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“I FOUND IT AGAIN. MY HOME.”: THE ROLE OF ART IN THE MEDIATION OF  
TRAUMA AND LOSS IN *STATION ELEVEN*

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Emily Zhong  
May 2023

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Jordan Frith, Committee Chair  
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Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin

## ABSTRACT

This project examines the role of the fictional graphic novel – “Station Eleven” – at the center of HBO’s *Station Eleven* as a form of trauma mediation. The graphic novel serves as a central, physical object in the show through which the characters Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler process trauma, find comfort, and connect with others. I trace the creation process of “Station Eleven,” from Miranda’s original doodles as a child to the surviving physical copies in the hands of Kirsten and Tyler, exploring how each character engages with the artwork. Situating my analysis within a theoretical framework of contemporary trauma theory, expanding the Freudian, Euro-centric, individualized model, I argue art in *Station Eleven* serves as a reparative, spiritual, and collective medium through which the individual characters directly and their communities cope with trauma and grieve loss. Through my analysis of how “Station Eleven” is used by Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler as a mediator for trauma, I argue that, when the global scale of communication becomes inoperable, local collectives, collective memory, and shared storytelling become essential parts of trauma mediation.

## DEDICATION

For Mac, Liv, Luca & the future Undersea children.

If you lose your keys, I will walk you home.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Title Page .....	i
Abstract .....	ii
Dedication .....	iii
Introduction.....	1
“Never try to write an oral history of the world after it ends”: An introduction to the show <i>Station Eleven</i> and the graphic novel “Station Eleven” .....	4
“I remember damage”: Theories of Trauma .....	8
Origins, Contemporary Criticism, and Expansion of Trauma Theory.....	9
“Survival is Insufficient” The Therapeutic Value of Art in <i>Station Eleven</i> To Cope With Traumatic Loss.....	14
Miranda .....	15
Kirsten and Tyler .....	22
Conclusion .....	35
Appendix A.....	38
Bibliography .....	39

## INTRODUCTION

While logistics may seem like an odd place to begin a thesis about trauma and media, taking the ‘right path’ is a crucial through-line in HBO’s miniseries *Station Eleven* (2021). There are many converging paths in the show that lead each character to one another, and back again. For example, the tenth, and final episode of *Station Eleven*, “The Unbroken Circle,” opens with the character Miranda Carroll (Danielle Deadwyler) discussing her logistics job with a young Kirsten Raymonde (Matilda Lawler):

KIRSTEN: What does [logistics] mean?

MIRANDA: It’s the path things take from A to B. It’s always made sense to me.<sup>1</sup>

This short exchange harkens back to a conversation in episode three, “Hurricane,” when Miranda first interviewed for this logistics position. Her boss emphasizes that logistics does not simply mean the path things take, but the “right” path.<sup>2</sup>

*Station Eleven* is a story about paths: finding the ‘right’ path, even when the path is unclear, or seems far away. In the show, when globalized operations become inoperable due to a worldwide pandemic, the scale of communication becomes localized. Because of this disruption of scale, I argue that shared, oral storytelling and collective memory become essential elements

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<sup>1</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 10, “Unbroken Circle,” directed by Jeremy Podeswa, written for television by Patrick Somerville, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired January 13, 2022, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/player/urn:hbo:episode:GYbKraQjTqF-ikAEAAADk>.

<sup>2</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 3, “Hurricane,” directed by Hiro Murai, written for television by Shannon Houston, created for television by Patrick Somerville, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired December 16, 2021, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/player/urn:hbo:episode:GYbKRhQv46IHDwwEAAADu>.

of the newly formed local collectives. Art and storytelling form connections – or, paths – between individuals and localized groups.

The primary path that I will explore in this project is the creation and distribution of Miranda’s graphic novel “Station Eleven,” for which the television show is named.<sup>3</sup> I will also analyze two other main characters of the show – Kirsten Raymonde (Matilda Lawler, Mackenzie Davis) and Tyler Leander (Julian Obradors, Daniel Zovatto) – who find themselves on course with “Station Eleven.”<sup>4</sup> I center Miranda’s graphic novel because it is through the path this book takes – and its message as an artform – that the traumatic experiences of the pre- and post-pandemic life in *Station Eleven* can be grieved and mediated. Through art – specifically, Miranda’s art – *Station Eleven* explores how art not only brings people together, but it examines how, when the global scale of communication becomes inoperable, local collectives, collective memory, and shared, oral storytelling become essential parts of trauma mediation.

*Station Eleven* is, as the author of the novel that is the source material for the show, Emily St. John Mandel, states, “a love letter to the modern world,” an exercise in loving something because of “its absence.”<sup>5</sup> For Mandel, ending the world in order to love it, by way of a pandemic, is “terrible” but “an efficient way to get from Point A to Point B.”<sup>6</sup> There is no “dwell[ing] on horror and mayhem” in Mandel’s 2014 novel *Station Eleven*, nor in HBO’s

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<sup>3</sup> In this project, I differentiate the title of the television show with italics (*Station Eleven*) and the graphic novel with quotation marks (“Station Eleven”). When I mention the source material for the show, Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, I will also use italics, but identify the medium as the novel in the sentence.

<sup>4</sup> Because *Station Eleven* takes place in 2020 and in 2040, two actors play Kirsten Raymonde and Tyler Leander during their respective ages. Matilda Lawler and Julian Obradors perform as young Kirsten and young Tyler, respectively, while Mackenzie Davis and Daniel Zovatto perform as adult Kirsten and Tyler.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Lashbrook, “A Love Letter to the Modern World: On Emily St. John Mandel’s ‘Station Eleven’.” *Flavorwire*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.flavorwire.com/489116/a-love-letter-to-the-modern-world-on-emily-st-john-mandels-station-eleven>.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Rogers, “‘Station Eleven’ Mandel’s love letter to the world.” *The Spokesman-Review*, October 25, 2015, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2015/oct/25/station-eleven-mandels-love-letter-to-the-world/>.

adaptation.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the show calls on us to reside within a consistent, steady, overwhelming sense of hope, an earnest ache for those we have lost, those who have gone missing, and a life that must be created from the genesis of this loss. More specifically, *Station Eleven* is a story about finding, understanding, and coming to terms with the ‘right’ paths in life. Miranda’s passion for logistics and finding the right paths from point A to point B can be understood as a form of mediation through which she comes to terms with losing her family as a child.<sup>8</sup> As a means to cope with the trauma of losing her family as a child, Miranda begins composing her graphic novel “Station Eleven.”<sup>9</sup> She is loyal to ideas and people, not to places, enjoying the movement and freedom that comes with her form of engaging with trauma: escaping into the world of making art. As Miranda states, she is “at [her] best when [she’s] escaping.”<sup>10</sup> It can be argued that Miranda uses logistics as a projection to process her childhood trauma, guarding herself, her artwork – the graphic novel, “Station Eleven.” Miranda has “a job to do,” – she “will know [her] endpoint when [she] reach[es] it” – and only through her work – both her logistics work, and in creating “Station Eleven” – will she not “live the wrong life and then die.”<sup>11</sup>

In this thesis, I will trace the paths Miranda’s graphic novel “Station Eleven” takes as a form of trauma mediation in *Station Eleven*.<sup>12</sup> I will follow Miranda’s creation process, from her

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<sup>7</sup> Adrian Rogers, “‘Station Eleven’ Mandel’s love letter.”

<sup>8</sup> I use the terms ‘mediation’ and ‘remediation’ as defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999).

<sup>9</sup> “Station Eleven” is not a real comic book in our world, only in the show. There is no physical edition that can be viewed in-person. All artwork and quotations mentioned from “Station Eleven” are only what have been created for and shown in HBO’s *Station Eleven*.

<sup>10</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane.”

<sup>11</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane.”

<sup>12</sup> In this project, I use the definition of ‘trauma’ as outlined by the National Institute of Health’s *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*: “‘trauma’ refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions.” Traumatic events can be single incidents, or prolonged, repetitive, or chronic. Additionally, the NIH includes the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative’s working definition of trauma: “‘Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.’”



original, haphazard doodles as a child in the 1980s, to the two physical copies that survive post-apocalypse, in the hands of Tyler and Kirsten. Through its depiction in the show, the graphic novel offers a way for these three characters – Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler – to process their trauma, find hope, and connect with others. Not only does the titular graphic novel tie the many storylines of the show together, like many paths traversing a landscape, but “Station Eleven” serves as a central, physical object in which to mediate – and remediate – Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler’s trauma.

