

Spring 4-2018

Idealist or Strategist? Isamu Noguchi in the Early 1940s

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

East Asian Studies

Idealist or Strategist?
Isamu Noguchi in the Early 1940s
by
Qianran Yang

A master's thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts

May 2018
St. Louis, Missouri

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Acknowledgments

I must express my sincerest gratitude to Prof. Lori Watt, my advisor for this project and mentor. She encouraged and supported me to write I am interested. She also guided me in the right direction whenever I needed help. Without her genuine and kind help, I could not have completed this work. As a mentor, Prof. Watt always keeps her door open and whenever I needed. I am also grateful for my committee members, Prof. Copeland and Prof. Lewis, for agreeing to advise me on this project and for providing valuable comments on this thesis.

I must acknowledge the tutors at writing centers. Were it not their help in my drafts, I would not have produced readable research. I would also like to thank my friends for the moral support they have given me along the way.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my parents for unconditionally supporting me to pursue what I want. I dedicate this thesis to you.

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Washington University in St. Louis

May 2018

Introduction

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service launched a surprise military strike against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii Territory. Before this incident, many countries across the world had been taking part in the war, but not the United States. Shortly after the attack, the United States officially joined the Allies of World War II against the Axis Powers by declaring war on Japan and Germany. As a consequence, millions of soldiers and civilians suffered because of the war. Another group were also affected by the war: people of Japanese descent living on the West Coast. Following the declaration of war, the FBI arrested more than two thousand Japanese immigrants throughout Hawaii and the West Coast.¹ On February 19, 1942, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 to require “all persons of Japanese ancestry” living on the West Coast to be transferred to internment camps. Two-thirds of the internees were American citizens. These persons of Japanese ancestry were categorized into *Issei* and *Nisei*. These two words from Japanese refer to first-generation Japanese American, the Japanese immigrants, and second-generation Japanese Americans, who were citizens by birth.

The experience of one person of Japanese heritage, the Japanese-American sculptor, Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), provides an intriguing means for understanding interment. He was born in Los Angeles in 1904 and lived there until he left for Japan in 1906. He went back to the United States for school in 1918 and later studied abroad in Europe and Asia. In the 1930s, he designed many significant sculptures and portraits busts for different commissions over the

¹ Alice Yang Murray and Roger Daniels eds., *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans during World War II Mean?: Readings* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000), 3.

world. He became widely recognized in the United States because of his commission for the Associated Press Building in Rockefeller Center, New York City in 1938.

His artistic influence transcended national borders by following modern Western art while reflecting traditional Eastern culture. And by “Eastern,” I mean aesthetics and materials usually associated with Japan. This integrated approach is related to his origin and experience. Due to his pioneering designs in sculptures, gardens, and stage sets, many celebrated his artistic achievement that transcends national borders. His landscape designs in the postwar period, especially the design of the Memorial Cenotaph in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park (1952)² and the garden for UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (1958) demonstrate his understanding of Japanese-style public spaces design. The political significance of these places provoke debates on Noguchi’s national and cultural identity. However, Noguchi was more than a talented artist who used his artworks to impact public life and social understanding. Through his art, Noguchi expressed a democratic ideology that developed from his Nisei identity and his wartime experience.

In the 1940s, Noguchi participated in movements against anti-Japanese sentiment, wrote for the Japanese American Committee for Democracy, established Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilization for Democracy (NWAMD),³ and voluntarily entered the War Relocation Center of Japanese Americans to improve the living conditions there. There were other great and brave people who voluntarily entered the camps or made their efforts to help the internees. For example, Estelle Ishigo, a white woman who followed her Japanese-American husband into the

² Noguchi’s idea was rejected for political reasons, but the designer Kenzo Tange was influenced by Noguchi’s idea. See Bert Winther, “The Rejection of Isamu Noguchi’s Hiroshima Cenotaph: A Japanese American Artist in Occupied Japan,” *Art Journal* 53, no. 4. (1994).

³ Scholars, including Peter Duus and Amy Lyford, call this group Nisei Artists and Writers Mobilization for Democracy (NWAMD). However, in this thesis, I use the title Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilizations for Democracy (NWAMD) in accordance with how Noguchi addressed the group in his autobiography and manuscript.

internment camp. Many white American volunteers helped internees to get settled down when they first came to the camp.⁴ Alexander H. Leighton, a sociologist and psychiatrist, published the book *The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp* based on his working experience in the Poston Relocation Center. He and his team also tried to improve camp life. However, the reason I want to study Noguchi was because how particular his experience was, but how he understood his identity and took initiatives to transform and maintain that identity.

This thesis will explore the racial, cultural, and social environments that Isamu Noguchi experienced in 1940s and the subsequent actions he took in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor and in advocating full civil rights for Nisei. By analyzing Noguchi's exploration of his national identity, and how people of different identities and nationalities viewed Noguchi from their perspectives, this thesis argues that the social and ethnic community Noguchi cultivated during this time was crucial for the development of his art. The motivation and objection of his art creation changed dramatically while his role evolved from a Japanese-American artist to Nisei democratic fighter.

Exploring the topic of Noguchi's Japanese-American identity requires engagement in at least two realms of inquiry. First is an attempt to treat Japanese-American internment memories analytically. Second is to explore Noguchi's political and social impact on Japanese-American communities as a celebrity. In the decades after the war, many former internees shared their memories of war with the Japanese-American community. Many of them wrote memoirs of individual and family stories during the war, while others told their experience through interviews and biographies written by scholars. The internees on the West Coast and their

⁴ Alexander H. Leighton, *The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1945),

internment experience are popular topics in Asian American Studies and in social debate. Most works focus on the traumatic war memories—what happened to the Japanese Americans and how they were treated unfairly. These personal narratives are real and sentimental. Internees tended to share their memories within the context of the Japanese-American community and in terms of handing down experiences to future generations. This thesis, however, with more historical research and analysis, will contribute to the understanding of how Japanese Americans struggled during the war time.

Noguchi has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Contemporary newspapers reported on Noguchi's art as well as his involvement in advocating for democracy and racial equality. He was not a resident of the West Coast and therefore not required to go to an internment camp. He received approval to enter the camp from John Collier, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and chief administrator of the Colorado River Relocation Center. His connection with officials and his fame as a New York artist made him a special Nisei in the camp. Therefore, research on his wartime experience contributes to the analysis of racism against Japanese Americans. Much has been written about Noguchi as a brilliant modernist artist. Critics always mentioned his biracial background and took his Japanese aesthetic and style for granted. However, the significance of Noguchi's art is more than artistic hybridity, but the message he intended to convey in his works—he is not just American but Nisei. There are many ways we can read Noguchi's actions during the wartime, especially his voluntary to Poston Relocation Center. Is he heroic, idealist, or ultimately cowardly? This thesis strives to help us understand those actions.

Takashi Fujitani's use of the concept of vulgar and polite racism may be productive in the case of Noguchi.⁵ In his work on the intersection of empires and racism, Fujitani draws on the work of Michel Foucault to explain how the U.S. and Japanese states first ignored their minority populations of Japanese Americans and Koreans, and then in the 1930s and 1940s, constituted them as populations which the state could comprehend and possibly use as resources for the war. The Japanese Americans were constituted as a population partly through the census, and the Koreans partly through household registers.

Fujitani refines this Foucauldian analysis of constituting a population to bring it into view of the state by introducing the concepts of vulgar and polite racism. "Vulgar racism" is a biologically based racism that emerged from the assumption of difference in physicality and temperament, assimilation, and residence. It is exclusionary and blunt. "Polite racism" is an inclusionary racism that ostensibly disavows vulgar racism and accepts cultural difference on the basis of possible cultural assimilation. As he explains, when the American and Japanese states, in about 1943, turned to the newly constituted populations in their time of wartime need, they had to offer something in return for the service of these populations. According to Fujitani, that promised compensation took the form of a move from vulgar racism to polite racism. Once the empires decided to include Japanese Americans and Koreans in their biopower and governmentality, they granted benefits of the welfare state and wartime rations to their these two groups, respectively.

