They told us it can't be done, they won't get along; you will have gang problems between blacks and Latinos, it can't be done; the Denver public school system would not support us, most of the civic and government organizations would not support us; only a handful of grassroots people came forward to support the planning and holding of this kind of conference.

Despite the naysayers, we had over five hundred youth that came out on their spring break to an all-day conference to hear about their culture and history and how young people could help bring together, for progressive activities, indigenous people in America, with the indigenous people from Africa, in order to change their joint social and economic conditions.

Don't tell me it can't be done. Blacks and Chicanos can come together in order to change their similar oppressions. When we stop allowing those other people to lead us, to make us believe that assimilating is the way out, progressive people of color will come together and represent a powerful force for social change in this nation.

One final point: Don't believe that you simply have to get rid of all the Western Europeans in this country in order for you to come together. Do you think you'd be better off; you think gang violence would stop if Western Europeans were to go? You think the division among our people would stop? No. The only strategy that guarantees this, is people joining together to create a socially just society for all. When communities of color come together to change the system for the benefit of all people, then social justice for everyone will prevail in the United States.

9
The Impact of Malcolm X on Asian-American Politics and Activism

Yuri Kochiyama

The following interview with Yuri Kochiyama was conducted on May 19, 1972, by Miya Iwataki for radio station KPFK in Los Angeles as part of a celebration of Malcolm X’s birthday. It was slightly revised and updated by Ms. Kochiyama in June 1993. This interview and Yuri Kochiyama’s concluding statement not only summarize how Malcolm X’s thinking and actions influenced the Asian community in the United States, but thereby suggest at least one basis for political collaboration between black and Asian activists. Ms. Kochiyama has a long history of activities in the United States and abroad. In addition to being a close friend of Malcolm X, she has also worked extensively in the Asian community. A concluding statement by Yuri Kochiyama reflects the impact of Malcolm X on her recent activities.

THE INTERVIEW (1972)

Q: Now Yuri, when did you and your family first move to Harlem?

Kochiyama: We moved in December of 1960.

Q: What made you decide to live in Harlem?

Kochiyama: We were looking for a larger apartment. We were living in another project more in midtown in Amsterdam Houses and this new project Manhattanville was just going up. Luckily my husband
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racism. But when Malcolm spoke of nationalism he meant black nationhood. . . . totally free from white America. He meant a land base, he meant sovereignty, and he always spoke about self-determination, self-reliance, and self-defense.

Q: Well, what kind of impact did you feel that Malcolm and his teachings had on the Harlem that you lived in and knew?

Kochiyama: Well, I think that because there were many different kinds of movements, I think that most important is the impact he made about the awareness of . . . knowing oneself . . . and to know one’s history, one’s heritage. And then, to link it with politics. [This is where the] black consciousness movement and black power movement followed along with the Black Panther party and the Republic of New Africa were born. Many people are not aware that these were actually two different Black Panther parties in Harlem.

Q: Did you . . . Were you able to view his organizing skills and how people in Harlem responded to his strength and his teaching and his visions of black people and what they should and could become?

Kochiyama: Well, I think you have to remember that Malcolm was way ahead of most of the people. So, no matter what organizing skills that he had, he had a lot of things to go up against . . . obstacles. Let’s put it this way, Harlem was a nationalist’s enclaves but the civil rights movement was fast growing in the 1960s and the civil rights movement was integrationist and it was countering the nationalism. The media was antinationalist and did a scorching job on Malcolm; it depicted him a fanatic, a mad man, a hater, so, he had that to fight against too. I cannot say that all of his skills were utilized in the way that he would have liked to have done.

Q: Were the people afraid of him because of how the media portrayed him? Or did they gradually come to embrace the ideas?

Kochiyama: Oh, I think he had tremendous following . . . but he was not really an independent person at that time because he was still under Elijah Muhammad and I think he was constantly changing and he was growing above and beyond his “father” (meaning Elijah). He was growing beyond him in his knowledge and his understanding of what was happening in the world, especially in Africa . . . and I think the people definitely were seeing that what Malcolm was saying held a lot more water . . .

Q: What are some of the experiences or incidents that are still living strongly in your memory of Malcolm?

Kochiyama: Well, we just mentioned what a difficult time Malcolm had with the press and the power structure attacking him all the time. I would
say that what I remember about him... is the tremendous courage it must have taken to be able to say all the things that he did when no one else was saying them. He was condemning American hypocrisy and American duplicity, its illusions and misconceptions. And even though he got the full blast of the media's assault, he never backed off. He stood firm. I would also add that in dealing with the power structure he was intransigent, when it came to principles; but he was flexible with his own people, when it came to tactics.

