Teacher Note

It is important to note that social movements are about unifying groups of people to create change and progress for all. Frequently we isolate particular individuals to spotlight within movements, turning them into heroes and role models for children to emulate. With increasing emphasis on citizenship education, it is sometimes easier to give students specific examples of people who have overcome adversity and achieved greatness rather than talk in general terms about large groups of individuals fighting for a common cause; students can relate more directly to individuals and identify character traits, a common learning standard. This document provides some biographical information about some of the most prominent people within the Asian American Movement while acknowledging the roles of countless others who worked in the past and continue to fight in the present.

What is particularly significant about the following historical figures is their fierce determination to fight for justice across racial lines. Each figure was tutored in resistance by other activists involved in the Black Power movement, the Socialist Workers Party, and other groups. Their stories offer a glimpse of the interracial alliances that existed during the height of the civil rights movement but are rarely discussed. Such alliances are vital in today’s environment where people of color continue to face racial profiling, discrimination, and violence, among other injustices.

These interracial alliances have existed for a long time in American history. In 1903, Japanese and Mexican agricultural workers joined together to strike against local landowners. In the early 1900s, many men from the Punjab region of Pakistan/India married Mexican women in California. These and other examples demonstrate that mixed-race alliances and relationships have long been a part of our country’s history.
Richard Aoki

November 20, 1938 - March 15, 2009

Richard was born on November 20, 1938 in San Leandro, California, the oldest of two sons. Both sets of his grandparents immigrated from Japan to the San Francisco Bay area at the turn of the 20th century. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. When Richard was three and a half years old, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, ordering 110,000 West Coast Japanese Americans to be removed from their homes and placed into internment camps.

Richard's family was evacuated from their home in the spring of 1942. First they spent six months living in horse stables at Tanforan Racetrack just south of San Francisco, then they were moved to long-term housing at the internment camp in Topaz, Utah. Topaz was located on the edge of the desert, where days were very hot with no air-conditioning and nights were very cold. In the camp each family was assigned to a single room with no indoor plumbing, and the camp was surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. Internees were not allowed to leave camp without permission. In December 1944, President Roosevelt rescinded, or took back, Executive Order 9066, which allowed for the release of internees. Richard's family left Topaz in 1945 and returned to the Bay Area.

In their last year at Topaz, Richard's parents separated. After they were released from Topaz, Richard and his brother David went to live with their father in Oakland, California in the Aoki family home with his grandparents and uncle. West Oakland was a poor, predominantly African-American neighborhood and Richard and David witnessed many abuses by the Oakland police department. In 1953, the Aoki boys went to live with their mother in nearby Berkeley. His mother filed for divorce and his father left town; from then on, Richard had very little contact with his father.

Three days after graduating from high school, Richard enlisted in the military. He had hopes of becoming a fighter pilot, but after the Korean War there was an abundance of pilots and little opportunity for him in that area. Instead, at the urging of his mother, he enrolled in the medic corps to take care of the injured. Richard served on active duty and in the reserves for eight years; in the army, he had his first teaching position instructing X-ray physics to technicians.

When Richard left active duty in 1957, he returned to San Francisco. He worked a variety of working-class jobs: hospital orderly, strawberry farm worker, truck driver, and assembly line worker and foreman at a paint factory. During this time, he began to read heavily about U.S. labor history as well as books by John Steinbeck and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. His
work experience combined with his growing knowledge of the history of labor organization and capitalism helped Richard form stronger political ideas and a better understanding of working-class conditions.

In 1964, Richard became a full-time student at Merritt College with the goal of transferring to the University of California at Berkeley. An avid reader, he was very interested in politics. He was fascinated by Marxism and Communism and began attending meetings for a wide variety of organizations from the Socialist Worker’s Party to the Nation of Islam. While at Merritt College, he met Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton.

In September 1966, Aoki attended and spoke at the biggest Black nationalist conference ever held on the West Coast. A month later, his friends Bobby and Huey decided to form a political group called the Black Panther Party (BPP). They began by writing a Ten-Point Program, which outlined the purpose of the organization, and showed it to their friend Richard. They passed out surveys to get community feedback on their program and found that many community members wanted an end to police brutality (program point seven). The BPP was inspired by a community-based organization in Los Angeles that followed police cars to observe and record their activities. However, the Los Angeles police would retaliate against the community patrols and break their cameras and tape recorders. Huey looked up laws and discovered that a person has the right to have weapons as long as they are visible. With this knowledge, the BPP began “shotgun patrols” where they would follow and surround police when they made arrests to observe what the police were doing while BPP members carried visible weapons protected under the Second Amendment of the Constitution.

