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Asiatic Anxieties: Fukushima, Fringe Media, and Radiation as the New Yellow Peril

Trane DeVore

Introduction

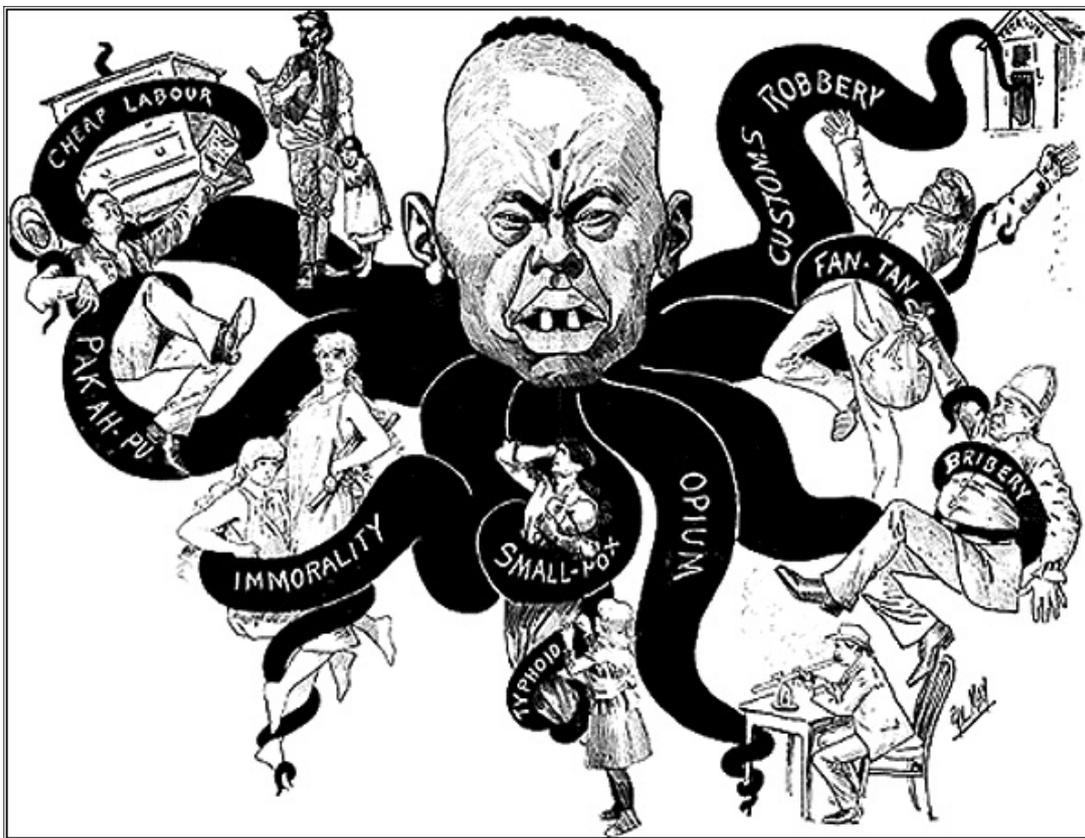
In an earlier essay written for the 2013 Osaka University Rhetoric Society Project based around the theme of “textual and cultural rhetorics” (言語文化共同研究プロジェクト 2013 テキストのレトリック 文化のレトリック), I argued that fringe alternative media websites, most of which are based in the United States, have commonly employed several rhetorical tactics in an effort to depict the 2011 nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in an exaggerated and apocalyptic light. These websites often depict the 2011 disaster as being the first stage in the end of the world as we know it, and offer up images of an ocean devoid of fish while worldwide cancer rates skyrocket. According to many of these sites, in the worst-case scenario humanity itself will cease to exist as spent fuel rods combine in an atomic conflagration that releases an unendurable amount of radioactive particulate matter into the air, resulting in the destruction of the bulk of life on the planet. As I argued in the earlier paper, titled “Pass the butter, Japan is toast’: Alternative Media, Paranoia, and the Apocalyptic Tendency in American Thought,” there are three fundamental rhetorical tools deployed by the fringe alternative media when presenting the exaggerated accounts that they like to offer up to the public as “the real truth”: 1) The purposeful misrepresentation and manipulation of scientific data for the purpose of adding the weight of scientific authority to claims that, in fact, are completely contradicted by almost all available scientific studies; the misuse of scientific language and data, and the widespread deployment of scientific jargon, lends a veneer of scientific respectability to pseudoscience that bears no relationship to reality. 2) The erection of a framework of spurious connections based on the ability to construct “orders *different from* the visible [. . .] *repeated as structure*” (Bersani 102). In a 1989 essay, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature,” Leo Bersani investigates the paranoid tendency to form patterns of connection between data points that actually have no verifiable relation to one another. The fringe websites that report on Fukushima use this tendency in order to form a web of associative linkages, all of which lead back to the Fukushima Daiichi plant whether there is any actual connection or not. 3) The appropriation of the Christian tradition of apocalyptic thinking and the application of this readymade schema — with its almost instant cultural legibility — as a framework for thinking through the ultimate consequences of the radiation releases from the nuclear plant.

