

# Peace in the Valley: For Chris Iijima

## I. INTRODUCTION

This address was given by Professor Mari Matsuda\* on October 14, 2005, at the Na Loio Keeper of the Flame Awards Dinner.<sup>1</sup> Professor Chris Iijima was one of the awardees. He passed away on December 31, 2005.

## II. ADDRESS

We are the children of the migrant workers  
We are the offspring of the concentration camp  
Sons and daughters of the railroad builder  
Who leave their stamp on Amerika

We are the children of the Chinese waiter,  
Born and raised in the laundry room  
We are the offspring of the Japanese gardener  
Who leave their stamp on Amerika<sup>2</sup>

Those lyrics by Chris Iijima and Nobu Miyamoto created a community, by putting down on vinyl what they called “a song of ourselves,” at a time when we were otherwise absent from the space called popular culture. I first heard that song not off the famous *Grain of Sand* album,<sup>3</sup> but sung at a Nuclear-Free Hawai‘i fundraiser at Harris Memorial Church, performed by earnest young ethnic studies professors from the University of Hawai‘i. That song traveled from Harlem to Honolulu. It was part of a huge wave of activism that picked up Asian Americans across the nation and plucked them down in sit-ins and

---

\* The author thanks Sonny Ganaden and Arash Jahanian for excellent research assistance. c. Mari Matsuda 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1983, Na Loio Immigrant Rights and Public Interest Legal Center is a public interest law firm serving poor and low-income immigrant families. See Na Loio, Immigrant Rights and Public Interest Legal Center, <http://www.naloio.org> (last visited Nov. 7, 2006). Na Loio annually awards The Keeper of the Flame Award, which is given to individuals who demonstrate lifelong commitment to social justice movements.

<sup>2</sup> CHRIS IJIMA, JOANNE MIYAMOTO & CHARLIE CHIN, *We are the Children, on A GRAIN OF SAND: SONGS FROM THE BIRTH OF THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT* (Bindu Records 1997) (1973).

<sup>3</sup> CHRIS IJIMA, JOANNE MIYAMOTO & CHARLIE CHIN, *A GRAIN OF SAND: SONGS FROM THE BIRTH OF THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT* (Bindu Records 1997) (1973). In the early 1970s, Chris became known as a singer-songwriter with Yellow Pearl, a trio consisting of Chris, Joanne, and Charlie, which toured the country singing about Asian American identity and freedom struggles. *A Celebration of Life: Remembering Chris Iijima*, UH NEWS, Jan. 12, 2006, <http://www.hawaii.edu/cgi-bin/uhnews?20060112111139>.

fundraisers and up against police lines<sup>4</sup> where the motto “serve the people” was not just theory, but also practice. It was life. It was music. It was a way to change the world, and Chris wrote the soundtrack.

The first time I saw Chris, he was speaking at a meeting of the East Coast Asian American Student Union,<sup>5</sup> a semi-political but largely social gathering of college kids.<sup>6</sup> I have learned over the years that law schools are adept at finding faculty of color who are smart and ineffectual. So, frankly, I was not expecting much when this Professor Iijima got up to talk.

I was concentrating on preparing my own remarks, when I was hit by the whirlwind that is the public Chris Iijima. He got up and assumed the posture of a pugilistic grizzly bear. He actually held his fist in the air at one point. He leaned into the microphone, then backed up, as if winding up for a punch, then came booming forward again, pacing rapidly to the front of the stage. He exhorted and orated and scolded the roomful of earnest pre-professionals. “Get out there and DO something for the people who sacrificed so you could get your precious college education.” He talked about power. He talked about oppression. He talked about racism. And when he sat down I looked at him and said, “Where did YOU come from?”

“Harlem,” he said.

And then I got it. This was one of those “Malcolm Asians.” Like Yuri Kochiyama,<sup>7</sup> like the Issei<sup>8</sup> communists<sup>9</sup> who drank whiskey and read Lenin,

<sup>4</sup> See generally ASIAN AMERICANS: THE MOVEMENT AND THE MOMENT (Steve Louie & Glenn K. Omatsu eds., 2001).

<sup>5</sup> The East Coast Asian American Student Union is an intercollegiate organization founded in the Ivy League in 1978. The group describes itself as “serv[ing] the social, political and educational needs of Asian American students.” See East Coast Asian American Student Union, <http://www.ecaasu.org/index.php?category=home> (last visited Nov. 7, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> This speech took place in 1993 at the State University of New York at Albany.

