

“Born Under the Shadow of the A-bomb”: Atomic Bomb Memory and the Japanese/Asian American Radical Imagination, 1968–1982

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Introduction

This article explores the significance of the atomic bomb in the political imaginaries of Asian American activists who participated in the Asian American movement (AAM) in the 1960s and 1970s. Through an examination of articles printed in a variety of publications such as the *Gidra*, public speeches, and conference summaries, it looks at how the critical memory of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki acted as a unifying device of pan-Asian radical expression. In the global anti-colonial moment, Asian American activists identified themselves with the metaphorical monsters that had borne the violence of U.S. nuclear arms. In doing so, they expressed their commitment to a radical vision of social justice in solidarity with, and as a part of, the groundswell of domestic and international social movements at that time. This was in stark contrast to the image of the Asian American “model minority.”

Against the view that antinuclear activism faded into apathy in the 1970s because other social issues such as the Vietnam War and black civil rights were given priority, this article echoes the work of scholars who have emphasized how nuclear issues were an important component of these rising movements. For example, Vincent Intondi suggests that the work of black activists who connected nuclear issues with the fight for racial equality “allowed the fight to abolish nuclear weapons to reemerge in the 1970s” after it was abandoned by other groups during the McCarthy era.¹⁾ A look at Asian American activism suggests something similar. Throughout the late 1960s and into the early 1980s groups such as the Asian American Ad-Hoc Committee on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Asian Americans for Nuclear Disarmament, Asian Americans for Nuclear Awareness and others were formed. In addition to showing great interest in the memory of the atomic bombings, these groups raised new critical questions about their memory and legacy, and they formed inter-ethnic alliances with other marginalized groups to call for accountability on issues of racism in the white-dominated anti-nuclear movement. I argue that critical atomic bomb memory during this time pushed activists toward new visions of social change, solidarity, and liberation defined on their own terms.

Asian American Radical Imagination

Arjun Appadurai contends that the imagination is a “staging ground for action” and a constitutive feature of subjectivity.²⁾ The Asian American radical imagination came into focus in a global anti-colonial moment and as a part of the overarching social unrest taking place within the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Amidst violent clashes between government authorities and their critics, civil rights and radical politics transformed the social culture of America. It was in this context that many who would come to constitute the Asian American movement questioned what it was to be “Asian” in America. Triangulated with prominent struggles for black power, the American Indian movement, chicanism(x), women’s liberation and other movements happening within the U.S.; and anti-colonial movements in Asia, the Asian American movement reimagined a coalitional self-determination under a unified pan-Asian identity. It did not dissolve divisions of class, immigration status, gender and ethnicity, but it sought to aggregate a radical Asian American consciousness in spite of it. For AAM activists, identification as *Third World* people, as opposed to the model minority, became a point of solidarity to raise critical questions about western domination and the tyranny of white supremacy in domestic and transnational contexts.³⁾

Asian American intellectual and social activists pushed against a tide of discrimination and Eurocentrism by emphasizing pan-Asian cross-ethnic solidarity in the broader fight for a radical transformation of the country and its social cultural, political, economic and juridical institutions shaped by a new vision of society. And, as I will discuss, in the Asian American movement (especially the early stages when Japanese Americans comprised a major element of the population), Hiroshima-Nagasaki memory functioned as an important apparatus of pan-ethnic and transnational solidarity that both constructed and gave legitimacy to an “Asian American” place in the global anti-colonial moment and the U.S. domestic social movements. Indeed, the memory of the atomic bomb acted as a vehicle for activists to transgress boundaries of racial categorization and national citizenship as they sought to confront colonial legacies and neocolonialism domestically and abroad. Activists directly linked the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the more protracted events of cultural and biological genocide, such as slavery, settler-colonialism (though this word was not yet part of the official lexicon), and the U.S. war in Southeast Asia.

Chicago, 1970

“Why is it so easy to drop a bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Why is it so easy for things like My Lai to happen in the present war? Why is it so easy to say that Japanese Americans or Asian Americans don’t have any problems?” asked Warren Furutani in 1970, during the Japanese American

Citizens League (JACL) convention held in Chicago.⁴⁾ The 1970 JACL Chicago convention is historically considered to be the origin of the Japanese American redress movement, and by extension the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 which granted reparations to Japanese Americans unjustly interned during World War II.⁵⁾ Less known is how the Chicago convention was also a momentous event for Japanese Americans in the Asian American movement.

In Chicago, AAM activists passionately insisted on the inclusion of their voices.⁶⁾ On July 15, 1970, the first day of the convention, thirty AAM activists assembled to challenge the organizations moderate-liberal stance. Introduced by Warren Furutani — the dynamic field director recruited by JACL in an effort to bridge the gap between an aging JACL membership and the emerging generation of Japanese American youth — for two hours the group presented an overview of issues catalyzing the Asian American movement. As will be discussed, central to their program was the image/memory of Hiroshima-Nagasaki as a signifier of Cold War anti-Asian U.S. imperialism abroad which they directly connected to a continuum of domestic racisms and their emerging visions for liberation.

