



**Diane C. Fujino.** *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. xxxviii + 396 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-4592-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-4593-0.

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## A Passion for Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

In 1969, Bill Hosokawa published a landmark book on the history of Japanese Americans. Entitled *Nisei: The Quiet Americans*, it told the important story of a relatively small but nevertheless significant component of the American population—the Issei (“first generation” Japanese immigrants) and Nisei (“second generation” American-born children of those Japanese immigrant parents) who encountered formidable racial prejudice and discrimination, particularly after the outbreak of the Second World War.

When Hosokawa’s book came out, some within the Japanese-American community, most of whom were younger Sansei (“third generation” Japanese Americans), vigorously protested that the Nisei–Hosokawa’s generation—had by no means been “quiet” and that the book’s very characterization of Nisei as such was offensive, for it would perpetuate “an undesirable stereotype” of the entire Japanese-American population.[1] As Hosokawa has contended, however, the majority of Nisei, who were interned during the war years in spite of their American citizenship, endured their hardships quietly, believing that the best and surest way to show loyalty was to support the nation’s war effort—even its misguided and racist relocation program.

In 2005, another landmark book in the field of Japanese-American studies appeared. Authored by Diane C. Fujino, a Japanese American, *Heartbeat of Struggle* traces the eventful life of Yuri Kochiyama, a Nisei woman who was transformed from a relatively “quiet” Ameri-

can into “the most prominent Asian American [civil and human rights] activist to emerge during the 1960s” (p. xxii). *Heartbeat of Struggle* is not in fact the first biography of Kochiyama. In 1998, a Japanese journalist profiled Kochiyama, and in 2004 she wrote her own memoir, which received an “Outstanding Book Award” from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in Boston.[2]

But these works do not diminish the value of *Heartbeat of Struggle*. The extraordinary life of Kochiyama had remained largely unknown and unattended by scholars until Fujino, an associate professor of Asian American studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, produced what is believed to be “the first U.S. biography of an Asian American woman activist” (p. xxxi). Fujino’s book is a much enlarged and more complete version of her earlier work entitled “Revolutions from the Heart: The Making of an Asian American Woman Activist, Yuri Kochiyama,” which was included in a 1997 anthology entitled *Dragon Ladies*. [3] Based on this earlier publication, extensive archival research, and interviews with Kochiyama, immediate family members, and longtime friends from the full spectrum of her life, Fujino passionately recounts and reconstructs the “political life” of Kochiyama, who has spoken out and fought shoulder-to-shoulder with blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans as well as whites for civil rights and social justice over the past four decades (pp. xxvii–xxviii).

Yuri Kochiyama was born Mary Yuriko Nakahara on May 19, 1921, in San Pedro, California, a small coastal town south of Los Angeles. Her immigrant parents were both well educated, and her father owned and operated a successful store, selling fresh fish, meat, fruits, vegetables, and other daily commodities to the U.S. Navy and Japanese passenger liners, which operated between the West Coast of the United States and Japan. Raised in a comfortable, custom-built Spanish-style house in the white section of the town and surrounded by her loving parents and two brothers, Kochiyama spent her youth being “apolitical, provincial, naive, and ultrapatriotic” (p. xxii). “Our home life was traditional in that we spoke Japanese and ate Japanese food and were expected to behave as proper Japanese children,” she reminisced in her memoir, “but ”outside our home ... I was very much an ‘all-American’ girl.”[4]

On December 7, 1941, Kochiyama’s cozy life was suddenly shattered when the Japanese Imperial Forces bombed Pearl Harbor. Within a few hours after the bombing, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) apprehended Kochiyama’s father, a severe diabetic, who was viewed as a subversive. In the end, the FBI was unable to substantiate its suspicions and eventually released him several weeks later. But deprived of proper medical attention while in detention, Kochiyama’s father passed away in late January 1942.

For thousands of Japanese Americans, the ensuing mass hysteria, fear, racial antagonism, and eventual incarceration literally represented “shattered dreams.” At the same time, the outbreak of the war also “inaugurated ... [a] racial awakening” of twenty-year-old Kochiyama (p. xxii). Before the war, she saw “America with American eyes.” But what happened to Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor made her “see the world and America with entirely new eyes—Japanese American eyes.”[5] Her traumatic experiences had awakened her to the existence of racial and social injustice in the United States. Kochiyama could no longer naively profess that she was “a color-blind patriot” (p. 1).

