

2017

## Survival is Insufficient: Northern Michigan as a Post-Apocalyptic Final Frontier

Carolyn Dekker

*Finlandia University*, [carolyn.dekker@finlandia.edu](mailto:carolyn.dekker@finlandia.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://commons.nmu.edu/upper\\_country](https://commons.nmu.edu/upper_country)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dekker, Carolyn (2017) "Survival is Insufficient: Northern Michigan as a Post-Apocalyptic Final Frontier," *Upper Country: A Journal of the Lake Superior Region*: Vol. 5 , Article 4.

Available at: [https://commons.nmu.edu/upper\\_country/vol5/iss1/4](https://commons.nmu.edu/upper_country/vol5/iss1/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Peer-Reviewed Series at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Upper Country: A Journal of the Lake Superior Region by an authorized editor of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact [kmcdonou@nmu.edu](mailto:kmcdonou@nmu.edu), [bsarjean@nmu.edu](mailto:bsarjean@nmu.edu).

## **Survival is Insufficient: Northern Michigan as a Post-Apocalyptic Final Frontier**

Carolyn Dekker Ph.D.

This essay compares two works of post-apocalyptic science fiction set in northern Michigan. The first, Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 best-seller and National Book Award Finalist, *Station Eleven*, set along Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. Second, the web-based television series *Northbound*, which is filmed near Iron Mountain and on the Keweenaw Peninsula. It released its first season in 2015, on the web platform Geek Nation and is moving Season Two to Seeka TV.

*Station Eleven* and *Northbound* continue a long tradition of collusion between the Western and science fiction genres through their use of particularized settings in a northern Michigan region that itself displays deep similarity to Western landscapes. These regions resemble each other in their environmental and frontier histories and the ways social and economic power are distributed in the landscape. The space opera, from *Star Wars* to *Firefly*, owes a great deal to the Western horse opera. Post-apocalyptic science fiction, too, has this heritage. Some cataclysm sweeps the continent clean, making room once again for the covered wagons, the horseback journeys, and small towns growing on the edge of prairies.

In both of these works, northern Michigan acquits itself well as a frontier setting. Western historian Phil Deloria provides some notion as to why. His work compares Boulder County, Colorado and Benzie County, in the northern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. He observes how frontier processes of extractive industry and land speculation shaped both places. The frontier in these places is not some steady and inevitable march of civilization, but rather a story of the "difficulties inherent in the place itself" and the "strategies and mistakes of those who tried to make very different lives on that land." Both regions, he concludes, bear the marks

of booms and busts, abandoned county seats, crazy miscalculations.<sup>1</sup>

The Upper Peninsula today is filled ghost towns, overgrown cemeteries, and feral apple trees marking abandoned homesteads, and especially mining ruins, some of which serve as filming locations for *Northbound*. Locals on the Keweenaw Peninsula tell a story—a wild myth, really—that was reported to me as truth when I arrived in the Copper Country, of Calumet having just barely missed out on becoming the state capital of Michigan.<sup>2</sup> This myth exploits the local sense that northern Michigan was once *in it*, providing the copper that wired America for electricity before the heartbreak of the Italian Hall disaster in 1913 and the Depression-era drop in copper prices helped drive the workers south to the greener pastures of auto work and left the land to reabsorb the infrastructure of mining as best it could.

The main characters of these Michigan works are not cowboys and Indians and gunslingers but are familiar to the Western landscapes nonetheless: a troupe of traveling actors in *Station Eleven* and a modern mountain man in *Northbound*. Both works produce post-apocalyptic imaginings of what types of cultures would persist in the face of disaster, what skills and cultural memories would allow for survival, and what the survivors would endeavor to preserve and celebrate. Each in its way contests the relationship of small places in Michigan's North Country to a wider culture and politics.

This last question is of acute personal interest as a professor of English—a culture worker—living in a remote and rural place. Culture is often seen as the mission of cities to rural places. Where I live in the far North of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, new fashions reach us only as blurrily interpreted by Walmart or Shopko, which we affectionately refer to as Yooper Target. We excitedly pass word around when Finlandia or Michigan Tech brings in an artist, speaker, or a good band is playing in the theater tucked away behind the bar at the local pizza parlor.

