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Stephanie Takaragawa

Chapman University, takaraga@chapman.edu

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Comments

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ISAMU NOGUCHI'S MODERNISM: Negotiating Race, Labor, and Nation, 1930–1950. By Amy Lyford. Berkeley: University of California Press with the assistance of the Getty Foundation, 2013. viii, 273 pp., [8] pp. of plates (Figures.) US\$60.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-520-25314-8.

Isamu Noguchi's Modernism: Negotiating Race, Labor and Nation, 1930–1950 provides compelling evidence to reconsider the work of the artist within larger social, economic and political contexts of pre- and post-World War Two. Amy Lyford brings fresh insight towards a much-needed corrective of the binary of identity that has manifested itself throughout discussions of Noguchi's work, obscuring larger issues of race and identity. With hindsight as its backdrop, Lyford recontextualizes the early work of Isamu Noguchi within a compelling and nuanced interpretation foregrounding racial and identity politics. This approach is central in decoding both the choices in artistic form and the places through which the artist laboured.

Noguchi was anomalous in many ways. His identity as a Japanese-American, artist, furniture maker and landscape designer, who worked in Paris with Brancusi and voluntarily interned himself at Poston Relocation center during the Japanese-American internment, has provided rich fodder for analysis. No identity is singular, and yet the racial discourse of the first half of the twentieth century was part of a very different ideological understanding of race, identity and community, which may account for its apparent lack of sophistication now.

The book is driven by the social and political discourses of the 1930s to the 1950s, to which Noguchi's work is responding. Divided into two main areas, the first half of the book is dedicated towards his integration of notions of labour, work and the artist and the second focusing on his identity as Japanese-American during World War Two. Part 1, titled "Labor," provides detailed discussions and documentations of Noguchi's works and unrealized plans that all foreground the notion of artist as social agent. These works, including Monument to the Plow, the Carl Mackley Memorial, and the design for the Associated Press mural, are developed as the forms through which Noguchi can express the collusion of identity of artist as labourer. Particularly for the Associated Press mural, located at Rockefeller Center where Diego Rivera's iconic *Man at the Crossroads* mural was censored, Noguchi's left-leaning views would have to manifest themselves in other ways. Lyford uses these plans and sculptures to illustrate how Noguchi invested himself in the production of his work, the subject of which conflated the individual and the labour through the physical representation of the sculpture, and where the production of the work itself provided labour and collaboration among artist and worker. This beautifully crafted argument draws attention to lesser-known and unrealized Noguchi works and plans, as well as the reinterpretation of well-known ones.

While previous literature both by and about the artist has rooted much of the analysis of his work in his Japanese and European ancestry, implicating identity as a biological constant arbitrating his work, this analysis resituates the complexity of identity and community. Part 2, "Race," focuses on Noguchi's *nisei* identity and his voluntary internment at Poston, as well as an analysis of his group, the Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilization for Democracy (NWAMD). Noguchi's own ambivalence towards his identity as *nisei* is examined through his work with the NWAMD and his essay *I Become Nisei* (appendix 2), as well as through recently uncovered FBI documents and letters. While race is the overarching theme, it is subtly divided into two sections, internalized and externalized racial identification. Section 4 draws out potential psychologies of Noguchi in his response to the sudden foregrounding of the Japanese part of his identity during World War Two. While always present, as indicated through reviews of his work, Lyford offers more critical analysis of how those reviews continue to mark the artist in gendered and racialized ways.

Particularly apt is her own analysis of both Thomas Hess' and Clement Greenberg's critiques of Noguchi's work in the last sections of the book. Here she utilizes the contemporaneous reviews of his sculpture and exhibitions to delicately, almost surgically, dismantle the Eurocentric and misogynistic construction and conception of the modernist artist as white male, and how that may have impacted Noguchi's own self-presentation, discussed at the end. This book also illuminates the social and political importance of the shifting relationship between Japan and the US, and its impact on labels of race and nationalism. Lyford's work is an important reminder that identity, community, race and nation shift over time and important new information often comes from neglected sources.

Lyford makes it easy to see why Noguchi has been interpreted in the ways that he has, but also, why that may not be sufficient. This book surveys the cultural environment to portend precisely why such difficulties and distinctions about both his work and identity will never be fully answered, but can continually be mined to garner a deeper understanding of social and political influences that both compel and restrict both actions *and* interpretations.

All writing is culture-bound. It reflects the sensibilities and ideologies of its time and place. Noguchi's work can easily be reconsidered through an analysis today that has articulated hyphenated and hybrid identities, through more sophisticated and nuanced understandings of community, race, ethnicity and identity. His time provided little of that ability, which makes it no surprise that certain aspects of that were either knowingly or unknowingly concealed by the artist, or misunderstood, willfully or not, by his critics. Lyford's research has provided a more cultivated analysis that may bridge many of his earlier unresolved acts that culminated in the artist so well-known today. It provides new opportunities for examining Noguchi's political alliances, his work itself and overarching social agendas of the time.