

Unfiltered Past: **Yuri Kochiyama's Legacy in American Social Movements**

This is a lesson plan for educators interested in teaching their students about Yuri Kochiyama, an Asian American female activist who participated in several social movements in U.S. history, and about interracial social justice activism. Due to the nature of the material, this plan is intended for high school students, but the lesson may be tailored for middle school students as well. This guide is split up into four sections: **Context for Teachers**, **Lesson Materials**, **Class Lesson Guide**, and **Conclusion**, and is intended to be taught in two 50-minute class periods.

Context for Teachers introduces the lesson to the teacher, contextualizes Yuri Kochiyama in the Civil Rights Movement, and details the objective for the plan. The **Introduction** is not intended to be shared with students, but educators are free to share as much of the lesson plan with students as they would like.

Lesson Materials explains what teachers will need to accomplish the lesson. All readings and videos are free online, and no physical materials other than something to write with (i.e. pen and paper, smartphone, computer) and a means of projecting/watching videos in class are needed. This lesson is intended to be financially and logistically accessible for students of all socio-economic backgrounds. While the links to readings and videos should be shared with students, the synopses accompanying each link provide context solely to the educator and are not meant to be shared directly with students. To ensure productive conversation, we suggest having students complete the readings before the first class. We suggest watching the video together in class to help generate conversation.

Class Lesson Guide details the actual class that educators will teach to students. It utilizes questions informed by the readings and videos and is intended to facilitate free and productive discussion among students. The questions are organized as follows: **Pre-Reading** (the start of the first class before discussing the readings), **Reading/Pre-Viewing** (questions that engage the reading and are intended to contextualize the movie), and **Post-Viewing** (asked after the class has watched the movie). There are no suggested time limits for these questions, as each class will engage in conversation differently, so feel free to adapt or change questions to best suit your students. To help guide students in their conversations, we have added themes and ideas for possible discussion under some questions. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, just to help guide student engagement. The **End of Unit Activity** is a letter-writing exercise to allow students to reflect on their class discussion, and teachers can decide whether or not to have students submit it.

Conclusion rearticulates the main take-aways from the lesson and the significance of Kochiyama's activist legacy. This section is intended just for the educator, but we recognize that creating a conclusion may help students solidify the take-aways from the lesson, and help reemphasize lesson material. Teachers who would like to create their own conclusion to share with their class may benefit from analyzing the one written in this report.

We thank you for using this guide and hope that your educational endeavors help mold the minds of activist youth.

Context for Teachers

Introduction:

The Civil Rights Movement, traditionally defined as beginning in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education* and ending in 1965 with the Civil Rights Act, was one of the most significant examples of human rights organizing in U.S. history. Most curricula and history textbooks attribute this feat to the culmination of political organizing among U.S. citizens, but almost exclusively highlight the efforts of black, white, heterosexual male activists. In overlooking the critical organizing work done by non-black activists of color in The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement in the later 1960s, the American public has come to characterize these movements as solely black and white issues. While figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, and Huey Newton have been revered (or reviled) since the 1950s and '60s, most textbooks overlook the contributions of non-black activists of color to black Civil Rights. In addition, this false racial dichotomy of Civil Rights organizing erases the work of non-black activists of color. These individuals worked, strategized, and built intercultural solidarity between black Civil Rights activists and those of other key social movements, such as the women's rights and labor rights movements. Figures such as Grace Lee Boggs and organizations such as the Third World Liberation Front of the University of California, Berkeley organized, rallied, and struggled alongside African American activists, putting their bodies on the line to support the freedom efforts of their fellow activists.

Among these hidden leaders is Japanese-American activist Yuri Kochiyama (1921-2014), whose anti-internment and African American Civil Rights organizing lead her to become one of the foundational voices for Asian American civil rights, and third world feminist ideology. Born to Japanese immigrant parents in San Pedro, California, Kochiyama developed her social

consciousness as a young adult during WWII.¹ Separated from her father and forced into a Japanese internment camp after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Kochiyama experienced explicit racism for one of the first times in her life, and began learning more about human rights violations in the U.S.² After her release from the camp, Kochiyama moved with her husband into a predominantly-black housing project in New York City, and from there she began to learn about black civil rights, slavery, and inculcated herself in organizing efforts.³ Over her lifetime of activism, Kochiyama has volunteered with several organizations that tackle problems involving the developing world, feminism, and African American and Asian American communities. Throughout her career, she has connected with individuals of all racial backgrounds, working with individuals such as Malcolm X and scholar Harold Cruse to challenge the racial categorization and injustice.⁴ Kochiyama developed interpersonal relationships and stood in solidarity with various organizing efforts regarding: race, gender, and sexuality. She was the vanguard of an interdisciplinary approach to activism that has become the standard in modern-day organizing. A nuanced understanding of the intercultural elements of black Civil Rights and social movements in the U.S. requires a thorough study of Kochiyama as a figure of race-defying and inter-communal grassroots organizing.