To inform my analysis of “Station Eleven” as a trauma mediator in *Station Eleven*, I will use contemporary approaches to trauma theory that expand the Freudian, Euro-centric, individualized model to include non-Western, collective ideologies. In the sections that follow, I will give a brief introduction to the show *Station Eleven*. I will then situate this thesis in a theoretical framework of contemporary trauma theory, before analyzing *Station Eleven*, and “Station Eleven,” in context with trauma theory. Through my analysis of “Station Eleven,” I argue that art brings people together, and, when the global scale of communication becomes inoperable, community building, collective memory, and shared storytelling and artmaking become essential parts of trauma mediation.

## “NEVER TRY TO WRITE AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WORLD AFTER IT ENDS”: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SHOW *STATION ELEVEN* AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL “STATION ELEVEN”

As showrunner Patrick Somerville has stated in an interview, the HBO adaptation of *Station Eleven* was not a show intended to emphasize the pandemic to incite the story’s

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Trauma can impact individuals differently, and may require varying methods of support and care. “It is not just the event itself that determines whether something is traumatic, but also the individual’s experience of the event.”

events.<sup>13</sup> Following Somerville’s lead, my thesis provides an understanding of how art – “Station Eleven” – is used to mediate the traumatic loss caused by the pandemic for the individuals and the collective. Therefore, before I begin addressing my theoretical framework and analysis of the show, it is important to provide a brief introduction to Station Eleven’s storylines and structure.

The central, devastating event of *Station Eleven* is a global pandemic. As the show begins in December 2020, the pandemic is already spreading quickly across the world. The pandemic kills 99% of the human population, presumably leaving scattered groups of survivors around the world. However, *Station Eleven* focuses on the surviving individuals and groups in the Great Lakes region of the United States, starting in Chicago, Illinois. The show’s present day is set in 2040, 20 years post-pandemic. One of the central links between pre- and post-pandemic life is one woman’s graphic novel “Station Eleven.” Miranda creates “Station Eleven” pre-pandemic, and two of the five physical copies she has printed at a small shop in Chicago survive post-pandemic in the hands of two people – Kirsten and Tyler. “Station Eleven” becomes not only a link between these two characters, but also acts as a mediator for the trauma experienced by Miranda. Of note, is one line from “Station Eleven” that is important to *Station Eleven*’s message about art as a trauma mediator: “Survival is insufficient.” Later in this thesis, I will trace the origins and journey Miranda follows to create “Station Eleven,” how Kirsten and Tyler come into possession of their respective physical copies of the book, and the important role “Station Eleven” plays in navigating post-pandemic life for Kirsten and Tyler. However, it is necessary to provide a brief synopsis of “Station Eleven’s” plot.

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<sup>13</sup> Joanna Robinson and Mallory Rubin, interview with Patrick Somerville, *The Prestige TV Podcast*, podcast audio, February 7, 2023, <https://www.theringer.com/2023/2/7/23590199/the-last-of-us-episode-4-deep-dive-with-patrick-somerville>.

Miranda's "Station Eleven" is a sci-fi adventure that depicts a group of survivors living on an Earth-like, planet-sized space station called Station Eleven after Earth is destroyed. The protagonist, Doctor Eleven, is a lonely spaceman who tries to avoid the rebel forces of the Undersea who live aboard the spaceship. As young Kirsten describes,

'Station Eleven' is the story of a stranger named Doctor Eleven, who we first meet floating unconscious in space, and who then gets stuck aboard a broken space station. Captain Lonagan is in charge, but he has no crew and is locked inside the bridge and just drinks scotch and talks about the past. An explosion destroyed the...gyroscope, and spilled half an ocean into the workstation of the crew. This drowned every grown-up. The survivors are kids called the Undersea. They want to go home and build a future Earth by using time travel. Doctor Eleven talks to both sides and doesn't care and doesn't care what happens or what they do. He scares everyone.<sup>14</sup>

The graphic novel reflects Miranda's own trauma through her imagination, as she lost her family in Hurricane Hugo when she was a child and found solace in drawing and creating her own world. "Station Eleven" inspires hope and guidance to Kirsten and Tyler in the post-pandemic world, by depicting a possible path forward. The graphic novel binds key characters together – like Kirsten and Tyler – and acts as a crucial through-line in its ten episodes.

Like traumatic memory, the structure of *Station Eleven*'s ten episodes relies on 'flashbacks,' and is not experienced chronologically. Instead, *Station Eleven* takes on the

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<sup>14</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 4, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Aren't Dead," directed by Helen Shaver, written for television by Nick Cuse and Patrick Somerville, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired December 23, 2021, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKRowm83MLCwgEAAADF:type:episode>.

traumatic “temporal order.”<sup>15</sup> The progression of *Station Eleven*’s episodes occurs as a fragmented sequence of events. Put another way, the show is not presented through episodic memory, but through fragmentation of memory. This fragmentation of memory can be symptomatic of someone who has experienced trauma, like some of the characters in the show: Miranda pre-pandemic, and Kirsten and Tyler post-pandemic. As Amit Pinchevski states in *Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma*, trauma presents “a different logic of memory storage and retrieval.”<sup>16</sup> As viewers navigate the ten episodes of the show, *Station Eleven* provides a visual experience of traumatic memory – a complex process of recollection, retrieval, and storage. Audiences are often asked to collect and explore many of the characters’ memories of pre-pandemic life and the days following the pandemic outbreak, as they are frequently, non-linearly shown as reactions to events in the past. Symptomatic of traumatic memory, these reactions arrive “compulsively, in the present as involuntary memory.”<sup>17</sup>

Simultaneously, it is through Miranda Carroll’s creation and then distribution of her graphic novel “Station Eleven” that audiences gather brief moments of sequential progression. While *Station Eleven* uses non-linear ‘flashbacks’ for many of its characters, Miranda’s adult experiences are told chronologically. While she dies of the flu and never lives through post-pandemic life, Miranda’s life story – and her creation of “Station Eleven” – is told in the past tense, but viewers follow Miranda’s linear retrieval of memories throughout the ten episodes of *Station Eleven*. Her life, “Station Eleven,” and the choices she makes before, and leading up to the pandemic, are the anchor around which the present-day, post-pandemic characters’ storylines are told. Viewers are able to mark, and then remember, the progression of her creation of

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<sup>15</sup> Amit Pinchevski. *Transmitted Wounds: Media and the Mediation of Trauma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Pinchevski, *Transmitted Wounds*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Pinchevski, *Transmitted Wounds*, 7.

“Station Eleven,” followed by her distributing to Arthur Leander (Gael García Bernal) – her ex-husband – the only two copies to survive post-pandemic. These copies end up in the hands of Kirsten and Tyler. Despite dying of the pandemic flu in Malaysia on assignment for her logistics job, Miranda has personal connections with both Kirsten and Tyler. These connections will be discussed below.

Similar, to anchoring time in relation to Miranda’s making “Station Eleven,” time can be situated with regards to how Kirsten and Tyler came into possession of their respective copies of “Station Eleven,” and how these copies were read by them post-pandemic. Because traumatic memory works “compulsively” viewers are only able to experience Kirsten and Tyler’s obsession with “Station Eleven” as they themselves “involuntarily” retrieve those memories.<sup>18</sup> Typically, something in the present day, in the year 2040, sparks a reaction in them, recalling a memory, or *Station Eleven* mechanically shifts viewers’ attention to the past to relive these memories along with Kirsten and Tyler.

### “I REMEMBER DAMAGE”: THEORIES OF TRAUMA

Here, I will look at the emergence of trauma theory and its expansion to include decolonial and postcolonial theories of trauma. These theories expand on the origins of trauma theory from the 1990s to include collective identification with trauma, rather than only the isolating, individualism inherent to early trauma theory. I return to trauma theory – specifically, a decolonized trauma theory – often to bring *Station Eleven* and “Station Eleven” into conversation with these contemporary theoretical models inclusive of community building and shared storytelling. To discuss trauma – and depictions of trauma in media – means

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<sup>18</sup> Pinchevski, *Transmitted Wounds*, 7.

acknowledging the historical and political implications of the traumatic event, fictional or not. While I do not dive too deeply into the politics of *Station Eleven* because the text provides little to analyze, I will, briefly, draw upon the moments that do politicize the story of the show. These moments largely occur around Tyler. Perhaps, what is more important in analyzing *Station Eleven* is appreciating and recognizing that pain and grief are both individual and collective experiences. While experiencing trauma inherently implies a breakdown of articulating the experience and its repercussions, in this thesis I will show how, in *Station Eleven*, the shared art of storytelling and narrativization of loss and mourning in the graphic novel “Station Eleven” are foundational elements of healing and repair in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

#### ORIGINS, CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM, AND EXPANSION OF TRAUMA THEORY

Trauma theory emerged as a field of study in the late-1980s and early 1990s by various intellectuals, including Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub. Caruth’s groundbreaking work in the 1990s was essential in establishing psychoanalytic trauma theory as a formal field of literary study. In her 1996 work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* she, like others in the field, used interpretations of Freud to define trauma theory in relation to history and the body.<sup>19</sup> Caruth, Herman, Felman, and Laub assign referentiality a critical role in understanding the subject’s relationship with a historical traumatic event. I use the term ‘referentiality’ as defined by Caruth through her consistent references in her work to events first, and bodies second. Caruth, by way of Paul de Man and deconstructionism, argues that the traumatic event is “the locus of referentiality...of the traumatic story” and, therefore, an

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<sup>19</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 31.

