

# ✦ SHIMANCHU NU KWII ✦

## *The Voices of Shimanchu*

AS VOZES SHIMANCHU • 島人の声



ISSUE #2

SHIMANCHU IDENTIT(IES) IN THE 21ST CENTURY

IDENTIDADE(S) SHIMANCHU NO SÉCULO 21

21世紀の島人アイデンティティー

---

# THE STRAWBERRY FIELDS

BY LAUREN HIGA AND ELYSE IZUMI

Conditions must be perfect for  
strawberries to grow.

The plants should be a foot and a half apart so they each get their 1.5 inches of weekly water and at least eight hours of daily sunlight. The soil needs to be nutritious enough, too. Should a farmer have the prowess to produce this environment, their plants will bear fruit.

Any Angeleno would not be surprised to hear that their hometown boasts an average of 284 sunny days annually. That's plenty of time for farmers to toil in the strawberry fields, backs bent, gloves on, clipping right where stem meets seed-speckled, red flesh. The berries will make their way into shallow cardboard boxes, some departing for the Farmers Market on Third Street and others the Donut Man on Route 66. Some will also make their way onto the dinner table – the not quite circular one – for the kids and their friends to eat after they're done playing in the fields.

*"The kids whose families suddenly moved away to places with weird names like Manzanar and Poston were back."*

---

Sunshine meant that there was fun to be had in becoming fast friends with neighbors who also enjoyed running at full speed between the rows of strawberry plants, like sprinters in the Nisei Olympics. Playing with the other kids on the block was the epitome of summer fun in Southern California. For these kids, it, too, was a survival tactic. The kids whose families suddenly moved away to places with weird names like Manzanar and Poston were back, and times were tough. But when they were together running in the strawberry fields, the troubles of the real world didn't seem so daunting. They felt present, connected, powerful, and whole, as they were meant to be.

Our dinner table isn't quite circular. It has a center strip that allows the table to be pulled apart and expanded on to create a more oval shape, should guests join us. We've never used the function because it was the perfect space for my family of four to come together every night.

My dad always stayed at the table a little longer with my sister and I to share his stories from growing up in Downtown Los Angeles, his uncles' stories from World War II, or stories he had heard from Poston, where our family was incarcerated.

On this particular night though, he spoke of Okinawa. He told us about the overthrow of the once Ryūkyū Kingdom and the complexities of the triangulated relationships between Japan, the United States, and Okinawa. I'll never forget what he said - *Okinawan people are technically not Japanese. You're technically Japanese (my mom's side) and Okinawan (my dad's side).*

The following college years were filled with searching - through ethnic studies classes, my senior thesis project on Okinawan American youth identity

For most of my life, the Higas "went with the flow" of calling ourselves Japanese American.

Years later, out of cultural curiosity, I enrolled in a year-long study abroad program in Tokyo. Upon meeting with my academic counselor to confirm my fall quarter registration, she asked if my family was from Okinawa. Surprised, I answered affirmatively and inquired about how she knew.

"Your last name," she said.

At the age of 19, I learned that I'd been carrying a last name that screamed "Okinawa" to everyone but me. Then, in one of the classes the counselor helped me register for, we discussed ethnic minorities in Japan. Much to my surprise, we began the discussion with Okinawa. This was the first time I learned about the colonization and annexation of the Ryukyus. The Okinawan history available to me was written by the victors.

Yet again, I took matters into my own hands. I pursued a research project on Okinawa, for which I read voraciously about my people. A new student in ethnic

---

formation, and my involvement in the Okinawa Association of America. I mourned that this information was new to me in early adulthood.

