Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Threats to the American Dream*

Article 25

2015

# Dear Yuri: A Thank You and Tribute to Yuri Kochiyama

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## Keywords:

Yuri Kochiyama, Japanese American, Asian American, Japanese internment, political prisoners

# Dear Yuri: A Thank You and Tribute to Yuri Kochiyama

From Alisha Roopchand

**Kochiyama, Y., & Lee, M. (2004). Passing it on: A memoir. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press.**

Yuri Kochiyama was a Japanese American activist, mother, and wife. Born in 1921, Kochiyama grew up in a white working-class neighborhood in San Pedro, California. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, her dad was arrested and detained by the FBI and died shortly after. Kochiyama and the rest of her family were subsequently incarcerated at an internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas. After their release, Kochiyama moved to Harlem with her husband and began what would become a lifelong devotion to social justice. Throughout her life Kochiyama was active with Black liberation struggles, the Puerto Rican independence movement, Japanese American reparations, the Asian American Movement, justice for political prisoners, and many other social movements. She died on June 1st, 2014 in Berkeley, California at the age of 93.

"Holla, swear to my kasamas
When I grow up I wanna be just like Yuri Kochiyama"
- Blue Scholars

Dear Yuri,

It's been nearly a year since you died, but I've learned so much from you in the past few months I feel you're still alive and with me. I recently read your memoir and I was left curious and confused by how much of it is not actually about you. From the People's War in Peru to the Black Panther Party and the Asian American Movement, I struggled to keep up with your grassroots account of history and searched the pages for more of yourself. I'm realizing now that your memoir is not your personal story, but rather a collective history of fighting injustice. As a young second-generation Indian American who has much to learn about the Movement, especially radical Asian American activism, I am grateful to you for leaving this overflowing fountain of history and hope for your people. And I admire your lifelong struggle to build communities committed to social justice and rooted in love and respect.

Your memoir is one of the first texts I've read by a radical Asian/Asian American woman, and it has been crucial to my understanding and embracing of radical Asian American identity, history, and politics. Growing up I often felt disconnected from the whitewashed history I was taught in school. My suspicions of the lessons coming from my white teachers combined with my mother's love for Maya Angelou opened my eyes to a number of Black women writers. Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler - I read their words not entirely understanding them but knowing they were true. These women spoke truths I never heard from the adults around me. They awakened my racial consciousness and introduced me to concepts of power and injustice. Throughout this time I never read, or even thought to read, Asian and Asian American writers. I read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* when I was ten years old. Another ten years passed before I read Arundhati Roy, my first Asian/Asian American writer.

I've spent the past four years living in St. Paul, Minnesota, studying at Macalester College. Although I initially planned to study Economics, I quickly abandoned this field and was instead drawn to African American Studies. I began to develop a more academic and historical understanding of race, and specifically anti-Blackness, in America. At the same time I was inspired by many activists and artists around me. I got involved with Occupy Homes MN, MPIRG, and other largely white activist groups. In search of spaces committed to racial justice, I visited Penumbra Theatre, listened to CeCe McDonald speak, and attended rallies for Mike Brown. But when I first heard about the murder of Fong Lee, why didn't I stop to learn more than his name? When "Miss Saigon" came to the Ordway and a Japanese American friend asked me to join her in protest, why didn't I show up? What knowledge did I have of other communities of color and Indigenous communities, and why had I not acted in solidarity with them?

In my second to last semester of college, I took *A Social History of Asian America,* one of the few Asian American Studies classes offered during my time at Macalester, taught by Professor Juliana Hu Pegues. We read your memoir (among other life-changing texts) and learned about your extraordinary lifelong struggle for justice. It was through this class that I finally began to understand how deeply I had internalized the model minority myth. White liberals had told me I was an honorary white, that I was not a legit POC, that Asians couldn't be radical. And I believed

them. As I struggled to interrogate my internalized racism, your memoir came to be the healing and invigoration I needed. It goes without saying what a kind and generous person you were, but I am amazed by how much this kindness and generosity translated into the pages of your memoir. Even though this is your story, you were so intent on sharing it with others. This means a lot to me because I easily buy into white supremacist ideas that Asians are submissive objects that don't fight back. I often feel my community is poor in resistance. *I feel lost, stuck, running in place.* But you've made it impossible for me to ever succumb to this thinking again. Because of all the radical Asian American history you've passed on to me - Kazu Iijima's early efforts to build an Asian American Movement, the young and militant I Wor Kuen, South Asian grassroots organizers Eqbal Ahmed and Prafulla Mukherji, and so many more - I feel I've suddenly become rich in resistance. You've sent me spinning in a million different directions. I'm dizzy with momentum, energy, and light. Yuri – I cannot yet understand all the history you've passed on to me and fully feel its power, but thanks to you I know I will always have footsteps to trace and lanterns to follow.

