

My Fate is in Your Hand: Revealing Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Conflicted Identity

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Abstract:

Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889-1953) was a Japanese-American émigré artist active and successful in the United States from the mid-1920s until his death. However, despite his artistic achievement and integration into American culture, Kuniyoshi's life and fate turned tragic as the Pacific War erupted, which intensified extreme racism toward the people of Japanese heritage and increased nationalism in the United States. Kuniyoshi's 1950 painting *My Fate is in Your Hand* reveals the artist's dual and conflicted identity, his social and political fate in the U.S. after Pearl Harbor, and suggests that a year before his death, the artist no longer controlled his fate. A majority of white Americans and the conservative American art world rejected him as an Asian "other." Kuniyoshi grew weary, stressed, and anxious, an artist caught between success and rejection and his split Japanese and American identity. In this essay, I argue that each major portion of the work's title—"My," "Fate," and "Your Hand"—reveals the symbolic meaning of the painting and suggests the artist's inner state in 1950. I also analyze four of Kuniyoshi's earlier works to provide insight into the meaning of *My Fate is in Your Hand* and to tell the story of the Japanese-American artist.

Scholarly Literature Review Section:

My argument is unique and original because there has not been any substantial research on or analysis of Kuniyoshi's *My Fate is in Your Hand*. Since the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art owns and displays this work, I had the opportunity to work hands-on with the painting and develop an original reading of the work. The main secondary sources on which I grounded my research were Tom Wolf's *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (2015) and ShiPu Wang's *Becoming American?: The Art and Identity Crisis of Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (2011). Wolf's book served as an introduction to and survey of Kuniyoshi's career. Wang's research focused on the artist's "identity crisis" in the U.S. during World War II, the time period on which my research focuses. Yasuo Kuniyoshi's memoir *Yasuo Kuniyoshi* served as my primary source in developing my argument and provided Kuniyoshi a voice in my essay. Through these secondary and primary sources, I came to a fresh analysis of Kuniyoshi's *My Fate in Your Hand* that expands beyond the image to tell the story of Kuniyoshi's conflicted identity.

Yasuo Kuniyoshi's 1950 painting *My Fate is in Your Hand* reflects Kuniyoshi's lifelong journey as a Japanese-American artist in the United States. Although Kuniyoshi achieved fame in the United States as an artist, *My Fate is in Your Hand* reveals Kuniyoshi's life as an outsider

in his own country due to his Japanese appearance and heritage. Ripe with symbolism, acidic color, and fragmentation, his painting captures the contradiction and conflict that troubled Kuniyoshi's life and career. Despite Kuniyoshi's artistic training in the United States, his success in the

American art world, and his embrace of democracy, the white majority population could never ignore his “Japaneseness.” *My Fate is in Your Hand* reveals Kuniyoshi’s fragmented and conflicted identity and the story of an artist rejected for who he was.

Kuniyoshi painted *My Fate is in Your Hand* (Appendix- Fig. 1) during his third and final artistic period. While optimism and worldly influence filled his early- and middle-stage paintings, anxiety, disillusionment, symbolism, and surrealist motifs characterized his late work.¹ In *My Fate is in Your Hand*, a hand, a caterpillar, an oversized grasshopper, and two juxtaposed figures dominate the composition. On the left side of the painting, which measures 40 1/4 x 24 1/4 inches, a large hand with its palm facing toward the viewer lies flat and stable. On the palm stands a dynamic and alert caterpillar; the caterpillar gazes toward a grasshopper, perched to the caterpillar’s right. The hand and the caterpillar exist in a space bordered by yellow geometric shapes. Blue and purple layer these yellow forms, and as the thumb ends and protrudes out of its assigned space, a strong vertical line divides the composition in half. The right half of the vertical contains two parts: the grasshopper in the top corner and the two figures in the bottom corner. The grasshopper rests at the forefront of the painting, and its green body contrasts with the calm blue behind it. Below the grasshopper, two figures stand back to back. They reside in *My Fate is in Your Hand*’s deepest red.

