The Politics and Poetics of the Women's Millennial Workplace Novel: The Trope of Burnout in Kikuko Tsumura'*s There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* (2015) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018)

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Abstract
"The "burnout novel" is flourishing" stated Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett in her piece in the *Guardian*, 15 May 2021. Cosslett is certainly not the first reviewer who recently noticed a resurgence in contemporary fiction, mostly written by women, on the discontents of contemporary work culture. Exploring the politics and poetics of the contemporary women's burnout novel, I will address the extent to which literary burnout in women's contemporary workplace novels is a trope belonging to an aesthetic of 'capitalist realism' – reconfirming it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – or a catalyst of an imagination of a more sustainable, possibly more caring world, that lies beyond the end of capitalism. Analysing Kikuko Tsumura's *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* (2015) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) I will address how current scholarship on the contemporary culture of overwork, stress, and burnout could benefit from ideas of care (work) and studies of capitalism's care crisis in recent cultural theory and women's literature, which have thus far been largely side-lined, or not properly considered.

Keywords: Burnout, Care, Social reproduction, Novel, Women's literature, Capitalist realism

Introduction

"The 'burnout novel' is flourishing." Thus observed Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett in the *Guardian* on 15 May 2021.[1] Cosslett is certainly not the first reviewer who has noticed a resurgence in contemporary fiction, mostly written by women, on the discontents of early twenty-first century work culture.[2] Recent examples include *The New Me* (2019) by Halle Butler, *Honey Girl* (2021) by Morgan Rogers, *Little Scratch* (2020) by Rebecca Watson, and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) by Ottessa Moshfegh. The remarkable similarities between these "burnout novels" has not gone unnoticed.[3] For example, another reviewer, Jess Bergman, laments "the

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[1] Lucy Rhiannon Cosslett, 'Out of Office: How the Pandemic is rewriting the Workplace Novel', *The Guardian*, 15 May (2021). At: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/15/out-of-office-how-the-pandemic-is-rewriting-theworkplace-novel. Accessed 22/08/2023.

[2] Ottessa Moshfegh*, My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (London: Vintage, 2018); Halle Butler, *The New Me* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019); Rebecca Watson, *Little Scratch.* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021); Morgan Rogers, *Honey Girl* (Toronto: Park Row Books, 2021).

[3] See also Katie Bloom, 'All Precarity, No Pathos', *The Nation*, 11 April (2019). At: https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/halle-butler-new-me-book-review-millennialfiction-temp-work/; and Eloise Hendy, 'Fatigue and Futility', *Review 31*. At: http://review31.co.uk/essay/view/92/fatigue-and-futility. Accessed 22/08/2023.

perplexingly alienated women of recent American fiction."[4] She stresses that what "unites this group of novels most significantly . . . is affect…. Numbed or deadened almost to the point of anaesthesia , the anti-heroines of contemporary fiction are almost totally drained of desire – 'except, of course', Bergman notes, 'the desire for nothing."[5] At the same time, however, Bergman complains about these novels' lack of political imagination. She says:

> As realist portrayals of alienated, detached life under late capitalism, these novels … are built upon premises that preclude the possibility of unalienated life. They are exaggerated renderings of how people already live under a system of domination that, in Marx's words, 'vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.'[6]

Taken together, Bergman avers, these burnout books tend to replicate the sensations of apathy, exhaustion, and futility they seek to describe. This leads to an infinite loop of disempowerment.

However, one might argue, the absence of a space to imagine possibilities outside, or beyond, the late capitalist millennial workplace might also precisely be touching the core of the problem these novels are trying to tackle. This may be the case especially if we recall cultural theorist Mark Fisher's idea of "capitalist realism".[7] The essence of "capitalist realism" for Fisher was today's widespread sense that not only is capitalism is the only viable political and economic system, but also, that it is nowadays impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it. This impossibility to imagine a world governed in any other way than the current regime of governance is aptly captured by the well-known phrase "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."[8] Capitalist realism, then, is not only a problem for literature, but in fact for anyone interested in bringing about social change.

Taking Fisher's notion of capitalist realism into consideration, the question becomes to what extent burnout in women's millennial workplace novels is a trope belonging to such a capitalist realist aesthetic. Are they reconfirming the notion it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, replicating the sensations of apathy, exhaustion and futility the imagination of burnout seeks to describe? Or perhaps, in the face of today's difficulty to imagine alternatives, could the trope of burnout better be seen as a catalyst of an imagination of a more sustainable, possibly more caring world that lies beyond the current discontents of millennial work culture?

