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There is a Stranger Among Us: The African-American Experience of Blackness in Japan

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There is a Stranger Among Us: The African-American Experience of Blackness in Japan

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Anthropology of the College of Arts and Sciences by

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Abstract

Representations of “blackness” are present in Japan in the form of advertisements, television personalities, animated films, and other popular culture domains. In city centers, such as Harajuku and Shinjuku, representations overemphasize rap and hip-hop street culture, amplifying certain racial stereotypes of black people. Anthropologists and historians have examined this commodification of “blackness” in Japan through popular culture forms like rap music (Condry 2000), film (Russell 1998) and jazz and hip-hop clubs (Atkins 2000). This ethnographic research study examines ways African-American expatriates experience being black in Japan. Interview and observational data were collected from African-Americans currently living in Japan. Their shared experiences help highlight the fluidity of “blackness” and the implications of black-bodied identities as products within contemporary Japanese society. A reflexive methodology facilitated a contextualized view of transnational practices taking place including the commodification of “blackness,” the emotional labor of “cultural ambassadors,” and emerging and converging forms of authenticity and imitation.
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Preface

I began this ethnographic journey wanting to know how “blackness” is experienced by African-Americans. Anthropologist John Jackson presents a theory of racial sincerity that suggests that measuring “blackness” is more than checking off attributes on a racial list (2005:13). I found his concept of racial sincerity could be applied to sociologist Maxine Craig’s theory of viewing beauty as both a system of pleasure and oppression (2006:3). Their theoretical framework was helpful in my conception of race as a role that is applied to African-American expatriates living in Japan. As I performed my ethnographic research, I became aware of how my own “blackness” was expressed. I was often confronted about my personal representations of race. It helped me stay grounded in my research study, and I believe it adds to the richness of the text. When I arrived in Japan, I soon realized how the experiences of “blackness” were more than just addressing stereotypes.

I chose to represent my data through specific vignettes that bring emotion to the forefront, where I as the researcher attempt to give equal attention to the emotional state and the lived experience participants in the research study. I found it interesting that my participants chose to visually and emotionally relate to me as a researcher and as a person. I anticipated that participants in my research study would not recognize our shared experiences due to my critical observations of their experiences. The experiences that they shared with me are relatable to the experiences that I had while in Japan, which provided a pipeline for setting up the emotional-centered vignettes. I believe it was this shared experience of “blackness” that allowed me to fully contextualize what it means to be black in Tokyo, Japan. There are vignettes that did not make it into this thesis, so I think it is appropriate to state that these experiences are not inclusive of all
aspects of “blackness.” In the future, I hope to build upon this research to expand the study of “blackness.”
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Introduction

Representations of African-Americans in Japan can be found in advertisements, television variety shows, animated films, and other popular culture forms. Outside of media representations, prescriptive attributes of “blackness” can also be seen in subcultural styles and performances like ganguro, at jazz and hip-hop venues, and souvenir shops that specialize in the sale of racial kitsch.\(^1\) In city centers, such as the Tokyo districts Harajuku and Shinjuku, these representations overemphasize hip-hop street culture, amplifying certain racial stereotypes of black people. Young Japanese people dress in NBA jerseys, tilted baseball hats, oversized jeans, and gold chains. These specific images of American “blackness” have been circulated to global audiences as an assertion of representing “things black” (Dávila 2001:221). The same aspects have been adopted by the fashion-savvy youth of Tokyo. While popular culture is a vehicle that allows for specific aspects of “blackness” to reach a global scale, how do these images complicate “blackness,” and what are the effects on the actual black people in these spaces?

My research ethnographically explores the ways “blackness” is experienced by African-Americans in Japan. When I tell people about my study, the first question I usually hear is always the same: “Are there black people in Japan?” On the surface, this seems innocent enough; black people, including African, African-American, and other African diasporic groups are a small minority in Japan. Indeed a recent report by the Japanese Ministry of Justice estimates that about 20,000 African-Americans, or less than 1% of the total foreign population, live in Japan (Japanese Ministry of Justice 2008). On a deeper level, however, “blackness” seems antithetical to Japan because people do not think about Japan as an ethnically heterogeneous society.

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\(^1\) *Ganguro* is an aspect of street fashion culture in Japan that embodies resistance to expectations placed on young women and freedom from traditional Japanese gender and cultural norms. Resistance is expressed through the wearing of bright colored clothing, gold lamé-painted faces, blonde and pink hair, and highly tanned skin. *Ganguro* has been conflated with blackness due to the women’s attitude and their appearances being likened to portrayals of women in hip-hop videos (Kinsella 2005).
During my thesis research study, I sought to understand how “blackness” was being experienced in Japan’s capital by African-American expatriates. My informants moved from the United States to live long-term in Japan, whether for work or personal reasons, designating them as expatriates. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I explored the many ways African-American expatriates would experience race in their daily lives. For some of the participants, conversations about black hair and US racial categories were daily occurrences in their role as language assistants, which I explore in Chapter 3 titled, “Viewing Black Bodies.” I explored how stereotypes and prescriptive racial categories are used by event promoters to assert authenticity at the emotional expense of the African-Americans attending and participating at the event. I examined both the internal and external experiences as a way to situate “blackness” not as an object, but a process or feeling. I paid particular attention to the emotional constraints and freedoms that come from being a cultural ambassador. I intentionally use the term “cultural ambassador” to represent the designation of African-American expatriates as experts and representatives of African-American culture ipso facto because they were African-American. I propose that the role of cultural ambassador is established based on visual cues and compliance is expected regardless of your knowledge or willingness to serve in this role. To this end, I found that everyday “blackness” practices turned into politicized decisions for African-Americans living in Japan.

As an African-America traveling in Japan, serving as a cultural ambassador, I infused my own subjective experiences into my analysis. My positionality as a researcher and a fellow African-American in a foreign, isolated place helped facilitate a common understanding with my participants in regards to the experience of being black in Japan. I viewed our shared roles as cultural ambassadors as a way to further examine the different experiences that add to the
discussion of defining “blackness” in Japan. My intention is to show the non-linear routes that exist in understanding “blackness” as a rhizomic system of physical and emotional traits, rather than normalizing “blackness” as a singular taproot that represents a fixed, singular structure.

In my thesis, I use “blackness” synonymously with black people, black culture, and those things attributed to the black diaspora. This is not meant to simplify or limit the global and cultural aspects of blackness, but to allow for the subject of blackness to be all encompassing; it highlights that blackness is mutable and inclusive of many racial categories, cultural backgrounds, and global perspectives. Also, in terms of blackness in Japan, much of black culture is a composite of multiple African diasporas—not just African-American—represented as a singular force. In Japan, blackness can be simplified by the use of its adjective form (e.g., black music or black style). It is then complicated by its dissection based on country of origin, or completely reinterpreted, as in the case of the hip-hop community in Japan. I define blackness further in Chapter 4 titled, “Embody Blackness Through and Through.”

The thesis’s opening chapter, “A Discussion of Blackness,” begins with a review of foundational literature on blackness. Drawing on critical theorist Stuart Hall (1993), I examine what makes blackness something that can be studied and how other scholars have viewed it as a commodified object. I apply a multidisciplinary approach to examine the effects of blackness. I compare cultural theorist bell hooks’ (1993) structural analysis of white supremacy with anthropologist John Jackson’s framework of racial authenticity and sincerity, which argues that blackness is more complicated than a categorical processing of attributes (Jackson 2005:15).

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2 I will be dispensing of the quotations around blackness from this point further in the text, but readers should know that I am not reifying or assuming its existence.
3 Although I acknowledge that there are cultural, social, and political differences between the people of the African diaspora, for the purpose of this thesis, I use the following concepts interchangeably: “people of the African diaspora,” “African-American,” and “black.” All refer to the targeted population of my research study: African-Americans.
Next, I review the ethnographic literature, which further highlights the ways blackness has been researched based on the visual perception of race and how it is being contested as something more than the purely physical. My goal is to bring awareness to the problematic nature of pressuring blackness to describe a singular thing.

In the Chapter 2, “Breaking the Surface,” I provide a description of my research site and methodology. I introduce the participants and contextualize their experiences of blackness in Japan. Finally, I provide a discussion of why Japan is ideal for studying blackness and the merits of using an ethnographic approach to study race. I argue that ethnography is a useful tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the African-Americans in Japan.

In Chapter 3, “Viewing Black Bodies,” I examine the concept of black body politics using sociologist Maxine Craig’s (2006) research on beauty standards and gender and racial marketing strategies. I continue this line of thinking to show that like beauty, the experience of blackness can be at once oppressive and pleasurable, as described by Craig (2006:160). Juxtaposed with Jackson’s theory of racial authenticity and racial sincerity (Jackson 2005:15), I show how race is a transformative process with both costs and benefits to the person. My specific research included African-Americans who were hired to provide authenticity to hip-hop nights planned by Japanese natives, as well as black language assistants who promoted racial understanding through cultural/language instruction. I use my participants’ frustrations and successes in classroom discussions of race and body politics to foreground their experiences of race and authenticity. I specifically highlight the experiences of African-American cultural ambassadors who use hair as agency to assert (or downplay) their blackness.

The final chapter, “Embodied Blackness Through and Through,” explores the emotional and visceral aspects of blackness as evidenced through the participants’ feelings of isolation,
seclusion, and emotional vulnerabilities. I suggest these examples of emotions, attributed to one’s blackness, play an important role in shaping the experiences of African-Americans living in Japan. In order to accurately represent what I see as internal workings of races that are felt and that are not seen, I utilize anthropologist Andrew Beatty’s suggestion of writing ethnography in a narrative format similar to fiction writing, moving away from first-person and confessional accounts (2010:430). He describes representing ethnographic vignettes in a way that gives an accurate description of emotion in action. This means explaining not only the scientifically observable, but also the emotional atmosphere to help give a native point of view. I chose to represent ethnographic vignettes in a narrative format to help situate external appearances and bodily presentations. I argue that these supplementary aspects of blackness shape the African-American experience in Japan. Participants feeling isolated became comforted by the presence of someone of a similar racial category. The internal feelings of comfort became very real as the experience was likened to the hug of a grandmother or what one participant described as a “blackness high-five.”

Performing blackness is an everyday practice full of decisions with real-life consequences. I add my personal experiences as an African-American who had my own blackness called into question as a way to demonstrate that while different, African-American expatriates have the shared experience of continually representing their blackness. In the following pages I hope to highlight the historical aspects of blackness as a subject of study, as well as explore the ways that African-American expats experience blackness in Japan.
Chapter 1: A Discussion of Blackness

In this chapter, I provide a brief background into the historical attempts defining blackness and its components. After exploring historical ways that blackness has been defined, I debate the limitations of such designations based on stereotypes. Next, I explore the parallels between these historical views of blackness and contemporary racial categories that are contested both within academia and contemporary society. I then move to a global viewpoint by presenting research concerned with the way black identities are shipped globally in the form of marketing campaigns and language assistants. Since my research study is concerned with the experiences of African-Americans living in Japan, I survey research being done on blackness in Japan. Finally, I use John Jackson’s theory of racial sincerity as an overlay to further highlight his belief that aspects of blackness remain outside the pre-ordained categories of race and racial authenticity.

What Does Blackness Look Like?

