

**Okinawa Essay Contest 1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Passively Passing:**

**Exploring Okinawan Identity in the Work of Yamanokuchi Baku**

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**Abstract**

This paper will attempt to expand the discourse on passing through a discussion of the Okinawan writer Yamanokuchi Baku. Through this examination it will be shown that passing can act as a metaphor for the struggles of people trying to navigate an ethnically homogenous society but whose ethnic and national origin are other than the majority. As an Okinawan living in Tokyo in the early 20th century, Yamanokuchi explored in his writing issues such as the perceived domestic orientalization of Okinawa and subsequent discrimination from mainland Japanese. By first introducing a discussion on recent scholarship of passing within America and Europe to establish a theoretical framework followed by a close reading of one of his poems, this paper will demonstrate that Yamanokuchi utilized passing to convey a nuanced understanding of Okinawan identity in Japan and strived to transcend traditional definitions of what it meant to be Okinawan or Japanese.

The notion of passing is one that has been a dominant theme in American literature since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prominently featured in African American texts such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) or Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), the trope has traditionally been contained to a discussion of race in America, such as in the aforementioned novels which tell the story of light-skinned black characters that pass for white in society. However, recent scholarship on passing has made efforts to demonstrate its border crossings in terms of genre and geography as well as areas of identity construction such as sexuality, gender and nationality.

This paper will attempt to expand the discourse on passing through a discussion of the Okinawan writer Yamanokuchi Baku (here forth referred to as Baku). Through this examination it will be shown that passing can act as a metaphor for the struggles of people trying to navigate an ethnically homogenous society but whose ethnic and national origin are other than the majority. As an Okinawan living in Tokyo in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Baku explored in his writing issues such as the perceived domestic orientalization of Okinawa and subsequent discrimination from mainland Japan. By first introducing a discussion on recent scholarship of passing within America and Europe to establish a theoretical framework followed by a close reading of one of his poems, this paper will demonstrate that Baku utilized passing to convey a nuanced understanding of Okinawan identity in Japan and strived to transcend traditional definitions of what it meant to be Okinawan or Japanese.

### **Theorizing Passing**

As mentioned, much of the early discourse on passing has examined it as a phenomenon of African American literature, focused specifically on issues of race, thus limiting its larger

sphere of influence in other regions and areas of identity politics. These works often focused on passing in texts as being situated in a binary between black as oppressed and white as maintaining a greater degree of agency and freedom. Thus, previous critics argued, narratives of passing exhibit a desire of an oppressed people to deny one's original identity and shed it as a means to cross over into the more liberated spheres of society.<sup>1</sup>

However, recent work has moved away from considering passing within the strict boundaries of race. Not only, as will be discussed shortly, can passing occur in terms beyond race, but considering it as simply contained within any binary restricts the greater potential for the exploration and construction of one's identity. In her discussion of traditional approaches to the issue, Anna Camaiti Hostert refers to this binary mode as the "institutionalized view" and argues against viewing passing as a deceptive act. Within her summary of the traditional approach she also voices her concern for its limits, "In so viewing passing as deception, as an individual assuming a counterfeit identity, the tendency has been to understand passing as racial self-hatred...the tendency to scrutinize passing as obvious self-hatred links passing within the pejorative tradition of withholding agency from African Americans."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Hostert argues, such a limited approach to passing actual serves to restrict the opportunity for true agency, and further reinforces an entrenched ideology of race. Moreover, while Hostert's comments are directly addressing passing in the context of African Americans, her critique is valuable when considering passing in different contexts as it has often been the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of early studies of passing see Steven Belluscio's *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (University of Missouri, 2006). In regards to this racial binary Belluscio pointedly notes, "such a conception relies upon a general reductive but long enduring definition as found in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), in which '[f]or all practical purposes 'passing' means that a Negro becomes a white man, that is, moves from the lower to the high caste'."