This study of Isamu Noguchi helps us to further understand this transition from vulgar to polite racism. As explained below, Noguchi was first the object of vulgar racism, especially in the 1930s, when he became famous in the American art world. He was unaffected in the first

⁵ Takashi Fujitani, "Right to Kill, Right to Make Live: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans During WWII," *Representations* 99, no. 1 (2007): 13-39.

place, but the breakout of war motivated him to step out and help Nisei fellows like him. Ideally, racism would be eradicated entirely, but it became apparent to Noguchi and other Japanese Americans that it was not possible in the short run. As I show, part of Noguchi's efforts aligned with, and indeed facilitated the change, as first described by Fujitani, from vulgar to a less violent racism—polite racism.

Roosevelt's signing of Executive Order 9066 in just two months after the Attack on Pearl Harbor demonstrated the latent vulgar racism of Americans and the government against Japanese Americans. Yet Noguchi had experienced different kinds of racism prior to the event. Growing up as a “hybrid”⁶ with Caucasian appearance, Noguchi always experienced vulgar racism from his Japanese neighbors and schoolmates, who considered him American. His works were discriminated against by the American art world in 1930s because of his Japanese ancestry. However, Noguchi was busy supporting himself and exploring various skills and materials that could be applied in his art. He rarely worried about his Japanese-American identity and the racism caused by the identity. He made and planned public projects during this period for a different means of communication on social problems, instead of his personal concerns. Not until the 1940s, did Noguchi devote himself to be a middleman between cultural and ethnic hybridity. But at first, he self-identified as Japanese American and participated in various political activities to demonstrate the loyalty of Japanese American, to be a trusted subpopulation, and to live with polite racism, instead of vulgar racism.

Fujitani's work indicates that the “norm” (the major race) disguises their blunt racism against ethnic minorities because the latter are considered capable of cultural assimilation. However, this thesis articulates that the norm shifts vulgar racism to polite racism because of

⁶ In this thesis, I use hybrid/hybridity to refer to a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions in culture and art, as well as a fusion of two ethnic groups for one's biological identity.

their trust in the minorities. I intend to argue that in the case of Noguchi, who was aware of his minority identity in American society and concerned about vulgar racism during WWII, he intended to gain trust from the norm and compromised by accepting polite racism.

This critical biography of Noguchi focuses mainly on his experience in the 1940s. The primary sources used in this research include documents collected in the database of Japanese American evacuees from National Archives, Japanese-English newspapers based in California, Noguchi's autobiography and manuscript, and some published interviews with Noguchi. Chapter One will discuss the larger social and political environment since the first Japanese immigrants came to America in the late nineteenth century and how Noguchi did not fit well into either the Japanese-American community or the white society that surrounded it. This experience led to his ambitions to challenge the traditional art that dominated the Euro American norm. Noguchi's father traveled to America from Japan and had a career as a writer in the U.S. in the early 1900s. However, due to his secret relationship with Noguchi's mother, Leonie Gilmour, who is a white American, he did not acknowledge Noguchi as his son. Being an illegitimate hybrid, Noguchi failed to truly fit in either American society or the Japanese community. During this "unidentified" period, Noguchi suffered double racism. He sojourned in Asian and European countries and focused only on learning art skills, leaving the troublesome identity problem behind. A discussion of Noguchi's art career during the 1930s in this chapter will lay the groundwork for analyzing the changes in Noguchi's self-recognition and career in the 1940s.

The second chapter analyzes how Noguchi transformed himself from a person with no easily identifiable identity into a Nisei, a loyal Nisei, after the attack on Pearl Harbor and before he entered the Poston War Relocation Center. He tried to put his fame to good use by representing to the white American public a model of the patriotic Nisei. He and other Japanese

Americans, including members of the Japanese American Citizen League, facilitated a change from vulgar racism to polite racism. He advocated for voluntary evacuation to help the Japanese-American community assimilate to the biosphere governed by white Americans.

The last chapter examines Noguchi's effort in helping transform vulgar racism to polite racism. He voluntarily entered Poston War Relocation Center to facilitate the American government's improvements of the living environment to other Japanese-American internees. Also, he hoped that his actions would set a good example of being a patriotic Japanese American. By analyzing Noguchi's activities in the camp and his interaction with both camp administrators and Japanese-American internees, this chapter analyzes the effect of individual effort in facilitating power.

Chapter One: before the 1940s

Noguchi's early experience before the 1940s is fundamental to his artistic sense and to his exploration of identity. He lived in the shadow of the tense relationship between Japan and America since the early twentieth century. In this chapter, I will outline the social, cultural, and political environment Noguchi lived in while in America and Japan and will indicate its importance for understanding Noguchi's early career focus. He lived without the acknowledgement of his father or of the community, without a certain identity; he sojourned in Europe and Asia, and threw himself into artistic creation.⁷ However, he never abandoned his "great attachment"⁸ for the East and combined the Eastern aesthetics with Western abstract expression in his works.

Immigrants from Japan began arriving in Hawaii in 1885 to work on the plantations as an agricultural labor force. They then traveled to the West Coast. By the early 1900s, Japanese immigrants in California controlled nearly one-half of the state's commercial produce and turned into the dominant power in agriculture. The economic advantages of this one percent of the population of California irritated the local labor force, which launched an anti-Japanese campaign. This racial movement expanded the fear of the "Yellow Peril" nationwide. On the one hand, a general sense of anti-Japanese sentiment permeated the West Coast in the early 1900s. On the other hand, Noguchi's father, Yone Noguchi, who incorporated his fresh Eastern culture with Western modernism in his poems, became a crucial link between Japan and America in

⁷ The biographical facts of Noguchi's life can be confirmed through any of the following sources: Masayo Duus' biography is the most comprehensive, and the "biography" tab on the Noguchi Museum website also records the biography and timeline of Noguchi.

⁸ Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2004), 17.

literature.⁹ Yone Noguchi travelled to San Francisco in 1893 with an ambitious American dream when he was only eighteen years old. Known as the first Japanese-born writer to publish poetry in English, his career in America was successful and fruitful.¹⁰ Many of his published works were assisted by Leonie Gilmour, an American writer and editor, who later developed a romantic relationship with Yone Noguchi and gave birth to Isamu Noguchi.

Noguchi's childhood was unsettled. The diplomatic relationship between Japan and America and the estrangement between the white California Americans and Japanese immigrants were tense during Noguchi's childhood in California. Along with the enforcement of a state law banning intermarriage of whites with mulattos as well as African Americans, popular anti-Japanese sentiments grew in local communities.¹¹ Noguchi might have been too young to feel the hostility toward him and other Japanese Americans, but his mother was concerned about the regulation barring Japanese immigrant children from school and other forms of discrimination.

Gilmour took Noguchi to Japan in 1906. However, Noguchi did not receive official acknowledgement by his father, who was legally married to a Japanese woman by the time Noguchi and his mother arrived in Japan. Therefore Gilmour again had to raise Noguchi on her own. She moved frequently due to insecure employment. Noguchi lived in the town of Chigasaki for most of his childhood, from 1912 to 1916, and first encountered carpentry work there. He considered Chigasaki as his hometown but claimed to be an outsider of Chigasaki, according to an interview with Paul Cummings shortly before he passed away.¹² As an illegitimate child, he was not protected or taken care of by his father, which made separated from him the conservative

⁹ E. T., "Yone Noguchi," *Poetry* 15, no. 2 (1919): 97.

¹⁰ "Yone Noguchi," Poetry Foundation, accessed April 8, 2018. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/yone-noguchi>.

¹¹ Masayo Duus, *Journey without Borders: The Life of Isamu Noguchi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 35.