Sometimes I think I know what it felt like to stand in a small Western town at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and see the advance man for the traveling circus or theatre arrive and start pasting up fliers.

*Station Eleven* opens twenty years after a flu epidemic has drastically reduced the world's population and focuses on a traveling symphony and Shakespeare company. The players and their wagons brave the dangers between settlements, then wipe off the traveling dirt and enter each new town with music playing and heads held high. They edge outline their stage with candles and clip their painted bedsheet backdrops onto the caravans they rolled in on, a 21<sup>st</sup> century reversion to the tent shows of yore.

Tent shows and traveling repertory and vaudeville troupes were part of the social landscape of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of rural America. Show business figures like the legendary Jack Langrishe of Deadwood, South Dakota were part of the Western imaginary. There is an anecdote about Shakespeare in the Old West that feels intimately connected to Mandel's *Station Eleven* premise. I first heard it during a graduate seminar on Shakespeare. A traveling company played *Othello* in a frontier town in the Old West. Near the end of the performance, an audience member drew a pistol and shot Othello dead in a misguided attempt to rescue Desdemona. Instantaneously recovering from the impassioned theatrical spell and realizing what he has done, the audience-member shot himself. The only printed versions of the story is a shaky sourced work that has Iago, not Othello, shot by an audience-member outraged at his scheming.<sup>3</sup>

This anecdote—apocryphal as it may be—is the stuff of theater legend because it speaks to the power of the stage to captivate and transport us, to arouse our passions. In any version, including the one set in Russia's Wild East, the rural/urban divide energizes the story. The

frontier was not ready for *Othello*; the tragedians were not ready for the frontier, where passions run high and the gun is the extension of the hand and the heart.

Mandel's *Station Eleven* gets much of its energy from a similar contact between high-culture and frontier roughness. The traveling musicians are their own scouts and armed guards, a delicious tension between symphony and archery, slipped lines and slit throats. As the narrative progresses, readers delight in watching Mandel's characters meet the challenges of bringing capital-C Culture to this roughshod frontier. The show must go on, despite interpersonal differences and love triangles among the musicians, storms, bad roads, bandits, and abductions. The English professor in me loves the traveling symphony's motto, painted on the lead wagon: "Survival is insufficient"—meaning that we need symphony and Shakespeare to continue a worthwhile human existence. It's also tattooed on the main character, Kirsten Ramonde's forearm, her "favorite line of text in the world."<sup>4</sup>

The cultural studies scholar and the unabashed nerd in me also loves that this endorsement of high culture is a quotation from *Star Trek*.<sup>5</sup> Kirsten Ramonde, with all the text of Shakespeare in her mind's library from which to choose a favorite line, finds it in *Star Trek*, although she is not actually sure she can remember seeing any episodes of the television show. *Star Trek* in *Station Eleven* exists in an oral tradition and as an archaeology project; Kirsten's friend August enjoys recounting episodes of his favorite show and obsessively searches abandoned houses for *TV Guides*, hoping to find and study the schedules and episode synopses inside. He claims he "remembered all the shows."<sup>6</sup> The *TV Guide* offers evidence of a time when an entire nation consumed art in common, a vast library of collective culture now accessible only in August's memory.

In Mandel's book, the apocalyptic plague has the side effect of collapsing the distinctions

between high and low culture. Any art is a relief from grubbing an existence from a dangerous, corpse-littered frontier. *Star Trek* and Shakespeare and the idiosyncratic limited-edition science fiction comic from which the book's title is drawn are all precious, in part because they have been ennobled by survival, like graffiti on the walls of Pompeii. In this topsy-turvy post-apocalypse, however, they are precious also for having been mass culture. While August looks for books of poetry and *TV Guides*, Kirsten's seeks out tabloids, celebrity gossip and other news clippings related to Arthur Leander, a famous actor who collapsed and died on stage while playing Lear on the night the plague began.