In addressing this question, the aim is to explore whether, and if so, how women's millennial workplace novels contribute to the current scholarship on the millennial culture of overwork and burnout. Analysing two recent women's burnout novels - *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* by Kikuko Tsumura and *Severance* by Ling Ma – I will focus on how in depicting burnout these novels help us to complicate a too facile, generalised, concept of

[4] Jess Bergman, 'I'm Not Feeling Good at All. The perplexingly alienated women of recent American fiction', *The Baffler*, 5 March (2020). At: https://thebaffler.com/. Accessed 22/08/2023.
salvos/im-not-feeling-good-at-all-bergman
[5] Jess Bergman, 'I'm Not Feeling Good at All.'
[6] Jess Bergman, 'I'm Not Feeling Good at All.'
[7] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Alresford: Zer0 Books, 2022).
[8] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

burnout culture.[9] Each in their own way, different contexts and by means of different narrative techniques, as I will argue, these novels depict the trope of burnout as a symptom of contemporary global neoliberalism's predominant focus on economic production, rather than on social reproduction. They highlight, each in their own way, how a suggested alternative to contemporary burnout culture might not be more individual resilience, but instead, a structural revalorisation of care and social reproduction in society.

In order to fully grasp the ways in which women's burnout novels challenge conventional ideas about millennial work culture from within, by describing the contemporary workplace, I will first situate them within a broader debate in contemporary cultural theory and gender studies about the widespread problem of burnout and exhaustion today. In doing so, I hope to bring into view how current scholarship of contemporary culture of overwork, stress and burnout could benefit from ideas of care (work) and capitalism's care crisis in recent cultural theory and women's literature, which have thus far been largely side-lined, or not properly been considered.

Burnout Culture: The Cost of Caring in Times of Capitalism's Care Crisis

Burnout has increasingly been studied as more than 'just' an issue of mental health, but rather, as a "signature affliction" of contemporary culture, acutely revealing everything that has gone wrong with the spirit of our age. The roots of the burnout concept are indeed seen alongside broader social, economic, and cultural developments that took place in the last quarter of the 20th century, which signifies the rapid and profound transformation from an industrial society into a neoliberal service economy, a social and cultural transformation resulting in unprecedented psychological pressures. Both Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* (2010) and Pascal Chabot's *Global Burnout* (2013), for example, contend that burnout and exhaustion are affective states which are explicitly linked to neoliberal capitalist political economies, centred as these are around prevailing values of meritocracy, hyperindividualism, and free market competition.[10]

However, one may ask whether both Han and Chabot do not deploy an all too facile concept of "burnout culture". In her review of Chabot's book, social historian Hannah Proctor, for example, points to Chabot's rather unspecific use of the notion of 'care (work)', at the same time when Chabot rightly points out that burnout originated as a term relating to overworked caregivers and still disproportionately affects women, and nowadays especially women of colour, in 'caring professions'.[11] To Hannah Proctor, Chabot is too abstract and ahistorical about the notion of 'care' even if it is so essential for an understanding of burnout. As Proctor observes, Chabot glosses over the extent to which care is (un)waged labour, by what kind of people it is traditionally performed, its affective dimensions – and "he does not engage with the large existing feminist literature on these subjects, from social reproduction theory to theories

[9] Kiko Tsumura, *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job*, trans. Polly Barton (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021 [2015]); Ling Ma, *Severance* (New York: Picador, 2018).
[10] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Pascal Chabot, *Global Burnout* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
[11] Hannah Proctor, 'Exhausting Concepts. Review of Pascal Chabot *Global Burnout*', *Radical Philosophy* (2019). At: https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/exhausting-concepts. Accessed 22/08/2023.

of emotional labour".[12] And we may want to add to this list, approaches to what has been called "the crisis of care" in today's society.

It is particularly in the field of gender studies that care and care work have been taken seriously as a realm or a practice worthy of study, and hence, it might be interesting to turn to this body of scholarship to further study the links between burnout and care. Similarly, as will become clear in my discussion of two novels, women's millennial workplace novels portray the phenomenon of burnout as inherently interwoven with notions of care and today's crisis of care and social reproduction. As such they portray burnout as firmly embedded within contemporary social inequalities and social structures which devalue care.

