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Savoring Slackness in Kingston

Independent Japanese Tourists and Jamaican Dancehall

This article focuses on Japanese travelers between the ages of twenty and forty years old who come to Jamaica driven by their passion for its dancehall music scene. They are working-class sojourners alongside a smattering of expatriates looking for an experience that they view as affirmative, authentic, and, at times, escapist. Slackness is a Jamaican vernacular concept underscoring a resistance to hegemonic cultural and social norms, especially in relation to sexuality, and is central to dancehall. It plays a key role in drawing these Japanese visitors to the scene and ultimately Jamaica. While most men tend to view their stay in terms of acquiring subcultural capital, the desires of women are more diverse. Their varied expectations of and experiences in Kingston's dancehall scene, and engaging with its many sites—the city, the hostels, and the clubs—are windows to questioning what Japaneseness and sociocultural belonging means to many of these individuals. Engagement with slackness ranges from a brief respite to a complete break from convention and national expectations in Japan. In the end, for the dedicated follower, dancehall acts as a resistance to or even insulates individuals from dominant cultural expectations.

Keywords: dancehall—identity—Jamaica—Japan—slackness—subculture—tourism

Asian Ethnology Volume 82, Number 2 · 2023, 301–322

Before the global Covid pandemic of 2019–2022, tourism was the fastest-growing sector of the Jamaican economy, making up approximately 50 percent of the nation's foreign exchange (*The Japan Times* 2020). The majority of tourists in Jamaica come from North America, the UK, Germany, and, within the region, the Cayman Islands. However, from 2018 there was a renewed push within the Jamaica Tourist Board to bring in more visitors from Asia, specifically Japan and India (*Jamaica Observer* 2019). Historically, Jamaica was an attractive destination for Japanese tourists due in part to roots reggae drawing fans since the 1970s (Sterling 2016). This tourism heyday ended when Japan's bubble economy burst in 1989 and extended recessions followed. However, at that time there were about twenty thousand Japanese tourists coming to Jamaica per year, making it easy to understand why the Jamaican government is keen to retarget them.

Japanese tourists are viewed as desirable in general. While they demand high levels of customer service and tend to stay for short spans of time, on the flipside they are mature, presumed to have a high level of disposable income, and are willing to spend lavishly, especially on local goods used as travel gifts (*omiyage*) (Guichard-Anguis and Moon 2009). A typical example here might be package tour participants engaged in a flag-following fortnight-long cruise or a similar well-defined, well-orchestrated vacation. Such travel expectations, domestic and international, are common and widely promoted in Japan. They are seen and sold as a short period of respite from the workspace, a way to bolster cultural capital, *iyashi* (healing), relaxation, or even scoping a location with an eye to it being an affordable long-term retirement option (Ono 2018). The networks in place for such Japanese tourists to comfortably and efficiently navigate many countries—often minimally engaging with members of the host country—constitute a highly developed and profitable business for both Japanese and foreign companies willing to adapt their practices to suit Japanese guests (Chen 2018; Satsuka 2015). Though some of this holds true in what follows, there are networks, better described as personal meshworks (Ingold 2011), that specifically cater to Japanese dancehall enthusiasts; the travelers discussed herein do not fit the aforementioned stereotypical norms. For a start, they are younger, poorer, and more independent. Moreover, they have different motivations, expectations, and objectives than the average Japanese sojourner. Indeed, for reasons highlighted in this article, it is difficult to even imagine the possibility of packaged dancehall tours

in Kingston. More to the point, part of the attraction for these particular tourists is the impromptu and unpredictable nature of the city and scene.

This article focuses on a group of predominately working-class Japanese, generally between the ages of twenty and forty. Unlike the typically targeted package tourist, they are not coming to Jamaica drawn to the ease and safety of travel or relaxation. Japan and Jamaica can be juxtaposed via numerous political, social, and cultural contrasts, as highlighted in this article. But starting with logistics, Jamaica is not a simple getaway. The countries are on near opposite sides of the globe, and there are no direct flights from Japan to Jamaica. Nor is safety a draw. Jamaica topped the global murder rate in 2005. Indeed, in 2018 a state of emergency had to be declared in an attempt to curb a spree of murders. The island has a violent crime rate "three times higher than the average for Latin America and the Caribbean" (USDS 2019; also see Thomas 2011). Japanese are particularly vulnerable in this regard. They stand out culturally and phenotypically, and are frequently armed with poor English-speaking skills.[1] Yet, the young tourists I describe seek out many of the very areas that the Jamaican government actively attempts to keep tourists from. These dancehall aficionados spend much of their time, usually at night, in the poorer areas of the capital city of Kingston. Hungry for music first and "lifestyle" second, the relentless energy with which they consume Jamaican popular culture is perceived by locals as insatiable.

Dancehall is a popular musical genre that can at least be traced back to 1960s ska. But perhaps the best way to think about it for the case at hand is as a product of contemporary musical glocalization (Hope 2013; Galvin 2014; Sterling 2010). As a domestic product it comes from toasting and dub, essentially talking over a *riddim* (rhythm) track. Artists like U Roy or King Yellowman are the grandfathers of the genre. However, the Jamaican diaspora, notably to the UK and the US, has long cycled influences to and from the small island nation (Veal 2007). Thus, American rap alongside UK trance and dub, or even earlier drum and bass, with a heavy sprinkling of funk, R and B, and soul on either side of Atlantic, has been redistilled with local influences into a distinctive Jamaican sound and aesthetic. In sum, dancehall—for its good, bad, and ugly—is an undeniably unique and popular music form. Its heartland is Jamaica, but it is increasingly heard, produced, and influential internationally (Ferguson et al. 2016; Sterling 2010).

