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The Spectacle and the Routine: Neoliberal Biopolitics in Chain-Gang All-Stars and Severance

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Abstract:

Contemporary dystopian fiction has shifted from critiquing state totalitarianism to diagnosing the diffuse, market-driven operations of neoliberal power. This article examines Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's Chain-Gang All-Stars (2023) and Ling Ma's Severance (2018) as literary diagnoses of neoliberal biopolitics. Moving beyond earlier dystopian preoccupations with overt state authoritarianism, both texts expose how market rationality governs life through divergent yet complementary mechanisms: spectacularized racial violence and routinized, automated labor. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theorization of biopower and Wendy Brown's critique of neoliberal rationality, the article argues that these novels render visible the otherwise normalized operations of contemporary power. While Chain-Gang All-Stars literalizes the commodification of dispossessed bodies through a carceral-entertainment complex, Severance depicts the internalization of corporate discipline through pandemic-induced routine. Read together, the novels map a dystopian present in which the body is simultaneously a site of hyper-visible spectacle and silent extraction, offering a dual critique of how neoliberalism manages, monetizes, and exhausts life.

Keywords: neoliberalism, biopolitics, dystopian fiction, commodification, labor, surveillance, carcerality

Introduction

The dystopian imagination of the twenty-first century marks a decisive shift from the genre's mid-century fixation on centralized state power toward a more diffuse and intimate form of domination. Where canonical texts like George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's Brave New World dramatized the explicit coercion of the authoritarian state, contemporary dystopian fiction increasingly interrogates neoliberalism as a totalizing, biopolitical mode of governance. This system operates not primarily through repression but

through market rationality, reshaping subjectivity, labor, and embodiment according to the imperatives of competition, productivity, and consumption.

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's Chain-Gang All-Stars (2023) and Ling Ma's Severance (2018) are paradigmatic of this contemporary turn. Though radically different in tone and aesthetic—the former a brutal, satirical spectacle, the latter a deadpan chronicle of quiet collapse—both novels diagnose how neoliberalism governs life by transforming the human body into an extractable resource. Chain-Gang All-Stars stages this process through hyper-visible, racialized violence, presenting a gladiatorial prison-entertainment complex that monetizes punishment and death. Severance, by contrast, explores an almost invisible dystopia in which labor persists beyond social meaning, revealing how routine itself becomes a mechanism of somatic and psychic control. Together, they articulate a potent, shared critique of a power that operates simultaneously through spectacular excess and mundane repetition.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's foundational account of biopower and Wendy Brown's incisive analysis of neoliberal rationality, this article argues that Chain-Gang All-Stars and Severance expose the dual modalities through which neoliberalism manages life. The former resurrects the Foucauldian spectacle of punishment, now subsumed under market logic, while the latter depicts the thorough internalization of disciplinary rhythms. Read comparatively, the novels demonstrate that the contemporary dystopian horizon is no longer defined by an external force imposed upon subjects, but by a system sustained through participation, endurance, and a reconfigured consent.

Neoliberal Biopolitics: From Discipline to Market Rationality

To situate the literary critique enacted by these novels, the conceptual synergy between Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Wendy Brown's neoliberal rationality is essential. Foucault's work provides the architectural blueprint for understanding how modern power operates on and through life itself. In The History of Sexuality, he describes a power that "makes live and lets die," governing populations through the administration of health, reproduction, and productivity rather than through sovereign violence alone (138). This biopower is exercised diffusely, targeting the biological existence of the species-body. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault details the corresponding micro-physics of power that produce "docile bodies" through surveillance, temporal partitioning, and relentless normalization within institutions like prisons, schools, and factories (135). Crucially, this disciplinary model succeeds most fully when its constraints are internalized by the subject.

Wendy Brown's work provides the critical lens through which to read this Foucauldian framework in the late-capitalist present. In Undoing the Demos, Brown argues that neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies but a pervasive "political rationality" that economizes all spheres of human existence (31). It systematically reconfigures individuals as homo oeconomicus—entrepreneurial subjects who must

perpetually invest in themselves, understand their worth in market terms, and view every aspect of life (education, relationships, health) as a site of competitive optimization. Under this rationality, the very concepts of the political citizen and the social demos are eroded, replaced by the figure of the self-as-firm.

