

**Flying in the Face of Race, Gender, Class and Age:**  
**A Story About Kazu Iijima, One of the Mothers of the Asian American Movement**  
**On the First Year Anniversary of Her Death**

by

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*Those people who are in western civilization, who have grown up in it, but made to feel and themselves feeling that they are outside, have a unique insight into their society.*

C.L.R. James, 1984

It was the summer of 1972. Nixon was (still) president and the Vietnam War was (still) raging. Watergate transmogrified from a hotel into a scandal. Yet the ERA had passed and although we didn't know it at the time, the burgeoning Asian American Movement that had begun to radically transform our lives just four years earlier was reaching its peak. For me it was the summer I met three women who changed my life. Aiko Yoshinaga-Herzig was an untrained and non-degreed American concentration camp survivor who would later uncover key documentary evidence of the U.S. government's illegal incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Yuri Kochiyama was a waitress who made national headlines by being the first person to reach Malcolm X when he was assassinated. And Kazu Iijima was a mother who created a movement by starting the first Asian American political organization on the East Coast. Yuri and Aiko are still giving 'em hell. Kazu died on August 26, 2007 at the age of 89 years.

These women were unlike any I, and many of my generation, had ever met before or since. First of all they were leftists. We had never known Nisei (literally "second generation" meaning U.S. born Americans of Japanese immigrants), not to mention Nisei women who were politically progressive much less radical. Secondly they were old! To us twenty-somethings they were over thirty- way over thirty - in a market-driven youth culture that in the idiom of the day, eschewed anyone that old as not to be trusted. Third, rather than burning their bras or kowtowing to their husbands, they were content to be women in a world that was and still is dominated by men. Actually it was their husbands who were the homebodies, the less public, the quieter - and they and their husbands were fine with that. And lastly, they were comfortable in their own skins as Japanese Americans in a racist society that had labeled them the enemy and incarcerated them during World War II and then re-labeled them the "model minority"<sup>i</sup> when they got out and recovered.

How were these women able to transcend the social and psychological constraints of race, gender, class and age to be successful agents of social change? How did they resist the racist hate - for being non-white - as well as the racist love<sup>ii</sup> - for being non-black - to know who they were and what they could do? At a time when women were supposed to be personal and not political, how were they able to be both? In a youth-obsessed society, how did they defy stereotypes of middle age? And how did they come to view and work with their children as comrades in social justice? What was the secret to their

success? What was the formula for their antidote against racism, sexism, ageism and classism? If we can understand how they did it, perhaps we too - as well as the next generation and the next - can better struggle against such restrictions and be successful mediators for justice as well. On the occasion of the first anniversary of Kazu's death, this article seeks to explore those questions by looking into her life.

For this story about how Kazu was able to defy the constrictions of race, gender, class and age I rely on three levels of personal narrative. First I turn to Kazu herself; her own reflections and analyses as communicated in three interviews over four decades: a group interview with Kazu and other members of Triple A conducted by Don and Marsha Nakanishi in New York City in 1974<sup>iii</sup>, a published interview with Kazu by Glenn Omatsu conducted on September 15, 1985 in Los Angeles<sup>iv</sup>, and a video interview I conducted with her on May 18, 2005 in the home she and her husband Tak shared with their son Chris and his family in Honolulu. Because family was such a dominant theme in her life, secondarily I also include perspectives from her children as well as grandchildren. The third level of methodological subjectivity is my own, drawn from my perceptions of Kazu and experiences in the early Asian American Movement. Taking the lead from Zora Neale Hurston and many other cultural workers before me, I must admit to being part of the cultural scene that I observe, study, and seek to put into the canon of American history and culture. Consequently, for both scholarly disclosure as well as community accountability, I insert myself into the story.

### **Once Upon a Movement**

The Asian American Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was a defining historical moment that moved Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders from the stereotypically laden and decidedly un-American image of the "Oriental" into the panoply of a rich multi-dimensional and multi-cultural American identity. Aggravated by the social inequities and unrest of the times and inspired by the anti-Vietnam war, civil rights and Black Power movements, Asian Americans began to rally against unjust social policies and conditions, question Eurocentric values and standards and probe the cracks in the melting pot. In so doing they took on the formidable challenge of recovering their histories and redefining their identity and potential as a cultural and political force of influence and authority.

From their early immigration in the mid 1800s until the advent of the Asian American Movement in the late 1960s, Americans of Asian heritage - individuals of mostly Japanese and Chinese descent who formed the major Asian ethnic groups in the United States during those years - were referred to and regarded as "Orientals," a racial classification that signaled a subaltern position of difference and deviance. The substitution of the term "Asian American" was a conscious, pro-active effort by the socio-cultural-political Asian American Movement to overcome the foreign status the term "Oriental" implied and assert our rights as Americans. Although the literature on social movements of the 1960s and 1970s makes little mention of it, the Asian American Movement was a distinctive era that had significant impact on American history and culture.

Looking like the enemy during the Vietnam War, Asian Americans brought the issue of race to the forefront of the question of war. Recovering the history of the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, Asian Americans expanded civil rights beyond black and white. Being non-white in a Eurocentric society, Asian Americans identified with Blacks, Latinos/as and American Indians as Third World people in the United States. Edward Said wrote “we can read ourselves against another people’s pattern, but since it is not ours ...we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counter narratives.”<sup>v</sup> While this is so, C.L.R. James recognized that “Those people who are in western civilization, who have grown up in it, but made to feel and themselves feeling that they are outside, have a unique insight into their society.”<sup>vi</sup> Among those with the earliest and deepest insight was Kazu, one of the mothers of the Asian American Movement.