In the earlier paper I argued that the rhetorical exaggeration deployed by the fringe alternative media — perhaps out of an honest (though misguided) belief in the critical nature of the situation at the Daiichi plant, though just as likely an effort to generate clickbait headlines in order to increase traffic and advertising revenuesⁱ from overly credulous Internet users — effectively masks the very real nature of the continuing radiation leakage that is a byproduct of cleanup efforts, as well as the suffering of those residents of the Fukushima region who have been left without permanent homes for far too long, due in large part to the ineffectiveness of government remediation efforts. In addition, I argued that depictions of the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant often rely on a pair of tropes that rely on essentialist depictions of the Japanese “character” that are, in fact, variants of racist discourses that circulated most strongly during the period surrounding WWII. The first of these tropes is that of the sneak attack, which, though grounded in the historical attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base, takes on a life of its own by figuring Japan as a space of irrational unpredictability, the site of a pre-modern fanaticism that is ready to unleash itself on the rest of the world at any time. That this trope has a long afterlife can be seen in the descriptions given by several fringe media reports of the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant which figure the disaster as a “sneak attack”ⁱⁱ on the rest of the world, with particular focus on the west coast of the United States.

The second trope that is deployed is that of Japan as a closed, unknowable, and inscrutable country that is difficult to know because it is uniquely closed off from the rest of the world. This trope is related to Japan’s history of *sakoku* (鎖国 — “chained country”), the policy of the Tokugawa shogunate that restricted foreign access to Japan, as well as to stereotypical ideas surrounding the idea of *tatemaie* (建前), the performance of public identity and expression which is often thought of as a kind of deception, especially among commentators who oppose the idea of ‘saving face’ to the values of ‘truthfulness’ and direct ‘self expression’ that are assumed to be the purview of Western culture even though there’s not a scrap of evidence to suggest that the governments of Europe and the Americas are any less prone to presenting dishonest and hypocritical public fronts when it serves their needs.

In this paper I'd like to continue to explore the types of rhetorical language deployed by the fringe alternative media when describing the radioactive disaster that has resulted from the earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, placing a special emphasis on what I see as the circulation of rhetorical types and structures that are remnants of classic "yellow peril" thinking. Most of the articles and videos about the Fukushima Daiichi plant that are produced by the fringe media aren't blunt enough to openly reproduce the type of racist language that has largely fallen out of common usage; instead, these articles and videos exhibit traces of formerly common representations and figurations associated with "yellow peril" thinking, but transformed and recombined in such a way that they remain largely invisible without careful scrutiny. In this paper I'll investigate several related sites of racist anti-Asian thinking that find their roots in the late 1800s in an attempt to further unpack the political unconscious that lies behind fringe media reporting on the Daiichi disaster. In particular I'll examine the trope of the Asian octopus, threading its yellow tentacles throughout the world system in an effort to effect world domination, a trope that appears repeatedly in a variety of telling permutations, including media descriptions of the Fukushima Daiichi accident.

1. The "Mongolian" Octopus



(Figure 1: "The Mongolian Octopus – His Grip on Australia," by Phillip May, 1886, Wikimedia Commons.)

The image above, a cartoon by Phillip May titled "The Mongolian Octopus – His Grip on Australia," was originally published in Sydney, in *The Bulletin*, in August of 1886. Though this cartoon is Australian in origin, it serves to stand in for the genre of "yellow peril" thinking that infected the United States, Canada, Australia, and other areas within the zone of Anglo-European colonization in which increasing rates of Chinese labor were seen as a threat to the well-being of populations figured as largely Anglo-Saxon, European, and white. Anti-Asian sentiment was initially directed at the largely male Chinese populations emigrating to escape from poverty and famine, and attempting to find decent-paying work in labor markets that were seen as vastly more advantageous for Chinese workers than those back home. The prejudice that

these workers met was harsh and unremitting and culminated in race-based legal restrictions such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

“The Mongolian Octopus” is only one of a series of iterations figuring both China and Japan as Asiatic threats to Euro-American cultural and economic wellbeing. May’s cartoon combines two different, but connected, strains of thought. The first is a race-based essentialism that views the “Mongolian” race as culturally and physically degenerate, spreading crime, disease, and a dangerous, non-Christian, set of cultural values. It’s the second, however, that is in some ways more interesting for an analysis of the way in which the image of the octopus hides beneath many of the rhetorical figurations that emerge in the media, and especially the fringe media, at the time of the Fukushima Daiichi crisis. The second strain of thinking that informs the image of the octopus as figure for Asian invasion is economic in nature, and not based in purely racialized notions of essential and immutable cultural characteristics. While it’s certainly possible that “fan-tan,” a card game involving betting, “pak ah-pu” (more commonly known as ‘pakapoo’), a Chinese lottery game, “bribery,” and “customs robbery,” can all be thrown at the feet of racist notions of an essentially degenerate Chinese morality, “cheap labour” is a product of abstract market forces that come to the fore in a rapidly expanding global economic system in which the forces of industrialization, market expansion, finance capital, and monopolization all come into play in relation to emerging labor markets and transnational flows of population. In other words, May’s octopus transposes two different systems of critique – one a nativist form of racial panic and the other a more abstract critique of the market system — and marries them together in the image of a single monstrous body. The “Mongolian Octopus” works as a powerful rhetorical image precisely because of this spectacular combination of two functionally different concepts: on the one hand the racist caricature of the “Mongolian” face serves to metonymically stand in for the bodies of all Asians, encoding the idea of a degenerate, ugly, and — in comparison to representations of Anglo-Saxon strength and beauty — lesser form of racial being; on the other hand the figure of the octopus functions metaphorically to express the abstract structures of global capitalist expansion, including new structures of transnational interconnectivity and the ability of markets to create effects that manifest themselves on a global scale. The power of this hybrid figure lies in, of course, the fact that stitching the Asiatic face onto the abstraction of capitalist market expansion serves to racialize market forces and thus turn what should be a problem of class (capitalists replacing well-paid workers with low-wage labor in an effort to generate enhanced profits) into a problem of race that tends to generate nativist and exclusionary responses rather than responses that focus on race-neutral economic and political solutions.