When synthesized, Foucault and Brown illuminate neoliberalism as the apotheosis of biopolitical governance. Market logic does not displace disciplinary mechanisms; it perfects and disseminates them. Power operates not only by regulating bodies from the outside but by shaping desires, habits, and identities from within, aligning them seamlessly with the demands of capital. This fusion—where the biopolitical management of life meets the neoliberal imperative for self-commodification—forms the conceptual core of the contemporary dystopian mode, where domination is presented not as a dramatic rupture but as the unremarkable texture of daily existence.

Spectacular Bodies: Carcerality and Entertainment in Chain-Gang All-Stars

Chain-Gang All-Stars delivers one of the most visceral contemporary critiques of neoliberal biopolitics by spectacularizing its racial and carceral logics. The novel's fictional Carceral-Arena Prison Entertainment (CAPE) system incarcerates individuals, predominantly Black and brown, and forces them to fight to the death in televised gladiatorial matches for a chance at freedom. Their suffering is not hidden but produced as consumable entertainment, complete with corporate sponsorships, merchandising, and real-time betting. Adjei-Brenyah thus constructs a world where the prison-industrial complex and the entertainment-industrial complex merge, creating a seamless economy that profits directly from racialized pain and death.

Foucault's historical arc from the spectacle of sovereign punishment to the discipline of the hidden prison is perversely reversed here. The spectacle returns with a neoliberal vengeance. In CAPE, violence is no longer a public assertion of sovereign power meant to instill fear; it is a commodity designed for mass consumption and profit. The panoptic gaze Foucault located in the prison guard's tower is literalized in the omnipresent camera, and surveillance becomes indistinguishable from spectatorship. The audience does not merely witness punishment; through their viewership and financial participation, they become integral components of the carceral apparatus. This implicates the neoliberal subject in a new form of civic complicity, where consumption habits are also acts of social discipline.

The novel's most cutting insight lies in its exposure of neoliberal "choice." The incarcerated fighters, or "Links," are contractually bound participants who "choose" to compete for their freedom. This veneer of voluntarism masks a structure of absolute coercion, reflecting Brown's analysis of how neoliberalism recasts systemic constraints as matters of individual responsibility and competitive failure (133). A Link's death in the arena is framed not as a state-sanctioned killing but as a loss in a fair contest, a personal failure to

optimize one's performance. This logic effectively biologizes and individualizes racist violence, obscuring its structural origins.

Adjei-Brenyah firmly situates this dynamic within the longue durée of racial capitalism. The bodies commodified in CAPE carry the historical weight of chattel slavery, convict leasing, and the modern prison boom. David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession"—where capital generates new avenues for profit by privatizing and commodifying public goods and marginalized populations—finds its grim, literal embodiment here (149). CAPE demonstrates how neoliberalism does not break from but modernizes and monetizes earlier regimes of racial subjugation, extracting value from lives already rendered disposable.

Yet, within this brutal totality, Adjei-Brenyah plants seeds of insurgent subjectivity. The relationship between veteran fighter Loretta Thurwar and newcomer Hurricane Staxx, and Thurwar's culminating moral refusal, momentarily fracture the spectacle's seamless narrative. By turning her final, televised act into one of solidarity and defiance rather than violent triumph, Thurwar weaponizes the visibility imposed upon her. She transforms the screen from a site of passive consumption into one of jarring confrontation, demonstrating that the very apparatus of spectacular commodification can be hijacked to stage a critique of itself.

Routinized Survival: Labor and Automation in Severance

If Chain-Gang All-Stars dramatizes neoliberal power through a theater of excess, Severance uncovers its quieter, more insidious operation in the realm of habitual labor. Ling Ma's novel is set during a global pandemic caused by "Shen Fever," a fungal infection whose primary symptom is not violent death but a loss of consciousness trapped in endless loops of routine behavior. Victims mindlessly repeat the mundane rituals of their former lives—setting tables, commuting, performing rote work tasks—until their bodies give out. This "zombification" serves as a powerful allegory for labor under late capitalism, where the automation of the self precedes physical collapse.