I especially appreciated your narration of South Asian American histories and formations. Growing up as an Indian American kid I felt I did not belong to Asian America. With my big frizzy hair and hairy light brown skin, I knew I didn't fit the profile for how most people both within and outside the community imagined and defined Asian. Beyond the lack of physical representation, I felt the histories and cultures of my South Asian community frustratingly absent within Asian American discourse. I thought Asian only meant East Asian. As a result I came to dismiss the idea of Asian American community early on, thinking it was not for me.

Having come of age in the aftermath of 9/11/2001, I was also aware of the distinct ways in which Arabs, Middle Easterners, South Asians, and other brown peoples especially Muslims and Sikhs are criminalized and terrorized. I was in the third grade when the Twin Towers and Pentagon were attacked. While I felt this was a tragic attack on innocent people and mourned the victims and their families, I did not respond with acts of patriotism as many of my white classmates did. I remember my white friend Kayla and her family decorated their entire home with American flags; I could not imagine ever doing the same. I relate a lot to Eddie Huang's reactions to 9/11. He writes in his memoir, "For them, it was personal. But for me, it was surreal. I didn't take it personally. I'd never subscribed to America. I never felt included in this country."[1] After 9/11, I watched with confusion as my country waged war on the people of Iraq in the name of national security. And then as we did it again in Afghanistan. I saw my Hindu family's Islamaphobia resurface – a history of hatred and violence I still do not fully understand. I heard the men in my family get called Arab, and I knew exactly what that meant. I was conscious but I was not historical. Through reading your memoir as well as work by other Asian Americans[2], I have begun to learn more about Japanese American internment and see the similarities and connections between this mass violence and

**1** *Fresh Off the Boat* by Eddie Huang (2013)

**2** "What 12-7 has to teach about 9-11" by Jerry Kang (2001): http://jerrykang.net/talk/editorials/01-12-7-and-9-11/
"Asian American Studies after 9/11" by Kent A. Ono (2005): http://www.academia.edu/354415/Asian_American_Studies_after_9_11

post-9/11 terrorism. I have started to trace the historical arc of US imperialism in Asia and how it relates to anti-Asian racism in America. I have also learned about a lot of coalition and solidarity work, such as the Japanese American group Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCRR) and how they established a 9/11 Committee and continue to facilitate cultural exchanges and act in solidarity with communities targeted by post-9/11 violence[3]. I do not mean to suggest that these histories and oppressions are the same, but I do believe they are related and that you have helped me to see them as such. And your naming of South Asian American formations as both a part of and separate from Asian American histories makes me realize I do not have to choose one or the other; I can find homes in both South Asian and Asian American identity. And as with all homes, I can exist within, outside of, and in opposition to them. (Sometimes all at once!).

I am also beginning to understand the history and necessity of pan-Asian unity and solidarity. Throughout your memoir you illuminate so many histories of solidarity and coalition-building among Asian Americans that I never knew existed. I was fascinated to learn about how you started the Nisei[4] Service Organization to support GI's in town from Hawai'i, and then later changed the name to Nisei-Sino Service Organization as you started encountering more Chinese people. I also loved reading about your relationship to Chinese American Hung Wai Ching and how he helped prevent the detention and arrests of Japanese in Hawai'i and also helped start the Japanese American "Aloha" USO where you were able to work instead of returning to the internment camp in Jerome. Your narration of how a Chinese American from Honolulu "really went to bat" for you and your Japanese American community is a beautiful and radical history of Asian American community and solidarity that I have needed to learn about.

Through living in St. Paul I witnessed a magnificent coalition of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities coming together when they organized against the return of "Miss Saigon" to the Ordway Center in St. Paul in 2013. For the third time in twenty years, local AAPI's came together in protest of this racist and violent "love story."[5] I had initially assumed that the organizers were all East and Southeast Asians, but I was wrong. I came to learn about many South Asians such as Ananya Chatterjea of Ananya Dance Theatre and Dipankar Mukherjee of Pangea World Theater and their involvement in the campaign. After being asked by the Ordway in the Fall of 2014 to perform for the showcasing of their new concert hall, Ananya Dance Theatre helped pressure Patricia Mitchell, the president and CEO of the Ordway, into writing a letter to the Don't Buy Miss Saigon Coalition stating "the Ordway will not produce Miss Saigon as long as I remain President."[6] I