<sup>7</sup> Yuri Kochiyama (1921- ) is a grassroots civil rights leader who has advocated international political prisoner rights, nuclear disarmament, and Japanese American redress for World War II internment. She was a close friend and associate of Malcolm X, and she was by his side at his assassination in 1965. See generally DIANE C. FUJINO, HEARTBEAT OF STRUGGLE: THE REVOLUTIONARY LIFE OF YURI KOCHIYAMA (2005); YURI KOCHIYAMA, PASSING IT ON (2004).

<sup>8</sup> First-generation immigrants from Japan.

<sup>9</sup> Japanese socialists came to the United States beginning in 1904 in response to persecution in Japan, and they established their own organizations. The Japanese Socialist Group in America, formed in 1919, became a branch of the United Communist Party of America as the Japanese Communist Group in America in 1921. The group stated there were 100,000 Japanese people living in California and another 110,000 in Hawaii at the time. See generally Foreign Language Federations (1890s – 1930), Japanese Socialist Movement in America, <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/eam/lf/lfedjapanese.html> (last visited Nov. 7, 2006); Sen Katayama, *Japanese Socialists in America*, in THE AMERICAN LABOR YEAR-BOOK 137-38 (1916); Yuji Ichioka, *A Buried Past: Early Issei Socialists and the Japanese Community*, AMERASIA JOURNAL (July 1971).

like the New York artist collectives<sup>10</sup> that took the Japanese woodblock style and made prints of workers and demonstrations and evictions.

And Chris said to me, “You’re Mari Matsuda? You’re married to Chuck Lawrence,<sup>11</sup> whose sisters are Paula Wehmiller<sup>12</sup> and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot?<sup>13</sup> Gee, isn’t that kind of intimidating?” Chris knew Paula because they had both taught at the Manhattan Country School, a successful experiment in utopian, progressive education—a place where teachers and students are all learners, involved in the joint project of education, where education has as its end justice, peace, and humanity.<sup>14</sup> I put the pieces of the story together. This was the *Grain of Sand* guy, the one who wrote the song sung by those young ethnic studies professors. He talks like Malcolm and teaches like Paula. In that moment, I was inducted into the Chris Iijima fan club.

---

<sup>10</sup> An example is the political art of Hiroharu Nii, who founded Hanga Undo Kyokai (Japan Print Movement Society) with Makoto Ueno and Jiro Takidaira. HELEN MERRITT & NANAOKO YAMADA, *GUIDE TO MODERN JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS: 1900-1975*, at 108 (1992). With Takidaira, he produced *Hanaoka Monogatari* (Story of Hanaoka), a series of prints on Chinese mine workers forced into labor. *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Professor Charles Lawrence has taught at Georgetown University Law Center since 1992, after teaching at the University of San Francisco and Stanford Law School. He is a pioneer of critical race theory. Professors Lawrence and Matsuda have co-authored two books and are currently writing a third. See Charles R. Lawrence, III, [http://www.law.georgetown.edu/curriculum/tab\\_faculty.cfm?Status=Faculty&Detail=281](http://www.law.georgetown.edu/curriculum/tab_faculty.cfm?Status=Faculty&Detail=281) (last visited Nov. 7, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> The Rev. Paula Lawrence-Wehmiller is a gifted teacher and educational consultant. She has taught graduate and undergraduate education courses, directed a day-care center, and served as principal of an elementary school. She was ordained to the Episcopal priesthood in 1998. See Association of Independent Schools in New England, *Retreat for School Heads* with Rev. Paula Lawrence Wehmiller, [http://www.aisne.org/member\\_services/professional\\_dev/calendar\\_detail.asp?eventid=14116](http://www.aisne.org/member_services/professional_dev/calendar_detail.asp?eventid=14116) (last visited Nov. 7, 2006); see also PAULA LAWRENCE-WEHMILLER, *MIRACLE OF THE BREAD DOUGH RISING* (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot is a sociologist and professor of education at Harvard University. See Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty\\_research/profiles/profile.shtml?vperson\\_id=440](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty_research/profiles/profile.shtml?vperson_id=440) (last visited Nov. 7, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Inspired by the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Manhattan Country School has the dual mission of providing “equal opportunit[ies] . . . to students of a pluralistic society” and serving as a model for the desegregation of American schools. Manhattan Country School, [http://www.manhattancountryschool.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=239](http://www.manhattancountryschool.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=239) (last visited Dec. 14, 2006); see also AUGUSTUS TROWBRIDGE, *BEGIN WITH A DREAM: HOW A PRIVATE SCHOOL WITH A PUBLIC MISSION CHANGED THE POLITICS OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN AMERICAN EDUCATION* (2005); Gus Trowbridge, *Progressive Education and Civil Rights*, *ENCOUNTER*, Summer 2004, at 5; Damaso Reyes, *An Upper East Side Success Story, A Mirror to City’s Diversity*, *NEW YORK AMSTERDAM NEWS*, Nov. 6, 1997, at 21.