¹² Isamu Noguchi, interview by Paul Cummings, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Nov. 7-Dec. 26, 1973.

Japanese society, not to mention his exotic physical appearance inherited from his American mother and the alien language he spoke with Gilmour.

In 1916, Noguchi was made to attend Saint Joseph's College in Yokohama, an English-language school for foreigners and mixed-blood children. Yet he still felt out of place and became even more introverted. Meanwhile, Gilmour worried about the misconduct among the teenagers at St. Joseph's as well as the rigid education system in Japan. She finally forced Noguchi to go to America for school and grow into a complete American, which was against her original expectation of Noguchi becoming Japanese. Noguchi studied and lived in America from 1918 to 1927. He enrolled in Columbia University as a premed student in 1922 but later decided to drop out to pursue sculpture.

Noguchi applied for the newly founded Guggenheim Fellowship to fund his study in Europe and Asia.¹³ In his statement of application, he explained the reason he needed to go to Japan:

...I feel a great attachment for it, having spent half my life there. My father, Yone Noguchi, is Japanese and has long been known as an interpreter of the East to the West, through poetry. I wish to do the same with sculpture.
May I, therefore, request your assistance in enabling me to fulfill my heritage?¹⁴

Noguchi mentioned his father there, but his main point seemed to be to Japanese culture and interpreting his childhood memory to larger audience. His trip to Japan was to be a journey of self-discovery. Nonetheless, when he was about to leave for Japan in 1930, he received a letter from his father suggesting that he should not use the name of Noguchi. He went to Peking, China instead, where he thought people would show warmth and kindness to him as a stranger. After

¹³ Noguchi intended to study stone and wood cutting in Paris, but he did not mention the specific learning plan for Asia.

¹⁴Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 17.

staying in Peking for eight months, Noguchi finally decided to go to Japan and claimed in his autobiography that, “I wanted to see something of Japan before my money ran out completely and I didn’t see why I should have the hesitancy I did, or why my arrival should ever be known.”¹⁵ When the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi shinbun* reported how Noguchi yearned for his father, Noguchi denied this:

I have not come to Japan to meet my father...I have come to Japan not as the son of the poet Yone Noguchi. I have come as the American Isamu Noguchi to see Japan for my own sculpture...I want to see how Japanese culture has progressed, I want to look at the splendid sculpture of ancient Japan in Kyoto and Nara, and I want to work here under their inspiration. *Wakarimasu ka* (understand)? I have come to Japan only for work. I will not meet my father.¹⁶

Noguchi did have a “trying” meeting with his father and held several long “silent conversations later.”¹⁷ But those meetings were more like a result of pressure from public opinion and newspaper reports. By this time, Noguchi was barely concerned about his hybrid identity. Although he did not come to a reconciliation with his father, he found his attachment for Japan, especially Japanese terra-cottas and gardens. By this point, his investment in art was more important than his struggle for identity.

Unfortunately, he did not have the chance to promote the Japanese art through hybrid forms in his works by the time he came back from the trip. Upon his return, Noguchi could only earn a living by making bust portraits, due to the unsuccessful sale of his other exhibits. He admitted that “it was true that I could make some money doing heads even then at the depth of

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ Translated from article in *Mainichi shinbun*, January 29, 1931, quoted in Duus, 130.

¹⁷ Noguchi, *A Sculptor’s World*. Growing up without companion of his father, Noguchi did not have a close relationship with Yone Noguchi. They might did not know what to talk about when they finally met each other after living apart for more than 20 years.

the depression,¹⁸ but it was not what I wanted to do.”¹⁹ The portraits busts he commissioned during this period demonstrated his great skills in abstract sculpture and proficient use of various materials.²⁰ Nonetheless, Noguchi desired to make art that could make social impact, a means of communication, after he witnessed and experienced poor and unsettling life. He turned to the Public Works of Art Program and made several proposals. All the plans were either rejected or unrealized. However, this planted the dream of art with a social purpose in his mind. It might help explain why he intended to improve the living environment in the internment camp by designing public projects in 1942.

There was no clear evidence to suggest whether the rejection of Noguchi’s proposals was due to discrimination against his biologically hybrid identity or incomprehension of his avant-garde “environmental art.” But work by Noguchi caused racial controversies in 1935, and the bluntly discriminatory review of his work irritated Noguchi. The work *Death* was a metal sculpture of a lynched African American (fig. 1). It is a life-size stylized man who is suspended from a real rope attached to a metal gallow. Noguchi made this work out of his “sudden emergence into the field of social protest” against lynching, of which most victims were African-Americans.²¹ However, some critics focused on the identity of the artist rather than the artwork. Both Amy Lyford and Masayo Duus mentioned the harsh and discriminatory words by Henry McBride, who was a critic from *New York Sun*:

¹⁸ During the 1930s, the United States suffered from the Great Depression, which later caused a devastating worldwide effect.

¹⁹ Noguchi, *A Sculptor’s World*, 23.

²⁰ “Important Art by Isamu Noguchi,” The Art Story, accessed April 8, 2018. <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-noguchi-isamu-artworks.htm>.

²¹ Noguchi, *A Sculptor’s World*, 22.

The gruesome study of a lynching with a contorted figure dangling from an actual rope, may be like a photograph from which it was made, but as a work of art it is just a little Japanese mistake.²²

Lyford challenged McBride's statement as racist by denying that the possible failure of the work could be connected to the maker's identity, and indicated the prevalence of anti-Japanese sentiment in 1930s American culture.²³ Americans like McBride developed a sense of racial superiority toward Japanese Americans, emerging from the assumption of difference in appearance and other biological characteristics. This discriminating assumption then extends to nonphysical aspects, in the case of Noguchi, his art designs and ideas. Therefore, even though *Death* and many other of Noguchi's works during this period have no apparent reference to Japanese art, his works would be tagged as Japanese art, vulgar art. Noguchi was aware of this vulgar racism even though he did not consider himself Japanese American.

Noguchi also quoted McBride's review in his autobiography and defended himself by claiming that it was his original intention to create art that "beyond the accepted purposes and dimensions...I determined to have no further truck with either galleries or critics."²⁴ The acceptance he sought for was not necessarily the racial justice of his Japanese-American identity in particular. He was just making art, not fighting prejudice against his identity. In American history, many pioneer had made great efforts in eliminating racial discrimination. The steps toward abolition of slavery might have inspired Noguchi to focus on the issue of racial equality and his following steps toward fighting for group of his ancestry.

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Amy Lyford, "Noguchi, Sculptural Abstraction, and the Politics of Japanese American Internment," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 140.

²⁴ Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 23.



Figure 1. *Death*, 1934. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, NY

After this scandal, Noguchi made stage sets, traveled to Mexico, where he designed his first public work. Back in New York in 1937, besides making portrait busts, he made the famous stainless steel bas-relief *News* for the Rockefeller Center. He demonstrated an excellent understanding of space, material, and power of sculpture in this work. The unveiling ceremony in 1940 attracted great attention from both Japanese media and American society. Noguchi found himself torn between two geopolitical positions. According to Duus, the Japanese consulate in New York requested Noguchi, the son of “Japan’s patriotic poet” to make a pro-Japanese statement, while the American State Department also asked Noguchi to send an open letter to his

father, who was a “militaristic propagandist” at that time.²⁵ Noguchi either had a hard time making the decision, or he did not have a firm ground to support either party. Eventually, he followed his friend’s advice and did nothing.

Noguchi was obsessed with anything related to Japanese art, and he had an attachment for the country in which he spent most of his childhood. However, he did not yet identify as Nisei. His self-exploration before the 1940s introduced him to the hybrid culture, yet he was uncertain about his identity and later this uncertainty evolved to indifference. He became more curious about public designs and devoted himself to his projects. The next chapter will explore how Noguchi acknowledged himself as a Nisei and attempted to replace vulgar racism by polite racism before he entered the Poston Relocation Center.

