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Isamu Noguchi's Gardens: Yellow Peril in the Age of Information

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ABSTRACT: The origins of the information and digital age can be traced to Norbert Wiener's wartime document "Yellow Peril," a yellow-bound book of "perilous" statistics introducing his eventual science of prediction (cybernetics). This essay situates the emergence of "prediction science" alongside the growing sentiment of Japanese "unpredictability," two corresponding experiments in perception in 1942. It also examines sculptor Isamu Noguchi's blueprints to transform Poston War Relocation Center into a garden. Highly visible, orderly, and physical, a garden was the externalized proxy of Japanese interior desires, historically aligned with information's foundational premise of unpredictability and chaos. Through the case of Asian racialization, this essay contends that the historical formation of the information age is embedded within the historical formation of racial liberalism.

On February 1, 1942, in the midst of World War II, the mathematician Norbert Wiener drafted a classified document wherein he originated his theories of cybernetics, the science of prediction shaping foundational concepts of the information and digital age. Wiener's manuscript, bound in yellow and containing perilously difficult statistical formulas, circulated among mathematicians and engineers under the moniker "Yellow Peril." The racial connotations of Wiener's "Yellow Peril" are astonishing, considering it was published months after the Pearl Harbor attack and the anti-Japanese fear that followed.¹ Cultural

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anxieties regarding the Japanese—imagined to be volatile and unpredictable—animated the importance of Wiener’s document. Although no evidence explicitly addresses the racial dimensions of this yellow book of statistics, its social context suggests that the specter of Asian terror haunts the origins of the information and digital age.

Norbert Wiener’s “Yellow Peril” tethers together histories of Asian America and histories of the digital. I illustrate how these two seemingly disparate histories correspond to each other in powerful ways. In the first section, I situate the emergence of *prediction science* alongside the growing sentiment of Japanese *unpredictability* in 1942. Both events are embedded within the same historical moment when new experiments in perception were taking place. The second section turns to the story of Japanese American modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi (b. 1904), an artist who links these two histories of information and race. In 1942, Noguchi voluntarily interned himself at Poston War Relocation Center in order to “make the place more human.”² In Poston, Noguchi proposed a series of blueprints that attempted to transform the camp into an organized, livable Japanese “garden.” The design visions for the Poston garden demonstrate how understandings of race were recast as questions of perception, in which race could be calibrated on the threshold of unpredictability and predictability. Through examining Noguchi’s writings and blueprints for Poston, I argue that scientific concepts of the information age helped shape understandings of race, citizenship, and democracy during an era in which visible markers of difference gave way to the logics of prediction. Noguchi’s garden represented Japanese Americans as visible, orderly, productive, and ultimately democratic—altogether ameliorating a racial association with the “unpredictable.”

This essay considers Japanese internment as a “laboratory” for information design, where ideas of race could be isolated for experimental modeling.³ It juxtaposes two “yellow peril” projects of 1942:

Nayan Shah, John Carlos Rowe, Heidi Amin-Hong, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, and Christina Juhász-Wood for helping me develop the core ideas in this version of my research. All faults are my own. This work has also benefited from archivist Janine Biunno, who helped me navigate and access materials at the Isamu Noguchi Archive during the earliest stages of my research.

The main implementation of Wiener’s statistics in 1942 was automating anti-aircraft technologies for wartime combat.

2. Isamu Noguchi, letter to Yasuo Abiko, San Francisco, Feb. 23, 1979. The Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, New York.

3. Although scholars of Japanese American history debate the use of “internment” versus “incarceration,” I primarily mobilize the term “internment.” I do so to emphasize its etymology of “containment” and place it alongside technical logics of “isolation” and “control” that undergird the ethos of a laboratory.

Wiener's yellow book of cybernetics, and Japanese American incarceration. As histories of the information and digital age often examine seemingly race-neutral institutions such as International Business Machines (IBM), the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), or Bell Laboratories, this article understands Poston as a site for cybernetic thinking, a military-research laboratory for the social control of racial assimilation. The historical formation of the information age did not take place outside the historical formation of racial liberalism. In this light, new expansive scales of data-based calculation ushered in new fears and possibilities, sensibilities that were translated into the informatic project of Japanese internment.

Two Yellow Perils

In the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, a crisis in perception activated social panic in the United States. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, ordering the mass incarceration of Japanese and Japanese American civilians. Over 120,000 civilians from the West Coast were relocated and imprisoned in American internment camps due to anti-Asian fear. The 10 camps were: Topaz (Utah), Poston (Arizona), Gila River (Arizona), Granada/Amache (Colorado), Heart Mountain (Wyoming), Jerome (Arkansas), Manzanar (California), Minidoka (Idaho), Rohwer (Arkansas), and Tule Lake (California). Japanese internment—a direct response to the attack on Pearl Harbor—is one of the largest coordinated forced relocation and imprisonment projects in US history. Internment was the violent solution to the threat of the unpredictable—coded as Japanese—lingering at the threshold of a visible US racial order.

The element of surprise characterized the fear of the Japanese. Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command and lead advocate for the immediate mass incarceration of Japanese and Japanese American civilians, repeatedly invoked the description of an invisible and inscrutable menace waiting to strike. In "Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942," he wrote:

The Pacific Coast had become exposed to attack by enemy successes in the Pacific. The situation in the Pacific theatre had gravely deteriorated. There were hundreds of reports nightly of signal lights visible from the coast, and of intercepts of unidentified radio transmissions. Signaling was often observed at premises, which could not be entered without a warrant because of mixed occupancy. The problem required immediate solution. It called for the application of measures not then in being [. . .]

Such a distribution of the Japanese population appeared to manifest some-

thing more than coincidence. In any case, it was certainly evident that the Japanese population of the Pacific Coast was, as a whole, ideally situated with reference to points of strategic importance, to carry into execution a tremendous program of sabotage on a mass scale should any considerable number of them have been inclined to do so.⁴

This report narrated the general atmosphere of wartime paranoia and hysteria that resulted from the unpredicted attack on Pearl Harbor. The problem for DeWitt was how to contain the latent threat of further attack, one potentially worse than the Pearl Harbor strike on December 7, 1941. In this heightened state of fear, the covert forms of communication—the “signal lights visible from the coast” and “unidentified radio transmissions”⁵—became signs of “Japaneseness.” DeWitt mobilized these indiscernible activities as evidence of a dangerous Japanese presence forming both within and outside US borders. They were nowhere and everywhere, an ominous threat at the edge of the atmosphere; they were palpable only through the invisible and pervasive frequencies of electronic technologies themselves.⁶ Unpredictability, and the inability to discern meaning or intention, became a form of Japanese racialization.

Japanese internment, I suggest, was a racial form of information design that responded to the desire to manage a seemingly invisible and unpredictable threat. It was an American experiment that combined emergent sciences of systems and prediction with the social need to govern a racial “enemy” of the state. The executive decision to imprison Americans of Japanese ancestry in 10 isolated camps across the West Coast was an approach to national security through predictive measures of prevention. In other words, internment illustrated how the large coordination of data capture could go hand in hand with the physical capture of a racial minority.

