

IN MEMORIAM

Afro-Asian People's Warrior

Richard Aoki, 1938–2009

Diane C. Fujino

Based on my experience, I've seen where unity amongst the races has yielded positive results. I don't see any other way for people to gain freedom, justice, and equality here except by being internationalist.

—RICHARD AOKI¹

Richard Masato Aoki's memorial at the University of California, Berkeley, on May 3, 2009, began with a processional of former Black Panther Party (BPP) members carrying a large painted banner proclaiming Richard Aoki a "People's Warrior."² A large black panther leaped out from the center of the banner across a red star symbolizing revolution, with black lettering against a light blue background, the colors of the Black Panther uniform. The banner identified Aoki as a "Black Panther and TWLF member," signaling his two most recognized affiliations. Though Aoki's membership in the BPP is unknown to the public, in activist circles, Aoki is revered as the leading non-Black member of the BPP. He was also a visible leader and dynamic spokesperson for UC Berkeley's Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strike. The banner offered only one sign of Aoki's involvement with the Asian American movement—a small button on his black beret with the Chinese character, or *kanji* in Japanese, for "East," adopted by the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA). As on the banner, Black militancy looms large in Aoki's public image, but his own practice also demonstrated strong commitments to Asian American and Third World

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radicalism, grassroots activism, and the creation of educational opportunities for marginalized students.

Born on November 20, 1938, in San Leandro, California, Aoki was a quintessential East Bay person. He lived his entire life in the East Bay, primarily in Oakland and Berkeley, save for the three years that he was in the Topaz concentration camp in Utah and the year he spent at the Fort Ord army base in Monterey, California. To him, traveling the thirty minutes across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco was like going to a different state. Despite his physical provinciality, Aoki was profoundly worldly in his politics and life philosophy. By his own account, Richard's happy childhood ended at age three with his family's incarceration during World War II, an experience that turned his father's patriotism into disillusionment and broke up his parents' marriage. Perhaps it was the threats to Japanese American safety during the war, or perhaps it was the prescription of 1940s masculinity, but even as a youngster inside Topaz, Richard saw himself as the protector of his "baby brother," David, only fifteen months his junior. After the war, Richard moved to West Oakland to live with his father, brother, an uncle, and his immigrant grandparents in the Aokis' pre-war home. Having already learned a hard lesson in anti-Japanese racism, Richard learned about poverty and anti-Black racism on the streets of West Oakland. He played on the railroad tracks for lack of other recreational activities, learned from his homies to run from the police, and engaged in, as he put it, "five-finger shopping" and "midnight auto supply."

Like other boys growing up amid the Cold War's military buildup and national anxieties about nuclear blowback (and in most periods throughout the constant US engagement with war), Aoki developed a love of guns. After receiving gifts of coveted toy guns, Richard and his brother would play endlessly with their Colt .45 replicas and revolver-style toy cap guns. By age thirteen, Richard was an accomplished artist, proudly sketching lifelike military aircraft—on old Army Air Forces letterhead, no less. Even before he graduated from Berkeley High School, Aoki eagerly joined the US Army and served in the then-required military reserves.³ After facing racism in the Army, experiencing labor exploitation, and interacting with Left organizers in numerous working-class jobs, Aoki grew to political consciousness.

By the early 1960s, Aoki joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its youth group, the Young Socialist Alliance, because they were "the most radical game in town." In early 1964, after returning to school full-time, Aoki started the Socialist Discussion Club at Merritt College. At Merritt, soon to be the birthplace of the BPP, Aoki began exchanges with BPP co-founders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton of the Soul Student Advisory Council. A voracious reader since childhood—he remembered reading six hundred books in a year from the public library—Aoki had already read Marx, Engels, and Lenin before joining the SWP. Through the influence of Newton, Seale, and the Black na-

tionalism flourishing at Merritt College, Aoki devoured the works of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and other Black writers. Interestingly, it was through his SWP contacts that Aoki introduced Newton and Seale to some of the most penetrating and radical writings of Malcolm X. The SWP's newspaper, *The Militant*, regularly published Malcolm's speeches—copies of which Aoki gave to Newton and Seale—and SWP leader George Breitman published a collection of Malcolm's speeches, *Malcolm X Speaks*, in 1965.⁴

