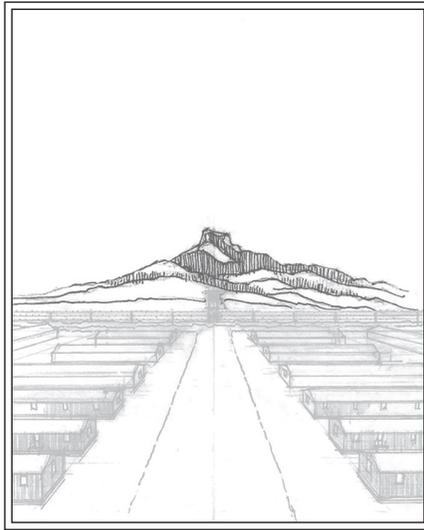


BEYOND

The Memoir of a World War II Japanese American Draft Resister of Conscience

THE BETRAYAL



Yoshito Kuromiya

EDITED BY Arthur A. Hansen

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INTRODUCTION

A Remarkable Man of Consciousness, Conscience, and Constitutionalism

ARTHUR A. HANSEN

There are many different types of memoirs. That authored by Yoshito “Yosh” Kuromiya (1923–2018), *Beyond the Betrayal*, is primarily a transformational one. Its dominant theme is how during his lifetime he repeatedly overcame challenging circumstances, the most significant of them by far being his 1944 decision as a World War II Japanese American inmate at Wyoming’s Heart Mountain concentration camp to resist the military draft. Although a total of some 300 other inmates in the ten War Relocation Authority (WRA)–administered incarceration centers made the same choice as Kuromiya, he alone has produced an autobiographical volume that explores in depth the short- and long-range causes and consequences of his fateful wartime action.

When reading Kuromiya’s memoir, I was powerfully struck by three interwoven strands of his personality expressed within it that help to explain why he is especially well suited to convey to the public the generic plight of the Nisei draft resisters, notwithstanding that each resister’s experience is necessarily distinctive. As foreshadowed in the title of this introductory essay, the three salient components of Kuromiya’s character showcased in *Beyond the Betrayal* are consciousness, conscience, and constitutionalism.

While eluding precise definition, “consciousness” has been characterized in common parlance as the state or quality of being aware of an external object or something within oneself, or put a slightly different way, as the fact of awareness by the mind of itself and the world. As for “conscience,” it has been ordinarily

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construed to mean the inner sense of what is right or wrong in one's conduct or motives, impelling one toward right action. In the case of "constitutionalism," it essentially describes one's belief in and support for the basic principles and laws of a nation or state that determine the powers and duties of the government and guarantee certain designated rights to the people.

With such operational definitions for this trio of behavioral qualities now formulated, we can next proceed to delineate how Kuromiya has exemplified them within the text of his life-review narrative.

In respect to consciousness, although Kuromiya does not mention this word per se until chapter 10, upon reading the four-paragraph segment of his initial chapter about the first days he spent in August 1942 as an inmate at the Heart Mountain concentration camp in Wyoming, we are made acutely mindful that our narrator is a complex person, both a writer and an artist, one who assays his surroundings, scrutinizes his place (and that of others) within them, and explores the nexus between these two processes. "As in a strange dream," records Kuromiya, "my US citizenship had vanished and in its place were rows upon rows of tar-papered barracks encircled by a barbed wire fence with guard towers at intervals, manned by armed soldiers barely visible in the wind-driven dust. It was all so surreal; I wasn't sure what to make of it." Fortunately for readers, the stream of such manifest consciousness as revealed in this passage suffuses the remaining pages of Kuromiya's redolent memoir.