In April 1942, only a few months after her father’s untimely death, she and her family were ordered to leave their well-appointed house in San Pedro and were sent to the Santa Anita Assembly Center in California, where they were billeted in horse stalls at a former race-track. Six months later, Kochiyama, along with her mother and older brother, were moved by train from California to a more permanent incarceration camp—the War Relocation Authority (WRA)’s Jerome Relocation

Center in Arkansas. The Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers in Arkansas were the only two Japanese-American internment camps located in the South, which the Office of War Information (OWI) had once hypocritically termed “new pioneer communities” for those evacuees.[6] Nearly 8,500 Japanese and Japanese Americans were incarcerated at Jerome, located in the midst of a dismal swampland in southeastern Arkansas and surrounded by barbed-wire entanglements.[7]

A few months after Kochiyama arrived at Jerome, by which time 122,000 men, women, and children (including 70,000 “American citizens”) were interned at ten war relocation centers, the Department of War began to form the U.S. Army’s 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated unit composed of all Nisei soldiers. When the recruitment plan for the 442nd was announced, many Nisei, in both the Hawaiian Islands and the relocation centers, responded enthusiastically. Eventually, in April 1943, the unit began to train at Camp Shelby, located near Hattiesburg, Mississippi.[8]

Soon, however, the young Nisei women at Jerome learned that the Nisei soldiers at Camp Shelby were not welcome at the United Service Organization (USO) in Hattiesburg. In response, they quickly organized their own USO, where Kochiyama met and fell in love with her future husband and “comrade”—Masayoshi William “Bill” Kochiyama, a Nisei soldier from New York City. When the war broke out, Bill Kochiyama happened to live in California, and he was interned at the Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno before being sent to the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah.[9] Having spent one year at the camp, he volunteered to join the newly organized Japanese-American combat unit.

In the spring of 1944, Yuri and Bill planned to marry at Camp Shelby, but a conflict with their families prevented their exchanging vows at that time. They decided to postpone their marriage until Bill could return from his overseas military duty. As the 442nd demonstrated its military prowess on the battlefronts in Italy and France, even the WRA began to praise the Nisei soldiers. “[The] devotion to America and gallantry in action,” according to the WRA’s booklet entitled *Nisei in Uniform*, should not be “determined by the slant of the eyes or the color of the skin.”[10] The 442nd eventually became the most decorated combat unit in the history of the U.S. Army.[11]

While waiting for Bill’s safe return from Europe, Kochiyama decided to remain in Hattiesburg and work with the “Aloha USO” for Japanese Americans.[12] Her main duties included taking care of the families of

the Japanese-American soldiers, finding them adequate housing, and doing “anything else to help them settle and feel at home” in Mississippi’s racially segregated society.[13] These experiences also helped transform Kochiyama’s “colorblind worldview.” As Fujino notes, “For the first time, she was being forced to recognize her own racial identity, to see herself not just as an individual but as a member of a targeted group” (pp. 50-51). Furthermore, what Kochiyama witnessed and encountered on a daily basis in Mississippi—the citadel of racial segregation and discrimination in the South—made it “increasingly difficult [for her] to deny” unfair and discriminatory treatment toward not only her own race but also blacks (p. 51).

After the war came to an end, Kochiyama moved to New York City in January 1946 and married Bill. The newlywed couple moved into a low-income housing project—the Amsterdam Houses in central Manhattan—which were predominantly occupied by blacks and Puerto Ricans. As Kochiyama got to know her neighbors, she began to understand more clearly the parallel between the way blacks were treated in the segregated South and the way Japanese Americans were evacuated and incarcerated. The connecting factors, Kochiyama recognized, were “senseless degradation, brutality, and hatred wrought by fear and ignorance” which was ultimately “caused by racism.”[14] That conviction was reinforced in 1958, when Daisy Bates, the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s Arkansas branch and the mentor of the “Little Rock Nine,” visited New York. Kochiyama had an opportunity to meet her and started to “take a serious interest in the civil rights movement.”[15]

In late 1960, the Kochiyama family, now with six children, moved to a new housing project in Harlem—the Manhattanville Houses—which was intended to accommodate low-income black and Hispanic families. The move to Harlem—a “university-without-walls” as Kochiyama has described it—put her and her family in the political, social, and cultural brew of the 1960s, including an incipient black nationalist movement, to which Kochiyama would soon be drawn (p. 134). It was under these circumstances that Kochiyama, at the age of forty, developed her political activism. While holding a series of community gatherings in their new home with guest speakers such as James Peck, a white leader of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) who had participated in the 1961 Freedom Ride, Yuri and Bill joined the Harlem Parents Committee in 1963. Working with the NAACP, CORE, and other civil rights organizations, the

grassroots committee demanded a better and integrated public school system in Harlem. In so doing, they initiated school boycotts and even opened their own “Freedom School” in October 1963.