An important point stressed in this ethnography is that these young Japanese are not interested in dancehall music alone but in the attitudes that are wedded to it in its heartland, Jamaica. The majority that I interviewed and observed over a month-long stint in Kingston in February-March 2014, another month in March-April 2017, and at a range of dancehall and rap events held in Tokyo and Sapporo from 2014 to 2020 are looking for something they contend is decidedly lacking in everyday Japan—in a word, *slackness*. Slackness is a slippery vernacular concept that is central to the ethos of dancehall music. The upshot of Jamaican cultural studies scholar Carolyn Cooper's four-page definition and theorization is:

> Slackness is a contestation of conventional definitions of law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency . . . the antithesis to uppercase Culture . . . it challenges the rigid status quo of social exclusivity and one-sided moral

> authority valorised by the Jamaican elite. Slackness demarcates a space for alternative definitions of . . . [small-c] . . . "culture." (Cooper 2004, 2–6)

There are alternative ways that one might frame Cooper's statement without the use of uppercase culture; for example, "resisting hegemonic power structures and dominant social norms" would seem to equally capture the reactionary side of this dynamic or resistance without relying on the fraught terrain of what defines "big-C" culture. Cui Chen (2020) offers a Japanese reading of *shuryū bunka* (common or mainstream culture) and *subukaruchā* (subculture) and notes that among Japanese researchers, subculture is often conflated with *otaku* (often rendered as "nerd," but "fanatic" might be a better description) interests or short-lived fads in fashion. Nevertheless, culture is used by Cooper, and it is also used herein as conceptual shorthand, because in the context of Japan, dancehall can clearly be defined as subcultural. As in Dick Hebdige's original conceptualization of subculture, there is, alongside the critique of hegemonic aesthetic and moral concerns, and what constitutes proper attire or sexual agency for example, the association of underclass or outcaste belonging (Hebdige 1988). Moreover, dedication to dancehall is not a fad; for many it is a lasting obsession. As noted in this article, from dancers to DJs, Japanese devoted to dancehall overwhelmingly make ends meet as precarious workers, and dancehall and slackness are viewed by them as concomitant. They come together as a particular entwined ideological and aesthetic package. And I will argue that they are clearly viewed and consciously utilized as forms of subcultural capital, social critique, and resistance (Thornton 1995), certainly for participants devoted enough to make a dancehall pilgrimage to Jamaica.

As with Jamaican fans, the attraction to slackness and dancehall is clearly divided with regard to female and male cisgender norms among Japanese devotees. For young women the attraction is most evidently expressed via physical displays of hyper-heterosexuality, self-assertiveness, and an identification with idealized Jamaican working class, or even underclass (Chevannes and Levy 2001), women. As noted in what follows, this is a stereotype held by many informants—the presumed passivity of "typical" Japanese women in contrast to themselves as "different" and inspired by their Jamaican sistren who they see as confident, outspoken, self-reliant, and empowered (see D.A.R.Y.L. 2014 and Ross 2009 for similar arguments). This idealized image has likely emerged through the commonality of working-class single mothers and "matrifocal" families in Jamaica, whereby men, in a nation with rampant underemployment, can be seen as a liability, "just another mouth to feed," rather than financial asset or marker of stability (Mohammed 1998, 25–28). I believe that one could also make a domestic comparison with *gyaru* (gal) and more specifically *kurogyaru* (black gal) subculture, wherein revealing attire, provocative behavior, and overt displays of heterosexuality are central, but one key difference is that involvement in it is seen as a phase, as a short-term resistance to norms and not a lasting lifestyle (Arai 2012).

Similarly, for young men dancehall and slackness are a critique of dominant forms of masculine sociocultural capital in Japan, such as education or employment status (Cook 2016). What I frame as slackness following Cooper, Ninomiya calls a youthful reverence for *baddomanizumu* (being a bad man), a resistance to hegemonic social

norms that eventually, often through a transformative medium like Christian faith, become a different type of working-class or underclass respectability in Jamaica (Austin-Broos 1997; Ninomiya 2012). But in the context of Japan, as noted in what follows, there is often no common transformation. In the cases of the DJs that I met, there was no vocalized inclination toward getting out of dancehall and becoming "respectable" in broader Japanese society. Instead, efforts were directed toward being respected in the dancehall community in Kingston and by extension back in Japan.

Thus, dedication to dancehall functions as a gender-divided resistance to, or I will argue in some cases a continuing "immunization" from (Esposito 2012), *futsū no Nihonjin* ("typical Japaneseness," or more accurately "popularly self-typified Japaneseness") and sociocultural expectations (Hansen 2018). In short, for women dancehall and slackness are a form of self-aware and self-empowered embodied defiance of covert misogyny—of sexism disguised in Japan through lip service to gender equality while entrenched conservatism remains unchanged. For men it allows for an accumulation of subcultural social-cultural capital in a drive toward authenticating a socially affirmed status as selector or DJ back in Japan: in sum, becoming a selector who has been to the Jamaican heartland and made personal and embodied connections in it. Such subcultural status is unavailable to Japanese men who subscribe to the dominant masculine ethos whereby rule-following, conservatism, and salaried employment play a central role in what traditionally makes and marks "proper" Japanese masculinity (Dasgupta 2013).

Conservatism aside, ask a Japanese dancehall aficionado, male or female, about what divides Japan and Jamaica and the terms *shai* or *hazukashī* (shy or bashful) and *hoshuteki* (conservative) are bound to come up as points of contention.[2] Simply put, dancehall and slackness are an unlikely domain for the reserved Japanese traditionalist. And slackness is a social statement rooted in an essence or a feel that is Jamaican and made all the more powerful if experienced in the flesh in the scene in Jamaica (Henriques 2010). I emphasize the word "essence" here, because it is clear that many Jamaican tropes in dancehall cannot be directly transported into the Japanese scene, such as violent homophobia or gun violence. Similar limitations have been noted in other imported and adapted music subcultures in Japan like hip hop (Klien 2020) or hardcore punk (Letson 2020) or in other locations where dancehall has made inroads, for example Germany (Pfleiderer 2018) or Singapore (Woods 2020). But as this other research also argues, the tension between mimesis, or copy, and adaptation does not detract from the seriousness with which participants take their travels to Jamaica, dancehall music, the sociocultural stance of slackness, or the formation of individual subcultural identities.

