

## **CET Japan, Summer 2025 | Anonymous Student**

**Privacy & Sharing:** "I am OK with CET sharing this piece in a public manner, but only if I can remain anonymous."

**Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece?** "Students of Color in Japan."

\*\*\*

### **Reckoning with Standing Out in Japan**

Going into the program, I had read that many students of color had an adjustment period when first arriving in Japan. Growing up in a white-majority community as a black woman in the South, I thought I would be prepared for potential feelings of isolation or standing out in a crowd.

When I first arrived in Osaka, I immediately recognized that I stood out on a day-to-day basis. However, the CET Japan program was full of diversity, so I never felt alone in that fact. Whether it was walking to the *conbini*, taking the train to class, or going out to Umeda after an exam, I was always surrounded by friends who were going through the same thing I was. Even if we did stand out, we stood out together.

The first time I truly felt like an outsider in Japan was when I did my first solo trip to Kyoto. I had left early in the morning to make the most of my day, so the train I caught wasn't very full. I sat down somewhere in the middle of the train, put on my headphones, and went about my business. However, I couldn't shake the feeling of being constantly observed. I realized that the seats next to me remained conveniently empty, even as the train filled up. Whenever I looked up, I would catch a pair of eyes that would conveniently look away the moment we made eye contact.

I realized very quickly that I was being perceived as different in a way that I had never experienced before. This wasn't hostility, which is something I had experienced before in white-majority spaces, but it was a form of isolation. On that train, I realized that for the first time, I was in a space with no one who looked like me. It made me think: how many Black people had I seen since I arrived? Could I be one of the few Black people someone has interacted with? What am I conveying by the way I talk, dress, and act?

I became very self-conscious. I fixed my posture, turned down my headphones, and tried to mimic the body language and train etiquette of the people around me. I didn't want to give people a reason to avoid me, even though I later came to understand that this was just a thing that happened. There was nothing I could do to make myself look less of a "foreigner."

On the way back from Kyoto, an older man sat next to me. I was practicing kanji for an upcoming exam, not even paying attention to my surroundings. Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder. The man had used Google Translate to ask me if I was studying Japanese. I immediately responded,

saying that I was an international student currently studying here. We had a brief conversation, no more than 5 minutes, before he reached his stop. I wonder if he knew how much those 5 minutes meant to me. It was the first time I had felt normal that entire day, and it was something I carried with me the rest of my time in Japan.

As a woman of color, I'm used to being a minority in the room, but being in Japan taught me how to deal with possibly being one of the only people like me in a space, both alone and with others.

One piece of advice that stuck with me, and I hope you take to heart, is this: "No matter what you do, you'll stand out. So stand out." Try to take in the cues and experiences around you, but don't stop being yourself to do it.