<sup>2</sup> Hostert, Anna Camaiti. *Passing: A Strategy to Dissolve Identities and Remap Differences*. Translated by Christine Marciasini, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. pp. 12.

case that narratives of passing do indeed center around characters of an oppressed group attempting to pass as a member of a less restricted group. Even within this consideration, other approaches to the issue in recent years seem to acknowledge Hostert's rejection of previous considerations of passing, making efforts to demonstrate that it acts not as a negation of identity, but rather as a subversive act that can unsettle various components of a constructed ideology of hierarchical difference, be it racial or otherwise. Specifically, one mode of interpreting passing is not a reflection of self-hatred, but rather an affirmative action, one of self-exploration and, ultimately, self-empowerment. Kathleen Pfeiffer has embraced this notion quite fully, arguing to see "the passer as a figure who values individualism, who may be idiosyncratic, self-determining, or inclined toward improvisation."<sup>3</sup> While Pfeiffer is writing here exclusively from an American literary context, this notion of individualism and self-determinism will be valuable to keep in mind during the direct discussion of Baku's work as it seems to embrace a self-deterministic approach to passing and defining one's identity in modern Japan.

Expanding on Pfeiffer's argument, we can look again to Hostert when she calls to treat passing as a metaphor of transgression that offers "the possibility of working oneself from within historically inherited identities to fashion identities of our own choosing." This fashioning, however, is more nuanced than simply electing to embrace a certain identity within the pre-existing hierarchy. Rather than allowing one to find a new, more advantageous position within society through an act of secrecy and deception, passing allows a transcendence of the necessity to choose between one's 'real' self or the option to pass as a 'fake':

Finally, in breaking with the commonsense notion of passing as the presenting of a false self in place of a true self, as a substitution of appearance for reality, my postmodernist

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<sup>3</sup> Pfeiffer, Kathleen. *Race Passing and American Individualism*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. pp. 2.

appropriation of passing views passing as not a mere inversion of the reality and appearance of distinction but, rather, transcending this either/or choice, the choice of the self as real or the self as appearance...Passing, far from instigating denial of one's true self, perhaps offers the most readily available process to acquire a notion of self, even if we cannot claim an essential self.<sup>4</sup>

Hostert's approach is liberating and will frame the discussion of Baku's work in this paper, though as will be shown in application, Hostert's emphasis on the subjectivity of passing and its potential for transcendence does not necessarily lead to a change immediately recognizable as positive. Additionally, Hostert makes efforts to recognize that passing (she also refers to it as "disidentification") is a transitional process, wherein the weight of the various categories (race, sexuality, etc.) that define one's identity begin to lighten, though not necessarily in a correlated manner. In doing so, the boundaries that these categories create begin to dissolve, allowing for individualism and the self-making process to begin; it is through this process that the passer may begin to re-write the story of their identity.

This notion of identity as storytelling is compelling, especially when considering that to know that someone is passing (or has passed) requires a narrative. Hostert insightfully points out that, "since secrecy is the condition of possibility for passing, it would seem that passing is beyond the regime of empirical study."<sup>5</sup> Unlike other sociological trends that academics and government agencies track such as marriage or immigration, passing is not something that can be illuminated in clear numbers or rates. To reveal oneself is to no longer be passing, and while there are those who have chosen to make their story public for various reasons, it is certain that there are a great number of people who have successfully passed, though the exact number is a

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<sup>4</sup> Hostert. pp. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Hostert. pp. 11.

known unknown. Therefore, rather than trying to illuminate the unknown, the study of passing has focused on narratives, be they fictional or otherwise, as means to understand the phenomenon. When discussing passing as a metaphor, the actual narrative of passing is bound to the identity of the passing subject, as the narrative is the vehicle that moves the transition along, both for the actor who is passing as well as the audience receiving the story.