“understanding of trauma in terms of its indirect relation to reference...insists on the inescapability of [the referent event’s] belated impact.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Caruth proposes that the traumatic event itself and the subject’s relation to the traumatic event in history are more important to consider than the subjective unconscious sovereignty of the individual survivor.

For early psychoanalytic trauma theorists like Caruth, what Freud identified as a period of latency after a traumatic event, wherein the brain does not have time to fully mediate or recognize the traumatic event as distressing, is a key component to the survivor’s referentiality to the traumatic event. The memory of the event, the trauma, cannot be directly accessed, and the distressing nature of the event is only cognitively considered much later. Caruth, through Freud, emphasizes the “absence” of an event’s traumatic effects, the “unassimilable or unknowable nature of the traumatic event.”<sup>21</sup> Caruth’s trauma theory, then, is “not so much a theory of recovered memory as (...) one of recovered referentiality.”<sup>22</sup> For those who follow Caruth’s trauma theory, a traumatic event can only be revisited through testimony and by reference to other people, objects, and, ultimately, the referent event itself. Narrativizing and storytelling about the traumatic event is impossible, unsayable, because it is ‘unknowable.’ Witnessing and testimony of a traumatic event becomes essential to define the survivor’s story and the recognition of the traumatic event itself.

Caruth, Herman, Felman, and Laub’s work has been foundational to trauma theory, but it has come under criticism for various reasons. One of these critiques is trauma theory’s inattention to political and historical circumstances. In the early 2000s, there was a marked shift

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<sup>20</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experiences*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy Caruth, as quoted in Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics” (*Paragraph*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007: 9–29), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, as quoted in Susannah Radstone, “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics” (*Paragraph*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007: 9–29), 12.

to decolonize trauma theory. Irene Visser, professor and scholar at the University of Groningen draws from Michael Rothberg's 2008 critique of trauma theory:

'turn-of-the-millennium trauma studies has remained stuck within Euro-American conceptual and historical frameworks'; thus, if we wish to find ways forward, we shall have to turn away from the original formulations of trauma theory and develop the tools need 'in the simultaneously intellectual, ethical, and political task of standing against ongoing forms of racial and colonial violence.'<sup>23</sup>

The Freudian trauma theory proposed by Caruth and others was conceived as an individualistic theory that aligned with the emergence of the Western identification of 'self.' However, while the Euro-American 'self' was heightened, the concepts that spoke truth to this individualized 'self' came at the expense of community building and community-driven acknowledgement of a shared experience. What I mean by this is the inherent isolationism of early trauma theory limited the importance of community expression regarding a traumatic event.

As Susannah Radstone argues, Caruth's trauma theory places "the traumatic *event* as its theoretical foundation."<sup>24</sup> For Caruth, what happens externally to the survivor during a traumatic event is more important than what occurs inside the body of the survivor. For Caruth, the traumatic event has not been fully integrated into the conscious mind of the survivor, and, thus, it is not the unconscious mind that is at work, but a fully conscious mind unable to consolidate an "overwhelming experience."<sup>25</sup> The pandemic event in *Station Eleven* is not the locus of the show's storyline, and it is evident that the traumatic events experienced by Miranda, Kirsten, and

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response," (*Studies in the Novel* 40, 2008), quoted in Irene Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects." *Humanities* vol. 4, no. 2 (2015), 251.

<sup>24</sup> Susannah Radstone, "Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics," *Paragraph*, vol. 30, no. 1, (2007: 9-29), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11



Tyler *are* accessible, as seen by the use of flashbacks to reveal the traumatic situations of the past caused by present-day, conscious reactions. These flashbacks are a component of my argument below.

Historically, while a psychoanalytic therapist may assist in the identification of a traumatic past that cannot be accessed – a past that is ‘inaccessible’ and ‘unsayable’ – the responsibility rests on the individual alone to recover and grow an enlightened, recuperated self. Individualism, then, breaks the drive to build community or recognize patterns of shared trauma. What is not widely encouraged in the Euro-centric model is shared, oral storytelling or narrativization of and about the traumatic event. If the Euro-American self is focused on healing an unlocatable traumatic experience rooted in the conscious mind, then one may be less likely to recognize similar experiences with others and find a common mechanism to cope. Similarly, as Rothberg points out, early trauma theorists’ scholarship places great emphasis on Euro-American concepts and histories, while neglecting the “‘legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world’.”<sup>26</sup> The emerging Euro-American self stands distinctly away from the suffering of colonial subjects, and “‘distorts the histories’” by which one examines trauma. To decolonize trauma theory means addressing history and resisting the narratives of Euro-centric aggressors, to take stock in the history, violence, and trauma of European and Western colonialism that has been hidden or distorted by a Euro-centric lens. To do so begins by resisting the individualization of trauma proposed by early trauma theorists, dismissing the event-based model, and focusing on a global, holistic approach to responsibly address the history of loss, grief, and trauma experienced by others.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Rothberg, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response,” (*Studies in the Novel* 40, 2008), quoted in Irene Visser, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects.” *Humanities* vol. 4, no. 2 (2015), 251. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h4020250>.

This thesis diverges from early conceptions of trauma theory – i.e. Caruth – in that I place greater emphasis on theories of trauma centered around collective memory and the role language plays in dealing with the healing and recovery process after a traumatic experience. Shared storytelling and community building are key concepts to my later analysis of Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler’s relationship with “Station Eleven.” In this thesis, I align myself with the work of James Berger, Stef Craps, Irene Visser, and Michael Rothberg. While the event-based model of early trauma theory is by no means the only contentious point of trauma theory, individual and collective healing via artmaking and storytelling is the focus of this thesis. In scholarship by Berger, Craps, Visser, and Rothberg, the relationship between the individual and collective experiences of trauma is important. The interdisciplinary perspectives held by Berger, Craps, Visser, and Rothberg emphasize the importance of acknowledging and recognizing the varied experiences of survivors of trauma. They argue that these experiences are often marginalized or ignored, which can compound the effects of trauma and make it harder for survivors to heal.

While Berger, Craps, Visser, and Rothberg have a unique focus or emphasis within trauma theory, they are all concerned with the ethical and political implications of trauma. They recognize that traumatic events are not only individual experiences but are also shaped by larger social and historical forces, and that addressing trauma requires collective action and political engagement. In this project, I analyze three characters – Miranda Carroll, Kirsten Raymonde, and Tyler Leander – living in the pre and post-pandemic world of *Station Eleven*, and how their individual actions post-trauma affect the collective. These three characters use Miranda’s graphic novel “Station Eleven” in different, individual ways to influence their relationships to others.

“SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT”: THE THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF ART IN  
*STATION ELVEN* TO COPE WITH TRAUMATIC LOSS

“Survival is insufficient” is a phrase used throughout *Station Eleven* to reinforce the importance of art and creativity in life. This phrase is taken from Miranda’s “Station Eleven,” but was originally a line in *Star Trek: Voyager* (1999), and The Traveling Symphony paints “Survival is insufficient” on the side of their caravan.<sup>27</sup> The Traveling Symphony is a group composed of semi-nomadic artists, performers, composers, and writers. They walk a designated circle – called, “The Wheel” – around the Great Lakes Region of the United States once a year, performing adaptations of William Shakespeare’s plays to the static communities that live along The Wheel. For The Traveling Symphony and those who revel in the joy of their performances, art adds something essential to mere survival. As Emily St. John Mandel, author of the source material for *Station Eleven*, states:

I remember being absolutely struck by that line. Survival was never sufficient. Here in the present, we play musical instruments in refugee camps. We put on plays in war zones. Immediately following the Second World War, there was a fashion show in Paris. But there’s something about art, I think, that can remind us of our humanity and it can remind us of civilization. So that line became almost the thesis statement to the entire novel.<sup>28</sup>

This thesis carries into the television adaptation of *Station Eleven* through Miranda’s graphic novel, “Station Eleven.” Post-pandemic, “Station Eleven” becomes a guide for Kirsten and Tyler on how to mediate the traumatic loss they suffered as children. In creating the graphic novel,

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<sup>27</sup> *Star Trek: Voyager*, season 6, episode 2, “Survival Instinct,” directed by Terry Windell, written by Gene Roddenberry, Rick Berman, and Michael Piller, aired September 19, 1999, UPN.