Pat<sup>15</sup> asked me to say something tonight honoring Chris as he receives the most prestigious social change award offered in the state of Hawai'i. Some of you know him well; many of you have never met him—for all of us, I searched for words that convey the essence of this human being, why we should all be his students, and why we honor him tonight.

I decided the way to do this is to sit at his feet as a student and see what there is to learn, gathering the yellow pearls—a random selection of five things Chris would like us to know.

Chris would like you to know that there are Hawaiian words for every kind of rain that falls in these islands, and that when the whisper mists of the *tuahine* rain fall in Manoa, as the late afternoon sun comes in from the west turning everything gold, you must stop, and feel that you are smaller than the rain. Take a deep breath, and notice. Remember that the Hawaiian people are the first people of this place, and their relationship to the rain is the one that recognizes what human beings need to survive and thrive.

Chris would like you to know that when Asian Americans gathered at *Grain of Sand* concerts, they heard songs in Spanish as well as English, because the movements for the liberation of Puerto Rico, to organize migrant farmworkers, to claim rights for Latino immigrants, were integral to the movement for Asian American liberation.<sup>16</sup> And the claim of Puerto Rican sovereignty is a cousin of the claim for Hawaiian sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Whatever move is made to kill the dream of sovereignty will not succeed. The dream will never go away because the human will to freedom will never go away, and someday *Puertorriqueños* and *Kanaka maoli* will regain control of their homelands.

Chris would want you to know that there are schools where rich children and poor children, Black, brown, yellow, and white children, are learning side by side with resounding success. Chris knows the teachers who know how to do this. Right in the middle of New York City, where school after school is labeled failing, there is the school where Chris and his wife Jane taught, where children from poor and working class homes are treated as learners, doers, and shapers of their world, with the predictable result that they learn and do and shape.

Chris would like you to know something about what law and lawyers and law schools can do. It is called justice, and there is no other justification for the existence of law and lawyers and law schools. He wrote this pledge, which

---

<sup>15</sup> Pat McManaman is the executive director of the Na Loio Immigrant Rights and Public Interest Legal Center. See *supra* note 1.

<sup>16</sup> As Chris sang, *Hablamos la misma lengua, porque luchamos por las mismas cosas*. (We speak the same language, because we struggle for the same things.)

<sup>17</sup> See James Early, *An African American-Puerto Rican Connection*, in *THE PUERTO RICAN MOVEMENT: VOICES FROM THE DIASPORA* 316 (Andrés Torres & José E. Velázquez eds. 1998) (describing coalition building around the Puerto Rican liberation movement).

all students at the William S. Richardson School of Law take, and which is worth repeating:

In the study of law, I will conscientiously prepare myself; To advance the interests of those I serve before my own, To approach my responsibilities and colleagues with integrity, professionalism and civility, To guard zealously legal, civil and human rights that are the birthright of all people, And, above all, To endeavor always to seek justice. This I do pledge.

In directing the pre-admissions program,<sup>18</sup> Chris has produced an army of students who not only took that pledge, but who live it. He pushed, pulled, and shoved them through law school and into a profession that was not made for brown-skinned justice seekers from rural O`ahu. They are remaking that profession, with Chris's voice in their heads as they go.