In this essay, I argue that each major portion of this work’s title— “*My*,” “*Fate*,”

and “*Your Hand*”— provides insight into the symbolic meaning of the painting and reveals Kuniyoshi’s personal and emotional state when he painted *My Fate is in Your Hand*. The possessive pronoun “my” refers literally to the caterpillar held in the ghostly hand, but also symbolizes Kuniyoshi.² The subject “fate” illuminates Kuniyoshi’s awareness of his ultimate social and political position in the United States, and the final words “your hand” suggest that Kuniyoshi himself was no longer in control of his fate at the end of his life. The American people held the alien artists artistic, social, and political future.

Just as the ambiguous, possessive pronoun “my” suggests multiple identities (the caterpillar and Kuniyoshi), Kuniyoshi himself also had multiple identities: he was a Japanese-American émigré artist. In 1906, at the age of seventeen, Kuniyoshi left Japan and moved to the United States. Once in the United States, Kuniyoshi quickly discovered his artistic talent and moved to New York City, the center of the American art world in 1910. There, he gained entrance into the Penguin Club, an avant-garde group of progressive artists, and enrolled in the Art Students League, a progressive art school, where he apprenticed under Kenneth Hayes Miller, who was “a legendary teacher, respected for his knowledge of art history and passion for the Old Masters.”³ His works were first shown in the Daniel Gallery in 1921, and Kuniyoshi’s artistic career progressed as his individual style led him to success and achievement in the American art world. However, despite Kuniyoshi’s successful career and social and

¹ Tom Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2015), 16.

² ShiPu Wang, *Becoming American?: The Art and Identity Crisis of Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 104.

³ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 19.

political integration into the United States, his Japanese appearance defined his identity.

In his 1927 *Self Portrait as a Golf Player*, Kuniyoshi illustrates his multiple identities.⁴ Posing in Western golfing clothes, Kuniyoshi brandishes his club as if he were holding a samurai sword. While his face appears distinctly Japanese and his pose resembles a sword-fighting stance, the artist has ironically chosen a “western” backdrop and costume, an acknowledgment of his dual Japanese-American identity. Golf was and still is a socially elite sport that requires physical and intellectual talent, and in the early-twentieth century, primarily middle-class men played. According to art historian Di Yin Lu, “The Scottish import began attracting members of the affluent American middle class by the 1920s.” Further, “By the 1930s, golf became an important part of privileged, white, middle-class, American culture: newspapers touted its contributions to physical health and published photographs of lithe, clean-cut young men enjoying a round of golf on a picturesque green.”⁵ In this picture, Kuniyoshi painted himself as a golf player as proof of his integration into western culture and the middle class, but he also proudly emphasized his Japanese identity through his appearance and stance. Kuniyoshi’s Japanese appearance would have banned him from belonging to country clubs, but his social connections and economic status allowed the artist to play as a guest.⁶ Unlike the white Americans posing on the “picturesque green,” Kuniyoshi was a

Japanese man standing in an American world.

While Kuniyoshi painted in the 1920s, the eugenics movement, spurred by anti-immigration sentiment, was spreading across the United States. This pseudo-academic and scientific movement argued on establishing a human hierarchy based on race, with whites residing at the top and Asians and other ethnicities existing below as “sub-humans.” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 *The Great Gatsby* displays the prominence of the eugenics movement as the racist character Tom Buchanan reads and praises Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, an influential book that persuasively advanced the eugenics movement. Stoddard’s book convinced the fictional Buchanan and many white Americans of their pseudo-scientific white superiority and confirmed their racist ideology. Kuniyoshi experienced this movement personally when his first wife’s parents disowned their daughter, Katherine Schmidt, for marrying a Japanese man.⁷ Schmidt lost her American citizenship when she married Kuniyoshi because of the Expatriation Act of 1907, and her parents did not speak to nor help the couple financially for six years.⁸ Kuniyoshi’s own family was racist toward him, and his Japaneseness continued to form his experience in the United States.

In 1937, ten years after Kuniyoshi painted *Self Portrait as a Golf Player*, the artist once again pondered his dual Japanese-American identity and position in

⁴ Kuniyoshi, Yasuo. *Self Portrait as a Golf Player*, 1927. Oil of canvas, 50 ¼ x 40 ¼ in. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Illustrated in Wolf, pg. 116.