Questions surrounding the “interiority” of the Japanese—what Earl Warren, the attorney general of California at the time, would

4. John L. DeWitt, “Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942,” <http://www.sfmuseum.org/war/dewitt1.html>.

5. Ibid.

6. The history of electronic media has often functioned as an archive of cultural sentiments. Due to its invisible “inner” workings, electronic technologies (i.e., the telegraph, early radio, networked radio, and television) often reflect the social desires and fears of their times. Jeffrey Sconce elucidates how the introduction of wireless radio inaugurated concerns of a porous and boundless “ethereal ocean.” This sea of radio waves does not simply index ideas regarding electronic presence and connectivity but also is shaped by social concerns regarding the disintegration and dissolution of borders and hierarchies of race and class. Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 2000).

call the problem of “hearts and minds”—emerged during a larger midcentury shift in knowing and representing external reality. Orit Halpern argues that the introduction of cybernetics in 1942 transformed the epistemic field of the visual. Inaugurating a scientific language of prediction, cybernetics introduced two interrelated ideas for understanding the world. First, the world was thought to consist of “black-boxed entities whose behavior or signals were intelligible to each other, but whose internal function or structure was opaque, and not of interest.”⁸ The internal “essence” or “meaning” hidden within an entity—human or nonhuman—became less important in comparison to the *process* and *patterns* of an entity’s external actions. A cybernetic world envisioned reality as chaos. This volatility activated the episteme of statistical “feedback,” broadly understood to be “the property of being able to adjust future conduct by past performance.”⁹ The external world of entities became visible through the ability to *approximate* the likelihood of future conduct based on a ground-level understanding of pure randomness. Isolation of “signals” from a sea of noise, the foundational premise of “communication,”¹⁰ emerged as the primary structure for knowing and visualizing the world. Although there are numerous limitations to the closed-system theories of cybernetics,¹¹ the science of prediction introduced a new vision of the world—a reality of dynamism whose most intimate secret was exposed through calculation and prediction. A world of information—made visible by concepts of data, feedback, statistics, calculation, patterns, process, systems, and so forth—emerged as one dominant episteme of the natural and human world.

In this cybernetic world devoid of interior or essential meaning, the information age introduced a new science of desire. Prior to cybernetics, the modern conception of desire stemmed from psychoanalysis

7. Earl Warren, “Testimony of Hon. Earl Warren,” Hearings before Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, House of Representatives, 77th Congress (Washington, DC: US Gov. Printing Office, 1942), 11011, 11015, <https://archive.org/details/nationaldefensem29unit>.

8. Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 2014), p. 44.

9. Norbert Wiener, *Human Uses of Human Beings* (London UK: Free Association Books), p. 33.

10. Halpern, *Beautiful Data* (above, n. 8), p. 61.

11. In many ways, the feedback systems of “cybernetics” helped facilitate the “closed-world” metaphors regarding computers and the Cold War. Paul Edwards provides a compelling account of the Cold War context in which the geopolitical world itself was imagined as a large “computer.” Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

and the theories of Sigmund Freud. In the 1890s, through the clinical attempt to diagnose neurotic or hysterical patients, Freud proposed a set of theories investigating the structure of the human mind. Psychoanalysis represented what Akira Mizuta Lippit calls a “phenomenology of the inside,” exposing the contours of the inner psyche.¹² With it, the burgeoning field of study gave language for understanding the attributes and drives that motivated human behavior. The calculus of desire structured this interior world of the mind. Ideas regarding drives, object relations, fetishes, and others mapped out how concepts of the ego, self, and subjectivity came into light. Psychoanalysis gave form to the psyche and its secrets, and, in this aim, named desire as the governing force of the subject.

If desire illuminated the cartography of the mind in the Freudian era, then the cybernetic epoch signaled the externalization of desire.¹³ Cybernetics bracketed questions of interiority and subjectivity in order to develop a language for processing behavior and actions in an observable world. Understanding the “desire” of an entity was not only possible through *interpretation*, typified by theoretical and clinical psychoanalysis; in addition, desire could be processed through inputting behavioral data into a statistical formula. In other words, cybernetics could expose desire not as an inner secret but as a visible, calculable one, unmooring desire from the depths of the psyche and the domain of psychoanalysis. Cybernetics processed past data and action in order to understand future conduct—an “objectified” desire—through new techniques of *prediction*.

Wiener’s “Yellow Peril” exemplified this shift from psychoanalytic interpretation to cybernetic prediction. Emerging from the US military-science complex of World War II research and the famous MIT Radiation Lab, Wiener’s classified document introduced new techniques for predicting aircraft patterns and preventing military attacks from the sky. These statistical experiments represent what Peter Galison defines as a new “ontology of the enemy.”¹⁴ The desire of an enemy—the wants and motivations of its inscrutable mind—was recast

12. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 5.

13. Freudian and cybernetic approaches represent two different ways for understanding psychic and social life and correspond to each other. For instance, notions of cybernetic “feedback loops” describe a machinic process to constitute a stable entity, a procedure that resembles psychoanalytic theories of subject formation. Zaretsky details the relations between the psychoanalytic and cybernetic epochs in a helpful synthesis. Eli Zaretsky, *American Imago* 72, no. 2 (2015): 197–210.

14. Peter Galison, “Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): p. 231.

as questions of response time, data, and patterns, all for the sake of prediction. Unleashed from the depth of an interior mind, desire *as prediction* could be visualized, mapped out, and ultimately calculated. Through a cybernetic episteme, the “other” could be conceived as a purely mechanical being, devoid of interiority.

The racial connotations of Wiener’s “Yellow Peril” are astonishing, considering it was published months after the Pearl Harbor attack and the anti-Japanese fear that followed. In my research, however, there has yet to emerge an explicit connection to the atmosphere of racial terror in which Wiener’s document emerged. Simply, as the story goes, “yellow peril” referred to its yellow-bounded cover and its perilous statistical rigor. To be clear, I am not interested in locating this link, nor do I believe one necessarily exists.¹⁵ Rather, Wiener’s “Yellow Peril” demonstrates the ideological power of the information age, and how its history of mathematical, scientific, and technological achievements can be cleaved from a sustained inquiry of race, difference, and identity.

How is race operating in these technical registers that seem to have nothing to do with race? What racial ideologies might be embedded within the very logics of knowledge production that constitute the information sciences? Although the statistical models used in Wiener’s “Yellow Peril” were developed during his time at MIT, the racial tint of this difficult theorem illustrates how, in the words of Brian Winston, the “social sphere invades the laboratory.”¹⁶ Feminist media theorists have argued for the permeability between the technology lab and the social world outside. Through investigating early UNIX software of the 1960s, Tara McPherson has argued for the imbrications of code and culture, software and the social.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Anne Balsamo has contended that technological achievements are always technological innovations, in which “culture [is] a precondition and horizon of creative effort.”¹⁸ These insights illustrate how the processes and practices of scientific and technological research do not remain confined within the walls of the laboratory. What would happen if

15. In fact, Wiener was a friend of “East,” often collaborating and making trips with colleagues in China and Japan. He was a member of the China Aid Society, which aimed to assist displaced Chinese researchers due to geopolitical conflicts.

