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Examining Afro-Japanese Encounters Through Popular Music

Warren A. Stanislaus, University of Oxford



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Examining Afro-Japanese Encounters Through Popular Music

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Overview

The following lesson plan introduces a collaborative creative project that requires students to select songs to be compiled into a class Spotify playlist. Originally delivered in an online format at Rikkyo University's Global Liberal Arts Program in Tokyo to a class of 26 Japanese students in the fall of 2020 as part of the course "Afro-Japanese Encounters," this mid-term assignment asked students to imagine that they were leading a cultural exchange event to introduce Black British artists and culture to the Japanese public as part of the UK's Black History Month (BHM) celebrations through a curated Spotify playlist. In this case, the instructor was able to form a working partnership with the British Embassy in Tokyo and so the digital playlist also became a public engagement initiative as it was shared as part of the Embassy's first ever official 2020 BHM campaign in Japan.

This lesson plan is specifically designed for Japanese university students in an English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) context and serves as an effective and engaging pedagogical approach to guide students in critically thinking about representations of "blackness" in Japanese society as well as connecting to broader scholarly discussions of Afro-Asian encounters. This lesson plan, therefore, should be used in a similar Japanese university setting or, as will be suggested later, can also be adapted for other EMI or content-integrated (CLIL) English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms at universities in East Asia.

Learning Objectives

1. This assignment's main aim is to use popular music to encourage Japanese students to critically consider how contemporary Japanese society represents and (sonically) consumes "blackness" and the potential for imagining new forms of representation or Black-Japanese interactions.
2. By actively getting students to be a part of this creative process of building a Spotify playlist to promote Black-Japanese interactions, this assignment allows students to contribute to transcending scholarly and media narratives (as will be discussed later) that are premised on the prevailing idea of an unbridgeable separation existing between people of African descent and Japan. In other words, students will learn to reinforce notions of historical Black-Japanese transnational connections as well as the potential for future exchange.
3. The assignment also generates an opportunity for students to consider how race and racism intersect with nation branding and public diplomacy – the question of who or what gets to represent a nation.
4. Finally, as suggested in the main overview above, by collaborating with the British Embassy in Tokyo to publish the playlist as a public digital educational resource as part



of its BHM campaign in Japan, this project also serves as an opportunity to raise student awareness of (and participation in) public engagement of research within higher education.

Rationale

In recent years there has been an increase in media and scholarly attention on representations of blackness in Japan. Several incidents of Japanese celebrities performing in blackface have received criticism and illuminated much longer histories of blackface minstrelsy during Japan's opening in the mid-late nineteenth century (Russell 2007). The rise of mixed Black-Japanese sports and entertainment personalities such as Naomi Osaka, Rui Hachimura and two Miss Universe Japan representatives to name a few, have further highlighted that issues related to race and racism are inseparable from Japan. Their presence has sparked debates about who can represent Japan, what does it mean to be Japanese and is there racism in Japan? Indeed, similar to the uproar surrounding the aforementioned incidents of blackface, an animated commercial by one of Naomi Osaka's sponsors, which depicted her as having a lighter skin tone also raised questions about representations of blackness in Japan (Takeda 2020). Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent global spread of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Japan unexpectedly found itself at the center of controversy when NHK, Japan's public broadcaster, aired an animated explanation of BLM protests in the US on the news show "Kore de Wakatta! Sekai no Ima" (Now I Understand! The World Today) that clumsily depicted offensive caricatures and stereotypes of black protesters (Russell 2020; Takeda 2020; Stanislaus 2021a).

Within this context of a growing recognition of both the existence and relevance of blackness in Japan, the theme of "Black in/and Japan" is increasingly being introduced into classrooms as a way of engaging students in discourses surrounding race, racism and multiculturalism (for instance see Ellis 2020). This is especially the case for English-based classrooms in Japan such as EMI or CLIL where it is common to introduce topics surrounding multiculturalism in Japan, intercultural understanding and cross-cultural communication.