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**3** "Decades after internment, Japanese-Americans warn of what's still possible" by Massoud Hayoun (Al Jazeera, 2014): http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/2/18/japanese-americaninternmentremembrancemuslimpatriottsa.html

**4** Nisei = second-generation Japanese American

**5** "War Before Memory: A Vietnamese American Protest Organizer's History Against Miss Saigon" by Bao Phi (18MillionRising, 2013): http://18millionrising.org/blog/2013/sep/16/war-before-memory/
"The Problem(s) With Miss Saigon (or, how many stereotypes can you cram into one Broadway musical) by David Mura (2013): http://opineseason.com/2013/09/11/david-mura-the-problems-with-miss-saigon-ordway/

**6** "Ordway CEO promises no further productions of 'Miss Saigon'" by Marianne Combs (MPRNews, 2014): http://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/11/03/ordway-miss-saigon

thought of what we had learned in class about how various Asian groups were brought to the US as strikebreakers against other Asian immigrant laborers. Specifically we learned about the 1903 strike of Japanese workers in Hawai'i and how 7,000 Korean workers arrived to break their strike. The corporations in collusion with the State had been dividing and conquering these Asian communities, but from their shared oppression Asian immigrant workers forged Asian American solidarity and unity.[7] The Ordway had depended on Asian American division and disunity in approaching Ananya Dance Theatre, but the bonds among Asian Americans in the Twin Cities had already been forged and were not going to break. The campaign against "Miss Saigon" has become a lesson to me that pan-Asian unity and solidarity is not just necessary, it is also very possible and real. It is literally right in front of me. I have since come to discover and admire a number of radical Asian American elders in my own community - Juliana Hu Pegues, Ananya Chatterjea, Bao Phi, Kao Kalia Yang, Jae Ran Kim, and so many more. I now feel ashamed it took me so long to see my people, but I'm glad I finally did.

As I claim for myself an Asian American political identity and come into Asian American community, I look to you as a guide as I strive to build genuine relationships rooted in love and respect. I especially admire the relationships you had with your children. As a 21-year-old who is frequently angry with my parents for a number of reasons (I'll admit - some legitimate, others not so much), I felt validated when you acknowledged your children's perspectives and gave them legitimacy and power, even when they challenged and hurt you. You wrote about your family's frustrations with you for being overly committed to the Movement, and expressed your regret that you were not there for them more. You honored and respected your children not just as your kids, but also as individuals with their own experiences, perspectives, and politics. I can only imagine how heartbreaking it must have been for you to cope with Aichi's death and Billy's suicide. In reading your commemoration of Billy, I found it deeply powerful and loving how you described his suicide as an act of liberation and sought to understand the oppressive context in which he was living as a person with a disability. Rather than shaming or pathologizing him for his suicide, you gave him agency and grace and thanked him for the life he shared with you. This makes me think about how I want to relate to people in my communities. I'm trying to figure out what it looks like to be critical but not destructive, to speak back without silencing, and as Noura Erakat says, "to fight for justice from a place of love rather than guilt."[8] I have also been thinking about how the older I have become the more I have disrespected my elders. This is a trend I am committed to reversing. I'm slowly learning to leave my youthful arrogance behind and respect the wisdom and resilience in my elders, to be grateful for their work and wisdom but never demand it, to honor my

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**7** "Asian American History Timeline" (primarily adapted from Sucheng Chan's book *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*; some elements adapted from LEAP: Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics): http://www.cetel.org/timeline.html
"Asian American History, taken from The Journey from Gold Mountain: The Asian American Experience" (Japanese American Citizens League, 2006): https://www.jacl.org/asian-american-history/

**8** "Yet Again As Captives: Mass Incarceration in the U.S. & Palestine: A Conversation with Angela Davis and Noura Erakat" (Washington Center for Performing Arts, The Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace & Justice PEACEWORKS 2014): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fw_LbMopPzk

people's history while also carrying the courage to chart my own. I'm not entirely sure what these practices look like, but I'm thankful I have you and many other Asian American ancestors and elders to guide me.

प्रणाम -
Alisha

***Thank you to Marie Johnson, ray(nise) cangé & RP Yang for helping me edit this letter. Thank you to Professor Juliana Hu Pegues for *A Social History of Asian America* and many office conversations. Thank you to Alizarin Menninga for her artwork and allowing me to incorporate it into this letter.