16. Brian Winston, *Technologies of Seeing: Photography, Cinema and Television* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 55.

17. Tara McPherson, *Feminist in a Software Lab: Difference and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 2018).

18. Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* (Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 2011), p. 3.

we took Wiener's "Yellow Peril" not simply as a foundational theory of information science but as a prototype for a theory of race and racialization? Further, within histories of the early digital age, could this yellow document expand our understanding of the research laboratory—beyond the usual institutional narrative of MIT, IBM, Bell Laboratories, and others—to include unexpected experiments in US culture and society in more expansive ways?

Wiener's "Yellow Peril" signifies the emergence of prediction science during the historical context of Japanese unpredictability.¹⁹ These technical formulas cast the Asian other not simply as a racial other—a knowable or unknowable entity—but as a racial episteme that uniquely exemplified the process of prediction. Within the calculus of information sciences, Japaneseness occupied the threshold of unpredictability and predictability.

Alongside the research powerhouses of the information age, Japanese internment functioned as a laboratory in which the logics of prediction shaped a larger US experiment on race and identity. Internment became a way to violently isolate, and therefore test, the desire of an entire racial group and its potential for democratic assimilability. Tara Fickle has suggested it was precisely the unascertainable desire of the Japanese—the "galling problem of their 'hearts and minds'"—that fueled legislation surrounding Japanese internment.²⁰ In testifying before a House committee in 1942, Earl Warren identified the Japanese as marking a new limit of enemy knowledge: "When we are dealing with the Caucasian race, we have methods that will test the loyalty of them, and we believe that we can, in dealing with the Germans and Italians, arrive at some fairly sound conclusions . . . But when we deal with the Japanese we are in an entirely different field and we cannot form any opinion that we believe to be sound."²¹ This "entirely different field" marked a racial imaginary that produced new methods of calculating the desire of a population through mass information. In this sense, desire *in mass* demanded new techniques of information extraction and management.

What, then, was new about race and racism during the emergence of prediction science, or cybernetics? In attuning to the social dimensions of race that contextualize mathematical, scientific, and tech-

19. For a comprehensive examination of Wiener as a historical figure, see Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener The Father of Cybernetics* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

20. Tara Fickle, "No-No Boy's Dilemma: Game Theory and Japanese American Internment Literature," *Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 4 (2014): p. 741.

21. Warren, "Testimony" (above, n. 7).

nological advancements, my contention is that the rise of US racial liberalism in the 1940s posited race less as a static category and more as an experimental variable to be *modeled*. Scholars like Jodi Melamed have examined the post-World War II era, in which the US racial hegemony transitioned from an oppressive regime of white supremacy to the formalization of anti-racism in state ideology.²² Shifts in racial knowledge were integral to this transition; “what counts as a race matter” shaped liberal modes of racial control and expanded the reach of state power.²³ Further, race-liberalism positioned the United States to ascend as a democratic world leader in the global, postcolonial world order after the Second World War.²⁴ Unmoored from biological essentialism and the body, race was increasingly understood as a cultural phenomenon, reflected in group-specific traits, practices, and associations. Recasting race as cultural allowed Japanese culture to function, as Ellen Wu notes, as a “malleable screen onto which various actors could project their political agendas, from validating Exclusion, internment, and resettlement to rehabilitating Japanese American citizenship and reconstructing Japan, depending on the exigencies of the moment.”²⁵ The isolation of Japanese Americans created the conditions for race to be understood as an isolated variable in the larger shifting experiment of American democracy. That is, the overarching category of “Japaneseness”—stretching over gender, class, age, and other markers of difference—utilized experimental logics for testing notions of citizenship and national assimilability. The social experiment of Japanese internment limned a new model of democratic citizenship through the early formation of a verified racial model: the *model minority*.²⁶

22. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 3.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

25. Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 2015), p. 156.

26. A topic common to scholars of Asian American studies and ethnic studies is the myth of the “model minority.” In the US context, the model minority refers to a racialized minority group that is thought to be an idealized embodiment of American nationalist and capitalist values. The legacy of the US model minority draws heavily from the racialization of Asian Americans. In her incisive historical account of the model minority myth, Ellen Wu details how Chinese and Japanese in the US transformed from excluded unassimilable foreigners—exemplified by the term “yellow peril”—to included model Americans. Wu suggests that the accumulated efforts of multiple institutions (including the social sciences, the public relations industry, liberal anti-prejudice initiatives, immigration and legal reform, and others) produced the idea of a racial model minority.

The model minority was also a minority model. It represented the idealized calibration of desire toward the aims of the US nation and empire. The Japanese, racialized as unpredictable, carved out the epistemic ground in which citizenship subsequently could be modeled through strategies of predictability. Out of the chaos of unpredictability was born the possibility of order and control—a cybernetic ethos that resonated in sites beyond the information technology laboratory. As a myth born of US racial liberalism, the model minority functioned as a visualizing mechanism for processing racial difference in relation to an increasingly complex US social landscape slowly transitioning into a “formally anti-racist, liberal-capitalist state”²⁷ decades later. Great efforts to visualize the desires of the Japanese shaped strategies of racial assimilation and integration for the nation-state.

Experiments in Desire

Quoting from *The Matrix*, Jean Baudrillard famously describes digital space as the “desert of the real.”²⁸ He posits that the defining trait of digitality is the severing of representational regimes from a “profound reality,” where the real might be found in “some shreds that are still discernable in the desert.”²⁹ The metaphor of the desert references Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “On Exactitude in Science” (1946), where Borges allegorizes cartography and the relation between a map and its territory. In Borges’s story, the “Desert of the West” holds the remnants of this fabled map, scraps of an all-encompassing representational model.³⁰ By inverting Borges’s fable, Baudrillard suggests that in the digital age, it is the model that is dominant, and the “real” is relegated to the desert, whose “vestiges persist here and there.”³¹ While Baudrillard’s account of the desert is allegorical, a historical account of the digital might also take the desert as an experiment in race-making happening in places out of sight, in the vestiges “here and there.”³² To begin with the desert—to put the territory first—and its layered

The model minority functioned to mythologize the US as an “anti-racist” democracy in order to facilitate the ascendance of racial liberalism in the US. Wu, *Color of Success* (above, n. 25).

27. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, (above, n. 22), p. 1.

28. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

29. Ibid.

30. Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science,” *Collected Fictions*, trans. A. Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 90.

