



“Survival Is Insufficient”: The Politics of Communitas and Domination in Emily St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the politics of community in Emily St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven (2014), arguing that catastrophe functions in the novel not as a reduction of human life to bare biological survival but as a generative political threshold at which competing forms of social organization become possible. Drawing on Rebecca Solnit’s account of disaster-borne altruism, Victor Turner’s concept of communitas, and Murray Bookchin’s genealogy of hierarchy, the study undertakes a close, interpretive reading of three post-collapse communities: the itinerant Traveling Symphony, the settlement that forms around the Severn City Airport’s Museum of Civilization, and the coercive theocracy instituted by the self-proclaimed Prophet at St. Deborah by the Water. The analysis shows that Mandel locates the novel’s political stakes not in catastrophe itself but in the divergent ideological responses catastrophe occasions, so that solidarity and domination emerge as equally available, historically contingent outcomes rather than natural inevitabilities. The findings indicate that the Symphony’s deliberative fellowship and the airport’s spontaneously curated museum instantiate a genuine communitas grounded in earned and revocable authority, while the Prophet’s theocracy demonstrates how providential narrative forecloses negotiation and reinstates hierarchical domination. The novel’s motto, “survival is insufficient,” thereby names the surplus of meaning, memory, and consensual order that distinguishes community from mere aggregation.



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Introduction

Post-apocalyptic fiction has, over the past two decades, functioned as a privileged genre for interrogating political possibility, precisely because the imagined destruction of existing social, economic, and infrastructural arrangements offers novelists an unusually unencumbered ground on which to speculate about the forms human association might otherwise assume. Diletta De Cristofaro (2018) situates the genre within a broader critique of the utopian teleology

underwriting the Western apocalyptic tradition, in which the end of history culminates in either total annihilation or total renewal; she argues that the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel—Mandel’s (2014) *Station Eleven* prominent among such texts—tends instead toward a critical temporality that resists such totalizing closure, declining to resolve the post-collapse world into either utopia or dystopia. It is within this broader conversation, increasingly attentive to the ways catastrophe reopens questions of political organization that pre-collapse modernity had rendered settled, that the present study situates its narrower inquiry into Mandel’s novel.

Station Eleven follows the aftermath of the Georgia Flu, a pandemic that collapses electric light, air travel, and centralized governance within a matter of weeks (Mandel, 2014, ch. 11). Yet what the novel discloses, once the initial catastrophe recedes into the deeper past of Year Fifteen and Year Twenty, is no uniform desolation but a proliferation of divergent settlements. Kirsten herself catalogues this plurality for the librarian François Diallo, observing that surviving towns variously retain elected mayors, submit to elected committees, or fall under the sway of a cult, and that theocratic settlements prove the most perilous of the three (Mandel, 2014, ch. 18). This taxonomy establishes, well before the reader encounters either the Traveling Symphony’s internal governance or the Prophet’s theocracy in detail, that the post-collapse world of Mandel’s imagining remains irreducibly political: governance must be instituted anew, and the manner of its institution varies according to the ideological commitments of each community. The present study takes this observation as its point of departure, asking not whether catastrophe destroys political life but which political forms catastrophe makes newly available, and under what conditions those forms tend toward solidarity rather than domination.

The remainder of the study proceeds in four stages: a review of existing scholarship on *Station Eleven* and the theoretical gap it leaves open, a statement of the study’s methodology and analytic framework, a close comparative analysis of the novel’s three principal communities, and a concluding discussion of the study’s findings and their implications.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways does *Station Eleven* figure catastrophe as a generative political threshold that precipitates alternative, consensual forms of communal organization—exemplified in the itinerant Traveling Symphony and the settlement that coalesces around the Severn City Airport’s Museum of Civilization—rather than reducing the post-collapse subject to a condition of mere biological survival?

RQ2: In what manner does the novel differentiate such horizontal, consent-based formations from the verticalized and coercive theocracy instituted at St. Deborah by the Water under the Prophet, and what does this differentiation disclose about the conditions under which catastrophe engenders domination rather than solidarity?

Research Objectives

O1: To examine, through sustained textual analysis of the Traveling Symphony and the Severn City Airport settlement, how Mandel’s novel figures catastrophe as productive of new communal, deliberative, and cultural formations that exceed the individualist logic of survival.

O2: To interrogate, via the contrastive case of the Prophet’s theocratic settlement, the ideological and institutional conditions under which post-catastrophic communities relapse into hierarchical

domination, and thereby to theorize the political stakes of the novel's governing motto, "survival is insufficient."