2. Octopi Palimpsest

Figures associated with yellow peril thinking may have originally pointed toward Genghis Khan and the Mongol “hordes,” but by the 1890s the locus of fear had migrated to China and was directed specifically toward the idea that the Chinese, and other Asiatics, would eventually overwhelm and supplant non-Asian populations in the Americas and Europe. May’s octopus cartoon is clearly directed at China, but the abstract idea of action at a distance that emanates from a central point of control that is embodied in the figure of the octopus so successfully conveys that idea that it ends up being continuously recycled. As Japan began its career of colonization in Asia and established itself as a genuinely powerful modern empire, for example, the image of the yellow octopus was repeated, but this time figuring Japan as the head, rather than the “Mongol” caricature that served to represent China in May’s cartoon. A telling example of this slightly revised figure of the Asiatic octopus is the Erich Schilling illustration used for the cover of *Simplicissimus*, a German satirical magazine, in 1935 (reproduced on page 2 of Tchen and Yeats). This image features an enormous yellow octopus with outstretched tentacles that engulf the globe. The head of the octopus, geographically centered on Japan, is a grinning caricature of the insidious Asian overlord, reveling in domination. Unlike the May illustration, there is no sense that the head of this octopus might be mentally degenerate; instead, the head of the Japanese octopus is made to feature a devious intelligence, an image that emphasizes the idea of an organized and intentional expansion under the direct control of a modern imperial government.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, the very title of the illustration – “The Japanese ‘Brain Trust’” – emphasizes the intelligence at work in guiding the all-encompassing tentacles; however, by embodying this intelligence in the form of an octopus – a creature that is the veritable image of the alien^{iv} when it comes to Western cultural representation – Schilling’s illustration serves to portray a mentality that is

incontrovertibly other: not the analogue of European rationality, but rather it's obverse form, a kind of wicked cleverness functioning in the service of Asiatic despotism.

The image of the Japanese octopus used for the *Simplicissimus* cover is such a representative example of the types of cultural production associated with racist anti-Asian thinking that John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, the editors of *Yellow Peril! An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, have chosen it as their cover image. The transfer of emphasis from China to Japan that can be traced through the two representative octopus cartoons follows the general trend of anti-Asian cultural production in the United States as anxieties surrounding Chinese immigrant labor are replaced by fears of Japanese invasion. However, it's far too simple to imagine that what is at work here is the simple transference of racist tropes from one geographically proximate group of people to another. As Colleen Lye points out in her discussion of two Jack London essays – “The Yellow Peril” (1904) and “If Japan Wakens China” (1909) – these essays “reveal the extent to which the turn-of-the-century Asiatic threat rests upon a combinatory notion of Japan and China” (15). As Lye puts it, in *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (2005),

The American identification of the Asiatic as the sign of globalization was not arbitrary; it was rooted in the material history of U.S. relations with East Asia. The antinomies of Asiatic racial form reflect the pattern of a modernizing China and Japan changing places as U.S. friend and enemy. (10)

These changing patterns of relations, the complex international interactions that result from the neo-colonial expansion of American interests throughout East Asia, are played out in the transformations of popular cultural artifacts that take their semantic cues from the lexicon of yellow peril thinking. A fast and loose summary of the basic history of trends in anti-Asian representation from a strictly American point of view would probably start in the late 1800s with the immigration of Chinese laborers (and American attempts to open trade with China), then move through the tensions with Japan that culminate in WWII, the Cold War conflicts in the Korean Peninsula and Vietnam (both of which involved China), increased trade with Japan and the concomitant anxieties about Japanese economic dominance that accompanied growing Japanese economic strength throughout the 1980s, and finally a similarly complex set of relations in regard to China, which currently plays the contradictory role of being at one and the same time the primary economic partner *and* primary geopolitical rival of the United States.

But the figure of the octopus isn't exclusively used as a figure for racialized international rivalry. Because of its effectiveness as a figure for representing abstract sets of complex relations that escape other modes of easy visualization, the image of the octopus has been used to represent everything from ideological conflict (depictions of the USSR as an enormous red octopus spreading its tentacles throughout the world are very easy to come by), imperial overreach (England as imperial octopus), the spread of religious doctrine (Mormonism and state Islam in Iran have both received this treatment), and – perhaps most especially – monopoly forms of capitalism.