31. Baudrillard, *Simulacra* (above, n. 28), p. 1.

32. Ibid.

conflicts and struggles is to historicize scientific abstraction and its co-construction of racial knowledge.

The racial history of the digital I trace is one that takes up the real desert of Poston War Relocation Camp, where the coordinated efforts between the War Relocation Authority and the Bureau of Indian Affairs attempted to create a racial model in response to the panic of racial unpredictability. The archives of artist Isamu Noguchi offer a view into how the emergence of prediction science and the sentiment of Japanese unpredictability (which resulted in Executive Order 9066) register two corresponding experiments in perception—one technical and one racial. During the early months of Poston in May 1942, Noguchi interned himself within the camp, and his seven-month experience in the desert influenced many of his artworks, including *This Tortured Earth* (1942–43), *My Arizona* (1943), and *Yellow Landscape* (1943), as well as his set design for Martha Graham's ballet *Appalachian Spring* (1944).³³

Primarily known as a sculptor, designer, and landscape architect, Noguchi embraced a technique of abstraction that corresponded to the styles of modernism. His achievements are extensive, especially for a minoritarian artist whose career began in the late 1920s. His profile includes commissioned works in Mexico, Japan, Israel, France, and the United States; he received the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, the Kyoto Prize in Arts in 1986, the National Medal of Arts in 1987, and others. In 1968, Noguchi received his first art retrospective in the Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 1985, he opened The Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, New York. Highly acclaimed, Noguchi has been lionized as an important artist of the twentieth century. His experimental approach to abstract forms embraced the sensorial capacities of art. Achievements in abstraction—through careful attention to form, technique, and style—allowed Noguchi to ascend beyond the presumed “confines” of identity and offer universalist, rather than relativist, artistic accounts of the human condition.³⁴

Noguchi's use of creative abstraction was deeply political for him. Being of Scottish American and Japanese heritage, Noguchi found that abstraction allowed his artistic works to be untethered from the

33. For more on the influence of Noguchi's internment experience on *Appalachian Spring* (1944) as a set of “spatial and material forms,” see Marci Kwon, “The Fence and the Chair: Isamu Noguchi, Appalachian Spring, and Internment as Modernist Setting,” *Modernism / modernity* Print Plus 3, no. 1 (2018).

34. For a thorough exploration of universalist and counter-universalist aspirations in modernist Asian American art, see Audrey Wu Clark, *The Asian American Avant-Garde: Universalist Aspirations in Modernist Literature and Art* (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 2015).

realist cues of identity, culture, or nation. He was born in 1904 to Yone Noguchi and Leonie Gilmour in Los Angeles. Amy Lyford contends that Noguchi's abstraction was primarily attuned to transformation—a process of becoming “hybrid” that was susceptible to reconfiguration and reprogramming.³⁵ Identity, and therefore identity politics, was for him a movement toward stasis rather than dynamism. Artistic abstraction, on the other hand, indexed the possibility to reimagine what was settled as the empirical real. In many ways, as a cosmopolitan artist of mixed heritage who spent his life and career in Japan, the US, Europe, and Mexico, Noguchi's hopes for abstraction illustrated his faith in the ability to transcend the material world wrought with visual markers of social, cultural, and national difference. This universalist aspiration, for Noguchi, did not strive to erase any reference to racial or political art but rather sought to rework the language and conditions in which concepts of the social came to be legible. As an artist who belonged in “no world,” a marker of pride for Noguchi, he hoped that through his art, he could attune to the infrastructure of a future world in which he belonged. For Noguchi, abstraction, unmoored from realist cues, was at its core the art of change.

Noguchi's experience in Poston was not the first time the artist used sculptural abstraction to express social critique. Prior to his voluntary internment, he also completed *Death* (1935), an explicit commentary on lynching that is quite shocking and visceral. Depicting an abstracted Black body hung by a rope, *Death's* semi-figural representation of a racialized body made the artwork closely resemble photographic realism, thus transforming the medium of sculpture into a form of social testimony. Lyford has explained how the directness of the artwork garnered Noguchi negative responses from critics who saw *Death's* social critique as a perversion of the “purity” of the national arts.³⁶ Compared to *Death*, Noguchi's artwork reflecting on his time in Japanese internment departed from human figuration and utilized landscapes as a conduit for expressing psychological trauma. They suggest a different scale in which race (and race-based violence) is configured, not necessarily on the level of the individual body but a proxied relationship between collective identity and one's situated environment.

Noguchi's primary media were the material arts of sculpture, landscape design, and architecture. These physical forms, for Noguchi, were not representations of frozen experience but prismatic expressions of time and change. He wrote:

35. Amy Lyford, “Noguchi, Sculptural Abstraction, and the Politics of Japanese American Internment,” *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): p. 143.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Sculpture is the one art, the one communication which cannot be conveyed as two-dimensional information as with photography. There is a residual experience that cannot be gotten in any other way than through physical experience, whether by sight, touch, contact, distance and the ever-changing relationship of volume and space which comes from the continuous changes that time gives, the time of day; that movement gives, or that thought begets.³⁷

Sculpture transcends representational capture. It is affective, perceptual, and experiential. From the play of light and shadow, perspective and position, depth and flatness, physicality and imagination, actual and virtual, sculpture attunes to a dynamism that, perhaps, could be sensed through the molding of physical space. Noguchi's philosophy of sculpture was not only artistic but also perceptual, a way to reconfigure a given environment to transform the experience of a physical space. Influenced by "Eastern" spiritual thought, Noguchi understood sculpture to be an experiment in experience itself. The environmental materials of the world contain within them the potentiality of transcendence—a "freedom" enmeshed in the physical surround.

In the same year Wiener published his classified "Yellow Peril" document, Noguchi voluntarily entered Poston War Relocation Center in an attempt to rectify the nation's "yellow peril" project of Japanese relocation and incarceration.³⁸ On April 27, 1942, John A. Bird, the assistant to the director of the War Relocation Authority, wrote a letter granting Noguchi permission to enter Poston War Relocation Camp.³⁹ When Executive Order 9066 was initially announced, Noguchi happened to be in San Francisco, where he saw firsthand the outrage and panic of Japanese Americans. As a New York resident, Noguchi himself was exempt from the executive mandate, but he was jolted into urgent political consciousness. He helped organize Nisei Artists and Writers Mobilization for Democracy (NAWMD), a group that aimed to improve the livelihood of interned Japanese and Japanese American persons through an arts and crafts initiative. During his months inside Poston, his relationship to internment and its administrators was complex and ever-changing; his writings reflect a mixture of measured optimism, ambivalence, frustration and disillusionment, fear, and other sentiments.

Poston was built on the land of the Colorado River Indian Tribes

37. Isamu Noguchi, "1949" (essay), Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, New York, p. 9.

38. For a historical and cultural examination of anti-Asian fear more broadly, see John Kuo Wei Tchen

and Dylan Yeats, *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear* (New York: Verso Books, 2014).