Q: Is there a specific incident or experience that you remember happening that you can just tell us here in Los Angeles because many of us weren’t able to be in a city where Malcolm was? Just an event that you remember that had quite a large impact on yourself or the community that you lived in.

Kochiyama: The time that he came to our apartment when we were having a reception for the Hiroshima-Nagasaki World Peace Study Mission for writers. It was to be held on June 6, 1964, and, of course, that date would be just a few months after he bolted from the Nation of Islam. Most people told us, oh Malcolm would never come. Why would he go to a strange place and to an Asian home? But he did come.

Q: These were four writers from Japan?

Kochiyama: Three writers, all Hibakushas, atom bomb victims. When he knocked and we opened the door and saw him, we were all so excited—we could hardly believe it. Our place was jam-packed from the living room, kitchen, all the way to the back bedrooms, and in the hallway, with civil rights activists as well as the three writers and some other Japanese Hibakushas. The house was full of Harlem-recognized civil rights leaders; white civil rights activists, and some Japanese that we asked to be host and hostesses.

He said he was quite amazed to see so many people there and he said he would like to meet everyone. So, he went through parts of the house shaking hands with everyone. It was one-third black, one-third white and, well, maybe not quite one-third Asian, but his warmth just amazed everyone, and it was really just overwhelming, and everybody was quite excited about him. The Hibakushas asked that the translators not interfere once Malcolm got started. He told the group a little bit about his prison life and that’s where he did most of his studying. He described the course of Chinese history and Japanese history and offered the difference that China, like most all Asian countries, went through feudalism and foreign domination, but that Japan was the only Asian country that was not transgressed upon in order to be occupied. It went straight from feudalism to capitalism; thus Japan was intact and strong until she

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was defeated in World War II. I think people were quite surprised at all the things that he said, and then he spoke of Vietnam.

Q: Well, what was Malcolm's knowledge of other people internationally... like the Asian people and other third world people?

Kochiyama: Malcolm said, “the struggle of Vietnam is the struggle of all third-world people,” encapsulating that Asian and third-world people’s fight was against foreign domination, imperialism, and colonialism. He had great admiration for Mao and Ho Chi Minh. Malcolm was so well-read already about Asian and third-world people’s struggles, his knowledge and perspective was very keen and astute.

Q: What kind of effect did you see or feel that Malcolm had on third world people both here in America and internationally?

Kochiyama: As for third-world people or people of color here, he’s constantly and continuously being quoted in movement newspapers, and by black, radical leaders, and leftist activists. He’s definitely an inspiration to the movement here. As for the black struggle itself, he’s unquestionably the guiding light, a very key example... He is the source for political clarity. The provisional government of the Republic of New Africa was established on the concepts of Malcolm’s thoughts and I think that’s a great tribute to have a nation derived out of this man’s life. Internationally, despite the character assassination that the American press did on him, he was admired in revolutionary circles worldwide. They understood him. I just want to cite some particularities. A Uruguayan Christian minister wrote a play about Malcolm, which was performed in Uruguay in 1966; in Chile in 1967; Cuba in 1969; in Czechoslovakia in 1970; and Poland in 1971. Malcolm is on a stamp in Iran. Malcolm’s life has been written in Italian, French, German, Spanish, and Japanese. He is highly esteemed in all the progressive African countries; Arab countries too. The Chinese ambassador to Ghana was so impressed by Malcolm that he held a special banquet for him.

That day when Malcolm came to that reception for the Hibakushas, a black teacher from the Harlem Freedom School read a two-page typewritten letter by [Ghanaian] students who wrote glowingly of Malcolm’s impact on the students of Ghana. He had just been to Ghana and had spoken with them. Also, of course, we all know that Malcolm made trips to the Arab world and Africa and he made contacts with many heads of states and also made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Wherever he spoke, he spoke of the black struggle in America; so he internationalized it. He also spoke at one of the OAU (Organization of African Unity) conferences in Tanzania. He
brought together Africans from the two continents, from the motherland and those here and in the diaspora, and he linked the struggles as one.

Q: What kind of impact did Malcolm’s life and teachings have on the Asian American movement as you saw it? And you’ve mentioned many examples, but if there are any more examples of the impact that Malcolm had on Asians internationally.

Kochiyama: Well, you know Malcolm always stressed things like, if you don’t know who you are and where you come from, meaning your heritage and history, how can you know in which direction to go? I feel that the Asian American movement heeded his words because through Asian American studies people delved into history to learn of the past, to learn about feudalism in Asia, of foreign domination and then here in America, about colonized mentality, being assimilated and of being a “banana”—yellow on the outside and white on the inside—like oreo cookies for blacks and pinto beans for the browns and Indians—I think Asians felt we had to find ourselves and feel pride in our Asian-ness.