### **Kazu Iijima: One of the Mothers of the Asian American Movement**

Like most Sansei (third generation Japanese Americans), I don’t speak Japanese but know a few key phrases and terms, *o-nesan* being one of them. It is a Japanese kinship term for one’s older sisters, and as such is an expression of respect. Dropping the honorific “o”, the familiar *ne-san* alters the connotation, signaling a personal relationship of affection and guidance. Although Kazu, Yuri and Aiko are a generation older than I, in the nomenclature of progressive movements, I called them my “New York Ne-sans” and think of them as my beloved older sisters in struggle.

I met them that summer of 1972 when, after failing to take over the quasi-liberal and historically patriotic Japanese American National Citizens League (JACL) at their convention in Washington, D.C. (which is another story,) some of us woulda-shoulda-been revolutionaries took the train to New York City to meet with our East Coast counterparts. It was my first trip to the Big Apple. There were about five of us including Warren Furutani and Victor Shibata who had been to New York a few years before where they had met Kazu, her husband Tak and their children Lynne and Chris, Yuri and her husband Bill, and Aiko who was then between husbands. Warren, who is currently a California State Assemblyperson and married to Aiko’s daughter Lisa, was one of the leaders of the early Asian American movement in California having honed his leadership skills in Third World student activism at the College of San Mateo in California.<sup>vii</sup> Victor had translated the skills he learned on the streets of the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles as a member of a gang called the Ministers into the Yellow Brotherhood, a self-help group to help the Japanese American community cope with the drug epidemic that was eating their young.<sup>viii</sup> Both had been hired by the national JACL to administer their youth program just a few years before. Both resigned after the 1972 convention.

How Warren and Victor first met Kazu and the New York movers and shakers of the Asian American Movement is worth a side story. Two years earlier in 1970, the national office of the JACL heard that a group from New York intended to disrupt that year’s convention to challenge the organization to take a stand against the Vietnam War. The JACL sent Warren and Victor to meet with the New York

radicals to stave off any altercation. Unaware of the reactionary reputation of the organization they represented, Warren and Victor were greeted with contempt and suspicion by the more politicized cluster of Japanese Americans in New York, which included Kazu, Yuri and Aiko. Warren and Victor were surprised at the multi-generational nature of the group - which turned out to be Asian Americans for Action the organization Kazu founded - but were soon preoccupied by a barrage of accusatory questions about their alliance with JAACL by the younger members of the group, the most vociferous of whom was Chris Iijima, Kazu's son. Warren's experience in student politics and conflict management kicked in as did Victor's street instincts that almost led to blows. But in the best practices of political struggle, they all persevered and ended up talking through the night after which they became life-long friends.

When we arrived two years later, although only Warren and Victor knew them, Kazu and Tak welcomed some of us to stay in their modest uptown high-rise while the others were welcomed by Yuri and Bill to stay in their modest Harlem project apartment. We arrived at Kazu and Tak's late at night and - good Japanese American female that I am - I was mindful of their willingness to take in us strangers as well as the lateness of the hour. We half expected them to be asleep and leave a key under the doormat, which was of course a Southern California practice left over from simpler times that I doubt New Yorkers ever adopted. Our ruminations aside, we arrived to find Kazu and Tak not only still up, they had a table full of food for us and were eager to talk. Most surprising of all however, belying our own ageist underpinnings, they looked like they could have been our aunt and uncle. It was the first time we had experienced such inter-generational camaraderie and it was cognitively disorienting. I had many aunts and uncles who I loved dearly, but I certainly didn't hang with them socially. That night and into the morning, without ever discussing or theorizing about ageism, classism, sexism or racism (which we would do later), we experienced what a world without such "isms" could be like and it was exhilarating. Here we were, bra-less and longhaired youth barely into our 20s who still didn't think of ourselves as real adults and Kazu and Tak were our elders in their late 50s who were the real deal. Yet they were talking and, more importantly, listening to us as if who we were and what we had to say really mattered. And if that was not enough we soon discovered that it was Kazu and the other the Nisei women who were more radical and outspoken than their male counterparts. This was a reality that flew in the face of not only the stereotype of the quiet unassuming Nisei woman but our own experiences with Nisei women as well.

Kazu founded the first pan Asian American organization on the East Coast in 1969 with Minn Matsuda, another Nisei woman. Called Asian Americans for Action - Triple A for short - it was unique in being the first organization to bring different Asian ethnic groups together under one banner. While there were separate Japanese American and Chinese American organizations in New York at the time, there was no concept of pan-Asian ethnicity. It was also exceptional in being a progressively political rather than cultural or social organization, although that was not Kazu and Minn's initial intent. And besides being pan-Asian and progressive, Triple A was extraordinary in yet a third area - it was multigenerational, with Kazu's son Chris and daughter Lynne along with many of their cohorts being part of its original formation. Although Asian American organizations and Asian American Studies are now commonplace,

in 1969 the concept of Asian American was groundbreaking and indicated a new era in thinking about race in the United States. And there has yet to be a multigenerational organization like Triple A.