The table we ate dinner on was the same table my sansei dad grew up with, the oils of many family dinners soaked into the grains of the table. In that moment that he told us about Okinawa, it felt like that table, for the first time, had been elongated to create space for new guests - new stories of people that I had known and heard about growing up, but never fully understood. In 2018, I applied to graduate school to try and paint a fuller picture of who these people were, and are.

studies, I revelled in how learning about my people made me feel seen and free. The next quarter, I ditched a few classes to visit Okinawa for a self-manufactured long weekend, using my toddler-level Japanese to excitedly explain, "America-jin des, demo kazoku no onamae wa Higa des. / I'm American, but my family name is Higa." It was as if to say that my family lost their way, but I made it back home. Eager for more wayfinding, in 2018, I applied to graduate school.



It rained on our orientation day in March 2018. Beside grumblings about the weather, the first order of business was to introduce ourselves - name, pronouns, research interests. While one of us was bracing herself to explain what Okinawa was and why it was important in Asian American Studies, the other began her introduction.

There was another Okinawan in the room who was also on *the journey*.

On our tour around campus, we enthusiastically chatted about how our interest in Okinawa started, our family histories, and our similar lack of knowledge.

---

Over time, we also found that, outside of research, we had an eerie number of overlapping interests, including but not limited to: loving the TV show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, carrying the same Madewell clutch with our respective initials embossed in the same color, our Libra astrological signs, and having black labradors at home.



However, things got weirder.

*Conditions need to be perfect for strawberries to grow.*

---

*"Brows  
furrowed, I  
told Auntie  
Roni, 'There  
can only be so  
many  
strawberry  
farming Higas  
in Azusa.'"*

One day, I drove to Auntie Roni's to carpool to a strategic plan meeting for the Young Okinawans of Southern California. Elyse invited me in, then went to finish getting ready. I sat on the couch and made small talk about the OAA with Auntie Roni. Eventually, she asked what my last name was.

"Higa? You know, when I was young, I used to run around the strawberry fields with some Higas. They had a house in Azusa."

I stared at her in disbelief. I recalled how I had to yell when speaking to my Grandpa Eddie because he was hard of hearing -- a result of working loud, heavy machinery for many years on our family strawberry farm.

Brows furrowed, I told Auntie Roni, "There can only be so many strawberry farming Higas in Azusa."

Elyse re-emerged. I must have looked like I'd seen a ghost as I recounted what Auntie Roni and I just uncovered.



It wasn't a ghost, exactly.

Thrilled, I immediately texted my dad, who texted his cousin, who confirmed that not only did our families live close to each other post incarceration camp, but they knew each other. I can't quite explain the feeling that our friendship expanded.

Our friendship was no longer just about shared interests and heritages. It was connected to something deeper that was set into motion years ago, generations ago. The details are still a little muddled, and the people I really wish I could ask are no longer physically present with us. But maybe in a way, they were still present in that moment.

---

It was almost as if our ancestors had been waiting for their stories to be heard and found and led us back to them in a time where we also really needed support and community.

*We found each other and we found our families,  
and in continuing to understand our families, we  
continue to find and understand ourselves.*

What might seem too specific, too troublesome, too hard is how strawberries grow.

Our families migrated in a time when Japanese annexation depleted the Okinawan economy. In need of a chance to survive, they came to the United States. They worked the soil of a nation that promised them success. And for their work they were incarcerated in a time of extreme fear of being considered Japanese. Coming out of the camps, they found themselves in the town of Azusa, California. They found themselves amongst other Okinawans because in a time of recovery and survival, community is essential. Perhaps our great-grandparents in particular needed each other at a time when they were ostracized from society and trying to rebuild a life for the generations that came after them. It is our privilege then that we get to unpack and explore these stories, beyond modes of survival or scarcity.

The generations of inconvenience, pain, and surviving ended up being the conditions needed for our friendship to flourish. Call it fate, destiny, chance, whatever you want. To our ancestors - we found each other. And we'll continue searching for you.

*"We'll continue searching for you."*

*Elyse Izumi (泉イリス) and Lauren Higa (比嘉ローレン) recently graduated with Masters of Arts in Asian American Studies. Elyse currently works with Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles. Her family hails from Haneji and Ogimi. Lauren works at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Her family hails from Gushikawa and Kin.*