

JASWDC- Tanaka & Green Scholarship Post-Semester Reflection Essay

For the 2019-2020 academic year, I was fortunate enough to enroll for study abroad in Japan, at Nanzan University in Nagoya. Having studied Japanese since high school; I knew that one day I wanted to be able to study abroad in Japan. This motivation significantly influenced the colleges and programs I applied to during senior year of high school. As a University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) Humanities Scholar, I was able to fulfil my goal in a yearlong program for my junior year. Unfortunately, due to the global coronavirus crisis, my second semester was cut short. Fortunately, my overall experience was amazing in the fact that I was able to travel, become friends with students from all over, and experience Japanese life first hand.

I decided to attend Nanzan for its comprehensive language program. As an exchange student, I attended Japanese language classes every day for 1.5-3 hours. While it was overwhelming at first, eventually the challenge of using Japanese in class daily began to yield improvement for me. During classes, I became more confident, raising my hand often to answer questions, and pushing myself to write as much as possible during essay tests. I was excited to realize my reading and speaking skills had gotten better over time. For example, in my first week of living in Japan, the grocery store was an absolute maze to me, and I could barely read anything. By the end of my semester, I was able to navigate the aisles, read nutrition and allergy information, and figure out the best deals on ice cream!

In addition to language classes, I also took classes in Japanese culture. I took a semester of Shodo (Calligraphy) and learned how to properly write in different artistic styles. Prior to my early spring semester departure, I enjoyed Ikebana (Flower Arranging), and Sado (Tea Ceremony) courses. Even though I was not able to complete these classes, I was able to learn the fundamentals of both disciplines and gained further appreciation of Japanese artistry. I am practicing Shodo, and will continue to learn about both Sado and Ikebana.

Outside of classes, Nanzan University offered spaces for exchange students to interact with each other and Japanese students. The two places I went to most often were the “Stella International Lounge,” and “Japan Plaza.” In Stella, students could speak any language they preferred, study, play games, and practice their language skills. While Stella allows students to speak any language, Japan Plaza was strictly Japanese language only. I often went to tutoring in Japan Plaza, and while it was sometimes difficult, the Japanese teaching assistants (TAs) were very encouraging and helped me and many of my peers improve.

One of the things I enjoyed doing the most while at Nanzan was traveling. Nagoya is located in central Japan, so I was able to visit several major cities like Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Nara. I enrolled in my study abroad program through IES Abroad, and the program included occasional trips to places like Hiroshima, Miyajima, Himeji, Takayama, and Kanazawa. During my travels, I visited gardens, museums, historic districts, shopping areas, shrines, and temples. I got to experience festivals, staying at Ryokan, using Onsen, watching Taiko, and eating countless Okashi (Taiyaki being my favorite).

On these trips, I got to see more of Japan than just the city life that I had experienced during my prior visits to the country. Most notably, I appreciated the aesthetics of Japanese architecture and nature, as the fall colors highlighted the antiquity of many castles, shrines, and pre-modern buildings. One of the biggest appreciations I have for Japan, is how antiquity is able to exist in modernity. For example, I was able to see shrines and temples nestled between high-rise buildings and stayed in a Tatami room in a hotel with a western style exterior. The preservation of Japan’s beautiful cultures and traditions into the 21st century has not ceased to amaze me.

One of the most valuable experiences I had while I was in Japan was attending the “Black Women in Japan” (BWIJ) conference in Kobe. This annual event is a conference for black women by black women, to allow them the opportunity to come together as a very small minority group in Japan’s homogenous country. While

attending Nanzan, I was one of the few black female students that was a part of the Center for Japanese Studies program. Two of my peers and I attended the conference as volunteers, where there were workshops, presentations, and opportunities to network and connect with others. Many of the workshops and presentations centered on surviving and thriving in Japan as a black woman with a range of topics like self-care, growing your career, intercultural competence, and even cosplay.

This conference was important to me, because it created a safe space where all of the women around me shared similar life experiences and backgrounds. Being in Japan as a black woman can be challenging. I often felt like a minority, within a minority. Frequently when I went out, I was often stared at, even if I was in a group with other foreigners. The usual encounter for me would involve a long silent stare of confusion, curiosity, or sometimes disgust. Occasionally, someone would even be bold enough to grab my hair. Walking around, I often felt like an exhibit or an exotic animal in a zoo. Experiencing these interactions daily is extremely draining, so after attending the BWIJ conference, I was rejuvenated mentally from seeing other women like me from all over Japan existing and living confidently. It makes me confident about my own future in Japan.

Because many Japanese people have not seen or engaged with non-Japanese people directly, they can be very curious and are not sensitive to how it can make the person they are looking at feel. For many, living in Japan as a foreigner – a minority, you may become hyper aware of your existence. For many non-White or non-Asian foreigners in Japan, it is important to have self-confidence and self-acceptance, because without it, you can feel as if your existence in Japan is extremely unwanted, or even criminal. On some days, I would feel too anxious to even go out, and for about a month, I would not go out by myself. Whether you want it or not, your existence outside of the norm will be apparent, therefore self-acceptance is important, because without it, living in Japan confidently is nearly impossible.

In recent years, I have worked to grow my confidence. When I first went to Japan in high school, I had no confidence in myself, and tried to conform to the expectations of Japan, which was entirely damaging. My second time in Japan was similar. This time around however, I came to the realization that I was never going to fit into the Japanese ideal, because I am not that. Therefore, the only thing I could do was be my most authentic self. While I had some days with the negative interactions that got under my skin, the majority of my time in Japan was spent being happy to be myself and knowing that my uniqueness is something to be celebrated, not seen as a curiosity. When I did get the chance to actually talk to Japanese people who were curious about me, their shocked curiosity usually turned to admiration, and I was able to have many wonderful discussions about my culture. One example that stands out to me, in particular was an older lady who, after seeing my braided hair, was reminded of her time in America and her love for Native American culture. Cultural appreciation goes both ways, so when I return to Japan, I will work hard to have more exchanges like that one.

The 6 months I spent in Japan this academic year has been one of the most wonderful experiences in my life. I was able to achieve my academic and personal goals, including seeing and experiencing as much of Japan that I could. I improved my skills in Japanese language and acquired a greater appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture and life. I was also able to grow as a person, and I built confidence in myself that I will carry with me throughout my life, especially when I return to Japan, hopefully as a JET or Fulbright Scholar. Overall, my study abroad in Japan was an amazing experience that I will never forget, and I will cherish it all for the rest of my life. I am tremendously grateful to the Japanese America Society Tanaka Green Scholarship committee for supporting me in this life-changing experience.