39. John A. Bird, letter to "Whom It May Concern," April 27, 1942, Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, New York.

and was thus officially under the jurisdiction of the Tribal Council for the Colorado River Indian Reservation.⁴⁰ Although the Tribal Council oversaw operations of their land and objected to Japanese internment, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) overruled their protests in the time of war.⁴¹ Lacking available land for housing the large number of internees, the WRA enlisted the support of the BIA. Many of the proposed internment camps were on designated Native American land, as they were geographically distant from the declared relocation zones.

In charge was John Collier, the commissioner of Indian Affairs, who was known for leading the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, or the “Indian New Deal.” Collier’s policies for Indian self-management and economic self-sufficiency demonstrate the persistence of US settler colonial strategies that strip Indigenous peoples of land and nation in the US liberal nation-state. As a radical reworking of the 1887 Dawes Act, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 promised to restore governance to Indigenous tribes on Native land. Jodi Byrd contends that this act of self-governance—rather than sovereignty—continues the legacy of settler colonization in the US liberal state.⁴² Recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples does not extend to recognizing sovereignty and nationhood and thus folds Native Americans into the larger vision of American liberal democracy.⁴³ Byrd argues that Collier was a key official for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and his plan for the Japanese Americans at Poston aligned with his larger strategy for managing Indigenous land. In Collier’s view, the trouble with the Colorado River Indian Reservation was the difficulty of building and sustaining an infrastructure of life in the arid land. The imprisoned Japanese peoples, many of whom were West Coast farmers, provided Collier a labor resource for transforming the desert into a productive agricultural site, one that could also be utilized by the Native Americans.⁴⁴

Poston in many ways exemplified the experiment of American democracy that began with Native Americans and would then incorporate interned Japanese Americans. On June 27, 1942, Collier espoused his vision for democracy at Poston:

40. The internment camp is named after Charles Poston, the first superintendent of Indian Affairs.

41. Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press), p. 186.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

We in this country join with the people of England, the people of Australia, with the Free French, China, etc., in asserting that Democracy is the right way of life. We are waging a war for Democracy. That war is going to be won. There is not the slightest doubt. But when we look around within our own country, whether it be on a national or local scale, we do not find that Democracy has been achieved. It has not been achieved in any of these countries and certainly not in the United States. Our Democracy is an imperfect, embryonic institution as yet.⁴⁵

Collier's speech reflected a mixed state of ambivalence and hope. As a US government official who saw as his life purpose the "betterment" of the American Indian, he could not wholeheartedly and unwaveringly support the indefinite suffering of a people through internment. Proclaiming an insidious optimism, Collier saw Poston as a unique opportunity for the Japanese to craft a life and society in the face of hardship.⁴⁶ In other words, Collier viewed suffering not as the end of the road but the grounds for interrogating questions of life, sociality, democracy, and citizenship.

In this light, the cybernetic ethos—of order and meaning emerging out of "chaos"—shaped the settler capitalist project of Japanese internment. The new sciences of prediction not only played a role in the surveillance technologies of racial confinement but also were the grounds by which racial meaning emerged. In the "yellow peril" panic following the attack on Pearl Harbor, ideas of citizen/enemy were drawn along the threshold of predictability/unpredictability. Lines between the "good" and "bad" Japanese became imperceptible based on visual markers alone, and thus required new methods for assessing the interior desires of a racialized subject. Most famous were the government's loyalty questionnaires that asked interned Japanese civilians to declare allegiance to the United States and renounce any possible loyalty to the Japanese empire or other foreign government.⁴⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has shown how Japanese internment also involved many sociologists who conducted sentiment analyses and other attitude-based data projects, which underlie current forms of social media networks.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the WRA collaborated with IBM

45. John Collier, "Speech to Poston Camp Evacuees," June 27, 1942, Wade Head Collection MS FM MSS 118, box 1, folder 1, Arizona Historical Foundation. Also available at <https://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/digital/collection/ahfreloc/id/93/>.

46. Ibid.

47. "Loyalty: The Questionnaire," Smithsonian, https://amhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/non-flash/loyalty_questionnaire.html.

48. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "The Space between Us: Network Gaps, Racism, and the Possibilities of Living in/Difference," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 7, no. 2 (2021): 12–16.

to coordinate the movement and internment of Japanese and Japanese American civilians. At the time, IBM was the primary producer of punch-card equipment, an analog form of coding and computation that could quantify and process information.⁴⁹ Banal in appearance but powerful in function, the IBM card provided a method for identifying, tracking, managing, and ultimately executing one of the nation's largest data experiments. This WRA "codebook" was central to information processing efforts within the 10 internment camps. Japanese internment was an abundant site of information technology, a place to test out new methods for securitizing the unpredictability of racial desire on a mass scale.

Within internment, "Japaneseness" was coded as not only a racial problem but also a perceptual crisis. As incarceration was not dependent on any evidenced crime or transgression, the internal logic of internment relied on the premise of Japanese unpredictability. Visual markers did not reveal a "truth" fixed to any sense of racial identity; rather, Japaneseness signaled the *process* by which notions of either "citizen" or "enemy" emerged into perception. As a racial episteme marking the threshold between unpredictability and predictability, Japaneseness represented the imperceptible world of information—the chaos of indeterminacy—that demanded new techniques of predictive modeling. These ideas of race on a mass scale corresponded to shifts in perceptual logics inaugurated by the prediction science of cybernetics. Orit Halpern argues that in the 1940s a new era of "information abundance" produced a vision of reality built on the recognition of patterns and processes rather than essences and forms.⁵⁰ Halpern suggests that in this complex and dynamic world of data, techniques of information visualization began to accrue perceptual power. If information abundance exceeded the capacities of human cognition, then information visualization could bring complexity into visual clarity, mass information into organized representation. Information visualization captured a humanizing power and functioned as a method for "making the inhuman, that which is beyond or outside sensory recognition, relatable to the human being."⁵¹ The information age introduced new ways to make sense of a dynamic world of data, corresponding historically with the mass incarceration of the Japanese. In the epistemic chaos of mass information, race could be calibrated in scales beyond the individual.

49. "The IBM Punched Card," *IBM100: Icons of Progress*, <https://www.ibm.com/ibm/history/ibm100/us/en/icons/punchcard/>.

50. Halpern, *Beautiful Data*, (above, n. 8), p. 14.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

With a sculptor's vision, Noguchi understood the perceptual dimensions of space and scale in ways that aligned with the ethos of the information age. For him, if visual markers were not the epistemic key to "truths," then concepts such as race could be viewed as dynamic and in flux—an optimism embedded within the possibility of transformation. Moreover, if one could not change one's racial identity, in the same way that one could not change one's historical conditions, then one critical avenue of political intervention was to reconfigure the operative logics by which social and racial identity came into perception. This task, for Noguchi, was the creative expertise of a material artist, one who was skilled in the formal crafting of the perceptual and the sensorial. Although Noguchi opposed Order 9066, he also saw internment as an opportune experiment for calibrating perceptions of "Japaneseness" through technical means.