Q: Can I just jump in here for a second? I think that . . . for myself I was a little before the time that they had Asian studies and so for myself and a lot of friends that I had I think one of the really important impacts that Malcolm had on us is that in Los Angeles in particular, there are a lot of Asian street people . . . ex-felons, ex-addicts that were not accepted in our community during the 1960s. (And) I think through the teachings of Malcolm and what we saw, the kind of work we saw he was able to do, in the black community, gave us inspiration to start drug abuse programs like Asian American Hard Core where ex-addicts and ex-felons worked with addicts and felons and helped work out, things around identity, why were they turning to drugs in the first place. Why did they have to steal, rip off their own people. A lot of these brothers and sisters did not like to read, but when we had readings like the Autobiography of Malcolm X, or even the sets of albums that have all his speeches, that really had a tremendous impact in winning them over into the movement and they’re still here today.

Kochiyama: That’s wonderful. Well, I certainly think he did the same thing here in the black community because you know . . . there are always those who are never included into the mainstream . . . even within the third-world communities there are people on the periphery. (And) I think Malcolm reached those people. He cleaned up, especially, those on drugs; no social workers could have done anything like that.

Q: What similarities do you see in the struggle of New African Freedom Fighters and the Asian Pacific American people? I mean . . . what areas of unity do you feel that our movements have?

Kochiyama: Well, the commonality of the two people I think would be in the commonality of the suffering. By suffering I mean the racism in this country; that all people of color in this country have had many similar experiences; for example, recently the Japanese Americans have been organizing a redress reparation movement because of their internment camp experiences. It happens to all third-world people, only they give it a different name. Africans were put on plantations. They were concentration camps. The American Indians were put in reservations, which were concentration camps. Wherever there is a concentration of people who have been dispossessed and disempowered, they are in concentration camps, and although it is not the same as what the Jewish people went through in Europe because they were in “death camps,” all third-world people have gone through a similar kind of experience here. The Chinese, while they were building the railroads, lived in railroad camps that were very much like concentration camps. I think that the Chicano migratory workers camps were like concentration camps.

Q: You know a lot of us feel that you were so fortunate to be able to even meet him . . . right?

Kochiyama: Oh my goodness, yes!

Q: And just what kind of impact or effect did he have on you and how did you find him as a person, and as a friend, because many of us just know him from media or his writings; what was the human side of him?

Kochiyama: He certainly changed my life. Well, I know it might sound a little bit corny, but I feel that Malcolm’s impact on my life was like that biblical story of Paul being struck by a light on the Damascus road; I feel that it happened to me. As I said, I was heading in one direction, integration, and he was going in another, total liberation, and he opened my eyes. He opened my mind, like opening a door to a new world. He helped me to start thinking, studying, listening, and observing and seeing contradictions. As a friend and as a person I felt he was a very humble person, very patient, he was very open, he was kind. He had great depth and breadth, there was nothing petty about him. He was just a . . . a phenomena. Everyone who’s met him has said that he did change their life.

When I first met him I had the gall to tell him that I disagreed with his feelings on integration. He didn’t look at me with scorn or ridicule, he was a very big person. He just smiled and said well, let’s
discuss it: we can’t discuss it here, on the floor, you know, in the courthouse. He just said, come to my office. Of course that never did take place because he was busy traveling all the time, but he asked me to start attending his OAU meetings, enrolling in his liberation school, which I did; I feel that through the course of going to these meetings, and the school, that it helped me to understand what Malcolm was trying to say.

Q: When you met and spoke with Malcolm and attended the liberation school, did that change your views on integration and assimilation to total liberation?

Kochiyama: Oh, definitely! It was just an eye opener. Malcolm was too busy to teach in his Malcolm X liberation school. A man by the name of Jim Campbell handled the classes; also there was a teacher from East Africa and it was unlike any school I have ever attended. Although, prior to that, I and my whole family participated in the Harlem Freedom School, which only taught about Afro-American history; but Malcolm’s school went beyond that because it linked us so closely with Africa, and of course they didn’t see the struggle as a civil rights movement; they saw it as a “human rights” movement.

Q: What involved you . . . what made you get involved in such an integral role . . . you and your whole family with the black movement?

Kochiyama: I guess we were just lucky that we moved up to Harlem in 1960. Although we lived in a low-income project before that, and by the end of the twelve years that we were there it was mostly black and Puerto Rican—although it began exactly opposite, 60 percent white and 40 percent black and Puerto Rican.