²⁵ Duus, *Journey without Borders*, 160.

Chapter Two: Outbreak of WWII

My trip to California, which had started out as an attempt to find new roots in the West, gradually become more and more unsettled. The war in Europe foreshadowed worse things to come, and I became personally very much aware of its spreading to the Pacific. Pearl Harbor was an unmitigated shock, forcing into the background all artistic activities.²⁶

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and growing racial hysteria against all persons of Japanese ancestry affected Noguchi. He committed to the identity of Japanese American and became a political activist in early 1942. Previous scholarship that focuses on Noguchi during this period records his sudden shift of focus in life and writes about his participation in the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), involvement in congressional committee hearings on the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast, organizing Nisei Writers and Arts Mobilization for Democracy, and his meetings with government officials in New York and Washington, D.C. discussing relocation policies. These writings are valuable but did not analyze his motivations. Drifting over the world, why would Noguchi devote himself to raising awareness of the patriotism of Japanese Americans? He did have an intrinsic obsession with Japanese art and his projects, especially public spaces and gardens, were known for their distinctive hybridity and manifested combination of Japanese Zen gardens and terra-cottas.²⁷ However, it is necessary to examine the reason why Noguchi, who used to think nowhere as home and had no certain national identity, suddenly considered himself a Japanese American, a Nisei, and stepped forward for this identity.

Identity is not only how one sees oneself, but also how one responds to the way how others see oneself. In this chapter, I argue that Noguchi's sudden shift from American to

²⁶Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 25.

²⁷*The Isamu Noguchi Catalogue Raisonne* (New York: The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, 2015), 700.

Japanese American is not a turning point of self-understanding. Rather, it is a starting point of consciously building of his Japanese-American identity, a loyal one. Fujitani's work indicates that both Japan and the United States understood how the treatment of corresponding minority groups could be used in propaganda efforts. With the understanding that identity was tagged with racism and already knowing his unchangeable identity, Noguchi intended to gain trust from other groups (Americans and Japanese Americans) on his identity and shift the racism against him from vulgar racism to polite racism.

Before Pearl Harbor, Noguchi barely thought about his Japanese-American identity. Born in California, Noguchi was an American citizen by law. However, as argued in the first chapter, Noguchi never felt a sense of belonging. He did not have an easily understandable identity and did not need one. The discriminatory reviews on his works in 1930s or earlier never penetrated his mind that focused solely on art. Noguchi also mentioned in his autobiography that he had no reason previously to seek fellow Nisei out as a group.²⁸

To the Japanese-American community, Noguchi was not part of them either. When Noguchi went to Hawaii for a commission, *The Nippu Jiji* addressed Noguchi as an American sculptor who wanted to live in a real Japanese atmosphere.²⁹ The newspaper introduced Noguchi in an official tone, "he was born in Los Angeles and has traveled considerably to China, Japan, Mexico, all over the United States and Europe."³⁰ He was a respectful American sculptor guest who came to Hawaii. *Rafu Shimpo*, a Japanese-English language newspaper based in Los Angeles, also called Noguchi a "noted sculptor of New York" and an "American-born sculptor"

²⁸ Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 5.

²⁹ *The Nippu Jiji*, "Noguchi Wants to Live in Japanese Atmosphere Here," (Honolulu, HI), May 8, 1940.

³⁰ *Ibid.*,

in their reports when Noguchi visited Los Angeles in 1941 before Pearl Harbor.³¹ When Noguchi recalled this trip and his very first encounter with Niseis, he said, “they looked upon me as one from the outside who had surmounted barriers which they felt closed advancement against them.”³² In spite of his half Japanese ancestry, he was not a member of a Japanese-American community. Also, in spite of his American identity (by nationality), Americans discriminated against him on the basis of vulgar racism.

Noguchi had a transient connection with the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) as early as 1940. However, this Nisei group only sought Noguchi out for his fame in art. Since its establishment in late 1920s until WWII broke out, the JACL was an exclusive organization by definition—open only to citizens.³³ Therefore, the JACL members were primarily American-born Niseis and they advocated for Japanese-American pride as outstanding American citizens.³⁴ In Spring 1940, when Noguchi went to Honolulu for a project, he asked Franklin Chino, a JACL leader in Chicago, to help him connect with local Japanese-American groups. Duus’ research suggests that in Chino’s letter to Noguchi, Chino introduced several Japanese-American newspaper editors, who were “among the leaders of the West Coast,” to Noguchi and indicated how excited they would be to meet with, the famous Japanese-American artist.³⁵ These Nisei editors must have been active in the West Coast Japanese-American communities and influential to the newspaper industry. It might be plausible to say that they were aware of the media calling Noguchi an “American-born sculptor,” instead of a Japanese-American. They had the power to cooperate with government agencies and convince the non-elite Japanese-American community.

³¹ *Rafu Shimpo*, “Artists and Architects to Exhibit their Works,” August 19, 1942; *Rafu Shimpo*, “Social Notes,” September 17, 1942.

³² Isamu Noguchi, “I become a Nisei,” (unpublished manuscript, 1942), 2.

³³ Cherstin M. Lyon, “Japanese American Citizens League,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed April 8, 2018. http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese_American_Citizens_League/.

³⁴ A few Issei veterans from World War I were granted citizenship through the Nye-Lea Act.

³⁵ Duus, *Journey without Borders*, 163.

Perhaps this connection with elite Japanese Americans and expressions that emphasized Americanness prompted Noguchi's understanding to the weight and pride of American citizenship. During the war period, both Noguchi and the JACL initiated plans to prove the loyalty of Nisei to American society and tolerated polite racism against Nisei.

The "Japanese American Creed" written by Mike Masaoka in 1941 stated the Japanese-American patriotism in JACL:

Although some individuals may discriminate against me, I shall never become bitter or lose faith, for I know that such persons are not representative of the majority of the American people. True, I shall do all in my power to discourage such practices, but I shall do it in the American way—above board, in the open, through courts of law, by education, by proving myself to be worthy of equal treatment and consideration. I am firm in my belief that American sportsmanship and attitude of fair play will judge citizenship and patriotism on the basis of action and achievement, and not on the basis of physical characteristics.³⁶

The creed sounded like a confession of a minority who was discriminated by vulgar racism and asked for polite racism. The "basis of physical characteristics" determined the inevitable vulgar racism against this subpopulation, even though Masaoka believed only some individuals had such prejudice. Likewise, Noguchi went through the blunt discriminating critics against him. JACL successfully established political power within their communities, mainly due to their close connections with government agencies.³⁷ Through wide distribution to government officials, media, and Nisei, JACL was avid to demonstrate its sincerity in becoming "a better American in a greater America."³⁸ By saying "proving," Japanese Americans were put in a lower

³⁶ "Japanese American Creed", from booklet "For Better Americans in a Greater America" published by the Japanese American Citizens League in 1950, Densho Encyclopedia, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/sources/en-ddr-densho-274-20-1/>.

³⁷ Paul R: Spickard, "The Nisei Assume Power: The Japanese Citizens League, 1941-1942," *Pacific Historical Review* 52, no. 2 (1983): 148.

³⁸ "Japanese American Creed."

position in the creed. They could only define their values through contribution to prove their values.