Thus, Noguchi embarked on his project to "make the place more human." In a letter dated February 23, 1979, to Yasuo Abiko, a Nisei journalist for *Nichibei Times* and the son of Japanese internees, Noguchi reflected on his motivations:

My going was suggested by John Collier of the American Indian Service. Poston was to be on Indian land, that of the Mojaves, and he had the idea that I might be of help in *making the place more human*. Indeed I had the notion that I could be of some help in making a more pleasant environment, and in a sense it was a step in my entry into the field of the "imaginary landscape" which the exhibit in San Francisco is to be about.⁵²

His philosophy of uplift resonated with Collier's desire to improve the lives of Native Americans through his life's work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In this brief account over 30 years after the end of World War II, Noguchi situated his role as a humanitarian one. The idea of "making the place more human" and "making a more pleasant environment" captured a liberal optimism that persisted in mass incarceration. Within the dehumanizing state of internment—physically, emotionally, and psychically damaging—Noguchi believed that one could exceed the historical conditions of material reality even if one could not change them. An "imaginary landscape," which would be the theme of a later exhibition, could be induced through intervention that provided relief not through an immaterial fantasy or escape but through a transformation of the material environment.

The key to intervention, for Noguchi, was arts and crafts. As an artist versed in gardening, landscaping, sculpting, woodworking, and design, Noguchi hoped to introduce artistry and craftsmanship to

52. Noguchi, letter to Yasuo Abiko (above, n. 2), emphasis mine.

the Japanese internees. In "I Become a Nisei," his most known essay addressing his time in Poston, Noguchi writes:

It is here as potential craftsmen and artisans that I see a solution of the Nisei problem. The teaching of specific craft and industrial skills and their placement will not only serve our war effort well but will hasten assimilation, and diminish these camps to the point where only those who willingly wish remain. Tell us what jobs there are, give us the training, permit us your confidence as Americans, and you will find an eager army for democracy.⁵³

The skills gained from learning material crafts not only offered aesthetic and leisure outlets but also, for an artist like Noguchi, suggested a path toward assimilation and democracy. Internment, here, is configured as a site of "potential."⁵⁴ The idle time of internment presented the possibility of an "army" of craftsmen and artisans who could serve the total US war efforts not through combat but through labor. The acquisition of new skills through hand-based work marked the occasion to re-craft self and identity.

For Noguchi, the material arts captured a desire to transform historical conditions through labor. He writes, "while outside the battle for freedom rages, it is planned to build here a community, dedicated in democracy and to the proposition that the spirit of freedom may be nurtured and grow even in confinement."⁵⁵ Shying away from offering an unwavering critique of Japanese imprisonment, Noguchi envisioned Poston at times in complementary terms to Collier. That is, Poston could serve as a laboratory where experimentation in self-making and self-governance could take place. The material arts were a conduit for crafting Japanese American identity due to their affinity for concreteness, visibility, and orderliness. These qualities correspond to the need to demonstrate the *predictability* of the Japanese American otherwise racialized as *unpredictable*. Put differently, the concrete, the visible, and the orderly attempted to ameliorate an association with the abstract, the invisible, and the chaotic. In Noguchi's eyes, handicrafts and physical labor presented an opportunity to reconfigure the perception of the Japanese race.

Central to Noguchi's design vision were a series of unrealized blueprints for Poston. Labeled "Poston Park & Recreation," these blueprints sketched the main sectors of the interior. Faint lines delineated the land partitioned by square miles while a legend decoded the vari-

53. Isamu Noguchi, "I Become a Nisei," Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, NY.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

ous locations, buildings, and markers that constitute the camp.⁵⁶ On the bottom left is a key of symbols that represented the main functional facilities of the camp, including smaller sites such as dressing rooms, tennis courts, shower fountains, and various types of plants and trees. At the top of this list were thick black lines signifying “canals” and “laterals.” Together, they made up the central diagrammatic infrastructure of the blueprint. The irrigation system of Poston, set on desert land, indexed the management of water as central to sustaining camp life. The system resembled the arteries of the camp interior, connecting the blocks together into a unified community. On the bottom right of Noguchi’s blueprint, in contrast, was a legend of “locations” that reflect important markers of cultural significance. These sites included a community center, a gymnasium, a natatorium, hospitals, administration, Japanese gardens, miniature golf, and others. Represented by letters of the alphabet, these cultural sites scattered the various sections of Poston. They not only marked spaces of cultural activity but also functioned as evidence of humanity in the deprived conditions of Poston.

Noguchi submitted these architectural proposals for the Poston landscape but was met with resistance from Poston officials and the War Relocation Authority. Although various factors contributed to Noguchi’s unexecuted vision, the primary reason was the logistical dilemmas of constructing Poston’s bare infrastructure.⁵⁷ The artist had arrived in Poston I (the camp site that connected its neighbors Poston II and III) on May 12, 1942, a few days after the camp officially opened on May 8. The imprisoned Japanese and Japanese Americans were put to work to build their living quarters. Arts, crafts, and cultural activity took a backseat to the necessity of constructing housing on the desert land.

Although these plans were never implemented, Noguchi’s blueprints captured the racial, social, and political aspirations within the confinement of internment. Through the built environment, these blueprints served administrative and governmental ends for envisioning wartime camp in its most “human” form, especially as they were contrasted against Nazi camps as sites of extermination.⁵⁸ I read Noguchi’s blueprints not simply as technical plans but as an aesthetic artifact that reveals a stubborn desire for transformation even in the

56. Isamu Noguchi, “Poston: Park & Recreation,” Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, New York.

57. Lyford, “Noguchi” (above, n. 35), p. 142.

58. Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2011), p. 137.

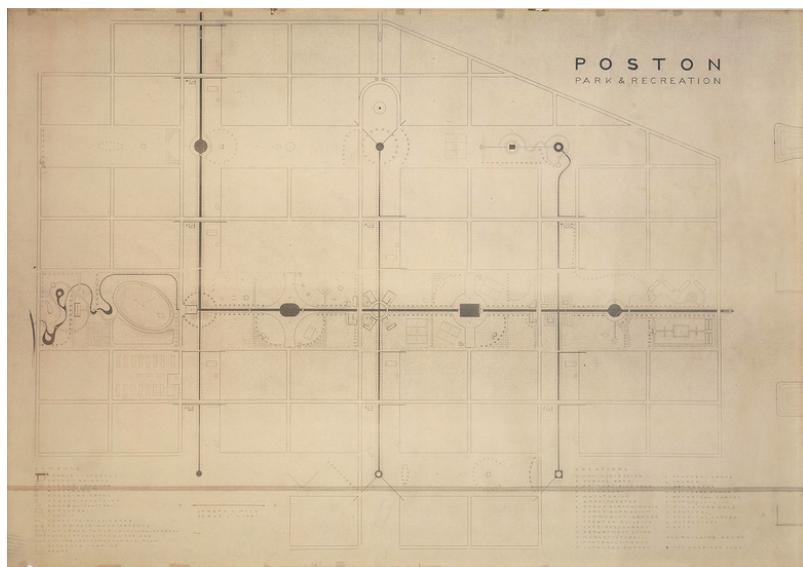


Figure 1. Isamu Noguchi, "Poston: Parks & Recreation" (blueprint), 1942. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00056. Photo: Kevin Noble. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS.

direst historical conditions—an optimism for the flourishing of cultural life unfettered. For an artist who was originally trained as a sculptor, landscape architecture represented the possibilities for dynamism and change on a larger scale. As a "sculptor of spaces,"⁵⁹ Noguchi understood the molding of physical landscape as a form of sculpture and thus also ripe for intervention. His careful attention to maintaining the beauty of the land through plants, gardens, and cultural activity reflected not simply technical expertise but rather a method for crafting a renewed Japanese democratic identity and community.