In another effort to defend the black community, the BPP served as traffic cops when they were approached by an elementary school in North Oakland. There had been a series of accidents at a corner by the school and parents of the elementary students asked the city to install a stop sign. When the city did not respond, Richard and members of the BPP stood at the school corner with their shotguns visible to enforce traffic. Self-defense was one of the major stances of the BPP, who had grown tired of police and politicians abusing their communities and not responding to their needs.

When Richard asked Huey if there was an issue with him joining the Black Panthers because he was Asian American, Huey responded, “The struggle for freedom, justice and equality transcends racial and ethnic barriers, and as far as he was concerned, I was a Black Panther!” Richard joined the BPP two months after it was formed and played a number of roles within the organization, from teaching political education classes to leading regional branches of the party. He was also critical in obtaining the firearms that became part of the BPP’s uniform of self-defense.
In 1966 Richard went to the University of California at Berkeley and became branch captain of the Berkeley chapter of the BPP. While at Berkeley he was approached by Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, two Asian American students who went on to form the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA). The AAPA created the term “Asian American” and was composed of student and community members who wanted to organize a political program and activities in support of the Asian American community. Richard joined and became their spokesperson, giving the first speech about their political four-point program.

In the winter of 1968, multiple student organizations at nearby San Francisco State University (SFSU) banded together to form the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). The TWLF was frustrated with many campus events, especially SFSU’s racially unequal admission policies and the recent suspension of an English instructor who was also the BPP’s Minister of Education. Students at SFSU began boycotting classes and listing demands, which included student input in the hiring of faculty and the development of curriculum about ethnic minorities. They went on strike for five months - the longest campus strike in national history - and gained national attention.

Inspired by their peers at SFSU, students at Berkeley began a TWLF and initiated the second-longest campus strike in January 1969. The Mexican American Student Confederation, Asian American Political Alliance, African American Student Union, and the Native Americans joined together, with Richard serving as one of four co-Chairmen. The Berkeley TWLF strike was more violent than the SFSW strike, and police presence at Berkeley increased dramatically. Many non-striking students and faculty were upset by the police presence and consequently joined the strike. When the faculty union joined the strike on March 2, 1969, the administration moved quickly and the university president established the first Department of Ethnic Studies in the country. By that time, Richard had completed enough classes to earn a Master’s degree and became one of the first ethnic studies instructors at Berkeley. Shortly afterward on March 20, SFSU created the first College of Ethnic Studies.

In 1971, Richard returned to Merritt College to teach. He remained at Merritt for 25 years as a counselor, instructor, and administrator. When budget cuts at Berkeley threatened to get rid of the ethnic studies program in 1999, Richard returned to the campus to show his support to students protesting in defense of the program. He died in 2009 at the age of 70.

“I do believe in mass action. There are other methods of gaining what one wants for the community, but ultimately it comes down to power. You don’t have power, you don’t have anything. And the only power that people have is people power.”
Learn More

- Dave Tatsuno's video from the internment camp in Topaz, UT
- Thorough description of the Topaz internment camp by Densho Encyclopedia
- The documentary Aoki was filmed over the last five years of Richard’s life (profanity)
- Wayne Au’s lesson for teaching about the Black Panther’s Ten-Point Program

Black Nationalism

Black nationalism dates back to the 19th century movement when African American abolitionists advocated free blacks to immigrate back to Africa in order to uplift the status and conditions of African Americans.

In the early 20th century Black nationalism was heavily influenced by Marcus Garvey, who founded the United Negro Improvement Association in 1914. He also promoted that Blacks emigrate to Africa and establish Black owned businesses that would lead to the economic uplift of Blacks and Black communities.

In the late 1950s Malcolm X emerged as a leader in the Black nationalist movement. He called for racial independence and was a critic of the mainstream civil rights movement and leaders. In 1963 he gave a speech called “Message to the Grass Roots” were he said that having land was the basis of freedom, justice, and equality. He argued that Blacks wanted land so that they could set up their own independent nation. He also signaled that a revolution was coming and it would be led by Black nationalists.

After the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 there was a rise in violence against civil rights workers and activists and many people were questioning whether nonviolent resistance was the best way to achieve equality. In 1966 Stokely Carmichael (a leader in the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee) began to signal a shift towards Black self determination and used the slogan “Black Power” to promote the idea of racial self respect and economic and political power for African Americans. Black power also advocated for African Americans to reclaim their identity and history.

