

Zuihitsu¹:

Teaching *Aiiiiieee!* as Intersectional Ecological Archive with thanks to *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh

By Kenji C. Liu

“...the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed ‘iiiiieee!’”

—from the Preface to *Aiiiiieee!* (Chan et al., *Aiiiiieee!* vii)

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34.0522° N, 118.2437° W: In Los Angeles, wildfires write themselves up and down our dry tinder hills, dark and billowing, then dissipating, until each syllable and phoneme cannot be reconstituted. Writing as the constant, hungry roar of a human-made monster. Writing as grief. As teeth.

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During week three of the quarter, one of my Asian American creative writing students has to evacuate from a wildfire only three miles away.

...

From Wakako Yamauchi (1974):

By March, the winds are vigorous and warm and wild flowers dot the desert floor (198).

Proposed revision (2019):

By October, the winds are vigorous and warm and wildfires consume the desert hills, along with people’s homes.

¹ A zuihitsu is a Japanese contemplative literary form characterized by loosely associated fragments of text.

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monster (n.)

from Latin *monstrum*: divine omen, portent, sign
from root *monere*: to admonish, warn; advice

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Asians—at the edges of the “rational” Western world—always incomprehensibly foreign to its map. Invaders, infectious. Here be monsters. Are we “the real or the fake”? (Chin “Come All Ye” 92)

*

The anthology *Aiiiiieee!* transformed a fake scream into a cry of Asian American (masculinists) setting things on fire. AIIIEEEEE!!! An admonition.

*

Wildfires accumulate and become more frequent guests. Like great wild animals, they feast at the edges of the fragile metropolis. If it rains, the growth only leaves more dry fuel for later.

*

In October, campus sent out 17 email alerts about wildfires.

*

The Japanese word *kaiju* (怪獣), commonly translated as “monster,” actually means something more like “suspicious” or “strange beast.”

*

California has the largest number of Asian Americans of any US state. We have written ourselves into and remade its geography, regardless.

*

Other suspicious beasts residing in Western map edges: other people of color, the disabled, queers, women, non-Christians, and elemental forces, like climate change. Are we the real or the fake?

*

“I am not writing about myself as a rational human being.” —Bhanu Kapil (33)

*

33.1166° N 139.7833° E: The original 1954 Godzilla is usually interpreted as a vindictive force of nature. But, awakened from the depths of the Pacific by atomic bomb explosions and human meddling, Gojira is both portent and representative of a human-made disaster.

*

“Aiiieeeee!” is not an exclamation used by Asians, though the closest might be the Chinese “ah” or “ai” or “aiya” or “aiyo!” In Japanese, each vowel in *aiieeeee* has its own sound—ah, ee, eh—so it reads “ah-eee-ehhhhh!”

*

Godzilla’s classic roar was created by Ifukube Akira. He dragged and mangled the loosened strings of a double bass with a leather glove. He worked for the imperial Japanese military, and was a survivor of radiation sickness.

*

38.3° N 142.4° E: Eight years ago, the Tōhōku quake unleashed a 46-foot tsunami and human-made nuclear disaster, releasing radioactivity that crossed the ocean to embed in our cells.

...

From Hisaye Yamamoto (1974):
The earth trembled for days afterwards (183).

Proposed revision (2019):
As radioactive water seasoned our fish, the earth trembled for days afterwards.

*

Solastalgia, “the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory” (Albrecht 45), acknowledges the links between catastrophic changes in the environment and mental health.

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Misdirected, unacknowledged grief will submerge and engulf until you no longer recognize yourself.

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7.1315° N, 171.1845° E: “at 2 degrees my islands, the Marshall Islands / will already be under water / this is why our leaders push / for 1.5 / Seems small / like 0.5 degrees / shouldn’t matter / like 0.5 degrees / are just crumbs / like the Marshall Islands / must look / on a map” —Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (“Poem: 2 Degrees”)

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“Aiiieeeee!” is not in any way universally primal, nor is it even a true reflection of Asian American dismay. It is a line in a script given to actors in yellowface. It is the anxious scream of the white imagination.

