contemplation or religious meditation, she stands very much in the tradition of Herman Melville's Bartleby and Samuel Beckett's Murphy. But her state of being also fundamentally differs from those of her fictional predecessors. What kind of world alienation, then, does Moshfegh's narrator—who seeks estrangement from both others and from herself—embody here? To pursue this question, it is worth revisiting Arendt's assessment of these categories.

14 In her novel definition of the *vita activa*, which is the central plank of her critique of modernity, Arendt distinguishes labor, work, and action as the three types of human activity. Labor rises out of necessity and is concerned with biological drives and needs. For Arendt, it is the least human of the three types of activity, because it creates nothing of permanence and can be pursued in isolation (22). The *animal laborans* as the agent of labor is contrasted with the *homo faber*, whose work, as an essentially human activity, creates a common and objective world of artifacts, buildings, and institutions in and through which people can interact (52). As such, work is a prerequisite for the third category—action—with the *zoon politikon* at its center. Unlike labor or work, action is an end to itself, and because of this, it is the only human activity that is completely free (Arendt 31). Arendt emphasizes the public character of action, which depends on human plurality (175) and "is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" (188).

15 Arendt's tripartite distinction of the *vita activa* goes hand in hand with a reevaluation of the spatial realms that had been commonly associated with the different forms of human activity. Where Aristotle distinguishes between the *oikos*, the private realm of the household and the family, and the *polis*, the public realm of political community, Arendt introduces a third realm, the realm of the *social* (38ff.). According to Arendt, the rise of the social has blurred the line between the public and the private by shifting concerns that traditionally belonged to the *oikos* into the public sphere, thus subordinating the public realm to the concerns of mere animal necessity (28). In her view, the victory of the *animal laborans* places the values of labor (life, productivity, abundance) over those of man as *homo faber* (permanence, stability, durability) and as *zoon politikon* (freedom, plurality, solidarity).

16 This historical development is inextricably linked to what Arendt calls *world alienation*. Modern world alienation refers to the loss of an intersubjectively constituted world of experience and action that depends on the "simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives" (Arendt 57). To Arendt, the private world of introspection and the individual's pursuit of economic interests threaten to eliminate the public sphere of action and speech. She connects her arguments to specific events in history that, in her view, stood "at the threshold of the modern age" and "determine its character": the 'discovery' of America (and, successively, of the whole earth), the Reformation (with the ensuing expropriation and accumulation of wealth), and the invention of the telescope (as the first attempt to overcome the confines of the earth). What unites these causally unrelated events is that they all imply humans' growing disentanglement from their immediate surroundings. Arendt argues that "[t]he greater the distance between himself and his surroundings, world or earth, the more he [i.e., man] will be able to survey and to measure and the

less will worldly, earth-bound space be left to him" (251). Thus, while humans' "twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" (Arendt 6) spurred scientific knowledge as well as self-knowledge, this "twofold flight"—both literal and metaphorical—also entailed processes of distancing that alienated people from the sphere of political action.

17 It is worth mentioning the central role of distance in Arendt's analysis, because distance is also key to the narrator's project in Moshfegh's novel. Throughout, the narrator describes processes of increasing detachment, whether it is the growing distance between herself and people near to her, or between herself and the outer world, or the growing gap within herself—the gap between her experiences and her memory, between her waking and her sleeping self. While in *The Human Condition*, Arendt draws on variants of world alienation in which the mind is "shut off from all reality and senses only 'itself'" (Arendt 284), Moshfegh's narrator goes a step further: in order to reach a new self by exerting the most radical form of nonaction, she aims for the obliteration of the center of experience itself.

Sleep and the Space of Action

18 Already as a young girl sleeping in her mother's bed, the narrator remembers feeling "very far away from the world, like I was in a spaceship or on the moon. I missed that bed" (Moshfegh 128). Growing up as an only child of aloof and unloving parents, she remembers her mother as a bedroom alcoholic. Her happiest times were when she was asleep next to her mother: "I'd always loved sleeping. It was one thing my mother and I had enjoyed doing together when I was a child. . . . We got along best when we were asleep" (Moshfegh 46). As a kind of reenactment of these childhood naps, the narrator's experiment is driven by her longing for sleep's "black emptiness," its "infinite space of nothingness" (Moshfegh 39). She describes drifting off to sleep as a "float[ing] up and away, higher and higher into the ether until my body was just an anecdote, a symbol, a portrait hanging in another world" (Moshfegh 177). Both with her mother and with her friend Reva, her rare moments of intimacy occur when she is detached both from herself and the object of affection: "'I love you, Reva,' I heard myself saying from so far away. 'I'm really sorry about your mom.' Then I was gone" (Moshfegh 177).