Fashion, music, and language are often the key aspects familiar to non-black people with a limited knowledge of blackness. Historically, many depictions of blackness were used to ostracize and parody black culture. Afro-historian Henry Sampson, working on African-American history in the US, has collected and analyzed images, cartoons, performance logs, and other material culture to document and critique the commodification of blackness through media prior to 1960. Sampson stresses that black imagery of this period usually involved depictions of blacks as “unintelligent, lazy, or hostile, and having cannibalistic tendencies...engaging in antisocial, illegal, or immoral behavior” (Sampson 1997:1–4). In Henry Sampson’s (1997) work, he argues that the commodification of blackness had and continues to have economic ramifications that made this practice not only entertaining, but also marketable.

Images of “mammie” archetypes circulating in the forms of dolls, salt and pepper
shakers, and other household goods and decorations in America seem like they are not connected with contemporary notions of race, but I argue that they inform the archetypes (and expectations) of racial categories. Today, race is marketed in a specific way to insinuate things are related to black cultural identity (Crockett 2008:2). The malleable nature of blackness as performance allows for practices that promote unjust stereotypes to be seen as creative and entertaining, rather than offensive and demeaning (Thomas and Campt 2007:54). Contemporary US black comedians, for example, use black masculinist stereotypes of “‘ghetto’ sensibility, cunning, and urban combat skills, as authenticating descriptors of Black culture and identity” (Jacobs-Huey 2006:61–62). I argue that this is to create a space where race becomes part of the greater social conversation while simultaneously generating alienation from the greater population with an “us/them” narrative. As anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006:62–62) points out, black comedians in urban comedy clubs used jokes about 9/11 and race to further delineate how race played an important role in the discussions about the terrorist attack and its aftermath. She also saw the comedians’ creation of such jokes to represent an in-group sense of estrangement from the US narrative of what it means to be safe in America, a feeling which they sensed never existed.

The stereotypes used by the comedians have roots in historical depictions of race as discussed in Sampson (1997). I argue that entertainment and popular culture serves as a vehicle for racial stereotypes to travel temporally and globally. I found it important to acknowledge that blackness has the ability to be historically referenced and applied in contemporary discussions of blackness and in global ways. A global discussion of race potentially means that ideas of racial categories extend beyond the US into the global marketplace where black expatriates abroad feel the effects of these racial transactions.
Stuart Hall examines the tension concerning blackness as a part of popular culture while simultaneously resisting dominance by white culture, ideally creating an autonomous, exclusive space itself for black culture (1993:3–4). This framing research suggests that blackness encompasses many aspects within the black traditions, the experiences of black people, the aesthetic choices that black people make (including clothing and language practices), and a black counternarrative or struggle to have one’s voice represented (1993:4). Hall’s definition opens the understanding of blackness as something visceral and experiential as long as it involves black bodies. His work also explores the idea that daily interactions and one’s own body should be included in the experience of blackness. Finally, Hall suggests that blackness is not only profitable, but also an easily commodified aspect of culture than can be rejected and injected into a global popular culture. I find this important in my discussion of Japanese promoters using black artists as headliners to increase attendance and profit from hip-hop open-mic events.

Critical theorist bell hooks (1989) focuses her research on examining how blackness serves as counter-narrative to dominant (often white) cultural forms. Her work examines the intersection of popular culture and mass media where the process of commodification takes place. She sees the commodification of black culture as a lucrative and harmful business due to its marketing and promoting of negative stereotypes through racist imagery by both black and non-black people. Using textual analysis hooks examines the representations of blackness on television and across other forms of media in the US. She notes that the movement to liberate stereotypes of blackness was overshadowed by the commodification of blackness through media practices.

While hooks’ (1989) approach to the commodification has merit, as evidenced by the overwhelming production of hip-hop music concerning masculinist, hetero-normative themes
intended to educate the black consumer, she attributes the production and perpetuation of negative black stereotypes to non-black consumers who reappropriate these images for their own purposes. I propose that the transfer of black American culture, and its globalization in the form of songs, goods, and ideas, facilitated by digital technologies, complicates the demand for such consumption practices. I see that hooks’ emphasis on white domination and imperialism obscures the interpretation of such acts of performance and simplifies the role of blackness to a malleable object rather than an active process that involves effort and work by the performer. I believe her application of white domination to whiteness within popular culture implies omnipotence, and therefore, she is relegating blackness, on a mass scale, to a niche concept, which allows for the overlooking of the many intricacies that exist in the interpretation of such forms. I argue that an oversimplification of racial attributes further leads to stereotypes based on generalizations of racial constructs.

Social scientists, anthropologists in particular, are interested in contextualizing blackness as a more than a racial category or a product of human agency (Jackson 2005; Crockett 2008; Simmons 2008). They show that blackness encompasses a transformative process and an affective space that exist beyond the stringent categorical checklist. Through ethnographic methods, social scientists are able to show how individuals perceive race based upon visual cues, and act accordingly, regardless of whether they match the way the person wished to be identified. They capture these intimate and complicated experiences to highlight how the experience of blackness affects people in their daily lives. Along with these anthropologists, I am interested in the ways race and identity travel and how they are experienced by black expatriates.

Anthropologists are interested in the ways identity travels in the form of images, actual bodies, and emotions. I found it important to recognize that the categories created based upon
stereotypes in the media are the same categories that are commodified and used as global images of blackness. Certain identities, such as the athlete or hip-hop artist, are both globally recognized symbols of blackness. These commodified and recognizable images of blackness help inform and shape the categories and choices that African-Americans make daily. African-American expatriates realize that being a black hip-hop artist ensures desirability when looking for work in Japan within the hip-hop community. I found that an ethnographic approach allowed me to examine the ways blackness is performed through the body, both externally and internally. I am also concerned with how blackness is taken up by the observer.

Contemporary, ethnographic works demonstrate how blackness can travel in different forms, such as images, products, lived experiences, and black bodies. For example, anthropologist David Crockett (2008) uses visual analysis to look at representations of blackness through representations in the media, specifically in advertisements and magazines. His analysis involves showing how marketers use racial tactics to attract black consumers through specialty-market products. Crockett’s visual analysis of race works well with anthropologist Kimberly Simmons’ (2008) exploration of race categorization by Dominican Republican officials. Simmons discusses the ways in which language assistants are perceived by border patrol and government officials in the Dominican Republic based on their skin pigmentation. Darker language assistants are often asked for their visa paperwork due to being perceived as Haitians.

Skin color practices, from the marketing of bleachers and ethnic products to associating a person’s perceived ethnicity with skin color and performing according to one’s prejudices, are examples of colorization practices explored by both David Crockett and Kimberly Simmons. The assignment of culture and blackness are practices that are not unique to the officials in the Dominican Republic. They are commonly shared practices that take place during most expatriate
experiences abroad, where transnational citizens are excluded from the dominant class. The globalized practices of marketing race provide easily digestible servings of blackness and are received, interpreted, and consumed by black and non-black people alike. The viewer consumes and reinterprets images in the same way border officials consume and reinterpret the images of language assistants, by constructing racialized ideas during the process.

Finally, these works highlight the ways that black bodies must be conscious of their own personal politics and semiotics at all times. Acknowledging that blackness extends beyond the body, that it is exuded through the skin like sweat and odor, that it can be invisible to the eye, encourages one to acknowledge the invisible, or felt, dimensions of blackness that exceed its physical representations. The external thing that cannot be seen is what anthropologist John Jackson calls “sincerity.” He argues that it can be found through ethnography. Ethnography helps to contextualize all of the stimuli to make sense of the unseen.

As John Jackson argues, “Race is more than just what relegates people to selfsame versions of impoverished objecthood, to little more than racial things that are externally narrated and scripted out of any form of agency or subjectivity” (2005: 28, emphasis in original). Jackson argues that “keeping it real” involves work, effort, and vigilance on the part the individual. There are often times when the interpretations of others are in direct contradiction with one’s personal interpretation of his or her self (e.g., confronting the notion of being good at dancing and sports based on your racial makeup). The contention between having to monitor one’s own blackness and the globalized form is often daunting, but this task is part of the effect of the lived experience of blackness. Regardless of group size, African-Americans are still forced to be conscious producers of blackness, especially when they travel, in essence “making sense of the categories, racial politics, and colorization in that new place” (Simmons, 2008:106). As Simmons points out,
African-Americans are always navigating blackness by having the added task of changing black identities and self-representation, making race “work” in a changing, global environment.

*What Does Blackness Look Like in Japan?*

The commodification of blackness in Japan has been examined by anthropologists through hip-hop music (Condry, 2000), the implied relationship between blackness and the *ganguro* girl experience (Koizumi, 2010), as well as film and popular culture (Russell, 1998). In each of these ethnographic accounts, blackness is not seen as only appropriated, but also internalized and reproduced as a different thing completely. Both anthropologists Ian Condry and Yayoi Koizumi take a non-binary view of blackness, not exploring it in terms of whether they are appropriating race or not, but acknowledging it as an alternate cultural form. They found that in most cases, b-boys and *ganguro* girls saw no connection to their perceived inauthentic appropriation of blackness; rather, they both felt that they were indeed part of an authentic culture. These works examine the reinterpretation of each specific aspect of blackness in Japan.

These two works are in contention with John Russell (1991:4) as he sees Japanese uses of blackness as an Othering process of creating a national identity of Self. Russell’s explanation supports Stuart Hall’s assertions that black culture is a “product of partial synchronization of engagement across cultural boundaries” and that black culture is full of “negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions” (1993:4). If we acknowledge that having the ability to partially synchronize certain aspects of culture makes it easier to reinterpret it in a meaningful way in one’s own culture, then we must question why blackness has been historically plagued with issues of exclusion and alienation. I believe that while blackness is seen as part of the racial dialogue, within academic discussions of race it has been included under the category
as the exotic Other, or as John Russell proposes, the equation of blackness with “coolness” (Russell 1991:4).

The *ganguro* identity performances should not be analyzed on the basis of being borrowed, but on the possibility that this new space was created and sustained through sincere interest. Jackson expresses that “to be real is an attribute of the inside, an immanence, that authenticity wants to place outside, trying to domesticate it through a topsy-turvy externalization” (2005: 198). I imagine John Jackson would argue whether it is important to differentiate sites of authenticity from sites of racial play. According to Russell “racial play happens as a way to construct Other, while sites of authenticity construct a sense of Self” (1991:4). Racial play in Japan takes place in these sites of intersection between the West and East, where one uses the exoticism of the Other to construct a sense of Self, identification, and nationality based on differences, rather than commonalities. That may be the appeal that entices so many people to want to experience the Other, if only for a fleeting moment of hip-hop dancing or getting your hair braided in cornrows. According to Russell, this exchange is a continuous flow of information and content delivered in multiple mediums and format “ranging from verbal humor, physical objects, knick-knacks and bric-a-brac, and graphic and visual displays, as well as, informative discourse” (1991:4-6). These forms of mass media allow for the message to be produced and consumed in high volumes, thus facilitating the spread and retention of the commodification of blackness.

John Russell (1998) does not thoroughly examine the influence that the commodification of blackness has on African-Americans living in Japan. My research study examines the experiences of African-Americans living in Japan from their point of view as consumers, and sometimes producers, who are willing participants in the process of commodification. They serve
as English teaching assistants, hip-hop artists, and one as a videographer and event promoter. These roles call for changing black identities dependent on the environment and also on a willingness to serve as a cultural ambassador. Their blackness is regularly called into question, thus the effects of their blackness are not only cultural, but also visceral.

