

TOP OF THE HOURGLASS

I) Introduction: I am examining place and lived experience in the production fiction representing or responding to earthquakes. This inquiry is motivated by the role of fiction as an artifact of culture and in this case of “earthquake culture” in the disaster discourse of the West Coast of the United States and Japan. Academically, this project fills important gaps in both the humanities and the sciences by bridging disaster and literary studies. The project speaks to the networks involved with creating art and the nebulous border between ‘reality’ and fiction. To this end, my framing question is: **How does literature relate to its cultural and physical context?**

II) Theoretical Frameworks & Key Concepts

- Theories
 - The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction (Le Guin 1984): Fiction is a container, and therefore a piece of human technology. Both the content and the form of the container implicate the cultural function of the story.
 - Transportation Theories (Green & Brock, Bussell & Bilandzic): Reading displaces readers from the place they are actually in into the world that the narrative constructs.
 - This narrative world has internal rules (Leitch).
 - Earthquake Culture
 - The integration of earthquake experience and knowledge into the political, physical (infrastructural), and informal knowledge of a place.
 - Where does earthquake culture come from? Where can we see it?
 - Nature/culture binary complicated and further dispelled by “earthquake culture”
- Key Concepts
 - Ecocriticism: the subfield of literary criticism that responds to the environmental movements of the later 20th Century (largely American, called “green studies” in Britain)
 - A response to apocalyptic classic environmentalism, hasn’t changed much. Deep ecology also resonates.
 - Many assumptions in critical works of eco-criticism; largely about ‘the environmental crisis’
 - Gap in ecocriticism: discussions of natural disasters such as earthquakes that are not often seen as anthropogenic, but have human consequences.
 - Science Fiction
 - Environmental history assigns narrative to environmental pasts (Cronon); science fiction often assigns narrative to imagined environmental futures (also known as speculative fiction)
 - Apocalypse and catastrophe a popular sub-genre of SF, which include earthquakes
 - What is the relationship between science and fiction in the genre of science fiction? Does the correct science matter to achieve good

fiction? Would the depiction of earthquakes in magical realist, realist, or speculative fiction count as science fiction?

MIDDLE OF THE HOURGLASS

III) Situated Context: Comparison and Relationship between PNW and Japan

- a. West Coast of the USA
 - i. Cascadia Subduction Zone: history and infrequency of earthquakes since colonial times, native oral tradition, missing earthquake culture
 - 1. Last event 1700: Orphan Tsunami
- b. Japan
 - i. Disaster culture
 - 1. 1923
 - 2. World War II
 - 3. 3/11
- c. How do Japan and The PNW connect
 - i. Physically connected via Pacific Ocean
 - 1. Orphan tsunami
 - ii. Cultural exchange, war, imperialism (historical context to come)

IV) Research Questions: **How and why do Japanese and American literatures differently, similarly, and/or relatedly render earthquakes and earthquake cultures? How do the physical, cultural, and authorial contexts of Japanese and American EQ literature influence the value of the art?**

V) Methods

- a. Literary Analysis of 6-8 (4) contemporary literary texts that render or respond to earthquakes
 - i. Identification of the function of artistic elements such as tropes, genres, narrative structure, metaphors, etc.
- b. Context Clues
 - i. Collection of interviews and author statements to discover authorial intention, biography, and lived experience (Slovic & Slatterfield)
 - 1. Necessary to answer research question #2 regarding the cultural and authorial contexts
 - 2. Comparison between literary theoretical framework and author philosophy
 - ii. Content and narrative analysis of news articles and reports documenting the specific disasters present in the text (Cascadia Subduction Zone, Tohoku Quake, etc.)

VI) Data and Results

- a. *after the quake* (Marukami) – responsive
 - i. Play adaptation – responsive
 - ii. Starrs
 - iii. March Was Made of Yarn – responsive and philanthropic
 - iv. Analysis: disaster peripheral, short story format, magical realism,
- b. “After the Big One” (Rothstein) – prospective

- i. Science Fiction
- c. *Tale for the Time Being* (Ruth Ozeki) – responsive
- d. Author biographies discussion (integrated)
- e. Comparative and theoretical discussion

BOTTOM OF THE HOURGLASS

- VII) Where does all of the above get us?
 - a. Disaster Studies: the role of literature to facilitate and channel grief and healing, the role of literature to serve as a warning and perhaps incite change (at least conversation)
 - b. Ecocriticism & environmental humanities: moving away from classic environmentalist assumptions and treatments of environmental crisis by considering the placement of disaster lit within this field
 - c. Culture versus nature: an untrue binary as demonstrated by its permeability and collapse within EQ fiction
 - d. Global disaster: the relationship between Japan and the US in this earthquake context demonstrates a fluidity between global boundaries that highlights the ripple effect of the emotional and physical sensations that accompany disaster
 - e. Place and unsettled landscapes
- VIII) The function of art to expand imaginations in many realms
 - a. Needed to supplement science with emotional content that assists scientific communication and application
 - b. While this paper argues that natural disasters complicate the classic environmentalist viewpoints of literature responding to climate change, the lessons learned about the relationship between prospective and responsive viewpoints, author intention, the unsettling of place, and global connection may serve to inspire, inform, and bolster literary campaigns regarding other types of catastrophes or fears. Importantly, this paper conceives of literature as an actor in a complex network of reader and writers in an unsettled seismic world. This literature is both a product of that unsettled world and produces it.