Lesson Objective:

The purpose of this lesson plan is two-fold. First, it is to introduce students to Yuri Kochiyama, a first-generation Japanese-American female activist whose decades of organizing efforts and leadership have been unduly excluded from the history books. The goal is to open students' eyes as to how non-black activists of color engaged with The Civil Rights Movement. By introducing Kochiyama's activist work with several racial organizations, especially with Malcolm X, students will develop a nuanced understanding of how activists rarely worked on one issue or movement, and often mobilized and supported the efforts of their comrades across racial and gender divides. The second goal furthers this discussion of Kochiyama by developing students' efforts for grassroots organizing and activist work. In studying the figure of Kochiyama and her influence on social movements in the U.S., students will better understand the importance of cooperation, sympathy, and cross-racial solidarity in student organizing. Kochiyama represents the significant social presence of Asian American, Pacific Islander, and immigrant activists during the Civil Rights Movement. Studying Kochiyama is meant to challenge the perception that "Asian American issues" and "African American issues" are fundamentally separate, and to help students understand that systems of oppression are interlocking, such that the liberation of one group depends on the liberation of others. Given the sensitivity of the material and complexity of the topic, this plan is intended for grades 9th through 12th, but it can always be modified to connect with most middle school students. After this lesson, students will be able to generate critical insights into Afro-Asian racial formations, learn about interracial organizing ideology that undergirded several activists' organizing efforts, and two of the most significant Asian American and African American feminist figures in American history.

Lesson Materials

We would like to reemphasize that this **Lesson Materials** section is different from the **Class Lesson Guide**, and is not the actual class plan.

Time: We suggest two consecutive 50-minute class periods, but please adjust as needed to suit your class.

Materials:

1. Free websites with the class readings (listed below)
2. Materials to write letters, could be pen and paper, smartphone, computer, etc...
3. Whiteboard/Blackboard
4. Projector or classroom screen that can show online videos to the class
5. WiFi

Readings to be Completed Before Class:

For students with IEP's and/or learning disabilities, the Wang, Democracy Now! and Code Switch readings are all recorded and available in audio or video format. Students will have the option to review these readings in a format that best suits their learning needs.

1. *Not Just a 'Black Thing': An Asian-American's Bond with Malcolm X*— Hansi Lo Wang
<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/19/209258986/the-japanese-american-internee-who-met-malcolm-x>

- a. A narrative account of the first meeting and years of correspondence between Yuri Kochiyama and Malcolm X. The article utilizes quotes and interviews with Kochiyama and her peers, and describes the moment Kochiyama witnessed Malcolm X's assassination.
2. *Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman* — Mitsuye Yamada — <https://hamtramckfreeschool.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/yamada-invisibility.pdf> in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* — https://monoskop.org/images/e/e2/Moraga_Cherry_Anzaldual_Gloria_ed_This_Bridge_Called_My_Back_Writings_by_Radical_Women_of_Color-Kitchen_Table_Women_of_Color_Press.pdf
 - a. A professor's personal experience with how stereotypes of Asian American women influence their activism and relationship to oppressive systems of power. The author details the routes of resistance available to Asian American activists, and her experience with not being taken seriously in her fight for racial justice.
3. *Civil Rights Activist Yuri Kochiyama on her Internment in a WWII Japanese American Detention Camp & Malcolm X's Assassination* — Amy Goodman
https://www.democracynow.org/2008/2/20/civil_rights_activist_yuri_kochiyama_remembers.
 - a. Transcript of an interview about Kochiyama's life in a Japanese internment camp, and witnessing Malcolm X's assassination. The interview is split into two parts,

and includes the videotaped interview and primary sources detailing Kochiyama's activism over the decades.

