

# densha onna

mind the “gap”

**antoinette sarpong**

It's 6pm on a crowded subway train in Osaka. You can barely move an appendage without violating a perfect stranger. It's prime *chikan* time and as such, safely situated in a coveted seat, **with the door to my right and a drowsy OL to my left, I was literally in a good place.**

That's not to say that I didn't commiserate with fellow commuters, packed in the center of the train like spectators in the mosh pit at a really lame concert. But hey, some days you come out on top and some days, well, you squeeze in the carriage with the rest of the corporate drones who've lost **today's round of musical chairs.** Yet I couldn't help but wonder, with such a sizeable space between me and the OL on my left, why wouldn't a single passenger blocking the exits take a load off? That was until four years of education in the unspoken laws of Japanese train etiquette reminded me of one important factor in the seat selection process: "the *gaijin* gap".

*Nihon* newbies may be unfamiliar with the vernacular, or you may know it by one of its other aliases, "the *gaijin* perimeter" or "the *gaijin* zone". But you're probably already familiar with the scenario. You queue on the platform for your train. Limp bodies spring to attention like conditioned Pavlov's dogs as the announcement signals the train's arrival. Everyone sizes up the seat situation from either side of the door before well-dressed bodies spill out of it. **A minute of careful strategizing** pays off for the most nimble riders, who snag the best real estate - the seats closest to the doors, natch - leaving the defeated standing and envious.

For passengers who think that they've outsmarted the others, the tease of the clearing in the midst of the crowd is oh-so-enticing. On this evening, for one young trenchcoat-clad businessman, this was no exception. Said salary man

walked toward me, squeezing through bodies in the doorways, clutching his book and briefcase. But as he glanced from the OL to the black female passenger on the other side of The Gap, he quickly put the brakes on his metro mirage. There was a moment of awkward hesitation as he glanced back and forth, sizing up his options. Proximity to a *gaijin*... or... become the **sliver of meat in an otaku + phlegm-spewing salaryman sandwich** on the opposite side of the train.

I don't have to tell you which side he chose.

I've asked some of my Japanese friends about this phenomenon and I've been offered a variety of explanations, ranging from: "I've never noticed that before" (possible) to "They don't want to disturb you" (doubtful) to "Some Japanese don't want you to ask them a question and draw attention to them" (**bingo, the xenophobia has a name-o**).

In a society so based on rules, the Japanese seem to have interactions down to a perfectly predictable science. Toss a foreigner in the mix and **we mess with that social ecosystem.** Who knows what we're capable of, left to our devices on a packed train? Of course, there are exceptions to the rule. Previous, prolonged *gaijin* exposure and liquid-induced courage a few hours before the last train considerably close "the gap". And, as many Kansai residents can attest to, those funky old *obachans* seem to play by their own rules.

But the fact remains that whether we are listening to loud trance in our headphones, **reading a novel without a book cover** - gasp - or harmlessly drifting into daydream, we can't help but draw attention to ourselves. For many Japanese passengers, that's a position they don't ever want to be in.





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