The cisgender divide and the lure of slackness

The young Japanese males who travel to Jamaica are *furītā* (individuals in part-time or freelance employment) and, when interviewed, they nearly all self-identified as selectors or DJs. In Japan they get by with irregular construction jobs or work in the service industry, but their passion is music—with Jamaican dancehall and its booming

sound systems often their central interest. Intriguingly, in terms of conventional status markers in Japan, of the eighteen young men I have interviewed, I have yet to meet one with a university degree or who is not directly working in the music industry in Japan. Women travelers are more diverse. Many are dancers with modes of Jamaican dance topping their repertoire, though many are also interested in hip hop. I also met two women who were DJs. Similar to their male counterparts, women held disposable "pink-collar" service jobs either inside or outside Japan. Of the twenty-six I have interviewed, their jobs ranged from being pachinko parlor workers in Yokohama to working as au pairs in New York. Unlike the uniformity of men being DJs, some women did not claim to be serious dancers or DJs but just liked the sound and image of Jamaican popular music. Moreover, in Kingston I interviewed one Japanese graduate student on vacation from a university in the US and one woman who had just finished an undergraduate degree in development studies in Japan. Still as a minority within this group, neither of these two women were particularly drawn to dancehall music, nor did they identify as dancers or DJs at all. In sum, they were just interested in music events as part of their overall travel experience in Jamaica. Nevertheless, though clearly not statistically significant, given these numbers, a trend of marginalization, even if it is self-marginalization, is apparent. Statistically speaking, approximately 52 percent of Japanese are expected to enter college or university (MEXT 2019). Thus, Jamaica and its dancehall scene clearly attracts undercast Japanese young adults, at least young adults with precarious employment potential in Japan. But why?

Beyond these types of uncertain, make-ends-meet employment, a largely shared educational background, and the typical split between males as DJs and women as dancers (though as noted there are a minority of women who DJ, and, though not encountered in my fieldwork, men who dance are becoming more common), there are other gendered dimensions to this music-oriented tourism. For example, and as explained in what follows, the males in my sample view their time in Jamaica, often with a shorter stopover in New York or Miami, as an opportunity to accumulate social-cultural capital: they collect rare recordings, meet other DJs, pay Jamaican artistes for dubplates, and simply want to "see and be seen" in the heartland of the contemporary Jamaican music scene.[3] This notion of accumulating subcultural capital can also be seen in research focusing predominantly on Japanese male dancehall artists attempting to make New York their base (McCoy-Torres 2018). In this case, however, all of the males I met intended to return to Japan, their music careers authenticated and status upped by their experiences and connections made in the home of dancehall and slackness.

For most young women, their time spent in Jamaica is viewed more as a break from conservatism and convention, especially regarding culturally particular hegemonic gendered expectations, a point returned to later in the article.[4] Yet, these young women often spend more time in Jamaica than their male counterparts, usually a few weeks or longer. They also frequently explore the country outside the city of Kingston and its immediate attractions. Another key difference is that a number of the women who enter Jamaica (fifteen out of the twenty-six I interviewed) do so with an eye open toward romantic heterosexual connections and in some cases (4) hope

for permanent residence with a Jamaican partner. To be clear, I am not suggesting they are engaged in a form of sex tourism, a common attraction for decades in the Caribbean. The point here is to underscore that their motivations are diverse, and their willingness to spend a longer time in Jamaica is more common than that of the Japanese men I encountered. For example, I have never interviewed a young Japanese man proclaiming interest in Jamaican women. They are in Jamaica to make musical connections first and foremost with eyes always fixed on a return to Japan. But many Japanese women are open to—and open about—finding Jamaican romantic partners. As explained in the following section, Japanese women are fetishized as sexual objects by Jamaican men in ways Japanese men are not, at least not audibly, by women—whether Japanese or Jamaican. Interesting in this case is the flipping of the typified model of transnational migration. In this context, it is not young men seeking opportunities, sexual or career, in a G10 "promised land" but a number of young women open and willing to forego life in an affluent, post-industrial G10 country and actively opting for love and life in a developing one.

Finally, for both men and women, the lure of Jamaica, specifically its dancehall culture, is enduring. As in the case study that follows, travelers are often not one-off visitors, and some return once or twice per year for several years. To varying degrees, these young Japanese immerse themselves in Jamaican society as a form of resistance, immunization, or even outright escape from culturally normative expectations in Japan (Guarné and Hansen 2018), seeking slackness (cf. Cooper 2004 or Stolzoff 2000). And Japanese are well regarded. They are respected and even valorized by the Jamaicans directly involved in the dancehall music scene. In my daily trailing of Japanese frequenting, or occasionally working in, the island's restaurants, hostels, and dancehall spaces, stories of Japanese enthusiasm for music have fostered a particular place for Japanese in Jamaican culture. As one record store owner in Kingston recounted, "Man, dem Japanese know more about Jamaican music than me! They teach me all the time looking for this or that artiste." Chuckling, he then added, "They are more Jamaican than Jamaicans, you understand?"

Placing Japaneseness and locating dancehall in Kingston

There is, thus, little doubt that dancehall in Jamaica attracts a certain demographic of dedicated young Japanese. There are people from all over the world interested in this music, but young Japanese may have more at stake through passionate involvement in the scene. While it is common in North America or Europe for young people to work odd jobs, travel, take a "gap year" and follow their dreams before success and/or settling, most young Japanese fear the employment repercussions of taking even a month out of employment, education, or even social relationships to "just" travel (Cook 2016; Kato 2009). There are simply fewer Japanese who feel they can leisurely "hang out" outside of Japan without serious negative ramifications on their future social or economic lives (Kosugi 2008).

There are several reasons for this, but two key issues are at the core in what follows. First, Japan has since been eclipsed by the rise of China and the relative increase in affluence of other Asian nations. Hence, Japan's future tends to be

perceived by many young Japanese today as lacking hope (Genda 2005), undergirded by social, cultural, and economic precariousness (Allison 2013). Second, Japanese institutions (here widely defined) and governmental policy tend to "talk the talk" of internationalization and global experience—for instance the word *gurōbaru* (global) is deployed like an administrative mantra in education—but in fact there is very little value placed on independent long-term travel and the critical, and often uncommon, cosmopolitan perspectives that this kind of experience can foster (Hansen 2016). The safest route to security for urban Japanese, despite demographic trends and trying economic times, is not to stray from the past proven path of doing well in school; getting into a national university; from where, if lucky, one can move to a big company job; and then onto marriage as a working father or stay-at-home mother (Guarné and Hansen 2018). These aspirations remain for many young adults, despite the increasing difficulty in actually following these steps. In terms of dominant social norms, this is how young men and women, hoping to thrive in what is still viewed as a predominantly middle-class country, *should* perform Japaneseness.