<sup>28</sup> “Survival Is Insufficient: ‘Station Eleven’ Preserves Art After the Apocalypse.” *National Public Radio*, 20 June 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/06/20/415782006/survival-is-insufficient-station-eleven-preserves-art-after-the-apocalypse>.

Miranda herself uses the process of making art as a therapeutic mode of mediating her own childhood and adulthood trauma.

As stated above, *Station Eleven* runs non-linearly, in fragmented memories and trauma-induced ‘flashbacks,’ so it is necessary for me to analyze Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler’s relationship to “Station Eleven” linearly. I begin with Miranda, as she is the creator of “Station Eleven,” before discussing Kirsten, who is the first character we see who receives a finished copy of “Station Eleven,” and whose story we follow closely throughout *Station Eleven*. I will finish by examining Tyler’s relationship to “Station Eleven,” and the similarities and differences between Kirsten and his perception and adaptation of the graphic novel’s message.

## MIRANDA

“Station Eleven” is a byproduct of the trauma Miranda experienced as a child, and, as an adult, the isolation and betrayal she felt caused by her egocentric husband, Arthur. Throughout her life, Miranda gathers images she sees and speech she hears during these traumatic and life-changing events, using these to compose “Station Eleven.” Through the creative process of making “Station Eleven,” she mediates these painful, past experiences, using Doctor Eleven – the main character of “Station Eleven” – as her foil. Two ways viewers come to understand this is through Miranda’s blurring of reality and imagination, and the show’s connection between themes of individual trauma and collective trauma. By using both imagined and real situations and characters, Miranda’s “Station Eleven” acts as a mediator for her individual trauma, and the collective trauma experienced by her – and others – during the pandemic outbreak.

As a child, Miranda sailed around the Caribbean Sea while her father worked as a boat cleaner for tourists.<sup>29</sup> When her family finally settled on an island in the Virgin Islands, Miranda enjoyed the stability. However, it was not long after they had settled into their new life on the island that Hurricane Hugo – a Category 5 hurricane – devastated their home, their island, and their country. Miranda witnessed her entire family die in their home during Hurricane Hugo when a live wire fell into the flooded waters of their home. She was sitting on top of a countertop, coloring, which saved her life. Art saved Miranda’s life, while the neglected colonial infrastructure in which her family worked killed her family.

Miranda’s home was in the Virgin Islands, a territory colonized and owned by the United States. She endured the pain and aftermath of two traumatic events as a child: the oppressive, longstanding effects of living in a colonized territory that receives little disaster relief or resources, and witnessing the death of her family in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. As an adult, Miranda would die from a third apocalyptic event: the pandemic flu in *Station Eleven* that wipes out 99% of Earth’s human population. However, she is not a passive, silent victim of these traumatic experiences. Rather, when Miranda encounters something damaging in her adult life, she takes action. As Judith Butler states in the afterword to David Eng and David Kazanjian’s anthology *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, although “a fractured horizon looms in which to make one’s way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full ‘recovery’ is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency,” Miranda becomes an agent for change and resistance.<sup>30</sup> Miranda’s childhood loss, and isolation as an adult, signals a fractured, hazy, undefinable future, yet she establishes a new type of agency and

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<sup>29</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane,” 00:23:44-00:24:24.

<sup>30</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 467.

a new type of boundary-setting to protect herself: her artmaking. This is best exemplified when she realizes her husband, Arthur, is cheating on her with his co-star, Elizabeth.<sup>31</sup>

During an at-home dinner party with Arthur's friends, including Elizabeth, Miranda, sees Elizabeth and Arthur flirting with each other. Already suspicious of Arthur's infidelity, Miranda is shocked to hear Elizabeth call Arthur a pet name, 'Art.' Later, after dinner, Elizabeth discloses to the table of guests that Arthur has allowed Elizabeth to see Miranda's progress on the artwork for her graphic novel "Station Eleven," and Elizabeth attempts to explain Miranda's art to everyone. Miranda has consistently, and forcefully, stated her boundaries around her art, and that she wants no one to see it. For her, publishing "Station Eleven" isn't her goal. Her art "makes [her] happy. It's peaceful, spending hours working on it. It doesn't really matter if anyone sees..."<sup>32</sup> Hearing that Arthur has not only betrayed their marriage, but also her most sacred form of therapeutic repair – her artwork – Miranda stands up, offers a toast, and boldly proclaims, "I stood looking over the damage, trying to remember the sweetness of life on Earth. I was late. Or you were early. Either one. Same mission. Burn every parasite motherfucker alive."<sup>33</sup> She then calmly, yet angrily, pours her glass of wine on the table, shocking everyone at the table, and leaves the room. That night, she sets fire to her and Arthur's pool house, the place in which she has been passionately consumed with working on "Station Eleven." All her work on the graphic novel is destroyed. Miranda leaves the home and divorces Arthur.

As Miranda leaves the house, bags packed, viewers see the pool house engulfed in flames, as Miranda's voice recites lines that will later find their home in her graphic novel "Station

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<sup>31</sup> In Emily St. John's Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, Miranda escapes an abusive relationship with a boyfriend by being with Arthur. While the book's source material would be another great example of her strong, resilient nature, the HBO adaptation does not discuss this relationship. However, there are hints of this relationship in the show through Miranda's "Station Eleven" and the reason Doctor Eleven finds himself "adrift in a stranger's galaxy for a long time" before finding safety.

<sup>32</sup> Episode 3, "Hurricane," 00:30:50-00:31:20.

<sup>33</sup> Episode 3, "Hurricane," 00:34:22-00:35:10.

Eleven:” “To be loved is a calamity for someone with your job. You have work to do. Work. Love will try to see the words before it’s finished. Love makes work impossible. Survival is insufficient. I don’t want to live the wrong life and then die. I am at my best when I’m escaping.”<sup>34</sup> Each of these lines corresponds to a specific moment in Miranda’s life, but the most prominent one featured in *Station Eleven* is, “Survival is insufficient.” For Miranda, existence is not enough, there must be a deeper meaning to life and the pain that comes with loss of life. Guarding her artwork is essential for her survival. To reveal its truths means revealing her wounds. Love and work are two avenues that attempt to bring meaning to existence, but it is through her escape into her art that Miranda finds a feeling of shared experience with others. Through drawing, she is able to mediate the experiences and encounters she has had, and, by collating them into a familiar medium, is able to transform her past and present into something more fixed and fathomable.

Episode 3 of *Station Eleven* “Hurricane” focuses on Miranda’s personal life in adulthood, yet she only briefly and indirectly implies she experienced a tragic loss as a child. The episode begins with adult Miranda walking the streets of Chicago towards a building wherein she will interview for her logistics job. We hear her reading lines from “Station Eleven”: “I remember damage. Then escape. Then...adrift in a stranger’s galaxy for a long time. But I’m safe now. I found it again. My home.”<sup>35</sup> The words “Chicago 2015” appear on the screen as viewers hear Miranda say “home” and walk into the office building.<sup>36</sup> Miranda’s path from damage has led her to finding her her home, again, in her logistics work. These lines from “Station Eleven” are repeated in full or in part throughout *Station Eleven* by Miranda, Kirsten, and Tyler, particularly

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<sup>34</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane,” 00:39:00-00:39:57.

<sup>35</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane,” 00:1:50-00:2:15.

<sup>36</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane,” 00:02:15.

the phrase “I remember damage.” While viewers do not see Miranda’s growth between childhood and adulthood, one central concept binds these two periods of her life: Doctor Eleven, the astronaut figure she first imagines as a child. Just after her family is killed after the hurricane, young Miranda is relocated to the United States. Still attempting to come to terms with the unspeakable loss of her family, Miranda begins to blur physical reality and her imagination when she begins to see Doctor Eleven in her everyday life.<sup>37</sup> Doctor Eleven becomes her guardian, watching over her during difficult times. However, Doctor Eleven makes appearances throughout her life. She finds comfort and stability in Doctor Eleven’s presence, and in the artmaking process of “Station Eleven.”<sup>38</sup> As Wole Soyinka states, “the harmonization of human functions, external phenomena and supernatural suppositions within individual consciousness merges as a normal self-adjusting process in the African temper of mind.”<sup>39</sup> Creativity allows Miranda to mediate the painful and traumatic events she has witnessed and experienced. Miranda’s artmaking is an “engagement with spirituality, ritual, and ceremony” that brings her comfort and connection, something she does not find living in the United States after her family has died.<sup>40</sup> As Marc Nichanian writes about the role of art after immense loss, “there is no art

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<sup>37</sup> See Image 3 in Appendix A for images of Miranda.