These blueprints proposed the planting of trees, flowers, and shrubbery to transform the interior of Poston into a literal garden. They lined the main walkways while strategic clusters of flowers and trees indicated ideal gathering spaces. The vision of Poston in these blueprints included an integrated system of greenery, gardens, irrigation, housing, and sites of cultural activity. These were aimed at building a functioning and thriving community. Flowers and gardens not only served a technical function but also a symbolic one. In Poston's desert, where plant life faced the harsh climate, cultivating an irrigable land allowed Japanese democratic life and sociality to "bloom."

59. Isamu Noguchi, "The Sculptor of Spaces" (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980).

These blueprints proposed making Poston “livable” and, in doing so, evinced a desire to craft identity through the cultivation of an otherwise barren land.

The imaginary of the desert as uninhabitable and lifeless often perpetuates the subjugation or erasure of indigenous life that has long existed in relationship to the land. Iyko Day contends that the specific relocation of West Coast Japanese farmers shows how Japanese labor became a vessel to tame Native land, opening up the Colorado River Indian Reservation land to be made “productive” for future use.⁶⁰ Not only did Japanese labor help build the infrastructure for the Native Americans living on the reservation but the development of the land through irrigation and farming techniques could also benefit white farmers.⁶¹ Imagining the desert as needing cultivation facilitates a frontier myth that, in this case, extends developmental logics by harnessing a Japanese labor resource. In fact, the incarcerated Japanese civilians were largely farmers. Prior to internment, Japanese farmers were racialized as a “yellow peril” as they were economic competition for white farmers and laborers.⁶² Legal measures in the form of alien land laws (starting with the California Alien Land Act of 1913) prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship” (code for all “Asians,” except Filipinos) from owning farmland and leasing it for more than three years.⁶³ The threat of Japanese American agricultural dominance on the West Coast marked a prewar yellow peril panic mediated through the environment. While Japanese farming signaled the fear of Asian capital accumulation, Japanese gardening in the confines of internment camps posed no economic threat and functioned primarily as an aesthetic and cultural practice. The vision of transforming Poston into a garden illustrates how the material arts of sculpting the land aligned with racial liberalism’s ideologies of self-fashioning and rehabilitation.

Envisioning a garden sprouting from the incarcerated space of Poston, Noguchi’s blueprints exemplified how ideas of race, identity, citizenship, and democracy were shaped by the physical molding of perceptual order. To imagine Poston as an organized and productive garden, lined with the orderly markers of plant and human life, configured internment as a layered operation for modeling desire. If

60. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 2016), p. 146.

61. Ibid.

62. Connie Chiang, *Nature behind Barbed Wire: An Environmental History of the Japanese American Incarceration* (New York, NY: Oxford U. Press, 2018).

63. Ibid, p. 10.

there was a distinctly “Japanese” character to the “hundreds of reports nightly of signal lights visible from the coast, and of intercepts of unidentified radio transmissions,”⁶⁴ as suggested by DeWitt, then a garden could serve an ameliorating and rehabilitating function. In other words, if the Japanese were associated with unpredictability and the non-visible mass of “nightly signal lights,” then a garden was the materialization of predictability. Highly visible, orderly, and physical, a garden was the externalized proxy of Japanese interior desires, historically aligned with information’s foundational premise of unpredictability and chaos.

In one of Collier’s speeches at Poston, he espoused an optimistic claim: “We will build a seed reservoir for the future. You are the middle people who will help teach Asia the meaning of democracy. This is construction in a world of chaos.”⁶⁵ Collier mobilized the language of a garden of the future—a “seed reservoir”—that would spring out from the ground of “chaos.” The garden not only served as a metaphor but also was the perceptual rubric for understanding ideas of “liberty” and “democracy” through modeled order, a path to citizenship through predictability. Thus, through the case of “unpredictable” Japaneseness, racial internment became a control test for racial liberalism.

I have contended that the epistemology of prediction was at the heart of Japanese internment at Poston. Prediction not only facilitated racial surveillance and other forms of carceral technologies but also functioned to make race itself. In *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver suggested that “information is a measure of one’s freedom of choice when one selects a message” out of an environment of noise.⁶⁶ Meaning emerges, then, precisely when there is *less* “freedom,” less chaos that could obfuscate the decipherability of a message. Ted Byfield puts it simply: “the more freedom one has, the less one knows.”⁶⁷ Although these accounts of freedom pertain to statistical theories, the concepts of containment and isolation were central to how “information” could obtain knowable form. Built into the very episteme of the information sciences, then, is a history of modeling unpredictability that shaped new ways of making racial identity under duress.

64. DeWitt, “Final Report” (above, n. 4),

65. Noguchi, “I Become a Nisei” (above, n. 53), p. 6.

66. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: U. Illinois, 1964), p. 13.

67. Ted Byfield, “Information,” *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 127.

Garden of the Future

At the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, New York, I first encountered the story of Noguchi's self-internment in Poston while researching the artist's working relationship with IBM. In 1964, Noguchi designed a garden for the new IBM headquarters in Armonk, New York. Commissioned by chairman James Watson, Jr., the piece was titled *Garden of the Future* and reflected IBM's scientific imagining of a world of computers. Through abstract sculptures that constituted a landscape of diagrams, algorithms, circuits, and networks, *Garden* captured a new frontier of computational thinking. It consisted of two main sections: a south garden of blasted granite, representing the organicism of nature; and a north garden that experimented with abstract sleek designs, a monument to the information age's future. Engrained within were circuitous lines and inscriptions from John von Neumann and Herman Goldstone's *Planning and Coding* (1946), a canonical book on digital computation.⁶⁸ The environmental artwork transformed the barren landscape into a garden of informatic visions.⁶⁹

Upon typing "IBM" into the digital archive, I stumbled upon Noguchi's IBM card used for identification in 1942 in Japanese internment camps. The punch card contained biographical information regarding Noguchi after being interviewed by Susumu Igauye on June 8, 1942, months into his voluntary internment at Poston.⁷⁰ IBM was the primary producer of punch-card equipment used for classifying interned Japanese civilians by the WRA. Introduced in 1928, these punch cards, or "IBM cards," were an analog form of coding and computation used to process data with up to 80 columns and 10 rows. According to the corporation's self-narrated history, the IBM card contained "nearly all of the world's known information for just under half a century."⁷¹ Within the camps, the WRA "codebook" was central to processing efforts and included instructions for coding iden-

68. Herman H. Goldstone, letter to Isamu Noguchi, Sept. 8, 1964, Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, NY.