In the couple of years before the BPP formed, Newton, Seale, and Aoki, often over wine and cheese or a bottle of scotch, had many lengthy political discussions about socialism, Third World revolutionaries, and organizing strategies. So when Newton and Seale wrote the BPP's Ten-Point Program in October 1966, it was not surprising that they ran it by Aoki for his input. Aoki thought it was outstanding and helped them reproduce it; he also stressed it was no easy task to cut stencils and make mimeographed copies. Seale credited Aoki with being the Panther most well-read in Marxism-Leninism in the earliest years of the Party.⁵

Aoki was the “Japanese radical cat” and “Third World brother,” as Seale famously stated in *Seize the Time*, who supplied the first two guns to enable the BPP's legendary police patrols.⁶ This was also an act of solidarity—an Asian American offering tangible support to a Black revolutionary group to stop police brutality on the streets of Oakland. It also reflected Aoki's lifelong fascination with guns. Panther leader Elbert “Big Man” Howard, when he met Aoki around 1966, was shocked by the “biggest .357” he had ever seen on “this little guy.”⁷ Aoki consistently went out “packing” and regularly carried a gun (stored in a briefcase) with him on campus because “you got to be ready.” Aoki believed that the need for self-defense was self-evident in a community bombarded by police brutality and the violence of everyday racial and economic oppression, and so tended to teach the pragmatics of weaponry and gun safety rather than any political philosophy of self-defense. But he himself was influenced by Frantz Fanon's thesis on the use of violence as a psychological cleansing force directed against colonial oppression and by Mao's statement that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”⁸ Still, Aoki, like the Panthers, primarily engaged a performative use of the gun to fight off the state's “monopoly on physical force.”⁹ When he used his Army training to teach self-defense, his first emphasis was on gun safety. In the Third World Strike at UC Berkeley, Aoki terminated plans to take power from the police when his assessment detected danger for student strikers. Aoki was like a “gun with the safety on,” using the symbolic power of violence to stop violence.¹⁰

A few years before participating in Berkeley's 1969 Third World Strike, Aoki had already embraced internationalism and Third World radicalism. His politics developed in the historic period following the 1955 Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, and alongside the 1966 First Solidarity Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America in Cuba. Through the

SWP, which formed a backbone of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, Aoki grew to support the Cuban revolution. In 1965, Aoki was part of the International Secretariat of the Vietnam Day Committee (VDC) in Berkeley, working to launch concurrent protests against the war in Vietnam in some eighty US cities as well as in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Seeking an endorsement of these International Days of Protest, Aoki wrote (via an SWP contact in Canada) to the Black revolutionary Robert F. Williams, then exiled in Cuba.¹¹ Thus began Aoki's correspondence with Williams and his distribution of Williams's US-banned publication, *The Crusader*. As an act of Afro-Asian solidarity, Williams—exiled later in China—solicited from Mao in 1963 and 1968 two statements in support of Black liberation.¹²

Aoki was a founding member of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), formed by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee. He joined AAPA at a moment when another group, the Tri-Continental Student Committee (Tri-Con), composed of radical foreign students and a couple of US-born radicals, disintegrated as a result of its bold public program to raise funds for the National Liberation Front (NLF) of Vietnam. Aoki's promotion of internationalism and self-defense were evident on the flyer he designed, containing a picture of the world resting on an outstretched arm and a hand gripping an "AK47-M68 hybrid."¹³ As the person who reserved the room for the event, Aoki was called into the vice chancellor's office and threatened with charges of "treason and sedition" unless the group desisted from fundraising for the NLF.¹⁴ The day after the event, Aoki recalled, "was a warm day, but some people in Berkeley must have wondered why the fireplace was going full blast. We burned our membership list, our mailing list, our correspondence . . . and [Tri-Con] dissolved."