The breakout of war concerned Noguchi and made him realize the biopower of vulgar racism. He attempted to transform vulgar racism to less violent racism, what Fujitani would call in Baliar's term, polite racism. Although Noguchi did not work with JACL, he did the same thing to facilitate moving Japanese Americans from outside to inside biopolitical government. And they did so by helping to define racism in more polite term, to compromise and to cooperate. In January 1942, Noguchi organized a group called "Nisei Writers and Artists for Democracy." Among the organizers, there were Larry Tajiri, a JACL leader and Shuji Fujii, editor of Japanese-American newspaper in Los Angeles.³⁹ Greg Robinson and Harry Honda's work reveals how Tajiri encouraged Japanese Americans to take advantage of resettlement as an opportunity and to assimilate into the white community. Taiji later also advocated for the loyalty questionnaire that was brought out by the War Department and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) in 1943 to assess the loyalty of Nikkei in the internment camps.⁴⁰

Noguchi's name frequently appeared in Japanese-American newspapers that reported JACL events in early 1942. He and other fellow Niseis organized a fifteen minute war-time air broadcast facilitated by JACL Anti-Axis Committee and the Nisei Writers group by the Los Angeles Fight for Freedom Committee.⁴¹ There are two parts to this broadcast. The first half depicts "the contribution of the Issei to America with his problems to the present war," and the second part "dramatizes the Nisei of today and his Americanism."⁴² Working with JACL and

³⁹Duus, *Journey without Borders*, 164.

⁴⁰Greg Robinson, *Pacific Citizens: Larry and Guyo Tajiri and Japanese American Journalism in the World War II Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

⁴¹DOHO, "Nisei War-time Broadcast to Come Over Air Sunday," January 9, 1942.

⁴²Ibid.

patriotic Niseis, Noguchi first assimilated to Japanese Americans and started to conceive an American identity. This identity was more than citizenship, but an acknowledgement of the Japanese-American community and hopefully of the white American community. JACL members and other so-called elite Niseis considered themselves a different group from Issei, by citizenship and identity, and they were responsible for playing a vital role for “dissemination of facts to the American public at large as well as to the Japanese community.”⁴³

Surely, Noguchi demonstrated his trustworthiness to America and influenced the community with his fame and action. *DOHO*, one of the most popular newspapers among Japanese-American community emphasized Noguchi’s signing of a resolution that condemned militarist Japan. “The resolution, dated December 12, 1941, was recently sent to Isamu Noguchi, Nisei sculptor now in San Francisco. Signers included...”⁴⁴ Noguchi’s hybrid identity, residence in New York, and his artistic skills, all “proved” the acceptance of American society to his identity. He was already in the circle of biopower, at least to him and his Nisei friends. As a Japanese-American leader who advocated for democracy, Noguchi called upon fellow Niseis in the West Coast to join their “New York City Japanese Artists” group, who have been “privileged to enjoy the freedom of expression and action extended to all inhabitants” of America, to fight against Fascism.⁴⁵ These prominent artists considered themselves part of the population in the regime of American governmentality and took democratic privilege for granted. Here democracy is the antithesis of fascism and the Japanese-American group was on the side of the Allied Powers. Japanese-Americans might intentionally publicized their stand to avoid vulgar racism.

⁴³*DOHO*, “JACL Set to Mobilize Community,” January 23, 1942.

⁴⁴*DOHO*, “New York City Japanese Artists Condemn Japan,” February 6, 1942.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

However, the privileged civil rights of Japanese Americans, vanished in the smoke of WWII gunpowder, when president Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized Japanese relocation with Executive Order on February 19, 1942. By defining the entire West Coast, home to the majority of Americans of Japanese ancestry or citizenship, as a military area, the order resulted in an evacuation of approximately 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, of which most were American citizens, to be evicted from the West Coast. It also justified the deprivation of Japanese-American citizenship that constitution aims to protect.⁴⁶ Although there is no single word associated with “Japanese” that appears in the order, only Japanese Americans felt the sting of targeted governmentality and were imprisoned as a result of it.⁴⁷

American government intended to include Japanese Americans in its biopower without explicitly acknowledging their citizenship or defining their identities. About two months earlier, when Roosevelt delivered the Infamy Speech after the attack, he claimed that “no matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people, in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory.”⁴⁸ It suggests that American government decided to enter the war to defend territory and fight against Japanese Fascist with the full force of the country, of its people. However, the speech did not articulate the definition of “American people” or whether they included American resident, citizens, or only the white? Fujitani’s understanding of Foucault’s idea in modern context indicates that in the regime of governmentality, government optimizes the life of its populations through the operation of

⁴⁶ The Fifth Amendment guarantees that no American citizens will be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.

⁴⁷ Roger Daniels gives a comprehensive analysis on why and how American targeted specifically on Japanese Americans in the West Coast in his work, “The Decision for Mass Evacuation” in *Concentration Camps USA: Japanese Americans and World War II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 42-73.

⁴⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The Infamy Speech” (a Joint Session of the US Congress, December 8, 1941).

mobilizing desires and interests.⁴⁹ The first step, though, is to determine population composition. America asked Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast to be relocated for national security, for the country that they might not belong to, as if they were part of the obligated population. Later the state denied those democratic rights to this racialized community by relocating Japanese Americans from their homes and letting them abandon their jobs, properties, and social status, not to mention the social welfare that they should have received, as the population of the state, the object of governmentality.

On the other hand, Noguchi and his group were prone to voluntary evacuation, to meet the obligation of American citizens, without questioning the rationality of the evacuation.

I remember that fateful night when Shuji Fujii brought us Governor Olsen's recommendation for voluntary evacuation. Then it was all in the hands of the Army, and mass evacuation became a shocking reality.

We draw up a plan whereby we hoped even out of evacuation good might result in furthering democracy and assimilation...⁵⁰

In spite of the "shocking reality" that Army took full control over the voluntary evacuation, Noguchi's group still hoped for democracy and assimilation that they thought Noguchi had attained. On February 20, 1942, one day after the issue of Executive Order 9066, *DOHO* reprinted the tentative principles and means for the suggested voluntary evacuation of the Japanese, Issei, and Nisei, drafted by the Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilization for Democracy. Again, the report introduced Noguchi as "noted New York sculptor."⁵¹ As the article articulated, "the evacuation by Nisei, if necessary, should be undertaken as a voluntary with their interest as American citizens, and their acceptance of this as a duty and responsibility of citizenship" to

⁴⁹Fujitani, "Right to Kill, Right to Make Live," 15.

⁵⁰Noguchi, "I Became a Nisei," 2-3.

⁵¹*DOHO*, "A Nisei Speaks," February 20, 1942.

avoid any wrong impression to the American public as a whole.⁵² If Nisei were part of the population, why did they need to be concerned about misunderstanding, the euphemism of vulgar racism against the subpopulation.

However, the idealistic loyalty and voluntary evacuation did not help Japanese Americans to gain trust from the government or the white, who still had vulgar racism against them. Many Nisei leaders presented and testified on the issue of evacuation at the four hearings held by The House Select Committee Investigation National Defense Migration, commonly known as the “Tolan Committee,” that investigated the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Hundreds of people presented testimony or submitted written statements to the Committee, trying to affect government policy on the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Mike Masaoka, the writer of Japanese American Creed and national JACL secretary expressed opposition to the mass or voluntary evacuation move at the session held in San Francisco on February 23. He questioned why Executive Order 9066 turned out to be a order that aimed primarily at “the Japanese Americans as well as alien nationals.”⁵³ He stressed the citizenship and loyalty of Nisei throughout his statement. Also, he acknowledged the distrust and discrimination that the state and American public had against Japanese Americans:

...we hope and trust that you will recommend to the proper authorities that no undue discrimination be shown to American citizens of Japanese descent.⁵⁴

The word “undue” indicated possible acceptance of a lower degree of discrimination. He suggested to continue cooperating on evacuation for military necessity and national safety in “complete agreement.” As mentioned in Chapter One, white Americans had hostility against

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Nichi Bei*, “Nisei Cooperation with Federal Orders Pledged at S. F. Hearing,” (San Francisco, CA), February 26, 1942.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Japanese Americans since the early 1900s, especially on the West Coast. The attack on Pearl Harbor and war hysteria intensified such discriminatory emotions. Even at the hearing, the congressional committee made no effort to hide their “pre-conceived bias against the JACL,” the group that had been cooperating with the government to facilitate evacuation, “and the Nisei spokesman were not given the chance for a full oral report,” commented by the guest writer from *Nichi Bei*, a San Francisco-based Japanese-American newspaper.⁵⁵ Knowing the difficulty to eradicate blunt racism against Japanese Americans and to stop the evacuation, Masaoka compromised to be a minority “citizen” who hoped to transform vulgar racism into polite racism by complying with the order.

