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**How to Cite:** West, M 2018 Apocalypse Without Revelation?: Shakespeare, Salvagepunk and *Station Eleven*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 7, pp. 1–26, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.235>

**Published:** 30 January 2018

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## STATION ELEVEN AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WRITING

# Apocalypse Without Revelation?: Shakespeare, Salvagepunk and *Station Eleven*

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This article argues that in *Station Eleven*, the apocalypse brought by the Georgia Flu does not lead to revelation. Organized around a close reading of a scene in which a character named Miranda explicitly links the economic collapses of 2007–8 and the collapse occasioned by the Flu, this article argues that the novel and its characters come close to acknowledging – as critics Frederick Buell and Evan Calder Williams do – that the pre-Flu world was already apocalyptic, but in failing to fully do so they seek to redeem and recuperate this world rather than build a newer, better one. The article is arranged into two sections. The first argues that the novel's use of Shakespeare helps Mandel register the way the Georgia Flu brings the end of the Anthropocene, an era she also defines as the era of globalized trade. The second section continues this focus on the novel's engagement with capitalism. Reading the novel through Evan Calder Williams' concept of 'salvagepunk', it borrows Jerrold E. Hogle's description of the gothic to show how *Station Eleven* simultaneously addresses and disguises what Williams calls 'capitalist apocalypse', and in the process comes tantalizingly close to – but ultimately refuses – revelation.

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'[O]n a beach on the coast of Malaysia' (Mandel, 2014: 217), the Georgia Flu is closing in; ultimately the pandemic will have a 'mortality rate' of '99 percent' (Mandel, 2014: 253) and cause what one character calls 'the end of the world' (Mandel, 2014: 176). In Malaysia, '[t]he three nearest airports had closed in the previous ninety minutes', and in the 'coffin chill' (2014: 217) of the 'oddly empty' (2014: 225) hotel Miranda is staying at, the 'staff had fled' (2014: 227); and the 'conciierge w[ears] a surgical mask' and looks at her with 'unmistakable fear' (2014: 225). In this new reality, Miranda muses on 'how casually everyone had once thrown the word *collapse* around' after the 'economic collapse' of 2007–8, something which makes her both 'troubled' and 'amused' (Mandel, 2014: 217).

This article will argue that this scene, in which Mandel places Miranda's reflection on the word 'collapse' immediately after a description of the world-ending pandemic, exemplifies a key characteristic of *Station Eleven*. The pandemic's seemingly apocalyptic scale and effect legitimize a desire to recuperate and redeem the pre-Flu world; lacking the revelation critics Andrew Tate, Evan Calder Williams, and Teresa Heffernan associate with the arrival of apocalypse, the novel rejects a critique of 21st-century capitalism, even as it alludes to its long history and its deleterious effects. In this respect, *Station Eleven* – while not a gothic novel – borrows an operation of the gothic described by Jerrold E. Hogle. In gothic fiction, suggests Hogle, contemporary 'desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety' are simultaneously 'address[ed] and disguise[d]' (Hogle, 2002: 4) by transforming those fears into 'extreme' (Hogle, 2002: 14) forms. The comparison implicit in Miranda's reflection, which takes place when she knows she is dying from the Flu, is wry and ironic. It says: *You wanted a collapse? This is a collapse*. Miranda's amusement works along the lines Hogle describes, addressing the economic collapse of 2007–8 only to disguise it by minimizing its effect in relation to a much larger collapse.

*Station Eleven* implies that civilization can be salvaged. What kind of salvage it envisions can be better appreciated by reading the novel through Williams' notion of 'salvagepunk' (2011: 20), in which salvage is the work of uncovering apocalyptic revelations hidden in the rubble of catastrophe in order to make a new world. *Station Eleven* is more nostalgic. A 'love letter to the modern world, written in the form of

a requiem', as Mandel herself puts it in an interview (Griffith, 2015: n. pag.), and its characters seek to shore up the remnants of the past against further destruction; the novel's new world, such as it is, is sought through reconstructing the old.

This article is organized into two sections. The first argues that the way *Station Eleven's* post-Flu landscapes register not just the end of its individual characters' worlds but also the historical epoch known as the Anthropocene, in which '[h]uman activity is . . . global and is the dominant cause of most contemporary environmental change' (Lewis & Maslin, 2015: 171), can be best comprehended through the novel's use of Shakespeare. His plays help both to time-stamp the Anthropocene epoch and define it as one characterized by the growth of globalized trade.

Mandel's use of Shakespeare entangles economic and post-Flu collapse, and the second section of this article develops this focus on the way the novel engages with capitalism by reading *Station Eleven* through the concept of 'salvagepunk'. It argues that Hogle's formulation of the gothic operation well-describes how Miranda's – and other characters' – evocations of 21st-century capitalism get very close to critiquing its apocalyptic nature before dismissing it by comparing it to the Georgia Flu, in the process refusing the possibility of revelation.