The story of how Kazu and Minn began Triple A – by “running up to” every Asian they met at anti-war demonstrations - which will be described later, is a testament to Kazu’s enormous organizing capacity regardless of race, gender, class and age. It also exemplifies how she was able to use those social dynamics that are more often points of discrimination to good use. Triple A’s foremost mission was to call for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. In doing so they brought to the fore the war’s imperialist and racist nature and supported the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination. They fought for Third World solidarity and community control. They fought against the draft and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.<sup>ix</sup> Triple A continued until 1976 when it changed its name to the Union of Activists and moved from a focus on being pan Asian American to one that embraced all progressive people involved in multinational class struggle. They continued until 1980 when they decided to dissolve over differences in ideology and strategy.<sup>x</sup>

Kazu had been a professed radical long before starting Triple A. She was one of the few Japanese American members of the Young Communist League (YCL) as a student at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1930s. She was a member of the Oakland Young Democratic Club, the only Nisei organization that spoke out against the mass incarceration during World War II. After the war when McCarthyism, HUAC and blacklisting were rampant and many leftists maintained a low profile, Kazu joined the anti-fascist Japanese American Committee for Democracy in New York that opposed Japanese militarism. During and after Triple A, Kazu was also active in the Coalition of Trafficking in Women, the New York Independent Committee to Free Chol Soo Lee, the United Asian Communities Center, the Organization of Asian Women, the Chinatown Justice Project, the David Wong Support Committee and other progressive organizations.

When Kazu died, Glenn Omatsu, who published an interview of Kazu ten years earlier, wrote that in mainstream society, the legacy of activists are assessed by the size and scope of the organizations they founded or led, the momentous events they were a part of or the famous people with whom they worked. In contrast, in Asian American communities, “The lives of long-time activists are not celebrated so much for the big things they accomplished but for the sincerity in which they lived their lives and for the creativity and courage they brought to activism, especially during the darkest times.”<sup>xi</sup>

### **A Life of Sincerity**

In perusing the three interviews of Kazu, life themes - what St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton also called “axes of life,” dominating interests, centers of orientation, lines of attention<sup>xii</sup> - emerged that threaded throughout Kazu’s life. It is these life themes that hold clues to how Kazu was able to transcend the social and psychological limitations of age, generation, gender and ethnicity to be an older Nisei

activist mother. They are race and racism, activism and progressive politics, family and generation, and feminism and gender equity.

### Race and Racism

Race and racism was a dominating center of orientation in Kazu's life, as it has been for most people of color in the United States. Race was a constant, underlying dynamic and racism was a persistently re-occurring obstacle. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith wrote about imperialism and indigenous peoples, for people of color in the United States racism is "part of our story, our version of modernity."<sup>xiii</sup> Kazu and her generation were born in the U.S in the 1910s and 1920s to parents who, because of race, were not allowed to become naturalized citizens until 1952. Despite growing up as all-Americans and learning the lessons of freedom, liberty and justice, they were surrounded by legal and extra-legal racism and racialization. Kazu recalled:

*We came from Japanese ghetto communities. All our friends were Japanese. I went to a grammar school that was 90 percent Chinese and Japanese. We lived right by Chinatown and our whole neighborhood was Chinese and Japanese. So for us the big step was to step out of that community. Our whole thrust was to take our place in the white community because we grew up in an Asian community.*<sup>xiv</sup>

*Our parents took so much abuse. They discussed it openly to show their anger and humiliation. We grew up with the word, haiseki (being discriminated against). Haiseki and fukeiki (hard times). Those were the two words we grew up with. The indignation of our parents. So we really knew that there was an outer world that was very dangerous and very hostile.*<sup>xv</sup>

During World War II, racism again played a major role in her life. In November of 1941 on the eve of the war, the loyalty of the Nisei was secretly scrutinized and documented by the U.S. government when it investigated and found that Nisei in Hawaii would be loyal to the U.S. in the event of war with Japan. Although the report was not made public until well after the war, it concluded, "The Nisei are *pathetically* eager to show this loyalty (italics mine). They are not Japanese in culture. They are foreigners to Japan. Though American citizens they are not accepted by Americans largely because they look different and can be easily recognized."<sup>xvi</sup> The month after this report was issued, Pearl Harbor was bombed and two months later these "pathetically" patriotic Nisei were incarcerated en masse without due process of law. Kazu was sent to a camp in Utah and even in a concentration camp<sup>xvii</sup>, Kazu's fighting spirit was not diminished.

*In camp – I went to Topaz – we had a small group of very close friends. In fact, some of them stayed over at our place so that we could go to camp together. And even in the camp, we were the ones who used to go to hassle the administration at two o'clock in the morning because we were unhappy about something. We wanted to hassle them.*<sup>xviii</sup>

It wasn't only discrimination against Asians that infuriated Kazu and caused her to put her convictions regarding social justice on the line. Kazu's husband Tak was drafted into the U.S. Army a month before Pearl Harbor. They were married in 1942 and Kazu left Topaz to go to Mississippi with Tak where he was to train the segregated all Japanese American 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT.

*One day I was on a bus. The blacks were allowed only the last seat and a black woman came in who was pregnant so I got up to give her my seat. The bus driver stopped the bus and there was dead silence. But I wasn't going to give up what I had started. The black woman was so frightened she wouldn't even sit down. So finally a white woman said, "Look, you sit with me, and she'll be able to sit there." So I did.<sup>xix</sup>*

### Activism and Progressive Politics

Kazu was always an activist. In college one of the first things she did was to join the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Japanese Women Students Club. Soon after, she joined the Young Communist League along with both her sisters. In the following excerpt, she tells the story of how she was recruited – while trying to talk her red sister out of the party.