But as noted, there are an increasing number of working-class or precarious Japanese young adults for whom university or a stable company career are unlikely to be a part of life, for example precariat who are not in education, career goal employment, or training (labeled NEET). Unsurprisingly, such individuals increasingly resist the rigidity of an elite-dominated, aging society that demands (now despite the lack of perks or security) that they should act like everyone else—suggesting that they should settle, conform, *gambaru* (do one's best), and *gaman suru* (endure) with an air of *shikataganai* (things cannot be helped). Many find their place in an abundance of music subcultures that question hegemonic structures in Japan, such as hardcore punk (Letson 2020), hip-hop (Klien 2020), and of course dancehall and reggae (Manabe 2015; Sterling 2010, 2016). Here young people find their *zoku* or "tribe" and make a stand against big-C culture like corporate J-pop convention or dominant sociocultural expectations. For those devoted to slackness and dancehall, travel to Jamaica is a resistance. It is viewed as a sort of life affirming and agentive move, a rebellion against hegemonic expectations that offers an alternative vision of what it is to be Japanese. But what kind of Japaneseness emerges is an interesting question.

Elephant Man's pioneering dancehall hit "Chiney T'ing" can function as a summary of dancehall as a music genus, slackness, and where both gender and Japaneseness fit within it.

> Intro:
> Elephant Man: Jano, watch dem two, watch dem two like Japanese deh, hol on, hol on, Hi ladies
> Japanese Women (ostensibly): Hi Elephant Man!
> E: Where you from?
> J: We come from Tokyo, Jaaa-pan (sound lengthened to highlight a Japanese stereotype)
> E: What you doing in Jamaica, ladies?
> J: We come to Jamaica, but we don't want no itsy bitsy man, we want
> Jamaican man 'cause they are black and strong. And the anaconda weh long.
> E: So, you want the anaconda weh long eh?

J: Yeeees
E: (start of toasting) Yuh see Jamaican man fuss ting we nuh carry nuh teeny weeny ting, da sintin
ya fatta dan di bottle of a Heineken
So, when diss chiney ting tell me I she know fi climb di limb
When di sintin overweight dis gyal a tell mi chiney dream
When mi find di ting, mek she sing like how di chiney sing
J: cho nun cho nun cho nun ping Elephant man we want again.

(Excerpt from Elephant Man's 2007 "Chiney T'ing")

Thick patois may make it difficult for some readers to decipher exactly what is being said. First, the title says a lot. Asians, due to a long history of people of Chinese ethnicity being in Jamaica, are often popularly classified as Chinese. This is not accurate, but does not necessarily hold a strong derogatory meaning, much in the way that any Caucasian is popularly assumed to be American in Japan. The song itself is rife with derogatory comments, however. In sum, Elephant Man asks women from Tokyo why they are in Jamaica. They reply they want a strong, black man with a large penis. He then begins toasting. Breaking the patois down (basically): We (Jamaican men) don't have a small penis (like other men, but given the travel from Japan presumably Japanese men in particular); we have something fatter than a beer bottle. So, when Chiney T'ing (in this case clearly Japanese) tells me she wants to get on me she dreams about my weight on her. When I find her thing (presumably the clitoris) she makes a repetitive sound followed by "ping" (presumably an orgasm) with other Japanese women wanting more sex. The rest of the song details rather energetic, and certainly male directed, sex acts.

The overtly sexualized and ethnicized lyrics of this now classic dancehall song are average, perhaps even a bit tame today. Clearly, Japanese or Euro-American capital-C culture-bound notions of "woke" political correctness are not what guides the direction or appreciation of dancehall's aesthetics for fans. The lyrics are a form of poetic play, just as the space of dancehall is a space of physical play. Again, following Cooper, dancehall events are "a dedicated space for the flamboyant performing of sexuality" (2004, 3). They are places of lively contact, predictable in their promise of unpredictability, of which, again, Julian Henriques offers an outstanding ethnographic description (2010). An important point of contact here is that this popular Jamaican culture differs from the staged *nigiyaka* (lively) nightlife one typically experiences in Japan, whereby exchanges, for example in a host/hostess club, are basically scripted, rooted in safe expectations (Allison 1994; Takeyama 2016). A night of dancehall in Kingston is very far from this indeed.

To comfortably attend a dancehall event, one must be ready to deal with a hyper heterosexualized space with communicative ambiguity due to the sheer volume of the music and the playful poetry of patois; "*Seen*?" means "do you understand?" and "*Ya feel me*?" can mean the same thing or as easily be the preamble to a fist fight or worse. One also needs to be able to tactfully react to a joke in which they may be the butt, not be taken in by a multitude of minor swindles, and not flinch when being touched or grinded on by a stranger, male . . . or female. It is a relentlessly heteronormative and sexually charged atmosphere. Added to this, one can expect to be sharply bumped and

have drinks unapologetically spilled on them. All are common aspects of dancehall space interactions (see Niaah 2010 for outstanding ethnographic descriptions). These experiences are hard to imagine in the heavily self-policed mainstream of Japanese club culture (Hartley 2020). Moreover, the boundaries between official and unofficial, legal and illegal, are often precarious and tacit. One may or may not have paid their way into the event, it may end at the designated time or just be unceremoniously shut down, and for a country where the ganja was against the law at the initial stage of research, in the dancehall space its consumption has always been open and everywhere, including men with gunnysacks-full brokering break-off-a-bud sales. Yet, transgressing these fuzzy bounds can have immediate and dire consequences, legal or otherwise. Many Kingston garrison towns where dancehall events are held, like Tivoli Gardens, the famous Trench Town, or near political dividing lines like Mountain View Road, are truly dangerous areas where only luck and loquaciousness can get you out of tight spots. Local Kingstonians, linguistically competent and aware of nuance, enter with caution and only at particular times like dancehall events. Young Japanese males, but perhaps more so females, dive into Kingston headfirst.