19 Moshfegh visualizes her narrator's falling asleep as a metaphorical flight from the earth. This metaphor evokes the concept of earth alienation that also forms part of Arendt's understanding of modernity. Arendt describes the launch of the first space satellite in 1957 as an "event, second in importance to no other" as it challenged "the earth as the very quintessence of the human condition" (2) and showed that human beings would not "remain bound to earth" forever (1). In Moshfegh's novel, the metaphor of sleep as a distancing

from earth conveys a similar sense of freedom, which in the narrator's case translates into an escape from the confines of her own painfully conscious mind. At the same time, this detachment, this "growing less and less attached to life" (Moshfegh 84), marks her increasing alienation from the world—from her participation in it and her interaction with others. She describes how, in falling asleep, "the universe narrowed into a fine line" and how she "travelled more peacefully through outer space. . . . There was no need for assurance or directionality because I was nowhere, doing nothing. I was nothing. I was gone" (Moshfegh 276). Both in Arendt's philosophy and in Moshfegh's novel, the subject alienating herself from the world risks not mattering—however, in Moshfegh's novel, this is the very thing the narrator desires.

20 Paradoxically, the narrator feels most productive when she is "doing nothing" (Moshfegh 186): "I was finally doing something that really mattered. Sleep felt productive" (Moshfegh 51). This explains her annoyance when, after a couple of months, the drugs she initially used to knock herself out no longer work: "Still, I didn't sleep. Life could go on like forever like this, I thought. Life would, if I didn't take action" (Moshfegh 193). Immune to the 'natural' narcotics that helped at the beginning—she tries to calm herself by masturbating twice and watching movies on repeat—she resorts to the usual "activity," which, strictly speaking, is none: "I took a Zyprexa and some more Ativan. I ate a handful of melatonin, chewing like a cow on cud" (Moshfegh 193). The simile between herself and a cud chewing cow pointedly captures the animalistic character of her project. In fact, from the very beginning, the narrator's desire for dreamless oblivion had been targeted at ridding herself of exactly the qualities that distinguish her as a human being. Her chemically induced sleep allows her to have "no nightmares, no passions, no desires, no great pains" (Moshfegh 84); "no visions," "no ideas," "no distinct thought" (Moshfegh 36). To her, thoughtlessness—which Arendt considers as one of the most dangerous tendencies in modern times (3)—becomes the privileged state of mind: "OH, SLEEP, nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, such power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (Moshfegh 46). Eviscerating Arendt's equation of action and freedom, the narrator in Moshfegh's novel defines freedom as the escape into emptiness, a withdrawal into a space where mental activity is, paradoxically, divorced from the mind. But the course of the novel challenges such a concept of freedom, and the recurring metaphor of trash puts its value into question.

21 Pondering the purpose of her year of rest and relaxation, the narrator remarks, "[i]t seemed like everything now was somehow linked to getting back what I'd lost. I could picture my selfhood, my past, my psyche like a dump truck filled with trash" (Moshfegh 99). The metaphor of trash figures as a kind of reverse-

image to the novel's descriptions of an abounding materiality characteristic of consumerist culture, openly represented by Reva (who is obsessed with design, fashion, and makeup) and unintentionally by the narrator herself: while her withdrawal from the outer world and her mockery of Reva's greed at first seem to suggest her resistance to consumerist desire, the narrator's withdrawal is inevitably incomplete as long as she remains digitally connected to others. This is where the novel most demonstrably updates Arendt's critique of modernity. Perhaps even more profoundly than the rise of the social (as Arendt suggested), the digital age has blurred "the decisive division between the public and private realms" (Arendt 28). With Moshfegh's story taking place at the beginning of the new millennium, and thus at a time when the digital revolution picked up pace and punctuated the privacy of the *oikos*, the narrator's home no longer offers the protective function traditionally associated with the private realm. Privacy no longer "shelters the intimate" (Arendt 38). The narrator's internet use, which increases during her hibernation, exposes her to strangers, while the allures of capitalism come to further penetrate her unconscious, resulting in a consumerism for consumerism's sake, whereby she does not even use the things she buys.

22 The metaphor of trash is also symptomatic of the narrator's self-worth and her role in relation to others. The idea of participating, of contributing, of connecting—human activities fervently defended by Arendt—has literally deteriorated into waste: "Having a trash chute was one of my favourite things about my building. It made me feel important, like I was participating in the world. My trash mixed with the trash of others. The things I touched touched things other people had touched. I was contributing. I was connecting" (Moshfegh 115). While the narrator's radical nonaction and almost complete absence of human contact are meant to be paving her way to a new beginning, they come at the price of her humanity. Seen in this light, the intimacy between people disintegrates into the intimacy between the things they dispose of.