I have situated my research in a space that is concerned with travelling identities of black expatriates, and I am interested in the experiences they face while being a minority in a homogenized environment. I propose that blackness is amplified in Japanese contemporary society due to its limited exposure and its knowledge-base of race being defined and confined to racial categories produced through the media. There has been limited research on the experience of blackness by African-Americans who are forced to encounter these commodified representations of race. In this way, my thesis research addresses a gap in the literature concerning African-Americans who reside in Japan. My goal is to not only contribute to literature on representations of blackness globally, but to also show ways in which blackness is represented by both the dominant Japanese culture and the minority African-American expatriate culture.
Chapter 2: Breaking the Surface

This section is concerned with the methodology of the research study and the participants who made it possible. Given my interest of qualitatively describing blackness, I explored aspects of blackness that exist outside of the currently understood concepts of race. I find that ethnographic data is ideal for highlighting the experience of race beyond racial performativity and the adherence to, or repulsion of, stereotypes. The duty of interpreting information is always a sensitive matter, and I believe there is considerably more pressure when researching one’s own culture. I, like Jackson, hoped that with ethnography I would be able to challenge the boundaries of race and self and to engage in the spaces often left out of academia (2005:58-59).

I explore ways in which African-Americans experience blackness in Japan through local and transnational practices, such as, international hip-hop nights, cultural ambassadorships through teaching abroad, and through the daily interactions of expatriates within Japanese society. I implemented interviews and participant-observations in order to document the stories of African-American expatriates from their lived experiences. There was resistance initially from participants due to the fear of how they would be represented in the written portion. A common response I received was, “I will give you my opinion, but I don’t want to be in your project.” This constant rejection lead to me implementing fail-safe measures throughout the research process. Part of this process included giving participants the option to participate in person or through the web application Skype, allowing the participants to pick the time and place, and instituting a pre-screening portion where I would thoroughly explain the research study allowing for them to give or refuse consent at any point in the process. Throughout the process I learned to navigate the cultural and geographical landscape, and I gained a better understanding of how ethnography can be used to suit my specific research needs.
Location

This research study was conducted in Tokyo, Japan, over twelve weeks. At the time of the study, June 2011-September 2011, everyone was still being affected by the results of March 2011 tsunami and earthquake. Life was progressively becoming normal, absent the rolling brownouts. I gathered observational data and interviews in Tokyo. I specifically chose Tokyo due to it being a cultural center and it having a high influx of foreign culture, especially hip-hop music and fashion (Matsushita, 1998; Socha, 2006). Tokyo, and Japan to a greater extent, was also ideal because blackness has a pervasive presence even though black people account for a small percent of the population. There also exists an historical relationship between African-Americans and Japan, as evidenced by the mass immigration of African-American soldiers to Japan post-World War II.

In Tokyo I attended hip-hop clubs, African-American meet-ups, and social gatherings. I interviewed people in coffee shops and then attended meetings or performances with them. Most of the observations took place at The Jade Necklace, an arts and culture bar in Shibuya. The other participants outside of Tokyo were not met in person, but we had frequent conversations over Skype (a free internet video chat program). While these conversations were not in person, I was privy to the emotions and reactions that participants had while responding to questions. Festivals, running events, embassy parties, and hip-hop nights all served as places of data collection. Everyday locations such as bars, grocery stores, and restaurants also served as important places for observation. Participant-observation allowed me to directly observe ways in which African-American expatriates in Japan experienced blackness by observing daily activities and interactions taking place (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland, 1998). I attended a weekly hip-hop night that allowed me to directly interact with people within the Japanese hip-hop community.
and directly observe how African-Americans experience blackness.

Participants

I employed multiple methods of attracting ideal subjects for my research study. I naively thought this would be the easiest task of my research, yet it was one of the most daunting. Finding African-Americans who identified as such was part of the problem. Initially, it seemed that this level of specificity was important for my project. In retrospect, a more inclusive criterion of black expatriates (from America) rather than African-American would have been more representative of the black expatriates that were living in Japan. In Japan, black identity is more inclusive of diversity in comparison to the diversity in African-American communities in the United States. My interest was to examine the experience of blackness, and my experience, of a black American who moved to Japan added to the experience of blackness in Japan.

Accepting blackness as a transformative process further highlights the ways in which racial categories are not relegated to cultural and geographical similarities. Participants expressed feelings that the label African-American felt more politicized and not representative of their full cultural heritage. Many of the participants in my research study preferred to identify as black, due to having a shared social position and categorization of Other within the contemporary Japanese context. They equally agreed that the term African-American was problematic as it inherently served as a tool to create racial hierarchies amongst other black expatriates living in Japan.

By regularly attending Extreme Hip-Hop, a weekly hip-hop and urban arts night at the Jade Necklace, I met two participants: Chris and Sanje. Both men worked in the Japanese hip-hop community and as educational assistants in Japanese grade schools. They utilized their knowledge and blackness for political, social, and educational means. I was able to gain access to
them due to my love of hip-hop and my status as a researcher. Both participants were interested in the ways I used my own blackness in education to bring awareness of black culture. It was this same interest in my research that attracted Geoffrey, a businessman, who owned a trading company. He held a role in top management, which is not normal for African-Americans in Japan.

I met Geoffrey at an African-American meet-up for young professionals working in Japan. The intention of this group was to provide a place where black expatriates could meet each other and create social networks. The group chose different venues around Tokyo for their meetings. Initial access to the group was gained by joining an online community for black professionals living in Tokyo. Expatriate professional businesspeople, or “salary men,” work abroad for long periods of time which allows for insight into the changing roles that one occupies as a foreigner (gaijin), a worker, and a black person temporally. The opportunity to meet other black people in Tokyo was not only beneficial for my research, but it was emotionally beneficial for me. Having other people to connect with socially allowed me to recharge and push forward during the research study. I would update the group on my research and we scheduled social outings outside of the group.

I recruited Melody, Pamela, and Jamie through an online group catering to English teaching assistants of African descent. They were initially interested in participating in the research study because they had a genuine interest in culture and in serving as cultural ambassadors. The purpose of their specific organization is to support those who serve as American language and cultural assistants in Japan. Language assistants are positioned in a mediated space of foreigner (gaijin) and diplomat. It should be noted that most of the individuals in the program’s online group were women, thus this is reflected in the female participants’ data.
They lived in three neighboring prefectures, about 400 miles outside of Tokyo, so I was not able to physically meet with them. Instead, I conducted Skype interviews, which I audio-recorded, with them during the research process. Navigating Japan by train can be a daunting task, so utilizing Skype allowed for me to connect with participants who were not easily assessable.

The sample comprised of three women and four men, all of whom either self-identified as black or African-American. Participants ranged in age from twenty-four to forty-one years old, with an average age of approximately twenty-seven years old. The majority of the sample presently works, or at some point worked, as language teaching assistants. The changing roles of African-Americans as citizens, teaching assistants, and cultural ambassadors shed light on the skills and practices needed to navigate Japanese society. As part of their training, language assistants are given basic tools such as Japanese language instruction, culture classes, and mediated social circles to ensure individuals have adequate knowledge to immerse themselves in Japan.

The combination of the sample and methodology helped me to experience the expatriates’ Japan through stories, observations, and participation in events. Having the ability to observe participants in the role of cultural ambassadorship allowed me to see first-hand how they traversed contemporary Japanese society. Most of the participants were either current or past language assistances, so they served as a cultural ambassador in their personal and professional life. Given that my research seeks to measure the impact of commodified forms of blackness on African-American expatriates, seeking out participants that served dual roles within the Japanese society was critical.
To say that hair is an important part of black culture in an understatement, at least in the realms of popular culture according to an article in *The Florida Times Union* (2013) by Tracy Jones. She describes how hair has become an instrumental part of black culture with books and documentaries focused on the subject, hair in music, and the continual focus on First Lady Michelle Obama’s hair. As Althea Prince, author of *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair*, notes (quoted in Jones 2013), “Black people’s hair is so judged. You can’t just decide to wear your hair how you were born and walk down the street, because that’s an Afro, and it’s judged.”

The topic of hair, coupled with political insinuations accompanying our hair choices, especially when choosing a natural hairstyle, tended to crop up in my weekly conversations with Melody. Both of us had decided to wear our hair naturally until the end of the rainy season. We laughed about our hair practices because we knew they were limited in Japan. It is not only difficult to find a stylist willing to do your hair, but it is also difficult to find products and secondary assistance for black peoples’ hair needs. Melody began our usual banter with a faux-exasperated tonal response to my question of where she currently gets her hair done.

“Boyyy! I don’t get my hair done here. I do it myself. So it’s in a bun all the time. This one lady, I told her ‘My hair takes forever to do’ and she said ‘Oh okay’ and if we were to make an appointment she said she would block out hours.” Melody laughed at this offer as if it was an absurd, short-term solution. “And since getting hair done here is such an ordeal, financially and physically to actually get it done, some people have been telling me it is not worth worrying about.” I could hear Melody’s exasperation in her voice. Melody was a straightforward person whose emotions could be heard in her words. For this reason, I felt “Melody” perfectly described
her. She was eloquent in the way could give you a sense of the emotional stakes by providing introspective details.

“If the weather permits, I won’t wear it natural. I will just straighten it. And boy do they love it. I remember the time I straightened my hair. I came to school with my hair straightened and they [fellow teachers and her students] were like ‘Melody, kawaiiiiii, I love your hair, it’s straight, it’s straight, it’s straight.’ And I was like get out of here, man! So I was like…Yeah, I get the point, you don’t like when my hair is the way it is, like when it’s natural.”

Melody felt that her natural hair represented aspects of her blackness. When she wore her hair natural it invited criticism and exploration in the form of students wanting to touch her hair. When she chose to straighten her hair, the reaction of others was that of approval rather than curiosity. The reaction to her straight hair gave her a feeling of rejection of her natural hair choices. The black aesthetic of natural hair was challenged and coerced, by approval by peers and teachers, influencing her beauty choice to conform to the standard that they see as desirable.

Blackness is more than just stereotypical, physical characteristics. While on the surface level, the focus is on blackness as experienced through bodily practices, I argue that it is the external that informs the internal. Bodily practices, such as hairstyles and clothing, are also political symbols and cultural tools used by African-American expatriates. Their unique position, as one of the few black people in Japan, gives them access to economic and social mobility due to the visual practice of admiring the exotic. The current interest in American hip-hop further pushes African-Americans into

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4 *Kawaii* is the Japanese word meaning small or cute. It has a hegemonic use as a genre of things that are cute and desirable. Emphasis is often added to signify extreme approval.
becoming objects of desire and aversion. I apply sociologist Maxine Craig’s theory of beauty as both pleasurable and oppressive as a lens to show the ways black people use stereotypes, which tend to be negative, as a learning moment to discuss and share aspects of their black culture. Melody’s hair served as a tool for students to engage in ideas of race and the body.

Like Melody, Chris, an African-American hip-hop artist and language assistant, chose hair as the vehicle to confront the misunderstanding about black people and culture. Melody’s and Chris’ experiences are not fully exhaustive of the experiences of blackness through hair, but they represent oppositional stances (in regards of activism through hair), and they demonstrate how one is forced to serve as a cultural ambassador due to their natural body. Their personal bodily practices both inspire cultural understanding and have a detrimental effect on their self-value and confidence. With each conversation in this study we delved deeper into the physical and psychological questioning that both people must endure on a daily basis.