And in the end, Chris would like you to know something about meaning. A few years back, before we knew that Chris would hit the wall of illness, he began prodding friends about the Big Questions. He observed with interest that progressive Asian American feminists of a certain age were going to the dojo and turning to Buddha. Chris and I were both raised by Nisei<sup>19</sup> progressives<sup>20</sup> who inculcated a healthy skepticism of religion. If religion is the opiate of the people, why was spirituality suddenly so intriguing to Chris?

Chris Iijima is a humanist and he takes human beings seriously, just as Marx did. A coal miner's son/organizer/communist named George Meyers<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Established in 1975, the William S. Richardson School of Law's Ulu Lehua (Preadmission) Program admits and supports students from historically underserved communities who show great promise as lawyers and community leaders. Professor Iijima served as director from 1998 until his death. See William S. Richardson School of Law, Ulu Lehua Program, <http://www.hawaii.edu/law/information-for-students/prospective-students/how-to-apply/pre-admission-program/index.html> (last visited Nov. 7, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Offspring of Issei. See *supra* note 7.

<sup>20</sup> See Glenn Omatsu, *Always a Rebel: An Interview with Kazu Iijima*, 13 AMERASIA JOURNAL 31 (1986) (an interview with Chris's mother).

<sup>21</sup> George Meyers (1913-1999) chaired the Labor Department of the Communist Party, USA from 1968 until near the end of his life. George Meyers, *Why Join the Communist Party?*, available at <http://www.pww.org/archives97/97-08-30-3.html>. He was a founding organizer of the Congress of Industrial Organizations ("CIO") and president of the CIO Council of Maryland-DC. *George Meyers: 1913-1999*, <http://www.pww.org/past-weeks-1999/George%20A%20Meyers%20%201913-1999.htm>. Prior to that, he was president of the 10,000-member Local 1874 of the Textile Workers Union in Cumberland, Md. *Id.* Meyers served a four-year sentence in federal prisons for violating the Smith Act. *Id.* He ran for U.S. Senate in 1952. See Frostburg State University, Meyers Collection, <http://www.frostburg.edu/dept/library/archives/series.htm> (last visited November 7, 2006). The George A. Meyers Collection at the Frostburg State University Library in Maryland is a collection of Marxist and working class literature built around his personal library. *Id.*

changed the way I see Marx's famous quote on religion.<sup>22</sup> He described his father leaving for the coal mines every morning. His mother would say goodbye with a look of terror on her face, because nearly every family they knew had lost someone in the mines.<sup>23</sup> Every morning's goodbye was quite possibly the last good bye. George's father would say gently to his wife, "Don't worry, the good lord will bring me home to you." That, George Meyers explained, is what Marx meant by the opiate of the people. You don't reach for the drug because you are a stupid dupe to capitalism, but because you are in pain.

Well, aren't we all? Many of us who do social change work throw ourselves into it with life-eclipsing zeal. As a young lawyer I was pulled into doing pro bono work for Na Loio, and stayed up all night at the Xerox machine, borrowed from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union ("ILWU")<sup>24</sup> across the street, making copies of briefs. The quick dinner grabbed from the food court, the stapling assembly line, the agonizing over strategy, the big emergency—no time to sleep or to stop and think about your messed up personal life or the fact of your mortality, or to confront whatever demon it is that breathes down your neck. The People! The Struggle! The Cause!

Chris the activist might have lived that way at times, but Chris the artist never has. The guitar won't resonate for fingers that are denying the existence of the soul. When I picture Chris the musician, I see the eyes close, the brow crease, the head tilt forward in the posture of the seeker. In theoretical terms

---

<sup>22</sup> "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, DEUTSCH-FRANZÖSISCHE JAHRBÜCHER (Feb. 1844).

<sup>23</sup> Coal mining has a tragic history of disaster and death caused by explosions and other accidents. "The deadliest year in U.S. coal mining history was 1907, when 3,242 deaths occurred. That year, America's worst mine explosion ever killed 358 people near Monongah," West Virginia. MINE SAFETY & HEALTH ADMIN., U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, INJURY TRENDS IN MINING (1999), <http://www.msha.gov/MSHAINFO/FactSheets/MSHAFACT2.HTM>. While the fatality rate in coal mining dropped ninety-two percent between 1970 and 2005, the 2004 rate of 28.3 per 100,000 employees for all of mining made it the second-most dangerous job in the U.S. See Pamela M. Prah, *Coal Mining Safety*, 16 CQ RESEARCHER 241, 245-48 (2006).