23 Realizing that her consumerist desire, and the inescapable cycle of material wealth and material waste, stands in the way of her project's success, the narrator gets rid of nearly all her possessions and cuts her connection to the digital world in the very last phase of her project. Yet, ironically, her project now becomes "productive" to someone else: the performance artist Ping Xi. The translation of a withdrawn existence committed to the numb maintenance of life into a piece of performance art is no longer the "artistic transposition of individual experience" that Arendt saw in art (50); rather, it even more pressingly evokes questions of purpose and permanence.

Art as a Window to the World

24 Early in the novel, the narrator mentions that she once had ambitions of becoming an artist, but rather than being a *Bildungs-* or *Künstlerroman*, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* presents a terminally cynical view of the art world. In her college essay, written for her application to study art history at Columbia University, the narrator analyzes "Anton Kirschler," who, it turns out, "was a character of [her] own invention." The narrator recounts how she argued that "his work was instructive for how to maintain a 'humanistic approach to art facing the rise of technology,'" describing "various made-up pieces: *Dog Urinating on Computer*, *Stock Market Hamburger Lunch*," and revealing "that his work spoke to me personally because I was interested in how 'art created the future'" (66). The Columbia admissions board does not notice her invention and accepts her for study, but the question of if and how art creates the future ends up proving more real than her feigned interest at first implies: later in the novel, she herself turns into a piece of art in the attempt to create a new future for herself.

25 After graduation, the narrator discovers that the New York art scene resembles the profit-driven, amoral world of Wall Street in which Bret Easton Ellis sets his *American Psycho* (1991):

> The art world had turned out to be like the stock market, a reflection of political trends and the persuasion of capitalism, fueled by greed and gossip and cocaine. I might as well have worked on Wall Street. Speculation and opinions drove not only the market but the products, sadly, the values of which were hinged not to the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual—a value impossible to measure, anyway—but to what a bunch of rich assholes thought would "elevate" their portfolios and inspire jealousy, and, delusional as they were, respect. I was perfectly happy to wipe out all that garbage from my mind. (Moshfegh 182–83)

Despite her overt disgust for the art scene and everything it represents, the narrator's own position is curiously ambiguous. She describes her brief professional venture into the art world self-ironically as being "the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avant-garde outfits" (Moshfegh 136–37) and refers to the art exhibited at the gallery as "canned counterculture crap" (Moshfegh 36). Already before her hibernation, she had begun napping during her working hours—the perfect means for expressing her aloofness and indifference to the job—which eventually does get her fired. This triggers no feelings of "sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I'd wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing" (Moshfegh 49). Her contempt is nowhere more apparent than in her farewell gesture: before leaving the gallery for good, she defecates on the floor and uses her feces to befoul the dead dogs the artist Ping Xi has put on show after freezing them to death. Terms like "crap" (36), "garbage" (183), "wasted time,"

and "labor" (49) stand in stark contrast to "the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual" (182). The narrator dismisses the pieces in the gallery as mere commodities. Her stance is a far cry from Arendt's elevation of art, and her emphasis on its "purity and clarity" manifest in its durability (167–68), the narrator dismisses the pieces in the gallery as mere commodities.

26 Despite her aloofness, the narrator is unable to escape the "garbage" of the art scene. When she realizes that she must depend on another person for her plan to succeed, she enlists Ping as her collaborator, whom she describes as a "producer of entertainment more than an artist" (Moshfegh 262). Entering into an agreement that is less a matter of co-creation than a well-calculated "tit for tat" (264), the narrator volunteers her body for Ping's next artwork in exchange for his assistance in taking out the trash and filling her fridge with junk food—the garbage metaphors continually accumulating—so that she can fully dedicate herself to sleep.

27 At the end of her hibernation, the narrator reads a review of Ping's exhibition in which she participated, *Large Headed Pictures of a Beautiful Woman*. The reviews are good, and it is from them that the narrator finds out the exact nature of her contribution to the artist's project. The show consists of photographs and videos taken of the narrator while blacked out on Infermiterol:

> The videos described were of me talking into the camera, seeming to narrate some personal stories—I cry in one—but Ping Xi had dubbed everything over. Instead of my voice, you heard long, angry voice mails Ping Xi's mother had left him in Cantonese. No subtitles. (Moshfegh 284)

The only moment of emotional display in the story thus remains mute, dubbed over by another person's emotional outburst. While a number of people visiting Ping's exhibition might presumably speak Cantonese, and thus be able to understand at least some of his mother's anguish, the reader of Moshfegh's novel has no chance of retrieving the meaning of either woman's pain. If the exhibition figures as a kind of mise-en-abyme for the gaps in which most of the novel's action and all its emotive content takes place, then this missing content remains permanently irretrievable both to the narrator herself and to the reader.