By Amanda Vickery

Richard Aoki (left) participates in the Third World Liberation Front strike at the University of California at Berkeley in 1969. Photo courtesy of Nancy Park.
Yuri Kochiyama
May 19, 1921 - June 1, 2014

Yuri Kochiyama was born Mary Yuriko Nakahara in San Pedro, California in 1921 to Japanese immigrants. The local hospital did not allow Japanese to deliver their babies there, so Yuri and her siblings were all delivered by a family friend. She went by her American name, Mary, and had a comfortable, middle-class childhood as a result of her parents’ successful fish business. Her friends describe her as someone who would always reach out to those that were shy and who would stand up for others. She was also heavily involved in church activities and began teaching Sunday school right after graduating from high school. She attended Compton Junior College in June 1941, where she majored in journalism and English, but faced racial discrimination when she began looking for a job and discovered that most employers would not hire Japanese Americans for jobs outside of farming or domestic service.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, when she was 20 years old, Yuri came home from church. Less than ten minutes later, FBI agents arrived at her home and took her father away. Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor earlier that morning, and within twenty-four hours of the bombing, more than 700 Japanese Americans (mostly immigrant men like Yuri’s father) were arrested with no charges.

Yuri’s father had surgery shortly before the arrest and the family was very concerned about his health in jail. When she was finally able to visit her father five weeks later, he was very ill. The next week he was sent home and a day later, on January 21, 1942, her father died in their home. Two months later, Yuri’s family was forced to leave their home in San Pedro and relocate to a horse stable at the Santa Anita racetrack as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. While at Santa Anita, Yuri tried to stay positive and active. She began teaching a Sunday school class that became a service club called The Crusaders. From Santa Anita, the Crusaders wrote hundreds of letters to Japanese American soldiers fighting for the U.S. as well as to Japanese American orphans and tuberculosis patients.

In October 1942, they were moved to the internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas. The Crusaders letter-writing campaigns grew larger and even spread to other internment camps. While Yuri was very active in Santa Anita and Jerome, she became increasingly aware of the discrimination that she and other Japanese Americans were facing. For the first time, Yuri started to see herself as a Japanese American after interacting with only Japanese for so long and became proud to be Japanese. Yuri put her journalism skills to work in Jerome and wrote a column about Japanese American soldiers for the camp newspaper. She became very
involved in the United Service Organizations (USO) in Jerome, which hosted and entertained Japanese American soldiers on weekends. On November 20, 1943, Yuri was working for the Jerome USO when she met Private Bill Kochiyama. They fell in love and soon began a constant exchange of letters. Bill left to work overseas but they vowed to get married when he returned.

In 1945, the war ended and Yuri’s family decided to return to San Pedro. Once again, no one would hire her because she was Japanese. On January 23, 1946, Yuri moved to New York City to marry Bill, who had just returned to the U.S. and was discharged from the military. Bill went to school while Yuri worked as a waitress. The waitressing job put Yuri in contact with the Black community as almost all the workers and customers at the restaurant were Black. They told her about segregation in the South and Jim Crow laws.

While Bill was in school, he and Yuri had two children. They moved to a larger apartment in a Manhattan housing project that was predominantly Black, where they would live for the next 12 years. After Bill graduated from college in 1949, he found that his race was still a barrier to employment and struggled to support his family. Their friends in the housing project provided them with financial assistance and food until Bill found a job working for the Japan International Christian University Foundation (JICUF). Afterward, the Kochiyamas had four more children and Yuri stayed home to raise her children. The Kochiyama home had many visitors, from veterans to friends from the USO and San Pedro to newcomers who saw the invitation Saturday night open houses published in their annual Christmas newsletters. Their hospitality became so well known that, in addition to speakers and musicians, children visiting New York City for surgeries and other trips stayed with the family.

In the mid-1950s, the Kochiyamas assisted in organizing support services for the Hiroshima Maidens, 25 atomic bomb survivors who came to the U.S. for a year of reconstructive surgery. The Maidens were teenagers when the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and had severe radiation burns caused by the bomb. Their interactions with the Maidens would grow into decades of organizing against nuclear weapons with the slogan “No more Hiroshimas.”

In 1960, the Kochiyamas moved to a larger apartment in Harlem, a predominantly poor and Black area. Harlem was also the home of the Negro Renaissance (also known as the Harlem Renaissance), a culturally rebellious and intellectual period in U.S. history during which figures such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston used their literary and artistic works to raise race consciousness. Moving to Harlem allowed Yuri to meet people directly involved in the struggle for civil rights and she became involved in political activities, even giving her family’s annual Christmas newsletter a markedly political tone.
In the summer of 1963, Yuri worked with the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights organization that led campaigns including the Freedom Rides, the March on Washington and Freedom Summer. Yuri attended protests against racially discriminatory hiring practices, often bringing her children on a daily basis. During one protest, Yuri and her son Billy were among over 600 protestors arrested.