*

35.6762° N, 139.6503° E: The worst typhoon in 60 years recently smashed into Tokyo, flooding the metropolis where my uncles, aunts, and cousins live. While a super typhoon might seem more “natural” than a nuclear accident, both have human parents.

*

11.6065° N, 165.3768° E: The United States conducted 67 nuclear weapons tests on the Marshallese island Bikini Atoll between 1946 and 1958. The area still burns with dangerous levels of radiation.

*

Typhoons are a weather concept geographically constrained to the Asia Pacific. Its etymology is related to Greek (typhon), Arabic (tufan), or the Chinese “da feng” or great wind. It is also related to the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European *dheub or “deep, hollow” —inhabited by mythological monsters.

*

These disasters smash into our everyday, are becoming the new normal. What we are losing is the veneer of predictability.

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October 12, Fire Update #4: The Air Quality at [] is currently considered unhealthy for sensitive individuals, which includes persons with pre-existing heart or lung disease, older adults, children, and pregnant women.

*

Dear I Ching: *What is the relevance of the Aiiiiiiii! anthology for me today?*

Cast Hexagram: 9 - Hsiao Chu / Gentle Restraint

Winds of change high in the Heavens: Air currents carry the weather. Dense clouds blow in from the West, but still no rain. The Superior Person fine tunes the image he presents to the world. Small successes.

We strange beasts are inked into the map’s margins, but if we come, we come to destroy civilization. Meanwhile inside civilization, the “superior” person fine tunes his image.

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Trying to be as manly or more manly than a white man is, to repurpose Frank Chin, “restating the white [heterosexist archetype]” (“Come All Ye” 29). Is he the real or the fake?

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Psychological studies surmise that Asians may tend to somaticize feelings more than others. We store emotions in our fat, muscles, sinews. Our bodies are written with its language.

*

Drought and the drainage of underwater aquifers from pumping “unweights” the Earth’s crust, causing changes in stress around an earthquake fault (Buis “Can Climate Affect Earthquakes”).

*

In Japan, earthquakes are caused by the namazu, a giant catfish. The unfortunate god tasked with sitting on a boulder on its head falls asleep from time to time, and the great fish body wakes, shaking us from our normal.

...

From Louis Chu (1974):

...the day had broken humid and muggy (76).

Proposed revision (2019):

...the day had broken humid and muggy, the inflamed river swallowing our once-dry neighborhood.

*

What happens when the earth is obviously beyond the control of our benevolent regime of rational governance? We continue on our schedule.

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In a tightly-classed society, sometimes releasing the power of irrationality is our only creative recourse against the status quo. AIIIEEEEE!!!

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According to Amitav Ghosh, the summer of 1815—when Mary Shelley wrote her quintessential monster novel, *Frankenstein*—was covered in ashes (66).

A volcano near Bali (8.25° S, 118.00° E) had erupted, and the enormous amount of ejected dust led to several years of temporary global climate change. Plagued by darkness and rain on the shores of Lake Geneva (46.2246° N, 6.1827° E), Byron and the Shelleys, Percy and Mary, stayed inside and challenged each other to write ghost stories. Frankenstein’s monster, a man made by a man from the parts of dead men, was violently shocked into living. The

monster was a slave to the histories in his body—unable to transform his impulses. He could not grieve. Is he the real or the fake?

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Restraint is a human trait. Sublimation, as a Western psychological concept, is the repression of powerful human impulses deemed unacceptable to civilization.

*

“The fate which befalls all feelings, the ostracizing of what has no market value, is applied most harshly to something which cannot even contribute to a psychological restoration of labor power, mourning” (Horkheimer and Adorno 179).

*

If we sublimate in the name of capitalist productivity, that “mature” behavior of Progress that has led to our current disaster, then de-sublimation is to bring disaster to the disaster. The great monster rises from the deep. Is it the real or the fake?

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From Diana Chang (1974):

Mornings were lemon-colored, afternoons, gold, the heat dry and virile, hitting one at the front door like the sound of drums (46).

Proposed revision (2019):

Mornings were lemon-colored, afternoons, gold, the heat dry and virile, suffocating people who couldn't afford air conditioning.