28 Much of what the narrator says about the short interim between the end of her project and the end of the novel is about her relationship to art. While visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she describes how

> [t]he vision of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn't exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something—a thought, I guess—as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings—that time could be contained, held captive. (Moshfegh 286)

She touches the painting "simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just things" (Moshfegh

286–87). Greenberg reads this unique moment of exaltation in the novel "as a revelation of meaning . . . as an acceptance of [the narrator's] own limited existence in time, an understanding that 'still life' is possible only in art" and observes that "the recognition of temporal limitation is also an affirmation of the openness of the future" (200). Indeed, the scene encapsulates the novel's general oscillation between stasis and movement. Still life is an artificial condition, just as the narrator's project of sleeping a year away is far from natural and must be chemically maintained; movement, though closer to life, necessarily implies decay. These two oppositional perspectives are here negotiated, with different kinds of painting representing the two ends of the spectrum.

29 On the one hand, there are the still lifes of fruit. Looking at them, the narrator hopes that the artists, "who had stared long and hard at bowls of fruit," "had some respect for the stuff they were immortalizing" (Moshfegh 284). This reads like a belated reaction to Ping's earlier project: not unlike the British artist Damien Hirst, who famously displayed animal carcasses in formaldehyde, Ping created his 'still lifes' by freezing and thereby immortalizing dogs. Indirectly, it seems, the narrator raises the question of his morality, too: did he have some respect for the stuff he was immortalizing? Moshfegh leaves this question unanswered, and instead emphasizes the narrator's stance. Having earlier besmirched Ping's dogs with her own feces, the narrator now once again challenges the elevated status of artworks: not only does she touch the painting, whose endurance depends on *not* being touched, but she also visualizes the painting's genesis as an antithesis to its immortalized status, by inventing a narrative that dynamizes the still life. She imagines the painters buying the fruit, the fruit rotting, and the rotten fruit being thrown out of the window to some "passing beggar," who is himself pictured on the verge of rotting, a morbid figure that leads her to Pablo Picasso's subjects (Moshfegh 284). For the narrator, Picasso's art stands at the other end of the spectrum: while she has little admiration for those painters of fruit who thought "only of their own mortality, as though the beauty of their work would somehow soothe their fear of death," she notes that "Picasso was right to start painting the dreary and dejected. The blues. He looked out of the window at his own misery. I could respect that" (Moshfegh 285).

30 Not only does she, somewhat contrarily to her own project, prefer life and decay over the artificiality of still life, but she also respects the painter for the very thing she—quite literally—did not do: look out of the window at her own misery. The idea of art as a window to the world echoes a comment the narrator makes earlier in the novel: "Once I started sleeping full time, I didn't look out of my windows very often. A glimpse was all I ever wanted" (Moshfegh 71). Although the distance between herself and the world seems

to offer the viewpoint of a remote observer, she has no interest in making use of this holistic perspective. "The world was out there still," she notes, "but I hadn't looked at it in months" (Moshfegh 273), reasoning that "[i]t was too much to consider it all, stretching out, a circular planet covered in creatures and things growing, all of it spinning slowly on an axis created by what—some freak accident?" (Moshfegh 273). She chooses not to look, but to "stay in the black" (Moshfegh 260). Unlike Picasso's, *her* "flight from the world," to use Arendt's phrase, was never intended to lead back "into the self" (6). Rather, it was meant to generate a new one.

Death and New Beginnings

31 *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is shot through with allusions to death. There is the death of both of the narrator's parents, the dead dogs in the art gallery, the death of Reva's mother, the narrator's fantasies of dying, and, finally, Reva's death, fictionalized as one of the many deaths caused by the 9/11 terror attacks. Foreshadowing to the novel's ending likewise pervades the narrative. When Reva becomes pregnant by her colleague, she gets a promotion and is transferred to a new office in the Twin Towers, to work for "a new crisis consulting firm. Terrorist risks, blah blah" (Moshfegh 203). Despite her feigned aloofness, Reva is actually excited about her new workplace and the possibility of a new beginning that it entails: "I've always wanted to work in the World Trade Center. . . . I kind of like the Twin Towers. It's peaceful up there" (Moshfegh 206–07). This, of course, turns out to be dramatic irony, as readers are aware of the fate of the towers.

32 Alongside these direct allusions to the disaster looming at the end of the novel are subtle imbrications between the friends' fates. Repeatedly, the narrator envisions death by falling out a window: "I might jump out of the window, I thought, if I couldn't sleep" (Moshfegh 197). Near the end of the novel when she is locked inside with no keys to leave her apartment, and so thoroughly dependent on another human being, she realizes that "the only way out would be through the windows." This turns into a comforting, even promising thought: "I figured that if I jumped out while on Infermiterol, it would be a painless death. A blackout death. . . . If, when I woke up in June, life still wasn't worth the trouble, I would end it. I would jump" (Moshfegh 260).