*My first political work was as a freshman in college. I was active in the YWCA because my sister was also active. The YWCA picketed the YMCA for its discriminatory practices. Then she (her sister) got into the CP. She was distributing leaflets at Sather Gate. And my older sister and I were horrified! So we called (on) her and we talked all night. And guess what? She's the one who convinced us! Now we grew up with our parents always talking about haiseiki, being discriminated against. We knew as long as we stayed in our community we were safe. But beyond the community was a dangerous point. We couldn't understand why everyone hated us so much. So when my sister talked about communism and socialism we responded to that. We said, "Now that's why! This country is controlled by corporations and rich people who want to keep people down." We talked about the ideal society where people would be equal. It really appealed to our idealism and we talked all night long. So she recruited us into the YCL (Young Communist League). I will say that it's in the YCL that I first felt free of racism.<sup>xx</sup>*

In addition to the YCL, Kazu was an active member of the Oakland Young Democratic Club, which was the only Nisei organization that spoke out against the mass incarceration during WWII. They wrote a statement denouncing the forced incarceration as a fascist act and sent it to a Japanese American paper but it was never published and there is no extant copy known. After the war, Kazu moved to New York where she continued her progressive activism by joining the Japanese American Committee for Democracy, an early progressive organization started by Isseis, first generation Japanese immigrants to the U.S., to protest Japanese militarism.



Her life-long activism culminated in her founding of Asian Americans for Action, Triple A. It was the first pan Asian American organizations on the East Coast and as such helped launch the Asian American Movement that contested, expanded, enriched and complicated the notion and identity of the United States as a diverse democratic state. In addition to its political significance in the historiography of the Movement, Triple A was structurally and socially exceptional because of its multigenerational composition. In the following quote, Kazu indicated the reason she and Minn formed Triple A was for their children.

*Minn and I were always attending these Black rallies. Rap Brown and James Farmer and all. They were so inspiring, the way they talked about society, about imperialism and everything. What really impressed us a lot was how they politicized their cultural history. This whole Black is beautiful thing and the pride they took in being Black - that was so wonderful that Minn and I kept saying, "We wish our children could be in a movement like that." There was nothing going on. So that's when we decided, "Well look, nobody's doing it. So you and I are going to do it." So that's when we got started.<sup>xxi</sup>*

The influence of the Black experience on Kazu was considerable. Kazu's earlier encounters confronting segregation in Mississippi had expanded her already racialized sense of justice. Kazu and Minn were not only familiar with the personalities and the content of the Black Power Movement, they actively participated by attending rallies and talks. They identified with and related the Black experience to their own.

*We felt it was too bad that Asians weren't relating to themselves as Asians at all. Even our children were so whitewashed they were not as aware as they should be. They were aware they were Asian but there was no organization in which they could get together and discuss things the ways the Blacks were doing.*

Remembering the rich cultural community they grew up in before the war in California and lamenting the lack of a Japanese American community for their children in New York, they seized the moment and decided to create their own organization. Kazu immediately talked to her children Lynne and Chris, who were 20 and 19 at the time. The idea for a pan-Asian organization came from Chris.

*We asked our children and Chris was very helpful. He said, "Mom, one thing. It has to be pan-Asian. Don't make it Japanese American." So I said, "Oh, that sounds great! But how are we going to contact the Chinese, the Koreans?" Because at that time, the communities were completely alienated from one another. There was no communication from one community to the other. So we decided what we would do is to contact every Asian we saw at the demos. And there was a demo practically every week. This was during the war against Vietnam.<sup>xxii</sup>*

Kazu's organizing experience and acumen sprang into action, as did her indefatigable spirit, engaging personality and contagious enthusiasm. In the following excerpt, she shows that she was well aware of her advanced age and that it didn't hold her back.

*We decided we'd have to determine a date when we'll first have a meeting. We decided April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1969. So, whenever we went to demos - we were early protestors so we knew that we saw Asians here and there - so every time we'd see an Asian person, we'd run up to that person and say, "We're thinking of starting an organization. So could you give us your name and address? Our first meeting's going to be on April 6<sup>th</sup>" and so forth. Of course, many of them just couldn't make us out. These two little old ladies talking about a movement, an organization. So anyways, on April 6<sup>th</sup>, we thought, "I wonder if anyone's going to come?"<sup>xxiii</sup>*

She recalls that about twelve to fifteen people came – Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. In the following extract, although she indicates her awareness that the recruits were "already political" she admits that she and Minn initially thought it would be a "social organization."

*We discussed what kind of an organization it was going to be. And most of these people, they were protesting the war. So they were already political. Minn and I thought that this was going to be a social organization. But no, they really, from the beginning, said, "No, this is going to be a political organization. We're going to find out why we've gone through the racism that we've gone through. What's the cause of it? What's behind it all?" So we (Minn and Kazu) said, "Oh, this is great!" We were very excited about this.<sup>xxiv</sup>*

Given Kazu and Minn's leftist convictions and the fact that they recruited at anti-war demonstrations, it is interesting that she and Minn were surprised that the group decided to be political. My hunch is that it evidences the genuine focus of their desire to create a cultural milieu for their children and the key role that motherhood played in their activism. They did not intend to found the first pan Asian American political organization on the East Coast. Rather, inspired by the cultural aspect of the Black Liberation Movement and recalling the rich social and cultural community they had in their own youth, they simply wanted to do good by their children.

### Family and Generation

Like most Nisei, family was a pivotal axis in Kazu's life. She particularized her high esteem for the Issei by talking about her parents. Both were rebels who no doubt provided early role models for Kazu. Her father Kando Ikeda was born into a family of Buddhist priests and ran away from home rather than follow in the expected tradition of taking over the family temple. He graduated from Imperial University and came to the U.S. where he attended the University of California, worked for a Japanese newspaper for a time and wrote many books.