⁵ Lu, Di Yin. *The Visual Dialectics of Golf, Leisure, and Beauty in Eva Fong Chan’s Paintings* (Chinese America: History and Perspective, 2007), 168.

⁶ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 38-9.

⁷ Elizabeth Broun, “A Stony Journey: Yasuo Kuniyoshi in America” (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2015), 12.

⁸ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 21.

the United States in an interview with *Esquire* magazine. Kuniyoshi remarked, “I have spent most of my life here. I have been educated here and I have suffered here. I am as much of an individual as anyone— except that I have Oriental blood in my veins.”⁹ Kuniyoshi’s Asian blood subordinated him in the eyes of some whites, but his social/artistic achievement placed him in a different position than many American citizens: he existed in an in-between state.

Because immigration laws banned people of Japanese birth from becoming United States citizens until 1952, Kuniyoshi was legally a “resident alien” his entire life. This position situated him in a political in-between space, not an illegal immigrant, but not a United States citizen. In his social sphere, Kuniyoshi also lived in a third space. He excelled in the American art world, but conservative critics rejected his work as non-American because of his Japanese identity. Rejecting one’s assimilation into American culture due to his or her ethnicity is a prominent theme in the United States. George M. Fredrickson, a comparative historian who deals with the history of race and racism, in his essay “Models of American Ethnic Relations: A Historical Perspective” states that “If an ethnic group is definitely racialized, the door is closed because its members are thought to possess ineradicable traits (biologically or culturally determined) that makes them unfit for inclusion.”¹⁰ Kuniyoshi’s Japanese appearance and heritage ‘definitely

radicalized’ the artist in the United States. In the eyes of many Americans, he could never fully assimilate into the country’s culture.

Analogously, the caterpillar in *My Fate is in Your Hand* also exists in an in-between state, post-cocoon but pre-butterfly. The comparison between Kuniyoshi and the caterpillar and the double meaning of “my” suggest that the caterpillar represents the artist. The caterpillar found in *My Fate is in Your Hand* stands on the palm of the ghostly hand, thick and alert, its eyes directed toward the grasshopper. The green caterpillar seems to resist the red color covering the hand, but its craned position creates tension and leads the viewer’s eye to the grasshopper. The grasshopper possesses what the caterpillar envies, wings. Suspended between birth and freedom, the caterpillar, as Kuniyoshi, has not transformed into a butterfly and grown wings of its own. Kuniyoshi paints the caterpillar confined to the hand, free to move but not to fly. Similarly, Kuniyoshi was able to exist outside of his cocoon in the United States, yet never able to grow his wings, restricted by his Japanese identity in the nationalistic, racist, yet also “free” United States. However, even if Americans allowed Kuniyoshi to grow his metaphorical wings, it appears he would have transformed into a traditional “pest” and not a beautiful butterfly. Many American citizens believed the Japanese were pests stealing land, business, work, and space from the white man.¹¹ Kuniyoshi’s Japanese appearance

⁹ Harry Salpeter, “Yasuo Kuniyoshi: Artists' Artist,” *Esquire*, April 1937, 215, quoted in Gail Levin, “Between Two Worlds: Folk Culture, Identity, and the American Art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 43, no. 3/4 (2003): 12.

¹⁰ George M. Fredrickson, “Models of American Ethnic Relations: A Historical Perspective,” in *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical*

Thinking and Writing, ed. Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 636.

¹¹ Beth B. Hess, Elizabeth W. Markson, and Peter J. Stein, “Racial and Ethnic Minorities: An Overview,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, (New York: Worth Publishers, 2001), 330.

placed him within the stereotype, a pesky other in the eyes of Americans.