One of the most famous novels about the monopoly power of the railroads is Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California*, published in 1901. The novel concerns the conflict between monopoly interests, represented by the Pacific and Southwestern railroad, and the interests of the people whose lives have been affected by monopoly forms of control, represented in this case by wheat farmers whose land is in danger of being taken by the railroad but who simultaneously rely on the railroad to move their wheat. The railroad is able to control the cost of transport, which puts the farmers at a disadvantage when negotiating with the railroad. Indeed, the price of wheat has been falling because of a crisis of overproduction involving the oversaturation of the European market by American wheat produced in California. As Colleen Lye points out in her astute analysis of the dynamics of economic representation involved in this novel, there is a fascinating move at the close of the novel that places hope for the wheat farmers in the idea of an expansion of the American wheat market into China. Although there are no Asian characters who speak in the novel – Asian characters don't even form a significant background presence – Lye points out that the representation of the market itself ends up forming a figure for the Asiatic:

In *The Octopus*, the Asiatic is a metonymic figure for the loss of autonomy experienced by individuals caught in the web of globalizing markets [. . .] the Asiatic refers to a condition of extreme economic determination. That is why the Asiatic is a ubiquitous but not necessarily manifest presence in naturalism. (86)

In Lye's reading, the Asiatic is here the sign of larger globalized market systems that end up determining the possibilities, pressures, and limits of life at the local level. The eponymous monopoly held by the Pacific and Southwestern railroad turns out not to be the biggest cephalopod in the pond, an honor that is reserved for the true octopus, the international system of capital that binds East Asia and the United States together in a trans-Pacific series of relations that affect the citizen-subjects of all countries involved, a kind of TPP *avant la lettre* in which the population at large has involuntarily ceded control to systems of governance and finance that, in their scope and reach, necessarily evade the prospect of localized comprehensibility.

Before leaving the figure of the octopus behind to concentrate on some of the particular effects enabled by its deployment, it would be useful to consider the way in which the various manifestations of this trope might work together to create an overlapping set of palimpsests, a series of similarly shaped images piled on top of one another that fade in and out depending on the angle of vision involved. These eight-legged tropes might all share a similar set of characteristics — the notion of action at a distance, the notion of expansion from a center, associations with control, ravenousness, conquest, entrapment, etc. — but it's equally important to consider how those qualities that might initially appear to pertain to a particular iteration of the octopus trope — the racialized militarism of WWII-era imperial Japan in one case, the California rail monopoly in another — might be allowed to slide between iterations in the form of a connotative trace. One obvious example of this can be seen by comparing three different politically-based octopus tropes: the USSR in the form of a red octopus with Stalin's head^v, communist China as an octopus with tentacles reaching out to grab Tibet, Indo-China, and Malaysia^{vi}, and Schilling's depiction of the world-engulfing Japanese imperial octopus. There are interesting slippages that are enabled between these tropes, areas where characteristics associated with one figuration are allowed to pass into another and become visible as part of a single shared imaginary. For example, the sign of 'communism' flickers between the depictions of Stalin's red octopus and the Asia-engulfing PRC, even though the actual relations between these two communist nations are fraught with tension and occasionally outright conflict. Similarly, the imperial Japanese octopus and the eight-legged People's Republic of China flicker in each other's figurative bodies under the sign of the Asiatic imaginary, even though the political content of their national forms couldn't be further apart.

These slippages don't only occur synchronically, across national borders and through national political forms, they can also occur diachronically within the shape of a single nation-state complex. A prime example of this can be seen in the way that the image of imperial Japan as world-conquering octopus reemerges in the 1980s as the image of a ruthlessly capitalist Japan (capitalism in this case seen as having particular 'Japanese' characteristics) attempting to conquer the world through domination of the marketplace. These images of Japan spreading its tentacles throughout the world system, whether through military conquest or market domination, have a lengthy half-life in American depictions of Japan and, unsurprisingly, the figure of the octopus rises to the surface again in the discourse that surrounds the Fukushima Daiichi disaster.



(Figure 2: “The Curse of California” by G. Frederick Keller, originally published in *The Wasp* in 1882. Wikimedia Commons.)

