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Unsettling Fiction: Earthquake Literature in The Pacific Northwest and Japan

Writers have long used the magic of fiction as a tool for both responding to change and creating it. Crisis is central to the structure of literary fiction. There are many examples of real world crises appearing in fictional works, often for the purpose of protecting the author from the historical consequences of risky ideas.[1] Fiction has the unique power to conjure entire worlds where it can transport readers (Busselle and Bilandzic 2008). While certain types of literary criticism aim to understand fiction by examining only the world contained within the pages, other methods consider literature as an artifact of culture, of place, and of history. These broader lenses for studying literature acknowledge that earth systems, political events, migrations, wars, and other aspects of human culture seep across the nebulous border from 'reality' into fiction. When fiction engages with events of the real world, this expands the possibilities of that 'real' world (Le Guin 1986). In this way, the power of fiction is not just determined by its content, but also by specific contexts, experiences, and intentions of its author and its reader. When instances of crisis and change are rendered in fiction, this offers both writers and readers emotional vocabularies to grapple with changes outside of their own control, such as the case of political upheaval and natural disasters. What power does literature have in this capacity to act upon cultures unsettled by change? Considered as creators of place and reflections of lived experience, literatures bring emotional power to bear on complex networks of earth systems, regional identities, and individuals in dialogues of crisis and response.

Locating the power of fiction in both the world of the text and the world of the author pinpoints an intersection between place, language, and lived experience. These facets of fiction allow us to consider it as an artifact of a specific culture. In the genre of 'environmental' literature, nature writing and science fiction generated in the last two centuries celebrate rural landscapes, imagine dystopian and utopian future, and lament processes such as urbanization, deforestation, industrialization, and climate change (Buell 2001). Today's environmental discourse is strewn with the language of dramatic and looming crisis. This pillar of 20th century environmentalism is largely concerned with anthropogenic catastrophe. Environmental writers create fictional worlds that model evolving relationships between humans, technology, and the non-human world. However, the genre of natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanoes is largely overlooked in catastrophic environmentalism. Human cultures developing with the historical memory of disasters and resulting understanding of risk, have adapted to these events and folded their occurrence into regional cultures.

Earthquakes differ from other types of environmental crises because of unpredictable occurrence and non-anthropogenic sources. To probe the literary contribution to disaster cultures, I compare the earthquake literature of two locations equally situated at seismically active zones: The Pacific Northwest and Japan. They share an important physical connection in The Pacific Ocean, which serves as a conduit for seismic information in the form of tsunami waves. In fact, the history of the Cascadia Subduction Zone has only been able to be known to contemporary scientists because of cultural and scientific data from Japan (Atwater et al. 2015). Japanese disaster infrastructure and preparedness exceeds that of the Pacific Northwest due to the fresh historical memory of disasters in Japanese society. The Pacific Northwest may be able learn from Japanese earthquake and tsunami culture on many different levels to prepare for the future Cascadia events. With this instrumental possibility in mind, we turn to the earthquake literature of Japan and the Pacific Northwest to ask: how and why do these artifacts render, represent, and respond to earthquakes and therefore contribute to earthquake culture?

To examine the earthquake cultures simultaneously contained within and propagated by each text, my analysis considers fictional worlds alongside the lived experiences of their authors. To find texts that represented earthquakes, I utilized lists such one compiled by the *Los Angeles Times* (Ulin 2011). From a wide array of choices, I decided to pursue contemporary fiction representing real or predicted earthquakes in earthquake-prone regions: *after the quake* by Haruki Murakami, the stage adaptation of Murakami's collection by Frank Galati, *After the Big One* by Adam Rothstein, *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki, and *March Was Made of Yarn*. My analysis of these contemporary pieces has the benefit of historical and popular discourse revealing earthquake cultures and of living authors able to speak with authority regarding the specific motivations and circumstances that lead to the production of the work. To examine the fictional worlds, I turn to the stories themselves. I look at narrative structure, figurative language, and characterization to learn how the earthquakes are represented through these textual devices and how the characters reckon with the events. The 'real world' component of my textual analysis is to collect statements and interviews from the authors to create context for why each work was created in regards to the seismic events to which they respond.[2]