The subject “fate” in the picture’s title refers to Kuniyoshi’s ultimate social, political, and cultural position in the United States. As international tension between the United States and Japan arose during the 1930s, Kuniyoshi’s art and fate transitioned from inspired to tragic. The United States gradually grew more nationalistic and hateful toward the perceived Japanese enemy. Kuniyoshi, a Japanese man living in New York City, felt the hate and racism himself. As he read newspapers and magazines, he would see the racial slur *jap*, and while he walked through the streets, he would feel the stare of Americans, for he was perceived as the country’s *enemy*.¹²

Kuniyoshi’s painting *Waiting* (1938), belonging to his 1930s “woman series,” suggests the artist’s sentiments toward the escalating international conflict and reflects his inner emotions/being.¹³ *Waiting* depicts a woman who has just finished reading her newspaper. She is somber and posed with a cigarette, and her eyes look away from the viewer in a sorrowful gaze that suggests present or impending despair. In *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, author Tom Wolf analyzes who this woman could be: “His women of the 1930s are thinking; accompanied by newspapers and set against backgrounds of swirling, agitated passages of thick oil paint, they are sensuous sex objects, but also projections of the artist’s mental state, figures of empathy.”¹⁴ If the

woman displayed in *Waiting* is interpreted as Kuniyoshi’s alter ego, then Kuniyoshi would have been melancholy when he and other Americans read about the militarism and fascism in Japan. Additionally, assuming Kuniyoshi continued utilizing women as his alter ego, the female figure in *My Fate is in Your Hand* also symbolizes the artist.

The December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor forever changed Kuniyoshi’s fate in the U.S. because he witnessed and experienced the discrimination toward the Japanese in his adopted home. Pearl Harbor spurred nationalistic sentiments and led to the internment of Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans. After Pearl Harbor, the United States government issued Executive Order 9066, which granted President Roosevelt and the U.S. military authorization to move between 110,000 and 120,000 U.S. residents of Japanese descent to “relocation centers” as they were deemed security threats.¹⁵ Women, children, and men alike were allowed to bring only what they could carry on their backs. Many were forced to leave behind their homes and most of their belongings to relocate to the camps that Japanese-American workers had built. Upon returning home from the camps in 1946 when the war was over, many found their property stolen and farm lands destroyed or taken over by white farmers.¹⁶ Race, class, and gender sociologists Beth B. Hess, Elizabeth W. Markson, and Peter J.

¹² Wang, 68.; Gail Levin, “Between Two Worlds: Folk Culture, Identity, and the American Art of Yasuo Kuniyoshi.” (*Archives of American Art Journal* 43, no. ¾, 2003), 11.

¹³ Kuniyoshi, Yasuo. *Waiting*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 40 x 31 in. Collection of Gallery Nii, Osaka, Japan. Illustrated in Wolf, pg. 124.

¹⁴ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 56.

¹⁵ Wang, *Becoming American?*, 19.

¹⁶ Beth B. Hess, Elizabeth W. Markson, and Peter J. Stein, 330.

Stein in their essay “Racial Ethnic Minorities: An Overview” state:

Although the reason given for this forced evacuation was ‘national security,’ the more powerful motives were economic and emotional. Japanese agricultural success had long been envied by their white neighbors, who eagerly took over property without compensation. Emotionally, the social construction of the Japanese as untrustworthy Asians could go unchallenged because of their relative isolation.¹⁷

Even though the government did not intern Kuniyoshi, the detainment of his fellow Japanese and the restriction he experienced inspired the artist to confront the racism and unfair economic and emotional treatment that the Japanese experienced.

The U.S. government labeled Kuniyoshi a “loyal enemy alien” due to his celebrity status and New York residence; nonetheless, the government confiscated his camera and binoculars and imposed on him numerous other restrictions: he could not fly, his bank account was frozen, he had to observe a curfew, and in the months after Pearl Harbor, he could not leave his apartment.¹⁸ The attack on Pearl Harbor led Kuniyoshi to question the true nature of American democratic principles and his own identity. According to ShiPu Wang, a leading scholar on Kuniyoshi, in his book, *Becoming American?: The Identity Crisis of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, “Pearl Harbor forced Kuniyoshi

to confront the fact that not only was he *still* categorized as Japanese by the U.S. government, but also that perhaps he had always been considered as something ‘other’: an alien from an enemy land.”¹⁹ Kuniyoshi’s identity grew confused, fragmented and conflicted as he confronted his Japanese “otherness” in the white majority of the United States.