While direct and indirect references to consciousness in *Beyond the Betrayal* are few in number, they are nonetheless quite significant in illuminating how exceedingly Kuromiya prized this quality. His initial allusion to consciousness in chapter 10 relative to the new consciousness of the so-called "Age of Aquarius" of the 1960s¹ is enlarged upon four chapters later, wherein he links this epoch to "a revolutionary transformation of man's collective consciousness" and foretells that this development would be a "long, arduous one . . . [with] no turning back." In between these two references, and more relevant to his education and budding career in landscape architecture, Kuromiya makes mention of environmental consciousness, a concept that he was introduced to in one of his assigned texts at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. This book, authored by Garrett Eckbo (who later employed Kuromiya in his noteworthy firm), was a landmark publication entitled *Landscape for Living*.² This volume impressed upon Kuromiya that environmental consciousness "was everyone's responsibility, and the landscape architect must play a pivotal role in bringing about that awareness through his work." Moreover, when he was hired by Eckbo's progressive company, Kuromiya viewed this opportunity as symbolic of "a new awakening of environmentalism," a fortuitous development that was magnified in significance because of being coincident with the political stirrings of a new generation of human rights consciousness that swept the US and, in the process, "upset the status quo and challenged smug apathy."

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It is perhaps one direct and two indirect references to consciousness by Kuromiya in the latter sections of *Beyond the Betrayal* that serve best to penetrate to the core significance of this state of heightened awareness for him. In recalling the letter and telephone exchanges he had with his much-admired friend Michi Nishiura Weglyn³ in the waning months of her life, Kuromiya writes: “We agreed that our spiritual nature was our true identity, and that our physical manifestation was the means through which we relate to the dimensional world that is essentially an illusion. Illusions end once they serve their purpose in the dimensional realm, and the spirit moves on to further enhance universal consciousness.”

The two indirect references that Kuromiya makes to consciousness both revolve around a group known as The Prosperos.⁴ Members of this school of thought believe that God is pure consciousness. It was through his second wife, Ruth, that Kuromiya, who was never a member of any church, encountered The Prosperos. He became “intensely interested” in this group, primarily because its general philosophy was “based on the premise of teaching one *how* to think as opposed to *what* to think.” Kuromiya was so enamored with this philosophy, in fact, that he chose to end his memoir’s epilogue with a poetic stanza he attributed to The Prosperos:

The truth is that which is so.

That which is truth is not so.

Therefore, Truth is all there is.

While consciousness was assuredly the backdrop milieu and psychological precondition for everything that transpired in Yoshito Kuromiya’s creative life, including the writing of his memoir, what assumes the foreground in *Beyond the Betrayal* are his profound respect for and fierce allegiance to conscience and constitutionalism. The coupling of these two items in terms of the World War II Japanese American experience were accorded prominence most openly in Frank Abe’s 2000 documentary film, *Conscience and the Constitution*, in which Kuromiya appeared. But this pair of elements was also spotlighted in five other extraordinary productions that surfaced at approximately the same time and in all of which Kuromiya played a significant part: Emiko Omori’s documentary film, *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999); William Hohri’s edited compilation of commentaries, *Resistance: Challenging America’s Wartime Internment of Japanese-American* (2000); Eric L. Muller’s historical monograph, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II* (2001); Frank Chin’s documentary novel, *Born in the USA: A Story of Japanese America, 1889–1947* (2002); and Mike Mackey’s edited anthology of essays, *A Matter of Conscience: Essays on the World War II Heart Mountain Draft Resistance Movement* (2002).⁵

Even though Kuromiya overwhelmingly invokes the matter of conscience in his memoir in relationship to his 1944 decision at the Heart Mountain camp to

resist being drafted into the military, he sometimes employs it in a different context. For example, his very first utilization of the term, which appears in chapter 1, is summoned in connection with an incident involving his Issei father, Hisamitsu, which had occurred well before his own birth in 1923. When Hisamitsu discovered with great certainty that one of his heretofore trusted Issei business partners had been bilking the firm's treasury, he found himself in a dilemma. On the one hand, he could confront his friend and alert the others partners, but he reasoned that to do so would result in the offending friend being humiliated and himself having to bear the disgrace of being a snitch. On the other hand, he could simply remain silent and resign from the partnership. His wife, Hana, without hesitation, advised him to "Reveal all!" But, as Yoshito Kuromiya surmised in his memoir, "for Hisamitsu it wasn't that simple. Certainly, he was outraged at being duped, especially by a trusted friend, but the issue was neither about the friend nor even the money. It was about honor. It was about the age-old tradition of a samurai and his sense of honor—or, if you will, his own conscience and personal integrity. His, not theirs." So Hisamitsu, acting on his conscience, promptly turned in his resignation. Toward the end of his memoir, Kuromiya returns to the subject of his father's conscience when commemorating his death in 1969. As expressed in his words, Hisamitsu "never preached virtue [but] . . . merely followed his conscience." This, then, was the family legacy that Kuromiya inherited, to utilize throughout his life as his own conscience dictated. Coming increasingly to believe that "one's conscience is in a sense the language of one's soul," Kuromiya drew unfailingly upon his conscience during the darkest days of his imprisonment at Heart Mountain and the McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary when it was his "constant companion and solitary counsel."