Kirsten was on the stage with Arthur Leander that night, playing a childhood version of Lear's daughter, Cordelia. In researching Leander, she is researching the genesis of her own acting career as well as what was perhaps the last human death to be individualized sufficiently to receive a printed obituary, the last death to be assigned a meaning by a worldwide audience. Kirsten's unearthing and archiving of celebrity gossip, a salacious biography, and paparazzi shots of Leander and his ex-wives assigns a preciousness to even these, the most mawkish aspects of mass culture. Once, people experienced art, life and death together. Then the last television news anchors died on air or their stations and the electricity necessary to receive them winked out, and human beings sunk into their private hells of fever beds and, if they survived, hunger and hardship. Now, little by little, through the efforts of a traveling symphony, a museum of Culture, a small-town printer who interviews Kirsten, a rustic version of celebrity reporting, human beings are putting mass culture back together.

There is a very different trajectory at work, so far, in *Northbound*. If *Station Eleven* shows the hopeful story of an atomized world knitting itself back together, *Northbound's* main characters fight to remain atomized. *Northbound's* hero owes something to the trapper and

mountain man as a heroic figure. The series opens with an establishing shot of a river that recalls the shots of *Jeremiah Johnson* just after the titular character rides up into the mountains and the opening credits finish in the 1972 film. In contrast to the young, green Johnson, however, *Northbound's* Father, played by Nate Alwine, is all competence. Johnson draws up an empty beaver trap and commence splashing in this river, trying unsuccessfully to catch a fish by hand while a Native American warrior sneaks up behind him and silently observes his incompetence. Alwine gets his water, attaches himself to his sledge, and moves on up the hill.

Though the series is set just months “after the cataclysm”—cataclysm undefined as yet—there is no greenhorn learning arc, even in recollection. Alwine is competent. Alwine has always been ready. If his choice of campsites—on an exposed ridge—and his method of clearing an abandoned house are suspect, it is not clear that the film-makers mean for them to be.

It says something about Upper Peninsula fashion that I spent some time trying to decide whether Alwine's costume was a custom job for the web series or a parka that I had seen some of my co-workers wear to the office on particularly chill winter days. I finally settled on custom, but I had to wonder. Upper Peninsula closets come equipped for the apocalypse with winter attire and hunting gear.

We do not know it at first, but inside the sledge that Alwine the Father is dragging when we meet him lies his comatose daughter. *Northbound* develops Alwine's character largely through his care and protection of his daughter as he embodies a quietly competent, protective masculinity. There is a moment in *Jeremiah Johnson* when another character asks Johnson regarding his wife, “How long you been carrying your squaw?” Johnson is offended by the presumption that Swan is less than a wife, but the film seems to endorse the gendered assumption that as a woman, Swan is a burden to be carried and protected by Johnson, a point

that is emphatically driven home when Swan and the couple's adopted son are murdered while Johnson is not home to protect them. Frontier men carry their women and children, and at many points in *Northbound*, Alwine is quite literally carrying all that is left of his family in his arms.

The sleeping children of *Northbound* are a nightmarish mystery. What has afflicted them so? How can the parents care for them and keep them safe? Will they wake? For a while I was tempted to view their slumber as a clever dodge to avoid the necessity of directing child-actors, but as I think more deeply of the extent to which this region holds tight to tradition, the passive children began to take on a symbolic life as a kind of dangerous parental fantasy carried to extremes.

When a comatose child rouses to wakefulness, off screen, in a top-secret government facility played in Michigan Technological University, the event is greeted with dangerous alarm. There are sirens and adults running in every direction. How much simpler parenting might be if we could carry our children into adulthood like medium-large pieces of luggage who needed only occasional inputs of saline IV's to stay alive. It is the free-thinking tendencies of our offspring, particularly when they head off to Tech or beyond, that drive intergenerational tension and social change. The father in *Northbound* can drag his daughter on a sledge across the frozen landscape, her eyelids fluttering angelically, and she never says, "When are we gonna get there?" Or "I want to go to college downstate" or "Dad, meet my girlfriend." Protecting the passive and helpless child is parenting at its most pure moral imperative.

In the Upper Peninsula, there is a strong pride in being a place apart. Where I live in Hancock-Houghton, we are fond of saying that we are further from Detroit than Detroit is from Washington DC, a statement that expresses our distance both from centralized government and from what passes for ideas of Michigan. And yes, there are chip-on-the-shoulder undertones of



“we are not urban and we are not black.”