33 The narrator's visions of falling unfold a rich web of meaning. Not only do they complement earlier descriptions of her own blacked-out sleep as a falling through space, thereby further interweaving sleep and death, but they also create intertextual allusions to 9/11 literature and culture. As Laura Frost has shown, images of people falling from the crumbling towers are constitutive to post-9/11 storytelling. "Disturbing as they are," Frost writes, "images of 9/11's falling bodies have emerged as a significant concern in art and literature,

fiction and nonfiction, from poetry to prose and from documentary film to sculpture" (182). In Moshfegh's novel, the interspersed metaphors of falling are strikingly ominous and fuel the novel's teleological timeline. The feelings of "gravity sucking me deeper, time accelerating, the darkness around me, widening until I was somewhere else, somewhere with no horizon, an area of space that awed me in its foreverness" and of "my brain throbbing from the pressure, my eyes leaking as through each teardrop shed a vision of my past" (Moshfegh 275) make the narrator's own physical experience when sleeping an uncanny prediction of Reva's death, as if giving words to the unrepresentable experience of dying. Reva's death, in turn, becomes a kind of substitute death for the narrator's own, which remains incomplete.

34 Indeed, the parallels the novel draws between the two women tie their fates firmly together: Reva, who is "angry, impassioned, depressed, ecstatic" is a foil to the "frigid" narrator, who thinks of herself as "the ice queen," dreaming of death by hypothermia, because to her "that was the best way to die—awake and dreaming, feeling nothing" (Moshfegh 204). Sleep is the closest the narrator comes to achieving this state of mind, and her deathlike sleep has a clear purpose: at the heart of her project is a deep desire for a new beginning, a rebirth, a new life: "when I'd slept enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person" (Moshfegh 51). She muses that if she "kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was my dream" (Moshfegh 84). Elsewhere, she refers to this dream as "a quest for a new spirit" (Moshfegh 264). Toward the end of the novel, her "quest" appears to have been fulfilled, if only for a short period of time: "My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now." Not only does the narrator herself feel like "a newborn animal" (278), but the world around her has also woken up. During a walk in Central Park, the narrator muses:

> The humidity carried in the warm wind mixed the sweat of the city and its dirt and grime with the heady fragrant lushness of the grass and trees. Things were alive. Life buzzed between each shade of green, from dark pines and supple ferns to lime green moss growing on a huge, dry gray rock. Honey locusts and ginkgos aflare in yellows. What was cowardly about the color yellow? Nothing. (Moshfegh 287)

After the numb monotony of her hibernation, now even her words are invigorated, and bespeak a new sensuality. The color yellow, complementary to the blue the narrator associated with Picasso's dreary and dejected subjects as well as with her father's dying ("he fit right into Picasso's Blue Period" [Moshfegh 139]), seems to promise a new beginning. This hope for a new beginning reveals an optimism that is also inherent in Arendt's concept of *natality*. Diverging from Martin Heidegger's emphasis on death and mortality, Arendt highlights humans' capacity for new beginnings. Drawing on the Greek

word *archein*, which means both *ruling* and *beginning* (189), Arendt's concept of natality is closely related to action. She argues that spontaneity and new beginnings set in motion the unexpected and unpredictable. The ability to start something new is what makes humans free, so that action as the realization of freedom is intricately linked to natality. Despite the narrator's reverse conception of action—and therefore of freedom—her desire for a new beginning, not death, is the driving force of her project. Are new beginnings possible in isolation? Can things simply "get sorted out" (Moshfegh 51) for the narrator while she is devoting herself to the carefully orchestrated nonaction of sleep? At first, it seems they can. But even though the novel constantly gestures toward an open-ended future, it does not easily grant new beginnings. Just as the narrator appears ready to open a new chapter in her life, death defeats her plan. The novel's ending brutally shatters the illusion of a new beginning and reveals the limits of the narrator's solipsistic understanding of freedom. There are too many people whose actions ultimately affect her, too, for the narrator to continue her self-centered life beyond her hibernation; the world is simply too unpredictable—the flip side of the human capacity for starting something new, as Arendt points out (244)—for her to be fully in control of creating her own future in this way. Within the logics of the novel, moreover, her future as a fictional character is far from open and is instead encapsulated in a teleological timeline that moves toward the narrative's inescapable ending.