On another occasion in *Beyond the Betrayal*, Kuromiya utilizes the term conscience in the service of a species of gallows humor that bears upon his imprisonment and that of other Japanese American draft resisters and conscientious objectors at the McNeil Island prison. "One morning," writes Kuromiya, "the warden arrived to find a large banner strung across the second-story dorm windows which read: 'If Warden Stevens had a conscience, he would be a CO' (conscientious objector). He immediately ordered the confinement to the dorms of all the COs, which was about one-fourth of our population. He questioned them individually. One CO told us later that he had asked the warden why he was accusing only the COs. The warden retorted angrily, 'You're the only bastards on this island who know how to spell "conscience"!'"

Kuromiya's other references to conscience in his memoir are anything but a laughing matter. In chapter 6 he relates that when, in early 1944, at Heart Mountain he was informed that the US government had changed his draft classification, along with that of other Nisei, from 4-C (enemy alien ineligible for conscription) to 1-A (eligible for conscription), he was gladdened that he was "no longer

considered sinister,” but was dismayed that the reinstatement of his civil rights had not accompanied this change of draft status. He thus became determined that he “could not in good conscience bear arms under the existing conditions.” Later in this chapter Kuromiya enlarges upon the rationale for his intrepid decision. “Had the mainland United States been threatened with invasion,” he reasoned, “I would not have taken this stand. But to join in the killing and maiming in foreign lands, not because they were the enemy but in order to prove my loyalty to a government that imprisoned me and my family without hearings or charges, I felt would be self-serving, irresponsible, and totally without conscience.”

Then, in chapter 8, having allowed that he had thought the name of the organization that coalesced at Heart Mountain to champion the draft resistance movement on constitutional grounds, the Fair Play Committee, was “rather silly,” Kuromiya quickly added that “there was nothing silly about the issues it would soon challenge, nor the compelling principles it would invoke to jar the conscience of all who believed in the sanctity of citizens’ rights.”

Two chapters farther along, after Kuromiya reveals that in 1947, just a few days before he and his fellow draft resisters at the McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary were to be released, one of the most intelligent and respected of them, Fred Iriye—to whom he dedicates *Beyond the Betrayal*—was “accidentally” electrocuted when training the inmate who was to assume his vacated position as supervisor for the penal facility’s entire electrical power system. On the train that took the released draft resisters from Washington to California, reflects Kuromiya, they were absorbed by silently trying to fathom a possible deeper meaning for the “unfortunate accident” suffered by Fred Iriye. Seeking to give retrospective voice to their collective questioning on this occasion, Kuromiya offers this reverie: “Was it some sort of *bachi* [retribution]? Was it instead punishment for self-righteous arrogance? Why Fred? He certainly wasn’t guilty of arrogance. And if not Fred, then who? Maybe all of us—and Fred paid the price. Yet, why should we be punished for what our conscience demanded of us as the only honorable choice, given the circumstances? And where indeed is the arrogance in defending the constitutional principles we swore to uphold?”