The protagonist, Candace Chen, is the paradoxical survivor. Immune to the fever, she remains in a depopulated New York City primarily to fulfill her contractual duties as a coordinator for a faceless corporation, producing a product "Bible" for a nebulous entity called Spectra. Her continued labor in the absence of any meaningful social or economic framework reveals the utter autonomy of capitalist discipline. Candace embodies the ultimate "docile body" Foucault described: productive, obedient, and evacuated of interior purpose (Foucault, Discipline 135). Her work persists not because it is necessary, but because the habit of work has become her ontological ground.

Candace personifies Brown's homo oeconomicus in a state of advanced crisis. Her identity is wholly subsumed by her professional function; to stop working would constitute

a form of existential death. Neoliberal biopolitics is here fully internalized: survival is made contingent upon a productivity that has lost all external referent. The novel's chilling effect arises from this lack of overt oppression. There are no wardens, only schedules; no direct coercion, only the relentless, seductive pull of routine and the attenuated comfort of a paycheck. Power operates through affective numbness, the normalization of exhaustion, and the erasure of alternatives.

Severance thus exposes a dystopia that requires no spectacular violence. The apocalypse is not an event but a gradual fading, a continuation of pre-existing conditions pushed to their logical endpoint. The fever does not create a new world of control; it simply strips away the social veneer to reveal the zombified reality of labor that was always already there. In this sense, Ma's novel is a profound critique of the biopolitical management of life under neoliberalism, where the body is kept in a state of functional, living death in service of a logic that has outlived its own justification.

Spectacle and Routine as Complementary Modalities

Read in tandem, Chain-Gang All-Stars and Severance reveal neoliberal biopolitics to be a system that operates across a spectrum of visibility, employing both spectacular excess and mundane repetition to achieve the same end: the extraction of value from the governed body. In the world of CAPE, life is commodified through its spectacular, public destruction. In Candace Chen's world, life is commodified through its silent, perpetual expenditure in labor. One system is fueled by the adrenaline of racialized voyeurism, the other by the anesthesia of routine.

Despite their aesthetic opposition, both modalities effect a similar collapse: the erosion of any meaningful distinction between living and laboring, being and performing. For the Links, to exist is to fight (to produce entertainment-value); for Candace, to exist is to work (to produce corporate-value). In both novels, to cease this performative, commodified function is to cease to be a legible subject within the system. This is the core of the neoliberal dystopia: it reconstitutes life itself as a form of capital, to be competitively optimized in the arena or passively depleted in the cubicle.

These complementary modalities also reflect different racialized and class-based applications of biopower. Chain-Gang All-Stars focalizes the hyper-exploited, predominantly Black body subjected to spectacularized, lethal extraction. Severance focalizes the aspirational, professional-class body (Candace is a first-generation Chinese immigrant) subjected to internalized, existential extraction. Together, they map a comprehensive biopolitical terrain where power differentially manages populations through a calculus of visibility, violence, and value.

Conclusion

Chain-Gang All-Stars and Severance exemplify a potent strand of contemporary dystopian fiction that takes neoliberalism itself as its primary subject of critique. Through

the theoretical lenses of Foucault and Brown, this analysis has argued that these novels function as sophisticated diagnostic tools, revealing how neoliberal rationality governs life biopolitically through two key modalities: the spectacular and the routine. Adjei-Brenyah's novel exposes the brutal, racialized spectacle of a carceral-entertainment state, while Ma's novel uncovers the quiet, internalized discipline of labor that persists beyond societal collapse. In both, the human body emerges as the central site of governance—monetized, disciplined, and rendered expendable within the totalizing logic of the market.

By extrapolating present-day logics to their extreme yet plausible conclusions, these novels operate less as prophecies of a distant future and more as sharp-focused X-rays of the political present. They render tangible the abstract forces of neoliberal biopolitics, translating concepts like "accumulation by dispossession" or "entrepreneurial selfhood" into gripping, affective narratives. In doing so, they reaffirm the enduring critical power of the dystopian genre: its unique capacity to make visible the often-invisible architectures of power that shape our bodies, our time, and our very sense of possibility. The true dystopia, these novels suggest, is not on the horizon; it is in the routines we accept and the spectacles we consume.

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