The (An)Aesthetics of the Novel's Ending

35 The last day depicted in the novel falls on 9/11 and takes up the entire final chapter. "On September 11," this chapter begins, "I went out and bought a new TV/VCR at Best Buy so I could record the news coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers. . . . I watched the videotape over and over to soothe myself that day," she begins, but then shifts suddenly to a present-tense mode:

> And I continue to watch it, usually on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I am bored. Each time I see the woman leap off the Seventy-eighth floor of the North Tower—one high-heeled shoe slipping off and hovering up over her, the other stuck on her foot as though it were too small, her blouse untucked, hair flailing, limbs stiff as she plummets down, one arm raised, like a dive into a summer lake—I am overcome by awe, not because she looks like Reva, and I think it's her, almost exactly her, and not because Reva and I had been friends, or because I'll never see her again, but because she is beautiful. There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake. (Moshfegh 289)

36 By recording the news coverage, the narrator gains a degree of mastery over a reality that is overwhelming and entirely beyond her control. Playing the tape that captures the woman's fall mirrors the very delusion she ascribed to the

paintings she saw at the Metropolitan Museum—the idea "that time could be contained, held captive." What is contained and held captive through these recordings is an impossible still life: a woman desperately wanting to live and yet eternally about to die. To the narrator, the woman jumping from the tower turns into the epitome of being alive at the very moment when death is seized in mid-action, which captures the novel's pervasive interconnectedness of life and death: "There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake." Having attempted to erase the very characteristics that make her human, the narrator now comes to recognize another person's humanity precisely at the very moment she is witnessing the anonymous woman's final, desperate act.

37 Each time the narrator sees the woman leap off the seventy-eighth floor she is "overcome by awe . . . because she is beautiful" (Moshfegh 289). This remark positions the narrator's response in the realm of aesthetics, and as such it takes up the discussion on the aestheticization and beautification of terror fueled by contemporary artists' responses to the attacks, such as Damien Hirst's perception of 9/11 as a "kind of artwork in its own right" and Karlheinz Stockhausen's comment that the attacks were "the greatest works of art imaginable" (qtd. in Schechner 1820). More specifically, the narrator's response evokes the register of the sublime, which, going back to Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, resurfaces in recent analyses of the aesthetics of terror and war, such as Susan Sontag's essay "Regarding the Pain of Others" as well as Robert Schechner's article "9/11 as Avant-Garde Art?," which cautiously situates the terror attacks in the tradition of transgressive art.

38 The beauty that Moshfegh's narrator ascribes to the woman's body is of the "challenging" kind of beauty that Sontag addresses, which she traces from Leonardo da Vinci's instructions for battle paintings to the photographs of the World Trade Center ruins and identifies as "the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful" (65). What seems "heartless" in the narrator's reaction—if not "frivolous, sacrilegious," to borrow Sontag's vocabulary (65)—is the linkage of terror and beauty. But Sontag's insistence on the aesthetic sovereignty of images builds on a very clear distinction between art and reality: "as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life" (66).

39 Moshfegh's novel emphatically upholds this distinction. The last scene makes the distance between fiction and reality, between aesthetics and emotion, and, finally, between the narrator and the author, perfectly clear. The images of the woman falling are at twice-removed from reality: the woman is *like* but not identical with Reva ("almost exactly like her"), while Reva, a fictional character, is of course *like* but not identical with the many young women who died in the attack. This shifts the focus away from the personal and toward

the bigger structures in which the narrator, even after her experiment, finds herself inevitably trapped.

40 But something else happens on this last page, something that complicates the alleged epiphany of the ending, this sudden acknowledgment of someone else's humanity, which I have described above. The ending is epiphanic not in the sense of an individual revelation that would, in the above-mentioned tradition of the *Bildungs-* and *Künstlerroman*, serve the narrator's personal growth; rather, it is epiphanic to the reader in that it immediately challenges the very possibility of such an epiphany for a narrator like Moshfegh's. 9/11 is here not staged as the "terrifying awakening" that "artistic fanatics" such as Stockhausen had assessed it as (Schechner 1826), and to which the narrator's hibernation project would be too easy an analogy. Rather, the narrator translates the singularity of the terror attacks into a spectacle—soothing, encouraging, an antidote to loneliness or boredom—that can easily be reproduced and rewatched. For the narrator *continues* to watch the videotape, which implies a certain habituality, a shift from the extraordinariness of the event itself to the ordinariness of her rewatching it. This is the first and only time in the novel that we get a glimpse of the narrator's future as it reaches beyond the text. While Greenberg's article draws attention to the iterative at the novel's beginning—"whenever I woke up, night or day, I'd shuffle through bright marble foyer of my building" (Moshfegh 1)—this iterative at the very end of the novel is just as significant, and perhaps even more so. The narrator continues to watch the news recording just as she before watched Hollywood movies on endless repeat. That the event is made into a comforting spectacle that can be consumed like animal crackers, designer jeans, or Hollywood movies to fit the narrator's individual needs is strangely at odds with the alleged awe that the horrible spectacle of 9/11 seemed to have triggered in the narrator. Once it has become part of the loop of mass-mediated consumerism, even 9/11 ultimately has a numbing, anesthetizing effect. The implications of this final iterative bring to mind the narrator's earlier description of her hibernation as a "monotonous plane ride through the clouds" (Moshfegh 84) and leave us with the unsettling possibility that the narrator has never truly woken up.