<sup>38</sup> According to the Olivia Cadaval at the *Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage*, in the real-life aftermath of Hurricane Hugo in the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1989, people turned to songs, cultural traditions, and celebrations of life. While the U.S. sent in the military to stop looting, and described the ‘mayhem’ of the Virgin Islands, post-hurricane, the people of the Virgin Islands were actually just trying to stock up on food and resources. The “underclass” was frustrated with “the system’s dual standards” of being a U.S. territory. A call for traditional forms of artmaking and storytelling emerged out of the devastation of the hurricane and lack of U.S. government aid and assistance. As Teresa Younger recalls her father’s life, Dr. Ottley, when power was cut to the islands, Dr. Athneil ‘Addie’ Ottley, Lee Carle, Jean Greaux, Irvin Brown, and Anita Davis took to a.m. radio to be “a friend in the dark,” and became the only outside voices to the world for the people of the Virgin Islands, offering them hope, guidance, and essential information.

<sup>39</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), quoted in Irene Visser, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects.” *Humanities* vol. 4, no. 2 (2015), 260.

<sup>40</sup> Irene Visser, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects.” *Humanities* vol. 4, no. 2 (2015):261. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h4020250>.



without mourning.”<sup>41</sup> As a child, possibly without realizing what she is doing, Miranda begins to grieve the loss of her family by sketching the first doodles that would later become some of the imagery of “Station Eleven” while safely on top of the kitchen counter in her family’s kitchen, as her family’s corpses floating around her in the water. As an unconscious, cultural, and traditional process of mourning her family, Miranda uses her crayons and pencils to draw the images she sees from the news footage on a television across the room that is broadcasting updates about Hurricane Hugo.<sup>42</sup> She begins to draw a swirl pattern that mimics the hurricane’s formation she sees on the television. Miranda also internalizes some of the newscasters speech, using it in “Station Eleven,” one such line being, “There is no rescue mission.”<sup>43</sup> For Miranda, the immaterial character she develops, an astronaut named Doctor Eleven, is real, while the physical act of making art becomes therapeutic and a site of mourning loss and healing pain.

As an adult, working as a logistics expert on assignment in Malaysia, Doctor Eleven appears behind Miranda before she receives news of her ex-husband, Arthur’s, death, and again in her hotel room as she succumbs to the pandemic flu. While she and her colleague seal up their connected rooms, someone knocks on the door between the rooms. Rather than meeting her colleague, she sees Doctor Eleven. Viewers of this episode – episode three, “Hurricane” – hear Miranda reading, again, from “Station Eleven,” as Doctor Eleven embraces her: “I have a job to do. I still have a job to do. I have found you nine times before, maybe ten, and I’ll find you again. There is no rescue mission. We are safe.” Miranda obsessed over her work on “Station Eleven” because it was a form of repair and healing that she does not find in the world. “Station Eleven” allows her to explore her feelings of isolation and loneliness, states of being inflicted on

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<sup>41</sup> Marc Nichanian. “Catastrophic Mourning.” In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian. (California: University of California Press, 2002), 99-124.

<sup>42</sup> See Images 1 and 2 of Appendix A for images of Miranda.

<sup>43</sup> Episode 10, “The Unbroken Circle,” 00:16:30-00:18:10.

her as a child without consent. She sought to capture the “‘irresistible dimensions of the human experience’, such as faith, awe, and transcendence, which may infuse the mundane with a richness of experience.”<sup>44</sup> Doctor Eleven, as Miranda’s foil, embracing her at the end of her life, signifies home. Miranda is safe.<sup>45</sup>

Later, in the final episode of *Station Eleven*, episode 10, it is revealed that the ‘last job’ Miranda must do is save her friend Clark, Elizabeth, and Tyler, Arthur’s son with Elizabeth. Miranda receives a phone call from Clark who tells her that he and the others are stranded, but safe, in the Severn City Airport. Using her logistics skills, Miranda locates the airport, but sees an incoming flight has already landed: Gitchegumee Air Flight 452. If the passengers on the plane enter the airport, they risk exposing everyone inside to the deadly flu. The survival of those in the airport falls on Miranda, so she finds a way to contact the pilot of the plane – coincidentally named after Hurricane Hugo – and convinces him to not let his passengers off. Miranda dies shortly after, and viewers see her go home, into her imagined paradise “Station Eleven.”

During her life, Miranda is passionate and guarded about her work on “Station Eleven,” and it serves as a way for her to process the loss and pain she experienced first as a child, and then as an adult. However, “Station Eleven” also becomes a guide for surviving trauma in the post-pandemic world to two other characters that I discuss below – Kirsten and Tyler. Two of Miranda’s lines in “Station Eleven” are also significant for Kirsten and Tyler: “I remember

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<sup>44</sup> Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2013), quoted in Irene Visser, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects.” *Humanities* vol. 4, no. 2 (2015), 261.

<sup>45</sup> As I will discuss below, Kirsten, and especially Tyler, also find meaning in “Station Eleven” and the character of Doctor Eleven because of their own feelings so isolation and abandonment.

damage” and “There is no before.” The first acknowledges the loss Kirsten and Tyler suffer, while the latter is an attempt to learn from or erase the past.

## KIRSTEN AND TYLER

Kirsten and Tyler both receive a copy of Miranda’s “Station Eleven” as children. However, Kirsten and Tyler represent two different ways of reading and using Miranda’s graphic novel in the post-apocalyptic world. Where Tyler distorts Miranda’s vision and message of the graphic novel to justify his violent fanaticism to destroy everything belonging to the past, Kirsten uses “Station Eleven” as a source of inspiration and comfort. Tyler sees the message of “Station Eleven” as a destination to reach because the graphic novel ends before a solution is presented. Kirsten sees the novel as a journey, a path to explore. It is their unique, respective interpretations of the graphic novel that cause them to lead different lives. Through their contrasting interpretations of Miranda’s graphic novel, the show explores how one person’s art can be used and interpreted for surviving in a post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic world.

Kirsten is the first character viewers see read Miranda’s “Station Eleven.” She is given a copy by Arthur, Miranda’s ex-husband, before she witnesses him die on stage while performing an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.<sup>46</sup> Arthur had acquired two copies of “Station Eleven” from Miranda backstage in his dressing room before the performance. Kirsten also happens to be in the room, coloring, during this exchange, and Miranda greets her, “Hi. It’s nice to meet you, Kiki.”<sup>47</sup> Sometime before the performance, Arthur gives Kirsten one copy of “Station Eleven.” After Arthur’s collapse on-stage during *King Lear*, Kirsten loses the woman

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<sup>46</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 1, “Wheel of Fire,” directed by Hiro Murai, written for television by Patrick Somerville, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired December 16, 2021, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKRPwzFdL26iAEAAACd:type:episode>.

<sup>47</sup> Episode 1, “Wheel of Fire.”

who is in charge of taking her home.<sup>48</sup> Backstage, a helpful stranger – Jeevan – realizes she has no one to help her, and he decides to take her home. However, her parents are not home and Kirsten does not have the house key. Jeevan hears that the flu is spreading quickly and killing indiscriminately, and decides to seek shelter in his brother Frank’s apartment.<sup>49</sup> It is in Frank’s apartment that Kirsten turns to “Station Eleven” on the night she finds out, via text, that her parents have died from the flu.<sup>50</sup>

Unable to cope with the traumatic loss of her parents, Kirsten begins reading “Station Eleven” obsessively as a way to mediate her loss. Like Miranda, Kirsten connects with the character Doctor Eleven in “Station Eleven.” Doctor Eleven is lost, drifting through space, looking for home and safety. As Miranda had done, Kirsten also seeks a transcendent experience of the world, one in which to find repair and healing. “Station Eleven” becomes Kirsten’s guide for surviving the post-pandemic world as a piece of art in which she finds comfort and meaning. Like Miranda, Doctor Eleven also visits Kirsten as a guardian watching over her.

While viewers do not see a lot of Kirsten’s childhood, it is implied that she is a lonely child. For one, she is a child actor whose guardian while working is a woman named Tanya – “the child wrangler.” Like Kirsten’s parents, Tanya never seems to be around when Kirsten needs her, like after Arthur’s collapse on stage in Episode 1 and Kirsten needs to get home. Kirsten’s parents are also markedly absent in her life, as Kirsten seems to be a ‘latch-key kid,’ who does not even have a key to her home. In Episode 8, backstage before their performance of *King Lear*, Arthur tells his friend Clark, “Tanya, the child wrangler, says that [Kirsten’s] life is sad. But you

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<sup>48</sup> Episode 1, “Wheel of Fire.”

<sup>49</sup> Episode 1, “Wheel of Fire.”