*

In a few decades, will we look back at our idyllic descriptions of nature-as-background and wonder how they were possible, when the signs were all around us?

*

“Asian-Americans... have been separated by geography, culture, and history from China and Japan for seven and four generations respectively.” — from the Preface to *Aiiieeeee!* (Chan et al. *Aiiieeeee!* vii)

By this definition, I am not Asian American at all. As a 1.5-gen immigrant, my distance from Japan and Taiwan is zero generations on both sides. When disaster hits across the Pacific, my family is in the path of earthquakes, tsunamis, radiation, typhoons, record heat, record rainfall, and monsters. Am I the real or the fake?

*

At some point, we become victims of authenticity, in which "...we have given up even the pretense of reporting from the real world." (Chin "Come All Ye" 26)

*

Natural phenomena have their own noises, seismic signatures. Every fire, earthquake, typhoon, and tsunami in Japan or Taiwan bursts from the spectral depths between here and there, exploding into my diasporic awareness, a rumbling *aiiiieee!*

*

The mainstream environmental crises of the 1980s and 90s consisted of acid rain and ozone holes. Videos of dying trees, and slowly decaying granite buildings and statues. Invisible ultraviolet portals above our heads, burning skin and laying cancers. Concerned scientists and adult faces looking vaguely apologetic about the future they facilitated. Am I not that adult now?

*

40.5187° N, 74.4121° W: As a teen, when I found *Aiiieee!* in my suburban public library, I returned the book soon after without really reading it.

In the 1990s, I was a spectacled youth mostly surrounded by middle-class whites, Jews, and lots of Chinese, Filipinos, and Indians, mostly first and second generation. The major events considered part of the Asian American historical narrative, I had never heard of. I did not formally learn about them until decades later. Am I the real or the fake?

*

What I did know: when it rained, I feared being burned.

*

October 28, Fire Update #3 and 4: [] is cancelling classes today. While the fire remains west of the 405 Freeway and poses no immediate threat to campus, we know some members of our campus community live in evacuation areas or may be impacted by road closures. Employees should report to work if they can get to work safely and stay in touch with their supervisors, but we ask everyone to put safety first in determining whether or not to make today's commute to the university.

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Chinese, Japanese
Dirty knees
Look at these

"Aiiieee!" rhymes with Chinese, Japanese, knees, and these.

*

1965: "The Immigration and Nationality Act is amended to read as follows:

Visas shall be made available... to qualified immigrants who are members of the professions.... The term 'profession' shall include but not be limited to architects, engineers, lawyers, physicians, surgeons, and teachers in elementary or secondary schools, colleges, academies, or seminaries" (U.S. Congress, Public Law 89-236).

*

My father's profession: Engineer. As a post-1965 immigrant family, the US allowed us into the lower middle-class. My father and I were allowed to naturalize. Many suspicious creatures were allowed in from the edges of the map. Are we the real or the fake?

*

"Item: Scientists here and abroad have concluded that some of the soil in the northeastern United States and in Sweden is becoming increasingly acidic—an irreversible change in the life-supporting chemistry of forests." —"Opinion: Acid Rain Falls and Falls," *The New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1985 (Oppenheimer A17)

*

From 1981 to 1982, my family lived in Belgium (50.5039° N, 4.4699° E). In 1982, two white autoworkers beat Vincent Chin to death with a baseball bat outside of Detroit (42.4056° N, 83.0969° W), mistaking him for Japanese, as Japanese auto manufacturing success had led to Detroit's decline. I learned about Chin decades later. What I did know back then, subconsciously: it was dangerous to be perceived as Japanese.

*

Freon, the chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) directly responsible for ozone depletion, was used in refrigerators patented by Frigidaire, which in turn was owned by General Motors, headquartered in Detroit (42.3314° N, 83.0458° W).

*

The relationship between capitalism and mental and physical health is an uncontrollable fire.

...

From Shawn Hsu Wong (1974):
The sun was so pure (173).

Proposed revision (2019):
The pure sun was so dangerous without the ozone layer.

...

