

Fiction from Unstable Ground: The Imagination of Disaster in the Aftermath of the Kantō Earthquake

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Abstract: *This essay explores two different approaches to disaster found in fiction following the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923: trauma and differential vulnerability.*

Keywords: *fiction, trauma, vulnerability, disaster, Great Kantō Earthquake*

The subtitle of Susan Napier's influential 1993 essay, "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from *Godzilla* to *Akira*," calls attention to the Japanese imagination of disaster. Napier's essay, like the Susan Sontag essay (1966) from which Napier borrows the term, centers on fictitious disasters, namely those found in popular movies, novels, and manga. Whereas the disasters in science fiction discussed in both Napier and Sontag are imaginations of future apocalypses, the imagination of disaster is also a fruitful way of considering representations of real disasters as well. Fiction looking back at the 1923 Kantō earthquake in the aftermath provides different frameworks through which people can make sense of that particular disaster as well as understand similar catastrophes that will inevitably arise in the future. Together, these frameworks create a shared imagination of disaster through which we can make sense of

events that exceed the everyday.

In the essay "The Cultural Analysis of Disaster," Isak Winkel Holm suggests that the representation of catastrophes is "a cultural tool enabling human beings to make sense of a disaster" (Winkel Holm 2012, 22). These representations contribute to the more general imagination of disaster but do so in a variety of ways. In this essay, I discuss two different frameworks, what Winkel Holm has called "cognitive schemes structuring the cultural imagination of disaster" (Winkel Holm 2012, 24). One is the most frequently taken approach to disaster representations, that of trauma. The other, less frequently cited in cultural analysis but often central in sociological studies, is the way disasters exacerbate social inequalities. Both frameworks can be seen in fiction following the Kantō earthquake, and they shape the Japanese imagination of disaster by conveying the psychological damage of mass death and destruction on the individual level or the macro structural inequalities of society that impact vulnerability.

The cognitive schemes Winkel Holm identifies are focused on the Western world and include the sublime, trauma, theodicy, and apocalypse. In Japan, there is less of a history of the Kantian linkage of disaster and aesthetics in the sublime or of debates over the goodness of God in the wake of disaster à la Voltaire following the Lisbon earthquake. Trauma is one approach to disaster that is shared both in the Western examples Winkel

Holm explores and the Japanese earthquakes. For example, trauma is the focus of Leith Morton’s recent book on war and disasters in modern Japanese literature. We can furthermore see representations of disaster-induced trauma in Murakami Haruki’s stories “ufo in kushiro” and “honey pie” from his collection *after the quake*, set in the months following the 1995 Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake (see Rosbow 2012), and in the recent anime film *Suzume*, in which the protagonist visits the sites of Japan’s disasters from the last century while dealing with the loss of her mother in the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011.



Figure 1: The hit anime film *Suzume* approaches the devastation of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami through the lens of trauma (Eiga *Suzume no tojimari kōshiki* 2022).

Although psychoanalysis was a recent import to Japan in 1923, and it was not the codified response to disaster it is today, we can nevertheless see evidence of authors viewing the disaster as causing psychological distress manifest in an inability to speak, the repetition of distressing images and sounds in the mind, and hallucinations.

Few authors lost loved ones or others close to them, and few suffered more than minor damage to their homes.¹ Their explorations of disaster-induced trauma were therefore mostly through fiction. Masamune Hakuchō hints at a traumatic response in his fictional account of a woman who is recuperating in the countryside from a minor injury sustained in the disaster, “The Suffering of Another” (“Tanin no saigai”) from early 1924.² Although the protagonist,

Kitako, does not seem to outwardly suffer from trauma, there is a boy in the story who cries out in pain without having an apparent physical illness. Kitako’s response to her skeptical mother suggests her own inner trauma as well. “You can’t cry out like that with just a feigned illness. I heard many similar screams at the time of the quake. It is as if they are stuck, echoing in my ears, even now” (Masamune 2003, 54). Hakuchō’s story displays an awareness of different levels of suffering and of psychological wounds that may not be apparent on the outside.

Often, depictions of trauma appear in the form of encounters with the dead. One story from 1927, titled “A Strange Story from the Quake” (“Shinsai ibun”) by Togawa Sadao, centers on the trauma of losing someone to the disaster coupled with the trauma of witnessing so many dead. The macabre story is narrated by a magazine photographer who takes photos for his work as he searches unsuccessfully for his wife after the earthquake. Unfortunately, his publishing company is destroyed in the disaster, and he decides to sell the photos himself as mementos of the earthquake, noting that photographs of the dead sell particularly well.



Figure 2: Example of a postcard showing the dead sold illegally after the quake. Collection of the author. Please click

through for the full size image.