Let me briefly elaborate this point about today's crisis of care. In the last decades, cultural theorists of different backgrounds and strands have been prominent in addressing what has been named in the public debate 'the crisis of care'. This term commonly refers to the systematic pressures, particularly related to the organisation of labour, that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities, those available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally. These 'life-making' instead of 'profit-making' activities and professions, which are also called practices of 'social reproduction', have been historically cast as women's work. Although often performed without pay, such forms of care work are nevertheless indispensable to society. According to Nancy Fraser: "No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long. Today, however, a new form of capitalist society is doing just that."[13] The result is a major crisis, not simply of care, but of social reproduction in the broader sense, which in Fraser's eyes is one aspect of a 'general crisis' that also encompasses economic, ecological and political strands, all of which intersect with, and exacerbate one another. The contemporary care crisis thus shows itself in the persistent devaluation of the time, energy and human resources it takes to perform life-making activities and care (work), whereas these are crucial in providing the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for people, the planet and non-human creatures to thrive.

Another theorist whose work in this context is worthwhile to mention is Tithi Bhattacharya, who is an advocate of so-called "social reproduction theory".[14] As Bhattacharya argues, we all know that it is the working class who produces commodities. Social reproduction theory, however, asks another question, a question which is often ignored: "how is the working

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[12] Hannah Proctor, 'Exhausting Concepts'.

[13] Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of capital and care', *New Left Review*, vol. 100, no. 99 (2016), p. 117.

[14] Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.). *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Books, 2017). The concept of social reproduction and care ethics is part of a longer feminist tradition dating back to at least Nel Noddings' question: 'Why care about caring?' (1986). Noddings's book signalled a shift in moral philosophy away from conceptualisations of an autonomous human subject and towards concepts of relationality and dependence. Other theorists such as Carol Gilligan (1982), Eva Kittay (1991), Joan Tronto (1993), and Virginia Held (1993) began to lay out philosophical frameworks for a terrain of care ethics which would go on to influence a wide range of interdisciplinary fields such philosophy, political theory, education, nursing, and social work, although it has had arguably less impact on the arts. In particular Carol Gilligan's work has been of great importance in challenging patriarchal and capitalist understandings of 'justice'. In that work, Gilligan argued that girls exhibit distinct patterns of moral development based on relationships and on feelings of care and responsibility for others. Gilligan proposed that women come to prioritize an 'ethics of care' as their sense of morality along with their sense of self while men prioritize an 'ethics of justice'. Taken together, this body of theory has been fundamental in understanding how care and care work is socially engendered, historically being assigned to women and devalued.

class being produced?" The working class is not an infinite reservoir of labour force; it needs to be produced and reproduced. We need to ask: what are the social processes that are needed and are involved in the production of the working class? What happens before and after working hours, which can ensure that the worker is sufficiently regenerated to be able to go to work the next day? Social reproduction does not only refer to the biological reproduction of the working class, for example, within the family and through childbirth. It refers also to the wider social conditions in which the worker is produced. It is also about slavery and migration, which, as Bhattacharya argues, have been historically part and parcel of the social reproduction of the worker. Approaches to the crisis of care and social reproduction, such as the ones formulated by Nancy Fraser and Tithi Battacharya, then, involve that we explore the "production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process."[15]

However, it would arguably be too simple to unequivocally re-embrace care and the recentering of life making activities as an alternative to the current system's human depletion and care crisis. After all, despite, or precisely because of, today's structural erosion of society's capacities for care, care seems to be precisely experiencing a remarkable success lately. Care has become indeed a veritable buzzword during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example - think of the new 'care' button that Facebook implemented in the wake of COVID. It means that we need to stay cautious of the shifting uses and contradictory significations of care – for example think about the corporate discourses which have been called 'carewashing'.[16] Or what Emma Dowling called "care fixes" – the temporary comforting balms offered by some caring initiatives whilst failing to address the deeper structural crisis (e.g. free classes in mindfulness or yoga offered by companies to their employees, while not structurally addressing the problem of stress and overwork.[17] Analysing notions of care, then, and burnout as a problem of care, we need to be critical of the fact that care's popularity has grown proportionally today, alongside the way in which the systemic crisis we are experiencing seems to have democratised human vulnerability.

Before we delve more deeply into the novels under investigation, we could ask: why study the poetics and meaning of their portrayal of burnout, instead of, for example, reading these books against the grain for signs of empowerment, resistance, resilience, in spite of the exhaustion at, and weariness with, the modern workplace these novels ostensibly describe?