### **Capitalism's Long Collapse**

The different kinds of collapse – economic and post-Flu – juxtaposed in the scene on the Malaysian beach are entangled in the way *Station Eleven* depicts the post-Flu landscape. Mandel's survivors experience 'solastalgia', which Robert McFarlane has called a kind of 'modern uncanny, in which a familiar place is rendered unrecognizable . . . the home become[s] suddenly unhomey around its inhabitants' (2016, n. pag.). The term, coined by Glenn Albrecht, describes the experience of people whose environment changes drastically around them. He defines it as:

[t]he pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation . . . It is the 'lived experience' of

the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation ... solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'. (Albrecht, 2005: 48)

Solastalgia describes the desolation one of Mandel's survivors, Jeevan, feels at finding himself nearly alone in the world:

It was becoming more difficult to hold on to himself. He tried to keep up a litany of biographical facts . . . trying to anchor himself to this life, to this earth. My name is Jeevan Chaudhary. I was a photographer and then I was going to be a paramedic. My parents were George of Ottawa and Amala of Hyderabad. I was born in the Toronto suburbs. I had a house on Winchester Street. But these thoughts broke apart in his head and were replaced by strange fragments: This is my soul and the world unwinding. Finally whispering the same two words over and over: "Keeping walking. Keep walking. Keep walking". (Mandel, 2014: 194)

Jeevan walks across a landscape 'rendered unrecognisable' by the cataclysmic event, an 'overgrown wilderness' (Mandel, 2014: 284) littered with the disintegrating remains of 'the lost world' (Mandel, 2014: 121), where people 'live in the gas station' (Mandel, 2014: 123). Jeevan notes how:

The entire operation [of society] grinds to a halt. No one delivers fuel to the gas stations or the airports. Cars are stranded. Airplanes cannot fly. Trucks remain at their points of origin. Food never reaches the cities; grocery stores close. Businesses are locked and then looted. No one comes to work at the power plants or the substations, no one removes fallen trees from electrical lines. (Mandel, 2014: 178)

What remains in this landscape are 'ghost cit[ies]' (Mandel, 2014: 274), 'ghost plane[s]' (Mandel, 2014: 280), and '[r]usted-out cars here and there along the road, abandoned where they'd run out of gas' (Mandel, 2014: 133). Clark, one of those stranded at an airport since the day of the pandemic, gathers together items for a 'Museum of

Civilization': 'cell phones . . . iPads, [a] Nintendo console, a selection of laptops . . . impractical shoes, stilettos mostly . . . three car engines . . . a motorcycle . . . magazines and newspapers, a stamp collection, coins . . . driver's licenses . . . credit cards' (Mandel, 2014: 258). One visitor to Clark's museum is bemused by his need to collect: 'the entire world is a place where artefacts from the old world are preserved' (Mandel, 2014: 146). The visitor is right; through this 'ghostly infrastructure' (Buell, 2013: 17), the pre-Flu world is constantly viewable in the new. As Kirsten – a member of a troupe of actors and musicians called The Travelling Symphony that travels in 'caravans [that] had once been pickup trucks, but [which are] now . . . pulled by teams of horses on wheels of steel and wood' (Mandel, 2014: 49) – discovers one day: 'It was possible to look up at the McDonald's sign and fleetingly imagine, by keeping her gaze directed upward so that there was only the sign and the sky, that this was still the former world and she could stop in for a burger' (Mandel, 2014: 49).

It is not just objects that are ghostly; people populate this landscape with their absence:

Kirsten and August came upon a line of cars, queued along the shoulder of the road . . . They'd been cleaned out, no bones in backseats or abandoned belongings . . . An hour later they reached a gas station, a low building alone by the road with a yellow seashell sign still standing, vehicles crowded and blocking one another at the pumps. One was the color of melted butter, black lettering on the side. A Chicago taxicab, Kirsten realized. Someone in the very final days had hailed one of the last taxis in the rioting city, negotiated a price and fled north. Two neat bullet holes in the driver's side door. (Mandel, 2014: 145)

Survivors attempt, as Kirsten does here, to read the traces of their stories: the 'someone' hailing a cab, the recipients of those two bullets. Believing in ghosts is dangerous, because to do so is to '[i]magine how many there'd be' (Mandel, 2014: 308). There are, though, interactions that can only be explained by the presence of ghosts. Kirsten and other members of The Travelling Symphony explore abandoned houses, and in these they encounter the traces of the dead:

Kirsten had gone upstairs in search of Charlie and found her in a room that had obviously been a nursery once, staring at a porcelain tea set sized for dolls . . . She was staring at the tea set as if in a trance. August called their names from downstairs, and all at once Kirsten had the impression that someone was watching them from a corner of the room, but except for Kirsten and Charlie, the room was empty. Most of the furniture in the nursery was gone, nothing remaining except this little table set for dolls . . . How could this table have remained set, when the rest of the house was ransacked and in disarray? Now that Kirsten looked, she realized there was no dust on the tea set. The only footprints in the dust were hers and Charlie's, and Charlie wasn't sitting close enough to the table to touch it. (Mandel, 2014: 307)

In other houses, those traces are stronger still: 'Upstairs, there was a room that had once belonged to a child. The child in question was still present, a husk in the bed' (Mandel, 2014: 149). Kirsten is famed for her accuracy as a knife thrower, and she has two tattooed knives on her wrist. As literal signs of the dead, they are awkward memorials to those she has had to kill for survival (Mandel, 2014: 132, 265). Kirsten feels like she is 'dragging souls across the landscape like cans on a string' (Mandel, 2014: 297).

The remains that populate the landscape don't just register the end of the world these individuals themselves knew, but also the end of a much longer history. If the redundant technology and infrastructure testifies to the scale of the post-Flu collapse and the cause of the survivors' solastalgia, it also emphasizes a new, inescapable reality: humans will no longer be able to influence the earth to the same degree that they have hitherto been accustomed. The contours of this world are outlined in a litany of losses: 'the age of electricity having come and gone' (Mandel, 2014: 57); 'The era of light pollution had come to an end' (Mandel, 2014: 251); 'the post-anesthesia era' (Mandel, 2014: 270). Over the course of the novel, we learn that the pandemic ushered in 'the end of gasoline' (Mandel, 2014: 36) and of the gun — 'By Year 15, the ammunition was running low, guns used rarely and only for hunting' (Mandel,

2014: 271) – and Mandel provides us with a list of things that are ‘no more’: ‘cities’; ‘pharmaceuticals’; ‘flight’; ‘countries’; ‘fire departments’, ‘police’ (Mandel, 2014: 31); the ‘internet’ (Mandel, 2014: 32). What has come to an end is the globalized world, a world in which the majority of humans live in urban areas, in which modern medicine gives the ‘certainty of surviving a scratch on one’s hand, a cut on a finger while chopping vegetables for dinner, a dog bite’ (Mandel, 2014: 31), in which humans can travel great distances on planes and the gasoline that powers them, a world organized around nation states, some of which have the social infrastructure of ‘fire departments’ and ‘police’ and the physical infrastructure of ‘road maintenance’ (Mandel, 2014: 31–2) and ‘garbage pickup’ (Mandel, 2014: 32); this diminished world will no longer be connected by telecommunications.