Literature Review

Scholarship devoted specifically to *Station Eleven* has, since the novel's 2014 publication, tended to cluster around three principal concerns: the status of art and cultural memory amid catastrophic loss, the novel's revision of apocalyptic temporality, and its intertextual engagement with Shakespeare. Carmen M. Méndez-García (2017) examines the postapocalyptic curating enacted by Clark Thompson's Museum of Civilization, arguing that the novel positions the preservation of ordinary, functionally obsolete objects as a mode of cultural continuity that exceeds mere nostalgia. Matthew Leggatt (2018), in a complementary vein, contends that the novel privileges imagination over remembrance, locating hope not in a longing for the restoration of the lost pre-collapse world but in the speculative possibility of "another world just out of sight," a phrase he draws from the novel's closing pages. Philip Smith (2016) reads the novel's sustained engagement with Shakespearean drama as an allegory of civilizational renewal, the Traveling Symphony's performances figuring the transmission of cultural inheritance across catastrophic rupture, while Maximilian Feldner (2018) situates the novel's postapocalyptic imagination within a longer tradition of plague narrative, arguing that Mandel recontextualizes Shakespearean apprehensions of religious, civil, and biological catastrophe for a contemporary readership. De Cristofaro's (2018) own reading of the novel, beyond her broader generic argument, attends closely to the Prophet's cult as a site at which *Station Eleven* interrogates the persistence of apocalyptic metanarrative even within a supposedly post-apocalyptic world.

What emerges from this body of scholarship, considerable and varied as it is, remains a criticism preoccupied predominantly with questions of memory, aesthetics, and temporality. Although this work occasionally gestures toward the novel's represented communities, it has yet to undertake a sustained, comparative analysis of the specifically political architecture by which those communities are instituted, legitimated, and, in certain instances, corrupted. Few of the studies surveyed above examine the institutional mechanisms—the modes of deliberation, consent, and coercion—through which the Traveling Symphony, the Severn City Airport settlement, and the theocracy of St. Deborah by the Water each constitute themselves as distinct political formations, nor do they examine systematically the conditions under which catastrophe, in Mandel's imaginative logic, gives rise to solidarity in one instance and domination in another. It is this lacuna, situated at the juncture of postapocalyptic literary criticism and political theory, that the present study undertakes to address.

To address this gap, the study draws on three complementary bodies of political and anthropological theory, detailed in the following section, which together furnish a vocabulary for distinguishing consensual from coercive community formation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis, the method most appropriate to a single-text literary-political inquiry of this kind. Rather than testing a hypothesis against a representative sample, the study undertakes a purposive, theory-informed reading of *Station Eleven*, treating the novel as a case through which to examine how catastrophe fiction imagines the institution of political authority. The analysis proceeds primarily

through paraphrased engagement with the primary text, supplemented by direct quotation where the novel's own language is analytically indispensable, and cross-references this engagement against secondary scholarship to situate the study's contribution within existing criticism.

The study's analytic vocabulary is drawn from three complementary theoretical sources. Rebecca Solnit's (2009) *A Paradise Built in Hell* provides an empirically grounded account of disaster-borne altruism, arguing that catastrophe tends to catalyze mutual aid and improvisation among ordinary survivors rather than the Hobbesian collapse into self-interest that popular and cinematic convention presumes; Solnit's account extends an older argument, associated with Peter Kropotkin's (1902) *Mutual Aid*, that cooperation rather than competition constitutes a primary evolutionary and social strategy. Victor Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*, the mode of unmediated, egalitarian fellowship that arises within the liminal, "betwixt and between" phase of ritual transition, supplies a vocabulary for describing the horizontal solidarity of communities such as the Traveling Symphony. Murray Bookchin's (1982) genealogy of hierarchy, finally, furnishes the study's central analytic distinction between social influence—authority that remains earned, deliberative, and revocable—and social coercion, the accumulation and institutionalization of power that admits of no such accountability. Taken together, these three frameworks generate a set of interpretive categories—deliberation, voluntary contribution, and revocable authority, on the one hand; unaccountable interpretation, ritualized coercion, and non-negotiable command, on the other—against which the novel's communities are read.

