

Winter Book Review

HISTORY

Examining the stratification of NYC's *Nikkei*

DISTANT ISLANDS: THE JAPANESE AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN NEW YORK CITY, 1876-1930s

By Daniel H. Inouye (University Press of Colorado: Louisville, Colo., 2018, 360 pp., \$34.95, paperback; \$27.95, Ebook)

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"Distant Islands: The Japanese American Community in New York City, 1876-1930s" by Daniel H. Inouye is one of the first books to devote in-depth research into this long overlooked history.

This is the first in a trilogy that will examine the *Nikkei* in New York City. The first volume examines the stratification of the Japanese in New York City along status, class, geographic and religious lines.

The second volume, according to Inouye, will focus on the discriminatory laws that were passed against the *Nikkei*, and the various organizations and movements that developed within the New York *Nikkei* community.

The third volume is set to examine the World War II and post-war years.

Although this is an academic book, it is not bogged down by academic jargon, and it is obvious that Inouye did a great deal of research on both the history of Japan and the Japanese in the United States. His sources include oral history interviews, memoirs, government documents and newspaper articles.

Inouye begins the book by focusing on those who were considered the "elite" class of Japanese in New York as measured by wealth. Readers are introduced to Dr. Jokichi Takamine, who amassed great wealth in the U.S. in the late 1800s, married a Caucasian woman and had mixed-race children. Inouye shows how class and status, rather than ethnic solidarity, came into play when Takamine made decisions on where to live (in the upper class neighborhood, among Caucasians) and with whom to interact with (not the working classing Japanese day laborers).

Inouye also follows the life of the mixed-race children,



showing that while money may have helped alleviate racism directed against the children, it didn't completely shield them.

Inouye also devotes a section to the curious case of Nobuteru Sumida, the first *Nisei* born on the Atlantic Coast. Sumida, a full-blooded Japanese, never knew his birth parents and was raised by a European American foster family. When the U.S. entered World War II, Sumida was incarcerated at the Manzanar War Relocation Authority camp, despite the fact that he was a U.S. veteran of the Spanish-American War.

Through a bit of history detective work, Inouye narrowed down whom Sumida's father and mother may have been and under what circumstances he was born.

In discussing social stratification, Inouye points out that the Japanese in New York City, unlike their counterparts on the West Coast, did not face intense anti-Japanese sentiment, which resulted in the New York Japanese living along an unspoken stratification system imported from Japan. This meant the diplomats and corporate executives held the top tier, followed by the mid-size merchants, small business owners and laborers. *Ryugakusei* or Japanese students studying abroad were considered separate from this hierarchy.

Inouye points out that, among scholars, this hierarchy had not been fully explored, and it is true that most scholarly research has been largely focused on the racial discrimination faced by the *Nikkei* community.

However, a hierarchy, whether acknowledged by scholars or not, did exist even on the West Coast before World War II. Nowhere was this class divide more obvious than in the treatment of the *burakumin* in Northern California. The *burakumin* were the outcast group in Japan and at the bottom of Japan's social order. In Northern California, the *burakumin* lived separately from the local *Nikkei*, and if they went to the local Japanese community center, they sat segregated from the other *Nikkei*.

If volume two is as educational and entertaining as volume one, this entire trilogy is worth a read.