Mandel is detailing here the longer history of what, we remember, she calls ‘the modern world,’ one we might think in terms of the Anthropocene. Indeed, for McFarlane and Albrecht, solastalgia describes the emotional effect of living in this period, ‘the new epoch of geological time in which human activity is considered such a powerful influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the planet that it will leave a long-term signature in the strata record’ (McFarlane, 2016: n. pag.). We might also think of the end of the longer history *Station Eleven’s* landscapes mark in terms of Jason Moore’s concept of the Capitalocene, which finds ‘[t]he origins of modern ecological crisis – and therefore of capitalism’ (Moore, 2017: 3) in ‘the epoch-making transition in humanity’s environment-making relations and patterns beginning in the sixteenth century’ (Moore, 2017: 29–30). Whatever term we use, though, it seems clear that *Station Eleven’s* landscapes register not just the end of its characters’ world but the end of this ‘Age of Man’ (Mentz, 2015: n. pag.) as a whole.

This epochal end can be comprehended in the novel’s use of Shakespeare, whose plays feature heavily in *The Travelling Symphony’s* repertoire. They had ‘performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but what was startling, what no one would have anticipated, was that audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare’ (Mandel, 2014: 38). The symphony argues about what this means. Some say the plays represent a timelessness attractive to survivors of the end of time; ‘people want what was best about the world’ (Mandel, 2014: 38) one member says, anticipating



reviewers' responses to the novel which emphasized its suggestion that 'the transition to a new world and new way of life doesn't mean we have to give up on everything that was good and worthwhile about the past' (Mond, 2014: n. pag.).

Other members of the Symphony suggest the opposite: Shakespeare's plays have been newly invigorated by circumstance, and he is suddenly timely, again. In a world defined by disease, they say, Shakespeare's life is instructive: 'Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did The Travelling Symphony' (Mandel, 2014: 288). Mandel has Kirsten deliver lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which concern the 'rheumatic diseases' that 'abound' (2014: 58) in the air, and this enables her to make an explicit connection between the world of the late 16th and early 17th-centuries, and the early 21st:

Lines of a play written in 1594, the year London's theatres reopened after two seasons of plague. Or written possibly a year later, in 1595, a year before the death of Shakespeare's only son. Some centuries later on a distant continent, Kirsten moves across the stage . . . Plague closed the theatres again and again, death flickering over the landscape. And now in a twilight once more lit by candles, the age of electricity having come and gone, Titania turns to face her fairy king. (2014: 57)

These arguments for Shakespeare's relevance appeal to art's mimetic function, the comfort and stimulation audiences receive from seeing representations of their own experience.

But Shakespeare's presence in the novel is not just a reminder of 'the human capacity to create and to pursue meaning via art' (Tate, 2017: 133); it is also testament to the novel's entanglement of economic and ecological collapse and helps to establish their historical scale. It's here that the Anthropocene is a particularly useful concept. In a 2015 article in *Nature*, geologists Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin proposed 1610 and 1964 as two possible dates for the beginning of the Anthropocene. Based on a decline in CO<sub>2</sub> levels resulting from the 'ecological mixing' (Mentz, 2015: n. pag.) of foodstuffs, plants, animals, and, crucially, diseases dating from the '[t]he arrival of Europeans in the Caribbean in 1492' (Lewis and Maslin, 2015: 174), the

earlier of these two dates, writes Steve Mentz, 'catches this Shakespeare professor's eye: 1610 is . . . one year before the first staging of *The Tempest*. Amid the glories of the English Renaissance sits an ecological spike. When Sir Walter Raleigh graced Queen Elizabeth's court and Shakespeare's dramas were first staged, our Anthropocene nightmare began' (2015: n. pag.). Both the 1610 date itself and Mentz's comments on it catch the eye of readers of *Station Eleven*, because they have implications for the significance of Shakespeare in the novel. Viewed through the lens of the 'timeless' Shakespeareans, who argue that the plays' post-Flu popularity is because they represent 'what was best about the world,' the 'best' comes from the same time as the beginning of 'our Anthropocene nightmare'. Viewed from the perspective of the 'timely' Shakespeareans, the plays' new relevance – their emergence from and into a disease-ridden world – casts them as book-ends of the Anthropocene, helping to register the end of Mentz's Age of Man having also marked its beginning.