4. *A Letter From Young Asian Americans To Their Families About Black Lives Matter* —

Code Switch Podcast

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/07/27/487375314/a-letter-from-young-asian-americans-to-their-families-about-black-lives-matter>

- a. This article addresses Asian Americans engaged in activism around black incarceration and police brutality and how they discuss cross-racial organizing with their immigrant families. Students can either read the piece or listen to the podcast, and gain a new perspective on how non-black activists of color mobilize around issues of injustice in black communities.

The discussion questions based on these readings are in the **Class Lesson Guide** section.

Reading Objectives:

1. The Wang and *Democracy Now!* readings provide context for Yuri Kochiyama's life, and lay the groundwork to understand the documentary.
2. The Yamada reading interrogates questions of Asian American communities' stake in civil rights issues, challenges the perceived privileges of Asian American communities that prevent other communities from empathizing with them as oppressed communities of color, and emphasizes how Asian American women must be taken seriously as activists.

3. The Code Switch reading provides students a modern example of cross-racial organizing and coalition-building whose roots they will further explore through Yuri Kochiyama's work.

Viewing List:

1. *Mountains That Take Wing: Angela Davis & Yuri Kochiyama (2009)* Free —
<https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/mountains-that-take-wing-angela-davis-and-yuri-kochiyama-trailer/>
 - a. A documentary about conversations between social justice activists Yuri Kochiyama and Angela Davis over 13 years.
 - b. We suggest watching two clips. The first clip should start at the timestamp 29 minutes 49 seconds and finish at timestamp 52 minutes 30 seconds. The second clip should start at timestamp 1 hour 31 minutes and 25 seconds until the end (30 minute total watch time including credits). We provide a few examples of insights to match these clips, but feel free to adjust the viewing to reflect your curriculum goals and students.

Viewing Objectives:

1. Explore key themes the class will discuss in the readings
 - a. Further explored in **Reading/Pre-Viewing Discussion Questions**
2. Help students deconstruct the boundaries that separate Asian American and African American identities.
3. Highlight Asian American activists' relationship with black liberation movements.

Class Lesson Plan

We suggest teaching this material in two 50-minute class periods. It may be productive to cover **Pre-Reading Questions** through **Reading/Pre-Viewing Questions** in the first section, and **Post-Viewing Questions** through the **End of Unit Activity** (or **Conclusion**) in the second section. We will clearly mark our suggested places to stop.

Beginning of First Class Period

Pre-Reading Questions:

1. What do we think of when we think of The Civil Rights Movement?
2. How did the government discriminate against communities of color before The Civil Rights Movement?
 - a. On the chance that most students focus on laws that impacted African American communities, try to offer laws that also impacted other non-black communities of color
 - b. Examples include:
 - i. Immigration restrictions to prevent Asian populations from increasing⁵
 - ii. Labor rights violations among Hispanic itinerant farmers⁶
 - iii. Abolishment of Native American tribal governments on reservations and utilizing federal law to oversee Native communities⁷
 - iv. Segregated schools for students of color, including Latinx, Native, and Asian American/Pacific Islander communities⁸
3. In reflecting on social justice organizing today, can anyone tell me about activist groups that they know of currently? What issues are important to them? What reforms do they advocate for?

- a. For groups that they name, write down both their names and their areas of focus.
4. ***Once there are 5-7 examples*** What communities are impacted by the issues that these activists are addressing? Can you talk about examples of how these issues affect people?
 - a. Record responses by writing the community near the issue/reform, but try to have students name at least 2-3 communities per example. The goal is to help them realize that liberation work supports people of all races, as these issues almost always impact various communities of color, not just one or two.
 - b. Some examples to help students generate connections are as follows:
 - i. The Carceral State
 1. Police brutality and high acquittal rate
 2. ICE raids on undocumented immigrants
 3. Minimum sentencing
 4. Solitary confinement/torture
 5. Access to healthcare in prison (i.e. cell crowding during coronavirus pandemic)
 6. Those impacted: African Americans, Latinx Americans
 - ii. Education reform
 1. Poor school funding
 2. School-to-jail pipelines
 3. The possible repeal of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
 4. Affirmative Action and higher education
 5. Those impacted: African Americans, Latinx Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans
 - iii. Immigration reform

1. Criminalization of immigration
 2. Barriers to naturalization
 3. ICE border detention facilities
 4. Those impacted: Latinx Americans, Asian Americans
- iv. Environmental justice/Environmental racism
1. Land sovereignty and government territorial expansion (i.e. Dakota Access Pipeline)
 2. Environmental disaster relief (i.e. Hurricanes Maria and Katrina)
 3. Unsafe water (i.e. Flint, Michigan)
 4. Those impacted: Native Americans, African Americans