Following a film screening of the same name in the multimedia program presented by the AAM activist in Chicago, Joanne (Nobuko) Miyamoto's poem, "Hiroshima-Nagasaki," articulated the underlying grievances confronting the Asian American movement in that historic moment:

. . . On anniversaries. Americans remember BAN THE BOMB PRAY FOR PEACE. remember Pearl Harbor. Ban the bomb. Pray for peace (who do you pray for). The Japanese American remember little. Trying to forget concentration camp days. Working hard. August 5-9, 1970 HIROSHIMA-NAGASAKI WEEK . . . HIROSHIMA IS HAPPENING EVERY DAY . . . This time the radius is more than three miles . . . For a long time now the smell of burning flesh. VIETNAM. The unexplainable hell . . . And why are jails filled mostly with black and brown people. and why is it that not one white man has been executed for the killing of a black man? HIROSHIMA. EVERYDAY, HIROSHIMA. And you send your children to school. and tell them they can make it . . . You send them to schools to make more HIROSHIMA's. Genocide — HIROSHIMA . . . and we will not be nice when we know that the system can only survive by making more HIROSHIMAS . . . HIROSHIMA is happening every day, everyday HIROSHIMA . . .⁷⁾

For Miyamoto, and many other Asian American artists and activists, the memory of the atomic bomb did not signify the triumph of American democracy at the end of the Second World War. Instead, *Hiroshima*, as a rhetorical refrain in Miyamoto's poem insisted on the connections between Japanese American concentration camps, the atomic bomb, the war in Vietnam, anti-Black racism, and other

contemporary struggles for social justice. Condemning historical injustices, the closing of the poem reads like a manifesto with a pledge of disloyalty to the systems of violence (whether racist, colonial, or capitalist) underpinning the post-colonial moment that AAM activists saw themselves to be a part of: “Well if this is our lesson, we are not going to learn . . . We will not be nice when we know that with the technology we have today it is not necessary to have poverty. Poverty is necessary for profit. Poverty is necessary for capitalism. We will not be nice when we know that this system can only survive by making more Hiroshimas.”⁸⁾

In Chicago, radical Japanese Americans (and perhaps some other Asian Americans too) declared that if loyalty — the rhetorical foundation for Japanese American civil rights — was complicit with injustice, they preferred to see themselves as *accomplices* with those who were criminalized for being Vietnamese, black, and poor, just as many of their parents had been criminalized and mass-incarcerated in the 1940s for the sole crime of having Japanese ancestry. Hiroshima-Nagasaki memory was a crucial element of the critical position advanced by the AAM activists throughout the five-day convention. Indeed, in the global anti-colonial moment, critical atomic bomb memory constituted a key discursive technique for AAM activists to reimagine themselves as not only part of the Third World, but as part of the Third World liberation movement.

By the 1970s the status of Asian Americans in the United States had risen to that of “model minority” and, as historian Ellen Wu notes in *The Color of Success*, Asian Americans themselves were considered an “American success story.”⁹⁾ If thirty years earlier, Asian Americans were relegated to the margins, Japanese Americans forced from their homes and into American concentration camps given the violent politics of U.S. war hysteria and racism, the postwar era seemed to embrace Japanese/Asian Americans as respectable, loyal citizens. That is, as long as they could be subsumed in the status quo. But, as Miyamoto’s poem, and the actions of AAM demonstrate, not all wanted to simply be absorbed into the postwar neoliberal society. In Chicago AAM activists challenged JACL complicity to U.S. aggression, and they called on the conservative organization to pass resolutions to demand the release of political prisoners, the withdrawal of all U.S. troops in Southeast Asia, the exemption of so-called “gooks,” “slopes,” “dinks,” “chinks,” and “japs” born in the United States from military service; and the immediate termination of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.

Backing up the neophyte revolutionaries in Chicago was the seasoned activist (and political icon) Yuri Kochiyama. By this time, Kochiyama’s annual Hiroshima Day speeches had already begun to set a precedence for Asian American activists to draw correlations between the atomic bombings and other atrocities. Consistent with her annual speeches, in Chicago Kochiyama described Hiroshima as a symbol of U.S. violence for domination. As she would continue to reiterate throughout her long activist career, Kochiyama articulated her view that Hiroshima was not an isolated event but one consistent with a pattern of U.S. violence against Asian bodies. She asserted that: “as Asians

we must understand what is happening in Asia."¹⁰⁾ In 1970, Kochiyama described the Vietnam War as simply the latest manifestation of the U.S. protracted war in Asia. Against the reluctance of the JACL to take a stand on U.S. violence in Asia since 1945, she resolutely challenged members of the audience to think of the apparatus of U.S. imperialism and to consider the banality of its everyday presence:

The weapons of domination are not just planes and ships, tanks and mortars, missiles and bombs, but also the arsenal includes U.S. foreign aid with a hitch, development banks, corporate investments, American educational institutions, research projects, pacification projects, and brainwashed minds, insensitive to human needs, to human wants.¹¹⁾

The following day, the *JACL Liberation Newsletter* which was published daily by a radical contingent at the convention recounted the event as having a "dramatic impact." Narrating the convictions of the AAM activists, it declared: "Born under the shadow of the A-bomb, these Sansei youth spoke of their disenfranchisement with the establishment and their commitment to work for change unencumbered by the need to be nice, quiet Japanese Americans."¹²⁾

Challenging JACL conservatism, Japanese Americans for Confrontation and Liberation, a clever twist on the JACL acronym, circulated an opinion piece insisting on the necessity of the JACL to denounce U.S. violence in Asia. Here again, the memory of the atomic bomb is recalled to provoke the JACL leadership to condemn U.S. wars in Asia:

On a light-weight level, mass media is starting to revitalize the Japanese stereotype of the 40's (sinister, unscrupulous, inhumane) and apply it to the stereotype of the Chinese and Viet Cong today (Communist, war mongers, vile, unhuman). This type of brainwashing will dull the senses of the American public so when an atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or when a massacre like My Lai happens then the public will respond by saying, 'To Asians life is cheap' or 'My Lai, Hiroshima, it's no real loss.'¹³⁾

In this way, throughout the Chicago convention, the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was used as a technique to evoke alarm over the perceived apathy of the JACL to the violence enacted against Asian bodies in U.S. wars. At the same time, it also opened up the possibility for Japanese Americans to debate the legitimacy of the U.S. atomic attacks on Japan and for some to begin addressing a grief that remained dormant under the suppressed memories of the atomic bombings.