Despite differences in membership—with AAPA being largely made up of US-born Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos—AAPA was, in its Third World focus and radical politics, the ideological successor of Tri-Con. At an event announcing AAPA's formation, Aoki was selected to read its program:

We Asian Americans support all non-white liberation movements and believe that all minorities in order to be truly liberated must have complete control over the political, economic, and educational institutions within their respective communities. . . . We unconditionally support the struggles of the Afro-American peoples, the Chicanos and the American Indians in their efforts to attain freedom, justice and equality. . . . We Asian Americans oppose the imperialist policies being pursued by the American government. . . . In conclusion I would like to add that the Asian American Political Alliance is . . . an action-oriented group and we will not just restrict our activities to merely ethnic issues, but to all issues that are of fundamental importance pertaining to the building of a new and better world.¹⁵

From its beginnings in Berkeley in May 1968, AAPA branched out in three significant directions. First, at the Asian Experience/Yellow Identity symposium, held at UC Berkeley on January 11–12, 1969, Asian American organizations from thirteen campuses throughout California and beyond decided to establish themselves as AAPA chapters, including at San Francisco State College, where AAPA helped establish the first School of Ethnic Studies in the nation; at Yale University, where AAPA helped create *Amerasia Journal*; and at Columbia University, where AAPA helped found the first national Asian American revolutionary organization, I Wor Kuen. Together, this loosely based national alliance of AAPA groups, inspired by Berkeley's AAPA, helped spark the emergence of the nationwide Asian American movement.¹⁶

Second, Berkeley AAPA members prioritized community issues, including opposing the continuing existence of concentration camps, this time to incarcerate Black radicals and other alleged subversives, again without any benefit of evidence or due process. After AAPA dissolved, around September 1969, many former AAPA members went to work in the community, particularly in the struggle to save the International Hotel as a low-income residence for elderly Filipino and Chinese laborers and in opposition to gentrification in San Francisco.¹⁷

Third, AAPA immersed itself in campus issues. This is the main path taken by Aoki. In winter 1969, when the Third World Strike for ethnic studies emerged at UC Berkeley, Aoki became the chair of AAPA and a major leader of the strike. Throughout, he emphasized Third World solidarity and equality by, for example, promoting equal representation and decision-making power across the four major racial groups comprising the Third World Liberation Front. The most famous image of the strike—featuring Aoki, African American Charles Brown, and Chicano Manuel Delgado with their outstretched hands on top of one another's—is an unambiguous symbol of the Third World unity embodied in the strike.

After the Third World Strike victory established ethnic studies, Aoki became one of the first coordinators and instructors of Berkeley's Asian American studies program. As an instructor, he taught courses on Third World studies, social theory, and Hawaii, and as a coordinator, he emphasized community studies. By the early 1970s, Aoki was physically and emotionally exhausted, resulting from the overwhelming state repression of the radical movements, his own intensity and commitments to justice, and his personal problems. After developing Berkeley's program for its first three years, Aoki embarked on a twenty-five year career as a counselor, instructor, and part-time administrator in the Peralta Community College District. He worked for four years to save the sinking ship that was the Grove Street campus of the original Merritt College that birthed the BPP. When the Grove Street campus closed, Aoki moved to the new Merritt College in the Oakland hills and then to the

College of Alameda; at both campuses, he helped to create Asian American studies, developed support and an infrastructure for marginalized students to transfer to the University of California, supported student groups, and fought for retirement and other benefits for his colleagues as two-time president of the Academic Senate. At the new Merritt College, Aoki was also proud to have helped Black Panthers enroll in school or obtain campus jobs as they responded to Newton's call to organize Panther electoral campaigns for Oakland politics.

Aoki was inspired to reinvigorate his grassroots activism following the creation of BPP commemorations inspired by Huey Newton's death and the TWLF 20th reunion, both in 1989, and again as a result of the changed US political landscape following 9/11. While his activism waxed and waned, he remained a radical thinker throughout his life and one concerned with "freedom, justice, and equality" for peoples around the world. Recovering from a recent surgery, he dragged himself to the TWLF 30th anniversary activities and was out daily in support of the 1999 UC Berkeley hunger strikers in their struggle to strengthen ethnic studies.¹⁸ As he proclaimed, "We didn't end the strike in 1969. We declared a moratorium." He spoke out against US imperialism, foreign invasions, and racism as vehemently in 2003 as he had in 1965. For Aoki, the struggle for justice was ever ongoing, as long as there were people anywhere suffering from oppression.¹⁹ He saw himself in the spirit of Bandung, Mao, Malcolm, Fanon, and Che, to "Create Two, Three . . . Many Vietnams," to spread the fire of resistance in the East Bay and throughout the world.²⁰

NOTES

Note: This piece is based on my extensive interviews with Aoki and archival research for the book project *Samurai among Panthers*.