I agreed to meet Chris at a local coffee shop in Shibuya. He especially liked this area because he felt there was more of an African and African-American presence. As we sat and discussed how Japanese people perceived him in his roles as artist and educator, he explained how dealing with Japanese people’s perception of black people was a struggle, but he loved the opportunity to discuss his blackness. He was very methodical in his speech and movement, his dreads swayed in agreement along with his assertive responses to my questions. I imagined him handling his students the way he maneuvers a crowd, each one head bumping to the beat of his intellectual classroom performance.
Carefully, he took time to think before each response, almost assuring himself that he is going to say what he means in a definitive manner.

He explained his physical transformation, which went from wearing dreadlocks in the US, to cutting them off when he came to Japan to get a job, to finally growing them back to confront stereotypes of black people. He was inspired to use his choice of dreadlocks to show pride in his natural hair and black heritage. “Well I might accentuate it [my blackness] actually. I might try at least. I don’t really think I over-exaggerate,” Chris explained. I nodded my head in agreement while I mentally questioned what makes up the scale of over- or under-exaggerating blackness. Chris chose to wear dreadlocks to present black people, and himself, in a non-confrontational manner that would open up conversation and cultural understanding. He had first-hand experience of hair culture and he could present his choices to Japanese people if needed. Smiling, Chris continued to tell his story. It was evident that his hair gave him a sense of pride, and the cultural reasons for his dreadlocks added to his appeasement.

“"I worked in a juunoko, which is like cram school. I was working with little kids, elementary school like 3-12 year olds. I overheard the kids talking in Japanese that they saw something on TV with a black guy who was wearing dreads. Or you know, he had some kind of [black] appearance that was scary to them. And so, I was like, well, part of my teaching English, isn’t just the language, but the culture with it.” At this point, he let out a small laugh.

“I missed my dreads anyway but, you know, these kids, they knew me and a lot of these kids stayed with me a couple of years. I think that is part of my responsibility: to teach them about appearances. So I guess in terms of accentuating my blackness I have.” His tone turned serious.
“I had a responsibility to do that so I grew my hair back. That was the point. That was one of the main reasons because I wanted Japanese people to be able to experience positive blackness in that sense. You know ‘cause I don’t always go around clean-cut in a suit and a tie, but I do think I wield a certain amount of intelligence, and so I think that’s important for [Japanese] people to see. Not just see what they see on TV. Which is usually ‘gun, shoot’em, bang,’ ‘niggah, slut, getting drugs’ but to see us like this [as people] and like ‘oh he’s got dreads, but he’s just a normal person.’“

*My Body, My Race*

To talk about racialized bodies, one must explore the ways bodies serve as a source of agency. Sociologist Maxine Craig’s (2006) “Race, Beauty, and the Tangled Knot of a Guilty Pleasure” opens by noting both the oppressive and pleasurable aspects of beauty. She keeps race intertwined in her analysis of beauty standards and the marketing of race in the United States. Craig recounts the ways African-Americans utilized beauty discourse and practices to resist racism through grassroots efforts and solidarity of hair practices such as the Afro during the Civil Rights Era. Craig argues that beauty is a structure of oppression, while at the same time, a pleasurable instrument for feminist agency (2006:159). This viewpoint recognizes the tension within bodily practices and body politics. This perspective is relevant in theoretically analyzing how racialized identities are perceived.

Wearing one’s hair naturally during the Sixties was not necessarily a new style, but when added with the events of the Civil Rights Era, the imprisonment of Angela Davis as political and feminist icon, and the implications of gender and racial equality, it served a different purpose. I expand on the idea of bodily practices and sociopolitical concerns of female identity, to include the minority group of African-Americans living in Japan. I believe that people of color, like
women, are intrinsically connected to their bodily presentation. Women and people of color, both share the burden of confronting structural barriers within society based on their identity. There are social expectations placed upon both groups due to their social and political journey. I propose that assessing beauty is assessing one’s expected identity performance on the basis of one’s perception and visual cues. I argue that by lifting this idea of beauty being oppressive and pleasurable, and applying it to identity performance, it maintains the idea that they are both a rigorous and continuing process. While Craig’s (2006) analysis is limited to beauty practices, I argue that this theory should be expanded to include identity performance. This view can certainly be felt in with African-American hip-hop artists who are routinely hired based on their skin color, or language assistants who endure the embarrassment (and fulfillment) of allowing students to pull and touch their hair as a way to promote cultural understanding or learning.

In these excerpts, both participants made conscious decisions to exercise agency through their bodily practices in order to advocate for cultural education. I also see their actions as fulfilling their role as cultural ambassadors in different ways. Chris, in particular, used his dreads as a way to strengthen Japanese understanding of foreigners and difference, while Melody felt pressure to conform by straightening her hair at the expense of her personal feelings and choices. Although these occasions seem minor, or even voluntary, other people’s perceptions of their personal practices affected their choices on a daily basis. African-American expatriates must be consciously aware of how they will be perceived and how they wish to represent themselves in Japan. As cultural ambassadors, their literal black bodies become contested spaces that are continually displayed and politicized for the public.

I see the actions of Melody and Chris as a need to accurately represent and explain black culture to others. They believed that it was their duty to share realistic, diverse representations of
blackness to their Japanese students. These cultural ambassadors wanted to present “sincere” representations of blackness rather than the purely categorical stereotypes that are rampant in popular culture. The black cultural ambassadors are trained to answer generic questions of what it means to be American, but not specifically “black American.” They wanted to go beyond the superficial aspects of presenting blackness and provide a real-life brokering of black culture. They both shared that questions of identity and bodily politics came up often, and they were forced to decide whether to stick to the practiced answers versus sharing their true opinions of race. The language assistants shared that part of their training involved fielding questions about race that should not be discussed in class. I found it interesting that there was an informal curriculum built into the process that coerces your bodily performance.

The goal of both of these cultural ambassadors is to present blackness in forms of racial sincerity. They are trying to show that blackness is not only the categorical, which is termed authenticity, but it is also the area that lies outside the boundaries of conceptions of race, or sincerity. I borrow John Jackson’s concepts of sincere and authentic meaning to distinguish the authentic aspects, which tend to be physical or concrete such as clothing, hip-hop music, and appearance with sincere aspects that tend to be intuitive, such as, the struggles of making it as a black hip-hop artist in Japan, or in how Melody’s hair practices affect her economic decisions. Applying the concepts presented by anthropologist John Jackson helps to expand the thinking of how bodily practices, while appearing mundane on the surface, are in reality continuous, politicized decisions being made, often below the level of consciousness. I see these decisions as complicated and less about how you wear your hair to school, straight or natural, but how others form opinions on what is desirable (or detestable) about black hair.
It Hurts to Be Beautiful

Images of black people are used for marketing purposes at hip-hop nights in Tokyo. It is not uncommon to see a flyer for a hip-hop night with a black male who appears to be a rapper. For many hip-hop artists like Chris, the hip-hop night was a way to get exposure and network with the community. Sometimes African-Americans are invited to open-mics based on their race and nationality, regardless of experience or expertise. Both Sanje and Chris will admit that their race played an important role in their profession as hip-hop workers, but they also acknowledge that a greater hierarchical system exists in Japan, sometimes complicating their lives as black expatriates even further. I suppose that one’s socially-derived racial category has the ability to create opportunities for upward mobility where they do not exist for the native Japanese hip-hop artist. I highlight the complications of the notion that being an African-American expatriate in Japan is always economically beneficial by presenting a situation where one’s blackness is exploited for purpose of asserting authenticity at the expense of the individual. Global stereotypes of blackness facilitate economic gain for Sanje, who was hired for a show based on his appearance and connection to hip-hop. I present a vignette where Pamela felt her blackness was being exploited by a cameraman inside a hip-hop club. I believe these examples explore the application of the pleasurable and oppressive nature of racial categories.

Sanje shared the experience when aspects of blackness, particularly those seen in rap music videos and magazines, were used as guidelines to ensure that his category, a black rapper, was understood by the mostly Japanese audience. On appearance alone, Sanje looked like the stereotypical image of hip-hop artists usually being seen, wearing jean shorts and a graphic tee with hip-hop art abstractly placed across the chest. He was a tall man, in his thirties, who wore a small afro hairstyle and was active in the Japanese hip-hop community. He was the
creator/promoter of Extreme Hip Hop at the Jade Necklace, while also serving as a hip-hop videographer as a career. He explained the intention of the Extreme Hip Hop night was to present hip-hop culture to a Japanese audience from an insider view. He believed his background as a hip-hop videographer and promoter, his experience, and his racial identity as a black man, allowed him an “insider’s edge” on the subject. Sanje approached his views of blackness in the same way. He saw African-American expatriates as having an insider’s view into how blackness is experienced in Japan, so his willingness to participate in this research study was evident.

On one occasion particularly, Sanje shared an experience that highlights the tension that exists between being an African-American and working in the hip-hop industry in Japan. Sanje experienced his blackness being coerced for economic profit, but he saw value in the performing at the event and he enjoyed the experience. Sanje fully understood that his involvement was based upon an image the promoters wanted to portray to the audience, which was a visiting international black hip-hop artist. He was given explicit instructions to help convey the racial messaging for the performance. His acceptance of ascribing global stereotypes supports my notion of racial identity being both pleasurable and oppressive. The controlling of Sanje’s appearance by promoters further highlight the reality that stereotypes of racial categories based on visual cues, as well as, expectations of racial performativity are prevalent aspects of identity, especially in minority populations.

Sanje and I sat in a donut shop discussing his experiences in the hip-hop community in Japan. We discussed struggles of being a black hip-hop artist and the challenges of preserving his ideals of hip-hop. Sanje expresses that, “[hip-hop] was created by Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Koll to spread love around the world. To spread connectivity and that role has been accomplished many times over, and hip-hop is everywhere.” Sanje was critical of the hip-hop community in
Japan because he felt it lacked authenticity. He feels that the majority of the Japanese hip-hop culture has been superficially lifted in the form of fashion, ad libs, and material culture, but it fails to “go deep into the roots, into the culture, and have an understanding of why we do it first of all.” He stated that the Japanese hip-hop culture was an imitation of the hip-hop culture in America, making it inauthentic, or a carbon-copy. “It’s not about copying us, trying to use our words and trying to use our styles, and every other word is something like “muthafucka” and they’re throwing words in like they hear in English rap.” The authenticity Sanje alluded to was based upon his vision of hip-hop as a vehicle to build to community and understanding around social issues.

Sanje shared how his blackness was indeed useful at times. “I’ve gotten a few contacts directly. If I was a Japanese cameraman, running around Tokyo trying to do an interview or documentary about Japanese hip-hop, it wouldn’t work. I think probably 90% of the people I met were due to me being black.” He felt the current Japanese communities were attached to the purely aesthetic aspects of blackness in hip-hop. Jackson’s concepts of sincerity and authenticity are at play here as well. Sanje felt that his actions, to proactively support the hip-hop community in Japan, would be able to express the other aspects of hip-hop and blackness, besides the aesthetics. Sanje suggested that due to the nature of the hip-hop community in Japan, it makes it more difficult as a “real” black hip-hop artist or performer to gain access in the community. He recalled stories where music stations coined the adjective “black,” but there are no black people working there. These same stations refused to hire him or work with him as a consultant.

Being an African-American expatriate had benefits, but it also has an oppressive nature that can remain omnipresent, as you are viewed as an outsider. It is not only for being an African-American, but also for being a foreigner. The categories of race and nationality complicate the
ways that black people navigate through Japanese society. On this occasion, Sanje shared a story that I could understand empathically because it was a shared experience.