Daring a generalization, working-class Kingstonians have an energetic and palpably passionate approach to life. They tend to jump into interactions, verbal or physical, with two feet, in a boisterous and outgoingly touchy-feely way that would be utterly alien, and alienating, in urban Japan. Take public transportation as a touchstone for cultural comparison. Beyond private buses, even on the more upscale air-conditioned city buses in Kingston, I have variously encountered people loudly playing radios, bus drivers singing at the top of their lungs, and religious believers standing up to preach or testify in the middle of a bus journey—with numerous fellow passengers nodding and chiming in with a "Hallelujah!" on cue or interjecting an emphatic "Jeeeeesus!" when compelled.

Such joie de vivre is perhaps more manifest at the street level where dancehall is played out, but it is an overall component of Jamaicanness in general (at least to this very self-conscious author/outsider). For example, flying into Jamaica, Jamaican co-passengers are usually open and chatty from the moment one sits down, and when the plane arrives they animatedly hoot and applaud the successful landing. The point is, land or sky, down-at-the-heels or well-heeled, it would be difficult to envision a more telling counterpoint to the sterile, silent, and somber mood of public transport and its many broadcasted warnings and rules in Japan. As opposed to off-the-cuff announcements in Jamaica delivered with personal observations and jocular banter, given the rote format and intonation and repetition it is often difficult to discern the difference between a recording or a living human voice in Japan (see Plourde 2019, for example). Simply, there is a tendency, a big-C cultural acceptance, in Jamaica for people to be spontaneous, loud, and lively; as such, popular "culture" offers numerous embodied and affective resonances of vivacity from spicy food to feeling bass in your bones. My Japanese interlocutors have said as much, using the patois term "livity" as an affect-oriented marker to describe the vibrancy and energy of Kingston as contrasted with Japan. In the way that Katakana in Japanese can be used to create nearly impenetrable portmanteaux, so too with Jamaican patois. "Livity" (perhaps a combination of "life" and "vitality") is a Rastafarian-inspired term

meaning a sort of inspired life full of vitality, an awareness of a lively and vibrant energy that encompasses all things. In an impromptu discussion with a Japanese man at a dub event I asked what he thought was different between life in Japan and Jamaica. Yelling in my ear, he declared: "In Japan life is (h)eavy, you know?" Perhaps influenced by the throbbing dub bass and his Jamaican-inflected English, I presumed he meant deep or meaningful. My face obviously betrayed some confusion at the use of the word "heavy," but before I could respond he interjected, "it (sic.) a fucking 'downpressing' [depressing and repressive] place man, here has livity." He nodded, I nodded, and Jah Shaka thundered on.

Ikeda Taiyo, in discussing young Japanese DJs interested in Jamaican music, notes that there is a resistance to both an overly conservative or local (*jimoto*) and corporately adopted or "Westernized" notions of Japanese life, alongside a romanticization of a "real placeness" (*honba*) found in Jamaica (Ikeda 2016, 229). Part of this everyday "liveliness" in Kingston is how music plays a ubiquitous role in the soundscape. From mento, the 1950s precursor to ska and reggae; to gospel or American soul classics; to contemporary R and B, rap, and dancehall, music provides an omnipresent and extremely context-dependent catalyst for embodied and affective interactions in public space. Simply, music is everywhere. There are dozens of weekly dance parties that cater to different types and eras of Jamaica's incredibly diverse music scene, from relaxed Sunday evenings at Raetown listening to classic Jamaican music and 1960s and 1970s American soul; to bass-driven Dub overlooking the city at Kingston Dub Club, where I encountered the man above; or Wednesday nights at the raucous Weddy Weddy or Passa Passa dancehall parties, places I attended with the women described below.[5] Young Japanese are commonly found at these venues, and despite the title of Elephant Man's song, participating East Asians at such events are presumed to be Japanese. They have forged a place of respect and belonging in the scene. However, where and how long they choose to stay in Jamaica betrays a great deal about the depth of their engagement with Kingston's dancehall community and their identity as Japanese.

Placing dancehall: An immersion into slackness at three hostels

Halfway Tree, a major transportation hub, can be seen as a dividing line between the hills overlooking Kingston and affluence and the gullies, garrison towns, and poverty beneath them. This liminal space is where the majority of Japanese dancehall fans opt to stay. Already a counterpoint to Japan, it is hot, dusty, and noisy, with street higglers relentlessly hawking knock-off brand-name goods. Pedestrians swarm, traffic darts and dashes, and private bus conductors hop on, hop off, or dangle from rattling buses with fistfuls of low-denomination bills making change while simultaneously, and in no way subtly, hitting on women, joking and jockeying with each other, and hollering their terminal destinations, downtown not uptown, like Parade. All this takes place over the competing stereo systems of other buses and route taxis, alongside the foreground music of stores and street vendors pumping out dancehall hits, pushing their speakers to distortion level.

Within walking distance of the Halfway Tree bus terminal there are two hostels run and owned by expat Japanese women; one hostel that was formerly run by a Japanese woman and a Jamaican man, but after their separation and the woman's subsequent return to Japan, it is now run by the man and his friends; and another large Jamaican-owned hostel. I have had week-long stays at all of them, alongside others, and they each cater to specific Japanese inclinations toward immersion in Kingston, slackness, and dancehall.

Patwah, perhaps the best known, is sandwiched between an apostolic revivalist church offering nightly mic'ed up sermons of a hell-and-brimstone variety and a somewhat unusual combination business of an aspiring-to-be-upscale nightclub / carwash / restaurant, offering thumping invitations to nightly debauchery.[6] The hostel has a steady flow of people passing its foreboding steel security doors and a burly, toothless, multiple-chain-wearing Jamaican security guard. In sum, and somewhat fittingly, pressed white shirts go to the building to the left, see-through miniskirts into the club on the right, and Japanese tourists dwell in between. Indeed, at this hostel guests are predominately Japanese, and from instructions on how to use the kitchen facility to the posted location of weekly events in Kingston, the information distributed in the hostel is in Japanese. Moreover, the lingua franca of the hostel space itself, less the Jamaican workers, is Japanese. There are Japanese books, manga, DVDs, and the walls have posters about reggae and dancehall events in Kingston as well as Yokohama and Osaka, again, all in Japanese. In the context of Kingston this includes a brief description of the event, costs, and a "danger" rating linked to the neighborhood hosting it.