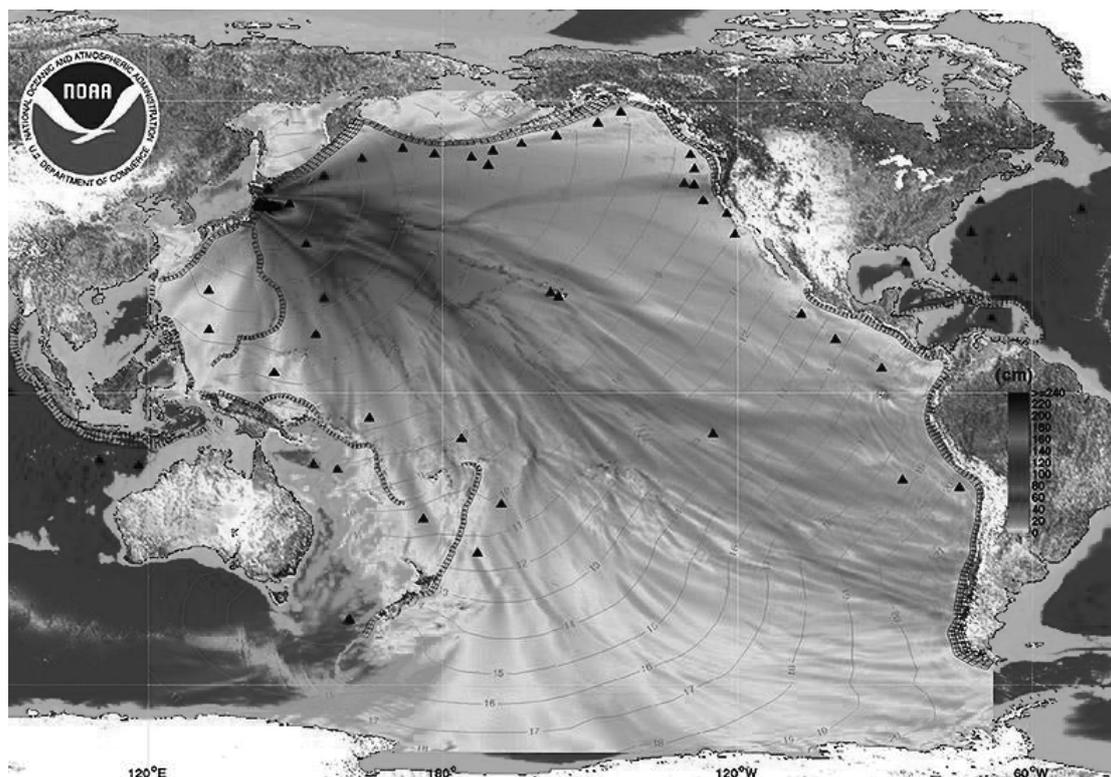
3. Creatures from the Deep: The Fukushima Kraken

The mythic, ship-devouring Kraken is a constant background presence when it comes to the various all-consuming octopus tropes that have been discussed in this paper. The Kraken might be seen as a kind of urtext of the contemporary octopus trope, a precursor that is less associated with the articulations of power at a distance and more aligned with notions of sudden, unforeseen, cataclysmic destruction. The associations of precipitous, irrational violence that accompany representations of the Kraken often make their way into more contemporary figurations of the grasping octopus. When the Imperial Japanese Army attacks Pearl Harbor this is certainly seen as one of the octopus arms at work, enacting action at a distance under the command of an imperial center, but there's more than a hint of the Kraken as well in the sheer destructiveness of the entirely unanticipated attack.

One way to think of the relationship between the image of the Kraken and that of the octopus is to imagine that the octopus trope always carries within itself the potential release of elements of violence and destruction that have long been generally associated with the Kraken. In the case of the depiction of Japan as octopus this activation can be seen at work in the attack on Pearl Harbor; conversely, though Japan is compared to an economic octopus in the 1980s, there is no single explosive event which might end up releasing the Kraken, and so the figuration of Japan as economic octopus^{vii}, though sinister and controlling, does not ultimately suggest any type of outright violence or rapid destructive attack.

As I have already pointed out in “‘Pass the butter, Japan is toast’: Alternative Media, Paranoia, and the Apocalyptic Tendency in American Thought,” the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant has generated an enormous body of associated literature, including a particularly rich set of pseudo-scientific and conspiratorial texts that can be readily be accessed on fringe media websites such as GlobalResearch (globalresearch.org), Natural News (naturalnews.com), Alex Jones’ Infowars (infowars.com), and ENENEWS (enenews.com). The figure of the octopus haunts these websites, and often reveals itself in the pages of mainstream media sources as well. In analyzing the way in which reporting on the Daiichi accident reproduces and resuscitates the language of yellow peril discourse, I’ll focus on the figure of the octopus and the way it manifests itself in descriptions of the spread of radiation throughout the Pacific. In addition, I’ll also examine some samples of *actual* cephalopods that make an appearance on the radio-tropic menu.

One of the most prominent types of images that can be found on the Internet in relation to the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant are images purporting to model the spread of radiation throughout the Pacific Ocean. While many of these images do, in fact, represent the scientific data surrounding radioactive spread from the Daiichi plant, an equal amount consist of ocean current mappings and propagation models that have been re-labeled to make it seem as if they are mapping the spread of radioactivity when, in fact, the maps themselves are not related to radiation studies at all. Perhaps the most commonly mislabeled map is a screenshot that has been taken from the NOAA Center for Tsunami Research^{viii}. This image (Figure 3) tracks the propagation of the tsunami that was generated by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake via the elevation of the ocean surface. This image is featured prominently in an article written for the NWO Report website, titled “Radioactive Water from Fukushima is Systematically Poisoning the Entire Pacific Ocean”^{ix}. Using the Google image search function, this same map can be found accompanied by a variety of panic-inducing captions: “A RADIOACTIVE NIGHTMARE,” “Fukushima Radiation Spread Across the Pacific Ocean,” and – a personal favorite – “Holy Fukushima – Radiation From Japan Is Already Killing North Americans”^x. One of the striking features of both the false radiation maps and legitimate mappings of radioactive outflow from the Fukushima area is the way in which the branching tendrils in the images recall the dendritic structure of an octopus’s body. Programmed to view images like this in a largely negative light – the fact that most of the cartographers involved with these projects have chosen the traditional ‘danger’ colors of red, orange, and yellow as the vehicles for their data certainly doesn’t help – these images recall the menace associated with the yellow peril octopus trope. While this connection might at first appear to rely on a very superficial set of associations, in fact the connection between radiation trails is often figured in terms of a set of tentacles in both fringe and mainstream media accounts. For example, an online opinion piece from the Australian Broadcast Corporation titled “Uranium’s long and shameful journey,” contains a comment from “TG,” who writes that the Fukushima disaster “has spread it’s radioactive tentacles throughout the Pacific ocean, and the world will never be the same again”^{xi}.



