

Name _____ Date _____

Yuri Kochiyama

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

Yuri Kochiyama was born Mary Yuriko Nakahara on May 19, 1921, in Los Angeles, California. She was the daughter of Japanese immigrants and had two brothers, Peter and Arthur. As a student at San Pedro High School, she had an outgoing personality and kept a busy schedule. She played sports, studied journalism, and served as the school's first female student council officer. Outside of school, she taught Sunday school and wrote for a local newspaper.

\n

Her life changed dramatically on December 7, 1941. That day, the Japanese Empire bombed Pearl Harbor, an American naval base near Honolulu. One day later, the US declared war against Japan.

\n'

Notes

2. b'

Notes

Tensions between the US and Japan had been building for years before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the attack, there was a widespread public belief that Japanese immigrants living in Hawaii had helped plan it. This belief was encouraged by both private organizations and the US government, who began to release anti-Japanese propaganda full of racist stereotypes. Posters, movies, and songs compared Japanese people to rats, apes, demons, and other creatures. They encouraged Americans to hate all Japanese people, even those who were American citizens. Japanese Americans often faced discrimination from their coworkers and neighbors.

\n

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, Kochiyama's father was arrested by FBI agents, who claimed he was a potential threat to national security. He had recently had surgery and was in ill health, and he died the day after he was released.

\n'

3. b'

Notes

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. This order gave the War Department the authority to declare any part of the country a restricted military area from which any or all persons may be excluded. Japanese Americans were never specifically mentioned, but the order was written with them in mind. Japanese American citizens living in California, Oregon, Washington, and southern Arizona were forced to leave their homes and report to one of 10 internment camps around the US. Eventually, nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans were interned. About 60 percent were Nisei, meaning Japanese Americans who were born in the US. Of the rest who were Issei, or born in Japan, many had lived in the United States for decades.

\n

The Nakahara family was sent to live in a prison camp in Arkansas for three years. Life at the camp was difficult, but Yuri did her best to use her time meaningfully. She organized other young women at the camp to write letters to the thousands of Nisei soldiers who were serving their country during the war. Her experience at the camp, as well as her glimpse into the Jim Crow South, raised her social consciousness and sparked her desire to become an activist for equal rights.

\n'

4. b'

Notes

Yuri Kochiyama was released from the Jerome Relocation Center in 1944 to help run a USO center for soldiers in Mississippi. There, she met her future husband, a soldier named Bill Kochiyama. They married two years later and moved to New York City. The Kochiyamas lived in public housing projects for over a decade. They listened to their neighbors, who were mostly Black and Puerto Rican, talk about civil rights and wanted to join their cause. Eventually they moved to Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood of NYC, where they joined several activist groups. Their apartment became a meeting place for activists to gather.

\n

In 1963, Yuri Kochiyama attended a protest about discriminatory hiring practices and was one of hundreds to be arrested and sent to a Brooklyn courthouse. Malcolm X visited the courthouse to support the protesters, most of whom were Black. At first she wasn't sure if she, a non-Black activist, should approach him. But she decided to introduce herself, and the two became friends. Kochiyama was more moderate than Malcolm X at first. She believed in integration, not separation. But the more she studied his ideas, the more radical she became. She joined Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity. She also became Muslim for a time. On February 15, 1965, Kochiyama went to see her friend give a speech at the Audubon Ballroom in Washington Heights. As he spoke, three members of a rival Black Muslim group shot him. Kochiyama held Malcolm X's head in her lap as he lay dying.

\n'

5. b'

Notes

Over the next few decades, Kochiyama supported various causes, which she considered interconnected in the name of equal rights for all. She protested against the Vietnam War and campaigned for nuclear disarmament and Puerto Rican independence. She fought for the liberation of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a journalist and political activist who was sentenced to life in prison for a murder he claims he did not commit. In the 1980s, she and her husband pushed for reparations and a formal apology from the US government for Japanese American internees. President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which granted \$20,000 to each surviving internee, in 1988. Kochiyama remained politically active until her 90s, encouraging young people to become activists. Kochiyama died on June 1, 2014, but her legacy continues to inspire activists of all ages.

\n'