Yuri Kochiyama and Nobuko Miyamoto: Atomic Bomb Memory and the Radicalization of Two Asian American Women

When Nobuko (Joanne) Miyamoto delivered her poem to the audience at the JACL convention in 1970, the sum of her experiences as a young Japanese American woman in America came into new focus as she reflected upon the violence she saw erupting on the streets all around her. Born just before the start of the Second World War, Miyamoto was two years old when her family was taken from their home in 1942 and sent to a concentration camp. Her father was Japanese American, or *Nikkei*, of mixed heritage and her mother was a Nagasaki *Kibei* (a term that refers to Japanese Americans who lived part of their lives in Japan, literally translated “returned to America”), who had at least one close relative die in Nagasaki due to the bomb. In the 1960s, after leaving a career in Broadway — where the exploitation of the exotic Asian female image in the 1950s kept her employed in shows such as *Flower Drum Song*, *King and I*, *Kismet*, and *The World of Suzie Wong* —¹⁴⁾ Miyamoto became involved in a documentary project about the Black Panthers. Her experiences during this project greatly influenced her activism and her self-awareness. “[It] made me aware of my own oppression as a person of color in the U.S.,” she recalled.¹⁵⁾ It was during this time that Miyamoto met Yuri Kochiyama, whom she credits to having brought her in to the Asian American movement.¹⁶⁾ Describing her motivation for writing “Hiroshima-Nagasaki,” Miyamoto explained:

The Vietnam War was the third war in my lifetime that the U.S. had with an Asian country. They looked like they could be our relatives. It was easy to relate back to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to see that America had little regard for the lives of Asian people. The incarceration of Japanese Americans was another proof of it.¹⁷⁾

I think what is so remarkable about critique’s like the one so fiercely articulated in Miyamoto’s poem is the way it is able to break down barriers between past and present, American and Asian in ways which were both personal and political. Indeed, how all of these elements are working together as though it wouldn’t be possible to remember or critique one without the other. Her own historical experiences — internment and her mother’s stories of bombed Nagasaki relatives — made it possible for her to connect to the protracted realities of U.S. racism and violence against Asian bodies in the war in Vietnam. The inverse was also true: thinking about the U.S. violence in Southeast Asia in the 1970s made it possible for her to better understand her own history.

As part of Asian Americans for Action, Miyamoto would continue to organize events that connected the commemoration of Hiroshima-Nagasaki to other social justice issues. Significantly, the memory of the atomic bomb continues to show up as a theme in Miyamoto’s contemporary artistic

work.¹⁸⁾

Miyamoto's mentor and fellow activist, Yuri Kochiyama, mentioned several times above, was a pioneer of Asian American activism and an influential figure in the history of American activism. Miyamoto was not the only Asian American to get involved in the movement through Kochiyama, and though Kochiyama passed away in 2004, without doubt her legacy continues to inspire new generations of activists. Kochiyama is perhaps most notorious for her close work with Malcolm X and her role in Asian Americans for Action. Certainly her exposure to black intellectual thought and activism in 1960s Harlem influenced her radicalism, but as Diane Fujino has shown in her biography on Kochiyama, in many ways Kochiyama's political consciousness was galvanized through her experiences supporting the Hiroshima Maidens — a group of twenty-five young, Japanese *hibakusha* brought to the United States in 1955 to undergo reconstructive surgery for injuries and mutilations incurred as a result of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima.¹⁹⁾

Caroline Chung Simpson describes Kochiyama's participation in the Hiroshima Maidens project as "social activities" that preceded her radical politics.²⁰⁾ In 1956 Yuri Kochiyama spent a year visiting the young women at New York's Mt. Sinai Hospital. One of only a select few who were granted visits during the early stages of their stay and surgeries in the U.S., Kochiyama (along with Helen Yokoyama) provided vital support for the young women and was instrumental in coordinating aspects of the project. According to Fujino, encounters with the Hiroshima Maidens had a big impact on Kochiyama which would influence her future activism, including anti-nuclear activities.²¹⁾

A latecomer to political activism, in the 1960s Kochiyama's politics incrementally connected the struggles confronting her Harlem community to her historic experiences of internment, her interactions with the Hiroshima Maidens, nuclear proliferation, and the war in Vietnam. Not only did this lead her to develop a critical Asian American political consciousness that was interdependent on the struggles of other people of color, but it was also the beginning of her decades-long anti-nuclear struggle.

For both Kochiyama and Miyamoto, questions about the legacy of the atomic bomb in the global anti-colonial moment put them on a path of radical activism. Together with other Asian American activists they built up a critical Asian American discourse about the atomic bomb. They argued that the same racism that enabled real estate profiteering off of Japanese American internment was part and parcel of the nuclear attack on Japan and the successive U.S. atrocities and egregious acts of violence in Asia against Koreans and Indochinese. This critique of the atomic bomb pushed forward a radical platform for liberation which envisioned a complete reconceptualization of American society and a reorganization of politics and foreign relations, beginning in their own communities.