In her essay "Bouncing Back. Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience, Sarah Bracke offers a powerful critique of resilience, which she views as "a point of departure to tell yet another tale of neoliberal governmentality".[18] One of the main problems Bracke has with the notion of "resilience" is that it ties up the subject structurally to the shocks of neoliberalism he or she is assumed to bounce back from, while simultaneously withholding subjects the possibility of imagining substantial social transformation. From this perspective,

[15] Meg Luxton, 'Feminist Political Economy in Canada and the Politics of Social Reproduction', in *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neoliberalism*, ed. Kate Bezanson and Meg Luxton (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), p. 36.
[16] Emma Dowling, *The Care Crisis: What caused it and how can we end it?* (London: Verso Books, 2020)
[17] Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg and Lynne Segal, 'From Carewashing to Radical Care: The Discursive Explosions of Care During Covid-19', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 6 (2020), p. 891. At: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1781435.
[18] Sarah Bracke, 'Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience', in *Vulnerability in Resistance: Towards a Feminist Theory of Resistance and Agency*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 34.

Bracke calls for a resistance to resilience, even though she also admits that it is unclear what this might precisely entail. Part of this difficulty, she argues, possibly results from our understanding of "a neoliberal social ontology that revolves around the individual, and the paralyzing effect that the complexity of our world has on that individual."[19] Bracke's suggestion, then, principally revolves around the refusal of such an ontology and a shift to a "social ontology centered in relationality, vulnerability and interdependence."

In so doing, Bracke joins a chorus of voices in gender theory who have recently embraced and reclaimed notions of vulnerability, precariousness and care as a ground for an ethics which may generate new imaginations of more sustainable worlds.[20] The current interest in feminist theorisations of care builds on a long tradition of care ethics dating back to at least Nel Noddings' question: 'why care about caring?' (1986).[21] Vulnerability in this sense is understood, not as something that needs to be overcome (as resilience asks us to do), but seeks to reconstruct an ethical condition of human life, which is domesticated and obscured within contemporary political economies. It sees human beings as embodied creatures who are inexorably embedded in social relationships and institutions, and thus underscores the necessity of rethinking social relations and interdependencies as well as prevailing notions of the autonomous, self-sufficient and resilient individual.

Given the theoretical debates about, and amplified discursive uses of, notions of care in the public arena today, we need more understanding of care ethics and the potentially productive links between contemporary literary practice and care ethics, in particular in forging innovative responses to the various burnout crises wrought by neoliberal values we are experiencing today. In what follows, I will endeavour to open up such worthwhile perspectives by exploring two very specific literary imaginations of burnout and care in the neoliberal context of contemporary work culture. In the following close readings of the novels by Kikuko Tsumura and Ling Ma, I will build on Toril Moi's proposal to 'think through examples'.[22] Inspired by Wittgenstein's philosophy, Moi argues that thinking through examples releases us from the grip of the logic of representation and the craving for generality which dominates, in Moi's view, feminist theory today and consequently, transforms our understanding of concept and theory. Rather than aiming to 'do' theory or formulate a concept of burnout and care in contemporary literary practice, I will alternatively approach the topic by means of attentive close reading of the particulars of two distinct illustrations.

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[19] Bracke, 'Bouncing Back', p. 72.

[20] Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leicia Sabsay (eds), *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance: Feminism and Social Change* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016); Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care Speculative Ethics in More Than Human worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2020).

[21] This body of theory is critical of how caring is socially engendered, being assigned to women and consequently devalued. A related strand of anti-racist feminist scholarship including Ericka Huggins (2016), Audre Lorde (1988), bell hooks (2000), Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) and Angela Davis (2018), have highlighted has highlighted how the practice of self-care and self-love is crucial, particularly for women of colour, in dealing with the daily onslaught of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression.

[22] Toril Moi, 'Thinking through Examples: What Ordinary Language Philosophy Can Do for Feminist Theory', *New Literary History*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2015), pp. 191- 216. At: DOI:10.1353/nlh.2015.0014.

"Deconstructing and Rebuilding Care" in Kikuko Tsumura's *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job*

In *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* a Japanese female 36-year-old unnamed narrator has left her job of 14 years because of burnout syndrome – though it is left unknown until the end of the novel what job precisely she had. She now shows up at an employment agency and tells her recruiter that she is not interested in a meaningful job; she just wants an easy one, one that is "very uneventful" – one requiring "no reading, no writing", and, preferably, "very little thinking". In the first chapter she has taken on 'The Surveillance Job'. She sits on an office chair and stares at two screens, both of which show the same man, also sitting on an office chair, staring at a screen. Her job is to watch him, to oversee the mundane movements of an author with writer's block. 'The Surveillance Job' would appear then to be what David Graeber calls "a bullshit job"; it is essentially meaningless, and the narrator knows it.[23] Indeed, she seems to echo Graeber's assertion that "huge swathes of people" are "basically paid to do nothing".[24] She states "it was weird because I worked such long hours, and yet, even while working, I was basically doing nothing".[25] And it's not just The Surveillance Job that's 'bullshit'; each chapter opens with the promise of a new temporary position. On face value, each job seems easier, more uneventful, and potentially more pointless than the last.