The study's textual corpus consists of Mandel's (2014) *Station Eleven* in its entirety, with analytic attention concentrated on the three communities that furnish the novel's most sustained instances of post-collapse political organization: the itinerant Traveling Symphony, the sedentary settlement that coalesces around the Severn City Airport's Museum of Civilization, and the theocratic settlement at St. Deborah by the Water. These three communities were purposively selected because each receives extended narrative development and because, read together, they allow the study to examine both the horizontal and the vertical poles of the novel's political imagination. Passages depicting scenes of deliberation, contribution, command, and coercion within each community were identified and analyzed against the theoretical categories outlined above, with secondary scholarship consulted throughout to confirm that the political dimension of these scenes has not already been addressed by existing criticism.

As a qualitative, single-text case study, the analysis does not aim at statistical or genre-wide generalization; its claims pertain to Mandel's novel specifically, though they may suggest lines of comparison with other works in the post-apocalyptic genre. The interpretive method is also necessarily inflected by the analyst's own theoretical commitments, and the study restricts itself to English-language primary and secondary sources.

Analysis and Discussion

Catastrophe as Generative Threshold: *Communitas* in the Traveling Symphony and the Severn City Airport Settlement

Rebecca Solnit (2009), in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, contends that disaster, contrary to the popular and cinematic conviction that catastrophe unleashes a Hobbesian war of all against all, tends instead to catalyze an efflorescence of altruism, improvisation, and mutual aid among ordinary

survivors, such that a great majority tends toward altruism and mutual aid while only a comparatively small minority succumbs to the callous self-interest she terms elite panic. Solnit's thesis furnishes a productive point of entry into Mandel's novel, for *Station Eleven* stages, with unusual deliberateness, precisely this bifurcation between communities constituted through consent and communities seized through coercion, thereby refusing the genre convention whereby catastrophe is presumed to issue automatically in either utter anarchy or totalitarian consolidation.

The Traveling Symphony offers the novel's most sustained instance of such consensual institution. Its structure of authority, vested in the figure of the conductor, operates not through unilateral command but through deliberation among the ensemble's senior members: when the Symphony must determine an unfamiliar route home, the conductor solicits the assembled company's knowledge of the surrounding territory, and the tuba player, dissenting from a proposed course through an unfamiliar forest, declares plainly, "I vote against it" (Mandel, 2014, ch. 12). The moment is a minor one within the narrative's larger architecture, yet it discloses a mode of authority answerable to collective judgment rather than insulated from it—an instance of what Bookchin (1982) distinguishes as social influence, a form of authority that remains earned and, crucially, revocable at the community's discretion, as opposed to social coercion, the accumulation and monopolization of power that admits of no such accountability (p. 125). The conductor's eventual decision to press onward toward Severn City, reached only after several members have offered their fragmentary knowledge of the terrain, exemplifies this earned rather than imposed authority, her judgment remaining always answerable to the very body she leads (Mandel, 2014, ch. 12).

Victor Turner's (1969) theorization of *communitas*—the mode of unmediated, egalitarian fellowship that arises characteristically within the liminal, "betwixt and between" phase of ritual transition—further illuminates the particular character of the Symphony's solidarity. The Symphony's condition is one of permanent liminality: its members inhabit no fixed territory, pass continually between the ruined and the reconstituted, and derive their coherence not from a shared claim to land or blood but from a shared, freely reaffirmed commitment to the performance of Shakespeare and to the motto emblazoned on the lead caravan, "because survival is insufficient" (Mandel, 2014, ch. 11). This motto, which the company borrows, as Dieter ruefully observes, from an episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*, functions nonetheless as a genuine political statement, an explicit rejection of the reduction of communal life to bare continuance in favor of an ongoing, collectively sustained project of meaning (Mandel, 2014, ch. 19). Even the Symphony's own members occasionally doubt the wisdom of this commitment—the narrator concedes that their itinerant vocation seems, at certain moments, "a difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it"—yet the persistence of the commitment across two decades of hardship testifies to its status as a freely reiterated, rather than merely inherited, communal value (Mandel, 2014, ch. 19).

The settlement that coalesces around the Severn City Airport furnishes a second, complementary instance of catastrophe's generative political capacity, one distinguished from the Symphony's itinerant *communitas* by its eventual sedentarization yet united with it by a common ethic of deliberation and voluntary contribution. Clark Thompson's proposal that the stranded passengers dispatch a scouting party is met not with unilateral assent but with sustained debate over its wisdom, the assembled survivors weighing the risks of departure against their present, precarious