after the quake by Haruki Murakami is a collection of five short stories published in response to the 1995 Kobe earthquake. The earthquake itself is peripheral to the stories, only appearing on televisions and through indirect reference. At the same time, it establishes an underlying and sustained tension within each piece. The collection was translated by Jay Rubin, who changed the title from the original literal translation "All God's Children Can Dance" to the lower case *after the*

quake. This decision emphasizes the earthquake's centrality resonance for the English-reading audience. Marukami's self-reflexive style contains a deep awareness that fiction is not real life.[3] In "Honey Pie," there is a character who is himself a writer. In "Superfrog Saves Tokyo," magical realism and comical elements challenge the characters to believe the unbelievable. A key passage in "All God's Children Can Dance" connects the artistic movements of dancing with the unsettling truths of instability in the experience of earthquakes.[4] By drawing attention to fakeness of fiction, Murakami asserts the power of literature to make salient the experiences of grappling with disaster. He is motivated by a drive to correct the personal abstraction he felt from Japan during his time as an ex-pat in the United States. His intention to use writing, fiction, and craft for a personal end also may serve a similar saliency for his English readers, distant from the place of disaster. These stories have captured the imaginations of many people in the United States and has been adapted in various media from film to musical composition. Since the early 2000s when his collection was published, he has been vocal about the power of art to grieve, process, and reckon with disaster.[5] Both Murakami's art and philosophy argues that writing fiction has the power to make disasters real and meaningful in ways that news reports cannot, even if that writing renders the disasters themselves in comic, magical, unrealistic, or subtle ways.

Frank Galati's stage adaptation of Marukami's *after the quake* in the arena of American theatre highly emphasizes the contours of Murakami's narrative structure. In fact, the characters within the stage production alternate narrating their own stories alongside the explicit narrator. The figure of the writer in "Honey Pie" becomes the storyteller in the adaptation of "Superfrog Saves Tokyo," thus embedding these stories within one another. Besides greatly emphasizing the process through which stories are told and received, this model is fundamentally unsettling, confusing, chaotic, even difficult to follow. To draw upon Le Guin's theory on the importance of form, the play is a series of interior containers or narrative each spilling into one another and into the audience. This breaches the borders between stories. Importantly, the most interior narrative embedded within the layers of narrative is the myth of a villainous, earthquake causing worm. By placing the actual source of an earthquake at the very center of the narrative structure, Galati as the playwright reinforces the unsettling and fear-invoking event of an earthquake at the heart of the art. This stage adaptation demonstrates the American reverence of Murakami's collection which celebrates the depth of the work and speaks to the transmission of earthquake cultural artifact across borders.

While Murakami's collection is largely retrospective in its invocation of the aftermath of the 1995 earthquake, other earthquake narratives such as Adam Rothstein's anticipatory *After the Big One* look forward into the future rather than into the past. This series depicts the predicted fallout of a

massive Cascadia event in Portland, Oregon. Published on *Vice*'s science platform *Motherboard*, Rothstein describes the piece as speculative fiction as it engages with a possible, but uncertain future (Rothstein 2016). Rothstein takes great care to represent the host of statistics and scientific data-points in a narrative to translate the earthquake culture of the government officials and scientists for mainstream audiences. Rothstein, like Murakami, is very aware of his chosen medium of fiction. He bestows hope in the instrumental possibilities of this tactic to make salient the risk an unprecedented future hazard. He uses fiction to escape the nightmares of surprise disasters by replicating, predicting, and modeling that nightmare in an immediate and proximate world. The status of this piece as fiction invites a collaboration between scientific fact and the fundamental falseness of fiction to bring future events into present imaginations. He relies on vivid, factual descriptions of the fate of known places which are only fictional because it hasn't happened yet. His intention is to create risk awareness to correct an uninformed earthquake culture by writing a hyper-realistic world.

Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* is an artifact of Pacific Northwest earthquake culture that fixes its gaze on the disaster culture of Japan. Like Marukami's stories, Ruth Ozeki's narrative structure experiments with the relationships between 'reality' and fiction, between writer and reader. Ozeki is herself the fictional character who discovers a Japanese diary on the British Columbia shore after the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Nao, the voice of the diary, is fully aware of the powers and limitations of writing. The power is magic: being able to reach through time and space in order make a human connection. The limitation: the impossibility of ever traversing the distance between writer and reader to corroborate this connection in real life. Ozeki's novel asserts that writing actually does have the power to transport readers to make real, emotional, and sympathetic change within an unsettled world. Her fictional style, her Zen philosophy, experimental scientific theory reinforce and bolster the frameworks of transportation by blurring the boundaries between 'reality' and fiction in order to foreground the very real potential of fiction to create sympathy. Indeed, her focus on Fukushima's aftermath hints at the unpreparedness of her island in British Columbia for Cascadia. The novel's relationship between Japan and The Pacific Northwest through the Pacific Ocean emphasizes the water expanse both a force of destruction and a conduit for connection. Not only does Ozeki blur the containers of fiction and 'reality' but she also blurs the distinctions between the different earthquake cultures of the Pacific Northwest and Japan.

Rothstein's piece is inherently prospective while Murakami, Galati, and Ozeki each engage retrospectively with the event of seismic disaster. This is certainly related to the place-based histories of each work: the lack of recent seismic history in the Pacific Northwest, the significance of Japan's disasters in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Each author admits that the stories channel the energy of

their grief upon hearing the news of the events that inspired each piece: Rothstein's fear, Ozeki and Murakami's mourning. In this way, social wounds, geological histories of each place, and the distance from the event both in space and time impact the authorial intent and stylistic form of each work. In some cases, adaptations of Murakami and another collection of stories called *March Was Made of Yarn* sent funds generated by sales to disaster relief efforts in Japan after Fukushima. Here, art exerts a monetary power in addition to its emotional value in post-disaster networks.

As demonstrated by these works, the narrative form can make disasters far in temporal and geographic space seem present, significant, and salient. This study finds that literature is a powerful place where one person's grief can resonate as a national example of earthquake culture, as Murakami demonstrates. Rothstein invests in the power of literature to incite some change within readership by interjecting itself as an artifact of a missing earthquake culture. Ozeki's witness of distant, fictional, or imagined disaster informs the earthquake culture of a place like British Columbia. My reading of these texts demonstrates how human actors can assert creative agency over tumultuous physical systems. These authors, motivated by grief, fear, and impotency, generate emotional work that adds a fictional counterpart to real places. At least in the minds of the authors, the production of creative works is a useful cultural contribution to places both grieving and anticipating disaster. By considering disaster literature in conversation with scientific and popular discourses, this study demonstrates how fiction can imbue the disaster culture of jargon and sensationalism with emotional awareness and reflection. This has the potential to assist in scientific communication and application which is necessary for effective disaster relief, response, and preparation.

Considering earthquake literature under a lens of ecocriticism demonstrates how non-anthropogenic catastrophe creates and changes culture by necessitating emotional adaptation and preparedness. The relationship between Japan and the U.S. in the context of earthquakes demonstrates a fluidity of global boundaries, resulting in a ripple effect of the emotional and physical sensations through a connected world. According to the specific intentions of authors, literature has the power to either unsettle or sooth people enmeshed in disaster. The scope of this paper is limited to the creation of literature rather than the reception by a readership, a ripe question for further study. By recognizing the unique power of transportation, emotional rehearsal, and border crossing offered by literary engagement with disaster, we may be able to apply the lessons learned from earthquake literature to production and reception of art responding to the disasters of the future that range from political upheaval to subduction to climate change.

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Notes

[1] For instance, the creation of an imagined island in Thomas More's *Utopia* allowed him to speak freely about social and political crises without pointing fingers directly at the powerful regime of King Henry VIII.

[2] This methodology is inspired by Satterfield and Slovic's work on environmental values (Satterfield and Slovic 2004) and Pauls Toutonghi's fiction courses at Lewis & Clark College.

[3] In an interview with *The Paris Review,* Murakami admits "I don't want to persuade the reader that it's a real thing; I want to show it as it is. In a sense, I'm telling those readers that it's just a story—it's fake. But when you experience the fake as real, it can be real. It's not easy to explain" (Wray 2004).

[4]"And then it struck him what lay buried far down under the earth on which his feet were so firmly planted: the ominous rumblings of the deepest darkness, secret rivers that transported desire, slimy creatures writhing, the lair of earthquakes ready to transform whole cities into mounts of rubble. These, too, were helping to create the rhythm of the earth" (Marukami 2000, 79).

[5] See Murakami's speech "Speaking as an Unrealistic Dreamer" delivered in July 2011.