Lewis and Maslin's earlier date is persuasive in the context of *Station Eleven* not just for its co-incidence with Shakespeare's plays but also because the scientific rationale for that date describes a world that looks very much like Mandel's. Lewis and Maslin describe the effects of European arrival in the Americas. It:

led to a large decline in human numbers. Regional population estimates sum to a total of 54 million people in the Americas in 1492, with recent population modelling estimates of 61 million people. Numbers rapidly declined to a minimum of about six million people by 1650 via exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement, and famine. The accompanying near-cessation of farming and reduction in fire use resulted in the regeneration of over 50 million hectares of forest, woody savanna, and grassland. (2015: 175)

The 'overgrown wilderness' of Mandel's landscape, which registers the depopulation of the land in the wake of the Georgia Flu, has a precedent in its 'regeneration' in the 16th and 17th-centuries as a result of European arrival in the Americas, an arrival that produced a mortality rate of roughly 90 per cent, only nine per cent less than Mandel's Flu. If the 1610 Anthropocene 'means that the most consequential historical

and ecological forces in the Age of Man have been inhuman viruses' (Mentz, 2015: n. pag.), then it is apt that Mandel depicts this epoch's end with another disease. If 'smallpox and influenza cleared the New World' (Mentz, 2015: n. pag.), then the Georgia Flu cleared the world of 'Old Man Anthropos' (Mentz, 2015: n. pag.) almost entirely. The scale of the deaths associated with the 1610 Anthropocene date is enabled by 'the impacts of globalized trade' (Lewis and Maslin, 2015: 177); the deaths in *Station Eleven* are aided by the 21st-century descendants of those global networks such as mass air travel, which allow it to spread. As Andrew Tate has noted, '[o]ne of the reasons that the world dies so quickly in *Station Eleven* is because of its relentless mobility and the ordinary miracle of air travel: people travel across the globe in hours and the virus, horribly resistant to treatment, goes with them' (2017: 133).

Mandel's use of Shakespeare, then, draws attention to a historical period in which diseases were mobilized by global trade networks, the descendants of which (at least) seemed to collapse in 2007–8, and definitely do in *Station Eleven*. 'We suggest naming the dip in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> the "Orbis spike" and the suite of changes marking 1610 as the beginning of the Anthropocene "Orbis hypothesis",' write Lewis and Maslin (2015: 175). They take 'Orbis' 'from the Latin for world, because post-1492 humans on the two hemispheres were connected, trade became global, and some prominent social scientists refer to this time as the beginning of the modern 'world-system' (2015: 175). This entanglement of capital and nature is a feature, too, of the Orbis spike, which shows how 'unequal power relationships between different groups of people, economic growth, [and] the impacts of globalized trade' helped 'br[ing] about the Anthropocene' (Lewis and Maslin, 2015: 177).

In mapping out a temporal arc in which the Anthropocene ends the same way it began, with a devastating disease enabled by global trade networks, *Station Eleven's* use of Shakespeare helps us understand precisely what is ending with the Flu, namely the capitalist 'world-system'. In doing so, it begins to show readers how the novel's apocalyptic pandemic scenario is entangled with this system. The problematic nature of Miranda's reflections on the beach, which initially seem to continue this depiction of entanglement, are the focus of the next section.

## The Apocalypse Before the Apocalypse

In newspaper and journal reviews of the novel, *Station Eleven* was often called an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic novel.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the way the novel depicts ‘a plague that results in the immediate and total collapse of civilization’ (Nunez, 2014: n. pag.), these reviews appeared to rely on a ‘popular understanding of apocalypse as a destructive, violent ending to an era or social order’ (Tate, 2017: 18) in order to define the novel. As David Barnett wrote in his review for *The Independent*: ‘post-apocalypse novels are, by their definition . . . concerned . . . with the complete and utter collapse of society as we know it’ (2014: n. pag.). In this respect, the novel’s initial reception sought to slot it into a broader cultural trend for apocalyptic scenarios, a trend that is the focus of Andrew Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* (2017) and which includes novels like ‘Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* (2007), Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* sequence (2003–13) . . . Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008–10), and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* sequence (2011–13), as well as *Station Eleven*’ (Tate, 2017: 2). This proliferation of such narratives bolsters Frederick Buell’s claim that ‘post-apocalypse is a cultural dominant today’ (2013: 11). James Berger, too, has spoken of ‘the pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility of recent American culture’ (1999: xix).

These scenarios, and the culture they are part of, are not restricted to – and indeed are not necessarily initiated by – cultural products like novels and films. The economic collapses of 2007–8, the fallout from which are arguably ongoing, and certainly were when *Station Eleven* was published in 2014, seemed to encourage the sense that we were ‘living in the end times’, as the title of a 2010 book by Slavoj Žižek put it, or even that ‘an ending has already occurred, and . . . we have somehow outlived it’ (Hurley, 2013: 61). In an article published in 2011, I noted one way this sensibility had been discussed; echoing Teresa Heffernan’s sense of ‘the end as post’ (2008: 6), I gathered together a ‘growing list of “posts” [used] to describe contemporary society’ (West, 2011: 20):

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Tripney (2015), Barnett (2014; 2016), Cameron (2014), Valby (2014), and Nunez (2014).

Post-crisis has entered common usage as a term referring to the economic crises of 2008. As of writing, a Google search returns articles in *Businessweek*, on BBC's Business pages, the *London Times*, the *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *The Independent*, *Reuters*, the International Monetary Fund, and the *Harvard Business Review* on its first two pages. (West, 2011: 20)

In that article, I referred to an event held in Los Angeles in 2009 – called, inevitably, Postopolis – in which the designer and theorist Benjamin H. Bratton collected more 'posts': 'Post-war period, post-Watergate, post-modernity, post-fashion, post-humanism . . . post-bubble, post-finance, post-production, post-consumption [. . .] post-American, post-leverage, post-abundance, post-secular, post-social, post-urban . . . post-cinema [. . .] post-art [. . .] post-security [. . .] [p]ost-thing [. . .] post-opacity [. . .] post-border [. . .] post-crime' (Bratton, quoted in West, 2011: 20). Now, of course, we can add the infamous and ubiquitous 'post-truth,' named 'Word of the Year 2016,' to that list (Flood, 2016: n. pag.).