<sup>50</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 7, “Goodbye My Damaged Home,” directed by Lucy Tcherniak, written for television by Kim Steele, Patrick Somerville, and Emily St. John Mandel, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired December 30, 2021, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKrcg4fsqTDVQEAAAD5:type:episode>.

can't tell, right?"<sup>51</sup> It is implied Kirsten is left alone a lot by her parents. However, Kirsten finds joy and companionship with Doctor Eleven and "Station Eleven." The spiritual, celestial aspect of the graphic novel, and its premise, are similar to the type of 'magic making' done through her acting. In adulthood, Kirsten continues this natural reality by finding joy and companionship with her found-family, The Traveling Symphony.

In the post-pandemic world, Kirsten shares "Station Eleven's" message to some of the younger members of the traveling group of performers she has joined, called The Traveling Symphony. The Traveling Symphony performs Shakespearian adaptations for static, local communities along a circular route in the Great Lakes Region of the United States. Kirsten tells the group members about "Station Eleven," but does not force them to adopt its message in the same way Tyler does, as outline below. Instead, Kirsten becomes overly cautious of post-pandemic life, and incorporates elements from the graphic novel into her relationships with her found-family, The Traveling Symphony. The Traveling Symphony's caravans are emblazoned with a phrase from "Station Eleven" – "Survival is insufficient" – and Kirsten, while performing as Hamlet in one adaptation of *Hamlet* remembers the trauma of losing her parents at a young age – "I remember damage."

Similar to Kirsten, Tyler also receives a copy of "Station Eleven" as a child, from Arthur, his father. Arthur and his mother, Elizabeth, are divorced by the time Arthur dies and the pandemic flu spreads globally. While alive, Arthur maintained little to no contact with Tyler. However, before his death, Arthur gave Elizabeth a copy of "Station Eleven" to give to Tyler as a Christmas present. Stranded in the Severn City Airport with a group of people who also became

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<sup>51</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 8, "Who's There?," directed by Helen Shaver, written for television by Patrick Somerville and Sarah McCarron, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired January 6, 2022, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKrXwEMzr68wwEAAADV:type:episode>.

stranded due to the collapse of civilization from the pandemic, Elizabeth presents Tyler with “Station Eleven.”<sup>52</sup> Tyler calls the artwork “cool,” and flips through the pages. Elizabeth informs Tyler that the initials “M.C.” on the book refer to Miranda Carroll, his father’s ex-wife. Tyler remembers her. He takes the book to a secluded place – a ramp that opens to the outside landing strips of the airports – and begins reading “Station Eleven.”<sup>53</sup>

However, it is not long before he looks up from the book, and wonders about the lone plane on the tarmac. Gitchegumee Air Flight 452 had flown into the airport just after the other stranded flights had disembarked and taken shelter inside the airport, but no passengers had disembarked from the Gitchegumee. By the night Tyler reads “Station Eleven” for the first time, all of the passengers on board the Gitchegumee are presumed dead from the virus. Yet, while Tyler takes a break from reading “Station Eleven,” he sees a man emerge from the plane.<sup>54</sup> He attempts to save the man, bringing him inside the airport, but the rest of airport community are distraught and angry that Tyler would risk bringing an infected person inside their home.<sup>55</sup> After a stand-off between Tyler, the man and members of the airport – who now believe both Tyler and the man are infected – someone shoots the man, killing him, and spraying Tyler’s face and body with the man’s blood. Elizabeth, his mother, rushes to Tyler’s side. Believing Elizabeth is also infected for coming into close contact with Tyler and the deceased man, the airport community decides to quarantine Tyler and Elizabeth inside an airplane located inside a hangar attached to the airport for 30 days.<sup>56</sup> It is during this quarantine that Tyler begins to read “Station

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<sup>52</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 5, “The Severn City Airport,” directed by Lucy Tcherniak, written for television by Cord Jefferson and Patrick Somerville, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired December 16, 2021, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKRzAZI8T6NIQEAAAD5:type:episode>.

<sup>53</sup> “The Severn City Airport,” 00:36:51-00:40:16.

<sup>54</sup> “The Severn City Airport,” 00:40:00-00:40:51.

<sup>55</sup> “The Severn City Airport,” 00:41:44-00:42:56.

<sup>56</sup> “The Severn City Airport,” 00:43:00.

Eleven.” As Tyler is angry with his mother for not doing more to protect them, the only means for Tyler to pass the month-long quarantine is by obsessively reading the “Station Eleven”.

In one scene inside the quarantine-airplane, viewers see Tyler staring at a page in “Station Eleven,” obsessively reciting one line from the book repeatedly: “There is no before.”<sup>57</sup> This line becomes Tyler’s mantra throughout his childhood, and into his adult life. It takes on a spiritual, divine quality for him, as does “Station Eleven.” He has just witnessed the murder of a man he tried to save, his father died only days before, and he feels his mother has failed to protect him once again. Like Kirsten, “Station Eleven” becomes a spiritual guide for Tyler, mediating the traumatic events he has just experienced. However, unlike Kirsten who finds the tenderness of *The Traveling Symphony*, Tyler leaves the airport alone. Tyler’s broken relationships with his mother – who had always been busy with work, leaving him in solitude – and his father – who, after the divorce from his mother, never tried to contact Tyler – reinforce Tyler’s irritation with the ‘before’ of pre-pandemic life. As adult Tyler states to Kirsten in episode 8, “I remember being locked up because I tried to help someone. I remember that they failed. I remember damage...then escape, then adrift in a strangers galaxy for a long, long time. But I’m safe now. I found it again. There is a Before. It was just awful.”<sup>58</sup> However, what solidifies Tyler’s break from the past and his connection with the line from “Station Eleven” is when he overhears Clark – a friend of his mother and father – say that he must get rid of Tyler because he is too “destructive.”<sup>59</sup> Having obsessed over his interpretation of the message of “Station Eleven,” Tyler decides to fake his own death by setting the aircraft from which he

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<sup>57</sup> Episode 5, “The Severn City Airport,” 00:44:22-00:44:39.

<sup>58</sup> Episode 8, “Who’s There?”

<sup>59</sup> Episode 5, “The Severn City Airport,” 00:49:46-00:54:00.

attempted to save the man on fire and run away. Taking his copy of “Station Eleven” with him, Tyler successfully follows through with his plan, and leaves the airport, and the past, behind.

Although Kirsten and Tyler each receive a copy of Miranda’s graphic novel “Station Eleven,” how they differently interpret the graphic novel, mediating their respective and shared trauma, changes the course of their adult lives. While they both use “Station Eleven” as a transcendental guide, Tyler sees the graphic novel as a cult-like prophecy, while Kirsten’s interpretation is one of caution and caring for and protecting others. They each take the same phrase from the graphic novel as their mantra: “There is no before.” However, their interpretation of this phrase differs. For Kirsten, “there is no before” means that everything from the past defines you. You cannot deny the existence of the past, and to do so would mean denying who you are in the present. The past is an anchor, but you should learn from it. As an adult she teaches the children and teenagers about life before the pandemic, and is extremely cautious of the post-pandemic world. On the other hand, Tyler sees ‘the before’ as deadweight, an anchor that needs to be cut off in order to move on with life post-pandemic. As Miranda would say, “cut and run.”<sup>60</sup> For Tyler, the past does not need to exist for life to continue, and does not define your existence in the present.

As James Berger writes, “Both apocalypse and trauma present the most difficult questions of what happened ‘before,’ and what is the situation ‘after’.”<sup>61</sup> For Tyler, “there is no before” is an absolute. There is only what exists after the apocalyptic flu, and after trauma. To see the world ‘before,’ and all its contents, means facing the reason there exists an ‘after.’ It is too hurtful for Tyler to remember – to look at his wounds, and cope with the cause of these

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<sup>60</sup> Episode 3, “Hurricane.”

<sup>61</sup> James Berger, *After The End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21.



wounds – so he chooses to try to ignore them by, paradoxically, making it his mission to erase them. “Station Eleven” offers Tyler a solution to ignore his wounds: resist and destroy the ‘before.’ However, in ignoring the past, Tyler creates an ‘ending’ that doesn’t exist. The story of civilization in the Great Lakes Region of the United States continues. The world has not ended. Something has “remain[ed] *after the end*.”<sup>62</sup>

As an adult, Tyler calls himself ‘The Prophet’ and uses “Station Eleven” as a manifesto – “a prophecy” – interpreting the text’s message to mean once an apocalyptic event has occurred, once trauma has ravaged the body and the land, there is nothing to be gained by looking to the past – only the present remains.<sup>63</sup> Because Tyler knows what it is like to feel abandoned and lost, he refuses to allow post-pandemic children to suffer in the same way. As The Prophet, Tyler attempts to create a new future civilization by gathering and stealing children from communities he finds, believing that he is fulfilling the fictional “Station Eleven” character Doctor Eleven’s prophecy, and leading them to a new home, unburdened by suffering and loss. Tyler adopts the name of this child army – The Undersea – directly from “Station Eleven,” as part of this prophecy.