As a strategy to control his fate and promote freedom, Kuniyoshi made war propaganda for the United States government. In 1942, the United States Office of War Information (OWI) recruited Kuniyoshi to create propaganda in support of the U.S. war effort. Kuniyoshi accepted and created propaganda that emphasized the brutality of oppression and promoted universal freedom. Two years before his engagement with the OWI, Kuniyoshi wrote, “In spite of the grave threats looming all over the world, we must hold firmly with all those who believe in and encourage freedom of expression and democratic principles, so that— for them and with them— we may continue to create a great American art.”²⁰ This encouragement of “freedom of expression and democratic principles” became a central theme in his propaganda.

For example, Kuniyoshi’s 1943 U.S. propaganda poster *Torture* illustrates violence’s brutality and emphasizes the universalism he wished to promote in his home and around the world.²¹ In *Torture* Kuniyoshi drew a captured and beaten man. An oppressor has tied the man’s hands

¹⁷ Ibid., 330.

¹⁸ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 61-2.

¹⁹ Wang, *Becoming American?* ,6.

²⁰ Yasuo Kuniyoshi, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi* (New York: American Artist Group, 1945), 11. Kuniyoshi wrote this memoir in 1940.

²¹ Kuniyoshi, Yasuo. *Torture*, 1943. Pencil on paper, 40 x 28 ½ in. Collection of John Cassara. Illustrated in Wolf, pg. 134.

behind his back and his fingers twist with strength and desperation to shed the rope that traps him. He hunches his shoulders and cocks his neck in a tight flex. His back bears three slashing red lines that suggest he has been whipped. His hands and body twist in agony while he attempts to break free from the chains, yet he remains upright and moving forward, attempting to maintain his pride and humanity. Since Kuniyoshi hides the victim's face, the tortured man could be of any race or ethnicity. Instead of race, Kuniyoshi asks the viewer to consider the suffering and cruelty of human oppression and "leaves open the question of who the victims are in the depicted [scene], and by extension in this war."²² Kuniyoshi's *Torture* suggests that Americans must recognize victims of oppression not only abroad, but also in the United States.

In this poster, as the man's back faces the viewer, he could be any oppressed person, including Kuniyoshi and other Japanese-Americans. Wang states, "The violent physical assaults depicted in his designs point not only to Japan's destructive forces overseas but also to the kind of attacks [Kuniyoshi] had witnessed, if not personally experienced, against others in the forms of xenophobia (racist imagery), incarcerations (FBI arrests), and internment in the United States."²³ Since the U.S. government interned Kuniyoshi's fellow Japanese-Americans, he used his propaganda to communicate the view that U.S. treatment of the Japanese was undemocratic.

He also worked for the OWI as a tool to control his political position in America's racist climate. By working with the U.S.

government he was safe from the suspicion of being a Japanese threat. However, by 1950, Kuniyoshi felt unable to control his social, political, and artistic fate. White Americans and the conservative art world rejected him as an "other." While nationalism was running deep in conservative America's veins, World War II ended and the Cold War began, leading to the "Red Scare" and the right's accusation of Kuniyoshi being a "red artist" because of his universalist sentiments.²⁴

Two figures situated in the deepest red of *My Fate is in Your Hand* haunt the composition. They symbolize the helplessness and depression that Kuniyoshi felt was his fate. The larger of the two figures stands in profile to the viewer with its hands clasped in front of its body. The figure's head is larger than the rest of its robed body, and Kuniyoshi painted its eyes with a Japanese slant. The figure's skin tone is ghostly, a mix of white and purple, and Kuniyoshi hides the subject's ethnicity and gender. One wonders who this figure is and what it has clasped between its hands. Standing back to back with the ghostly figure, yet further into the composition stands a nude and possibly pregnant woman. Her face is in profile to the viewer, and she wears makeup. She looks to be walking out of the composition into a deeper space defined by a black rectangle, a mystery in the depths of the painting.

Kuniyoshi layered the two figures with symbolism that only he could precisely articulate, but I argue that the two figures represent a prostitute and her controller or master. As in the picture *Waiting*, Kuniyoshi's woman is a sex object and acts

²² Wang, *Becoming American?*, 85.