Oftentimes this narrative is a conscious construct, a back story to help the subject navigate their world in a convincing manner, always in secret to everyone but themselves. A deeper consideration of the construction of these narrative reveals that passing is not merely a mode of trying to move forward, but rather the result of an ever-shifting personal affect with one's own background. Thus, if we are to accept the notion that one's identity is not a stable ground, then by extension we may also recognize that our relationships to the previously maintained elements of our identity, ones that have come to shape the person in the living moment, also shift. One may, at an earlier point in life, make concerted efforts to construct a backstory with a parent of a certain background, or a particular hometown and the path that led from then to now. Depending on the situation these details are as explicit or foggy as need be, but they always stand to help maintain an unquestionable air of legitimacy to the perceived identity of the passing subject. Linda Schlossberg has discussed the role of storytelling in passing, stating that passing "becomes a way of creating new stories out of unusable ones, or from personal narratives seemingly in conflict with other aspects of self-preservation."<sup>6</sup> As time progresses, the need to go into detail in one area increases, while other superfluous details may fall to the wayside but the story always acts to maintain self-preservation. The longer one passes

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<sup>6</sup> Schlossberg, Linda. "Introduction." *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, edited by María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, New York University Press, 2001. pp 4.

and the more confidently they are accepted within their community, the better the passer becomes at recognizing what parts of their narrative are relevant. Eventually, the passer may no longer be passing, through repeated interactions within their community their transformation comes full circle and the false identity becomes more real than the original. That is to say, if you tell someone something enough times, then you yourself may begin to believe it.

### **Yamanokuchi Baku and Passively Passing in “A Conversation”**

It is natural then that fiction has been one of the prime arenas for such developments to be displayed and explored, as it allows the discussion and observation of identity transformation without the fear of repercussion of being ‘outed’ that a non-fiction narrative contains. Oftentimes though, even fictional narratives of passing are based in truth. This can be seen in James Weldon Johnson’s remarks that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a composite of the lives of people he knew personally. In regard to Baku, the narrator of many of his texts that deal with passing, such as the short story “Mr. Saitō of Heaven Building” (*Tengoku-biru no Saitō-san* - 1939), is named Yamanokuchi Baku.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, we can argue him to be the speaker in the poem “A Conversation” (*Kaiwa* - 1935), which presents a more nuanced and subtle approach to passing where the speaker subject wrestles with revealing his hometown. As the border between fiction and non-fiction blends, so do the various boundaries or categories that construct the identity of narrative’s subjects. However, before looking at these texts directly and seeing how they treat, it would be beneficial to give a brief background on Baku to contextualize why he would need to pass in the first place.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, in Baku’s short memoir “Days of My Youth” (*Watashi no seinen jidai* - 1963), he claims that the poem was written shortly after an encounter in a coffee shop where he felt shame for being Okinawan.

Baku was born in Naha, the capital of Okinawa prefecture, in 1903. However, while much of his work discusses Okinawa and its people directly, Baku spent most of his life in Tokyo, first moving to the capital at age 19 in 1922. Though he did return to Okinawa briefly after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, in 1925 he went back to Tokyo, where he would remain a resident of the city for the rest of his life, often working a variety of menial jobs while also writing and publishing poetry. At the time, Baku's move from Okinawa to mainland was not unusual; starting in the early 1920's, economic hardship had forced many Okinawans to leave their home prefecture and emigrate to mainland Japan as well as other nations in the Japanese empire such as Taiwan. When Okinawans did arrive on the mainland, they faced serious discrimination, often having trouble finding a job to which they could apply. The jobs they could find were low-paying manual labor – textile factories, construction work, etc. – and they faced immediate difficulties in securing proper wages and protection.

Many of Baku's poems deal with these issues of discrimination directly and the emotional and economic struggles he tried to overcome in his daily life. Such struggles can be seen in his poem, "A Letter to My Sister" (*Imōto he okuru tegami* – 1935) which describes an inability to tell the truth to his sister in Okinawa of his distressful situation. "Your brother who is in Tokyo, looking like a starved dog / I can't write that / Your brother, who doesn't have an address / No, there's no way I can write that..."<sup>8</sup> The shame Baku displays for his impoverished existence in Tokyo is one that was felt by Okinawans throughout mainland Japan at the time as they faced a system that seemed constructed against their social advancement. This was no coincidence, as the pain and frustration displayed in this poem and the living conditions from which such emotions are born are the result of *kōminka*, the imperial ideology ostensibly

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<sup>8</sup> Yamanokuchi, Baku. "Imōto he okuru tegami." *Shinpen Yamanokuchi Baku Zenshū, Dai 1 Ken, Shi Pen*. Shincho-sha, 2013, pp. 334. *All translations from Japanese in this essay are my own.*

designed to assimilate all of Japan's colonial subjects into loyal imperial subjects. However, though Okinawa had been a prefecture of Japan since 1879 and was thus not a colonial entity in technical diplomatic terms, the relationship between mainland Japan and Okinawa was not encouraging.