The Kochiyamas joined the Harlem Parents Committee (HPC) and Yuri participated in her first boycott in the fall of 1963. The HPC called for a boycott of every Harlem school with the goal of upgrading the quality of education in the Harlem community; despite the passage of Brown v. Board a decade earlier, Harlem schools were still segregated and had inferior facilities, textbooks, and learning opportunities. The boycott was successful and the HPC, along with other civil rights groups, continued several other campaigns in the schools and community. The HPC opened a Freedom School, which the Kochiyama family attended each Saturday. The school exposed Yuri to the work of Black activists and intellectuals like James Baldwin, Fannie Lou Hamer, and W.E.B. DuBois, which developed Yuri’s historical and political understanding of structural racism.

Saturday night gatherings at the Kochiyama home reflected the family’s politicization. Political activists and folk singers shifted the atmosphere from socialization to social concern. But what truly changed Yuri’s political vision was her relationship with Malcolm X. She met Malcolm in October of 1963 at the hearing for her arrest during the CORE protest. The next day, she heard him on the radio and composed the first of several letters to him responding to his comments and hoping for “togetherness of all people.” Months later, Yuri was contacted by three atomic bomb survivors who wanted to meet Malcolm X. During a Saturday night gathering with the survivors in June 1964, Malcolm visited the Kochiyama home; although he had never responded to Yuri’s letters, he apologized and began corresponding with the Kochiyamas during his travels thereafter. Malcolm’s political ideas about race and class evolved significantly at this time and he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU).

In November 1964, Malcolm invited Yuri to join the OAAU’s Liberation School to take classes. She was the only Asian American in attendance and learned more about the role of racism in American society. The beliefs of the OAAU contrasted significantly with the other civil rights groups with which Yuri had been involved. There was no focus on integration and Malcolm X and the OAAU viewed nonviolence as a tactic to be used depending on the circumstances and was firm about the need for self-defense. In his messages about self-defense, Malcolm shifted the responsibility for violence from the oppressed to the perpetrators, views which made sense to Yuri. Yuri was also attracted to the sense of self-pride that Malcolm elicited in the Black community and his emphasis on teaching people to learn their own history. While she did not agree with all of Malcolm’s ideas, she was not afraid to associate with him or learn more about his ideas.
On February 21, 1965, Yuri was present in the Audubon Ballroom when Malcolm was shot and killed. She was one of few attendees who ran onstage to help him rather than run for safety, and was captured in a *Life* magazine photograph cradling Malcolm’s head in his final moments. Although only sixteen months passed between their meeting and his death, Malcolm X greatly influenced Yuri’s politics and she dedicated herself to his vision. That year, Yuri started a second family newsletter named *North Star* as a tribute to Malcolm.

While Yuri did not join all of the revolutionary Black Power organizations that were active in the 1960s, she was well-known for her networking abilities. She was approached by various Black Power leaders to listen to their ideas and hosted many of these leaders in her apartment. She was seen as a valuable person to know because of her wide network of friends and acquaintances that respected her and her openness to communication and facilitating conversations. At the same time, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began investigating her because of her extensive social and political networks; they suspected that she might have Communist ties to China and questioned why an Asian American would be involved in the struggle for Black self-determination and self-defense.

In 1968, the Republic of New Africa (RNA) was founded by several Black nationalists, including many of Malcolm X’s followers. Yuri was eager to participate and join the Friends of the RNA. The next year, the RNA extended citizenship to non-Blacks and Yuri was among the few invited to join. She became a citizen of the RNA on September 13, 1969. This date is significant because when Mary Kochiyama joined the RNA at the age of 48, she began using her Japanese middle name, Yuri. She regularly attended weekly RNA classes and learned about the struggle for a separate Black state and demands for reparations to the descendants of enslaved Africans. She deeply supported reparations and later pushed reparations for Japanese American internment as well.

In the 1970s, many activists were jailed for their activities. Yuri became the first person many political prisoners contacted when they were arrested or released from prison due to her extensive networks and fantastic memory and organization of information. As the Asian American movement began to grow in the late 1960s and 1970s, Yuri served as a mentor to many activists and published a memoir of her life in 2004. Until her death on June 1, 2014, she remained active in fighting for political prisoners, nuclear disarmament, and Japanese American reparations. She has been the subject of several documentaries, plays, and a rap song.