For Buell, the collapses Žižek and Bratton addressed mark the end of a long trajectory and are confirmation that we already live in apocalyptic times:

the dot. com collapse; the 9/11 attack, and the transformation of globalization from a new world order to be celebrated into a vulnerability to be feared; the emergence of a widely diffused war on terror and land wars; sharp price spikes in oil and a new round of near-apocalyptic predictions of peak oil; a return of environmental catastrophe to mainstream consciousness in the form of climate change and the (ill-coped with) devastation of hurricane Katrina; and then finally the great financial collapse. This compound of contingency and surprise in many different, apparently unrelated areas was, together with after-echoes of the previous decades, what specifically laid the ground for post-apocalyptic today. (2013: 18–9)

If these truly are apocalyptic times, then we need to ask questions about an element of the apocalyptic 'misse[d]' (Tate, 2017: 12) by the 'widely understood' version of it 'as a kind of classy synonym for spectacular destruction' (Tate, 2017: 11): 'the *primary*

valence of the term . . . that signifies revelation, the uncovering of what was previously hidden' (Tate, 2017: 12). Teresa Heffernan notes the importance of this original meaning, writing in *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth Century Novel* (2008) that '[c]atastrophic narrations . . . that are bereft of redemption and revelation are not apocalyptic in the traditional sense' (2008: 6). Evan Calder Williams relies on it too, and in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011) he suggests that proclamations of our era's apocalyptic nature should not just insist on the presence of revelation but be specific about the content of that revelation: 'If we call these apocalyptic times, we do so because of what is revealed. Namely, the pervasive structures of capitalist apocalypse and the fantasies needed to approach and mediate them, not in the simple fact that an era is drawing to a close' (2011: 3). In other words, our times are apocalyptic not only if they are accompanied by revelation, but also if that revelation uncovers the destructive — apocalyptic — realities of the capitalist economic structures that control our world. As he puts it, we are living in a period of:

*capitalist apocalypse*. This does not mean just an end of capitalism or even an end that suddenly reveals things about it which we didn't know before. Rather, capitalist apocalypse is the possibility of grasping how the global economic order and its social relations depend upon the production and exploitation of the undifferentiated, of those things which cannot be included in the realm of the openly visible without rupturing the very oppositions that make the whole enterprise move forward. (Williams, 2011: 8, emphasis in original)

'Those things' are the things of apocalyptic fiction:

all that we know very well yet regard as exceptional nightmares or accidents to be corrected with better, greener, more ethical management: hellish zones of the world, whole populations destroyed in famine and sickness, 'humanitarian' military interventions, the basic and unincorporable fact of class

antagonism, closure of access to common resources, the rendering of mass culture more and more banal, shifting climate patterns and the 'natural' disasters they bring about, the abandonment of working populations and those who cannot work in favor of policies determined only to starkly widen wealth gaps. (2011: 8)

If, like Tate and Heffernan, Williams emphasizes the way apocalypse is 'intricately linked to the emergence of a better world, to revelation and disclosure' (Heffernan, 2008: 6), then for him '[y]ou aren't post-apocalyptic because the apocalypse happened . . . You become post-apocalyptic when you learn to do something better . . . with the apocalyptic remains of the day' (Williams, 2011: 47–8). Contemporary post-apocalypse is for Williams defined by the particular kinds of revelation and disclosure it opens up possibilities for, namely a thorough critique of the capitalist structures that have wrecked our world and the creation of a new one from sifting through its apocalyptic rubble to find the revelations hidden beneath. This is what Williams calls '*salvagepunk*: the post-apocalyptic vision of a broken and dead world, strewn with both the dream residues and real junk of the world that was, and shot through with the hard work of salvaging, repurposing, détournant, and scrapping. Acts of salvagepunk strive against and away from the ruins on which they cannot help but be built and through which they rummage' (2011: 19–20). Williams finds these acts across a range of 20th and 21st-century cultural forms: 'the traditions of montage (Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker) and collage (Hannah Hoch, Schwitters, John Heartfield, Terry Gilliam), détournement (Duchamp, Debord and the Situationist International, hip-hop, some of Italian *arte povera*), and farce (Monty Python, Richard Lester, Marco Ferreri)' (2011: 38). These forms are 'crucial' because 'all are forms of idiosyncratic uses of "given" materials' (2011: 38).

Does *Station Eleven's* apocalypse come with revelation? This question is key for any consideration of *Station Eleven*, a novel that comes – through its use of Shakespeare and Miranda's reflections – tantalizingly close to recognizing the apocalyptic nature of 21st-century Western culture before minimizing it in comparison to the apocalypse brought by the Georgia Flu. This can be productively explored by examining more

closely the scene we began this essay with – Miranda on the Malaysian beach on the evening she dies – and its wider context. Miranda is in Malaysia in her capacity as a shipping executive, ‘sent . . . to observe’ (2014: 28) what Mandel calls ‘this remnant fleet’ (2014: 28) of ‘ships ordered in a moment when it seemed the demand would only ever grow, built over the following three years while the economy imploded’ (2014: 217). It is Miranda’s strand of the novel, and this trip to Malaysia in particular, that pins the year of *Station Eleven’s* Georgia Flu as 2009, the year of Bratton’s list of ‘posts’. ‘That was the year when 12 percent of the world’s shipping fleet lay at anchor off the coast of Malaysia’, Mandel writes, ‘container ships laid dormant by an economic collapse’ (2014: 28). We know this is 2009 because that was the year 12 per cent of the world’s shipping fleet really did lay at anchor off the coast of Malaysia, as Mandel tells us in her acknowledgements: ‘I owe a debt of inspiration to Simon Parry’, she writes, ‘whose September 28, 2009 *Daily Mail* article “Revealed: The Ghost Fleet of the Recession Anchored Just East of Singapore” inspired the chapters of the book set in Malaysia’ (2014: 335). The ships, like the cars, gas stations, and McDonald’s restaurants of *Station Eleven’s* post-Flu landscapes, are ghostly remnants of the apocalypse – one in full swing before the Flu. In their obsolescence, they are exemplars of the kinds of junk Williams finds populating our capitalist apocalypse: ‘discarded objects are spatially displaced to South Asia . . . where we find . . . the silent hulls of oil tankers [to be] . . . scrapped, scrubbed, and broken down’ (Williams, 2011: 34).