sufficiency in venison and water (Mandel, 2014, ch. 43). The Museum of Civilization, which Clark inaugurates in the airport's Skymiles Lounge by laying a spent iPhone and a dead man's American Express card beneath a glass display case, begins as an act of private, grief-inflected memorialization yet is transfigured, without any directive from Clark or any other figure of authority, into a genuinely collective undertaking, as unnamed others contribute a second telephone, a pair of stiletto heels, and a snow globe (Mandel, 2014, ch. 43). This spontaneous, unsolicited participation enacts precisely the disaster-borne altruism that Solnit (2009) identifies as characteristic of catastrophe's aftermath, an altruism that requires no coercive enforcement because it answers to a need the community discovers itself to share: the need to preserve some tangible relation to a vanished world. The museum's democratizing effect further merits notice: the Amex card and the driver's license of the dead, artifacts that once indexed sharply differentiated positions within a hierarchically stratified economy, are here leveled into equal relics beneath the same pane of glass, their prior significations of wealth and status dissolved into a common, communally curated memory (Mandel, 2014, ch. 43).

Considered together, the Traveling Symphony and the Severn City Airport settlement furnish a compelling answer to the study's first research question. Catastrophe, in Mandel's novel, functions not as the occasion for the wholesale collapse of the political into the merely biological but as a threshold at which new forms of legitimacy must be, and are, negotiated horizontally, through vote, debate, and voluntary contribution rather than through inherited or imposed command. The insufficiency named in the Symphony's motto identifies exactly this surplus—the excess of meaning, memory, and consensual order that distinguishes a genuine political community from a mere aggregate of survivors—and it is this surplus that both the Symphony and the airport settlement labor, imperfectly yet persistently, to sustain.

Domination Reconstituted: The Prophet's Theocracy at St. Deborah by the Water

Murray Bookchin (1982) insists, in his genealogy of social hierarchy, that domination constitutes no natural or evolutionary residue but rather a historically specific institution, one that crystallizes only when "privileges and powers . . . become generalized into institutions" (p. 12). Mandel's novel dramatizes this thesis with unusual precision, for the theocratic order that consolidates itself at St. Deborah by the Water under the Prophet emerges not from any inherent or inevitable tendency of catastrophe as such but from a specific, traceable ideological genealogy—one that originates, moreover, within the very airport community this study has, in the preceding section, characterized as an instance of consensual *communitas*.

The Prophet, subsequently revealed to be Tyler, the young son of Clark's former airport companion Elizabeth Colton, inherits his providential conviction directly from his mother, who insists throughout the airport's early years that "everything happens for a reason," a conviction Tyler later echoes before departing with Elizabeth to found what becomes the settlement at St. Deborah by the Water (Mandel, 2014, ch. 43). This genealogy is instructive, for it demonstrates that the seed of verticalized authority may germinate even within a horizontally constituted *communitas*, contingent not upon catastrophe's bare occurrence but upon the ideological interpretation to which catastrophe is subjected. Where the Symphony and the airport settlement treat the collapse as a shared, revisable loss requiring ongoing collective negotiation, Elizabeth and, still more radically, Tyler treat it instead as a providential sign, a divine culling requiring not negotiation but obedience.

The Prophet's sermon before the Traveling Symphony renders this providential logic with striking explicitness. Addressing the assembled crowd as "my people" and "my angels," he invites his listeners to consider the perfection of the virus, proposing that so lethal an agent could only be divine, and he casts himself and his followers as the elect, declaring, in a phrase of fewer than fifteen words, that "we are the light. We are the pure" (Mandel, 2014, ch. 12). The rhetorical structure of this sermon—its repeated invocation of blessing, chosenness, and impending further cullings—performs precisely the operation Bookchin (1982) identifies as constitutive of hierarchy's institution: it transforms a contingent biological catastrophe into a necessary, divinely authored order, and it installs the Prophet as that order's sole legitimate interpreter, a position that, unlike the conductor's earned and answerable authority, admits of no revocation by the community he governs (Mandel, 2014, ch. 12; Bookchin, 1982, p. 125).

The coercive apparatus by which this authority sustains itself finds no analogue within either the Symphony or the airport settlement. Those who depart St. Deborah by the Water without the Prophet's sanction are pronounced dead to the community, their names inscribed on markers erected in the town's graveyard, an act of ritualized social death the Prophet distinguishes explicitly from the merely physical death he otherwise professes to have transcended (Mandel, 2014, ch. 12). More strikingly still, the Prophet proposes to the conductor that the Symphony leave behind one of its own members, Alexandra, as what he terms a guarantee of future good relations, disclosing that he seeks, in effect, an additional bride (Mandel, 2014, ch. 21). The proposal treats a member of the Symphony's consensual fellowship as negotiable currency within a transaction of political subordination, an act wholly incommensurable with the Symphony's own internal ethic, and the conductor's composed yet unmistakable refusal, together with August's visible alarm upon learning of the proposal, dramatizes the Symphony's collective resistance to the incursion of coercive logic into a community organized on entirely different principles (Mandel, 2014, ch. 21).