After his images have earned him a considerable sum, someone who claimed to have been with his wife on that fateful day points out her body in two of the images he sold. It does seem possible, but inconclusive, and the photographer is distraught. Later, however, his wife suddenly appears and takes to her bed sick. He cares for her, but after he leaves to fetch a doctor, he returns to find her gone. In shock, he looks at the negatives he had hidden, and the two supposedly showing his wife have been destroyed. This story was published in *Shinseinen (New Youth)*, and thus perhaps its interest in psychosis, ghosts, and the macabre is to be expected.³ The narrator mentions in the introduction that scientists laugh at his story and diagnose him as suffering from neurasthenia (*shinkei sui'yaku*, Togawa 1989, 316). Terms like the recently imported word “hysteria” (*hisuteri*) and “madness” (*kichigai*) appear regularly throughout and showcase the era’s concern with abnormal psychology. Nevertheless, this is one of the few stories of the time that emphasizes the link between the traumatic experience of the earthquake and psychological pain using the lexicon of trauma.

One powerful story of disaster trauma comes from Tayama Katai. Katai wrote a few works relating to his own experiences of the disaster, such as the book-length *Record of the Tokyo Earthquake (Tōkyō shinsaiki)*, but he also wrote a short, fictional story entitled “A Single Grain Adrift in the Sea” (“*Taikai no ichizoku*”).⁴ This story is about a man, identified as B, who searches for his missing father among the corpses in the aftermath. Upon returning from his first excursion, B starts to relay the horrors he witnessed to his wife but goes silent as “images swept through his mind like a movie reel” (Tayama 1923, 4). The inability to express himself and the mental images of death and

destruction suggest psychic anguish and trauma. There is a possibility that Katai’s depiction of trauma at encountering mass death provided a model for “Summer Flowers,” Hara Tamiki’s short story about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Hara, who came to Tokyo not long after the 1923 earthquake, included a short coda in his personal account of the bombing that described another person, called only “N,” looking for his wife among the bodies following that atrocity. Both Katai’s and Hara’s stories convey the trauma and horror of looking at bodies in the aftermath of mass death.

One popular writer, Nagata Mikihiko, wrote about traumatic experiences of the earthquake through a framing narrative describing his encounter with a man who lived through the worst of the disaster: the inferno at the site of the razed army clothing depot, the *hifukushō*. Many residents of the more working-class district of Honjō took refuge in this vacant lot as fires spread through the wooden buildings in the area. Eventually, however, they were surrounded by the flames which then engulfed the entire region leaving more than 30,000 dead. Mikihiko’s story “Wild Dance of the Flames” (“*Honoo no ranbu*”) is primarily comprised of the account by this man.⁵ It is hard to tell whether Mikihiko actually met a survivor of the *hifukushō* or whether the story is a true recounting of that experience. Fictional or not, Mikihiko portrays the experience in extreme terms. Before losing consciousness, the man describes “people on fire twirling around me as if they were swimming insanely in the air” (Nagata 1923, 161). Later he awakens beneath a pile of bodies and is so thirsty that he drinks from a pool of water “made muddy by human fat and burnt blood” (Nagata 1923, 163). Like “B” in Katai’s “A Single Grain Adrift in the Sea,” this man tells of looking for the bodies of his family members amid the tens of thousands of bodies at the *hifukushō*. These extreme experiences would be called traumatic by any definition,

and the man’s trauma is conveyed by Mikihiko in the end of the story within the story. The last words the man says are “When I recall the mountains of bodies, I feel like I am no longer among the living. ...” (Nagata 1923, 166). Those ellipses show that there are further words that cannot be spoken due to the trauma and Mikihiko’s narrator, modeled on himself, says that the man’s words trailed off as he gazed toward the direction of the *hifukushō*, where the smoke from cremation still rose. Seeing the man’s state, the narrator muses “What can save the spirits of those sunk in the depths of a despair that even denies life?” (Nagata 1923, 167).

Although trauma is a useful way to approach representations of disaster, it can deflect attention from other aspects of disasters. As Winkel Holm writes, the trauma approach is “unable to grasp the context of collective and systemic mechanisms through which human beings contribute to disaster” (Winkel Holm 2012, 28). In other words, the ways that social structures impact the vulnerability of different groups in a disaster gets hidden when the focus is on individual pain. Disaster representations can nevertheless call attention to those structures in ways that move beyond the individualized focus of trauma.