The sequential portrayal of the temporary jobs reflects the new conditions of flexible work characterising contemporary work culture. As Mark Fisher indicated, where formerly workers could acquire a single set of skills and expect to progress upwards through a rigid organisational hierarchy, now they are "required to periodically re-skill as they move from institution to institution, from role to role. As the organisation of work is decentralized, with lateral networks replacing pyramidal hierarchies, a premium is put on 'flexibility'."[26] These new conditions of work also play out on the novel's narrative level. It is structured as a short story cycle, with each new chapter introducing a new temporary role for the narrator in a different workplace, each time presenting us new variations of the same theme, without seemingly any progression.

The narrator seems to suffer from a compulsion to describe, resulting in the proliferation of endless details in her account. She is indeed very often hyper-focusing on inconsequential details that do not seem to add much to the narrative progression of events. For example, she fixates on the specifics of the meals of co-workers, or on the reactions of a character as he's watching TV, or on her thought process on how to perforate tickets in a straight line. The narrator is a self-professed "over-thinker", and we indeed spend a lot of time inside her head analysing every single occurrence of her day, most of it rather ordinary.

This compulsion to describe reminds us of what Jennifer Fleissner in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* singled out to be a formal feature of naturalist writing.[27] Fleissner redefines naturalism as a form of writing expressing woman's life narratives embodying technologised modernity and which is marked "by an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion", a

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[23] David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).
[24] Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*.
[25] Tsumura, *There's No Such Thing*, p. 5.
[26] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 36.
[27] Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University Press, 2004).

strange movement Fleissner characterises as a "stuckness in place", replacing the concept of naturalist determinism "with the more nuanced concept of compulsion."[28] As *There is no such thing as an easy job* illustrates, this naturalist sense of stuckness in place arguably suits an aesthetic for today's work culture as well, conveying the repetitive work routines that many today experience. This compulsion to describe, as Fleissner argues, is grounded in a "feeling of incompleteness" and a compulsive sense of doubt. It takes the form of "an endless, excessive attempt to gain control over one's surroundings that at the same time actually reveals one's actual lack of control and concomitant frozenness in place."[29]

This is arguably what *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* wants to suggest: in today's Japanese late capitalist work culture, there exists in fact no such thing as an easy job. Today, work is never finished and achievement is always incomplete. Today you take work home with you and you home from work.[30] This is why for example in the chapter The Surveillance Job, the narrator indeed almost lives at work, where "the lights in the building stayed on throughout the night"…where you soon started to feel your sense of night and day melting away."[31]

That there is in fact no such thing as an easy job is not only because, due to today's relations of production, work is never done, but also because workers care too much about their jobs. Today the external surveillance mechanism of what philosopher Michel Foucault called "disciplinary societies" have been succeeded by internal policing. In the terms of Han:

> The late-modern achievement subject does not pursue works of duty. Its maxims are not obedience, law, and the fulfilment of obligation, but rather freedom, pleasure and inclination … because the structure of gratification has been disturbed, the achievement subject feels compelled to perform more and more…[32]

It is probably here where we could see the relevance of bringing in Tithi Battacharya's questions relating to social reproduction, and asks ourselves what are the social processes involved in the reproduction of these late-modern achievement subjects who feel compelled to perform more and more?

In *There is No Such Thing as an Easy Job*, the narrator deliberately chooses an uneventful, job, that requires little action and thought because she is exhausted. She has burnout. "If I read more than one side of A4 a day, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of such despondency that I was unable to function", Tsumura's protagonist explains. "At the same time, my brain would fire up and I'd be on full alert." This seemingly paradoxical sense of inertia and overstimulation is crucial to the experience of burnout, which, as psychoanalyst Josh Cohen writes, 'combines an intense yearning for a state of completion with the tormenting sense that it cannot be attained.'[33]

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[28] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, p. 9.
[29] Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, p. 43.
[30] As Gilles Deleuze aptly observed, the Societies of Control make use of "perpetual training" and "limitless postponements". Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, vol. 59 (1992), p. 4.
[31] Tsumura, *There's No Such Thing*, p. 10.
[32] Han, *Burnout Society*, p. 38.
[33] Josh Cohen, 'Is there more to burnout than working too hard?', *The Economist*, 29 June (2016). At: https://www.economist.com/1843/2016/06/29/is-there-more-to-burnout-than-working-too-hard. Accessed 22/08/2023.