Hoping to defend the name of American democracy and help the evacuation and resettlement of Japanese-American fellows, Noguchi presented the hearings in early March and waited a chance to testify for Japanese-American loyalty. However, the committee only allowed him submit a statement written with two other Nisei leaders. Besides some general suggestions on regulation and assistance to Japanese-American evacuees, the statement ends with their clarification on loyalty:

In testing for loyalty, we wish to point out that loyalty is not entirely a matter of citizenship or educational background, nor a matter of religious or political affiliation.⁵⁶

This is the only sentence that humbly expresses their concerns with American democracy projected on Japanese Americans in the statement. The statement indicated the acceptance to possible removal and resettlement by Noguchi and his group. They were against improper incarceration and unequal treatment to the Japanese Americans affected by the Executive Order

⁵⁵Nay, “Bay Iotas,” *Nichi Bei*, (San Francisco, CA), Feb 28, 1942.

⁵⁶U.S. Congress, House, Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration. 77th Congress, 2nd sess. *National Defense Migration* (hereafter Tolson Committee hearings), 77th Cong., 2nd sess., 1942, part 31, 11877.

9066.⁵⁷ However, the implicit expectation of the hearing was to see how the Committee would comment on their counterparts of German Americans and Italian Americans, regarding their similar reference to Axis powers. Then Japanese Americans hoped to be accorded the same rights, with no further racially-based discrimination. The Committee did not issue its final report until May 1942, but the main topic for the hearings shifted to anti-Japanese groups urging evacuation in the end.⁵⁸ It was predictable that the final report would only indicate the necessity of removing Japanese Americans from the prohibited military zone and how the government assured a “democratic” evacuation and relocation, but no reference to other ethnic groups. In the television documentary series *The World at War*, Noguchi recalled the hearings and talked about his understanding to why America only targeted Japanese Americans for evacuation. He thought, “the picking on Japanese was partly a kind of a logistically rational thing that army could handle. And not we cannot handle the Germans but we can handle the Japanese.”⁵⁹ Rational or not, Japanese Americans had not authority or power or change it.

The testimonies and statements on hearings did not halt the evacuation process. Again, Noguchi accepted the discriminatory governmentality and embraced it by promoting the humane aspect of it. Noguchi and his group made a documentary film about the evacuation to promote the “democratic” treatment of Japanese Americans. Before shooting the film, they have obtained approval from the Army and asked for relaxation on the travel restriction and curfews placed on Japanese Americans so they could travel to a further place with a more flexible schedule.⁶⁰ Therefore, the government approved and granted privilege to the project that helped to bolster

⁵⁷Here the “unequal” means being unfair to Japanese Americans who had different education background, social status, income, etc.

⁵⁸Duus, *Journey without Borders*, 166.

⁵⁹*The World at War, On Our Way: U.S.A. (1939-1942)*, created by Jeremy Issacs (Dec 12, 1973; London, United Kingdom: Thames Television), ITV Network.

⁶⁰Ibid.

“moral” of Japanese-American evacuees. The film started by shooting the departure of the voluntary working crew on March 22 and followed by scenes taken in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles. According to a review published on *DOHO*, the scene showed “clearance sale” shops on the street that used to be busy; once a colorful downtown gradually died down.⁶¹ When moved to the scenes the new city—Manzanar, which was one of the first cities that established War Relocation Centers and functioned as a “reception center” during the early evacuation period.⁶² By presenting the visual transition from old home to the new relocation place, the film advertised for the relocation life brought by the government. It intended to “show the government and the American people the spirit of cooperation of the Japanese people in this evacuation,” as Shuji Fujii, one of the producers said when introducing the film was shown to an audience of 2500.⁶³ They presented a promising living environment for the evacuees and glossed over it as a new home for Japanese Americans. Again, Noguchi and his colleagues from NWAMD, who were all famous Japanese Americans, considered themselves obligated Americans who should facilitate building American democracy for the public of Japanese-American community, who experienced vulgar racism and were not a part of the “population” yet.

In April, after meeting with several government officials, Noguchi came up with a threefold solution that allowed him to promote American democracy, which was supposed to be non-racist, help Japanese Americans who experienced vulgar racism and prove the loyalty of Japanese American who lived with polite racism. It was to enter a War Relocation Camp. Noguchi traveled to Washington D.C. and met John Collier, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs

⁶¹*DOHO*, “2500 See Evacuation Moving Pictures,” Apr 10, 1942.

⁶²*Reflections in Three Self-Guided Tours of Manzanar* (CA: Manzanar Committee, 1988), 15.

⁶³*DOHO*, “2500 See Evacuation Moving Pictures,” Apr 10, 1942.

from 1933-1945. He presented the plan for a “Government Sponsored Farm and Craft Settlement for People of Japanese Parentage.” Collier then suggested Noguchi go out one of the camps that would be under his direction, and it was Poston, Arizona.⁶⁴ Noguchi expected to make the place into a “park-like place,” that he could both work for the authority as well as benefit the community in the camp with what he was good at, as an artist. In the letter by John A. Bird, the assistant to Director John Collier, it articulates Noguchi’s voluntary entry to the camp, his responsibilities, and rights:

...[Noguchi] has volunteered his service to the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the United States Department of the Interior, to aid in the development of a handicraft project among Japanese evacuees...

Mr. Noguchi is not an evacuee from a military area, and does not require a permit to travel outside a military area.⁶⁵

After the Attack on Pearl Harbor and till Noguchi’s voluntary entry to Poston War Relocation Center on May 12, 1942, Noguchi ran around different cities, met and cooperated with different groups, and engaged with various social and political events. This was because of Noguchi’s multiple identities, including American citizens, Nisei, and Japanese American. By law, culture, and ancestry, his ambiguous connections to the two communities interweaved into a trap that he could not get rid of. He chose to live with it and deal with it. As a racism survival strategy, he sympathized with the minority who kept struggling in the trap to no avail, but he also understood the importance of proving loyalty and value. Therefore, he facilitated both groups by transforming blunt vulgar racism to more acceptable polite racism. The next chapter will analyze how Noguchi’s voluntary entry to the camp is a further step toward polite racism.

⁶⁴ Isamu Noguchi, interview by Paul Cummings, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Nov. 7-Dec. 26, 1973.

⁶⁵ John A. Bird, letter to Whom It May Concern, April 27, 1942, National Archives.

Chapter Three: In the Camp

In May 1942, Noguchi voluntarily entered the Colorado River Relocation Center in Poston, Arizona, with the ambition to promote the democratic idea of America to Japanese Americans and prove Japanese-American loyalty to the state and mainstream, i.e., to convince both “giver” and “receiver” to transform vulgar racism into polite racism. The controversies and misunderstanding to relocation were an urgent challenge to democratic principles. Noguchi considered it an opportunity to establish better governmentality to comfort the internees. It is possible that the internees thought they had been victimized by racial prejudice and war hysteria and they attributed internment to predatory or revengeful political and economic interests.

In this chapter, I will analyze Noguchi’s stay in Poston War Relocation Center from May to November 1942 to trace the shifts of his understanding to polite racism, and corresponding actions taken after the changes. It was impossible for Noguchi to know the term “polite racism,” and he never admitted acceptance to any forms of racism. However, as I demonstrated in previous chapters, Noguchi spontaneously fell in the trap of polite racism and the biopower of American government when he decided to cooperate with the government and facilitate the transformation from vulgar racism to polite racism that against Japanese Americans. I am using the terms directly in this thesis for my analyses. He requested an early release after living in the camp for one month. He actively wrote to friends, officials, and even acquaintance to speak on his behalf. His experience with camp administration officers and Japanese-Americans fellows, the living condition and other objective factors of the place, and the failures of his artistic plans might all contribute to his disappointment at the “democratic” camp dream. Ultimately, Noguchi

realized the differences within the Japanese-American community and such differences made it worthless to facilitate the racism transformation.