Historically, the people of the Ryukyu Kingdom (which became Okinawa prefecture in 1879, seven years after the Meiji restoration) had been viewed by mainland Japanese officials as being less civilized and cultured than the rest of the nation and the image of the squalid lives of migrant workers such as Baku reinforced the stereotype and further perpetuating the prejudices they faced. However, as Alan Christy points out, the way many Okinawans at the time felt they could elevate themselves beyond such stereotypes was to mimic the Japanese in all aspects of life. This included embracing the spread of Japanese instead of Ryukyuan language and concentrated pedagogical shifts in the education system to fall in line with that of mainland Japan. Sometimes it went as far as changing one's surname from a conspicuous Okinawan one (such as Aragusuku) to an innocuous Japanese name (Shinjo) – though both of these names would be written with the same kanji, 新城.<sup>9</sup>

While much of these efforts were concentrated in Okinawa itself, for those who had emigrated to Tokyo, Osaka and other mainland cities to work, the realities of their economic conditions made it difficult for this Japanization process to be fully realized. This is especially

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<sup>9</sup> Leo Ching notes in *Becoming "Japanese": Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (2001) many of these efforts made in Okinawa were official policies dictated by the Japanese government in other colonies, especially Korea and Taiwan. In the case of Okinawa, the "national language movement" (*kokugo undo*) was indeed implemented, with strict adherence in schools. The name changing efforts however, were a voluntary effort, and the process was more complicated, as Okinawans were already Japanese citizens and thus had an established *koseki*. For more information on name changes in Okinawa see Shunzo Sakamaki's *Ryukyuan Names: Monographs On and Lists of Personal and Place names in the Ryukyus* (1964).

true since, as Christy argues, *kōminka* was less about actual ‘enlightenment’ than it was a self-serving act on the part of Japanese to maintain their position in the power hierarchy:

Low pay, segregated working conditions, and the ghettoization of Okinawans living in Osaka and Kobe combined with the discourse on Okinawan backwardness to produce an image of Okinawan workers as unhygienic, unproductive, unskilled, and undependable. Of course, the construction of this image was necessarily related to its opposite: the productive Japanese worker. That is, Okinawans were defined as poor workers not because they actually were, but because the standard of a “good worker” was defined as “a Japanese worker”...To be seen as good workers, they had to present themselves as Japanese, which was defined as being obedient and hardworking.<sup>10</sup>

To present oneself as Japanese can take on a variety of forms, and while many Okinawans living in mainland Japan did embrace this notion so completely that hid their Okinawan origins and began to pass as Japanese, Baku was not one of them, at least not actively. However, as the poem “A Conversation” shows us, he was keenly aware of the prejudices and stereotypes that Okinawans faced in Tokyo and the way in which he deals with questions of his background in the poem is a form of passing I will refer to as “passive passing”. The poem is structured as a conversation between the narrator and an unnamed woman and begins with her asking, “Where do you come from?” Before replying to the question, the poem then turns to an internal dialogue, “Hmm, My homeland? I lit a cigarette and though, / that place colored by the associations of tattooed hands and *jabisens* / that are like a pattern of customs – is that my homeland?!”<sup>11</sup> However, rather than give such a nuanced reply, the narrator replies cryptically,

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<sup>10</sup> Christy, Alan S. “The Making of Imperial Subjects in Okinawa.” *Positions* vol. 1, no. 3, 1993, 607–639.