While pain and loss continue to exist post-apocalypse, Tyler believes the pandemic flu is an opportunity to purify the world. As a child, prior to receiving “Station Eleven,” Tyler begins to have these thoughts. Roughly a week after they and others are stranded in the Severn City Airport, Clark, Elizabeth, and another man decide how to run the community inside the airport. Tyler is present, and Clark – a friend of his father’s – says he can’t discount Tyler’s opinion in

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<sup>62</sup> James Berger, *After The End*, 6.

<sup>63</sup> *Station Eleven*, episode 6, “Survival is Insufficient,” directed by Helen Shaver, written for television by Sarah McCarron, created for television by Patrick Somerville, based upon the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, aired December 30, 2021, HBO, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKrGAdtx3kerGAAADx:type:episode>.

their leadership. Tyler and Clark have the exchange that follows, wherein Tyler's budding nihilism peeks through:

TYLER: Why do we need a leader at all?

CLARK: Because, Tyler, leaders give us hope. And we won't survive here long enough to repopulate the Earth if the people here don't feel hopeful.

TYLER: Maybe we shouldn't though.

CLARK: Shouldn't what, Tyler?

TYLER: Repopulate.<sup>64</sup>

His mother, Elizabeth, is shocked at this exchange, asking Tyler, "Isn't that a little bleak?" Clark laughs lightly and says, "No, it's cute," dismissing Tyler's opinion almost immediately after he spoke of Tyler's importance in their leadership group.<sup>65</sup> As mentioned above, Tyler lives a lonely, unsociable life: he lives with his mother full-time in Germany and other parts of the world for her work, and she is consistently distracted by work. His father – recently deceased – has never tried to connect with Tyler.<sup>66</sup> He is abandoned and dismissed. Having no one to speak with, Tyler is consumed by his electronic device, reading the news and browsing the internet. Tyler's childhood is filled with neglect and rejection, and his wish not to repopulate the earth is a sign of his doubt that humanity will ever live without pain.

Through "Station Eleven's" 'prophecy,' Tyler believes it is his mission to create, what Berger calls, "an utterly new, perfected world" without pain.<sup>67</sup> He wants to rid the world of any trace or memory of pre-pandemic life. Tyler conflates what he believes is prophetic wisdom in "Station Eleven" for inevitability: the world must have come to an end via pandemic because it

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<sup>64</sup> "The Severn City Airport," 00:28:28-28:48.

<sup>65</sup> "The Severn City Airport," 00:28:48-00:29:00.

<sup>66</sup> "The Severn City Airport," 00:37:23-00:39:10.

<sup>67</sup> James Berger, *After The End*, 7.

was the inevitable conclusion to the pain and suffering of the world.<sup>68</sup> He treats “Station Eleven” as a guide – a manifesto – for how to continue post-pandemic, and part of this new world means destroying everything and everyone connected to the past, especially those that caused him pain. Instead of grieving his loss, sharing his story of pain with others, Tyler seeks revenge – a purifying revenge.

What Tyler forgets in his mission is that just because something is gone or disappears, does not mean it is forgotten. In fact, his mission – the prophecy that “there is no before” – comes from a pre-pandemic source: Miranda Carroll’s graphic novel “Station Eleven.” By adapting pre-pandemic source material, mediating Miranda’s pre-pandemic trauma, and remediating its message for a ‘purified world,’ Tyler is inadvertently continuing the same destructive tendencies as pre-pandemic times. In his attempt to kidnap children from their families to raise them as post-trauma, creating a perfected world without suffering, Tyler is committing the same heinous acts that led to his own childhood traumas. In essence, Tyler finds the present and forgiveness incompatible.

Instead of destroying pre-pandemic sources of trauma, Tyler continues them. In attempting to ignore and forget, Tyler perpetuates a cycle of trauma. In fact, because he has lost his copy of the graphic novel, he uses his memory of “Station Eleven” as a bedtime story for his following of children. As Berger notes, nihilists “demand a complete destruction of existing practices and institutions and then, not surprisingly, are unable to imagine what would come after that ending.”<sup>69</sup> Tyler can easily “lose control of the story.”<sup>70</sup> Without his direct knowledge and mediation of “Station Eleven,” the hordes of children who follow him reinterpret the message.

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<sup>68</sup> James Berger, *After The End*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> James Berger, *After The End*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Episode 6, “Survival is Insufficient,” 00:25:40-00:26:00

This happens when he is stabbed by Kirsten when she believes he will kill her friends in The Traveling Symphony. Tyler cannot think past another ‘ending,’ a complete annihilation of the past. The world, after the end, is also damaged.

For Tyler, the apocalyptic flu created an opportunity for a sort of rebirth. However, as the word ‘apocalypse’ denotes, apocalyptic events tend to reveal or uncover. For Tyler, it is Kirsten who helps him see what has been uncovered for him post-apocalypse: the pre-pandemic isolation symptomatic of many children in the modern United States continued into post-pandemic life. Tyler attempts to gather children to create a new world free of pain, yet fails to build a community not tied to destruction. As Judith Butler states in the afterword to David Eng and David Kazanjian’s anthology *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, “the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past; loss must be marked and it cannot be represented; loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression.” It is Kirsten’s mediation of “Station Eleven” that helps Tyler find redemption of the past in the future. Kirsten helps Tyler forgive.

When Kirsten and Tyler meet in the post-pandemic world of *Station Eleven*, it is Miranda’s graphic novel “Station Eleven” that binds their lives together. Tyler – as the Prophet – needs Kirsten and her found family – The Traveling Symphony – to get into the Severn City Airport and destroy a museum – called, the Museum of Civilization – in which the airport community has been collecting remnants of the past: cell phones, credit cards, a gun, passports, figurines of one popular movie characters. The Museum of Civilization preserves the ‘before,’ the “real evil...[that’s] been rotting for two decades,” since the pandemic occurred.<sup>71</sup> By believing his mission is to destroy everything from the past, Tyler plans to destroy the Museum.

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<sup>71</sup> Episode 6, “Survival is Insufficient,” 00:26:45-00:27:02.

He needs a way to sneak into the airport to blow up the museum. Initially, he has one option: fraudulently join The Traveling Symphony as a member. When Kirsten and Tyler meet for the first time, Tyler recognizes a symbol from “Station Eleven” Kirsten has tattooed multiple times on her hand. After Kirsten’s suspicions of Tyler, and nearly killing him because of his threats towards The Traveling Symphony, Tyler no longer has his first option to enter the Museum of Civilization. Instead, a wounded Tyler tells Kirsten the Museum has imprisoned her friends – The Traveling Symphony – and exaggerates the dangers at the Severn City Airport. Eventually, the ever-cautious Kirsten agrees and they journey to the airport.

Resting for the night on their way, Tyler retells his interpretation of his ritual bedtime story of “Station Eleven” to his army of children followers. Despite having lost his copy, Tyler engages the children – and Kirsten – in his version of the story. Once the children are asleep, Tyler and Kirsten begin an emotional, yet guarded discussion of “Station Eleven.” During this conversation, Kirsten reveals pieces of her understanding of the story, leading Tyler to rethink how he has perceived the message of “Station Eleven”:

TYLER: When I was a kid, someone gave me a comic book. I read it and...I lost it. Tried to forget it. It all came to me when I needed it the most. That blue spaceman really calmed me down.

KIRSTEN: That’s because Doctor Eleven is a kid. It’s K inside the suit, the Rebel Undersea Leader. She’s in a time loop.

TYLER: I never thought about it like that. I do relate though. I’m a Post-Pan. Just born before.

KIRSTEN: Most Pre-Pans lost their minds.

TYLER: Yeah, that's the whole problem<sup>72</sup>

While Tyler only briefly questions his perception of “Station Eleven,” he is quick to claim he identifies with Doctor Eleven as the leader of the Rebel Undersea Leader. Unsurprisingly, this is because he has adopted the persona of David, The Prophet and leads his own army of rebel children that he calls the Undersea.

Tyler continues to divulge his personal pre-pandemic childhood story, including how his father thought his first-wife couldn't speak Spanish.<sup>73</sup> Before his first-wife – Miranda – left him, his father would have phone conversations with other people discussing how much he did not understand her. Eventually, after the two had divorced, his father's first wife calls his father and reveals she can speak Spanish, and has known all along what he has said about her, and that he never once asked her any questions about herself. Tyler then begins speaking in Spanish: “Igual y na' mas era egoísta el muy cabrón. Pero igual vale madre, no? El “antes” ni existe. Solo existe lo que esta por venir” [He was a selfish bastard. But it doesn't matter. There is no before. Only what is to come]. When Kirsten replies, “I don't speak Spanish,” Tyler tells her “Neither do I.”<sup>74</sup>

In this moment, Tyler is agreeing with Kirsten that Pre-Pans, like his father, Arthur, were – and continue to be – a problem. They are selfish and cruel. More importantly, in revealing and denying that he can speak Spanish, Tyler implies that his father also never knew Tyler could understand him when he spoke Spanish. Similarly, throughout episode 5, “The Severn City Airport,” during the initial outbreak of the pandemic while he, his mother, and others become stranded at the airport, Tyler wears headphones. Around him, his mother, Clark, and other adults rudely or dismissively talk about Tyler, yet there are brief moments when Tyler appears to be

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<sup>72</sup> Episode 6, “Survival is Insufficient,” 00:37:27-00:38:30.