1. Qtd. in e-mail by Harvey Dong for the Richard Aoki Commemorative Committee, announcing Aoki's death, March 2009.

2. Pete Bellencourt created the banner, sponsored by the It's about Time/BPP Alumni; see www.itsabouttimebpp.com. While *warrior* often connotes masculinist and military strategies, I use the term in its fullest context to refer to service, sacrifice, and militancy in supporting the community. Aoki died on March 15, 2009; see ramemorial.blogspot.com.

3. Aoki was in the US Army from October 1956 to October 1964, including one year of active duty and seven years in the reserves (Aoki, Honorable Discharge certificate). Young men in the United States were expected to participate in military service via the Universal Military Training (UMT) Act, passed by the US Congress in 1951 and modified in 1955. The UMT required men, ages 18–28, to serve in active duty for a period of six months, followed by seven and a half years of reserve service in the armed forces. While the draft was also in effect at the time (1940–1972), it was barely noticed between the Korean War and the Vietnam War buildup. See House Committee on Armed Services, US Congress, "Universal Military Training" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1952), 1–5; House Committee on Armed Services, US Congress, "Reserve Forces Act of 1955" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1955), 1–8.

4. George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

5. Bobby Seale, interview with author, Oakland, CA, September 2, 2003.

6. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1991), 72–73, 79.

7. Elbert “Big Man” Howard, interview with author, Forestville, CA, November 18, 2005.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
9. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 202–205.
10. Douglas Daniels, conversation with author, Santa Barbara, CA, March 15, 2010.
11. Richard M. Aoki, letter to Robert F. Williams, September 12, 1965, sent via Vernel Olson, September 25, 1965.
12. Mao’s statements in support of Black liberation (1963, 1968) were published in *The Crusader* along with articles lauding revolutionary China (October 1964 special edition on China, 1–10; February 1964, 6–7; March 1968, 12–14); rpt. in *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 91–96.
13. Tri-Continental Student Committee, “Mass Meeting in Support of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam,” flyer, n.d.
14. William Boyd, letter to Richard Aoki, March 31, 1968.
15. Richard Aoki, “AAPA Rally,” speech, July 28, 1968. His speech was closely based on AAPA’s program, “AAPA Perspectives,” *AAPA Newspaper*, Summer 1969.
16. Harvey C. Dong, “The Origins and Trajectory of Asian American Political Activism in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1968–1978” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), 50–51; Karen Umemoto, “‘On Strike!’ San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–69: The Role of Asian American Students,” *Amerasia Journal* 15, no. 1 (1989), 3–41; William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 19–26, 207–217; Fred Ho, ed., *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), 399.
17. Yuji Ichioka, “Would You Believe Concentration Camps for Americans?” *AAPA Newspaper*, November–December 1968, 3; Estella Habal, *San Francisco’s International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-eviction Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).
18. Aoki is featured in “On Strike! Ethnic Studies, 1969–1999,” produced and directed by Irum Shiekh, distributed by Progressive Films, 1999.
19. In a rare moment in our interviews, Aoki got choked up and teary-eyed as he discussed *The Grapes of Wrath*, both the widely read novel (Viking, 1939) and immensely popular film (20th Century-Fox, 1940), known for its heart-wrenching, poignant scenes of human suffering caused by capitalist exploitation. Aoki paraphrased Tom Joad telling his mother, “Wherever there’s oppression, I’ll be there.”
20. Che Guevara’s speech, “Create Two, Three . . . Many Vietnams, That Is the Watchword,” was written for Tricontinental (or the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, OSPAAAL)—established after the 1966 conference in Havana—and published in the inaugural edition of *Tricontinental* magazine on April 16, 1967. See reprint in David Deutschmann, ed., *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution: Writing and Speeches of Ernesto Che Guevara* (Sydney: Pathfinder, 1987), 347–360.