²³ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

as the artist's alter ego. If Kuniyoshi intended the woman in *My Fate is in Your Hand* to be his alter ego, then he suggests that he identified with a prostitute. He may have felt as if the United States was using him as "a *safe* 'enemy alien' for [the U.S. government] to support," just as a prostitute was used for sex.²⁵ Kuniyoshi may also have felt as helpless as a prostitute because he was caught between two identities: "For remaining 'anonymous' and the same as other Americans (in terms of allegiance and cultural assimilation) promised greater freedom than being the Other who were interned," writes Wang, "Yet remaining in the crowd required a certain degree of distance that rendered him the seemingly disengaged 'other' among the émigré Japanese and Japanese communities."²⁶ Just as a prostitute may substitute morals for an income, Kuniyoshi rejected his Japanese roots to preserve his "Americaness." He suffered an identity crisis, as helplessness, stress, and anxiety clouded his life.²⁷

The dominant figure appears to be a ghoulish keeper of the caterpillar, controller of the prostitute, and holder of Kuniyoshi's fate. The figure's ghostly robed body, painted in whites and purples, controls the bottom right corner of the painting as the figure holds its clasped hands in front of its body. The ghostly figure's dominant position shows that it controls the woman's fate. As she stands behind the keeper, one wonders whether she has finished with her customer or paid her master. Kuniyoshi may have believed he had to please the American people and pay the U.S. government with

propaganda, masking his Japanese identity with an obedient smile. The figure may also be the keeper of the caterpillar. The figure's hands closed and the caterpillar trapped within. Referring back to the possessive pronoun "my" in the picture's title, Kuniyoshi's fate also could be trapped within the deathly figure's hands or revealed on the hand's palm through palmistry. Regardless of the interpretation, the keeper has haunting control over the woman, Kuniyoshi, and the red composition. Kuniyoshi's fate appears doomed.

The final words "*Your Hand*" refer to the holders of Kuniyoshi's fate, the American people, and their choice to accept him as an American or reject him as an "other." In 1946, the U.S. Department of State organized *Advancing American Art*, a traveling exhibition meant to promote American art on the world stage. For this exhibition, the DOS chose eighty-four works, one of which was Kuniyoshi's *Circus Girl Resting* (1925).²⁸ In this painting, a stout proportioned woman sits with her legs crossed as she looks out at the viewer. She wears black leggings that reveal her legs, and her red slip has fallen to exposing one of her breasts. According to Wolf, this painting "became the symbol of the exhibition and the target of ridicule" because "the painting was the closest thing to a nude in the show, and the girl was rendered in Kuniyoshi's exaggerated figurative style of the 1920s."²⁹ Conservative art critics critiqued the exhibition and Kuniyoshi's painting, finding ugliness and foreign influence in

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Ibid., 112.

²⁷ The theme of Wang's *Becoming American?*

²⁸ Kuniyoshi, Yasuo. *Circus Girl Resting*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 38 2/5 x 28 1/2 in. Jules Collins Smith

Museum of Fine Art, Auburn University, Alabama; *Advancing American Art* Collection. Illustrated in Wolf, pg. 112.

²⁹ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 72.

Kuniyoshi's work.³⁰ This type of criticism and ridicule had plagued Kuniyoshi since he arrived in the U.S. because conservative art critics scrutinized his art and identity. Since Kuniyoshi faced external criticism from those around him, leading to stress, anxiety, and drunkenness, he may have felt out of control of his fate.³¹ The American people could either accept him as an American for his integration into American ideals and democracy or reject him as an outsider for his Japanese appearance and heritage.

Kuniyoshi displays three outcomes of potential acceptance or rejection in *My Fate is in Your Hand*, distinguished by three colors— blue, red, and a mix of colors. In the top right of the composition, the green grasshopper contrasts with the blue that Kuniyoshi painted behind it. This soft blue suggests Kuniyoshi's ideal universalism and his acceptance in the United States. As blue can be a symbolic color for the sky or heaven, Kuniyoshi depicts that grasshopper in the cheeriest part of the composition, where it is free to fly. This blue most closely resembles the "subtle palette of earth colors" that Kuniyoshi painted with during the 1920s as a young artist.³² Kuniyoshi suggests nostalgia for his youth, before fame, controversy, and conflict dominated his life and art, yet even the earthy blue in the composition cannot escape the acidic red, as it appears to seep into the blue from underneath the surface of the painting. Kuniyoshi expects that he will never be allowed to grow his wings and live his life without prejudice and rejection.