<sup>11</sup> Yamanokuchi, Baku. “Kaiwa.” *Shinpen Yamanokuchi Baku Zenshū, Dai 1 Ken, Shi Pen*. Shincho-sha, 2013, pp. 313. *I have included a full translation of this poem at the end of the essay.*

“A ways away.” The woman says that she doesn’t understand what he means, asking for clarification, which again leads to a lengthy answer that includes clues such “women that carry pigs on their heads” where “customs are in a gloomy way” before once more refraining, “is that my homeland?!”. Again, though, these details remain unspoken, and the narrator replies curtly, “down south”. This pattern repeats itself twice more, with the narrator once again including specific details such as subtropical plants like papayas and *deigo* trees that play into the Orientalized stereotypes that mainland Japanese maintained about Okinawa during this time. However, none of these specifics are spoken, as the narrator only ever gives sterile geographic replies such as “the subtropics” or his final answer, which ends the poem, “near the equator”.

Thus, by the end of the poem, the unnamed woman does not have a clear answer to her question, in fact, the entirety of their conversation is contained to around ten words. As readers with access to the coded language of the inner monologues, we are aware that the narrator is from the Ryukyu islands, even though neither the words ‘Ryukyu’ or ‘Okinawa’ appear in the poem. This interaction is what I want to call “passive passing”; none of the narrator’s actual words are lies, though they hardly serve to give a clear picture of his origin. However, though the obtuse nature of his answers obscures any potential for the woman to definitively ascertain the narrator’s background, it is not an active deception. The narrator does not claim to be from Tokyo or another part of mainland Japan, rather he deflects attention away from himself through vagueness, which is itself a strategy of passing. What is equally important though is the language of the unsaid internal monologues, as the decision to provide an extensive list of stereotypes about Okinawa but then refusing to actually speak them out loud is reflective of both Baku’s struggles of transcending the prejudices he faces on the mainland as well as the mixed feelings of frustration he holds against those who hold such biases in addition to a genuine attachment to

what they represent. However, while the narrator embraces a rather technical lexicon when speaking, something that is neutral of cultural and geographic ideology, his internal thoughts express a decidedly Ryukyuan origin, though these stereotypical symbols of Okinawa are ironical used to express anger with the fact that he and other Okinawans seem to be nothing more than synonyms for an exotic land. In addition to these images of tropical plants and foreign customs the narrator makes pointed comments on the language spoken in Okinawa, with the first instance coming in the third stanza's internal monologue, "That place where they wonder if the people are Japanese or if they can even speak Japanese." This frustration intensifies in the final stanza's, after the woman does not seem to comprehend what he means by subtropics (*anettai*) the poem switches once again to an internal monologue, "Yea, the subtropics, my lady, can't you see the subtropics right here in front of you?/ Someone like me, a Japanese who can speak Japanese / but was born in the subtropics - this is us / though we are looked at as synonymous with chieftains, with natives, with karate, with awamori." This frustration goes unsaid, and the poem ends with the final line "near the equator". Has the man passed for being Japanese? Or has he let slip that he is something different? Perhaps more relevant – does the narrator see himself as being different, and if not, might this poem be trying to close off the possibility of difference?

In his discussion of this poem, Okinawan scholar Nakahodo Masanori makes a note that had the narrator actually said any of the descriptors in his internal thoughts he would have immediately tipped off the location of his background because "as the interaction between those from Japanese mainland (*nihon hondo*) increased the awareness that perhaps something about Okinawa was different was also born, on both sides, Okinawan and Japanese."<sup>12</sup> Thus, because

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<sup>12</sup> Nakahodo, Masanori. "Kindai Okinawa No Bungaku - Okinawa No Bungaku No Ni Keitou." *Okinawa Bungaku Sen: Nihon Bungaku No Eiji Kara No Toi*, edited by Keitoku Okamoto and Toshio Takahashi, Bensei, 2003, pp. 20–24.

they are technically true, the use of geographic descriptors to answer the question of his origin dissuades both parties from acknowledging any potential differences about Okinawa. This is an example of passing as disidentification, for the narrator of the poem is not trying to erase his Okinawan origin, rather he wants to dictate the discourse surrounding Okinawa by forcing someone to see an Okinawan not as an exotic native, but rather as a fellow Japanese. The narrator is not either Okinawan or Japanese, he is both, though it is his act of passing that allows for others to perhaps identify him the same way he does himself.