When I was a guest, the middle-aged Japanese woman owner, her seventeen-year-old Jamaica-born son, and their drowsy dog were the only permanent residents. The owner is well-known by a somewhat derogatory, but given the above explanation hardly surprising, nickname. As a strong and independent woman, she owns it, wearing the sobriquet with pride even: "Yes, I am Miss Chin." She rightly views herself as a filtering point for many Japanese budget travelers to experience Jamaican culture. And indeed, most Japanese I spoke with, especially females, and certainly those who had been to Jamaica more than once, had stayed at her guesthouse and moved within her well-meshworked links with other long-term Japanese around the island, from other hostel owners in Negril to nail spa owners in Montego Bay.

Jada Home is the other Japanese-run hostel. It is more suburban, further uptown, and more expensive and secure. There are three locked doors to pass just to enter one's room! The owner, Kumi, was married to a Jamaican man who was tragically murdered in Kingston. Nevertheless, she opted to remain in the city and continue running the hostel after his death. She too is extremely well connected, especially within the reggae and dancehall music scene, having her own recording studio and competitive car sound system, while working as a DJ on radio as well as in clubs like the Japanese-owned Asia World, a slightly upscale Japanese-owned restaurant and bar that hosts Jamaican and Japanese DJs on Friday nights. The owner of Asia World ran a restaurant in a large US city before moving to Jamaica and employs both Japanese and Jamaicans.

While Jada Home is not as open as Patwah, beyond the Jamaican flag and Rastafari color schemes, a somewhat noncommittal attitude to sanitation, and copious amounts of ganja consumption, one would be hard pressed to differentiate these hostels from ones found in Japan. Garrison is a more immersive experience. It is an older house that has been converted to a hostel owned by Benny, a Jamaican man whose Japanese partner and son have relocated to Japan, and it is a far more "authentic" subcultural Jamaican experience. The cheaper option, costing under US $20 per night, there are no locks on the entrance gates, flimsy ones on the room doors, and all conversations and smells in the courtyard come in through the wrought iron bar windows. Jamaican and Japanese Rastafarians are frequent visitors: coming and going, passing around a chalice (water pipe), and reasoning (discussing anything, but often politics of Babylon) for hours at a time during the afternoon or evening. There is a makeshift bar, with Red Stipe, Dragon Stout, and health tonic, but the consumption of prepackaged "herb" is by far the brisker business. Guests are a mix of Japanese and non-Japanese, and Benny can speak enough Japanese to sort out any issues that might arise in dealing with Japanese guests.

In many ways, staying at Patwah or Jada Home feels akin to staying in a Japanese outpost. Garrison is far more cosmopolitan, and its Japanese guests reflect this. Open and frequent conversations quickly developed into a hybrid of English and Japanese liberally spiced with Jamaican patois (allowing multiple avenues for miscommunication but also repeat questions and unexpected detours). And of course, Japanese stay at other hostels as well. Indeed, a few doors down from Garrison is one of the city's larger ones, always busy and filled with Europeans and North Americans and a smattering of Japanese. It was there that I shared a bunk room with the three young Japanese dancers who I describe in the following section.

An ethnographic vignette: Three nights with three Japanese queens

Outside the Japanese-oriented hostels outlined in the previous section is Rasta Hostel near the aforementioned Garrison. One of the city's largest, it caters to a cosmopolitan crowd of young to middle-aged patrons. Many of its guests are not interested in dancehall but are simply staying a day or two in Kingston before heading off to a beach. Having stayed there before, a staff member aware of my research greeted me with, "Paul, have I got a treat for you." He announced, "Man, you are sharing a dorm room with three Japanese ladies who are *crazy* into dancehall," reaching over the till and prompting me to rub thumbs with him as a sign of affirmational respect for his tactical arrangement.

I walked to the room, knocked on the door, and nobody replied, so I entered and put my pack in an unoccupied corner. The other areas of the room were filled with suitcases and vibrantly colored clothes strewn about and hanging on bedframes and windowsills. I claimed the last remaining bed, a top bunk. I headed for the communal shower. Returning to the room at about 5 pm, I found three women fast asleep. I started half reading and dozing. When an alarm went off about an hour later the three immediately began animatedly chatting about where they were going to go that night. I rose up in bed, looking a bit like a sunburnt Dracula I suspect, and interrupted

with a *konbanwa* (good evening), creating dead silence and wide eyes. However, within five minutes of introductions—who I was, why I was in Jamaica, how come I can speak Japanese—they agreed to become a kind of impromptu focus group. Over the three days that followed, I was witness to their largely nocturnal Jamaican lives and privy to their views about why Jamaica and dancehall were attractive to them.

A typical night went as follows. After eating self-catered food in the back yard, they would start preparing for the evening at around 8 pm. As I was in the courtyard they would change, and when I would make my way back to the room there was always an overwhelming mix of aromas: ganja, perfume, alcohol, and cigarette smoke. Letting me tag along, we would leave around 9 pm to go to a nearby event. They would stand in the back of the venue, engage in small talk with other women (Jamaican and Japanese) and men (predominantly Jamaican, but never Japanese). Indeed, inside or outside the hostel space there was, to me, surprisingly little interest or communication across genders among Japanese compatriots, a point I return to shortly. Gradually, as the night wore on a camera would inevitably start moving around the venue filming the partygoers. As the space got crowded and libations and other substances took effect, the three would-be dancehall queens would start to dance, and usually the DJ would give some form of recognition for the Japanese ladies in the house. I would head back after midnight. The first night I was surprised when at 1:30 am my roommates came in and, while chatting and sharing a spliff and beer, simply started undressing and redressing in new outfits, occasionally offering me a katakana-inflected *sōrī* or *gomen, ne* (hey, sorry), leaving me uncertain if this apology was about "the show" or being woken up.[7] This went on for three days. They would return around 4 or 5 am and sleep until around noon, then after showering, they would make their way to the common area to smoke, drink, and chat while tanning. This pace continued for two weeks before a brief trip to Montego Bay, where a mutual Japanese friend worked at a hotel, and then they returned to their respective homes (personal email communication).