The dark red, where the two figures reside, represents the darkest fate Kuniyoshi

could experience. This red signifies betrayal, death, and the "Red Scare" as nationalistic conservatives attempted to pin Kuniyoshi as a communist for his praise of universalism. In 1947, members of the Artists Equity Association (AEA), an organization formed "to provide overarching support for all artists especially as the antagonism intensified against artists who had been labeled leftists or liberals," elected Kuniyoshi as the founding president.³³ The AEA's association with universalism and the left led conservatives to confront Kuniyoshi as potential communist during the Red Scare. According to Wang, "the 'red scare' . . . fundamentally tested Kuniyoshi's vision and version of American democracy and, personally speaking, again threatened to undercut the unprecedented success he had acquired."³⁴ As the red hunt spread across the U.S., the deep red of *My Fate is in Your Hand* suggests Kuniyoshi's involvement in the Red Scare and the accusations against him. Even though Kuniyoshi attempted to promote the universal ideals that he believed in, conservative Americans rejected him as an Asian "other."

The mix of yellow, blue, purple, and green clouded by acidic red signifies the position Kuniyoshi resided in while painting this work in 1950: an in-between space of success and rejection, a space of constant waiting, stress, and anxiety. If Kuniyoshi identified with the caterpillar, then the mix of colors reflects the position that he felt he lived in when he painted *My Fate is in Your Hand*. Late in his life, Kuniyoshi began a lecture by quoting Alan Watts, a proponent of East Asian philosophy in the United

³⁰ Wang, *Becoming American?*, 124.

³¹ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 72.

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

³³ Wang, *Becoming American?*, 131.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

States during the early 1950s. “Walk on! For we can only understand life by keeping pace with it, by a complete affirmation and acceptance of its magic-like transformations and unending changes.”³⁵ Despite the controversy and ridicule that Kuniyoshi faced, he attempted to maintain a positive and encouraging self-image even though he also possessed a dark side, characterized by stress, anxiety, and damage. Kuniyoshi attempted to maintain his dignity and faith in the United States, yet criticism, rejection, and racism toward his Japanese-American identity disturbed another part of him. Although Kuniyoshi encouraged acceptance of life’s “magic-life transformations,” the caterpillar in *My Fate is in Your Hand* never transforms into a butterfly.

I argue that Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s *My Fate is in Your Hand* illustrates the artist’s conflicted dual Japanese-American identity. Through a symbolic reading of the hand, the caterpillar, and the grasshopper, the painting reveals Kuniyoshi’s identity and his in-between social and political position in the United States. The two juxtaposed figures of an ambiguously gendered ghostly figure and a pregnant woman suggest Kuniyoshi’s tragic fate in the United States. The distinct

tones of red and blue, as well as a mix of colors, reveal Kuniyoshi’s potential outcomes of rejection or acceptance in the United States by the American people. Americans in the 1950s could move away from nationalism and embrace Kuniyoshi and his art as American or reject him for his Japanese identity. Anxiety, stress, and depression haunted Kuniyoshi’s “American Dream” of prosperity and achievement as he fought to prove his loyalty to and assimilation into the United States.

The oxymoronic label “loyal enemy alien,” attached by the U.S. government to Kuniyoshi and thousands of other Japanese-Americans in the nationalistic hysteria following Pearl Harbor, helps the viewer understand Kuniyoshi’s career and his painting *My Fate is in Your Hand*. Throughout his life, Kuniyoshi experienced external and internal contradictions and conflicts due to his Japanese heritage in the United States. One year before the artist’s death the U.S. passed the McCarran-Walter Act, which permitted the naturalization of Asian immigrants. In 1953, the artist died from stomach cancer. He never became a United States citizen.

³⁵ Wolf, *The Artistic Journey of Yasuo Kuniyoshi*, 78.

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Appendix



Fig. 1.

Yasuo Kuniyoshi, American (born Japan, 1889-1953). *My Fate is in Your Hand*, 1950. Oil on Canvas, 40 ¼ x 24 ¼ inches. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Commerce Bancshares, Inc. in memory of William T. Kemper, F94-2.

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