69. Noguchi also had a strong friendship with systems engineer Buckminster Fuller. Although the full extent of this partnership exceeds the scope of this essay, they shared interests in designing controlled environments and transforming spaces of confinement into techno-optimistic possibility. For more, see Shoji Sadao, *Best of Friends: Buckminster Fuller and Isamu Noguchi* (New York, NY: Isamu Noguchi Foundation, 2011).

70. Aloha P. South, letter to Edward McPherson containing Noguchi's IBM punch card for internment identification at Poston, Dec. 3, 2003, Noguchi Museum, Long Island City, New York.

71. "The IBM Punched Card," *IBM100: Icons of Progress*, Accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.ibm.com/ibm/history/ibm100/us/en/icons/punchcard/>.

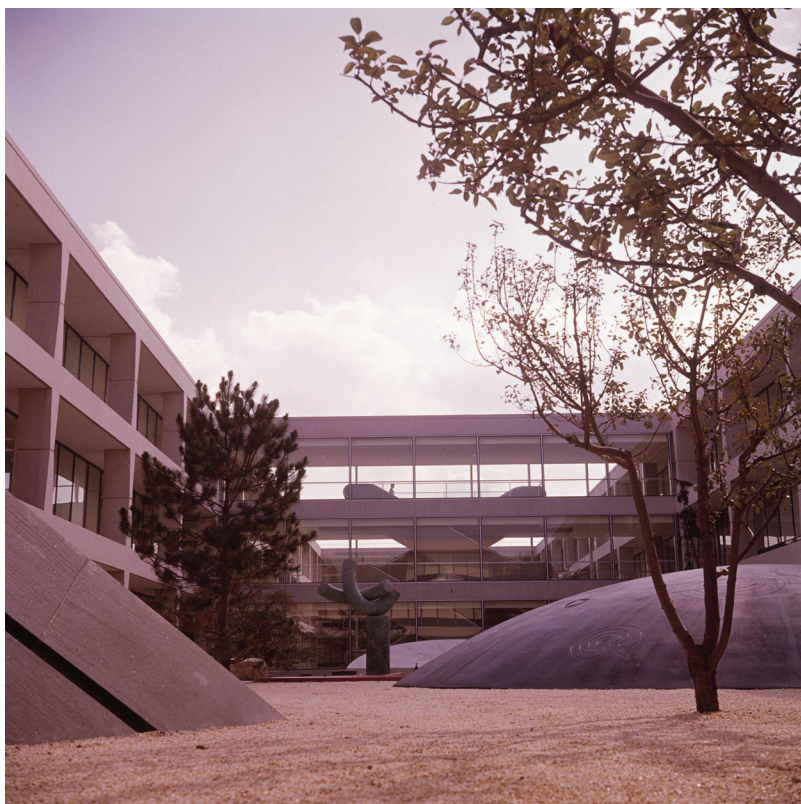


Figure 2. Isamu Noguchi, *Garden of the Future* (for IBM headquarters), Armonk, NY, 1964. The Isamu Noguchi Museum, Long Island City. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00575. Photo: Minoru Niizuma. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS.

tifying information related to geography, occupation, education, family status and history, and so forth. The digital database united these two moments in Noguchi's life, bringing into stark juxtaposition the horror of Japanese incarceration and the later celebration of Japanese artistic merit at IBM. Noguchi's *Garden of the Future* eerily resembled similar desires for a "garden of the future" in Poston's desert. In *Garden*, slightly off-center was a large black dome that, in Noguchi's words, "emerges from the earth to explore the universe."⁷² Although this statement most explicitly linked computational technologies to

72. Isamu Noguchi, correspondence with Herman Goldstine (August 26, 1965), Armonk, New York. "IBM Gardens," 1975–77, folder 3, archives of Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

1960s space research, it also depicted a faith in transcendence, the ability to exceed material constraints. Homay King has suggested that a longing to escape the binds of earthly embodiment has been a precondition for the digital. After the space race, the “longing to escape Earth . . . was channeled into digital futures, dot-com bubbles, and the information superhighway.”⁷³ *Garden* captured a belief in “transcending” material embodiments and environments, a dream that characterized the emerging digital era. Moreover, the landscape sculpture depicts a myth associating the digital with the immaterial and the virtual, detached from earthbound experience. Yet, this desire to perceive beyond the limits of empirical reality also described Noguchi’s artistic approach decades prior in Poston, where he hoped to make the internment camp more “human” through a garden. Through the possibilities of material arts, he believed in perceptual dynamism in which the meaning of embodiment, experience, and identity were not fixed or static but could be recalibrated and transformed.

By no means does this essay offer a comprehensive mapping of Noguchi’s artistic networks or collaborations, to which his robust archive of art and writings can attest. Instead, I have focused on contextualizing his creative responses to Japanese internment within an emerging information age, drawing connections across disparate histories of scientific and racial knowledges. In Poston, Noguchi’s desire to craft a “garden” of the future (one that promised to be democratic in nature) registered the “problem” of racialization as a perceptual one. If Japaneseness was closely aligned with unpredictability, then Noguchi’s use of the material arts aspired to cast Japaneseness as orderly, visible, and productive—an externalized proxy of the minority model. Yet, perhaps we can understand Noguchi’s failure to implement his vision (and his subsequent disillusionment and anger) as evidence of the irresolution of this model, which ultimately reflects the stifled promises of liberal democratic inclusion.

At its core, the origins of the information age reckoned with ideas of perception, meaning, and, ultimately, freedom. Histories of the digital *are* histories of race, not simply because they include or impact racial minorities but because they reproduce and reinforce the racial schemas integral to the development of US liberal capitalism.⁷⁴ In an

73. Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke U. Press, 2015), p. 6.

74. Throughout this essay, my work builds centrally from Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s conception of “race and/as technology.” Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 7–35.

emerging era of information abundance, Japanese unpredictability became the grounds for crafting a model of race through the isolation of a racial “enemy” other. As an informatic experiment, internment can be understood as a human interface for reconciling myths of freedom with realities of violence, animated by the desires for transcendence that continue to shape the fictions of digital immateriality.

Erratum

In "Isamu Noguchi's Gardens: Yellow Peril in the Age of Information" (issue 32:1), Norbert Wiener's last name is consistently misspelled. This misspelling has been corrected in the digital edition of the journal.