“I rap for fun. I never pursued it as a career. I was never concerned about getting a record deal, or putting out an album, or anything, right?” I nodded in agreement as he continued his story. “But I’ll get on an open-mic every now and then.”

At this point, his eyes widened and he smiled as if he had a hot tip to share. “Last year, a friend of mine threw an open-mic event, and a Japanese promoter invited me to come out [and perform], and I told him I would come. Next thing I know, I’m on a flyer, like headlining this event. I’m thinking this is the ‘validation-black-guy-on-the-flyer’ around all these other Japanese hip-hop artists.”

I was all too familiar with this type of plan. It was used to attract other black people, as well as Japanese fans of American hip-hop. It worked on me numerous times, but I withheld my experiences in favor of hearing Sanje finish. Instead he paused and took another bite of his burger and chewed on it while staring as if reliving the experience. “He hit me up again a couple weeks later saying ‘Oh that was so much fun, do you think you can do it again?’ and I was like, uhhh I wasn’t booked for it, I didn’t get paid or confirmation, or a performance time, but I appeared on his flyer. So I decided not to go [to the next event], because I felt used, you know, I felt like, he’s exploiting me, so I didn’t show up.”

I politely nodded as I listened to his story. Sanje was animated and his energy was heightened as he finished his burger and story. “But what happened was, a little after that he contacted me and said ‘I have this guy in Fukashima who wants to book you for a show’ and that was based just on the first little open-mic free-style thing I did.
Apparently, somebody was there, who ended up contacting that promoter, and wanted to get to me. These guys paid for everything.”

I couldn’t help but show my audible excitement by gasping and saying, “Balla.”

“He sent me out on a bullet train to go perform in Fukushima. They got me a hotel room for two days, they drove me all around their town, and they introduced me to everyone. It was great! I signed autographs and everything – mind you I don’t have an album out or anything out, but it was kinda like, I felt the same [like a famous rap star]. It was kinda like they used me as a validation, of like ‘we’ve got this international black rapper coming in to town’ and they actually told me how to dress too. Like they were like, ‘We need you to wear a white tee with blue jeans, baggy blue jeans.’ I needed to fit a certain image that they wanted to see and stuff. It was cool, I did it, they treated me well, and I made really good friends.”

Sanje was not alone in his feelings of being “used” for his blackness. Many of the participants had examples where they felt their blackness served as a tool for validation or exploitation. Pamela, a language assistant in living in Osaka, had similar experiences of being forced into the role of cultural ambassador, but at her expense and for the sake of authenticating a hip-hop event. She described a time when she went to a hip-hop club in Osaka with her host sister, where she was the only black person in the club.

Pamela explained the story to me over Skype. “We went to the club and a camera guy kept wanting to take pictures of me. I was like ‘Stop!’ because I felt that he wanted to play onto the idea of that “Oh! Here’s this black girl, here in Osaka, in this hip hop club” like trying to promote it — and I didn’t feel comfortable with that. I felt that he was trying take advantage of the fact that I was this [black woman], in this known hip hop club, so it didn’t make me feel
comfortable that every time I turned around he’s [taking pictures of me] — I see flashes coming my way. So I’m like ‘Can you not take my picture?’”

I viscerally felt the frustration of both Sanje and Pamela as they explained the disappointment in their blackness being reduced to stereotypes and associations. When images of black people in the media are consumed, they are internalized and become real representations of blackness from America. Acts of violence, entertainment, and parody promoted by black people in films often help influence orientations and trainings of Japanese exchange students and workers coming to America. Russell (1991) describes an example of how the phrase “freeze,” often seen in American crime movies, was suggested to become part of all Japanese exchange student’s orientation after the slaying of a Japanese student in Louisiana (93). It was believed that due to the heavy usage in the genre, it would be useful to teach students the meaning for safety.

I too had a memory of performing race in Japan. While strolling through Shinjuku after dinner with friends, I was approached by two giggling teens. They explained that I was the first black person they have ever seen and then they asked to take my picture. I agreed to take the picture and afterwards they hesitantly asked me a question. They asked could I show them how to do “the Dougie,” an American hip-hop dance associated with a song that was popular at the moment. They assumed that I, a representative of African-Americans, had a connection and knowledge to hip-hop culture.

In both cases, Sanje and Pamela are participating in everyday practices that usually would not require extra thought in other situations, but in Japan, where blackness is usually only experienced through popular culture and not actual people, they are charged with fulfilling the expectations of race performance, while trying not to support global stereotypes (i.e., “angry
black woman” or “angry black man”). I argue that due to the globally circulated images of blackness and hip-hop, that in Japan, blackness has been reduced hip-hop culture. I also propose that the imagery that is imported to Japan dramatically influences the experiences of African-American expatriates in Japan. Sanje shares, “I am now living in Japan, and I am black. I’m a one-man band. I shoot, edit, everything. Why wouldn’t they want me to work for them, but they don’t. I have been told by some Japanese people, that they see me as a threat. Like if I get one foot in the door, then a year later I would be running the company.” While the hip-hop field seems like a contentious space, it tends to be an area within grasps of African-American expatriates in Japan.

The hip-hop field is not the only space where blackness is beneficial to the person being commodified. In business spaces, where strict, structural hierarchies exist, African-American expatriates use their shared experience of discrimination and struggle with co-workers, which helps them to gain social and economic mobility. Geoffrey told me stories of Japanese workers who selectively choose social relations with people based on race. He felt some of his native Japanese colleagues trusted him more due to his blackness and their feeling of shared racial experiences. According to Geoffrey, there is a small percentage of African-American men in the Japanese business sector in management positions. Geoffrey’s time was limited, but he was able to share his experiences of how his blackness was strategically used in the workplace.

Geoffrey is a black business owner who works in the trade industry, an industrial market involved in the site selection, expansion, and relocation of businesses and products globally. His industry is predominately run by native Japanese companies. Within his company, he is the only African-American in a high-level position. He explained how his blackness played a key role in some of his personnel interactions and business decisions. We met at The Garden Clubhouse, a
swanky, rooftop restaurant in a tall building in East Tokyo. This restaurant was filled with leather booths, marble counters, a clear cigar humidor, and wine cave of what looked to be 100 wines. The walls were covered in Art Deco engravings on a single wall, as the rest of the room was lined with windows overlooking Tokyo.

Geoffrey was a confident and sturdy person, both in composure and personality. He was a very straight-forward person who did not hold back much. This would appear to be an asset in his business where he acknowledges he is a minority, but a successful one. He has had occasions where Japanese businesses chose to trade with him because he is black. Geoffrey felt that some Japanese businesses had a special affinity for African-Americans due to the perception that they shared global minority status. He described them as feeling as though he was more trustworthy, due to having a similar position in terms of dealing with Western companies. The distrust felt by the Japanese businessmen were against both Japanese natives and other global entrepreneurs, white Americans included.

“I told you this story about the woman that I worked with who said she wouldn’t work for a [European or American] company because they would consider her a yellow monkey.” Geoffrey continued to talk as he peered at a table of young Japanese women. “She worked with my company. She didn’t say ‘because you don’t think I’m a monkey,’ it’s implied. She wouldn’t work with them, but she’d work with us. So that was a very good experience of being black.”

I felt Geoffrey could tell that I was not following his line of thinking. It was difficult to concentrate knowing that many of the people eating and working in the restaurant spoke English. I felt more conscious of my race as we continued the conversation, not wanting to be viewed as disrespectful to the Japanese diners surrounding us. Geoffrey tapped the table and gestured to me, as if giving my help to the conclusion. “But the point is that I wasn’t part of the crew that
considers her a yellow monkey. She was aware of [the perception that Western businesses show racial preference], and I didn’t know that Japanese people were aware that. But the thing is that I didn’t know that Japanese were aware of [racial politics in America], and that [black Americans] wouldn’t look down on them in the same way that white people do. I didn’t know that they knew about it [the perception of racism], I didn’t expect them to know about that. Apparently some people do understand.” His voice trailed off as if he was continually perplexed that American racism could be felt outside of an American context.

Although there are suppositions of racial discrimination in the dialogue above, this passage also illuminates how Geoffrey’s blackness not only made him an ideal choice for some prospective employees, but it also established a level of trust based purely on race. His minority status allowed him access to personnel, but on a deeper level, created a shared experience with a woman who felt marginalized by foreign companies. He was in agreement with her emotional desire to connect on the same level. His blackness was enacted as a racial litmus test of trust, thus helping him become more successful by creating social networks based on trust and friendships, in a sector that is difficult for expatriates and Japanese natives alike.

Sanje and Geoffrey are both African-American males trying to be successful in an industry dominated by native Japanese, and they both have experienced their physical blackness used for economic and social mobility. Both men acknowledged that their blackness has made existing barriers surmountable for African-American expatriates in Japan. Although they work in different fields, they both have similar experiences of race taking the forefront in occupational situations. They not only experience race, but they actively shape their race, or blackness, to suit their specific needs.
Blackness can be used as a tool to promote access in spaces that are not normally accessible to black bodies. The same stereotypes that are used to “ostracize and parody black culture” (Samson, 1997:1-4) can be used to provide employment or an opportunity to share cultural aspects through interpersonal relationships. Geoffrey was able to leverage his blackness to gain contracts and create social networks. Sanje described how he felt he was being used for validation, but also that it was fun, while Pamela was annoyed and did not want to actively participate. Emotional labor does not have to be synonymous with oppression, but as Craig reminds us, there still remains a tension between oppression and pleasure (2006:164). This means blackness should be expected to serve both positive and negative directives.
Chapter 4: Embodied Blackness Through and Through

In this section I build on the Maxine Craig’s theory of the pleasurable and oppressive nature of beauty and race to show how the embodied emotional status is a crucial aspect to understanding the experiences of African-Americans in Japan. It is not purely about looking different and having an exotic identity; it is also about the essentializing of race in the form of expected behaviors and beliefs, such as the love of dance and hip-hop or a “gangster” attitude or short temper. John Jackson’s theoretical framework of “sincerity versus authenticity” assists my analysis of viewing blackness not only as phenotypic attributes, but also as the emotional state and the actual act of being that are specific to one’s race based on historical representations and contemporary expectations of what being black means in Japan. Jackson (2005) explores the way that the racial sincerity of blackness can be used as a framework to view race and the space it inhabits outside set categories. I continue by giving some insight into how simple actions like salutations to a stranger or listening to rap music with Japanese natives are anything but mundane occurrences.

Intertwined in these lived experiences are snapshots into the forced ambassadorship of being black and representing a culture solely based on your racial background. The emotional state of cultural ambassadors dramatically shapes their lives while in Japan, and specific representation of blackness dramatically affect the way African-American expatriates interact with Japanese natives. The above reasons are why I feel emotionally-centered vignettes are crucial to successfully ethnographically representing the experience of blackness in Japan. It is not only important for the vignette to push emotions to the forefront, but I feel it is also necessary for the ethnographer themselves to be part of the experience they are researching. To
this point, I argue that my experience as a black cultural ambassador adds depth and context to my ethnographic vignettes.