The emerging villains of the *Northbound* series are the flack-jacketed militarized group running the medical facility and those locals who cooperate with them. Their trucks and uniform bear an “Allied Command—North America” crest. This symbol, with its UN-blue map of North America inside, bespeaks a relationship to conspiracy-theory driven fears of the United Nations organization that simmer in communities like mine. Many of these theories focus on Agenda 21, a nonbinding planning paper signed in 1992 by 177 nations including the United States. Agenda 21 encourages communities to come up with their own solutions to environmental sustainability in the face of overpopulation, pollution, poverty, and resource depletion. In the minds of many Americans, particularly those influenced by conservative media personality Glenn Beck and the John Birch Society, Agenda 21 is an assault on national sovereignty and private property rights via carbon emissions regulation. It is a sinister plot to impose a totalitarian, socialistic world government and murder 90% of the American population. The conspiracy theory is every bit as wild and unfounded as it sounds, but it has had real-world consequences in local communities across the nation in rallying resistance to sustainable development projects like urban planning and bike lanes.<sup>7</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that the villains who want to bring the Father and his daughter in from the wild wear UN blue. After escaping from the facility and gathering up his daughter, the Father heads north and is rescued from a gunfight with the Allied Command by a family group who are staying in a church. In contrast to the high-powered rifles of the villains, this group carries hunting rifles and fishing poles, comes wrapped in plaid and wool and one even sports a fur hat made from an entire red fox.

When the father awakens on a cot in his rescuers' pantry, he gathers his daughter from the

next bed and prepares to flee again, but his rescuers confront him and, Bible in hand, their leader asks, “Where you gonna go? . . . You're gonna have to trust someone.” The stranger gives his name as Justin Wallace, and, taking one last glance at his daughter, the father replies with his own name, “Alex.” The wind howls outside the warmly lit church, and Alex's name, his first act of trust, is the last line of Season One. The solo heroic father has come in from the cold. It remains for Season Two to show what this thawing in his rugged individualism might mean.

*Station Eleven* explores northern Michigan from the point of view of the traveling symphony, emissaries of culture who visit frontier outposts that are either grateful to receive this culture or are skeptical of it. Mandel herself is from a small place, Denman's Island in British Columbia, but she is more recently of Toronto and New York. Northern Michigan is to her is a vacationer's blank, treed canvass. In *Northbound*, the culture is situated on this land. The Upper Peninsula convincingly plays itself. It's already depopulated, and its citizens are armed and accustomed to living amongst ruins. It woke up this morning ready for winter and ready for the apocalypse, and its fathers stand ready to carry their children and protect them from sinister government plots. It will, above all, defend its right to be itself.

---

1. Deloria, Phil, “Drain the Lake! Tear Down the Butte! Build Paradise! The Environmental Dimensions of Social and Economic Power in Boulder, Colorado and Benzie, Michigan,” *Southern California Quarterly* 89, no. 1. (2007): 65-88.

2. For an excellent history of this myth, see: Schmitz, Emily. “Place Mats: Calumet, Michigan and the State Capital Myth.” *Upper Country: A Journal of the Lake Superior Region* 1.no 1 (2013): 5.

3. Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of the Bard* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 379. Longtime Seattle theatre critic Joe Adcock recounts the legend as set either in the “Wild West” or “Russia's Wild East,” with the murder weapon varying by nationality. See Joe Adcock, “Seattle's 'Othello' is Rightfully Scary,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 8, 2005, accessed January 8, 2018, <http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/article/Seattle-s-Othello-is-rightfully-scary-1170483.php>

4. Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 119.

5. *Star Trek: Voyager*, “Survival Instinct,” direct by Terry Windell, writer, Gene Roddenberry, (September 29, 1999). Uttered by Seven of Nine.

6. Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 40.

7. Beirich, Heidi, “Agenda 21: The UN, Sustainability and Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, April, 2014, accessed January, 8, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/20140331/agenda-21-un-sustainability-and-right-wing-conspiracy-theory>