In chapter 15 Kuromiya first reflects back on the onset of the war when among Japanese Americans “ethics became a matter of political expedience rather than one of personal integrity guided by one’s conscience,” and then observes how astounded he was in the aftermath of the war to find out how many of his fellow resisters not only “felt it best to let sleeping dogs lie” but also even suggested that he “not be so outspoken about civil justice, constitutional responsibilities, and matters of conscience.” Ultimately, he concluded that “one’s conscious . . . is a very personal matter.” As a consequence, he was very transparent about his prison experiences and on one occasion talked freely and candidly about them to his young daughters, after which they good-naturedly presented him with a tiny doll

attired in a convict's striped suit with a ball and chain attached to one of its ankles. Regarding this doll as a medal of honor, it hung from Kuromiya's desk lamp until the day he died.

In the penultimate chapter of *Beyond the Betrayal* Kuromiya pays homage to three special people he interacted with among many other extraordinary personalities in the post-WWII "psychological and spiritual recovery period of the Japanese American people": James "Jimmie" Matsumoto Omura,⁶ Michi Nishiura Weglyn, and Ehren Watada.⁷ For him, "all of them, in their own time and in their own way, refused to remain silent." Although cognizant of Weglyn's strict adherence to conscience, Kuromiya makes particular reference to Omura and Watada in this regard. Echoing what he had previously written about his father, Kuromiya extols Omura by noting that, "like Papa, Jimmie never spoke of high moral standards, nor of always following his conscience. He merely lived by them. That is, no doubt, why I knew he was a man of impeccable integrity. He reminded me of Papa." With respect to First Lieutenant Watada, who in November 2006 refused on the grounds of conscience to deploy his troops to Iraq and faced the possibility of both a court martial and prison time because he saw no legal or moral justification for the US attacking that country, Kuromiya felt a powerful experiential bond with him. What linked their two acts of resistance, which spanned a period of more than six decades, was that both could bear witness to the same hard truth—"conscience sometimes comes at a high price."

In his epilogue, Kuromiya turns from those individuals he raptly admires to the Japanese American Citizens League, an organization that he roundly condemns. To his mind, the JACL owed an apology to the entire Japanese American community for "falsely claiming" to represent their interest while in actuality "conspiring with our government to surrender our civil and human rights." Moreover, when the JACL leadership urged the mandatory induction of male Japanese Americans from behind the barbed wire of their wartime concentration camps under "the pretext of proving their loyalty," it effectively prevented each man from exercising his right as a citizen "to serve or not according to his conscience."

As for constitutionalism, while Kuromiya never refers in his memoir to this specific term as such, it is pervasively evoked by him through other words with a common base, such as constitution, constitutionality, constitutional, and unconstitutional. For example, in chapter 3, he employs this language in conjunction with the JACL. In wantonly providing the FBI with the names of supposedly "dangerous" Issei in the wake of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, charges Kuromiya, this older Nisei-dominated organization "apparently regarded the need to prove *their* loyalty to the US as a higher priority than the defense of the constitutional and human rights of their own people." This action made it evident to him that the JACL could not be trusted to assume the leadership of the Japanese American community, since it demonstrated starkly that the group's leadership too

readily set aside “constitutional principles” when “confronted with issues of political convenience.” Indeed, these self-appointed Nisei leaders were so anxious to accommodate government orders, however unjust, as a safe survival course for Americans of Japanese ancestry that, in the process, “the US Constitution was abandoned.”

In chapter 5, in reference to his incarceration experience at Heart Mountain, Kuromiya resorts to scathing irony when reacting to the War Relocation Authority’s plans to build a new high school in the middle of the camp: “Thus, our white captors could teach our children the beauty of our United States Constitution while in captivity.” Later in this chapter he communicates to readers of *Beyond the Betrayal* what he believes to be the inescapable issue, then and now, of the World War II Japanese American incarceration experience: “*What is the citizen’s rightful response to constitutional transgressions?*”

Within the succeeding chapter, Kuromiya discusses his responses to the two key questions on the highly controversial and contested “loyalty questionnaire” administered to all Japanese American adult inmates in early 1943 by the US government and endorsed by the JACL. He explains that he answered a somewhat reluctant yes to question 28 (Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks by foreign or domestic forces, and foreswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?), precisely because he had never ever sworn allegiance to the Japanese emperor. On the other hand, he states that his response to question 27 (Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?) was a conditional yes, the condition being that he “first be accorded equal constitutional rights as Caucasian American citizens.”