“Public-health experts fear that the increasing intensity of ultraviolet radiation that now penetrates the atmosphere may greatly increase the incidence of skin cancer and cataracts, and could significantly diminish global crops and the marine food chain.”
—“Worst Ozone Hole Stirs Health Fear” *The New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1991 (Browne A23)

*

If our environment is being destroyed by our economic decisions, then solastalgia is also a form of psychic distress about the effects of capitalism.

*

From *Gojira* (Godzilla) (1954):
[zapping] [explosion booming] [flames roaring] [all shouting indistinctly] [heavy crashing]

*

If I have ever been a fire to anyone, let them be free.

*

Other strange beasts in the margins of our capitalist map, from *Aiiiiieee!*

- The one-legged veteran, Kenji (Okada)
- The “weird” Robbie (Chin “Chickencoop” 50)
- The ‘mad’ mother, Kin-chan (Okada)
- “Boys... watchin men in the pisser” who are “a little funny that way” (Chin “Chickencoop” 66)
- The women, bodies, who appear in the I-Hotel on the first of each month (Tagatac)
- The depressed great-grandfather (Wong)
- The neighbor’s wife with “masculine habits,” Mrs. Oka (Yamauchi 195)

Chin’s publicly documented homophobia and misogyny notwithstanding, we who are represented in this list are, as Giorgio Agamben might say, various types of bare life, excluded to the edges of the “good life” (7). Physically, mentally, economically, the first to be devastated by climate change. Canaries. Are we the real or the fake?

*

October 30, Fire Update #11: In light of weather conditions, including Santa Ana winds expected to last through Thursday, [] continues to closely monitor the [] and [] fires in coordination with LAFD. Although the fires do not pose an immediate threat to campus, and

air quality at [], which has remained in the good to moderate range, we are sensitive to the fact that many students, faculty and staff, and their families, have been directly and indirectly affected by the fires not only in the Southland, but throughout the state.

*

Transformed Hexagram indicating the direction of change:
53 - Chien / Gradual Progress

The gnarled Pine grows tenaciously off the Cliff face: The Superior Person clings faithfully to dignity and integrity, thus elevating the Collective Spirit of Man in his own small way. Development. The maiden is given in marriage. Good fortune if you stay on course.

I think the maiden wants to set things on fire. What could progress and development look like that isn't what has brought us to this disastrous point? The I Ching wants to steer me back toward the unsustainable "good fortune" of (Confucian) heteropatriarchal bourgeois life, which is only achievable for a very slight percentage of the Earth. Good fortune for who? Is the question real or fake?

*

Godzilla was eventually killed by an underwater oxygenator weapon. In 1995, Japanese scientists found that CFCs could be destroyed using sound waves in water.

*

Annual Santa Ana winds propel multiple wildfires burning north and southeast of Los Angeles. In Northern California, Pacific Gas & Electric shuts down electricity to millions to avoid possible wildfires due to "Diablo" autumn winds, and rewards its lobbyists and shareholders generously.

*

"I myself use life-sustaining medical equipment, my ventilator, 16 hours a day. My doctor completed extensive paperwork telling pg&e [sic] why I need power to live. (Let me say that again—My doctor completed extensive paperwork telling pg&e why I need power to live.)" —Stacey Park ("We Need Power to Live")

*

Some of my undergraduate students come to class and write about how many times they have evacuated during their lifetime. What sound does the accumulation of psychic distress make?

*

I have never screamed, *AIIEEEEE!!!* but I agree completely.

*

Book after science fiction book about the US after climate change—ravaged coastal areas, western states transformed into deserts. They are all memoirs.

*

Has *Aiiiiiiiiiii!!!* been the start of a declaration all along? A statement of intent, “I . . .” whose conclusion is unknown? An admonishment? A manifesto? “I . . . !!!”

*

Asian Americans run the gamut from impoverished to billionaire. Some of us will not survive. What do our collective politics have to look like in order to face this not-speculative not-future approaching from the map edges? Do we have time to grieve, and from this, to reorganize a new, haunted politics?

*

A matchstick is a promise that is almost certain to be fulfilled. Is a fire the real or the fake?

*

I see the leading edges of orange flames licking the edges of freeways as I fly in and out of Los Angeles. In the coming times, what strange beasts will we have to become?

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