In my experiences living and working abroad, it is a common occurrence for natives to ask questions that essentialize my race. I have succumbed to the expectations of answering the questions in a generalized way that gives the perception that I am a representative for all black people. This is the pitfall that ethnographies can make without having the binding experience of living the life of your research participants. The responses to the questions asked about race and black culture can determine whether you take the role of ambassador or adversary with your questioner. For this reason, I suggest that bodily labor takes place every day as part of the lived experience for African-Americans living in Japan, forcing them to devise strategies for coping with their lives while living abroad.

I view this differently than the experience of race by other expatriates in Japan due to the method of blackness being universally applied to expatriates regardless of sending or receiving country, the universal association of blackness with common beliefs (i.e. hypersexuality, violence, uncleanliness), and the commonly used idea specific words and phrases based on colorization practices (i.e. *kurochan* and *doujin*, where *kuro* (black color) and *dou* (dirt) are used to describe the color of the person and *chan* (child) is used to describe their mental and social level), which are derogatory and further work to devalue and subjugate black people as opposed to their white counterparts who are usually delineated to non-native at most. These practices, in my opinion, are what make the experience of blackness unique to people of color, but specifically to African-American expatriates living in Japan.
When the Internal and External Meet

Earlier, I discussed how cultural ambassadors are forced into the position of a race broker due to their profession, but they are also forced into being a race broker simply by being a black expatriate. While in Japan, cultural ambassadors serve as gatekeepers for black culture by helping to interpret aspects of blackness that are consumed by Japanese natives. It is not always purposeful, but instead it tends to happen as African-Americans create social networks and assimilate into Japanese society. This position affirms the black expatriate as an expert based on their skin color and perceived racial category in which they occupy. At once, blackness becomes an act of performance and education with real life benefits and consequences rather than a passive attribute. Situating the experience with emotion truly illustrates what John Jackson tries to ascertain with his definition of racial sincerity.

Like Jackson, I propose that race and nationality, coupled with the non-tangible aspects of blackness beyond the physical, work together to create racial sincerity. What I add to the conversation is the importance of pushing emotion to the forefront of the black experience due to the linear function of connecting the individualized experiences of each black person to another. I am arguing that emotion lies farthest on the peripheral of identity, which makes it hard to express in written documents and it acknowledges that blackness is nebulous, while at the same time a shared experience that African-American expatriates have in common. Jackson introduces racial sincerity as a way to view one’s “humanity, interiority, and subjectivity” (2005: 15). He continues saying, “Racial sincerity is an attempt to apply this ‘something-elseness’ to race, to explain the reason it can feel so obvious, natural, real, and even liberating to walk around with purportedly racial selves crammed up inside of us and serving as invisible links to other people” (15). The framework of racial sincerity acknowledges the intangibles of race, while vignettes that
push emotion to the forefront transmute the intangible attributes into communicative experiences that can be articulated through ethnography.

Black language assistants like Melody, Chris, and Sanje, utilize their role as cultural ambassadors to promote racial sincerity, even if it is at the expense of confronting the rules of a language assistant (language assistants are not supposed to discuss controversial topics with students) or the stereotypes promoted in everyday life. The idea of racial sincerity gives them a pipeline to describe how race is more complicated than skin color or place of origin, instead they are able to describe race in multiple ways to give a complete picture of how race is complicated. Regardless of their reasoning, African-American cultural ambassadors are forced to interact with the world through the lens of a cultural broker first and as an African-American person second. Jackson writes, “Collective identities provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (2005: 12). While the scripts become texts for authentication purposes and the creation of a performative blackness, the emotion is often left out, or misinterpreted, leaving key aspects of blackness underrepresented. Jackson challenges us to take this logic further to include racial sincerity in our analysis of race because race should be seen as more than prescribed categories, but also as the spaces that black people create to provide a sense of self and cultural identification, as with “ghettofabulousness” (Jackson, 2005:59).  

Using a strictly aesthetic assessment of race dismisses both the affective nature of being a marginalized racial minority, as well as, the other aspects of being an individual person within a community of people. I argue that it is problematic because it reduces people to racial categories.

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5 John Jackson explores the notion of “ghettofabulousness,” or the embracing of marginalized culture, to critically look at the way consumerism creates racial and social hierarchies and highlight how blackness exists beyond aesthetic observations. Jackson describes how ghettofabulousness coercively acts to authentically highlight marginality within society.
based on stereotypes and broken information. I maintain that remaining bound to such categories produces an over-simplification of the vastness that makes up black identity and African-American culture. I agree with John Jackson’s (2005) view that blackness is not solely a composite of aesthetic attributes. It encompasses the visceral body, as well as an affective space outside racial classifications. I assert that it should integrate the emotional and psychological aspects of being a black person to help highlight how blackness is expressed and lived differently by each lived experience. I believe my position as an African-American expatriate does not validate sincerity, but instead it provides an additional lens through which racial sincerity can be examined. I believe pushing emotion to the forefront in my ethnographic vignettes helps to smooth out the complexities between looking at racial sincerity, or as Jackson (2005) calls it, “liveness of everyday racial performances,” versus looking for prescriptive actions and behaviors in the name of authenticity only to find racial performances, or “racial scripts” (18).

Anthropologists Tom Boellstorff and Johan Lindquist (2004) examine the ways in which emotions play an instrumental role in the makeup of culture. They argue that “emotions should be viewed as a culturally embedded phenomenon that brings together domains usually set apart as ‘intimate’ versus ‘public’ or ‘embodied’ versus ‘symbolic’” (2004:441). Boellstorff and Lindquist describe the ways scientific inquiry has represented emotions as classifiable objects. They outline how emotions have been placed in prescriptive categories based upon the ease of reifying and categorizing them in ethnographic work (438). They push emotion to the forefront one step further by describing how emotions are able illuminate our “true selves” (437). They believe, and I agree, that framing emotions as a functional, internal facet that affects our everyday decisions will help to highlight sincere (as borrowed from John Jackson) experiences
of emotion. It is their exploration of the “embodied versus the symbolic” that resonates with my enveloping of ethnographic vignettes with emotion pushed to the forefront.

John Jackson’s (2005) concept of true selves can be understood as the emotional and psychological aspects of oneself. I find it useful to keep this emotional framework in mind when thinking of possible ways in which black cultural ambassadors internalize and deal with emotional struggles in a foreign place, and how emotional decisions affect their experience while living in Japan. The internal, emotional selves represent the affective aspect to one’s identity, a sincerity that we present that to the world. I view this as a transformative task that one must undergo as a way of asserting an identity of self and an identity as a cultural ambassador.

Boellstorff and Lindquist’s (2004) fieldwork in Asia is useful in providing a cross-sectional view of the interactions between personhood, nationality, and race. Their research focuses on emotions helping people relate to the world around them, and how ethnography is poised to show this relationship. Their focus shows how emotions are used “as a way of thinking about the anxieties that cultural, economic, and political change generates in the lives of people” (440).

It is Jackson’s view that sincerity serves to question the scripts presented by superficial readings of race. It challenges ethnographers, and people in general, to not only present ourselves as authentic, but to actually present ourselves in a sincere manner, rather than adhere to the roles of racial scripts that work to “dehumanize, much like the processes they ostensibly critique” (15). I find it paradoxical that we feel obligated to present ourselves as sincere, yet racial scripts limit the ways in which we can represent ourselves based on the reduction of identity to specific categories. In using this theory of racial sincerity, it is important to realize the murkiness that exists with both essentializing race and also in searching for racial sincerity. It is necessary to acknowledge that some scripts are useful for gaining access, as in the case of Sanje at the open
mic, while others help provide understanding, as in the case of students asking language assistants about their hair practices.

Blackness has the possibility to change, stay the same, or disappear altogether, whether this occurs through personal effort or socio-cultural influences. This is the case of the emotional state of black expatriates who serve as cultural ambassadors in Japan. The emotional state of African-Americans is vulnerable to being commodified and used for authentication purposes, but Japan offers an outlet due to African-Americans who can utilize their blackness for mobility. Like racial scripts attributed to blackness, emotional blackness is co-opted, packaged, and categorized. Such categories include the angry black man or woman, and the carefree and tough hip-hop artist. Popular culture and media helped racial categories to spread globally, eventually reaching Japan (Russell, 1991:6).

John Russell (1991) states, “The representation of blacks follows conventions largely derived from Western racial categories and hierarchies. Contemporary images — more old wine in new bottles, or more accurately, old stereotypes in new media — continue to rely on Western conventions, though some of these conventions, as in the case of the Sambo imagery, may have passed out of usage in the West itself” (20). Racial imagery in the media has global implications by creating stereotypes that inevitably become part of the way race is explained. I added aspects of emotion and narrative to my analysis of embodied blackness as way of contextualizing the way race is experienced emotionally.

Anthropologist Andrew Beatty (2010) adds to the practice of pushing emotion to the forefront of ethnography in order to show the affective nature of the participants we study (440). He argues that attempts to display emotion usually fall flat due to the positionality of the researcher to the experience, especially the practice of trying to bring out emotion (i.e., writing
about the experience of an experience). He outlines that many times ethnographic vignettes fall flat due to a synapse in the process of hearing the experience from participants and actually being involved in the moment that the experience has happened. Beatty (2010) suggests that the reason that emotions evade ethnography is because “in writing about the field, we choose examples for their broader significance within some theoretical perspective. The people in our case histories are in unwitting dialogue with the people in other ethnographies; they are never merely themselves. However individuated, they are types, figures in a larger story that is not their own” (437).

The vignettes chosen in this thesis were intentional in showing the shared experience and emotionality of being black in Japan. Like Jackson (2005) and Beatty (2010), I worked to show the affective nature of race and identity through vignettes that uses emotion to foreground the experience and interaction. To further this point, I present alternate vignettes that move beyond reporting an experience to displaying emotionality, an affective essence. I hope these vignettes will pivot the visuality from that of a fly on the wall to that of a catalyst within numerous reactions.

I view this standpoint differently than what is sometimes represented in ethnographies, which I contend to be based solely on its descriptive aspects of culture. I feel that focusing on emotion in vignettes is only possible by considering how emotions affect the way our participants interact with the world and by finding a way to represent them in actual texts. This embodied state of mind acknowledges the mental labor that marginalized people undertake every day in regards to race but it remains elusive in ethnographic vignettes (Beatty, 2010:437-38). This process acknowledges that hair and clothes matter to black expatriates and Japanese natives
alike, albeit in different ways. Emotional experiences represented in vignettes were mediated through interviews, shared experiences, and my perception of their internal state.

Vignettes that incorporate emotional experiences highlight the use of sincerity to explore race, which means going beyond the purely physical and incorporating emotion into analysis (Beatty, 2010). Melody and Sanje actively expressed their blackness through emotions (in both words and mannerisms) during interviews. They were open to sharing their emotional states at the time of the experience and during recollection. Through our extended conversations and observations, I was able to understand clearly the emotional state that blackness created for them during their stay in Japan.

The Emotional Experience of Blackness

Melody was gleefully getting ready for our interview while I was organizing my paperwork and notebook. She was vibrant and had a lyrical personality, like a bird always having something cheerful to report. Her ease in conversing was reminiscent of a song you always hear on the radio and at an odd time you recall the tune, if only the melody. She always shared things that happened the previous week. She was in her first year of being a language assistant for The Teaching School. Her voice carried much of her emotions, and one could tell exactly how she felt about situations depending on her tone. She would methodically recall and share her many experiences of being black in Japan. As she began to tell this story, I could hear her distraction, as if she wanted to say something, but was unsure whether she was ready or not. She let out a sigh and began in her usual merry and exciting tone.

