

Writing We Hereby Refuse: 3 Things I Learned about Resistance

When I was a little kid in California in the early 1980s, it was cool to be a rebel, or a resister. On the sawdust-covered playground of my elementary school, we played out different scenes from the movie *Star Wars*. A popular scene reenactment was the trash compactor scene, when we would pretend the wooden play structure was closing in on us and we had to fight our way out. I had to play Princess Leia, the only role that felt available for girls then. (I'm glad that today there would be a wider range of roles and role models.)

Some forty years later, I've been learning about what rebellion and resistance has meant over time in the Japanese American community. I've been co-writing a graphic novel with Frank Abe about Japanese American resistance to wartime incarceration, entitled *We Hereby Refuse*. The illustrators are Ross Ishikawa and Matt Sasaki, so it's an all-Japanese American creative team. (All four of us are Sansei, though I'm a younger Sansei; born in the early 1970s, I'm probably more of an age with Yonsei than with other Sansei. My dad Taku married later than most Nisei men, in his late thirties.)

Here is how we describe the book:

Three Japanese American individuals with different beliefs and backgrounds decided to resist imprisonment by the United States government during World War II in different ways.

Jim Akutsu, considered by some to be the inspiration for John Okada's *No-No Boy*, resisted the draft and argued that he had no obligation to serve the US military because he was classified as an enemy alien. Hiroshi Kashiwagi renounced his United States citizenship and refused to fill out the "loyalty questionnaire" required by the US government. He and his family were segregated by the government and ostracized by the Japanese American community for being "disloyal." And Mitsuye Endo became a reluctant but willing plaintiff in a Supreme Court case that was eventually decided in her favor.

These three stories show the devastating effects of the imprisonment, but also how widespread and varied the resistance was.

As a teenager, I used to wish I had been born earlier. When I heard about the civil rights movements of the 1960s, with Black Power and Yellow Power movements, about the singing and the protests, I used to wish that I was alive then. In my suburban romanticization of protest and resistance, growing up with a whitewashed form of American history, I conveniently glossed over the reasons that would spark any forms of protest and resist. Racial profiling, police brutality, family separation, distortion of or erasure from the major narratives and histories that define and are supposed to reflect our national identity—all issues which are still relevant today.

In January 2017 the Wing Luke Asian Museum hired me with the rest of the creative team, in a new era of resistance and protest. #Resist became its own hashtag and bumper sticker. It's been a long journey to completion, but I am proud of what the book has become.

As I worked through years on the research and writing for *We Hereby Refuse*, I realized how much of a learning opportunity it is to write a book. Like the writing of my first book, it is a gift I will be unwrapping and unpacking for many years to come. But here are three central things that I learned about resistance:

1. Resistance has both familiar and unfamiliar faces.

Even in 2021, the range of knowledge about camp history still varies widely across generations, regions of the country, and communities. If folks know much about camp resistance, they are more likely to know about Gordon Hirabayashi, principled objector. Or thanks to Frank's PBS-aired documentary *Conscience and the Constitution* (2000), they know about the Heart Mountain resisters. And there are of course three famous *coram nobis* cases, including Hirabayashi's, plus Minoru Yasui and Fred Korematsu. Many are surprised to know that resistance existed at all among Japanese Americans.

Some know about Mitsuye Endo, but not about the story behind her case which reached the U.S. Supreme Court. When I learned more about her participation in the class action lawsuit filed by other state employees in California, I was struck by their organizing, and how long their case lasted. I also learned more about the impact of Endo's decision to remain in camp for the duration of the case, choosing to spend months longer at Topaz when she could have left. Partly because she remained largely silent about her Supreme Court case—even with her own children, and even through most of the redress campaign—many do not know the larger context of her story. Frank and I chose to feature her story as part of the graphic novel, to bring more about her decision to light. I believe that people need a variety of paths, even quieter ones, to resistance and protest. Hers is one of those quieter stories with a great deal of impact.

I want to add that there are still many more stories of protest and resistance to be told. While we told as many stories of resistance as we could, I hope it will continue to open the doors and conversations for many more. There are the “[Disciplinary Barrack/DB Boys](#),” who resisted combat training in 1944. There is [Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi](#), a Nisei woman who wrote a telegram to President Roosevelt in protest at the beginning of the incarceration and became a distinguished scholar after camp. There are the resisters at Poston. There are the “[Mothers of Topaz](#)” and the “[Blue Star](#)” [Mothers at Amache](#) who wrote petitions, similar to the Mothers' Society of Minidoka that [scholar Mira Shimabukuro](#) wrote about and that we portray in our book. [Tadayasu and Yukiko Abo](#) of Washington State, who participated in a class action lawsuit on behalf of the renunciants. My grandfather Junichi Nimura, the first Issei to be arrested at Tule Lake, for speaking out against the draft. The [Suyama Project](#) at the University of California in Los Angeles also has an exciting online archive of Nikkei dissident history. My dear friend Kiyoko (Nancy) Oda has translated and published portions of her [father's diary here](#), written at the Tule Lake stockade.