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Biography

Having received an M.A. in comparative literature at Freie Universität Berlin in 2015, **Marlene Dirschauer** did her PhD at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School in Berlin and the University of Cambridge. Her book, Modernist Waterscapes. Virginia Woolf and the Poetics of Water, will be published with Palgrave Macmillan in 2022. After completing her PhD, she gained a one-year scholarship from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation at Ludwig Maximilians-Universität München for her current postdoc project, which examines literary representations of death and desire in late medieval and early modern women's writings as a vehicle of emerging female subjectivity. The project is also funded by the FONTE foundation. In 2021 and 2022, Marlene Dirschauer was a visiting professor at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. In April 2022, she joined the DFG research group "Geistliche Intermedialität in der Frühen Neuzeit" at Universität Hamburg.

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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On Engagement: A Postscript on Critical Practice in Times of Crisis

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1 In the introduction, we highlighted the importance of detachment in cultivating a self-reflexive critical practice. Remaining self-reflexive, even self-critical, is doubly as important in times of crisis, which can make jumping to conclusions all too tempting, as the writers of *LARB*'s *Quarantine Files* also acknowledged: Rushed diagnoses, whether medical or cultural, are likely to do more harm than good, especially at moments of urgency. At the same time, it is in the nature of a crisis to refuse to be simply ignored but to insist upon engagement from those affected. Humanities scholars responding to the coronavirus pandemic find themselves embroiled in (at least) two crises at once: A global health crises draws our response from without, while the permanent crisis of the humanities—a compelling oxymoron, as Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon have recently argued (1)—threatens our position within the academia. And this is not factoring in whatever personal crises—financial, emotional, physiological—scholars may or may not be experiencing, whether as a result of these global crises or independently of them.

2 If it is true that crises demand we engage with them, however inconvenient or unpleasant it may be for us, it is worthwhile considering what is meant by 'engagement' in the first place. For the purposes of this conclusion, I chose the word engagement intentionally for the specific type of proximity it entails: To engage 'in' something is to become involved in an activity from which it is difficult to break away—reading can be such an engrossing activity—whereas engaging 'with' someone or something requires establishing an intentional, meaningful connection with a person or a phenomenon. We are preconditioned to demand that others engage with us: newborn babies are barely out of the womb by the time they utter their first insistent demands. On the other

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hand, when someone or something is demanding our engagement, refusing to comply is rarely a matter of indifference. Intentional disengagement from a prior engagement can be infuriating, devastating, even (or especially) when it is strategically wise.

3 Contained in every en-gage-ment still lurks the archaic meaning of "gage," to pledge an "object or one's life . . . as a guarantee of good faith" ("gage"). While engagements these days are somewhat more superficial, we still refer to 'previous engagements' as a way of saying that the reason for our failure to engage is an earlier promise, and speak of those who have pledged their lives to one another as 'engaged to be married.' Making an engagement is thus comparable to making a promise, a pledge, or an oath, all of which J. L. Austin discusses as examples of performative utterances in *How to Do Things with Words*. Unlike constative statements—I extrapolate based on Austin's lecture—performative utterances are inherently social: They imply a speaker acting in a world populated by others, with whom she makes (and breaks) engagements at will—in Austin's succinct phrase, "*our word is our bond*" (10; emphasis in original). As with oaths and promises, engagements also imply a legal or moral obligation to do as one says.

4 Based on these qualities, engagement seems a rather apt model for critical practice in times of crisis. Contrary to "attachment," which Rita Felski has recently been calling for as a means of overcoming the critical "detachment" and "aloofness" she had identified in *The Limits of Critique* (viii-x), modeling critical practice after engagement offers several benefits. An attachment implies the ability to detach at will, as Felski writes in her most recent book Hooked, which makes it more akin to "Velcro than superglue: connecting parts that move against each other, that can often be unhooked and rehooked" (3). The brief exposition above already shows that, even though engagement and attachment both describe a kind of connection, they imply very different types of contact: Attachment calls to mind the affective and the tactile, whereas engagement implies the ethical and the contractual. Whereas attachments can be made and unmade with little harm done, engagements are made for life and are therefore never frivolous or free of ethical implicature. While every engagement retains a shrapnel of 'gage,' whose most evocative symbol is the glove tossed on the ground as a challenge to a duel, critical engagements need not be combative or lead to deaths on either side. What they do need to be is serious, which does not mean, however, that they cannot also be playful.