There was a difference, I think, when we got up to Harlem. Harlem is definitely a nationalist enclave and you can’t help but feel it. I think we were lucky, too, that we got to meet so many people that sort of pulled us into the movement. Where we lived Sonia Sanchez lived in the next building; Bill Epton was in another building in the project here; and we even heard that Paul Robeson, himself, was living in these projects because his son lived there. It was just, sort of natural living in this community to also become a part of it.

Q: Yuri, have you been attacked or harassed in any way because of your beliefs and your closeness with Malcolm and other revolutionary nationalist struggles?

Kochiyama: Not any more than anyone else, but I have to be careful because I think from reading my files that where it said . . .

Q: Which files are these?

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Kochiyama: I got my Freedom of Information Act files and it showed that they were watching me just to see what contacts I made. So I would have to be very careful not to bring heat on certain activists in the black liberation movement.

Q: As we stated earlier in your introduction, you were present at the time of his assassination and what are your memories of that terrible day?

Kochiyama: Yes, that day was February 21st, on a Sunday . . . Sunday afternoon. My sixteen-year-old son Billy and I went to the Audubon, and as soon as we entered the hall we felt that there was a sort of an eerie feeling that something was going to happen. Well, also, I guess, because we heard that Malcolm was uptight when he came in earlier, and we also heard that all the invited speakers backed off and declined or canceled that day, and only brother Benjamin was going to be up on the stage. Well, then Benjamin said a few words, and strangely he did say something to the effect that Malcolm is the kind of man who’d be willing to die for you. Shortly after that Malcolm came on and he only got to say a few words beyond “A Salam Alaikum” and everyone responded to him, when a ruckus in the middle section of the hall began.

We were sitting right across about the tenth or eleventh row facing the podium and was right in the center section across from us, when a man jumped up and said, “Get your hands out of my pocket,” then after that, it seemed like all hell broke loose. Two or three men rose up from the front and they started shooting and the whole place went into utter chaos. Brothers were chasing those who did the shooting. Chairs were crashing to the floor, people were hitting the floor, there was screaming. A brother in front of me ran to the platform so I followed after him. We found Malcolm had fallen backwards on the stage and we were shocked to see how many times he was hit. He was having difficulty breathing; I don’t think he even got to say a word and then he lost consciousness. In the meantime, people were running, screaming, running all over and people were trying to call the Presbyterian Hospital, which was only across the street. They were waiting for medical help and it seemed like it was forever before the medical people came with a stretcher. The shock, the grief, the anxieties, just engulfed everyone. We didn’t know that . . . well we didn’t know whether Malcolm was still alive. We didn’t know if he was beyond help. Sister Betty (Shabazz) was very brave trying to keep the children as calm as possible.

Anyone who was there would never forget this date. I think it was a turning point in the black struggle. I felt it reinforced that there was a hidden war against blacks who dared to rebel; people like Malcolm who dared to go another way, who dared to be inde-
pendent. I think it brought to light all the things that Malcolm was saying... That this country will let certain people survive here, but this country just wanted you to become puppets, robots, clowns, and pets, but for any black man or woman who stood up to them, that person would be in trouble.

Malcolm’s assassination, I feel, was inevitable. The FBI and CIA were close on his heels. There were many indications, like when he was poisoned in Egypt the summer before his death; also, before he went to Africa, the U.S. government sent memos there to different African governments to discredit him; they even used African Americans.

Malcolm was just becoming too powerful and too many people were listening to him and he became a threat to this government. They just had to shoot him. Well, I’d like to maybe just end this with an analogy; the analogy is that he was like a strong tree that protected and inspired his people; because of that the enemy cut it down. But they only cut the trunk of the tree. The roots will always continue to grow and the seeds of Malcolm, and by seeds I mean his ideas, that they’re everywhere and they’re growing in the fertile minds of young black “Bloods,” and the future generation of new Africans in America will continue to fight the struggle that he could not see through to the end... 

Q: I want to thank you very much Yuri for your input in our program celebrating the birthday of Malcolm X, a great teacher and leader, of not only the black people in America, but all third-world people.

MALCOLM X: DOES HIS MESSAGE HAVE RELEVANCE TO ASIAN AMERICANS TODAY?

Malcolm’s life and what he did with it, rising from the muck of enforced poverty to international recognition, is primarily a message to his own people—black people in America, Africa, and the diaspora. But the significance of his feat in transforming his life, makes him relevant to all humanity. His life is truly a lesson to prove that one can transcend adversity, hate, and lies. Through struggle, he became the symbol of fearlessness against powerful enemies, of commitment to fight racism in this society, and a motivator to seek truth. Thus, his life and his message certainly should have relevance to Asian Americans.