<sup>24</sup> The International Longshore and Warehouse Union has approximately 42,000 members in more than sixty local unions in California, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and Hawaii, along with a separate marine division and 14,000 members in the autonomous ILWU Canada. See International Longshore and Warehouse Union About Us, <http://www.ilwu.org/about/index.cfm> (last visited Nov. 7, 2006). The ILWU has a long and proud history of supporting the civil rights movement and other progressive causes. See generally SANFORD ZALBURG, *A SPARK IS STRUCK!: JACK HALL & THE ILWU IN HAWAII* (1979).

we might call it thesis/antithesis, or simply contradiction: that a guitar-playing atheist brings forth the voice of God.

So what does it mean that in his most recent publications Chris used words like “love?” He wrote: “[A]s I mature as a law teacher, engaged in my own existential, personal, and professional searches for who I am, part of that journey has also become a search in the pedagogy of my profession for some indication that we collectively are concerned about where each of our student’s ‘who’ is.”<sup>25</sup> He challenges all teachers to take each student’s search for self and meaning seriously.

Some of my students went to visit Chris recently, and from his hospital bed he handed out organizing lessons. “You can organize a campaign,” he said, “where you are in and out—work on one issue, hit it and leave. Or you can organize a community: think about building it and nurturing it as a place of strength from which structural change is possible.”

Chris is the community builder: through his music, his writing, his teaching, through the many struggles for peace and human dignity that he has signed on to in his long life as an activist he has made those around him feel like they belong to something deep and precious.

He said all revolutionaries are motivated by love. Chris is a lover: of the *tuahine* rain, of the dream of sovereignty, of the struggle for justice, of the search for meaning.

To the Iijima family, greetings of aloha and solidarity from everyone in this room. I know in your *enryo*<sup>26</sup> style, you would turn away from expressions of sympathy for the hard road you have faced, remembering that there is a world of suffering out there. Right now, as we sit in this banquet hall, in the park across the street there are those who are unhoused, hungry, ill with no doctor to care for them. There are brothers and sisters of ours in prison, some shipped off like cast-off junk to profit-making prisons five thousand miles away from their island home.<sup>27</sup> There is violence defacing our beautiful land, the raging violence of the fist lashing out in anger, the quiet violence of schools that can’t teach children, the relentless violence of lives worn bare by hard work for lousy pay. You would want us to remember all of this and to respond not with

---

<sup>25</sup> Chris K. Iijima, *Separating Support from Betrayal: Examining the Intersections of Racialized Legal Pedagogy, Academic Support, and Subordination*, 33 IND. L. REV. 737, 739 (2000).

<sup>26</sup> From the Japanese cultural practice of self-denial, holding back with humility.

<sup>27</sup> Private prisons located on the U.S. continent and operated by the Corrections Corporation of America house close to 1,900 Hawaiian inmates. Kat Brady, Commentary, *Time to End Crisis in Hawai‘i’s Correctional System*, HONOLULU ADVERTISER, Apr. 23, 2006, available at <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Apr/23/op/FP604230305.html>. Hawai‘i sends the highest percentage of its state’s prison population to these prisons, and in 2004 and 2005, “41 percent of all inmates shipped to private Mainland prisons were Native Hawaiian.” *Id.*

a liberal's guilt but with the revolutionary's love. Love people enough to go out and work for justice. And then when life knocks you down and you land in that hospital bed, at least you will know that you are part of the struggle, part of something bigger than yourself, that will last longer than any of us, and somehow that will have to make it all make sense.

Chris, we are learning from watching you. You said to me yesterday, "Get some joy!" So I end with that. "The Struggle" should not be like dragging around a bag of rocks. It should be like standing in the middle of the curl of a giant blue wave, carried by inexorable forces of nature, exhilarating, exquisite. Chris, you told me you are looking for serenity. I don't know a damn thing about serenity, but I do know about love. I love you, Chris.

I close with your words, from a song about the *tuahine* rain: "Peace will find the valley, when justice is reclaimed."<sup>28</sup> We'll see you there, Chris Iijima, *meka aloha pumehana, a hui hou*.

---

<sup>28</sup> CHRIS IJIMA, *Tuahine Rain*. This song was not released or published, but it remains in folk memory as part of Chris Iijima's legacy.