In spite of herself, the protagonist finds herself time and again treating every task and interaction with exaggerated care. When she begins writing copy for a cracker company, she falls "head first into thoughts of rice cracker packets", and as deadlines approach, the thought of submitting mediocre work upsets her, not because she is afraid of her boss but because it doesn't seem like the honourable thing to do. Her thoughtfulness becomes more proactive, too. The poster job becomes an undercover mission to infiltrate a local organisation; perforating tickets in the hut in the forest park turns into a search operation in the park for a man who has gone missing.

The narrator's self-reflexive spurs point out that she is well aware that despite her exhaustion, she overinvests in whatever bullshit job she performs. With self-irony, she comments on her behaviour: "I had not been asked to go to the social and here I was volunteering. This was what was known as an inappropriate relationship with one's work."[34] Caring, then, is at once presented as a problem as well as a solution. In Tsumura's novel, boring routine work is time and again ruptured, it is transcended by the worker's endless inclination to make contact with other people. "I felt very high levels of professional commitment. Thinking that a better understanding of the people living in the neighbourhood would help with my work, I struck up conversations with everyone I met, listening to their complaints and concerns."[35]

Towards the end it is revealed that the initial career which pushed the narrator to burnout was in fact social work – she used to be a medical worker who ended up emotionally exhausted after literally caring too much for too long. Yet, while at the start her overriding desire was to recover through detachment and 'doing nothing', she finds herself repeatedly drawn to instances that require bonds of attachment. This is what makes her human instead of an automaton mindlessly performing without brainpower. Care – and more generally the field of social reproduction – it is said, is indeed one of the most resistant to automation.

In the final chapter 'The Easy Job in the Hut in the Big Forest', the narrator's administrative job turns unexpectedly into a search for a man gone missing in the forest named Mister Sugai. The narrator's search for, and finally encounter with Mr. Sugai, who used to be a medical social worker suffering from burnout, provides the narrator with her own mirror-image. Just like herself, Sugai had finally left his job because of a breakdown. "He was having a tough time at work and kept using the words 'emotional labour'".[36] "Emotional labour": This is the abstract phrase which is repeatedly used to introduce the character of mister Sugai, as an epithet, even before we get to know the details of his identity. Emotional labour is also what the narrator was involved in, and which turned all her easy jobs into difficult ones.

At the end of the novel, the narrator decides to return to her first job and will take up medical work again. One motif in the final chapter might further hint at the way in which the narrator proposes a more care-centred ethic in the future workplace. In her search for mister Sugai she finds a book of his in the trees, the title of which she keeps on returning to in her mind and which eventually plays a role in her decision to return to her initial job. Its title is *Deconstructing and Rebuilding Care* – it is repeated at least four times in similar wording and printed in italics, and further stands out, just like in the case of the notion of 'emotional labour', because of its level of abstraction, transcending the concrete, anecdotal level of the plotline. A

[34] Tsumura, *There's No Such Thing*, p. 282.
[35] Tsumura, *There's No Such Thing*, p. 270.
[36] Tsumura, *There's No Such Thing*, p. 373.

modern workplace beyond the meaninglessness, beyond the routines and boredom of the long and repetitive bullshit jobs without an end, one in which the caring worker and social reproduction more generally might take more centre stage. The phrase *deconstructing and rebuilding care* hints at post-burnout socialities in the millennial workplace, however, at the end of the novel, the reader is left to imagine how precisely such a post-burnout sociality might look like.

Social Reproduction Beyond Zombie Capitalism in Ling Ma's *Severance*

Set in an alternate version of – during the early months of Occupy Wall Street – Ling Ma's satirical science fiction debut novel *Severance* represents the slow decline of New York City and other American locations as the result of an airborne pandemic disease called Shen Fever. In what follows, I would like to explore how through the lens of burnout, *Severance* depicts a powerful portrayal of global capitalist postcoloniality in crisis as well as the suggestion that even though the world after the end of capitalism might be difficult to imagine, it will be certain that social reproduction – and women's essential role in social reproduction – might be central to it.