Post-nuclear Monster's

Ishiro Honda's 1954 Japanese cult classic film *Gojira*, or *Godzilla*, has been widely analyzed for its allegorical critique of the U.S. nuclear threat metaphorically brought to life in its monster character that was a product of the post Hiroshima-Nagasaki, post Lucky Dragon late capitalist era. The 1950s monsterization of atomic exposure through *Godzilla* and other monster films didn't necessarily make it any easier for the over one-thousand Japanese American atomic bomb survivors to disclose their experiences.²²⁾ However, it is interesting to note that while the film was significantly revised for American audiences in 1956 (*Godzilla, King of Monsters!*), the original version was popular in theatres catering to Japanese American audiences in the latter half of the 1950s and into the 1960s.²³⁾ In the first half of the 1970s, the imagery of the post-nuclear monster was a conspicuous aspect of AAM representation. Identification with these monsters impervious to U.S. nuclear technologies, Hiroshima, and other post-nuclear icons, was a significant part of the Asian American political practice of imagination. Through this practice, AAM activists created a new vision of Asian American identity that opened up a space for social change.

While the Asian American movement band, Hiroshima, played at AAM events throughout the United States, several movement publications were named after post-nuclear monsters. The mission statement of *Rodan*, a Bay Area AAM newspaper established in 1970, clearly describes the symbolic value of the nuclear monster in the Asian American radical imagination:

An American-Bomb (A-bomb) created a monster which withstood all mankind's technology, and such is the concept of RODAN. RODAN is an expression in the feeling of unity amongst the Asian-American people — an attempt to offset a technology which is insensitive to humanity. The much used myth of 'Yellow Peril' can be considered real, as RODAN soars over America.²⁴⁾

Recalling the prejudicial attitudes loosely veiled just under the surface of the "model minority" promise, *Rodan*'s creators welcomed the possibility of being a threat to the U.S. world order. As a push back against loyalty politics, rather than mollify the "Yellow Peril" stigma they embraced it, identifying themselves with the metaphorical monsters that had borne the violence of U.S. nuclear arms. In doing so, they expressed their commitment to a radical vision of social justice that would not, as Miyamoto said in her poem, "be nice."

Preceding *Rodan* was the Los Angeles based *Gidra*, named for the three-headed monster who is the archenemy of *Godzilla*. Decisively anti-imperialist and international, between 1969 and 1974 *Gidra* served as the primary organ for Asian American activists on the West Coast. *Gidra* documented

and stimulated the radical Asian American imagination. As *Gidra* evolved, its pages became a venue of cultural (*re*)construction through art and poetry, recipes, and creative ideas such as DIY haircuts. And the newspaper became a site of cultural deconstruction, with contributors insisting on the importance of grappling with the internal oppressor, issues of sexism in the community for example was a regular topic of contention. Significantly, throughout its circulation span *Gidra* ran features that probed and politicized atomic bomb memory. At the same time that this content was used to strengthen activist critiques on U.S. foreign policy as well as link to problems of U.S. domestic colonialisms, strikingly it accomplished something that the previous twenty-five years of Japanese American journalism had all-but failed to do: raise questions about the atomic bomb and its legacy, and attempt to answer them.

The August 1970 edition of *Gidra* commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the two atomic bombings with a full-page picture of the mushroom cloud above Hiroshima. Through a variety of literary mediums, this issue raised questions about the atomic bomb and its meaning in Asian America. Among its pages Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto's poem "Hiroshima-Nagasaki" was reprinted in full. Several pieces also reflected on a San Francisco Hiroshima-Nagasaki commemorative weekend event (August 6–9, 1970) organized by the Asian American Ad Hoc Committee on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Like the growing discourse in the Asian American movement, the Hiroshima-Nagasaki commemorative weekend was significant because it relocated the public commemoration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into the Japanese/Asian American sphere. The flyer for the event called on Asian Americans to re-examine the atomic bombings: "After a quarter of a century, we feel that Asian Americans in America should examine and understand the terrible significance of these events."²⁵⁾ The success in cultivating critical Asian American perspectives was evident as interest in the event and attendance exceeded the organizers projections. What was originally planned to be a local event grew into a gathering of several hundred, many of whom came from out of town.

The weekend events were constituted by commemorative ceremonies held on August 6 and 9, and community discussions by prominent Japanese American scholars and activists on the 7th and 8th that explored the decision to drop the Bomb as well as Asian American perspectives on the atomic bomb and its legacy. Yuji Ichioka, historian and co-founder of UCLA's Center for Asian American Studies, and radical labor organizer Karl Yoneda were among the speakers. During his address on August 7, Ichioka called on his audience to raise critical questions about the atomic bomb and other U.S. actions during World War II in order develop more critical/ Asian American understandings of U.S. foreign policy in Asia:

Just as we should insist upon raising questions about our camp experience, I think that we

should also raise questions about the bombings, for the answers to both, in my opinion, will tell us something instructive about our country today.²⁶⁾

Ichioka also questioned why he could not recall ever raising questions about the atomic bombs — events contemporaneous to Japanese American internment. Perhaps he was insinuating about what is necessarily forgotten in a U.S.-centered immigrant paradigm, relevant limitations of which have been discussed by Michael Jin.²⁷⁾ The next day, Karl Yoneda shared his very personal recollections about the Bomb, memories which he could not forget:

When the first atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima, that tragic day twenty-five years ago, I was stationed as an enlisted man, in Kunming, China with the CBI Psychological Warfare Team of the U.S. Army. Upon hearing the news, thoughts about the U.S. having succeeded in producing such a powerful weapon did not enter my mind, nor what it would mean to mankind in the future. Instead, my concern was for the well-being of my mother, other relatives and friends.²⁸⁾

Karl Yoneda had spent many formative years in Japan's expanding empire. Motivated by passionate antifascism, after returning to the U.S. he became one of the most fervent advocates of Japanese American military enlistment. Yoneda believed that Nikkei should take up arms against Japanese fascism, yet when news of the bombing of Hiroshima reached him, he was devastated.²⁹⁾

That weekend, Reverend Roy Sano, professor at Mills College, told the audience that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki "helped us define who we are." Finally, reporting on the event in the August edition of the *Gidra*, reporter and critic Bruce Iwasaki, wrote that he experienced the commemorative weekend in a very personal way: "A historical perspective on the bomb provides insights into [my] Asian identity."³⁰⁾

While reflecting diverse intellectual and personal interpretive processes for understanding the meaning of the bomb among the Japanese American participants, comments made during the commemorative event were not simply concerned with identity. Much like the discourse that emerged in the content of the program presented by Asian American activists in Chicago or in the *Gidra*, comments made during the commemorative event demonstrate how the Vietnam War, rather than overshadowing nuclear issues, was a *wow moment* for Japanese Americans. It provided a context for Japanese Americans to address the memory and legacy of what happened in 1945. Just as the Asian American activists did in Chicago, that weekend Ichioka and Yoneda would both conclude that racialization and the corresponding devaluation of anything Japanese during World War II had not only underpinned internment and the atomic bombings of two Japanese cities, but that the same anti-Asian racism underpinned the U.S. war in Vietnam.

There is little doubt that the temporal proximity to the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was most tangible for Japanese American activists, however for Asian Americans across a spectrum of Asian identities, Hiroshima-Nagasaki became a powerful discursive tool to interpret and critique what they saw as a protracted and racist violence against Asians in American foreign policy. As Go Oyagi has pointed out in his study on Asian American internationalism, the critical memory of the atomic bombings (among other instances of transnational critique and solidarity) by movement activists helps us to see how they understood and critiqued U.S. foreign policy in Asia.³¹⁾ Writing in the *Gidra*, Charles W. Cheng, traced a line from U.S. policy of egregious violence against Asian countries and bodies in the 1970s straight back to Nagasaki:

... in Southeast Asia, the wiping out of entire villages, the defoliation of the countryside that once fed the people, a countryside that once could be enjoyed by the eye — an eye that no longer sees because of napalm — discloses America's Nagasaki military mind.³²⁾

Cheng's critique of the expendability of Asian lives for American domination, what he called "America's Nagasaki military mind," challenged historical interpretations of the Bomb and American diplomacy while lamenting the endurance of anti-Asian racism.

Connecting Hiroshima-Nagasaki directly to other atrocities affecting Asian and other non-white bodies, Asian American activists reinterpreted the historical meaning of the Bomb to inform their ideas about anti-Asian racism in the 1970s. In this way, the memory of Hiroshima-Nagasaki became a unifying device of pan-Asian radical expression which both constructed and gave legitimacy to their place in the global anti-colonial moment and the U.S. domestic social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Within Asian American movement culture the call of *No More Hiroshima's* became an imaginative social practice of resistance. Consciously and unconsciously remembering Hiroshima-Nagasaki became a source of Asian American radicalization which connected historical experiences of racism against Asian bodies to the realities of white American imperialism waging war on Vietnam, or against black communities.

On a practical and concrete level, discourse about the atomic bomb also shaped the individual actions and professional choices of the Asian American movement generation. Michio Kaku, the by now famed nuclear physicist, recalled that as a graduate student he had questioned why two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, "wasn't one enough?" he wondered.³³⁾ In August of 1973, Kaku and twenty other science and engineering students took a public oath not to participate in war research or weapons production. Bemoaning the science that would vaporize Nagasaki in order to test two different types of Bombs.

Speaking on the occasion, Kaku used the imagery of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to condemn U.S.

war technology and the use of science to enact violence in Indochina: “Every week, the tonnage of bombs dropped in Vietnam and Cambodia equals a Hiroshima bomb. Every week, the force of 20,000 equivalent tons of TNT rains havoc and death on the lives of peasant villagers. Every week — for the past seven years.”³⁴⁾

Women in AAM even pursued critical atomic bomb memory as a site to confront violence and oppression against women. Speaking at a Hiroshima Day demonstration in Boston in 1971, Hanna Takashige connected the memory of the atomic bomb to U.S. violence in Asia and widespread violence enacted on women’s bodies domestically:

I see my sisters dying from back-alley abortionists because abortion, a simple medical procedure, is illegal . . . I would like to see the billions of dollars spent on murdering Asian people used to make abortions and other basic services available. 7,000 women die in this country every year compared to the 1500 American GI’s who died in Vietnam in the past year . . . Today, we remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki and we demand that the United States get out of Indo-China now!³⁵⁾

By condemning violence against women—including the forced sterilization of native women and other restrictions on women’s reproductive freedom—alongside the U.S. war in Asia on the anniversary of Hiroshima, Takashige insisted on an intersectional understanding of oppression. In feminist fashion, she asserted that women’s issues were Asian American issues. And conversely, that women’s domestic experiences of oppression were connected to global issues of racism and war.