<sup>73</sup> Here, Tyler does not disclose Miranda or Arthur's name to Kirsten.

<sup>74</sup> Episode 6, “Survival is Insufficient,” 00:39:20-00:39:45.

listening. Like Miranda, Arthur's first wife, hardly anyone asks Tyler personal questions or takes the time to intimately care for him. Tyler turns to "Station Eleven" as a source of comfort because Doctor Eleven mediates his fears, anxieties, and pain.

In the scene above, and the others that follow, Kirsten slowly begins to show Tyler the importance of forgiveness. Their shared love of "Station Eleven" as a source of comfort and order in the chaos of post-trauma life bring them closer together. Tyler had previously never known another person who had read "Station Eleven," and did not have someone to connect with over the graphic novel. When he discusses the book with Kirsten, and shares his traumatic experiences from the past, he recognizes that sharing his personal stories, interpreting his connection to "Station Eleven," and narrativizing his pain to another person can be reparative and therapeutic. Although Tyler's plan to blow up the Museum of Civilization is already underway, he relinquishes something to Kirsten as she bears witness to the suffering of his past.

It is not until the final episode, when Tyler performs as Hamlet in an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with The Traveling Symphony that Tyler finally confronts and recognizes the importance of the past as a path that led him to where he has ended up.<sup>75</sup> Rather than continuing to live a life of strict individualism as the singular leader of an army of children, Tyler comes to understand part of Kirsten's interpretation of "Station Eleven," that "having just one person" who understands and bears witness to his pain – even in the form of representation in someone's handmade art – "it's a big deal" and can mean all the difference.<sup>76</sup> Forgiveness is reparative.

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<sup>75</sup> Adaptations of Shakespeare are a remediation of trauma in *Station Eleven*. Although I do not devote space to this in my project, the Shakespearian adaptations composed and performed by The Traveling Symphony are important to *Station Eleven*.

<sup>76</sup> Episode 10, "The Unbroken Circle."

## CONCLUSION

Art and other forms of storytelling allow Kirsten, Tyler, and Miranda to find meaning and community in the aftermath of indescribable loss. “Station Eleven” and *Station Eleven* are forms of resistance. Arguably, they are art implicitly resisting the ideals of uncompromising individualism and isolationism. They allow for “the potentially fruitful area of investigation of spiritual and religious traditions and ceremonies that are employed in non-Western cultures in therapeutic engagement with traumatic experiences and their aftermath.”<sup>77</sup> In *Station Eleven*, it is because of Miranda’s trauma-mediating process – creating “Station Eleven” – that she ends up connecting to, and the binding connection for, others by sharing her story in a narrativized form. She has reached an end point on her path to reparative healing. Kirsten and Tyler’s readings of “Station Eleven” lead them down different paths of healing, but, eventually, the graphic novels brings them together with others, allowing them to forgive and engage with their trauma.

In our own world, the show *Station Eleven* brought many people together during the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. While quarantining and social distancing, many viewers watched *Station Eleven*, finding hope and joy in the mediation of our similar stories. Two years since the release of *Station Eleven*, and others have not been ready to watch a remediation of the loss and grief they suffered as the pandemic continues. Yet, despite our loss, we turn to art – whether this art is the television show *Station Eleven* or not. As Jishnu Bandyopadhyay asserted on Twitter early-on in the pandemic “As you watch your thirteenth entire series or read a book or sleep to music, remember that in the darkest days when everything stopped, you turned to artists.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Visser, “Decolonizing Trauma Theory,” 263.

<sup>78</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Jishnu, Twitter Post, March 2020, 1:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/jishyouwish/status/1240147834172833794?lang=en>.



Many of us re-entered the outside world from a haphazard lockdown with splayed fingers across our eyes, nervously peering out, masks donned, unsure of ourselves and our places in the world. We emerged alone, with little direct guidance from government officials and medical professionals, but we were all confronted with the same mentality: you're on your own. So, we continued to turn to those things that made us feel safe: hobbies, music, food, television and film. In essence, we turned to art and artistry. Just as Kirsten, Tyler, and Miranda do in *Station Eleven*, when we were left without a direct link to commonality, community, and clear direction, we turned to the craftsmanship and creativity of our collective for guidance and hope.

In 2020, as the upper-class of society sang a hollow rendition John Lennon's "Imagine" via Zoom from their staffed and stocked primary homes or vacation houses, many viewers of the video in the U.S. confronted the inequalities of imposed quarantine during a global health crisis, and reassessed the manufactured societal strife, a product of the individualization of Euro-centric models of selfhood.<sup>79</sup> We grappled with the inconsistencies of distinctly different pandemic experiences so blatantly digitally remediated to us in real time or in YouTube or social media videos viewed later. This is not to say pandemic strife was equally distributed, as those already submerged beneath the colonial project of worlding, and the development of Western psychoanalysis, had been confronting its effects since its inception. However, those of us who have benefited from Western ideals of selfhood began to more quickly chip away at the cracks already forming in systemic ideologies like imperialism and capitalism that led to class disparities and the attitude prevalent in the United States of aggressive individualization and isolation. To remedy gaps in our knowledge, we picked up books, turned on the television, contacted distant friends and family, and committed to conversations that made us

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<sup>79</sup> CBS News, "25 celebrities sing 'Imagine' in isolation, creating a moving montage," YouTube, March 19, 2020, 2:02, <https://youtu.be/omEDLKS5pb>.

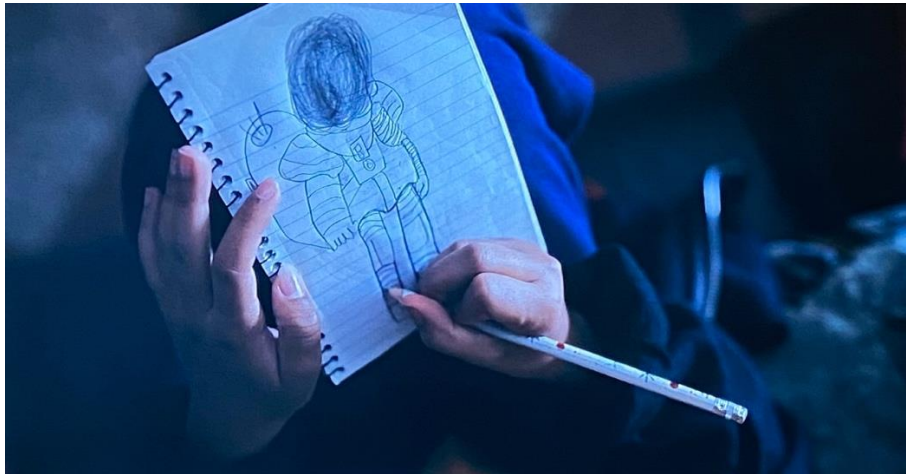
uncomfortable. We looked to others or their work to serve as guides to security and stability. We attempted to form community through shared grief, loss, and a revelatory uncovering that included other people narrativizing our shared experiences.

As we enter the fourth year of a global pandemic, an event that, by all accounts, has changed the way the average person operates, grief has become commonplace. Whether consciously acknowledged or buried in our subconscious, many of us in the United States have witnessed a complete dismissal of the immense loss we have collectively experienced over the past three years. Arguably, this is similar to what Tyler tried to do in *Station Eleven*: rather than acknowledge the loss of human life, and allowing time and space to mourn our past-selves and former ways of living, many of us have been told to press on and deny the past. As Zadie Smith said in her 2000 novel *White Teeth*, “Surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect.” There is no before. However, unlike Tyler, we continue to find our shared humanity in art, building community through narrativizing our experiences. We continue turning to and composing art, novels, music, and film to help us cope with an indescribable loss of the past, and forgive those who told us to go it alone. The present ends nothing from the past, no matter how hard a denial is pushed. We remember and share, listen and learn. Then, we begin to rebuild, together, because survival is insufficient.

APPENDIX A



(Image 1: *Station Eleven*. Episode 10, "The Unbroken Circle." HBO.)



(Image 2: *Station Eleven*. Episode 10, "The Unbroken Circle." HBO.)



(Image 3: *Station Eleven*. Episode 10, "The Unbroken Circle." HBO.)

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