This contrast furnishes, in turn, a considered answer to the study's second research question. Domination, within Mandel's political imagination, emerges not as catastrophe's necessary consequence but as one alternative institutional path among several, a path made available precisely when a community's narrative relation to catastrophe forecloses collective negotiation in favor of providential certainty. Where the Symphony and the airport settlement remain communities of ongoing, revisable consent, answerable to vote and voluntary contribution, St. Deborah by the Water constitutes itself as a community of finality, one in which the meaning of the collapse has already been settled by a single, unaccountable interpreter. It is this closure of interpretation, rather than the catastrophe itself, that the novel identifies as the true condition of hierarchical domination's re-emergence.

Results and Conclusion

The foregoing analysis yields two principal findings, each corresponding to one of the study's research questions. With respect to the first, the examination of the Traveling Symphony and the Severn City Airport settlement demonstrates that *Station Eleven* figures catastrophe as a productive rather than a merely destructive force, one that occasions the institution of new communal formations grounded in deliberation, voluntary contribution, and an ethic of collective memory that exceeds the individualist calculus of bare survival. The Symphony's consensual, itinerant fellowship and the airport's spontaneously curated Museum of Civilization together

instantiate what this study, following Turner (1969), terms a genuine *communitas*, a mode of association whose authority remains, in Bookchin's (1982) terms, a matter of earned and revocable influence rather than accumulated coercion.

With respect to the second research question, the contrastive analysis of the Prophet's theocracy at St. Deborah by the Water demonstrates that hierarchical domination, far from constituting catastrophe's inevitable residue, arises instead from a specific and traceable ideological choice: the transformation of a contingent biological event into a providential narrative requiring obedience rather than negotiation. The genealogical continuity between Elizabeth Colton's early providentialism and Tyler's later theocracy further establishes that the seed of verticalized authority may germinate within an otherwise consensual community, such that the line dividing *communitas* from domination is drawn not by catastrophe's occurrence but by a community's subsequent, ongoing interpretation of that occurrence.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the political vision *Station Eleven* ultimately advances locates hope not in any anticipated restoration of pre-collapse infrastructure—the electrical grid toward which the Symphony travels remains, until the novel's close, a rumor rather than a certainty (Mandel, 2014, ch. 37)—but in the ongoing, revisable labor of communities constituted through consent. The novel's governing motto, “survival is insufficient,” thus discloses itself as a properly political proposition: it is the surplus of consensual meaning, rather than the bare fact of continued existence, that distinguishes genuine political community from either the isolated survivor or the subject of theocratic domination, and it is this surplus that Mandel's novel, across the itinerant fellowship of the Symphony and the curated memory of the airport, labors most fully to imagine.

These findings should be read with the limitations of a single-text, qualitative case study in mind. The analysis is confined to three of the novel's several represented communities, and its interpretive conclusions, however well supported by the primary and secondary evidence considered, remain the product of one reading among the many that a text as capacious as *Station Eleven* can sustain. The study's theoretical apparatus, moreover, was selected for its explanatory fit with the novel's own political vocabulary and does not exhaust the range of frameworks—feminist, ecocritical, or postcolonial, among others—through which the novel's communities might otherwise be read.

Future research might extend the comparative framework developed here to other works within the post-apocalyptic genre, testing whether the distinction between earned and coercive authority elaborated by Bookchin (1982) and enriched by Solnit (2009) and Turner (1969) illuminates a broader pattern in contemporary catastrophe fiction, or whether *Station Eleven*'s resolution of the question is generically distinctive. A further avenue lies in bringing this study's political reading into dialogue with the memory- and temporality-focused criticism surveyed above (De Cristofaro, 2018; Feldner, 2018; Leggatt, 2018; Méndez-García, 2017; Smith, 2016): if, as this study has argued, *communitas* and domination alike are constituted through a community's interpretation of catastrophe, then the cultural practices of memory and performance that this earlier scholarship examines may themselves be reconsidered as political acts, instruments by which a community either keeps its authority answerable or surrenders that authority to a single, unaccountable interpreter. In this sense, Mandel's insistence that survival is insufficient names not only the subject of the present study but a standing invitation to further inquiry into the forms of meaning by which fictional, and actual, communities remake themselves after catastrophe.

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