Consisting of three separate cantonments, the Poston Relocation Center was located in Yuma County, Arizona. Noguchi lived in Poston I. The camp lies within a desert, which are extremely hot during summers.⁶⁶ The Colorado River Indian Reservation Tribal Council owned the land. The Army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) ruled it.⁶⁷ The War Relocation Authority did not take full control of the Poston Relocation Center until Dec 1943. BIA intended to develop a farm in the center, which would raise military funds as well as provide job opportunities.⁶⁸ In a report that presents selected statistics for the 120,313 persons of Japanese descent who were under the jurisdiction of the WRA, Agricultural, Fishery & Forestry ranked the evacuees by occupation. Approximately 43 percent of the evacuees worked in Agricultural, Fishery & Forestry Occupations out of 60,718 respondents. The second-largest occupation, Professional & Managerial Occupations, only accounted for 15%.⁶⁹

Noguchi felt a gap between the Japanese Americans in the camp and him. Once he arrived the camp, he was eager to draw up plans for the central park, recreation area, and the cemetery in the camp.⁷⁰ However, others seemed to have different concerns. In his letter to a friend, he states, “the people here are for the most part farmers, completely un-intellectual, and with little apparent interest in the policies or politics of democracy other than resentment with their common lot.”⁷¹ His complaint fits what Alexander H. Leighton, the social analyst and

⁶⁶Jeffrey F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord, *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* (University of Washington Press, 2002), 215.

⁶⁷Alexander H. Leighton, *The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1945), 48.

⁶⁸Burton, Farrell, Florence B. Lord, and Richard W. Lord, *Confinement and Ethnicity*, 215.

⁶⁹The Evacuated People A Quantitative Description, World War II-Documents, Illinois State Library.

⁷⁰Isamu Noguchi, letter to Collier, May 31, 1942. National Archives.

⁷¹Isamu Noguchi, letter to Carey McWilliams, June 11, 1942, National Archives.

psychiatrist, observed during his work in Poston War Relocation Center. Leighton examined the impact of the administration on the individuals and social organizations in Poston, as well as the consequential social events that took place there. He indicates that the Issei, which was one-third of Poston's total population, felt that coming to Poston was a waste of life and money.⁷² They were a group of desperate men who never had American citizenship and would never have it in the future. Therefore, they were not the target of biopower. They were indifferent to the so-called democratic principles and governmentality. They had been used to vulgar racism and did not intend to alter or eradicate it. They tended to obey rules and complete the work as required.⁷³ To Noguchi, he barely had contacts with this group from his previous works or social activities.

Noguchi did not get along better with the Niseis either. Having worked with the Nisei members of JACL and NWAMD, Noguchi might have come to the camp with an expectation to meet and cooperate with more Niseis. However, it turned out to be the opposite. On July 28, in his letter to John Collier, Noguchi expressed his frustration:

I am extremely despondent for lack of companionship. The Niseis here are not of my age and of an entirely different background and interest.⁷⁴

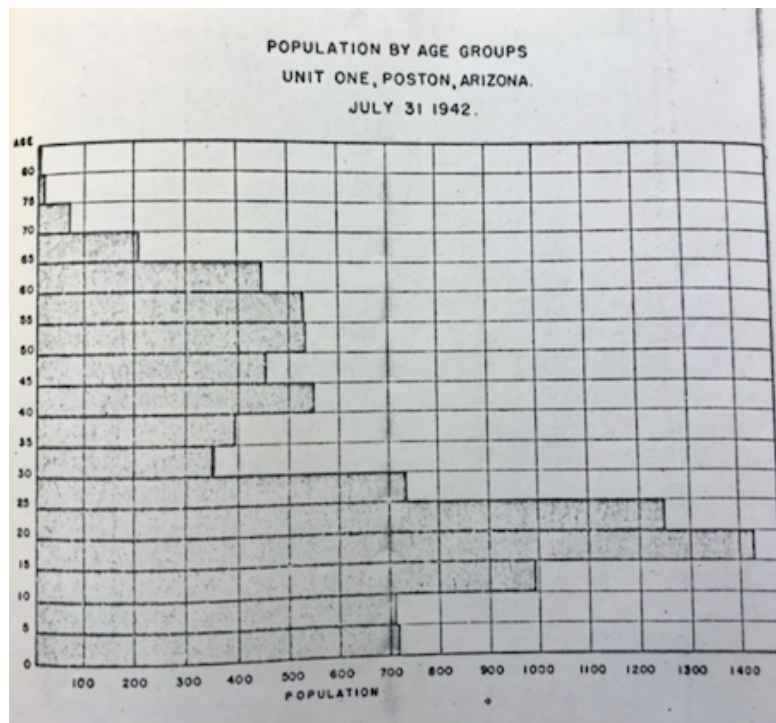
Previously, Noguchi primarily worked with "elite Niseis," since he was also considered a great model of Japanese-American, an elite Nisei. As an artist, he sympathized with the minority and fought against discrimination, at least in its vulgar form. However, he also valued the freedom of art, the privilege to create works freely and to choose the materials, techniques, and styles as he desired. However, all the freedom seemed irrelevant to the Niseis in the camp. According to Leighton's research, as shown in the chart, among the Niseis in Poston, the majority were under thirty years old. Most of them were in or just graduated from California

⁷²Leighton, *The Governing of Men*, 67-73.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Isamu Noguchi, letter to John Collier, July 27, 1942, National Archives.

schools, which were liberal in race attitudes.⁷⁵ Having left the umbrella of school and their friendly teachers, these American-born and American-raised youth were not mature enough to understand the discrimination against Japanese-American citizens. There might be other reasons that lead to a gap between Noguchi and other Niseis. But growing up in a discriminating environment and without his father being around, Noguchi might have difficulty getting along with Niseis, especially when they did not any common topics to talk about. “Many Niseis came to Poston with burning feelings of, ‘They can’t do this to me!’, and very much at sea as to what they should do and what to expect.”⁷⁶ Before Noguchi attempted to teach them how to be loyal, he had to convince them the value of loyalty and when they were mistreated for discriminatory mistrust.



Population by Age Groups, Poston I, July 31, 1942⁷⁷

⁷⁵Leighton, *The Governing of Men*, 73.

⁷⁶Ibid., 77.

⁷⁷Leighton, *The Governing of Men*, 78.

In addition to the difference on age and understanding to citizenship, Noguchi shared no common interest with the Niseis, as he mentioned in the letter. Even some Nisei college graduates might choose to work on the family farm after school because it was difficult for them to find jobs suited to their education.⁷⁸ Henry Kanegae, a block representative on the Camp Council told Duus in an interview that Noguchi was a famous person who was not close to farmers like him.⁷⁹ Kanegae also recalled how big the room Noguchi got while other internees had to share a single room, and how privileged Noguchi was able to get himself mesquite wood and other materials he needed while other internees had to work.⁸⁰ Noguchi's devotion to the building of his "ideal community" was too unrealistic to non-elite internees who were struggling to live.

Besides being misunderstood by Japanese Americans in the camp, Noguchi also became a nuisance to the camp administrators. He failed in all the three missions he planned to do in the camp. To the administrators, Noguchi was such a nuisance sent from BIA who kept requesting materials and other resources for his projects. They had no interest in making the interned Japanese Americans learn handicrafts or the arts. After all, polite racism was only Noguchi's wishful thinking, or Collier's as well, with no reference to WRA's objective of evacuation the people of Japanese ancestry in the West Coast that they did not trust.