“Oh, I wanted to tell you something else, but hold on. Let me see can I find it,” Melody responded. The silent pause was only broken by the audible clicking of her mouse and the typing
of the keys. “I had it somewhere.” She continued searching for a moment before continuing to talk with me, although her voice would trail off at certain points.

“I wanted to tell you about what happened when I went to Hiroshima to a baseball game. We were riding the train, me and my friend, my white friend,” Melody nonchalantly offered emphasizing that this fact was important. “We were riding the train to go to the Hiroshima Island from the game, and we came to another stop. A black woman gets on the train, and she’s leading her family behind her — like three kids, a husband, and another man — they were all black, and she smiles at me with this big smile. I’m just like ‘oh my gosh.’” Melody was verbally blushing at this fact, her voice sounding warm and fulfilled, as if her emotional well-being was being infused with energy.

Melody was having a difficult time explaining the emotions that she felt at the time. This was quite opposite to her normal tendency to freely verbally express herself. She was especially talented in relaying her sentiments about her experiences in Japan. Hoping to help facilitate further discussion, I prodded her thought process with a question: “What did it feel like when you saw this black family?”

She thought about it and would then speak with a clear intent to elucidate the experience. Melody let out a sigh and continued, “I felt like my grandmother came up out of the blue and gave me a hug or something. It was just that and I had been here for so long, and I had seen other black people so that shouldn’t have shocked me. But at that moment, I just felt that we had so much in common, even though we could have had nothing in common, right? Except for the fact that we were black.” Melody’s voice became excited, and her pitch became higher as if she was becoming more excited as the story continued. “Well, the woman smiled at me and I said “hi” and she said “hi” — so her family walks past me and my friends, and they all smiled of course,
and her littlest son waves to me and smiles. I felt it could’ve been a kid who waves to strangers or waves to anybody, but I felt like “you know me,” that’s why you waved to me you know because we’re both alike.” At this point in the story, her tone changed to one of a more somber nature.

“So, I told my friend I feel like crying and she’s like ‘Why? Because that kid waved at you?’ And I opened my mouth to tell her the reason, [but I did not respond]. I don’t think she would understand. I didn’t know if I could convey what I felt at that moment to her, so I said, ‘I felt like I wanted to get up and walk with them, because I felt like we were going to the same place. Or that we came from the same place.’ I guess in a way we kinda did. I don’t know why I felt that [emotion] so strongly. I just felt that it was her warmth, and I think she was thinking the same exact thing. It was all in a look and a smile. And it was just like bam! It was like a blackness highfive that like connects people.”

Melody was emotionally touched by the experience of casually viewing another black person on the train. So much so, that she described it as the comforting hug of a grandmother or a “blackness highfive.” It is safe to assume that she is engaged in an emotional state reminiscent of security at the same time as an unspoken, yet understood, racial solidarity. The visible confirmation and identification with another black person served as the stimulus for a heightened emotional state. While Melody did not feel her non-black friend would understand the emotional state she was feeling, she felt that I would understand how she felt because I was also black in a foreign place. In truth, I did understand how she felt. While in Japan, I would catch myself searching for the elusive tufts of black hair, or the comforting smile of another black passenger on trains. Even while walking in the streets of Tokyo, when I heard hip-hop music, I would meander towards the beat in hopes of finding other black hip-hop fans, only to be confronted
with young Japanese people who upon my appearance become delighted and ushered me to sing or dance to the music.

Not all emotional experiences of blackness were determined by feelings of isolation or internalization—some served the purposes of education and socio-political activism. Gaining fulfillment from sharing one’s culture for the purpose of education is another way in which the embodied state of blackness is expressed through emotions. Sanje was quite proud of his role as cultural ambassador by working with members within the Japanese hip-hop community. One of his many jobs entailed an after-school program where he taught youth hip-hop culture and dj fundamentals. Sanje came to Japan to begin his career as a videographer and hip-hop worker. Due to his connection to Japanese hip-hop, many artists would visit him or invite him to listening parties of the current hip-hop trends in Japan. Sometimes it was to share their love of hip-hop while other times it was to collaborate on projects. On this specific occasion, it was an opportunity to share Sanje’s personal knowledge of blackness with the Japanese hip-hop artists who hoped to learn about true American hip-hop. Sanje often served in the role of broker of information about blackness as a cultural ambassador.

Sanje told a story about how he used his intimate knowledge of black culture and hip-hop to educate some friends. He was invited to a record store during closing hours to listen to hip-hop. “We’re hanging out at the record store and we’re gathered around there,” Sanje crouched over the table as he recounted the story using his arms to insinuate a group of people huddled around a small stereo in a consensual vibe of concentration. “They’re listening to this hardcore gangsta rap, like hardcore and they are all bopping their heads. They’re putting on songs of rappers I’ve never even heard of, like super underground indie gangsta rappers, and they’re telling me, ‘This guy is like dope, everyone in Fukashima loves this guy’… and I’m like, ‘Does
this guy even know that you are listening to his stuff in Japan? Like who is this guy? How did you get this?’ You know, they were like some bootleg download somewhere.” Sanje furrows his eyebrows and his self-reflexivity to this question is apparent. He shakes his head and giggles. His recollection of the event was enough to bring a smile to his face.

Before he continued, his expression turned more concerned. He adjusted his posture, sitting more erect than before, and his gaze became stern. “And then, I am like listening to [the rapper] and certain things the guy was saying caught my ear. You know, certain catch phrases and metaphors that he used. So, I’m kinda laughing at some of the stuff that he was saying. Those guys were like, ‘We are so jealous, you can understand what he is saying, but we can’t. What is he saying, what is he saying?’ I literally spent an hour breaking it down word for word, like line for line.” Sanje used his hands as instruments cutting and chopping imaginary tape with his fingers, and replacing them with imaginary subtitles.

“We would play a line and pause [the recording], then I would explain [the lyrics] in Japanese. I was explaining it to them and they were like ‘wa’ and then I got to the point of explaining [the rest of the cultural significance]. And here are these guys dressed like gangstas, copying the imagery like it’s so cool to be a gangsta, and I got to explain to them like that this rapper that ya’ll are listening to is trying to tell you this is his life. He doesn’t recommend it for anyone else, especially if you don’t have to do it.” Sanje leaned back in satisfaction, his eyes widening and his smile transforming into a satisfactory grin. He leaned in closer to the table to finish his story. You could tell by his composure that the punch-line had already been delivered, but he enthusiastically began talking again. He seemed to convey a different impression than before, almost appearing experientially wiser after recounting the episode.

6 Wa is a Japanese phrase that has multiple meanings, but it is most often used when excited or amazed.
“By the end of it they were just like, jaws dropped. They were just amazed. They never had that experience to really understand what the words were about and why these gangsta rappers are that way. They would listen to the music and throw up gang signs. I told them, ‘You guys, if you ever, ever visit America don’t ever do that. Somebody will kill or hurt you just from like doing the little thing with your finger just like that. I got to explain to them a lot of things that was pretty interesting. Without having someone there [they wouldn’t know about the meaning]. It couldn’t just be an American—it has to be someone who understands the culture, who knows about the music. That was like a learning experience for everyone, which is cool.’

Sanje implied that only a black cultural ambassador with expansive knowledge of blackness could serve as a broker in that situation. I could also tell from his reactions that enjoyed being in the role of educator. He gained personal fulfillment out of being the subject-matter expert about the hip-hop lyrics. It could be visibly seen in his composure and was audibly heard in his voice while he recounted the experience. He felt that his position as a black expatriate in the hip-hop community allowed him special access to the space (a record shop after-hours) and the opportunity to share specialized knowledge of black culture, specifically hip-hop, with the Japanese natives in the hip-hop community. Sanje’s working knowledge of being a black hip-hop artist in combination with his professional and lived experiences shaped the way he experienced his blackness in that moment.

Two Sides of the Same Coin: Affect and Prescription

These two vignettes complicate the use of aesthetic assessments to explain authentic experiences of blackness. The purpose of choosing experiences that were part of routine living, yet so emotionally charged, was to highlight the potential impact of blackness in the everyday lives of both the cultural ambassador and the Japanese native. I codify them as racial experiences
of blackness because they were dependent on the participants’ marginalized position as an African-American and on the participant living within the context of performing race. I feel it is these types of experiences that are often left out of ethnographies. In order to explore the affective nature of being African-American in Japan, I engaged participants on an emotional and scientific level. This method is expressed through the form of my vignettes. I strategically thread blackness within the overarching structure of being an African-American in Japan.

In my analysis of the blackness, I adhered to John Jackson’s (2005) belief that race should be looked at as something both affective and descriptive. I found that his viewpoint highlights the constant tension that exists between descriptive categories of race and emotional experiences of race. The feelings associated with Melody’s “blackness highfive” held particular importance to my analysis due to its acknowledgement of both racial belonging and emotional empowerment. The creation of racial solidarity initiated by a simple utterance or glance was explored by psychologists William Grier and Price Cobbs. Grier and Cobbs (2000) outlined expressive aspects of blackness revolving around language use, performed behaviors, and the art of seduction amongst African-Americans. They stated that, “In this world of strangers, black men make a home wherever they can. Any black man in a white environment can establish a relationship with another black man by a glance or an easy salutation such as ‘hey, bro’ – and he has a colleague” (104).

I use the above scholars’ findings as a bridge to think about how race and emotion are communicated through our bodies and entangled into our very being. I represent blackness through both affective and descriptive vignettes to support Jackson’s (2005) ideal of presenting racial sincerity. I believe the affective nature of blackness is important to inform ways blackness is represented through the body and experienced in the world. In these two vignettes we are able
to get a fragmentary view of blackness at an emotional level. These experiences were important because they serve as a point where blackness can be viewed as a feeling, or consciousness, that is felt in a particular moment when your perception of solidarity is based on a smile. Blackness was also shown to be represented as an expert knowledge base of cultural symbols and messaging that needed brokering for full comprehension and education. Sanje served as a gatekeeper of black knowledge when he instructed the Japanese listeners not to recreate hand gestures that would associate them with American gangs.

Examining the emotions of blackness entails being able to identify the feelings of your participants and understanding the ways in which race is affecting the situation. Their emotive state was gathered from their voice and also from the ways they display emotions during the telling of the experiences through mannerisms, demonstrations, and postures. When Melody and Sanje shared these experiences, I could relate to them based on my own lived experiences in Japan. I view these moments as crucial points where an emotional memory can be reproduced ethnographically. As I argued earlier, blackness is more than just physical traits — blackness is also the invisible space that encompasses all the aspects of race that cannot be contained into categories. It is the very emotional being that is made up of partialities and intangible traits. I believe my analysis provided a useful lens for examining how emotional experiences, specific to blackness, can be an important enhancement of ethnographic data.
Conclusion

Reflecting on my experiences in Japan, I saw myself not only as an ethnographer studying the experiences of black expatriates, but as an active participant in the study. I felt that my role as researcher was part of the larger research study. My African-American experience of blackness in Japan became a useful tool from which I could garner deeper understanding and engage in shared experiences with my participants. Our collective roles as cultural ambassadors moved the experience, and discussion, of blackness beyond mere representations and behaviors. Instead our charge was to engage blackness and our sense of selves in a way that addressed both the prescriptive and the affective.