It is also worth noting that Asian American activist drew connections between and condemned the intersecting legacies of racism and colonialism beyond the American frame. Alongside the rhetorical use of Hiroshima-Nagasaki as stand-ins for U.S. imperial aggression against Asian bodies was also a criticism (albeit less clamorous) of the role of Hiroshima peace rhetoric in masking the historical imperial aggression by Japan and the U.S. during the Asia Pacific war. For example, included in Kochiyama’s list of historical acts of violence for which Hiroshima could speak, such as “the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans where untold millions died in the middle passage . . . the genocide of six million Jews during WWII . . .,” was a critical line about the Nanking massacre that called into question the tendency of Hiroshima peace discourse to sanitize Japan’s post war narrative. In her reminder that “the Nanking massacre took the lives of more people than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined,”³⁶⁾ Kochiyama also set a precedence for an Asian American transpacific critique of the atomic bomb to consider the ways knowledge about the bomb produced in both Japan and the U.S. have functioned as a mechanism of silencing surrounding egregious and unredressed violence perpetrated by both countries during the Asia-Pacific War.³⁷⁾

What these examples show is how Asian American activism worked towards decolonizing the memory of the atomic bomb in domestic and transpacific contexts, while simultaneously using the memory of the atomic bomb towards decolonizing the worlds around them. AAM activists raised critical questions about the historical memory of Hiroshima-Nagasaki in ways that challenged conservative constructions of what it could mean to be Asian American, or Japanese American, or how the atomic bomb should be remembered. According to most scholarship on the Asian American movement, by the end of the 1970s the movement was in its closing stages. But as Daryl Maeda has pointed out, this cannot be equated to an end of Asian American activism.³⁸⁾

Japanese/Asian Americans and Disarmament in 1982

On June 12, 1982 over a million people converged in New York City to protest against nuclear weapons during the United Nations Second Session on Disarmament (SSDII). It was the largest anti-nuclear demonstration in history and the largest protest to ever be staged in New York City. While attesting to the classically problematic demographics of power in American liberal organizing structures, where white middle class and CIS male individuals occupy disproportionate positions of power, internal dialogues and meeting notes by the June 12 organizing committee also highlight the important and intersectional antinuclear work of people of color, among them Asian Americans.

As participants and part of the organizing committee of the June 12 rally, the Asian American Caucus for Disarmament (AACD) — whose members were comprised of Asian American activists, scholars and community leaders such as Yuri Kochiyama and Michio Kaku — formed interethnic alliances with other groups of color whose communities have historically been disproportionately impacted by the economic and environmental costs of the arms buildup. Together, they constituted a Third World resistance that challenged the white hegemonic power structure within the disarmament movement and asserted their position as stakeholders in the anti-nuclear movement. As part of a body of Third World committee members, the AACD worked to ensure accountability on issues of racism. This included the affirmation of a principle of 1/3rd Third World [Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American] participation in the June 12 Rally Committee. This principle applied to staff, committees, program resources. They also insisted on the inclusion of anti-racist intervention strategies in the June 12 event program and literature.

Asian American critiques of the nuclear arms buildup (that escalated to epic proportions during the Reagan administration) simultaneously echoed those resounding throughout the U.S. and the world, and were distinctively Asian American. Domestically, activists linked military spending for nuclear arms buildup to the increased failing in social welfare as a result of cuts to education, housing and other programs. "In the next five years, \$1.6 trillion will be wasted on war preparations. The

recent “budget cuts” are not cuts at all, but a mere reallocation of funds from human services to military spending,” wrote Mike Murase in the 1982 Fall/Winter issue of *Bridge Magazine*.³⁹⁾ As a longtime anti-nuclear activist and member of Asian Americans for Nuclear Disarmament, Murase, brought attention to how U.S. priority on military spending uniquely undermined the welfare of Japanese and Asian Americans. In particular, he called attention to the unaddressed issues of redress for Japanese American incarceration and medical assistance for Japanese American atomic bomb survivors.⁴⁰⁾ He writes:

In a time when Asian, other Third World and working people are struggling every day to survive — with high unemployment, outrageous food prices, deteriorating housing and inferior education — the government is sacrificing the most basic human needs of the people. It would be just a drop in the bucket for congress to appropriate medical assistance payments to the 500-700 American Hibakusha who haven't received a penny from the government in thirty-seven years. It would only mean fifteen fewer b-1 bombers to meet the demands of the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations for compensation for the suffering of 120,000 Japanese Americans who were thrown into concentration camps during World War II. I get enraged just thinking about what \$1.6 trillion can do to improve the overall quality of life for the people.⁴¹⁾

Mike Murase had been one of the founding members of the *Gidra* over a decade and a half earlier. His articles in the *Gidra* often conveyed an anti-nuclear message and in 1971 he participated in the World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs as one of six U.S. peace delegates. Murase's relationship to a critical atomic bomb memory, though, was established much earlier in life. Murase was born ninety miles east of Hiroshima and his connection to the stories that he heard growing up in post war Japan about the suffering caused by the atomic bomb carried into his activism in the Asian American movement and beyond through a process of minor-transnationalism.