Reading/Pre-Viewing Discussion Questions:

1. Had anyone heard of Yuri Kochiyama before these readings?
 - a. If someone answers yes, have them explain where and what they have learned about her.
2. Can someone please relay some of the key themes discussed in the reading? (As they list themes, it might be productive to write them out so others can see them)
 - a. Once compiled (between 5 to 10 is a sufficient starting point), these themes will guide how students engage with the film. This list prepares them to engage in conversation by providing a base level of ideas to contemplate, and they can pinpoint scenes or events in the film that reflect the themes you have discussed.
 - b. The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of themes:
 - i. Cross-Racial Organizing
 - ii. Activism

- iii. Learning and Communication of Ideology
- iv. Feminism
- v. Revolution
- vi. Political Violence
- vii. Solidarity
- viii. (Forced) Migration (the parentheses indicate both voluntary/involuntary migration)
- ix. Scholar Activism
- x. Historical Erasure/Construction of Historical Narratives

End of First Class Period

Beginning of Second Class Period

Video: *Mountains That Take Wing: Angela Davis & Yuri Kochiyama*

Post-Viewing Questions:

1. So, what surprised you about this film? Was there anything that stuck out?
 - a. Places of possible discussion:
 - i. Malcolm X meeting the Hibakushas and the exclusion of his international organizing work.
 - ii. Kochiyama herself being so prominent in the movement and consistently putting her body on the line (protests, arrests, rallies, etc...)
 - iii. Intellectuals wanting to learn from one another (Hibakusha writers wanting to meet Malcolm X)
 - iv. Cross-cultural solidarity in organizing (“Yellow Peril supports Black Power” at timestamp 51:30)
2. When Kochiyama and Davis discussed the need for cross-racial organizing, what struck you about this idea of working together with individuals to tackle a wide range of problems? Was anyone surprised to learn of Kochiyama and other activists’ involvement in different movements?
3. Did anybody notice any connections with the readings we have previously discussed?
4. How did Kochiyama’s studies with activists and scholars such as Harold Cruse and Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) help shape her public consciousness?

End of Unit Activity:

Non-black communities of color, especially Asian Americans, have been an overlooked, yet integral part of community organizing for black liberation, both in the Civil Rights Movement and even after the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Activists rarely isolated themselves to just one idea or issue, organizing critical direct actions alongside African Americans to challenge injustice impacting all of their communities. They engaged in radical political and philosophical thought to transcend the limits of the government, and imagine new spaces to rest, resist, and build a new way of life. To conclude this class, students will reflect on Kochiyama's legacy of intercultural organizing, and think of how to continue her work in their own lives.

Using any kind of note-taking apparatus (pen and paper, smartphones, computer, etc...), students will create their own letters addressed to their families regarding social movements and organizations discussed in the **Pre-Reading Questions**. This draws inspiration from the *Letter From Young Asian Americans* Code Switch article, and is meant to help students articulate, seemingly to others but fundamentally to themselves, the necessity of transcending boundaries of race and sex to challenge discrimination. Students may address the letters to their nuclear families, extended relatives, friends, neighbors, community leaders, or any person to whom they have a strong-enough connection that they feel comfortable writing to them. While the letter can be up to their interpretation, the goal is to integrate their newfound knowledge of Kochiyama's ideology into their own activism, and as such, it may be helpful to have them draw on the themes discussed in the **Reading/Pre-Viewing** questions.

We suggest between 7 to 10 minutes of writing, but allow for as much time to write as you think would be productive for students. If there is additional time, invite some students to read their letters and explain their work. To end this class, remind them that activists like Kochiyama emphasized that students and youth are integral to organizing efforts, and to radically reimagining the current world order. Explain that these letters are to help students tap into the ideology of these organizers, and are meant to help them learn to emphasize interracial and gender solidarity in their social justice organizing.

End of Second Class Period

(Unless educator will add a Conclusion)

Conclusion

White supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy discriminate against all communities of color. This issue necessitates activists to bridge racial and gender separations and work together to effect progressive and sustainable change. Through this lesson, students will develop a nuanced understanding of one of the most significant hidden figures of social justice organizing, and continue these activists' legacies of collaboratively addressing these issues. These letters are the first steps toward this goal, and should hopefully encourage students to continue this integral work. In looking to the past, students will learn how to shape their future.

Works Cited

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