*But he could never get a job. He worked in the railroad. He worked as a servant, a houseboy. That's where he used to get into fights all the time with the bosses because they would say "Jap" and stuff like that. And he would be furious.<sup>xxv</sup>*

In contrast to all his children who were Communists, Mr. Ikeda was an outspoken Japanese nationalist. But he, like Kazu, was open-minded. He ardently supported Japan but also criticized the Japanese government for ending the "picture bride" system whereby, because of immigration and anti-miscegenation laws coupled with the dearth of Japanese women in the U.S., Japanese men married women in Japan via go-betweens and the exchange of photographs.<sup>xxvi</sup> And most outstandingly, despite their widely divergent political views, Mr. Ikeda supported his daughters, their right to their opinions and urged them to stand up to their beliefs.

*My father was a very active, well-known person. Very active in the community. But they snubbed us (when it was known that Kazu and her sisters were Communists). So my father knew about it, but he was very unusual, and he said that... He was a very sweet... he said, "Look, you can believe whatever you want. But you have to believe it so strongly that you'd be willing to go to prison for it."<sup>xxvii</sup>*

Before marrying her father, Kazu's mother Tsukiko Nagura Ikeda had an arranged marriage with one of Japan's leading industrialists but left him and traveled around the world before coming to the U.S. to study English.<sup>xxviii</sup> Her mother died when Kazu was just fifteen but influenced Kazu profoundly as will be discussed in the next section on the life theme of feminism.

Connected to family was the related theme of generation. One of the most unusual features about Kazu was the mutual relationship of influence and respect she and her children Chris and Lynne shared. Kazu and her children shared a two-way stream of inspiration, esteem, and impact that exceeded the bond of kinship. Most parents extend unconditional love to their children and in return children exhibit various degrees of filial piety toward their parents. Kazu on the other hand, instead of staying on her side of the "generation gap," a '60s buzzword that attempted to explain yet served to corroborate the division between young and old, built a bridge over it by cultivating and then embracing her children as her partners in activism. Chris and Lynne were founding members of Triple A, the organization Kazu spearheaded. It was Chris' idea that Triple A be pan-Asian, a novel and radical notion at the time that Kazu immediately embraced. Kazu and Lynne would later form the Organization of Asian Women – together. Many of us even met her children through Kazu rather than the other way around. Insight into Kazu's attitude of respect toward her children even at a young age is evident in the following excerpt.

*When Chris was about eight years old, I remember, he was reading The Times already. And he saw this picture of a lynching. And he said, "Mom, what is this?" So we got into a discussion about it, and I think that that was a big political thing for him.*

By framing it as a “discussion” it is clear that Kazu did not see this event so much as her maternal duty to educate Chris as much as an opportunity to create a dialogue even though he was only eight years old. Through the years Kazu spent hours in deep political discussion with Chris and Lynne. Her ability to rise above the so-called generation gap was personified by her relationship with Chris with whom she often argued vehemently about political perspective, strategy, assessment or action without compromising or jeopardizing their relationship as comrades or connection as mother and son. The intensity of their arguments was characterized by Chris’ passionate reactions and Kazu’s quiet determination, and inevitably ended with one of them saying, “So are you hungry? Wanna eat?”

Lynne was just eleven months old when Chris was born and Kazu took a hiatus from activism to raise her children. Chris was the one who got Kazu involved again.

*For a while I was out of politics raising the children. And then this Cuban thing came along and I was so upset about it. And so Chris said, “Look, Mom. If you’re feeling so upset about it, there’s a demo at the UN. You should go.” So I said, “Gee, Chris. I will.”*

Chris became one of the most well known personalities of the Asian American Movement. He had tremendous theoretical skills but was known primarily for his ability to put the passion of the Movement into music. He worked as a bartender, elementary school teacher, and lawyer and was a law professor when he died of a rare disease a year and half before Kazu passed away. In an interview I conducted with Chris eight months before his death he talked about how much his parents, specifically his mother, influenced his own activism. I indicated earlier that despite her radical activism Kazu was in many ways a typical Nisei woman. She had a job, she cooked, she cleaned and, as Chris indicates in the following excerpt, she showed him it was possible to lead a normal life and also be political.

*My mom and dad showed me you can be political and be a human being. With a family, with a job, with sending your kids to school. That you can make your life a normal life and have politics be a part of it. I think for me that was a huge lesson. It’s a lesson that often doesn’t get taught and is hard to learn. But my mom has been a political person her whole life and yet was a mom. And so it’s possible.<sup>xxix</sup>*

The multigenerational makeup of Triple A was a unique aspect of its composition. In talking with people who know about Triple A - and in thinking about it myself - there is a tendency to valorize it for breaking new ground and forging a movement. More often than not, the exceptional and distinctive feature of its multigenerationality tends to gloss over deeper questions and challenges it no doubt created. In the following excerpt Kazu offers critical insight into the internal dynamics of Triple A. Her comments are cogent and analytical.

*There was that whole philosophical difference between Nisei and Sansei. There was a constant struggle within Triple A on that. . . . The older people tended not to want to be rhetorical because we wanted to reach a great number of people. . . For the young*

*people, this was the first time they had the opportunity of taking a political thing and doing it on their own, so that rhetoric and everything was part of the catharsis. . . . Before, they were always a part of larger white or black groups. This was the first time we were taking responsibility for our own way of demonstrating, our own slogans, our own everything, so the tendency was to be very rhetorical, very militant, very up front. So the differences were real and I think that was part of growth for a very young movement.<sup>xxx</sup>*

Kazu's son Chris also offered his analysis that serves to further problematize and understand the issue of generation in Triple A.