Conclusion

Asian American movement activists raised critical questions about the historical memory of Hiroshima-Nagasaki in ways that challenged conservative constructions of what it could mean to be Asian American, or Japanese American, or how the atomic bomb should be remembered. Transcending ethnic and national boundaries, the wayward activism of Asian American movement activists unsettled several decades of Japanese American amnesia about the bomb. Simultaneously, memory of the atomic bomb played a key discursive role in the radical political imaginary of the Asian American movement and its valence in the global anti-colonial moment.

In defiance of dominant frames of Japanese American loyalty arguably complicit with American imperialism, Asian American activists engaged a critical memory of the atomic bomb to criticize U.S. foreign policy. Rather than mollify the "Yellow Peril" stigma they embraced it, from identifying themselves with the metaphorical monsters that had borne the violence of U.S. nuclear arms to pushing back against the loyalty politics and towards a radical vision of social justice. Vociferously, they redefined themselves as accomplices with those who were criminalized for being Vietnamese, black, and poor, challenging the fundamental structures dividing people across nation, race, class and gender.

By exploring the AAM generation as one that included folks like Yuri Kochiyama, Yuji Ichioka, Michio Kaku who lived through the war, this essay challenges the common characterization of social movements during that period as being exclusively youth movements. It also offers windows into the continued evolution of activists beyond the historical dates that confine a movement. Moreover, the continuous engagement in social activism by actors in this essay, many of whom continue to be activists today, is a testament against the argument that actors in social movements simply grow up, get jobs and stop caring.

These are not just interesting historical episodes, as Keeanga-Yamahhta Taylor asserted about her study on the Combahee River Collective — a group of radical black feminists active during the same time. They speak to the potential of the politics of solidarity and struggle. Asian American movement activists recurrently reread and rewrote the historical narrative of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, using it to push forward a radical platform for liberation as they envisioned a complete reconceptualization of society and a reorganization of domestic and foreign relations, beginning in their own communities. And in a neocolonial time, in their failures and dreams they offer more than one possible map of the past that might still be useful towards a critical Asian American subjectivity and waging solidarity in parallel struggles towards de-colonial futures.⁴²⁾

Notes

- 1) Vincent J. Intondi, *African Americans against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement*, Stanford Nuclear Age Series (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015), 2.
- 2) Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7.
- 3) For more on the Asian American movement see: William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Diane Carol Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy A. M Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power*, 2008; Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*,

American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century (New York: Routledge, 2012). *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power*, 2008; Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century (New York: Routledge, 2012).

- 4) Japanese American Citizens League, National Headquarters, "The Twenty-First Biennial National Convention of the Japanese American Citizens League, Official Minutes of the National Council of Meetings" (Chicago, Illinois, July 15–18, 1970), Japanese American Citizens League, Portland Chapter Records, 1930–2008, SC/2011.5, Series 2: Conventions (1934–200), Box 11, Folder 10, PSU Special Collections.
- 5) During the Chicago convention, as part of the program put together by JACL's newly formed National Liberation Caucus, Edison Uno introduced a resolution to urge legislative action towards compensation for Japanese American wartime incarceration. See "A Requital Supplication" published in Japanese American Citizens League, National Headquarters, "The Twenty-First Biennial National Convention of the Japanese American Citizens League, Official Minutes of the National Council of Meetings" (Chicago, Illinois, July 15–18, 1970), Japanese American Citizens League, Portland Chapter Records, 1930–2008, SC/2011.5, Series 2: Conventions (1934–200), Box 11, Folder 10, PSU Special Collections.
- 6) By 1970, the potential of the radical Asian American imaginary had penetrated JACL. AAM activism had in fact captured the attention, acknowledgement, and also the resources of the conservative leadership of JACL. Anticipating a confrontation with the AAM activists, leading up to the Chicago convention JACL leader Mike Masaoka publicly acknowledged the positive contributions of AAM activism in an attempt to mollify escalating tensions between the rising radicals and the established JACL moderates. Ahead of the Chicago convention, he praised these contributions as "innovations" — constituted by Asian American studies, the Yellow Brotherhood, and the national campaign to repeal emergency detention authorization. Masaoka even went as far as to suggest that "the real task of the Convention may be to orient JACL's goals and programs toward those desired by the new generation." But in the end, this amounted to little more than lip service as Masaoka made patently clear the conservative boundaries of the official JACL position — one in which there was no room for radicals: "We do not see as incompatible or competitive the formation of a new organization of, and catering to, the activists, militants, and radicals among Japanese Americans." See, Mike Masaoka, "Nat'l JACL Convention," *Pacific Citizen*, July 10, 1970, Washington Newsletter edition.
- 7) Joanne (Nobuko) Miyamoto, "Hiroshima-Nagasaki" (*Gidra*, August 1970), Courtesy of Gidra Collection.
* [.]'s were added by the author in place of the original stylization of the poem. In the original content [.] is represented in a new line.
- 8) Miyamoto.
- 9) Ellen D Wu, *Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1–2.
- 10) Yuri Kochiyama, "Speech during the 1970 JACL Biennial Convention in Chicago" (printed in the official minutes of the National Council of Meetings, twenty-first biennial National Convention of the Japanese American Citizens League, July 16, 1970), 11, Japanese American Citizens League, Portland Chapter Records, 1930–2008, SC/2011.5, Series 2: Conventions (1934–200), Box 11, Folder 10, PSU Special Collections.
- 11) Yuri Kochiyama, "Speech during the 1970 JACL Biennial Convention in Chicago" (printed in the official