I hope that all of us can continue to unpack this journey of protest and resistance together, as we create a larger picture and a more textured history of the legacy of camp. There are more familiar and unfamiliar faces to meet.

2. Resistance is what divides us.

A few years ago, over dinner with a Japanese American colleague, I was surprised to hear him say that he wouldn't want to work on a history of resistance because it was a slight to Nisei veterans. (I should note that I am also the daughter of a Nisei veteran, though my father was drafted during the Korean War.)

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, given my family history. My uncle Hiroshi Kashiwagi was one of the most vocal "No-No Boys," but I usually saw him in the context of family gatherings, rather than community events where at times he still felt slighted or shunned. And in trying to parse the convoluted and fraught history of resistance at Tule Lake, I found that the history itself is still being gathered, curated, as we look at sources long ignored or considered suspect, like Dorothy Swaine Thomas's studies in *The Spoilage*. Two sources on Tule Lake are especially helpful here: Michi Weglyn's incredible *Years of Infamy* (with its chapter on Tule Lake) and Konrad Aderer's documentary, *Resistance at Tule Lake*.

I have now conducted in-depth research now on veterans as well as resisters. In my research, part of what saddens me are the decades-long divisions, bitter fights, misunderstandings, and stereotypes that have hardened into fossilized caricatures. I recently published a short biographical essay of 442nd veteran [Robert Mizukami](#). Writing *We Hereby Refuse* in tandem did not feel like a contradiction or a slight—and vice versa. It felt, actually, more like filling in the broader outlines of a sketched-out story.

The origins of the word "resist," as I discovered, means "to take a stand."

3. Resistance is what unites us.

Because I came of age after the redress movement, I have entered newer circles of Japanese American activist history. On the 2016 Tule Lake Pilgrimage, I met several important community leaders, including Satsuki Ina, Mike Ishii, and Stan Shikuma, several of the co-founders of Tsuru for Solidarity. I also met Nancy Kiyoko Oda, whose leadership has been central in creating/founding the Tuna Canyon Detention Station memorial. I helped with some of the [#StopRago social media campaign](#) against the Rago auction house as it sought to profit off precious Japanese American artifacts made in camp. [Tsuru for Solidarity](#) has been an incredibly powerful and exciting movement, working with other Japanese American organizations like Nikkei Resisters and Japanese Americans for Justice, as well as prison abolitionist organizations such as La Resistencia. I covered Tsuru for Solidarity's [direct action](#) here in my hometown last year, and was moved to see Sansei camp survivors, their children and grandchildren, as well as folks from other communities and movements.

Even with the small contributions I've made to these movements, I have found new energy, unity, and community there. These movements have brought together the Japanese American community, from those born in the camps through those of us in the later generations, and our children. I've gotten to know Japanese American activists from all over the country, and have been inspired by their commitments to social justice. Resistance is what has united us in recent years.

What I really hope we can remember is that the choices were deliberately created, enforced, and made out to be binary: "good/bad," "either/or." In my research I found that more often, there were shared values which

expressed themselves differently. An intense devotion to acting for the good of the family. An intense and youthful idealism. A faith in democracy. A loyalty to the United States Constitution.

Though it will take some work, I believe that we who inherit this history can treat the decisions and stories of our elders with a broad sense of compassion and understanding. More recent graphic novels have acknowledged resisters and veterans, including George Takei's graphic memoir *They Called Us Enemy*, and Kiku Hughes's excellent graphic novel *Displacement*. It's important to remember that the government (and yes, circles within our own community) originated and then deepened the chasms which persist to this day.

For the sake of my Yonsei daughters—*kodomo no tame ni*—I have to believe that a deeper sense of empathy for all of our histories is possible.

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Author

Tamiko Nimura is an Asian American writer living in Tacoma, Washington. Her training in literature and American ethnic studies (MA, PhD, University of Washington) prepared her to research, document, and tell the stories of people of color. She has been writing for Discover Nikkei since 2008.

Tamiko just published her first book, *Rosa Franklin: A Life in Health Care, Public Service, and Social Justice* (Washington State Legislature Oral History Program, 2020). Her second book is a co-written graphic novel, titled *We Hereby Refuse: Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* (Chin Music Press/Wing Luke Asian Museum). She is working on a memoir called *PILGRIMAGE*.