Severance imagines the apocalypse as the end of capitalism through the "fevered", people who have been infected with a non-threatening zombie-like disease that compels mindless bodies to repeat tasks until they die. Protagonist Candace's devotion to the routines of commuting and office work – which persists long after her co-workers have abandoned their Times Square office – seems to parallel Shen Fever's distinctive symptoms of repetition and a "fatal loss of consciousness". At various moments, the novel invites us to question whether Candace herself is infected and to ask ourselves: what is the difference between her mindless drive to lose herself in work routines and the fevered repetitions of time-loop zombies? It is not difficult to see in the figuration of the fevered a dramatisation of a burnout culture in which everyone suffers from emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced sense of personal accomplishment, which are conventionally singled out as common burnout symptoms.

The repetition of routine is the novel's dominant motif, as Ma skewers the automation of late capitalism broadly, and the ritualised procedures of urban corporate culture in particular. Candace passes five years in the same job, recapitulating the same actions, the same empty gestures. "I went to sleep. Then I got up. I went to work in the morning. I went home in the evening. I repeated the routine".[37] Ma escalates and satirises this mindless mechanisation by integrating it into the symptomatology of Shen Fever: "the fevered", as they are called, stagger through unconscious rehearsals of daily activities, cyclically re-enacting habits of a past life.

How, we may ask, do the novel's time-loop zombies interact with its immigration plot, which features the coming of age of an orphaned Asian-American woman? While Candace's reflections, rendered in first-person narrative, lull readers into sharing her infatuation with routinised office work, interspersed scenes set in the past also emphasise the Asian American particularity of Candace's responses. These responses bring home to the reader that Candace's immigrant life has been characterised by severances of all kind, by several losses and ruptures and concomitant feelings of grief and nostalgia, by insecurities regarding identity and

[37] Ma, *Severance*, p. 159.

belonging. Candace has lost her mother, her homeland, her Chinese language, the bonds with fellow Chinese family members who stayed behind, when her parents decided to migrate to the US to work and seek a better life.

Candace's job at Spectra is to work with US-based "publishers who paid [Spectra] to coordinate book production that we outsourced to printers in Southeast Asia, mostly China".[38] As a middle-level manager, Candace facilitates the smooth operation of a global supply chain. While touring one of her vendor's factories in Shenzhen, she realises that both her Chinese identity and her American identity set her apart from the white male American business travellers who stay in her hotel as well as the Chinese workers in the factory she meets, offering her an "in between" position in Homi Bhabha's sense of the term, from which to view and criticise the larger global economic system in which she is embedded.

As an immigrant woman Candace grieves the loss of her childhood in Fuhzou, her dead mother, her ex-lover Jonathan. At the end of the novel, she wanders amidst the ruins of a deserted, ghostly New York. In times of pandemic, all workers have left their jobs and their city to stay with their families, even Candace's colleagues in China all went home. Candace, however, is left behind in the office, in the remnants of global capitalist postcoloniality, without family who are in China or dead. Her ongoing performance of her office duties long after Shen Fever has rendered both the work and the salary obsolete, indicates that she has no other place to go. She is alone, the disruption of her family bonds indicative of her fragile social support networks which are informed by a broader social reproductive crisis marking global capitalism and related Asian-US immigration.

Candace continues her office routines, even though the world around her has been disrupted, just like she has learned from her family history that one continues, finds a way, makes a new life, despite – or precisely because of – the experiences of loss, severance, broken connections generated by Asian American immigration. When everyone has left the city, we see Candace wandering through the ruins of a deserted, ghostly New York. She documents the remnants in her photoblog called "New York Ghost".

At the end of the novel, Candace seems to have broken the time loops that held her and the citizens of New York in suspension, yet *Severance* does not depict what a future beyond these routinizing structures – neoliberal urban development, global capitalism, office culture, compulsive consumerism, all of which distribute harm unevenly to racialised minorities and the global precariat – might look like. It only underscores the urgency of refusing these routinizing structures and imagining alternatives.

Candace chooses to break from this repetitive cycle by foreclosing any return to normalcy. Her dead mother urges her in a dream to try to escape the rule of Bob, who has led the band of survivors to squad a shopping mall land start a new world there, which however looks increasingly dictatorial. As soon as Bob realises Candace is pregnant, he imprisons her and appropriates her pregnancy into his semi-religious salvation narrative. Candace – an Asian American single mother to be – manages to escape, abandons the former world and walks away to meet an unknown future. The novel ends with what Emily Waples aptly described as "a pregnant pause".[39]

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[38] Ma, *Severance*, p. 10-11.