- minutes of the National Council of Meetings, twenty-first biennial National Convention of the Japanese American Citizens League, July 16, 1970), 11, Japanese American Citizens League, Portland Chapter Records, 1930–2008, SC/2011.5, Series 2: Conventions (1934–200), Box 11, Folder 10, PSU Special Collections.
- 12) National Liberation Caucus of the JACL, "JACL Liberation Newsletter" (JACL National Convention, July 16, 1970), Japanese American Citizens League, Portland Chapter Records, 1930–2008, SC/2011.5, Series 2: Conventions (1934–200), Box 11, Folder 10, PSU Special Collections.
 - 13) Japanese Americans for Confrontation and Liberation, "JACL??: A Position Paper by Japanese Americans for Confrontation and Liberation" (Presented at the 1970 JACL biennial convention in Chicago, n.d.), Japanese American Citizens League, Portland Chapter Records, 1930–2008, SC/2011.5, Series 2: Conventions (1934–200), Box 11, Folder 10, PSU Special Collections.
 - 14) Mark Diane, "Nobuko Miyamoto: The 'Mountain Moving Days' Continue," *Bridge Magazine*.
 - 15) Nobuko Miyamoto Joanne, email to author, December 7, 2016.
 - 16) Takeshi Nakayama, "Nobuko Miyamoto's Creations Add to SoCal Bon Odori," *Nichibei Weekly*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.nichibei.org/2015/06/nobuko-miyamotos-creations-add-to-socal-bon-odori/>.
 - 17) Miyamoto, December 7, 2016.
 - 18) Nakayama, "Nobuko Miyamoto's Creations Add to SoCal Bon Odori."
 - 19) Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle*, 97–109.
 - 20) Caroline Chung Simpson, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945–1960*, New Americanists (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 136.
 - 21) Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle*, 107.
 - 22) For a discussion of Japanese American atomic bomb survivors see Rinjiro Sodei, *Were We the Enemy?: American Survivors of Hiroshima*, ed. John Junkerman (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1998).
 - 23) Steve Ryfle, *Japan's Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of "The Big G"* (Toronto, Ont., Canada: ECW Press, 1998), 19–60.
 - 24) *Rodan*, August 1970, Volume 1, Number 2 edition.
 - 25) Asian American Ad Hoc Committee on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "25 Years Ago . . . Hiroshima-Nagasaki" (1970), Karl G. Yoneda papers, 1592, Container 10.2: Political Activities and Subjects, Box 42, Folder 3: Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings (1970–1995), UCLA Library Special Collections.
 - 26) Yuji Ichioka, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Twenty-Five Years Ago Speech" (*Gidra*, August 1970), Courtesy of Gidra Collection.
 - 27) See Michael Jin, "Beyond Two Homelands: Migration and Transnationalism of Japanese Americans in the Pacific, 1930–1955" (Doctoral Dissertation, 2013), 4.
 - 28) Karl G. Yoneda, "No More Hiroshimas and Nagasakis, Speech Delivered at Benjamin Franklin Jr. High School, San Francisco, California," August 8, 1970, Karl G. Yoneda papers, 1592, Container 10.2: Political Activities and Subjects, Box 42, Folder 3: Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings (1970–1995), UCLA Library Special Collections.
 - 29) Karl G. Yoneda, *Ganbatte: Sixty-Year Struggle of a Kibei Worker* (Los Angeles: Resource Development and Publications, Asian American Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983).
 - 30) *Gidra*, August 1970, Courtesy of Gidra Collection.
 - 31) Go Oyagi, "Over the Pacific: Post-World War II Asian American Internationalism" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2013).

- 32) Asian American Ad Hoc Committee on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, (Flyer) "25 Years Ago . . . Hiroshima-Nagasaki" (San Francisco, CA: Asian American Ad Hoc Committee on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 1970), Karl G.Yoneda papers, 1592, Container 10.2: Political Activities and Subjects, Box 42, Folder 3: Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings (1970–1995), UCLA Library Special Collections.
- 33) Michio Kaku, "Hiroshima Nagasaki Vietnam: When It Rains It Pours — Speech Delivered August 6, 1973," (*Gidra*, October 1973), Courtesy of Gidra Collection.
- 34) *ibid.*
- 35) Hanna Takashige, "Hiroshima Day Demonstration Speech," *Asian Americans for Action Newsletter*, September 1971, Yoshio Kishi and Irene Yah-Ling Sun papers, MSS.292, Series 1, Subseries C: Activism, Box 3, Folder: 29, The Fales Library Special Collections, NYU.
- 36) Diane Carol Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 242.
- 37) For more on the transpacific critique, see Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 38) Daryl Joji Maeda, "The Asian American Movement," in *The Asian American Movement*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 39) Mike Murase, "No More Hiroshima's," *East Wind Magazine*, Fall/ Winter 1982, Museum of Chinese in America: Asian American Movement collection.
- 40) For more on the history of Japanese American atomic bomb survivors and their struggle for medical assistance in the U.S., see: Rinjiro Sodei, *Were We the Enemy?: American Survivors of Hiroshima* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998); Naoko Wake, "Gender and Science in Hiroshima's Aftermath: A Cross-Cultural Approach," *Endeavor* 35, no. 4 (2011): 178–86; Naoko Wake, "Surviving the Bomb in America: Silent Memories and the Rise of Cross-National Identity," *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (August 2017): 472–509.
- 41) Murase, "No More Hiroshima's."
- 42) Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, How We Ge Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective, January 22, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/1/22/keeanga_yamahtta_taylor_what_we_can.