In the case of the Kantō earthquake, social structures had a clear impact on the outcomes. One obvious case is the Korean massacre, where colonialism and xenophobia lead to the deaths of thousands of Koreans, as discussed by Andre Haag in another essay in this issue and by Kenji Hasegawa (2022) and Sonia Ryang (2007), among others. There was also a clear distinction between the more working-class areas in eastern Tokyo, like Honjō, that bore the brunt of the disaster and the more well-to-do regions of Tokyo that weathered the disaster with relatively few casualties. In fact, this is a key element of Nakata Mikihiko’s story “Wild Dance of the Flames.” As I have discussed elsewhere, Mikihiko describes the need to

dress like a laborer to fit in with the people living on that side of the city, showing his awareness of the class difference and an anxiety surrounding that difference.⁶

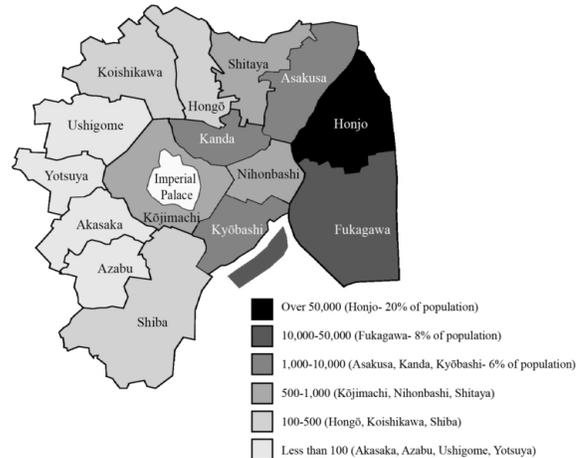


Figure 3: Map of Taishō-era Tokyo Wards with number of deaths recorded in each ward (Bates 2015 with data from Fujisawa 1926).

The disaster studies scholars Susanna Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith note that social structures in place before disasters become more pronounced afterwards. They write, “the distribution of power within a society reveals itself not only in the differential vulnerability of groups, but in the allocation of resources in reconstruction as well” (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002, 4). Aono Suekichi recognized this when he wrote in 1924 that “the earthquake and the fires may not have recognized class difference, but the calamity that befell people was certainly based on class.” (Aono 1996, 9). Some works called attention to these differences, even if they were not overtly critical of the social structures that led to the difference in vulnerability.

Fujimori Seikichi’s story from 1924, “Among

the Refugees” (“Nogaretaru hitobito”), emphasizes this class difference and vulnerability. Fujimori depicts the Aoki family, who had weathered the disaster with relative ease in Ushigome, on the western side of Tokyo, and felt a need to do something to help. They seek out a particularly needy family at a nearby evacuation center to take care of at their home. The family they take in, the Imamuras, fled the fires that destroyed their *shitamachi* home in Kanda. The father was a cart-puller but was injured in a work-related accident before the quake, leaving him an invalid. After bringing them home, the Aokis use their connection to a local hospital to help the father get admitted. Eventually, his condition worsens, and he dies. Shortly thereafter, the Imamura family heads out to the country to rely on the kindness of relations. The Aokis’ relationships with Omon, the mother, develops over the course of the story, but there are cultural differences that stem from their class differences that cause discomfort. In one obvious case, there is conflict between the children of the two families and the Aokis note with concern that the Imamura’s son uses rough “city language” like “temee,” a more aggressive form of you (Fujimori 2003, 31). The class difference is further emphasized when the Aokis pay for the hospital and funeral expenses. The story does not explore the root causes of the class-based difference in the earthquake experience but outlines the differences in resources including the social capital of hospital connections and the discretionary funds to pay for care. In so doing, Fujimori makes clear the differences in vulnerability.

Following a major catastrophe, authors are often concerned about the role played by the arts in the aftermath. As I have discussed elsewhere, a major literary debate was reignited following the disaster over whether art should benefit society, a position championed by Kikuchi Kan, or remain dedicated to “art for art’s sake,” as argued by Satomi Ton (Bates 2015, 37-50). This debate

was sparked by Kikuchi’s assertion that, in the face of disaster, “art is a useless luxury” (Kikuchi 1923, 117). Following the 3.11 disasters, Kumagai Tatsuya echoed Kikuchi Kan in an essay titled “When Words have become Powerless.” There he writes, “in the end, immediately after the disaster, in both the devastated area and beyond, words were mostly powerless” (Kumagai 2011, 175).⁷ But words do have a function in disaster. They teach us different ways to make sense of the shaken world that suddenly surrounds us. In other words, art helps us think about the ways that we can think about disaster.

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Notes

¹ See the discussion of authors in Bates 2015, 30–36. Major exceptions to this were those targeted by authorities like Hirasawa Keishichi, Ōsugi Sakae, and Itō Noe.

² This story is discussed further in Bates 2015.

³ For a discussion of psychology and *Shinseinen* in the work of Yumeno Kyūsaku, see Clerici 2016.

⁴ This story is discussed further in Bates 2015.

⁵ See Bates 2010 and 2015 for further discussion of this story.

⁶ See Bates 2010 and 2015.

⁷ For further discussion of authors' reactions to the 3.11 disasters, see Kimura 2013 and 2022, and Haga 2019.