[39] Emily Waples, 'What to Expect When You're Expecting an Epidemic: Ling Ma's Severance and Karen Thompson Walker's The Dreamers', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, vol. 64, no. 1 (2021), pp. 119-35.

This particular ending brings back into mind the novel's earlier references to Occupy Wall Street in the novel, and also the ideas Arruza Cinzia, Nancy Fraser and Tithi Bhattacharya expressed in their manifesto *Feminism for the 99 Percent*, written directly in the wake of Occupy Wall Street. In their book, Cinzia, Fraser and Bhattacharya discuss how capitalist societies rely on reproductive labour while at the same time disavowing its value. As they argue, "All told, people-making work supplies some fundamental preconditions – material, social, cultural, for human society in general and capitalist production in particular. Without it neither life nor labor power could be embodied in human beings."[40] For Cinzia, Fraser and Bhattacharya then, Occupy Wallstreet marks a general crisis, including a crisis of care, which is a "moment of political awakening and an opportunity for social transformation."[41]

Likewise, I would argue, in *Severance.* The novel shows how global capitalism presents an assault on social reproduction, especially for immigrant women and their families where family ties are dispersed and broken due to economic immigration. Capitalist societies rely on reproductive labour – which is for the most part put on the shoulders of women and minorities – while at the same time disavowing its value. When the end of capitalism has come, and everything has been depleted – the environment, office culture, urban decay – what however remains, as *Severance* indicates, is essentially social reproduction – life making capacities surviving profit making activities. *Severance* imagines the end of capitalism as the end of the world, except for one single Asian American mother-to-be, a woman's pregnant body and her social reproductive capacities. Entering a city evacuated of the repetitive schedules, rhythms and systems, Candace seems on the verge of a narrative without a template. A single, pregnant Asian-American woman walking out of the ruins of capitalist postcoloniality: This is how *Severance* ends. In this very specific embodiment, Ma leads us out of the burnout world into the next, however still undefined, unborn.

Conclusion

I have explored here the poetics and politics of two contemporary women's burnout novels *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* and *Severance* and proposed considering these literary imaginations of burnout as a narrative strategy to criticise millennial work culture - particularly its devaluation of care and social reproduction and as a motor of an alternative work culture to which care and social reproduction are more central. In particular, I have addressed how literary figurations of burnout might be understood as representations of burnout society in crisis, which is simultaneously also suggested to gesture towards an opportunity for a transformation. The novels present burnout as an alternative to resilience, as a "refusal to bounce back", in the terms of Sarah Bracke.

To be clear: Neither *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* nor *Severance* offer us a coherent alternative to contemporary globalised modern work culture. Rather, they offer us critiques 'from within', also aesthetically, the disruption happens from within. Both novels offer us portraits of women who have "leaned in", and pursue careers, their liberation has become entangled in a liaison with the contemporary workplace. As quintessential late modern caring

[40] Arruzza Cinzia, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*. (London: Verso, 2019), p. 21.
[41] Cinzia, Bhattacharya and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%*, p. 18.

and achieving subjects, they take the virtues of meritocracy to the almost absurdly extreme, leading to a burnout crisis. In *There's No Such Thing as an Easy Job* time and again the protagonist feels compelled to perform more and more, her efforts to care and establish bonds of human connection exceeding far beyond the official task description of her bullshit jobs. In *Severance*, while all workers have gone home and salaries have become obsolete in times of pandemic, Candace remains at the office, performing her routinised office work duties. At the same time, however, I have tried to show how the two burnout novels under investigation, each in their own way, refuse, in Bracke's words, "a social ontology that revolves around the individual and the paralyzing effect that the complexity of our world has on that individual." Instead they seem to suggest to making a shift to a social ontology centred in relationality, in care. The two novels indeed each in their own way militate for a form of life that de-centres automatised production and valorise unwaged activities, including care work and emotional labour.

At the same time, however, Tsumura and Ma's novels have open endings; refusing us the solace of coherent alternatives to the contemporary workplace. In times when there is a veritable explosion of discourses of care, which indeed have contradictory or sometimes questionable significations, to offer no well-defined narrative of care might serve to overcome the risk of easy appropriation. As narratives without a template, Tsumura nor Ma do not offer concrete proposals, perhaps it is more apt to say that they offer us merely directions. Or in the terms of the novelist Arundhati Roy, in their narratives burnout figures as "a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."[42]

[42] Arhundhati Roy, 'The Pandemic is a Portal', *Financial Times*, 3 April (2020). At: https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca. Accessed 22/08/2023.