In *Station Eleven*, these ships’ eerie presence unsettles both the locals and Miranda:

the local fisherman were afraid of the ships. The fisherman suspected a hint of the supernatural in these vessels, unmoving hulks on the horizon by day, lit up after dark . . . was it so unreasonable to wonder if these lights might not be quite of this earth? . . . it . . . seemed to her as she stood on the beach that evening that there was something otherworldly in the sight. (2014: 218)

If Mandel uses Shakespeare to establish capitalism’s long collapse, here she seems to be setting readers up for an examination of the ways we may be said to be already



inhabiting an apocalyptic landscape, or living in a kind of post-apocalypse. But this sense is ultimately undercut by Miranda's reflections on the word 'collapse', which distance the collapse of 2007–8 from the flu pandemic. It is worth returning to those reflections: 'Later that evening she would find herself troubled and at moments even a little amused by the memory of how casually everyone had once thrown the word *collapse* around, before anyone understood what the word truly meant, but in any event, there had been an economic collapse, or so everyone called it at the time' (Mandel, 2014: 217). The comparison between the two collapses — and the minimization of the economic collapse — is explicit here. After the economic crises of 2007–8, so Miranda's thoughts run, the word 'collapse' was alighted upon — even rushed towards — as the best description of the shocks that pulsed through Western economies. She implies that it was done casually and with little thought. Describing the economic situation of 2007–8 as such, Miranda suggests, is evidence of people failing to understand 'what the word truly meant', which, we are meant to comprehend, is the kind of collapse precipitated by something like the Georgia Flu.

Given that Miranda understands the word in such terms, it's unsurprising that she is 'troubled' by its prevalence, but it is worth interrogating her anxiety a bit more because it is not just its inaccurate use that Miranda is troubled by, but also what the rush to use an inaccurate word says about the culture that uses it. Miranda seems, here, to be edging towards a reflection similar to critics like Berger and Buell, who speak of a culture of apocalypticism. But that sense is diminished if we look at her comic, which shares its title with Mandel's novel. In imagining and depicting a fallen world, the comic is a cultural product that testifies to the pleasure found in imagining destruction. The comic takes place on a space station 'the size of Earth's moon and . . . designed to resemble a planet' (Mandel, 2014: 83), on which humans from earth live, having escaped the alien invasion of their planet. On this space station, a 'schism' has occurred between people who 'long only to go home, to return to Earth and beg for amnesty, to take their chances under alien rule' (Mandel, 2014: 83), and those who want to stay. These latter, led by Dr. Eleven, live on the 'only land remaining' in this world, 'a series of islands that once were mountaintops', after the aliens damaged its 'ocean levels' (Mandel, 2014: 83). The former 'live in the Undersea, an

interlinked network of vast fallout shelters under Station Eleven's oceans' (Mandel, 2014: 83). The comic, then, depicts two destroyed worlds – the Earth itself and the space station proxy for it, the former destroyed by violence, the latter by floods. Dr. Eleven, living in a post-collapse world, looks back in bittersweet fashion on what has been lost: 'I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth' (Mandel, 2014: 42). This comic is Miranda's life's work. 'It makes me happy', she says. 'It's peaceful, spending hours working on it' (Mandel, 2014: 95). Never finished, she works on it continuously, from her days as an art student right up to her death. Throughout the novel, then, and throughout her life, Miranda is imagining destruction.

If we consider Miranda's pleasure in creating a comic charting the destruction of worlds alongside her implication that society rushes to designate collapses, this seems to amount to a recognition that Western culture in some ways anticipates and welcomes collapse. Indeed, *Station Eleven* seems to acknowledge this in its incorporation of other cultural products that imagine destruction. We find it, for instance, in the theology of one of 'a dozen prophets' that roam what was the northern United States (Mandel, 2014: 272). The prophet understands the pandemic as 'an avenging angel' which allowed 'the great cleansing' and the survival of only a 'divine[ly]' chosen people, he and his disciples, who 'were saved ... because ... [w]e are the pure' (Mandel, 2014: 60). Later in the novel, we learn that the prophet was once Tyler, the son of a film star called Arthur Leander. Tyler was a child when the pandemic hit. That day, he was with his mother on the plane that ended up at the same airport as Clark, and there he read the Bible to Flu-infected bodies quarantined in a plane: 'One day her plagues will overtake her. Death, mourning, and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her' (Mandel, 2014: 259). When asked why he is reading to the dead, Tyler says 'I just want them to know that it happened for a reason' (Mandel, 2014: 259). His theology emerges out of this trauma, and out of this need for explanation.

While the theology of the 'doomsday cult' (Mandel, 2014: 62) Tyler forms draws on tropes that are clichéd and mark a 'weakness' of the novel (Mond, 2014: n. pag.), it nonetheless offers a narrative whereby collapse is welcomed as the arrival of the

Rapture, Tyler's prophecies reading back into history to construct the pandemic as an inevitability. Inasmuch as Tyler's theology works to explain the pandemic (as well as historicize it), it works in similar ways to the Hollywood movies the novel's characters reach for as survival guides and explanations when the Flu hits. Holed up in his brother's apartment in Toronto weeks after the pandemic arrives, Jeevan finds that he recognizes the scenario he finds himself in: 'It's like those disaster movies' he says (Mandel, 2014: 193). '[T]hat night there was a certain awful giddiness. All evidence suggested that the center wasn't holding – Was this actually happening? they asked one another . . . "You know", Jeevan had said, "in the movie version of this there's the apocalypse, and then afterward—"' (Mandel, 2014: 193). Those trapped at the airport, too, recognize their new world from Hollywood: 'everyone was hungry and trying not to think about all the apocalypse movies they'd seen' (Mandel, 2014: 244); 'They'd all seen the post-apocalyptic movies with the dangerous stragglers fighting it out for the last few scraps' (Mandel, 2014: 256).

