

Melody M. Miyamoto Walters. *In Love and War: The World War II Courtship Letters of a Nisei Couple.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8061-4820-5.

Reviewed by Stephanie Hinnershitz (Cleveland State University)

Published on H-War (January, 2020)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Melody M. Miyamoto Walters's edited collection of her Nisei grandparents' WWII-era courtship letters is a touching primary source that also makes important interventions in the fields of military, gender, and Asian American history. In fact, Walters tends to undersell the significance of her work in her introduction. She rightly proclaims that this treasure trove is "overall ... a personal story ... a family story," but claims that "the information gleaned came not through the rigorous standards of academe or through the personal tallies of human subject forms" (p. xiii). Emphasizing the personal element of her grandparents' letters is a valid point that differentiates this study from others, but *In Love and War* is skillfully edited to ensure a seamless flow between the letters themselves and Walters's introductions to their themes. Combined with careful archival research at the University of Hawaii archives and the Hawaii War Records Depository, the focal point of Walters's work—her grandparents' correspondence—goes far in "address[ing] the complex question of what it meant to be a Japanese American living in Hawaii during World War II" (p. xii).

Organized chronologically and thematically, each of *In Love and War*'s chapters focus on a key theme. Chapters 1 and 2 provide useful background information on Yoshiharu Ogata and Naoko Tsukiya (Walters's grandfather and

grandmother, respectively) as well as the general atmosphere and landscape of Hawaii immediately before and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Chapter 3 delves more into the intricacies of long-distance courtship between Yoshiharu and Naoko when both were teachers in different locations and living in the early days of martial law in 1942, while chapter 4 includes more details on the war efforts of Nisei in Hawaii as well as the maturation of Yoshiharu and Naoko's relationship as they approach marriage. The final chapter as well as the epilogue offer conclusions to the experiences of Japanese Americans more generally during World War II in Hawaii as well as the love story of Walters's grandparents. Clear organization and accessible introductions to the highlighted letters of each chapter allow the reader to absorb the personal stories and history of Hawaii.

But Walters's source base also reveals overlooked gaps in the narrative of Japanese American history, including the role of class in the relationship and experiences of Yoshiharu and Naoko. Far too often, the rich, detailed, and varied lives of Asian Americans and Japanese Americans are grouped into one racialized experience to make convenient generalizations of an ethnic and racial group (something this author is guilty of and is always looking to correct). Walters's grandparents and their letters offer a more nuanced understand-

ing of “local” Japanese in Hawaii. Naoko’s family were members of the merchant class on Oahu, practiced Christianity, and befriended many whites or *haoles*. Naoko’s class background also shaped her schooling and the high value her family placed on education: she graduated from the Teachers’ College at the University of Hawaii in 1940 and worked as an elementary school teacher and librarian. In contrast, Yoshiharu came from a more rural background on Kauai. His parents became plantation workers after arriving in Hawaii in the early 1900s and were practicing Buddhists who largely socialized with other Japanese immigrants. However, Yoshiharu’s family also embraced education as a means for social and economic advancement and he graduated from the Stout Institute in Wisconsin in 1940 with a degree in industrial arts education. Early courtship letters between Naoko and Yoshiharu reveal these class differences in subtle, yet powerful ways. Lacking a strong command of English at times, Yoshiharu often expressed some embarrassment of his writing. He joked with Naoko in a letter from August 10, 1941, and encouraged her to “have a good laugh” at his English as she “probably won’t come across anything funnier” (p. 27). In another exchange, he compliments Naoko on her eloquent letters, which, as he noted, “probably [didn’t] mean much to [her] coming from a guy like [him].” “I’m sure that the social and cultural contacts that you had so far is far beyond that you find in me and I’m sure those people also paid you complements” (p. 36). Naoko and Yoshiharu also playfully exchanged their thoughts on “civilization” and “high culture.” Naoko described her love of Beethoven, but also her disapproval of those who only claim that they like classical music “so they can say things like that” and “get all cultured on the outside” (p. 33). In response, Yoshiharu joked, “About the only time I’d really enjoy reading poetry or listening to symphony is when I’m in bed with perhaps a broken leg” (p. 34). The exchanges between Naoko and Yoshiharu that highlight their class backgrounds speak to the myriad ways that socioeconomic differences

worked in Japanese American communities; they could serve as obstacles or challenges in a relationship but could also be playfully mocked.

Walters’s use of her grandparents’ letters to explore the experiences of Japanese Americans in WWII beyond internment or the service of the Nisei men who fought with the storied 442nd regiment is her most important contribution to the existing literature. Books and articles abound on internment and war service, yet Walters offers an alternate narrative that offers space for exploring those who fall outside of the more documented case studies. Most striking are the different views on patriotism and war service between Naoko and Yoshiharu. While Yoshiharu sought to avoid the draft through his occupation as a teacher and service in the Varsity Victory Volunteer Corps (a civilian engineer unit in Hawaii) as a result of his dedication to traditional familial obligations, Naoko often chided him for his less-than-overtly-patriotic sentiments. Walter explains that as a more rural “outsider,” Yoshiharu lacked a strong connection to the American war cause because his family did not fit the standard image of “American,” while Naoko—being from a more “Americanized” background and having a brother who was in the ROTC—often expressed her desire for Japanese Americans to prove themselves in their war service. Although she detested the “female dictators” who served as administrators and who “[thought] patriotism is saluting the flag and singing the nat’l anthem every morning,” she explained that the “humiliation” among Japanese Americans of having ancestral ties to the enemy would hopefully “give us the chance to show we are as American as we can possibly be” (p. 3). However, Naoko also knew that service took many forms. “Of course you ought to ‘do your duty’ but you can do it better in the job you have right now,” she wrote to Yoshiharu after he previously informed her of his deferment for service (p. 70). Naoko also “did her duty” by being friendly (though, as she stressed to Yoshiharu in many letters, not “too” friendly) to the servicemen stationed in Hawaii. The wartime letters

of Naoko and Yoshiharu move Japanese American history beyond internment and service and allow readers to get a glimpse of life under martial law in Hawaii. As Walters explains, it was not that Yoshiharu or Naoko was oblivious to internment on the mainland or the discrimination faced by Japanese Americans during the war. Rather, their experiences as “local” Hawaiians and Japanese Americans were shaped by their environment and unique backgrounds.

In Love and War is a welcome addition to the scholarship on WWII and Japanese American history—highly recommended for the public as well as specialized scholars. Walters goes beyond her initial goal of uncovering the identity of local Japanese Americans in Hawaii and breaks ground for a new approach to military history that uses personal letters and family histories to uncover the complexities of war, gender, class, and love.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Stephanie Hinnertshitz. Review of Walters, Melody M. Miyamoto. *In Love and War: The World War II Courtship Letters of a Nisei Couple*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54135>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.