After living in the camp for about two months, Noguchi realized the challenges to achieving his goals. However, getting out was not easy. On Jul 27, Noguchi wrote to Collier to request an early release. Collier forwarded Noguchi's request to Dillon Myer, the head of WRA, who then told Wade Head, the Poston camp director to work on the issue.

⁷⁸Henry Kanegae, interview by Duus.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

I must finally ask you to do what is necessary to have me released...

As you know I sought a place where I might fit into the fight for freedom. This might have been the place where I stronger or more adaptable. As it is I become embittered. I came here voluntarily. I trust that you will not have difficulty in securing this request.⁸¹

Not until four months later on December 2 did Noguchi receive the approval from the Army Authorities. The documents from the National Archives show that the request was repeatedly denied. At first, the request was denied because of the rule that anyone “even with a drop of Japanese blood” was to be interned, even though Noguchi came as a volunteer. Later, the Fourth Army relaxed the qualification and allowed “mixed blood” to be released. Noguchi was supposed to meet the criteria, but he did not receive a permission.⁸² On October 29, 1942, the letter sent by Wartime Civil Control Administration explained that,

requested is denied as not falling within the mixed blood policy heretofore adopted, in that applicant is not an evacuee from Military Area No. 1 or that portion of Military Area No. 2 lying within the boundary of the State of California.⁸³

The reason seemed to be playing with words. Noguchi’s request was denied for coercive internment, which means he was not considered as a volunteer but an internee. However, the qualification then changed to the origin of the evacuee, which Noguchi had no way to change.

On November 3, Myer wrote to Head and suggested that Noguchi request a short-term leave instead, since Head had the authority to approve a short-term leave application, which was up to 30 days and could be extended up to 60 days.⁸⁴ Finally, Myer’s suggestion worked. On December 2, Noguchi was granted “a month’s furlough” to New York City.⁸⁵ The letter also indicated the specific time Noguchi needed to leave, which was 9 o'clock at night. He left in his

⁸¹Isamu Noguchi, letter to John Collier, Jul 27, 1942, National Archives.

⁸²W. Wade Head, letter to E. R. Fryer, Aug 28, 1942, National Archives.

⁸³Ray Ashworth, letter to E.M. Rowalt, Oct 29, 1942, National Archives.

⁸⁴D.S. Myer, letter to Head, Nov 3, 1942, National Archives.

⁸⁵Sawahata, letter to Isamu Noguchi, Nov 12, 1942, National Archives.

car in the evening, as required. Duus commented that Noguchi's stealthy leave haunted the Japanese-American community, who blamed Noguchi for failing in his commitment and leaving the rest in the camp. Therefore, Duus thought this might explain why the community never formally acknowledged Noguchi's wartime efforts.⁸⁶ Indeed, there were only a few reports on Noguchi after he stayed in the camp 184 days and moved on to his journey in New York.

I was free finally of causes and disillusion with mutuality. I resolved henceforth to be an artist only. I came into possession of an oasis, a studio with a garden at 33 MacDougal Alley, perfect in every way.⁸⁷

Noguchi's camp story did not have a perfect ending. However, as Collier once wrote, he saw no use in Noguchi being required to wreck himself trying to do the impossible. Having Noguchi go back to New York, in the art world, he could be useful to his people, people who understood him, and to the country he wanted to belong to, and to the culture more generally and broadly.⁸⁸

People might think Noguchi failed to transform vulgar racism to polite racism. He did attempt to be a middleman between cultural and ethnic hybridity in the early 1940s.⁸⁹ In the following years, he did not walk away but promoted democracy in his way. He devoted himself making extraordinary sculptures, set designs, furniture, etc. He continued to be a model Japanese American, and that was his way to maintain valuable to people who had polite racism against him.

He went back to Japan in 1950. He was highly appraised and asked to design several projects in Japan. He visited Hiroshima Peace Park in 1951 and proposed a design for the

⁸⁶ Duus, *Journey without Borders*, 174.

⁸⁷ Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, 26.

⁸⁸ John Collier, letter to Hon. Dillon, July 31, 1942, National Archives.

⁸⁹ Lyford, "Noguchi, Sculpture Abstraction, and the Politics of Japanese American Internment," 141.

cenotaph. Even though his proposal was rejected due to his American citizenship, the final design was based on his original idea.⁹⁰ In his later years (1952-1988), Isamu Noguchi designed many prominent gardens and sculptures for many prestigious organizations, companies, and buildings. Isamu Noguchi passed away on December 30, 1988 in New York.

⁹⁰ Bert Winther, "The Rejection of Isamu Noguchi's Hiroshima Cenotaph: A Japanese American Artist in Occupied Japan," *Art Journal* 53, no. 4. (1994): 23.

Conclusion

Noguchi's story in the early 1940s is a vital experience in his life and career, as well as in the history of Japanese Americans during WWII. He used to have no easily identifiable identity, because of his complicated family story and biological hybridity.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, he sorted out his identity and had a new understanding of different types of racism against to different identities. He strengthened his prominent Japanese American identity by helping the Nisei community to build their loyal identities. He cooperated and organized patriotic Japanese-American groups to fight for civil rights and then facilitate humane relocation of Japanese-Americans. Also, he intended to improve camp life by voluntarily entered a War Relocation Center, taught traditional Japanese art courses, and designed public facilities.

Noguchi's attempts to promote democratic ideas did not work, and this history was not appreciated or even recorded. There were only a few pieces of scholarship mentions his camp experience when analyzing Noguchi's achievement in art. Niseis who stayed with him and worked with him barely mentioned Noguchi, so did the Japanese-American community media in the postwar era. Even Noguchi himself only wrote less than a page on his experience in Poston in his autobiography. I sympathize with his idealistic ambition. He was so brave and selfless to enter the camp voluntarily, when nobody knew how long the internment would last and what would happen there. His intention was heroic, and his plan was idealistic. Noguchi thought the camp administrators would be "politely" provide comfortable facilities and environment to the internees. And he took it for granted that Niseis and other internees would understand him as he did. However, the gap between social status and different needs for survivals led to Noguchi's

escape from the camp. He failed his mission in the camp, but he never lost faith in democracy. After leaving the camp, he continued to work on art projects that infuse Japanese art and culture. He designed for United Nations and Hiroshima Memorial park for people who suffered discrimination and misunderstanding like him.

By showing a compelling illustration in the figure of Noguchi, this thesis applies Fujitani's idea in a different approach to understand biopower and racism. His camp experience revealed the power of racism and inefficiency of individual influence on biopower. Polite racism does not indicate politeness. Rather, it is a fake acceptance of the physical and potentially psychological difference when there is no way to eliminate racism. Noguchi has spent all his life searching, fighting for, and proving his identity to others, who have vulgar racism, polite racism, or both against him. However, the solution might be dismissing his identity. When difference does not matter, it becomes unnecessary for one to ask others for acceptance. Even though biological differences exist, we should recognize people for who they are without demanding them to acknowledge their different identities and to demonstrate their allegiance to the mainstream. Compared with vulgar racism, polite racism is more dangerous. It can divide communities and conceal how the biopolitical state tries to extract resources. By the time Noguchi left the camp, he no longer facilitated the transformation from vulgar racism to polite racism. He proved his value in his own way by creating fantastic artworks and he did not need the mainstream to determine his value and disguise their racism against the minority.

Noguchi was a significant figure in the story of Nisei identity. His contribution to the equal rights of Nisei and peace persists in his works and the Japanese-American history. However, he cannot represent all Niseis. There are other Niseis who joined military service to

attain recognition and acceptance into the mainstream of American society.⁹¹ Their stories are also valuable to understand development and transformation of polite racism. This thesis intends to provide a new approach to use ideas such as polite racism and governmentality to interpret war memories and understand how individuals contribute to communities.

⁹¹James C. McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II* (Place of Publication Not Identified: Books Express Pub., 2011).

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