Until the end of 1963, Kochiyama’s activism, as Fujino observes, “could be described as liberal-progressive,” reflecting her belief that the best way for racial minorities to advance their political, social, and economic status would be “integration into White America” (p. 123). But her faith in the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. was altered when she met and became friends with Malcolm X, then with the Nation of Islam, who “revolutionize[d] her political vision” (p. 135). Inspired by his vision of black self-determination, Kochiyama soon joined the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU).[16]

Then tragedy struck. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom. Kochiyama was in the audience, and it was she who cradled the dying OAAU leader’s head in her arms. Fujino contends that by the time of Malcolm X’s death, Kochiyama’s politics and activism had undergone a significant shift, “moving from integration and nonviolence to self-determination and self-defense” (p. 162). Kochiyama’s ideological transformation had certainly been influenced by Malcolm X. But it also reflected the emergence of radical politics espoused by those blacks who began to reject the traditional and moderate goals of the civil rights movement.[17]

As Kochiyama’s immersion in the broadly defined “Black Power” movement deepened in the latter half of the 1960s, her visibility as a Japanese-American woman prompted the FBI—which Kochiyama believed had shortened her father’s life—to place her under surveillance. One FBI agent even claimed in late 1966 that Kochiyama might be a “Red Chinese agent” (p. 174). Her children also came under state surveillance. In April 1965, only a few days after fifteen-year-old Audee Kochiyama arrived at McComb, Mississippi, with eight other student volunteers to register black voters, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission—the state’s “segregation watchdog agency”—dispatched one of its investigators to ascertain whether Audee, who “appear[ed] to be of Chinese extraction,” was “subversive or communist.”[18]

In the 1970s, Kochiyama remained a political activist. In 1977, she participated in and was arrested during the take-over of the Statue of Liberty by Puerto Rican nationalists who demanded independence for the Caribbean island, an end to discrimination against Puerto Ricans in the United States, and freedom for their compatriots in

prison.[19] She regarded her fellow political prisoners as “the heartbeat of the struggle.”[20] But as Fujino’s book title suggests, it was Kochiyama herself whom many have regarded as “the heartbeat,” “pumping life and energy into the Movement and sustaining the struggle” (p. xxiv).

As Fujino reveals, Kochiyama’s activism has encompassed “revolutionary and reformist, nationalist and internationalist, and separatist and integrationist elements” (p. xxvi). Yet her core and primary belief is that civil and human rights activism in the United States should forge unity among racially and ethnically diverse communities. “My priority would be to fight against polarization,” she explained in a 1993 documentary film on her life, and, “I think there are so many issues that all people of color should come together on.”[21]

Despite its great significance, *Heartbeat of Struggle* unfortunately has some minor flaws. Fujino might, for instance, have offered a more complete explanation and interpretation of Kochiyama’s complicated political beliefs, including how she was able to reconcile her belief in both integration and separation. At one point, Fujino explains that Kochiyama’s views were “profoundly shaped by the eclectic radicalism” espoused by Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams, who, as the president of the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of the NAACP, advocated armed self-defense (p. 188). Readers of Fujino’s book would naturally like to know whether Kochiyama ever experienced any inner turmoil as result of her—at times—contradictory views.

Fujino might also have trimmed some of the many lengthy and sometimes tedious block quotations, which hinder the book’s readability and the flow of the author’s interpretations. Finally, the lack of a bibliography, although perhaps due to the demands of the publisher, is regrettable and diminishes the book’s value as an academic work.

Yet *Heartbeat of Struggle* is an extraordinary work which details the life of a remarkable woman who has fought for racial and social justice her entire life. Regardless of whether readers sympathize with Kochiyama’s political views, she is undoubtedly an intriguing, inspiring, and instructive individual and truly one of the “most incessant” civil and human rights activists in the United States (p. 275).