Home for the eldest, the thirty-year-old of the trio, was New York. Originally from Saitama, near Tokyo, she had been working on and off as an au pair for wealthy Japanese families for three years. She had been to Jamaica four times. My other two roommates, twenty-three and twenty-eight years of age, were both living in Tokyo. The twenty-three-year-old was a hostess at a club but quit her job to come to Jamaica for the first time. She was also a student at the twenty-eight-year-old's dance studio, who had come to Jamaica via New York, LA, or Miami seven times. The dance instructor also worked at a club as a bartender.

About half the young Japanese women I have met over the years intended on staying in Jamaica for several weeks, and, as noted, in a few cases indefinitely. Indeed, the eldest of the three queens was open to the idea of staying in Jamaica for good, and she had had a long-term Jamaican boyfriend before. Moreover, when I asked if she wanted to move back to Japan, she emphatically replied, "*Nihon wa iya da, muri desu!*" (Japan, no way, it's impossible!). She paused and then waxed thoughtfully (in a combination of Japanese, broken English, and Patois). In sum, she confided that in Japan women are second-class citizens, treated like sexual objects, and not given equal opportunities. Jamaica was not radically different from Japan in this regard; it

was not some sort of liberating promised land of gender equality, but Jamaica was a *shōjiki na shakai* (an honest society). It was the *covertness* of gender discrimination in Japan she abhorred. She felt that non-Japanese men, including Jamaican men in her experience, respected her and did not hide their intentions. Even if their first impression of her was as a sex object, given the sexualized nature of dancehall she saw this as an earnest first impression. "Dancehall is erotic (*eroppoi*)," she said. "Of course, I try to be sexy when I dance . . . and, I love sex too . . ." an unsolicited added comment that caused me to turn an unfathomable shade of red, given my sunburn. However, she added, she could play this up or down, and if a relationship developed, she felt no social obligation (*shakai tekina atsuryoku*) or expectations about how that relationship should be. In short, it was liberating to stay outside and be *immune,* as I will expand upon below, from what she saw as the hegemonic expectations of middle-class Japan, where she felt women should always be cute (*kawaii*) or playing a supporting role for men (*kyōryoku teki*). She bluntly told me she had no interest in a return to Japan or dating Japanese guys, the latter a common refrain I will return to.

Dancehall events were a big part of affirming that *she* was an independent individual in control of her relations and choices. And slackness (the word she used in English after I used it) was indeed a type of escape. But for her it was not an escape into mimetic blackness (Russell 2012). It was into an identity marked as subcultural Japanese. Being the recipient of Japanese lady "big ups" from DJs at dancehall events was a recognition of her Japaneseness, not faux blackness. It highlighted her belonging to the dancehall "tribe" as a Japanese woman. And she was perfectly content to stay away from Japan in the US or make her life in Jamaica, if possible, literally escaping much as Sister Chin did years before, affirming and authenticating her Japaneseness within dancehall and Jamaica on her own terms.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that for others a copying or "playing at" Jamaicanness is absent. For her roommates, as for many young women I talked to, dancehall and Jamaica were opportunities to enjoy ambiguity outside the parameters of Japanese sociocultural norms alongside the thrill of walking around a potentially dangerous new city while being vaguely understood and being approached by men, men who were viewed as more forthcoming and honest, not to mention masculine and sexy. There is a symbiotic consumption of slackness here, whereby, beyond the obvious nature of sexualized female bodies, there is *asobi* (play and enjoyment). Japanese women can "play Jamaican" and consume the attention of Jamaican men, men viewed as more powerful and potent than in Japan (Cornyetz 1994, 115; Sheller 2003, 152–55). Asked why dancehall was attractive, the twenty-three-year-old said countless times, "*Jamaikajin wa kakkoii*!" (Jamaicans are cool), full stop. This was a frequent comment, usually combined with something marking Japanese guys as comparatively not cool. Karen Kelsky (2009) forwards a similar comparison with the popular redemptive and emancipatory nature of the "West" for some Japanese women.

Despite the common subcultural ground, young Japanese men and women had little interest in each other. Buttressing the above impression of young women was the other side of the gender equation. In every case, the young Japanese men I encountered at events and hostels were obsessed with another side of consuming Jamaica. Their time, usually only in Kingston, was marked in weeks, even days, and

though enjoyable at times, their purpose was business. It was to utilize dancehall as a form of uplifting subcultural capital back in Japan; slackness was thus the cultivation of "distinction," in Bourdieu's sense (1984). Their purpose was marking themselves as being hipply precarious by rebelling against big-C culture expectations, while authenticating and affirming their role as "proper" dancehall DJs in Japan, often with promoting their own sound systems as the central goal (again see McCoy-Torres 2018). In essence, these men enjoy a subcultural status in Japan (and occasionally outside) that education and employment in a traditional sense could never buy. Unlike the women, liberational or even consumptive sexuality, for example, played little role in their desire to be in Jamaica. Instead, they viewed their time in Jamaica as a road to acquire cultural and social capital. It was an internship alongside the masters and originators of dancehall; paying for dubplates, absorbing snippets of patois, and attending dancehall events with an eye, *in every case I encountered*, toward returning to Japan.

In Japan, through these men, the fetishization of Jamaicanness, and by extension blackness, takes on its most consumptive form at events like Sapporo's weekly "*Sūpa-Black*," a Friday evening dance party featuring Jamaican and African American music, whereby Japanese male DJs dominate, often sporting dreads and toasting in a mashup of Americanisms and patois. Indeed, women and foreigners (but not other Japanese men) are frequently enticed to enter their world without a cover charge (see Acid Room Sapporo 2023 for examples).

