Modern & Contemporary Literature — Notes on *After the Quake* by Haruki Murakami:

A) Lecture Notes (Contextual Information & Background on the Novel):

- Is Murakami a cultural mediator? being neither one thing nor the other, representing neither East nor West. inside both and outside both cultures
- western literary/cultural citations in the novel: Dostoevsky and Jean-Luc Godard provide epigraphs, Super Frog reads Conrad, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and others from the western literary canon. Jonko in “Landscape with Flatiron” thinks about a story by Jack London
- Think of the shift away from national literary identity towards something more transnational
- Is this “world literature?”
- The global circulation of literatures through global languages
- Can Murakami participate in world literature and also be “nothing but a Japanese writer?”
- The “Japanisation” of the west
- Until the 1980s: Japan was a global economic power but was not culturally global
- Changes during the 1990s: the international “Haruki boom” gained momentum during the 1990s, around the same time as anime and Japanese-made computer games pushed into global markets - Inuhiko Yomata
- Murakami is not a Japanese literary purist
- Yomata comments on the “absence of Japanese stereotypes” in Murakami’s writing
- Murakami’s novels are largely devoid of anything suggestive of traditional Japanese
- “Placeless” Japanese writer: his "cultural scentlessness”
- The beginning of Japan’s western modernity
- No geishas or samurais in Murakami, only stereotypical figures
- Edward Said, *Orientalism*: "the Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”
- *Orientalism* describes how the west has constructed images of the East for itself: it is a discourse used by the West to account for the East, to speak
about it, and distinguish itself from it. A way of administrating, but also of imagining, the East.

- Japan has long been a place of fascination for the West, talking about contemporary Japan
- How to be Japanese in the modern world, how to “inhabit” Japan
- Junichiro Tanizaki: “We Orientals…create a kind of beauty of the shadows we have made in out-of-the-way places…Such is our way of thinking — we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates"
- The Western view is all about light, illumination, vision, enlightenment: to see is know. but the Japanese view is in contrast to Western enlightenment: not to explain, to keep things “in the dark” to refuse to shed light on the subject. So shadows are built into the experiences of daily life: not just reserved for “special occasions”
- Tanizaki: “the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows. to form there a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament.” he disapproved of electric lighting
- Japan as an ultra secular place devoted to sensation, appearance, erotics
- Japan: fragmented, decorative, exquisite, pure
- A series of peripheral events
- No sense of progression or order
- Signs only point to other signs, difficult to find expressions of meaning
- A multitude of empty signs, inner emptiness
- “Content” as its theme, makes it absent or empties it of meaning
- Murakami = decentered himself

B) Lecture Notes (Analysis of the Novel):

- The stories circle around the Kobe earthquake of January 1995 but they are “distanced” from it: geographically, relationally etc.
- The earthquake is experienced not first-hand, but as a mediated event through TV, journalism, a note left by Komura’s wife, a comment from a character
• The effects of this trauma: remote yet intimate, life-changing and in some senses, in explicable
• The stories precede another national trauma, the sarin gas attack by members of Aum Shinrikyo (a Japanese radical, apocalyptic religious group) in Tokyo’s subway system in March 1995
• Between two cataclysmic events
• Murakami’s fascination with these events is “symptomatic” of modern Japan
• The effects of trauma
• The Japanese psyche in his non-fiction book Underground, interviews 60 people of the gas attack and 8 members of Aum. the focus on the “face” of the victims, to get the past the mediated, face to face interaction
• Connection between the ordinary person and the victim
• Face, a life, a family, hopes and fears, contradictions and dilemmas. Each character has a face.
• Their normality, not complaining, keeping their sufferings to themselves, docile
• Juxtaposition of normality and disorientation, conformity and difference, the ordinary and the irrational
• The average citizen
• When Komura’s sex drive for other women “simply and mysteriously” vanished - that’s the irrational bit
• Characters without content e.g. Komura’s wife. she is so ordinary
• Emptiness, absence, distance
• The little box Komura is given reflects his diagnosed condition: he gave it a little shake but he couldn’t feel or hear anything moving inside
• Tokyo = centre of Japanese modernity to the provincial, peripheral areas
• In the wake of Japan’s WW2 defeat and post-WW2 occupation by the US (and UK and Australia), in the wake of its humiliation and loss of national identity - Japanese literary modernism, Rebecca Suter
• Sharon Kinsella in Adult Manga: these grand narratives - the things that form a coherent, modern Japan - are built around “work, family, nation” 2000
• Japan is more conformist, more normalising
• Things are not absolute in Murakami’s work, there are fractured values, text is generally fragmented
• Murakami’s characters are identified as regional rather national, metropolitan or provincial rather than “Japanese"
• Murakami’s characters are also often estranged from their families: Komura and his absent wife, Miyake and his family (in Kobe), Satsuki, the thyroid
doctor in “Thailand,” estranged from her husband (in Kobe), Junpei, who will not return to his family (in Kobe)

- Characters who do not seem to have a clear future, lost
- What is the future for the Japanese youth?
- Murakami: my protagonist is always missing something, and he’s searching for that missing thing
- Solitary characters, not generally attached (positively) to work, nation, family
- Unambitious, inexplicably alone, not aspirational
- Self-effacement, characters who have dropped away from community structures, alienated
- Hikiko Mori: the term coined by psychologist Tamaki Saito: mostly applied to middle-class male adolescents who refuse to leave home (often, after the experience of social and/or academic failure)
- Acute social withdrawal, seclusion, isolation
- Do characters stand our or just blend in
- Self delusions of ordinary life
- In Murakami’s stories, solitary characters can at least take a journey, but towards what?
- Yoshiya in the baseball field, giving himself up to the “flow of time” and then he experiences an epiphany. a glimpse of, a connection to, the apocalypse?
- Super-Frog: “the whole terrible fight occurred in the area of imagination. that is the precise location of our battlefield. it is there that we experience our victories and our defeats"
- Taking journeys to the edge, periphery of modernity
- Process of discovery, becoming “placeless,” a condition of modernity
- Karl Marx: “all that is solid melts into air” with capitalism
- Modernity produces disappearance
- The mysterious
- Intimate and distant at the same time, absent and present, opposites seem to fold into each other and define each other

C) Notes on Reading 1 — A Shock to the System by Haruki Murakami (translated by Jay Rubin) in the New York times:

*includes page numbers within the article (these are direct quotes)

- Surprisingly epic and dark pg. 1