(Figure 3: NOAA Tsunami Propagation Map — screenshot)

Similarly, an article at the HotelExecutive website titled “The Long-term Impacts of Fukushima on Hotels & Tourism Worldwide”^{xii} poses this question: “Is it a non-issue for all but those living around the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, as governments and obliging media have been saying; or are the meltdowns spreading invisible tentacles of radioactive death around the world, as some are insisting and others are wondering, a sense of unease at our prospects for the future.”

While representations of radiation trails are frequently discussed using the trope of the octopus tentacle, this trope is far more commonly used in depictions which figure TEPCO, the Japanese government, and the nuclear industry as a whole as a monstrous, many-limbed sea creature with an omnipresent reach. A 2012 opinion piece from *Sentaku* magazine, translated and abridged for the *Japan Times*, is titled “Tepco’s political tentacles”^{xiii}. Similarly, *Fukushima: Dispossession or Denuclearization?*, a 2014 collection of essays, makes the claim that “the tentacles of the nuclear village reach deeply into all segments of the media” (62), and an online Al Jazeera article from 2012^{xiv} refers to TEPCO as “one of the world’s largest utilities, whose tentacles of influence reach well inside Japan’s huge government bureaucracy.” These depictions, which seem to run into the thousands on the Internet and – on some of the more fringe websites – even sometimes involve the notion of a worldwide nuclear conspiracy headed by the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), closely parallel classic depictions of capitalist monopoly interests (Fig. 4) – particularly those involving railroads and oil – as devouring octopi.



(Figure 4: “Next!” by Udo J. Keppler, a 1904 cartoon satirizing Standard Oil. Wikimedia Commons.)

While the disastrous spread of radiation is linked with the monopoly power of the nuclear industry through the metaphorical figure of the octopus, the spread of radiation from the Fukushima Daiichi site is also materialized metonymically in the form of literal cephalopod bodies. For example, one YouTube video featuring footage of a rare, but naturally occurring, giant squid caught off of the coast of Japan, has been titled “Giant Squid Caught in Japan - Terrifying - Fukushima Radioactivity!”^{xv} Meanwhile, the *Strange Sounds* website features a very obviously faked image of an enormous, decaying cephalopod of some sort, surrounded by a crowd on the beach, under the headline “Radioactive Gigantism? Giant Squid Discovered On California Coast – January 2014”^{xvi}. The *Strange Sounds* article goes on to state the following:

Scientists believe that following the 2011 disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant an unknown number of sea creatures suffered genetic mutations that triggered uncontrolled growth – or “radioactive gigantism.” Unfortunately, this cadre of mutant giants seems to be drifting towards the continental U.S.

The idea of radioactive gigantism is a staple of the giant monster films that emerged in the fraught climate of the atomic 50s, the most famous of which is undoubtedly the 1954 *Godzilla*, directed by Ishiro Honda. *Godzilla* offers a rather less-than-subtle critique of the nuclear industry by linking the awakening of the uncontrollably destructive Godzilla with the U.S. testing of hydrogen bombs in the Pacific. While the nuclear testing that awakens Godzilla results in an attack on the Japanese mainland, the monster in *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, released in 1955, heads straight for the west coast of the United States. *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, directed by Robert Gordon, features another undersea creature awakened by U.S. hydrogen bomb tests – this time, a giant octopus. The giant octopus, which is awakened off of the coast of the Philippines, damages a nuclear submarine that barely manages to make its way back – perhaps not coincidentally – to the naval base at Pearl Harbor. The giant octopus heads straight for San Francisco where it attacks the Ferry Building, and is ultimately destroyed by a torpedo after it is forced back to sea. Coming on the heels of WWII, and right in the midst of the Cold War, the movie certainly embodies fears of invasion; however, the fact that the creature originates in East Asia suggests the possibility of a specific unconscious association with yellow peril discourse, a fearful remainder that rises to the surface despite Japan’s military defeat and the subsequent repositioning of Japan as a U.S. ally.

The giant octopus in *It Came from Beneath the Sea* is the very image of the Kraken. Similarly, the fear of attack, invasion, and destruction that the Kraken embodies manifests itself in an altered state in the form of the giant squid that is imagined to be the result of radioactive contamination from Fukushima. This phantasmatic figure – that of the creature made monstrous through the process of “radioactive gigantism” –

in fact stands in for a larger set of fears about the unseen effects of radiation, fears that find expression in fringe media articles such as “36 Signs The Media Is Lying To You About How Radiation From Fukushima Is Affecting The West Coast,”^{xvii} an article that connects a litany of marine plagues – including dying birds, the hair loss of seals and walruses, low populations of sockeye salmon, the high death rate of killer whales living off of British Columbia, and melting starfish – to the radiation emitted from the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The article references the statement of one “Australian adventurer,” who says that on a voyage between Japan and San Francisco that he recently took, “he felt as though ‘the ocean itself was dead.’” This, of course, is the ultimate fear – that the Fukushima Kraken will destroy the entire planet with its radioactive tentacles, a sentiment that is widely shared between the writers of the articles that are published online by fringe media outlets, and those who join in by adding their voices to the comments section.

