

BOOK REVIEW: HOW LACK OF INTENSE ANTI-JAPANESE SENTIMENT CREATED LESS ETHNIC COHESION AMONG NEW YORK NIKKEI

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Books, Columnists

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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 of books that will examine the Nikkei in New York City, and Volume 1 examines the stratification of the Japanese in New York City along status, class, geographic and religious lines.

Volume 2, according to Inouye, will focus on the discriminatory laws that were passed against the Nikkei, and the various social and political organizations and movements that developed within the New York Nikkei community.

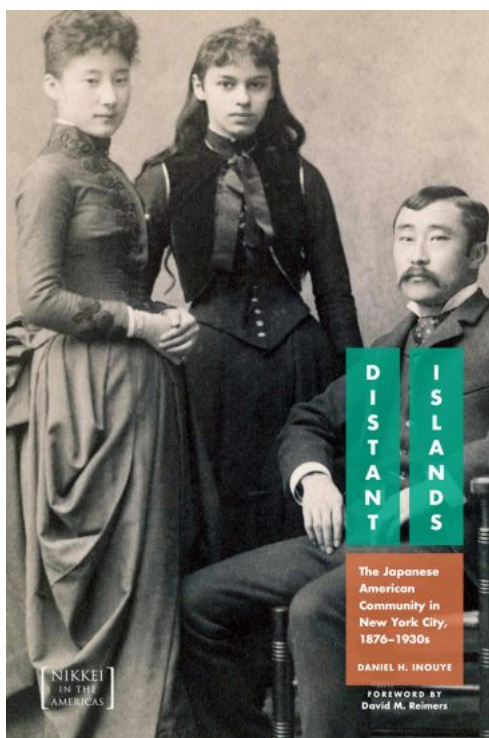
Volume 3 is set to examine the World War II and post-war years.

Although this is an academic book, it is not bogged down by academic jargon and is a smooth read, but despite the non-academic tone, 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 included oral history interviews, memoirs, government documents and newspaper articles.

To keep in line with the theme of class structure, 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-class Japanese day laborers).

Inouye also follows the life of the mixed-race children, showing that while money may have helped alleviate racism directed against them, it didn't completely shield them.

Inouye also devotes a section to the curious case of Nobuteru Sumida, who grew up in New York City and was 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. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was seriously wounded in the Battle of Santiago Bay during the Spanish-American War.



He ended up marrying a Caucasian woman and moved to Los Angeles. 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.

By doing a little history detective work, Inouye was able to narrow down who 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 *kaishain* or 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 within the Nikkei community, and it is true that most scholarly research, to this point, has been largely focused on the racial discrimination faced by the Nikkei community as a whole, rather than on individual social orders, leading to the impression that the Nikkei community was very cohesive.

However, it can be said that a hierarchy, whether acknowledged by scholars or not, did exist even on the West Coast before World War II. Nowhere was this pre-war class divide more obvious than in the treatment of the Burakumin community 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 to watch a movie or see a play, they sat segregated from the other Nikkei.

Today, this hierarchy can still be seen in play among the more recent Japanese immigrants. For example, a Toyota executive from Japan usually lives in the upper-class section of the community and has very little interaction with, say, the Japanese restaurant worker.

On a minor note, since the Nikkei community in New York City is small, readers will most likely recognize names of people mentioned in the book. For example, there is an entire section devoted to Senzo Kuwayama, the father of Yeiichi "Kelly" Kuwayama, a 442nd veteran.

The book is part of the George & Sakaye Aratani Nikkei in the Americas Series and was edited by Prof. Lane Hirabayashi.

Inouye is a Ph.D, historian and an attorney who specializes in analytical narrative history writing, public history, Asian/Pacific American history, and jazz history. He has taught courses at Columbia University, Queens College of the City University of New York, and New York University.

If Volume 2 is as educational and entertaining as Volume 1, this entire trilogy is worth a read. Notes on the second volume indicate that Inouye will discuss the formation of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) in New York City and the presence of the radical Issei. Perhaps discussions of radical Issei may include such colorful characters as illustrator Taro Yashima, the father of the late actor Mako. Stay tuned.