Spike Lee’s “Malcolm X” may be resurrecting him to a wider audience, but those who loved and followed Malcolm throughout the 1950s and 1960s to the moment of his assassination have cevotedly given him the allegiance and esteem through these twenty-seven years without fanfare and publicity. There never has been a February 21, his assassination date, that there has not been countless commemorations in the black communities. There has never been a May 19, his birthday, that there was not a pilgrimage to his grave site.

Around the world, people and nations have honored him. Malcolm’s picture appears on the postage stamp of Iran. Plays about him have been performed in Uruguay, Chile, Cuba, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. His writings have been translated into Italian, Spanish, German, French, Japanese, and African languages. In the last year of his life, he was invited to the African Summit Conference in Cairo, to a Conference of the Organization of African Unity, and the Commonwealth Ministers Conference in London. He also made the long-awaited sacred pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

When Malcolm was killed at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, there was a Japanese writer and his wife who witnessed the assassination. The journalist, who uses the pen name Ei Nagata, had been to many Malcolm rallies. He wrote the first stories of Malcolm’s death for Japanese newspapers. Malcolm was not a stranger to Asian history. During his seven years in prison, he read everything he could get his hands on. He loved reading history, history of every part of the world, even though the material on world history was Eurocentric.

In June 1964, Malcolm came to our apartment to meet with some Hibakusha writers of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki World Peace Study Mission, as these Japanese wanted to meet Malcolm more than any other figure in America. At that time, Malcolm’s life was in danger as he had bolted from the Nation of Islam only a few months earlier. No one really expected Malcolm to show, but a large number of civil rights activists, both black and white, paced our apartment, perhaps out of curiosity. None were actual Malcolm people. There were no Muslims, Yorubas, nationalists, or radicals. The mixed group who came were, however, community activists. They perhaps wondered if Malcolm would be cold, critical, and intimidating. To everyone’s surprise, they found Malcolm warm, gracious, open, and sensitive.

On learning that the Hibakushas had just gone to the world’s “worst fair” in Harlem, Malcolm thanked them for choosing to come to the real-life fair, rather than the well-publicized, commer-
cial World’s Fair in Flushing Meadow. The Hibakushas saw what life in some parts of Harlem is like: garbage piled up because the city was not picking it up regularly; windows and stairwells broken and unrepaird; toilets that would not flush; bathtubs that were clogged. He said something to the effect: “You were bombed and have physical scars. We also have been bombed and you saw some of the scars in our neighborhood. We are constantly hit by the bombs of racism—which are just as devastating.”

He spoke of Asia as a continent in which most of the countries have been colonized, and thus have had their sovereignty weakened. Only Japan, he said, had not been transgressed upon until the recent World War II when it was vanquished by the United States. But because it had not been colonized earlier, he explained, it was able to stay intact and strong. However, I do not think Malcolm was aware of Japan’s similarity to America in its racism and chauvinism that inflicted irreparable damage to neighboring nations—especially South Korea.

He spoke highly of Mao Tse Tung, as he felt Mao had moved in the right direction to simultaneously fight feudalism, corruption in the hierarchy, and foreign domination. He liked Mao’s selection of giving preferential treatment to the peasants, as the peasants, he felt, were the backbone of the nation, feeding that huge, vast population. Malcolm, of course, did not live long enough to see the changes that began to take place in the People’s Republic of China within a decade later.

In Malcolm’s last years, the United States was sending military advisors and specialists to Vietnam. Although the anti-Vietnam War movement had not quite begun to activate, Malcolm was aware of America’s intentions to begin sending troops and take control of an area soon to become strategic for Western powers. Malcolm made the following prophetic statement: “Vietnam is the struggle of all third-world nations—the struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Progressive people here must protest American incursion into Vietnam and Southeast Asia.”

Malcolm’s keen insight seemed to target all the critical areas of concern. Malcolm’s astuteness, political theorizing, and principled thoughts were inspiring. He could lift what might have been obscure into clarity.

Malcolm, as a private individual, was as admirable as he was a political figure, leader, and teacher. He was a loving and caring husband and father. He exuded love for humanity and for the ordinary people on the street; the children and the elderly; but most of all for the most rejected, degraded, and ghettoized. He was unpretentious, sincere, genuine, and humble. After he returned from Mecca with the title El Hajj Malik Shabazz, his followers asked him, “What shall we call you now?” He responded, “What did you call me before?” They said, “Brother Malcolm.” He answered, “Yes, just Brother Malcolm.”