“Life is not what you alone make it. Life is the input of everyone who has touched your life and every experience that entered it. We are all part of one another.”
Learn More

- Yuri’s granddaughter Maya assembled a photo album that includes rare family photos.
- Yuri’s 2008 interview with Democracy Now! where she talks about internment and Malcolm X
- Life magazine reflection about Yuri upon her death; includes images of Yuri by Malcolm X when he was shot (graphic)
- Biography about Yuri from NPR News
- Biography about Yuri at Densho Encyclopedia

Grace Lee Boggs

June 27, 1915 -

Grace Lee Boggs was born Yuk Ping above her father’s restaurant in Providence, Rhode Island in 1915. Her parents were Chinese immigrants and had the family name Chin, but they also used the name Chin Lee. Her father gave her the American name Grace in honor of an American churchwoman who gave him English lessons when he arrived in the U.S. At school, she went by Grace; at home, everyone called her Ping.

Grace’s father was a businessman and restauranteur who opened a chain of Chinese restaurants in the northeast called Chin Lee’s. The restaurant’s largest location was in Times Square in New York City and became very famous. Grace attended Barnard College then continued her education at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, where she earned a Master’s and doctorate in philosophy. After graduating, she moved to Chicago in 1940 and began working with a tenants organization. It was her first time interacting with the black community and working with real people outside of the academic world, and it inspired her to dedicate the rest of her life to becoming a movement activist in the black community.

Grace joined the Worker’s Party in Chicago where she met a man named C.L.R. James. She worked closely with him and Raya Dunayevskaya to focus on marginalized groups such as women, people of color, and youth. She wrote extensively with C.L.R. and Raya and through them met Jimmy Boggs, an auto worker and activist from Detroit, Michigan. They married in 1953 and she moved to Detroit, where she began to focus more on community activism.

Creativity is the key to human liberation

Grace Lee Boggs

In Detroit, Grace helped found a radical left group and newsletter called Facing Reality. She became a part of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s and supported a movement to put more African Americans in political positions. In the summer of 1967, there was a rebellion in
Detroit. Although Grace and Jimmy were not in town at the time, they and four others were held responsible for the rebellion, which resulted in a great deal of violence, destruction and theft. Each summer afterward, Grace and Jimmy spent time in Maine with friends discussing what true revolution looks like and how that was different from rebellion; these conversations were recorded and later published as a book. To Grace, conversations were essential to understanding the world, reflecting the beliefs of Hegel, one of her favorite philosophers.

After the summer of 1967, Detroit experienced what is known as “White flight”, where many White people moved out of the city and Black people were able to move into new areas of the city. Jimmy and Grace continued to have regular meetings at their home as well as study groups about revolution and evolution. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Boggs focused on community organizing and worked toward fighting crime, organizing unemployed workers, supporting elder care, and fighting utility shut-offs.

Grace published many articles and books, by herself as well as with Jimmy. In 1992, she and Jimmy founded Detroit Summer, a community movement that brought together people of all ages, races, and cultures to rebuild Detroit. The following year, Jimmy died at age 74. In 1998, Grace published her autobiography and continued to organize and support communities in Detroit. In 2013, a charter school in Detroit was opened in Jimmy and Grace’s name. The Boggs School was created to “nurture creative, critical thinkers who contribute to the well-being of their communities.”

"We have not emphasized sufficiently the cultural revolution that we have to make among ourselves in order to force the government to do differently. Things do not start with governments."

Learn More

- Grace’s website, The Next American Revolution
- James & Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership
- Trailer and Discussion Guide for PBS’ documentary American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs
FURTHER RESEARCH

YOU MAY WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT...

- **Mike Tagawa**, one of three Japanese Americans who joined the Black Panther Party.
- The union of Filipino and Mexican farm workers during the Delano grape strike and ultimately forming the United Farm Workers
- **Hyphen-Americans** from NPR’s LatinoUSA: Examining the spaces where Asian Americans and Latino issues meet, including the Reynolds Boycott

REFERENCES

**Richard Aoki**

*Samurai Among Panthers* by Diane Fujino (2012)
*Aoki* directed by Ben Wang and Mike Cheng (2009)

**Yuri Kochiyama**

*Heartbeat of Struggle* by Diane Fujino (2005)

**Grace Lee Boggs**

*Living for Change* by Grace Lee Boggs (1998)
*American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* directed by Grace Lee (2013)