Savoring slackness: Of resistance and immunization through dancehall

The combination of dancehall and slackness for Japanese in Kingston is an ideal example of what Foucault labeled a heterotopia (Dehaene and De Cauter 2015; Foucault 1986). As noted earlier, the scene is comprised of multiple places within the city. It is a shifting constellation of sounds, affects, and ideologies that are experienced in locations such as hostels, street corners, and obviously a plethora of nightly dance events. These heterotopic or mirrored scenes are lived locally, with a past, present, and future, but they are then encountered and interpreted individually and collectively by Japanese sojourners (see Hansen and Klien 2022 for similar examples), who are made aware of both their inclusion and Otherness within this omnipresent music scene. As highlighted in this article, local and Japanese presumptions about Japanese identity are constantly reflected back on participants—from comments about the relentless nature of Japanese record collectors, to song lyrics focused on Japanese women, to Japanese "big ups" at a party. As such, Japanese participants are able to experience both an inclusive and exclusive engagement with slackness. For example, for Japanese women this can range from a noncommittal enjoyment of the city; to a fetishized consumptive mimesis, such as the appropriation of patois to communicate with locals or the emulation of a lionized Jamaican femininity as a strong and independent woman; to reveling in Jamaican masculinity, be it a gaze or sexual encounter; to a self-affirming and literal political break, like Miss. Chin or Kumi opting to permanently reside in Jamaica. But to be clear, all encounters involve interpreting and being interpreted as Japanese by

Jamaicans and by Japanese themselves. While for the most part Japanese are viewed as outsiders in Jamaica, marked by their ethnicity for example, by that very same identification they are concomitantly widely recognized as being keen participants, albeit Othered participants, in the popular culture of dancehall by Jamaicans. There is thus a heterotopic liminality, an ability to continually reinvent or reimagine oneself through personal engagements and experiences in the city and its scene. This can be marked over weeks, months, and, for some, years.

Subculture, as updated by Ross Haenfler, is "a *relatively diffuse* social network having a *shared identity*, *distinctive meanings* around certain ideas, practices and objects, and a sense of *marginalization* from or *resistance* to a perceived 'conventional society'" (2014, 16; emphasis in original). As highlighted in this article, most young Japanese attracted to dancehall and slackness come to Jamaica driven by varied, yet highly heteronormative, notions of subcultural affirmation. They identify first and foremost as Japanese DJs, usually male, or dancers, usually female. In Kingston, they savor their own interpretation of slackness, whether sexual or sociocultural. In the lion's share of cases, they consume dancehall with the plan to return to Japan with an experiential and individual affirmation of their subcultural status—in short, having been *there* and done *that*. In a few cases, Japanese relocate to Jamaica. In either case (and those in-between, such as individuals who visit multiple times), the commitment to the ethos and aesthetic of slackness via dancehall is a clear resistance to a host of hegemonic norms in Japan.

Committed Japanese dancehall participants are already marginalized as precarious workers in Japan given their dedication to musical craft, but through slackness they further resist against expectations of what it means to be Japanese writ large, whether the cute and submissive woman or the obedient salaried workman. I suggest that this can be more than a resistance, however. Taking the steps to participate in the dancehall scene in Jamaica is a significant point—they must save money, often quit a job in a precarious work environment, travel across the globe to a potentially dangerous location, and for some they do this many times over several years. This, I contend, ought to be read more as an immunization. It is a considered break from the communal notion of what constitutes hegemonic cultural *belonging* in Japan but without letting go or wanting to resist *being* Japanese. It is a reinvention, I daresay a brave reinvention, of Japanese identity on individually negotiated terms. As Roberto Esposito notes, "to fully belong to the originary *communitas* means to renounce one's most precious substance, in other words one's individual identity. . . . If community refers to something general and open, immunity, or immunization, regards the particularity of a situation defined by its subtraction to a common condition" (Esposito 2012, 2, emphasis in original). The savoring of slackness in Kingston is an individualistic reimagining of Japaneseness through play, consumption, or indeed an earnest desire to remain and become a Japanese-Jamaican. In sum, long-term immunization is not simply prolonged resistance but acceptance, accomplished not by rejecting Japanesness outright but by rejecting the oppressive and hegemonic aspects of what might be called its big-C elements, inside or outside Japan, while reinventing and affirming a new individually negotiated small-c identity through

dancehall, an identity deeply indebted to an essence of Jamaica and a savoring of slackness.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Tsukuba University and Hokkaido University for funding research trips to Kingston; Moji Anderson for being an incredibly generous host at University of the West Indies at Mona; Erin MacLeod and Marvin Sterling for comments on early versions of this article; insightful comments from Nakano Kiwa at the Association for Asian Studies meeting, 2022; and my intrepid research assistant James "stay punk" Letson, who helped greatly with citations and suggestions, as did the comments of the anonymous reviewers who helped to hone this article.

Notes

1. This is not to suggest that Jamaica lacks people of East Asian ancestry or ethnicity. There is a long history of Chinese immigration to Jamaica (Bennett and Sherlock 1998, 316–35; Sheller 2003, 108–42), and there are Chinese and Japanese business people and development representatives in the country. The point here is that, even given these other groups, young working-class Japanese tend to be disproportionately represented at dancehall events and in secondary venues like budget hostels. In this context, being Japanese marks them.

2. A key point regarding the "voices" of informants arose in early reviews of this article. Not all, but the majority of interviews I had with Japanese were conducted in English peppered with patois and Japanese keywords. In the main, I have opted to quote people in "proper" English or use common Japanese terms without the stereotypical inflections of Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) speakers or patois that might be confusing to some readers.

3. A dubplate is a kind of "advertisement." A famous Jamaican artiste will "big up" (proclaim support for) a DJ (usually after money changes hands). These dubplates are then deployed in sound clashes (DJ competitions): e.g., "X artiste supports DJ Y's sound system." The more respected the dubplate name, the more cultural-social cache the DJ holding the dubplate receives (Veal 2007, 50–55).

4. In terms of gender parity in 2022, Japan is ranked 116th out of 146 nations. Jamaica, despite the stereotype of misogyny, in part perpetrated by dancehall, is 38th (World Economic Forum 2022, 10).

5. YouTube has numerous videos of Jamaican dance parties. Searching any of these names will produce promotional and private videos.

6. Pseudonyms are used in the following ethnography.

7. I fumblingly brought this up at the 2019 *Japanese Anthropology Workshop* meeting in Denmark. My point was that there was no need to pry information out of these informants. They were either keenly or nonchalantly forthcoming about extremely intimate details of their lives.

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