*I think you have to look at it in terms of context and hindsight. At the time, the only reason why there were old and new people in the organization was not for political reasons, but because it was the only organization around. . . . And the reason why I think it didn't work at that time was because of political immaturity on the part of a lot of young people.<sup>xxxi</sup>*

Chris also provides analytical support for the importance of generation in Kazu's life as well as why an examination of Kazu's and Triple A's contributions are important.

*The whole multigenerational thing – I saw the value of having older people involved. But the influence my mom, and Minn and the older people of Triple A had on me, people in LA and San Francisco too, I don't think that gets talked about enough. And it shows how important it is to have a multigenerational movement. It was a tremendous influence.<sup>xxxii</sup>*

Kazu's intergenerational influence that began with her parents and flowed to her children also reached her grandchildren. For a memorial for Kazu in Los Angeles, her grandsons Alan and Christopher, who live in Honolulu, wrote memories to be read. They are both *hapa* – half Japanese American and half white – and for eighteen-year-old Alan, the concept of community came in the person of his grandmother who simultaneously validated him as a person.

*Grandma taught me to be interested and proud of being Asian, and why it was important to be an Asian American, and not just an American Asian. Why it was important to always hold on to your heritage. Grandma was a woman who defined and shaped me and made me feel that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. She is my community.<sup>xxxiii</sup>*

Fifteen-year-old Christopher, like his Dad, was struck with how she combined the normal and the radical and is able to relay it in a wonderfully humorous style.

*Grandma was always two people to me, the loving figure who I knew, and the rebel who I heard stories about. You can imagine my surprise then, when I discovered how Grandma had marched in protest rallies, and helped found several Asian American rights*

*movements. I couldn't imagine Grandma marching in rallies, holding a sign and shouting in a megaphone. Baking cookies for the marchers and offering to pay for dinner afterwards maybe, but actually protesting? It was inconceivable. However, Grandma herself would often give me insights into her radical past. She once told me how, when working as a maid, she had heatedly defended communism and quit when her employer had angrily, and rightly as it happened, accused her of being one.*<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### Feminism and Gender Equity

The expressed goals of the three interviews with Kazu focused primarily on her life of activism. Although there was little inquiry specifically into the role women played in her life, feminism was a theme that clearly emerged. It began with Kazu's mother who had been a rebel before her. Mrs. Ikeda left her arranged marriage, a rare and bold move, which probably compelled her to leave her country as well. She traveled extensively around the world and wrote a book on her experiences. Although her mother died when Kazu was only fifteen, she was influential in shaping Kazu's identity as a woman and as a feminist. Kazu recalls,

*She really was a feminist and left her very, very wealthy husband to come to America. We were so poor all the time. My father was in debt all the time. He just couldn't make any money. So they had a rough time. But she was determined that three of us girls should go to college. She said, "It's more important for girls, women to go to college than men because you're closer to the children."*<sup>xxxv</sup>

This advice from her mother, that it was more important for women to be educated because they were "closer to the children," is deeply revealing in understanding how Kazu was able to transcend limitations of gender, how she was able to be a political activist and working mom at the same time. Rejecting binaries of home and college, her mother did not teach her that a woman's place is in the home; rather she taught her that a woman's place is in the home *and* in college. Her mother did not present Kazu with a choice between being educated *or* being a mother, she taught her that she needed to be well educated *in order* to be a good mother.

Her father also added to her feminism by demonstrating the value of gender equity. As a child she had an unusual relationship with her single-parent father who never remarried. By raising three daughters alone, he provided a role model of male as mother. Decades before feminists made statements such as "men will recognize women as true equals only when men themselves help to raise new generations by taking on the responsibilities of the home,"<sup>xxxvi</sup> Kazu experienced her father raising her and her sisters and taking care of their home as well as his work. Her husband Tak furthered this sense of gender equity. Although Tak was politically active, he preferred to take a more subdued public stance than his wife. Like Kazu's father before him, Tak was comfortable in the home and took an active role in raising their children. He complemented Kazu's public persona and provided a family stability that made them equal partners in their mutual quest for social justice and shared responsibility in child rearing.

Women were always a foundational aspect of Kazu's life. Kazu was drawn early to organizations of women having joined the YWCA and the Japanese Women's Students Club while she was a student at University of California, Berkeley. Although she did not have her mother's nurturance and guidance for long, her early death must also have made the bond between Kazu and her sisters closer. The impact of growing up with only female siblings, as well as their close relationship no doubt deepened the feelings of comfort that could be afforded to and by women. Her introduction to feminist politics came from novelist Rita Mae Brown who Kazu met while working for a publishing company when Brown was a fledging author. They became good friends and Kazu credits her for "influencing me about the Women's Movement."<sup>xxxvii</sup> She and her daughter Lynne began the Organization of Asian Women (OAW). Of the importance of feminism in Kazu's life, her daughter Lynne wrote:

*Mom was a fervent feminist and we had so many discussions together dissecting the women's lib movement and trying to apply its theory/practice to Asian American women and other women of color. We were both grateful to white women for "paving the way." That's why both of us started the Organization of Asian Women where we studied not only the ML (Marxist-Leninist) literature on women but also read the leading feminists of the time and discussed their theories. Mom always said to me that AAA, which was mostly women, and OAW were her most "favorite" activist groups--they were both very unique and extraordinary, probably because the women in them forged such sisterly bonds.<sup>xxxviii</sup>*

