



Queer Compulsions: Race, Nation, and Sexuality in the Affairs of Yone Noguchi

Amy H. Sueyoshi

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In September 1897 Yone Noguchi (1875–1947) contemplated crafting a poem to his new love, western writer Charles Warren Stoddard. Recently arrived in California, Noguchi was in awe of the established writer and the two had struck up a passionate correspondence. Still, he viewed their relationship as doomed?not by the scandal of their same-sex affections, but their introverted dispositions and differences in background. In a poem dedicated to his “dearest Charlie,” Noguchi wrote: “Thou and I, O Charles, sit alone like two shy stars, east and west!” While confessing his love to Stoddard, Noguchi had a child (future sculptor Isamu Noguchi) with his editor, Léonie Gilmour; became engaged to *Washington Post* reporter Ethel Armes; and upon his return to Japan married Matsu Takeda?all within a span of seven years. According to author Amy Sueyoshi, Noguchi was not a dedicated polyamorist: He deliberately deceived the three women, to whom he either pretended or promised marriage while already married. She argues further that Noguchi’s intimacies point to little-known realities of race and sexuality in turn-of-the-century America and illuminate how Asian immigrants negotiated America’s literary and arts community.

As Noguchi maneuvered through cultural and linguistic differences, his affairs additionally assert how Japanese in America could forge romantic fulfillment during a period historians describe as one of extreme sexual deprivation and discrimination for Asians, particularly in California. Moreover, Noguchi’s relationships reveal how individuals who engaged in seemingly defiant behavior could exist peaceably within prevailing moral mandates. His unexpected intimacies in fact relied upon existing social hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and nation that dictated appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In fact, Noguchi, Stoddard, Gilmour, and Armes at various points contributed to the ideological forces that compelled their intimate lives. Through the romantic life of Yone Noguchi, *Queer Compulsions* narrates how even the queerest of intimacies can more provocatively serve as a reflection of rather than a revolt from existing social inequality. In unveiling Noguchi’s interracial and same-sex affairs, it attests to the complex interaction between lived sexualities and socio-legal mores as it traces how one man negotiated affection across cultural, linguistic, and moral divides to find fulfillment in unconventional yet acceptable ways.

Queer Compulsions will be a welcome contribution to Asian American, gender, and sexuality studies and the literature on male and female romantic friendships. It will also forge a provocative link between these disciplines and Asian studies.

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