Farther along in chapter 6, when recollecting his attendance during the dawning of the 1944 year at a mess hall meeting of the newly formed Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee, Kuromiya recounts that he was “captivated” by its chair, the middle-aged Nisei from Hawai’i, Kiyoshi Okamoto, not merely because of his direct demeanor and “brutally crude” language, laced with expletives, but also, and perhaps chiefly, because “he seemed to have an impressive knowledge of constitutional law, indispensable in any civil-rights forum.” During attendance at future FPC meetings, he came to respect the other members of the group’s steering committee, seeing them as principled men “who knowingly jeopardized their own and their families’ welfare in an effort to regain dignity, if not justice, for all inmates.” Thus, on or about March 16, 1944, and not altogether surprisingly, when Kuromiya received his notice to report for his physical exam prior to induction, he refused to comply. This message reverberated in his mind: “NO! This is *my* country! This is *my* Constitution! This is *my* Bill of Rights! I am here finally to defend them. I regret that I had surrendered my freedom. I shall not continue to surrender my dignity nor the dignity of the US Constitution!”⁸

At the beginning of chapter 8, when ruminating about the spirit that gave rise to the Heart Mountain draft resistance movement, Kuromiya opines that it was rooted in “the ancient samurai tradition of honor, commitment, and perseverance.” But in America these values were not, as in Japan, rendered on behalf of a sovereign state or lord but in support of the “Constitution and the Bill of Rights.” Then, when taking up the six-day mass trial that he participated in during June 1944 as a defendant with sixty-two other Heart Mountain draft resisters of conscience at the federal district court in Cheyenne, wherein they were declared guilty of draft evasion by the presiding judge and sentenced to three years in federal prison, Kuromiya characterizes it as a “travesty of justice” representing “yet another blow to our now fragile hope of ever establishing credibility in the idea that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are the supreme law of the land.” Still, he reasoned, an appeal of the verdict would have to be made and a precedent set, “if, in fact, the constitutional integrity of our case was our ultimate goal.”

Following a sprinkling of references to constitutional matters throughout the next nine chapters, in chapter 18 these matters occupy center stage. What arguably sparked Kuromiya’s active involvement in the post–Civil Liberties Act of 1988 campaign to redress the World War II mistreatment of the Heart Mountain draft resistance movement—an activism that had been retarded by his “temporary self-imposed exile” from the Japanese American community—was his participation in the February 21, 1993, dramatic program, *Return of the Fair Play Committee*. Scripted by Frank Chin, the fourth-generation Chinese American playwright and civil rights champion, it was held at the Centenary Methodist Church, located in the heart of Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo district. This event, which brought together the leaders of the FPC and draft resisters from Heart Mountain and some of the other WRA camps with others who supported their actions during (and even) after the war, provided the catalyst for the development of *Conscience and the Constitution*, the documentary film by Chin and Frank Abe (which Abe alone brought to completion in 2000).

It was hoped by Kuromiya that this program and film and similar progressive happenings, building upon the efforts of a select number of reform-minded Nisei and Sansei a decade or more earlier, would bridge the “monstrous chasm” between the mainstream community and “all who protested the inhumane, unconstitutional treatment we were subjected to by the government—abetted by the insidious mind-control tactics of the Japanese American Citizens League.” While he was guardedly skeptical that this healing process would occur, Kuromiya took heart that the reform movement within his racial-ethnic community, in which he was increasingly taking part, had as its focus “the legal and moral supremacy of the US Constitution and a citizen’s fundamental duty to defend it.” He was also inspired by the corresponding upsurge nationwide in cultural diversity, which in concert with technical advancement, had the potential to propel America to

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world leadership “under the humanitarian principles of our Constitution.” At the same time, he was intensely aware that if his community and his country were to experience future redemption, people like himself who had “witnessed the catastrophic barrage of violations of citizens’ rights, the very principles upon which our Constitution is based and is the heart and soul of our country, must not remain silent.”