Miranda's comic, Tyler's theology, and these Hollywood films are also examples of cultural products acting as spaces for the 'articulation of repressed cultural fears and social anxieties' (Yang and Healey, 2016: 13), and it is in this that we begin to encounter some of the consequences of the problems posed by Miranda's reflections on the word 'collapse'. *Station Eleven* is a self-reflexive novel inasmuch as it recognizes the requirements of the speculative and apocalyptic genres and styles it is taking up; Miranda's comic, in sharing its title with Mandel's novel, is the most obvious example here, and Mandel has acknowledged the influence of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* on her thinking about the possibilities of speculative fiction.<sup>2</sup> What it is a bit less clear on, though, is the role its imagination of the destruction caused by the Georgia Flu plays in its simultaneous addressing and disguising, as Hogle puts it, of contemporary economic collapse. Miranda is a problematic character because of her minimization of the economic collapses of 2007–8. Dismissing the word 'collapse'

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Colin Griffith, Mandel said that she 'loved *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, but it was a pretty heavy-handed warning about the perils of nuclear power and the follies of man' (Griffith, 2015: n. pag.).

as a potentially accurate description of those events, Miranda ignores the way the economic system that (at the very least) significantly faltered in 2007–8 is one that comes with notions of collapse inbuilt and as such is one that initiates its own kind of apocalypse.<sup>3</sup>

Miranda, though, is not the only character who offers reflections occasioned by the post-Flu collapse that exhibit a blind-spot about the realities of the pre-Flu world. On 'Day One Hundred' (Mandel, 2014: 254) of the post-pandemic world, Clark sits in the airport he's been stranded at since the Flu hit and remembers how he 'had always been fond of beautiful objects, and in his present state of mind, all objects were beautiful' (Mandel, 2014: 255). What follows is a consideration of a snow globe, a tourist souvenir once sold in the airport's gift shop, which addresses but rather miscasts the globalized trade networks that ended with the Georgia Flu but which, in the eyes of Williams and Buell, contributed to a state of apocalypse before that:

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<sup>3</sup> While James Fulcher offers the pithy observation that '[c]rises of capitalism are not . . . exceptional events but rather a normal part of the functioning of a capitalist society' (2015: 102), Frederick Buell gives a lengthy description of the way this inbuilt crisis is part of a larger picture of what Evan Calder Williams would call capitalist apocalypse: 'Risk society, as theorized by [Ulrich] Beck, sought to show how risks that modernization had produced and that modernism helped conceal had grown so large they could no longer be externalized or contained. In the wake of 1970s environmental politics, which used a combination of nature idealism and the threat of apocalyptic destruction to help bootstrap the modern environmental movement into existence and pass signature legislation, these risks seemed still possible to contain. But then, in the 1980s, new environmental regulation was stopped by an anti-environmental counter-movement; a new commitment to economic growth, globalization, and new industries coincided with a new, supposedly inexhaustible abundance of cheap oil; and, despite 1970s environmental regulation, risks again proliferated, and did so this time not just despite but also *within* the protocols of the system set up to contain them. The result was a unique synergy between risk aversion and risk production. Risk-averse regulation heightened public awareness of problems at every turn, with every new contention over an environmental impact statement; risk-containment seemed unable to solve the problems, even as the system as a whole stood as a testament to the fact that risks were being regulated . . . One consequence of this double-edged situation was that the environmental movement, though embattled, broadened its reach, embracing issues like human health and environmental inequities and injustice as well as 'ecology' issues . . . In the process, Beck's risks — ones invisible to the eye, and only seen through a glass darkly by experts — have been woven contentiously into public mediascapes and private imaginations everywhere. As a result, society and individuals seemed to dwell in normalities ambiguously warranted by risk-control, even as these normalities seemed contained within a deeper, phantasmagoric context of unseen, but probably actual, runaway risk' (Buell, 2013: 15–6).

Consider the mind that invented those miniature storms, the factory worker who turned sheets of plastic into white flakes of snow, the hand that drew the plan for the miniature Severn City with its church steeple and city hall, the assembly line worker who watched the globe glide past on a conveyer belt somewhere in China. Consider the white gloves on the hands of the woman who inserted the snow globes into boxes, to be packed into larger boxes, crates, shipping containers. Consider the card games played below decks in the evenings on the ship carrying the containers across the ocean, a hand stubbing out a cigarette in an overflowing ashtray, a haze of blue smoke in dim light, the cadences of a half dozen languages united by common profanities, the sailors' dreams of land and women, these men for whom the ocean was a grey-line horizon to be traversed in ships the size of overturned skyscrapers. Consider the signature on the shipping manifest when the ship reached port, a signature unlike any other on earth, the coffee cup in the hand of the driver delivering boxes to the distribution center, the secret hopes of the UPS man carrying boxes of snow globes from there to the Severn City Airport. Clark shook the globe and held it up to the light. When he looked through it, the planes were warped and caught in whirling snow. (Mandel, 2014: 255)

This passage is clearly concerned with global capitalism. But in what way? Clark rather blithely aestheticizes – to the point of reverie – the forms of labor upon which global capitalism relies, and fetishizes the 'beautiful objects' at the expense of the workers who make them, workers who are dehumanized into assemblies of working parts (note the emphasis on their hands). In doing so, he risks engaging in a similar operation as Miranda. If Miranda dismisses the economic collapse because a bigger one comes along, Clark's 'present state of mind' – '[w]aiting for the scouting party to return with supplies, or return carrying the Flu, or return trailing unhinged survivors who wanted to kill everyone, or not return at all' (Mandel, 2014: 254) – contributes to and excuses a mindset in which problematic, even apocalyptic, systemic structures are minimized, rather than critiqued. Because of the Flu, he is absolved from all

awareness about the structures of the world prior to it, or how any prospective new world built out of the ruins of the old might replicate its failings.