### **Flying in the Face of Race, Gender, Class and Age**

I came to this article by wondering how Kazu, Yuri and Aiko were able to rise above the social and psychological boundaries of race, gender, class and age to become older, Nisei female activists. Especially in the 1970s when the white women's movement was concluding that the oppression of women was both universal and rooted in their domestic duties, specifically their socially and culturally defined role as mother, Kazu as well as Yuri and Aiko were living testimonies to the contrary.

bell hooks points out that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. create a diversity of experience that determine the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women.<sup>xxxix</sup> Other women of color like Audre Lorde (1984), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (1981) as well as progressive white women such as Karen Brodtkin Sacks (1988) helped shift the feminist agenda towards more particularistic and historically grounded studies and also place gender in the context of race, class, ageism, sexual orientation, education and other social dynamics. This examination of Kazu's life as one of the mothers of the Asian American Movement is a culturally and historically particular example that looks specifically at the social dynamics of race, gender, class and age. Her life contradicts the assertion that motherhood and child raising are the bases for the universal subordination of women. Rather, the role of motherhood was the specific reason Kazu's own mother

wanted her to go to college and was also the reason why Kazu and Minn started Triple A, the first pan-Asian and progressive organization in the country, to provide a safe and nurturing milieu for their children.

Still the question remains of *how* she was able to transcend the social and psychological limitations that race, gender, age, and class so often place on women. What were the personal characteristics she deployed that allowed her to be such a compassionate and effective activist and mother? Through her reflections and responses in the three interviews were the themes of race and racism, progressive politics and activism, family and generation and feminism and gender equality. It is in these axes of life that the following qualities emerge that provide insight into how Kazu was personally able to transcend the social and psychological constraints of gender, age, race and class - and how we might as well.

First of all, Kazu was not afraid. These days fear seems to be ever-present, like smog covering the city and smothering its citizens. Fear makes otherwise compassionate people believe more in “national security” than in civil and human rights. It makes those who are naturally empowered feel otherwise. Kazu knew racism but was not afraid of it. Instead, she confronted and challenged back the racism with which she was confronted and challenged. Despite growing up in a Japanese ghetto she did not hesitate to exert herself in what she called the “outer world” although she knew it to be “very dangerous and very hostile.” Even in a concentration camp, she not only “hassled” but “wanted to hassle” the administration despite the fact that they were direct representatives of the U. S. government that put them there in the first place. In Mississippi, although she was one of the few Asians in a black and white world and was without the ethnic support network that had been part of her entire life, she was bold enough to act out against what she knew was wrong.

Secondly, Kazu knew she was not alone. Even in this alienating racist, classist, sexist and ageist society, she felt the connection to humanity, drew strength from being part of a multitude and understood the power of solidarity. This made her an activist. She gained and gave energy from belonging and contributing to collectivities whether it was Triple A, the Communist Party, the Japanese American community, the female species, the Third World or the human race. And she was not just a passive member of the groups to which she belonged. She gave back the empowerment she derived, which in turn strengthened its collective power. She understood the strength that resulted from numbers. She embodied the rallying cry, “All Power to the People.”

Third, she was progressively open-minded and able to connect contrasting ideas. Although she was stubborn and steadfast in her convictions, she was willing to listen to and consider new ideas. Although she was at first appalled to learn that her sister was a Communist and set about to talk her out of it, Kazu was willing to change her mind based on information that made sense to her. When her sister talked about “corporations and rich people who want to keep people down,” it answered her innocent but seriously distressing question of “why they were hated so much.” Kazu was able to make the connection between racism, a lived experience she knew well, with the concepts of communism and socialism even



though she intended to dissuade her sister from such ideology. Later, she and Minn had intended to start a social and cultural organization for their children. But they not only acquiesced, they were delighted when it turned into a political one.

And lastly and perhaps most significantly, Kazu had a genuine respect for others. This was no doubt related to her basic feeling of camaraderie and connectedness to humanity. And she learned well the concept of reverence from her father. By accepting and respecting his daughters as card carrying Communists, even though it was on the opposite political spectrum from his own nationalistic views, he paid - and thereby taught - Kazu a high level of respect. She carried on this combination of love and respect with both her children as evidenced by the influence both generations had on each other. Instead of *teaching* Chris in a typically maternal top-down fashion when he read about a lynching, they had a *discussion* about it, reflecting her attitude of respect. She not only valued but acted on Chris' suggestions that she become politically active again and that Triple A should be pan-Asian. She and her daughter Lynne were partners in co-founding the Organization of Asian Women.

These personal characteristics – of courage, collectivity, open-mindedness and respect – honed her capacity to negotiate the social constraints of race, gender, class and age. They enabled her to affect her society and not just be affected by it. These qualities gave her the motivation and power to be an effective agent of social change. Yet these personal characteristics are not novel, unusual or even unique to Kazu. You could even say they are traits of any decent, caring human being. No wonder Glenn Omatsu eulogized her by saying that in Asian American communities “The lives of long-time activists are not celebrated so much for the big things they accomplished but for the sincerity in which they lived their lives.” And this is her lesson to us. All we need to do is to be brave not weak; act on the connections, not the conflicts between people; be open-minded not narrow or closed-minded, and demonstrate love and respect for others. This is the antidote. This is the secret. It is utterly simple yet exceedingly difficult. Agonizingly taxing but not impossible.