The connecting thread between all of these depictions is the idea of an attack on a usually Anglo-demarcated West by East Asian forces that are repeatedly depicted in the form of an anonymous conquering collective on the verge of overwhelming all that might stand in the way. Whether this depiction takes the shape of the “Mongolian octopus,” the imperial Japanese octopod, the reaching tentacles of communist China, the bubble-fueled appendages of Japan Inc., or the glowing yellow tendrils of radioactivity emanating from the Fukushima Daiichi plant, it is always instantiated as a conception of the Asiatic that foregrounds conflict with the West, and ultimately a desire for clearly demarcated borders that serve the interests of the Western powers, an interest that – in the twentieth century – finds the U.S. as its center. The recurring tendency to depict the Fukushima disaster as kind of (unintentional) attack on the western United States^{xviii}, a radioactive transgression of border-control checkpoints, in fact reveals an underlying sense of anxiety about the status of the U.S. position within the world system as the world centers of economic and political power become more diffuse.

In fact, the prophylactic desire for total control of national boundaries and the containment of forces that are viewed as threatening by the U.S. is the unconscious obverse of the actually existing series of relations in which the bulging sphere of American military and economic interests has long been extended westward to include the East. The figurations of the Asiatic that have been examined in this paper not only express the cultural and economic anxieties of the U.S., but also serve to obscure the reality of U.S. neo-liberal expansion and a military presence in East Asia that extends for over one hundred years and continues under the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” policy. The U.S./Asia ‘border,’ then, turns out to be an interpenetrated set of political, economic, and representational negotiations with no readily identifiable center. As Colleen Lye succinctly puts it,

The “Asiatic question” marks some of the ways in which postcontinental imperialism reconfigured the American frontier, demanding a reconsideration of twentieth-century U.S. colonial forms. The elusiveness of the U.S.-Asian border involved a host of contradictory trends, including the forging of imperial partnerships with economic competitors, persistent resistances to the development of overseas markets, and the integration of transnational labor forces into the processes of economic accumulation throughout the region. (53-54)

From the point of view of many Asians living on the other side of the U.S./Asia ‘border,’ it makes just as much sense to view the U.S. as the octopus with tentacles in every pie and, indeed, every depiction of the Asiatic octopus contains within itself the hidden historical trace of U.S. or Anglo-European activity in the East Asian sphere: the “Mongolian octopus” emerges at a time when the European powers are carving out colonial concessions throughout Asia while the U.S. is attempting to exert pressure through early forms of neo-colonial economic control; the tentacles of Japanese militarism can’t be viewed outside of U.S. attempts to control Japan’s economic and regional ascent in the early part of the twentieth century^{xix}, including a 1907-1909 U.S. naval world ‘tour’ – often referred to as the Great White Fleet – intended to showcase U.S. military power; the Japanese economic octopus of the 1980s can’t be separated from the continued identity of Japan as a staging base for U.S. Cold War military strategies of containment and control in Asia; and of course the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant should never be seen apart from the larger history of the spread of atomic energy throughout Japan in conjunction with U.S. interests, including the economic gain of companies like GE and Westinghouse, which sold plans for power plants to Japan that were subsequently built by Japan-based contractors. Three of the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant were supplied by General Electric.

This paper will close with a final glimpse of the tentacles of the nuclear octopus, but this time from the point of view of anti-nuclear activism. A poem by Maureen Hartmann, written on International Women's Day in 2013 and subsequently posted on the No Nukes Action Committee website, reads as follows:

Women of Japan, Fukushima Activists

They feel power as mothers,
protesting radioactivity
that is affecting their reproductivity
by abnormal births.

They've had their fill of United States'
stretching of tentacles
through Japanese nuclear energy industry.

As mothers they push
to stop dangerous dumping
of uranium waste in children's playgrounds.^{xx}

This poem figures the Japanese nuclear energy industry not as the head of a freakish glowing octopod disaster that stretches its arms menacingly around the world from a center in Fukushima, but rather as one node in a much larger complex of global power relations. Though perhaps underselling the culpability of TEPCO and the Japanese nuclear industry as a whole, the depiction of U.S. tentacles stretching *through* the institutions of Japanese energy production presents a more accurate image of the way in which economic and political power influences energy policy on the global stage, ultimately wriggling its way into every available corner of lived experience, including the playtime of children. Five years after the 2011 earthquake and subsequent disaster at the Daiichi power plant, it's the residents of Fukushima and the surrounding areas who continue to be most powerfully crushed in the grip of the nuclear octopus.

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URLs for Internet sources are listed in the endnotes.