The post-apocalypticism most common in *Station Eleven* works to redeem the pre-apocalyptic world. If, as I have suggested, this process draws on a specific operation of the gothic mode as described by Hogle, then it is also illuminated by Williams' discussion of 'undifferentiated things'; those things that 'the global economic order and its social relations' requires 'the production and exploitation of and which 'cannot be included in the realm of the openly visible without rupturing the very oppositions that make the whole enterprise move forward'. In other words, Clark's – and Miranda's – minimization of capitalist apocalypse is a way of avoiding having to come to terms with it and building a new – better – world. This redemptive position – what Williams calls 'a post-world nostalgic and desperate to shore up the remnants of its outmoded status quo' (2011: 4) – is consolidated in the way the novel repeatedly seeks to recuperate the pre-Flu world and offer continuity with it. This is seen, for example, in its collection of archivists: Clark himself, with his Museum of Civilization; François Diallo, 'librarian of the town of New Petoskey' who hopes to 'create . . . an oral history of the collapse' (Mandel, 2014: 108) and who is incredulous that Kirsten would think he didn't have 'the second-to-last edition of the *New York Times* . . . Of course I do' (Mandel, 2014: 184); and even The Travelling Symphony, whose canonical repertoire might retain 'what was best about the world' but which, for critics like Kirstyn McDermott, is also evidence of a world without creation – certainly without the creation of the new that Williams sees as central to salvagepunk. Indeed, speaking on the podcast *The Writer and The Critic*, McDermott frames her problems with the novel in terms that chime with Williams: The Symphony, she says, 'don't make up their own [plays. One character] writes one line and then gives up. This is one of the problems I had with the book . . . This is a book about how important the arts are . . . and yet who is actually creating anything? . . . Everyone's running around doing 600-year-old plays' (McDermott & Mond, 2014: n. pag.). Clark's Museum of Civilization, she argues, is a 'museum of old things,' and she asks 'where is the new stuff that's being created? Everything's about salvaging from the old . . . Survival is insufficient, the past is also insufficient' (McDermott &

Mond, 2014: n. pag.). *Station Eleven's* archivists work in line with a post-apocalypticism at odds with 'salvagepunk post-apocalypticism', which 'is concerned with being more apocalyptic than the apocalypse: clearing away the clutter to reveal the true hidden-in-plain-view, namely, the deep, permanent antagonisms on which capitalism runs and the untenability of that system's capacity to still run' (Williams, 2011: 56). As Williams puts it, the key question for 'salvage-thought' is 'how do we repeat differently, then?' (2011: 69). A fitting image for the way *Station Eleven's* characters do not repeat differently comes in Mandel's description of 'an inventor [who] had rigged an electrical system in an attic . . . a stationary bicycle that when pedaled vigorously could power a laptop' (Mandel, 2014: 38). This is less salvagepunk and more steampunk, a 'tendency/genre' (Williams, 2011: 18) that Williams calls 'a romanticized do-over, a setting of the clock back to a time of craftsmanship and real (fetishized) objects' (2011: 19) like Clark's snow globes. It 'remember[s] the era that never was, back when life was simpler and labor was meaningful' (Williams, 2011: 19). What, though, does *Station Eleven's* inventor hope to achieve by riding his stationary bike? '[H]e was looking for the Internet', Mandel tells us (2014: 38), before continuing: 'A few of the younger Symphony members had felt a little thrill when he'd said this, remembered the stories they'd been told about Wi-Fi and the impossible-to-imagine Cloud, wondered if the Internet might still be out there somehow, invisible pinpricks of light suspended in the air around them' (Mandel, 2014: 38). And what question does this possibility lead to? Rather than repeating differently, it is: 'Was it the way you remembered?' (Mandel, 2014: 38).

*Station Eleven* shows an end without revelation, one that ignores what the collapse that occasions Miranda's reflections suggests, which is – as Buell, Williams, Hurley, and Bratton suggest in various ways – that we are already living in apocalyptic times due to the contemporary forms of the capitalist 'world-system' which began with the Anthropocene, which Mandel acknowledges through her use of Shakespeare. Newspaper and journal reviews of *Station Eleven* claimed that the novel offers 'hope' (Barnett, 2014 and 2016: n. pag.; Nunez, 2014: n. pag., Mond, 2014: n. pag.), is 'hopeful' (Valby, 2014: n. pag.), 'consoling' (Tripney, 2015: n. pag.), 'optimistic' (Crum, 2014: n. pag.), 'less grim', with 'more warmth' than other apocalypses

(Maslin, 2014: n. pag.) and 'holds our current world in a golden light' (Cameron, 2014: n. pag.). I think it is sensible to scrutinize the ways hope could be offered in such circumstances, and what kinds of blind spots such hope might have. If *Station Eleven* does offer the possibility of redemption, as these reviews suggest, it does so by minimizing the capitalist apocalypse its characters were already living through, the revelation of which would help them repeat differently.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** West, M 2018 Apocalypse Without Revelation?: Shakespeare, Salvagepunk and Station Eleven. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 7, pp.1–26, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.235>

**Published:** 30 January 2018

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