However, even if the narrator himself may want to deflect the woman from seeing him as different, the very beginning of the poem alerts the reader to the potential for this dynamic. While I have translated it to “Where do you come from?” to maintain naturalness in English, in the original Japanese, the first line of the poem is “*Okuni wa?*” or literally “What is your country?”. In the context of this poem, the use of *okuni* is loaded, certainly more so than in conventional conversation, where pragmatically the question is much closer to the English translation provided than it is to the literal one. To be certain, people all over Japan – Okinawa included – use this phrase to ask other Japanese where they are from; it is innocuous and by itself does not implicate any bias or suspicion of foreignness. This is most likely the case in the beginning of Baku’s poem as well, as readers we have no reason to suspect that the woman is trying to pry and discover his Okinawan background. Nor does the narrator of the poem seem to take offense to the way the question is framed. However, returning to the beginning of the poem after seeing how it progresses, the decision to begin the poem with this question and using the word “country”, regardless of its standard neutrality in such a small-talk context, warrants attention. “*Okuni wa?*” is not the only way to ask where someone is from in Japanese, but in a

poem where issues of identity and origin are central, Baku's decision to include the word sets the stage.

Thus, even if the woman did not intend to dig, the narrator chooses, at least internally, to consider the question on a different semiotic level, one that is literal and brings with it a great weight of the anxiety of background and discrimination. Moreover, the narrator truly embraces the question of country, repeatedly ending his internal monologues with the question "Is that my homeland!?" (*Ano boku no kuni ka!*). The narrator seems to reject such an origin, but only in the sense that viewing Okinawa so reductively prevents it from being a part of the larger notion of Japan. Considering the context of the poem, written in 1935, and the previously mentioned social pressure to hide their identity that Okinawans living on the mainland faced, it is understandable for the narrator to be defensive about his background. However, in this poem Baku is doing more than simply displaying the anxiety of passing, he is also trying to subvert the ideological pressures that establish the very need for Okinawans to pass and hide their background. Baku wants Okinawans to be seen as Japanese, but he does not want Okinawans to erase their Ryukyuan heritage and the poem is a call for wider acceptance on the part of mainland Japanese, though as the speaker in the poem shows us with the disparity between his internal and spoken dialogue, this process is messy and without a clearly marked path.

That said, Baku, both in life and in art, seemed to have embraced this notion of messiness. Not only in his relation to Okinawa, but also in the relationship other Japanese had with his home. Reading any of his work, one is quick to recognize that Baku made no attempts to pass as anything but an Okinawan writer, but texts like "A Conversation" also serve to remind the reader of the struggles he faced in the 'real' world. However, the difference between these two worlds may not be as extreme as they seem - Baku was a writer who wrote what he lived. In

turn, Baku's work shows us that by taking action through his writing he could take control of the story of his own identity and thus could pass beyond the limited definitions that others gave him, in turn becoming an act of self-discovery and empowerment.

**Yamanokuchi Baku - “A Conversation” (Translation - Hilson Reidpath)**

“Where are you from?” the woman said.

Hmm. My homeland? I lit a cigarette and thought, that place colored by the associations of tattooed hands and *jabisens*, that are like a pattern of customs – is that my homeland?!

*A ways away...*

“What does ‘a ways away’ mean?” the woman said.

It means a ways away, right before the southern tip of the Japanese archipelago, the kind of place where woman carry pigs on their heads and walk barefoot, and customs are in a gloomy way – is that my homeland?!

*Down south.*

What is ‘down south’? the woman said.

Down south is down south. A region of endless summer situated by the indigo sea, with plants like *ryusetsuran* and *deigo* and *adan* and *papaya* huddled under the white season, that place where the stereotyped questions like ‘Are they even Japanese’ or ‘Do they speak Japanese’ have taken hold in the world – is that my homeland!?

*The subtropics*

“The subtropics!” the woman said.

Yea, the subtropics, my lady, can’t you see the subtropics right here in front of you? Someone like me, a Japanese who can speak Japanese but was born in the subtropics - this is us – though we are looked at as synonymous with chieftains, with natives, with *karate*, with *awamori*, this place where the world looks at us with this type of prejudice – is that my homeland!?

*Near the equator*

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