#### Notes

[1]. Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (New

York: William Morrow, 1969; reprint, Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1992), p. 502.

[2]. Mayumi Nakazawa, *The Life and Times of Yuri Kochiyama* [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Bungei-Shunju, 1998); Yuri Nakahara Kochiyama, *Passing It On: A Memoir* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2004); Annie Nakao, “Oakland: Inspired by Malcolm X, Asian American Activist Makes Her Own Story,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 9, 2005, p. F3; (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/09/09/EBGIBEG0QU1.DTL>); and, “2004 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award Winners Advancing Human Rights,” Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights, Boston (<http://www.myerscenter.org/pages/04winners.htm>).

[3]. Diane C. Fujino, “Revolutions from the Heart: The Making of an Asian American Woman Activist, Yuri Kochiyama,” in *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire*, ed. Sonia Shah (Boston: South End, 1997), pp. 169-181.

[4]. Kochiyama, *Passing It On*, p. xxiii.

[5]. *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

[6]. *Japanese Relocation*, prod. Bureau of Motion Pictures, Office of War Information, Washington, D.C., 1943, MPEG1 movie, Internet Archive, San Francisco (<http://www.archive.org/download/Japanese1943/Japanese1943.mpg>).

[7]. Roger Daniels, *Prisoners without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), p. 131; and Alice Yang Murray, ed., *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?*, Historians at Work Series (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), pp. 9-20. *Japanese American Relocation Digital Archives (JARDA)* at (<http://jarda.cdlib.org>) is an excellent online educational resource created and maintained by the California Digital Library.

[8]. Yasuhiro Katagiri, “Fighting against the Southern Way of Life: The 442nd Japanese-American Regimental Combat Team in Mississippi” [in Japanese with an English abstract], *Journal of Kyoritsu Area Studies*, 11 (Spring 1997): pp. 17-36; and Thelma Chang, “I Can Never Forget”: *Men of the 100th/442nd* (Honolulu: Sigi Productions, 1991).

[9]. U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of*

*the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 136.

[10]. War Relocation Authority, *Nisei in Uniform* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, n.d. [1945]), n.p., vertical file: "Camp Shelby, Undated, 1943-1958," Mississippiana Collection, William D. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

[11]. *Most Decorated: The Nisei Soldiers*, prod. Peter Kenney, dir. Robert Lihani, A & E Networks, New York, 1994.

[12]. Herbert M. Sasaki, "An Oral History with Mr. Herbert M. Sasaki," recorded interview by Yasuhiro Katagiri, September 2, 1993, transcript, pp. 50-51, Mississippi Oral History Program, Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, University of Southern Mississippi; William T. Schmidt, "The Impact of Camp Shelby in World War II on Hattiesburg, Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* 39 (February 1977): p. 46; and Ronald Smothers, "Japanese-Americans Recall War Service," *New York Times*, June 19, 1995, p. A8.

[13]. Kochiyama, *Passing It On*, p. 17.

[14]. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[15]. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[16]. Yuri Kochiyama, "A History of Linkage: African and Asian, African American and Asian American," *Shades of Power: Newsletter of the Institute for Multiracial Justice* 1 (Spring 1998): p. 3; (<http://modelminority.com/modules.php?name=>

[\\$>\\$](http://modelminority.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=156); and Norimitsu Onishi, "Harlem's Japanese Sister: Immigrants' Daughter Who Embraced Malcolm X Keeps a Radical Flame Alive," *New York Times*, September 22, 1996, sec. 1, p. 41.

[17]. Yasuhiro Katagiri, "Tough Enough to Take It and Big Enough to Hit Back: Beyond the Backlash Thesis?" review of Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*, online posting, January 7, 2005, H-1960s discussion list (<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-1960s&month=Å£â-â-0501&week=a&msg=W19cvLe2DCxwueNs0n2XcA&user=&pw=>).

[18]. Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 6; A. L. Hopkins, "Investigation in Pike County," investigative report, April 20, 1965, record nos. 2-36-2-48-1-1-1 to 2-1-1, p. 1-1-1, Records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, Archives and Library Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

[19]. Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords* (New York: St. Martin's, 2003), pp. 199-212.

[20]. Kochiyama, *Passing It On*, p. 187.

[21]. *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice*, produced and directed by Rea Tajiri and Pat Saunders, National Asian American Telecommunications Association, San Francisco, 1993.

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