5 Just as becoming engaged to be married is the opposite of hookup culture, proposing engagement as a model for critical practice is in many ways the opposite of Felski's call for attachment: Like a Velcro strip attaching to anything with a suitably porous surface, and detaching only to be reattached to the next favorably textured thing, attachment is free of deliberation—indeed,

as Felski acknowledges, attachments often operate on an unconscious level. Engagement, on the other hand, is not merely conscious but *self*-conscious. Just as one cannot make (or keep) a promise without conscious effort, one cannot go around engaging 'in' or 'with' things flippantly without considering the basis and future implications of each engagement. Understood, perhaps, as a specific *kind* of attachment, engagement may respond to an outward demand to engage, or it may result from an inward desire, obsession, even compulsion, which causes one to seek meaningful engagement 'in' or 'with' something or someone. Given the complex moral dimensions of engagement, it is not only a critic's moral duty to engage with the crises that require her engagement; keeping these engagements must also become a priority.

6 An unlikely champion of engagement, George Bataille, refers to us humans as "*discontinuous* beings" (12; emphasis in original)—his term for the condition of *being alone together* discussed in the introduction—which on a very basic level means that, as a species, our reproduction demands the presence of two distinct beings. Beyond this physiological discontinuity that we share with most vertebrates, Bataille argues, humans derive pleasure from conjoining independently of the reproductive drive. Bataille terms this pleasure "eroticism," which for him includes a physical as well as an emotional and a religious dimension. All three types of eroticism, Bataille argues, seek to "substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity" (15). The physical eroticism of sexuality, the emotional eroticism of intimacy, and the religious eroticism of transcendence, provide a powerful model for mapping the distinctly human modes of engagement discussed throughout this issue. More importantly, Bataille's eroticism also has potential as a model for critical practice. We recall that, decades before postcritics began lamenting the state of critique, Susan Sontag had demanded that in the "place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art" (14). As a model of critical engagement, Bataille's eroticism can overcome suspicious aloofness without falling into the trap of un-self-reflexive, egotistic, or unconscious attachment. Whereas engagement in the above-described Austinian sense can seem dry, duty-bound, and outmoded, eroticism offers a more tempting alternative to postcritical hookup culture à la Felski: A cultivated, intentional, and pleasurable practice, eroticism provides a model of engagement that is meaningful without being overly serious—a "quest," in Bataille's words (11), instead of a duel, but a pleasurable one.

7 Unlike attachment, whose practical applications remain somewhat opaque throughout *Hooked*, eroticism offers more than a buzzword or an abstract model for critical practice. The playful dynamic of eroticism offers a wealth of practical applications for the study of literature, as Peter Brooks argued already in *Reading for the Plot*. In this landmark volume, Brooks sets out answering

the same question as Felski and Sontag before her: How to find a way out of the dichotomy between strict formalism and the horizonless close reading of suspicious hermeneutics? His answer: Critics must learn to "read for the plot." As Brooks demonstrates with an inventive reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which becomes his "model for a 'textual erotics'" (37), reading for the plot requires a heightened awareness of the "text as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" (xiv). Compared to the self-probing of postcritical attachment, Brooks's approach to textual erotics encourages engaging not primarily with one's own affects or attachments but with the work of literature itself, which should be studied with what Amanda Anderson, cited in the introduction to this issue, might call a carefully cultivated critical detachment. Combined with Bataillesque eroticism as a model for critical engagement, Brooks's method of textual erotics allows critics to engage in the work of elaboration, interpretation, and analysis without becoming either engulfed in the text or overriding its concerns with one's own—and to have fun while 'doing it.'

8 Erotic engagement may sound novel, even esoteric, as far as models for critical practice go, but if the essays in this issue are anything to go by, such an engagement constitutes an intuitive, even instinctive approach to works of literature. In *Play It as It Lays*, a self-destructive desire for textual and psychological fragmentation initially structures the novel, Didion's vision of intimacy going from dismal to abysmal in the course of a few hundred pages. By the end, Maria has become untethered not only from other people, after a psychotic episode has led her to being consigned in a mental institution, but from reality itself. Yet, as McKenna demonstrates, the novel insists upon a rereading, demanding that the reader return once more to the "affective fix" provided by the secular communion of the highway—undoubtedly a version of Bataille's religious eroticism. By contrast, the novels in Dirschauer's and Pyykkö's essays, Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Ma's *Severance*, seem intent on overcoming discontinuity through their own fictional forms: Like Didion, both depict emotionally and socially alienated subjects who at times court an almost Deleuzian level of schizoid disconnection. Yet, as the authors of these two essays demonstrate, neither Moshfegh nor Ma is content with allowing their protagonists to take up permanent residence in the fragmented state of dissolution where Didion abandons her protagonist: By the end of each of novel, some connection with reality has been re-established—and continuity, intimacy, and connection have become possible once more. Only by engaging with the internal tugs and pulls of "textual erotics" can the authors in this issue overcome the discontinuity of distinct beings and establish continuity, if momentarily, between themselves and the novels they interpret.

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