ⁱ An especially questionable example of the conflict of interest between the content provided by fringe media sites and the revenue streams of those same sites can be found in the early reporting on the crisis by the Alex Jones media network. While

it was busy claiming that a plume of deadly radiation was on its way to the west coast of the United States, Jones's Infowars website (infowars.com), was simultaneously in the business of selling potassium iodide tablets (which were selling out on the west coast of the US during the height of the panic) as a counter to the potentially harmful effects of radioactive iodine to the thyroid. The Infowars web store still offers a product it calls "Survival Shield X-2 - Nascent Iodine," which it retails in the guise of a health supplement, though clearly the intended customer is someone who is taking the supplement based on a fear of developing thyroid cancer through contact with radioactive iodine.

ⁱⁱ This quote is from a NODISINFO (www.nodisinfo.com) story titled "Global Powers and the Fukushima Cover-Up." The full quote is as follows: "Failing to confront Fukushima honestly, the Japanese are laying the basis for what could amount to a radiological sneak attack on the rest of the world."

ⁱⁱⁱ This is in contradistinction to the image of Chinese expansion, which is much more often figured as uncontrolled, a stream of anonymous millions almost mindlessly flowing into Europe and the Americas.

^{iv} That the octopus is viewed as fundamentally alien in much of Europe and the Americas can best be illustrated by the fact that octopod features are so often used as the basis for pop cultural descriptions of extraterrestrial beings, those other 'alien' invaders. Indeed, one of the earliest and most famous descriptions of alien invaders, the Martians in H.G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*, very explicitly invokes the image of the octopus when describing the physiology of the invaders: "They were huge round bodies – or, rather, heads – about four feet in diameter, each body having in front of it a face. This face had no nostrils – indeed, the Martians do not seem to have had any sense of smell, but it had a pair of very large dark-coloured eyes, and just beneath this a kind of fleshy beak. In the back of this head or body – I scarcely know how to speak of it – was the single tight tympanic surface, since known to be anatomically an ear, though it must have been almost useless in our dense air. In a group round the mouth were sixteen slender, almost whiplike tentacles, arranged in two bunches of eight each." (From chapter two of *The War of the Worlds*, "What We Saw from the Ruined House" (Web))

^v <http://weburbanist.com/2013/06/12/the-red-menace-15-vintage-anti-communist-ads-propaganda/2/>

^{vi} <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/cartoon/34513/the-octopus-of-chinese-communism-1950>

^{vii} There are numerous depictions of Japan as economic octopus that stem from the period of the 1980s, but one quick example will serve as a representative. In Chu-chueh Cheng's book *The Margin Without Centre: Kazuo Ishiguro*, this sentence appears on page 122: "by the 1980s Japan not only attained the original objective of its Pan-Asiatic plan but also stretched its economic tentacles far and beyond East Asia, into the global arena."

^{viii} <http://nctr.pmel.noaa.gov/honshu20110311/>

^{ix} <https://nworeport.me/2013/08/06/radioactive-water-from-fukushima-is-systematically-poisoning-the-entire-pacific-ocean/>

^x A variety of good Samaritans have attempted to counteract the disinformation spread by these mislabeled images by providing similar images of their own with captions such as "this is NOT radiation – these are modeled tsunami sea surface elevations." The NOAA screenshot features prominently in the SNOPEs entry that debunks the notion that this image has anything to do with tracking the radiation spreading outward from Fukushima.

^{xi} <http://www.abc.net.au/environment/articles/2012/09/07/3583649.htm>

^{xii} http://hotelexecutive.com/business_review/2685/the-long-term-impacts-of-fukushima-on-hotels-tourism-worldwide

^{xiii} <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2012/02/28/commentary/world-commentary/tepcos-political-tentacles/#.VxDQBHCkFFQ>

^{xiv} <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2012/05/201252842649729894.html>

^{xv} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAH1v4xzkpQ>

^{xvi} <http://strangesounds.org/2014/01/radioactive-gigantism-giant-squid-discovered-on-california-coast-january-2014.html>

^{xvii} <http://thetruthwins.com/archives/36-signs-the-media-is-lying-to-you-about-how-radiation-from-fukushima-is-affecting-the-west-coast>

^{xviii} Interestingly, most fringe news stories that discuss the advance of radiation from the Daiichi plant tend to present this in terms of how it might affect California and the other Pacific Coast states, but Hawaii is almost never mentioned. Perhaps this is because Hawaii, which is the only US state with an Asian-American majority population, has always troubled the border between the U.S. and East Asia with its indeterminate status. In the political unconscious of American-based fringe media outlets it's possible that Hawaii is a space that is always already suffering from 'contamination.'

^{xix} There is at least one Japanese cartoon from the 1940s that depicts a heroic Japanese soldier fighting off Churchill and Roosevelt, both of whom appear in the form of an octopus. The soldier advances west, slicing off tentacles with his sword and driving the U.S. and the U.K. back toward Europe. I stumbled across this cartoon in a 2015 blog entry written by Eric Ross, titled "Discursively mapping the geopolitical menagerie."

(<https://ericrossacademic.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/discursively-mapping-the-geopolitical-menagerie/>)

^{xx} <https://nonukesaction.wordpress.com/2013/04/19/women-of-japan-fukushima-activists-a-poem-by-maureen-hartmann/>