The forced engagement of one’s race manifests in a fictive role that I coined as “cultural ambassador.” As evidenced above, this role is expected of some African-Americans due to the perception of their race. Although I have outlined that the role of cultural ambassador can be applied both voluntarily and involuntarily, it should be noted that all the participants (myself included) willingly took on the role knowing its political and cultural implications. We willingly served as cultural ambassadors knowing that our knowledge would be scaled, generalized, and applied on an entire culture by our native Japanese hosts. I attempted to equally engage ways in which African-Americans experience blackness in Japan from the perspective of aesthetics and affect. I explored race as a tool to successfully gain economic and social mobility. In order to give an accurate impression of blackness in Japan, I juxtaposed Sanje’s V.I.P. experience at the open mic with Melody’s uncomfortable, and slightly contentious experience when her blackness was challenged by her students and peer-instructors.

I stated that Japan is a place where African-American people stick out due to their skin color, hair texture, and language. The introduction of this thesis focused mainly on descriptive
attributes as the way that blackness has been assessed as authentic. I complicated these
definitions of blackness by placing them in a different location to see if they are consistent with
the United States. The prescriptive categories of blackness served as a springboard to affective
nature of blackness. I argue for moving to a more “subject-subject” focus when we examine race
as suggested by John Jackson (2005). I view his theoretical framework of racial sincerity to be a
precise way of experiencing spaces outside of the categorical prescriptions, while still taking
them into account. It allows us to see racial scripts for what they are and to build upon them with
affective attributes in order to fully represent racial sincerity. For example, hip-hop culture not
only contains racial scripts, but also visual and cultural scripts. These scripts differ depending on
race, class, geographical location, and citizen status, among others. These scripts have the power
to build up racial awareness, but they also have the ability to reduce the racial diversity to
simplified visual-bytes.

I found it helpful to visualize racial sincerity as the murkiness beyond racial categories
reported and analyzed by ethnographic work. It was useful to critically examine emotions by
acknowledging that there is a space beyond prescriptive notions of race. Prescriptive notions of
race tend to be purely physical (or bodily) in nature, things you can see with one’s eyes. I am
suggesting, however, that there is more than meets the eye. I see racial constructs built upon the
internal and the external. The feelings of a “grandmother’s hug” or a “blackness high-five” can
be seen as movement of the body or we can see it as a cultural acknowledgement of solidarity
and cohesion. I believe this concept of a “blackness high-five” could only have been expressed
by placing emotions in the context of how blackness is made from everyday experiences that
profit on the marginalized status of African-American expatriates.
Pushing emotion to the forefront may not look entirely different in text form, but in terms of analysis, it helps give context behind the experiences of participants. It also purposely situates the African-American expatriate experience of blackness in Japan. It is this intentionality that either helps the cultural ambassador flourish or deteriorate. The positionality of an African-American hip-hop artist at a Japanese open mic benefits the person more than being the only African-American woman in a hip-hop club under the constant scrutiny of a photographer. The experiences of the participants in this thesis have greater implications of nationalism, globalization, and the commodification of culture. Vignettes have the potential to serve as a vehicle to accurately represent affect. I took the advantage of having a shared identity to further facilitate my representation of sincere emotionality.

The cultural ambassador, as a concept, is useful for future research to examine ways in which identities influence the lives of people when they live in a foreign place. Black identity is not the only identity that should be examined ethnographically. Anthropologist Arlene Dávila points out that “US minorities are all subject to stereotyping as low-income, unskilled, uneducated, crime-ridden, unemployed, and, in some cases, as perpetual foreigner, and more or less family-oriented” (2012: 217). Although her analysis is concerned with the marketing of race to a consumer base in the US, I feel that her analysis can be applied to all minoritized groups with histories of oppression. This means that future research should focus on the ways in which multiple identities travel and transform the experiences of minoritized people in foreign places.

The importance of the cultural ambassador can be imagined as a broker who is able to create networks of knowledge and understanding around racial identities. Many universities are moving towards creating a global campus as technology and practice are connecting students worldwide. On the local level we can assume that the role of cultural ambassador would hold
importance in ethnically diverse neighborhoods and educational institutions. Organizations, such as Teach for America, specifically place teachers in underperforming inner-city schools. Perhaps cultural ambassadors could serve in the role of cultural sharing. These examples, and many more possibilities, highlight the importance of having someone with an insider’s view to serve as a resource.
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Socha, Miles

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Weller, Susan C.
Appendix A: Informed Consent

Adult Consent Form for Research
University of Cincinnati
Department: Anthropology
Principal Investigator: Christian “Key” Beck, B.A.
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Stephanie Sadre-Oraifai, Ph.D.

Title of Study: The African-American Expatriate Experience in Japan

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is Key Beck of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Anthropology. The PI receives research guidance from Dr. Stephanie Sadre-Oraifai, the faculty advisor of this study.

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this research study is to examine how African-American expatriates in Japan experience "blackness" in both local popular culture and everyday social interactions.

Who will be in this research study?
About 6-9 people will take part in this study. You may be in this study if you are a self-described African-American, or African descent, over the age of 18, and occupy expatriate status, meaning African-Americans who were born in the United States and spent at least their adolescence (up to age 10) in their native country, but currently reside in Japan. Desired participants for an initial interview and prolonged observations will be open to talking about issues of race, gender, and their experiences as an African-American expatriate. They will also be conversant in English, as they will have to be an African-American native to the United States.

The classification of African-American is anyone of African descent born inside the United States, or those individuals, born inside the United States, who identify as African-American based on culture, social relationships, or affiliations to the African-American culture. The expatriate criteria entails individuals who were born in the United States (as listed above), and moved to Japan for a period of time longer than 2 weeks. The participants can be Japanese, American, or shared status citizens, but must have held American citizenship at one point.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You will be asked to discuss your experiences as an African-American living in Japan, as well as agree to be observed in your daily life, including public and private spaces. There will be an initial interview and extended observations. Participants have a choice as to whether their interview will be audio-taped or not, as this is not a requirement for participation in the study. If participants choose not to be audio-taped, they may still participate in the research study. Audio-taping will not take place at any point in the research study without the participant’s permission. The initial interview will take place before observations occur, and will take 20 minutes. The observation times will consist of smaller 15 minutes to 3 hour sessions of observations.
throughout the entire research project duration of 2.5 months. The research will take place in multiple settings and stages, but the majority of observations will take designated settings in Tokyo, unless otherwise requested or given permission.

**Are there any risks to being in this research study?**
There is a minimal risk in this study, but there is a risk of emotional discomfort in answering certain questions.

**Are there any benefits from being in this research study?**
There are no direct benefits for taking part in the study.

**What will you get because of being in this research study?**
You will not be paid (or given anything) to take part in this study.

**Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?**
If you do not want to take part in this research study you should let the PI know, and may not participate. At any time during the research study you may stop participation, and your personal information will be kept private, and will be destroyed immediately.

**How will your research information be kept confidential?**
Information about participants will be kept confidential by using study ID numbers, as well as pseudonyms, instead of their names on the research forms, audio interviews, and typed transcripts. The study ID numbers will correspond to the demographic information provided at the beginning of each interview. Participants’ names will not be used on the audio interviews or typed transcripts. The master list of personal identifiers (age and race) and study ID numbers will be kept in a separate location from the research forms and typed transcripts. All research and interview data entered in the computer will be stored in password protected folders. Names will not be entered in the data spreadsheet. Identifiers such as age and race will be deleted two years after the completion of the study.

Your information will be kept in an isolated secure location in digital form for 3 months. After that, it will be destroyed by the culmination for the research project. Agents of the University of Cincinnati may inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.

**What are your legal rights in this research study?**
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.
What if you have questions about this research study?
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Key Beck at Beekcj@mail.uc.edu.

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?
No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you should contact Key Beck (beekcj@mail.uc.edu) and tell him you wish not to participate.

Agreement:
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Participant Name (please print) ________________________________________________

Participant Signature _____________________________________ Date ______

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent ___________________________ Date ______
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Date:

To whom it may concern:


This research study is being performed by the Key Beck of the University Of Cincinnati Department Of Anthropology. The purpose of this research study is to examine how African-American expatriates in Japan experience "blackness" in both local popular culture and everyday social interactions. This research study entails participants' willingness to take part in an initial interview and prolonged observational sessions during a 2.5 month process.

To be eligible for participation in the study, individuals must (a) self-identify as African-American; (b) be 18 years of age or older; (c) be a US expatriate, defined here as an individual born and raised through adolescence (age 10) in the United States who has moved to Japan for a period longer than 2 weeks; and (d) be a current resident in Japan, regardless of citizenship status (Japanese, American, joint).

You will be asked to discuss your experiences as an African-American living in Japan, as well as agree to be observed in your daily life, including public and private spaces. The initial interview will take place before observations occur, and will take 20 minutes. The observation times will consist of smaller 15 minutes to 3 hour sessions of observations throughout the entire research study duration of 2.5 months. The research will take place in multiple settings and stages, but the majority of observations will take designated settings in Tokyo, unless otherwise requested or given permission.

Please keep in mind that there are no direct benefits to the participants in this study. If you have a continued interest, and wish to participate in this study please contact Key Beck (beckcjd@mail.uc.edu) or call 513-544-0769.

Thank you for your continued interest in this research project.

Warmest regards,

Key Beck
Appendix C: Interview Guide and Observational Protocol

Initial/Primary Questions

1. What is your age, race, and gender?
2. Are you African-American?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. Are you an American citizen? (if not, they will not be used, but may continue with questions)
5. Do you live in Japan?
6. Do you interact with other African-Americans in Japan?
7. What activities do you do (if any) with other African-Americans?
8. What specific places (if any) do you spend time with other African-Americans or yourself?
9. How many (daily, weekly, and monthly) interactions do you have with other African-Americans?
10. Are you a member of any African-American focused groups?

Secondary Questions

11. In what spaces are race more important than nationality (and vice versa)?
12. How important of a role is race in living in Japan?
13. How important of a role is nationality (or your lack of Japanese nationality) while living in Japan?
14. Please describe a memorable experience in Japan in regards to race.
15. Please describe a memorable experience in Japan in regards to nationality.
Black Professionals in Tokyo Group Meetings

- How many people are present at the meeting?
- What are racial and gender demographic?
- How is this location serve as a site of commodification?
- What activities are performed during meetings?
- What happens pre- and post-meeting?
- Are there established relationships outside this location?
- How do members identify with the group itself?

Jazz and Hip-Hop Clubs

- How many people are utilizing the space?
- How many African-Americans are present?
- What sites of commodification are present?
- Is “blackness” being marketed? What type of marketing?
- How is music used to promote “blackness”?
- Is there a sense of cohesion?
- What factors make this space functional?

Homes of Participant

- How many people are present in the space?
- What is the location of the space?
- What is the make-up of the neighborhood?
- Is there diversity in race and nationality?
- Is this space a site of commodification?
- What media practices examine race?
- How much media usage does the participant perform?
## Appendix D: Demographic Information Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melody</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Language Instructor</td>
<td>Black/Mixed Black/Columbian</td>
<td>1/2 Black 1/2 Columbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanje</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hip-Hop Entrepreneur/Language Instructor</td>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>African-American (by default)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hip Hop Artist/Language Instructor</td>
<td>African American/Cherokee, African, Irish</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoffrey</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Businessman/Trade Industry</td>
<td>Black/Black and Caribbean</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Language Instructor</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Language Instructor</td>
<td>1/2 African-American/Filipino Multi-ethnic</td>
<td>Multi-ethnic/African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>