And thus my story about Kazu ends. Telling stories is how women pass on their wisdom and this article is but one story about Kazu Iijima, one of the mothers of the Asian American Movement. Many other people no doubt have many more stories of Kazu. Her life provides a new paradigm for combining the personal and the political by offering examples of the many forms activism can take. Most importantly for me, in her son Chris' words, Kazu showed how one could be “a political person her whole life and yet was a mom.” It is the wisdom of this possibility - that is so rarely offered - that she gave to me. And I have modeled my relationship with my own children after Kazu's example. Alice Walker wrote, “Write for your dead. They are listening.”<sup>x</sup> Death gives one pause to appreciate life. On the first anniversary of Kazu's death, I tell this story to reflect on the meaning and lessons of her life. And I trust that Alice is right. Thank you Kazu.

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**Endnotes**

- <sup>i</sup> Japanese Americans were referred to as the “model minority” by sociologist William Petersen in “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” New York Times Magazine, January 9, 1966, 20. A similar article on Chinese Americans appeared in “Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites,” Newsweek, June 21, 1971. Alan Nishio wrote a seminal critique, “The Oriental as ‘Middleman Minority,’” Gidra 1:2 (May 1969) p. 2.
- <sup>ii</sup> The terms racist love and hate are attributed to Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong. Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers. Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975.
- <sup>iii</sup> I acknowledge and thank Marji Lee of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center Reading Room for bringing this interview and related correspondence to my attention.
- <sup>iv</sup> Glenn Omatsu, “Always a Rebel: An Interview with Kazu Iijima,” Amerasia Journal 13.2 (1986-87). pp. 83-89.
- <sup>v</sup> Said, Edward. After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives. New York: Pantheon, 1986. P. 140
- <sup>vi</sup> James, C.L.R. “Africans and Afro-Caribbeans: A Personal View.” Ten 8.16 (1984).
- <sup>vii</sup> Warren was part of the College Readiness Program at the College of San Mateo that involved non-traditional students including working class African Americans, Latinos, Chinese Americans, American Indians and whites.
- <sup>viii</sup> For more on Yellow Brotherhood, see Nick Nagatani’s “Action Talks and Bullshit Walks: From the Founders of Yellow Brotherhood to the Present,” in Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment, Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu, eds., Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001, pp. 148-155; and Yellow Brotherhood (Digital video, 18 Minutes, 2004) directed by Tadashi Nakamura.
- <sup>ix</sup> From unpublished interview with Kazu Iijima, Minn Matsuda, Chris Iijima, Yuri Kochiyama and Phil Ozeki by Don and Marsha Nakanishi, New York, 1974.
- <sup>x</sup> A brief summary of Triple A appears in William Wei, The Asian American Movement (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). P.25.
- <sup>xi</sup> Glenn Omatsu, “In Memoriam - Kazu Iijima, 1918 - 2007,” Amerasia Journal 33.3 (2007).
- <sup>xii</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1945, 1962). P.385
- <sup>xiii</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (London, New York and Dunedin: Zed Books and University of Otago Press, 1999). P. 19.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Kazu Iijima, Chris Iijima, Yuri Kochiyama, Phil Ozeki, Don Nakanishi and Marsha Nakanishi, Interview with Asian Americans for Action, Transcript, New York. 1974.
- <sup>xv</sup> Glenn Omatsu, “Always a Rebel: An Interview with Kazu Iijima,” Amerasia Journal 13.2 (1986-87). P.85-86.

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- <sup>xvi</sup> Quoted in Michi Weglyn. Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps. Updated ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996
- <sup>xvii</sup> The earliest reference to the camps being called "concentration camps" comes from President Franklin Roosevelt in a White House Memorandum to the Chief of Naval Operations dated August 10, 1936. In Karen L., Ishizuka, Lost and Found : Reclaiming the Japanese American Incarceration, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. P.8.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Omatsu, "Always a Rebel: An Interview with Kazu Iijima." P. 94.
- <sup>xix</sup> Kazu Iijima and Karen Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima, rec May 18, 2005, Mini-DV, Honolulu, 2005.
- <sup>xx</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Omatsu, "Always a Rebel: An Interview with Kazu Iijima." P.97 n2.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid. p. 83.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Chris Iijima, Karen Ishizuka and Robert A. Nakamura, Interview with Chris Iijima, rec May 18, 2005, Mini DV, Honolulu, 2005.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Iijima, Iijima, Kochiyama, Ozeki, Nakanishi and Nakanishi, Interview with Asian Americans for Action. Conducted by Don and Marsha Nakanishi, New York, 1974.
- <sup>xxxI</sup> Iijima, Iijima, Kochiyama, Ozeki, Nakanishi and Nakanishi, Interview with Asian Americans for Action.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Iijima, Ishizuka and Nakamura, Interview with Chris Iijima.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Alan Iijima, "Memories of Kazu Iijima." January 2007.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Christopher Iijima, "Grandma Was Two People,".January 2007.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Omatsu, "Always a Rebel: An Interview with Kazu Iijima." P. 88.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Michele Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," Woman, Culture and Society, eds. Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974). P. 42.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Iijima and Ishizuka, Interview with Kazu Iijima.

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<sup>xxxviii</sup> Lynne Iijima-Marks, E-Mail to Karen Ishizuka, March 19, 2008.

<sup>xxxix</sup> bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984 and 2000). P. 5.

<sup>xl</sup> Quoted by Gelya Frank in "The Ethnographic Films of Barbara G. Myerhoff: Anthropology, Feminism, and the Politics of Jewish Identity," Women Writing Culture, eds. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995).