The core objective of this playlist assignment is to encourage students to consider how blackness is represented and consumed in Japan. In other words, how Japan "gazes" at blackness or what Black "voice" is desired. Studies have highlighted how Japanese have interacted with essentialized forms of blackness for self-expression through "primitive" rhythmic movements (Bridges and Cornyetz 2015, Ch. 11), sexuality (Cornyetz 1994; Kelsky 1996), fashion, makeup (Bridges and Cornyetz 2015, Ch. 2), and music (Condry 2006; Sterling 2010). Russell identifies that hyper-physicality, hyper-masculinity, and hyper-sexuality are reoccurring tropes in Japanese representations of, and desire for blackness (Russell 2012). Through creating their own "Black" playlist for a Japanese audience, students will be encouraged to critically engage with and compare their selections to such manifestations of blackness in Japan. Moreover, I consider that the assignment format of creating a music playlist



is especially effective for the purpose of illuminating these issues in a Japanese university classroom with non-native English speakers who have little experience in considerations of race and representation.

General Timeline

Afro-Japanese Encounters Course Design

This assignment was given to the students as a short mid-term project within the semester long class “Afro-Japanese Encounters.” The course as a whole was dedicated to examining the past, present as well as imagining the future of Black-Japanese interactions. At this point in the term, the students had already been exposed to instances of historical Black-Japanese transnational encounters from the 16th century through to the 20th century postwar period. For example, we looked at the significance of Yasuke the 16th century African samurai (Stanislaus 2021c), the “Black bodies” brought over on Perry’s “black ships” during Japan’s 19th century opening (Russell 2007), imagined Afro-Asian solidarity at the turn of the 20th century through the writings of W.E.B Du Bois and other African American intellectuals (Kearney 1998; Gallicchio 2000), and African American GI’s in postwar Japan. In conclusion, the students should have already gained an awareness of the shifting representations of blackness in Japan over time, and how particularly from the period of Japan’s opening to discourses of Western modernity and civilization in the 19th century, blackness largely became associated with “primitiveness” or “backwardness” in line with Western imperial racial hierarchies and taxonomies. Conversely the students will have seen how people of African descent have regularly looked towards Japan as a source of inspiration for Black liberation. The assignment was introduced at a point in the term when we wanted to begin to examine contemporary representations of blackness in Japan.

To be sure, the lesson plan can also be delivered as a stand-alone activity in courses that examine ideas of race or multiculturalism in contemporary Japan and does not necessarily require a previous understanding of historical representations as outlined above. The following assignment timeline will be introduced with the lesson plan as a stand-alone activity in mind.

Assignment Timeline

Step 1: The assignment consists of one homework task and one or two in-class sessions (depending on student numbers) with the first consisting of student presentations and the second will include an instructor-directed class discussion and additional explanations.

Step 2: Assign “Homework 1” (see *Detailed Lesson Plan* for description), which requires students to select 2 songs (in this case by Black British artists) then write up a 500-word essay and prepare a short few minutes long presentation as to why they chose those specific songs/artists for a Japanese audience. The students should write up to 5 keywords to describe why they chose each song.



Step 3: Presentation Class – Students present their song selections and reasons to the class. Based on the essay homework and the presentations, the instructor should identify any patterns in the students’ selections or interesting observations by way of preparing talking points for the class discussion. The instructor should use a word cloud generator application such as Mentimeter to input the 5+ key words that the students used to describe each of their selections as a way of identifying salient or reoccurring themes. The instructor can additionally prepare a list with the most selected artists/songs if they have been chosen by multiple students. These will be used in the discussion class.

Step 4: Assign “Homework 2” (see *Detailed Lesson Plan* for description), which is a set of readings and a few starter questions to help the students prepare for the discussion and reflection session that will use the class playlist to explore themes related to representations of blackness in Japan.

Step 5: The instructor compiles selected songs into one digital playlist (for example using platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube etc.) and shares link with the class.

Step 6: Discussion Class – The instructor begins by presenting the pre-prepared word cloud of key words chosen by the students, as well as any other useful lists prepared such as the most selected songs or artists etc. The instructor should then proceed to facilitate a class discussion by prompting students with questions based on the readings and observations related to the playlist selections (see *Detailed Lesson Plan: In Class Discussion – Rikkyo University Case Study* for an example of conversations and instructor facilitation).

Optional: Towards the end of the discussion or in follow up sessions, the instructor can introduce how this project relates to broader issues of Afro-Japanese encounters, nation branding and public engagement (see *Detailed Lesson Plan: Additional Lecture Notes*).

Step 7 (Optional): The digital playlist can be shared more widely as a form of public engagement through departmental communications channels or collaborating with an external organization.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Assignment

Homework 1 – Essay & Presentation

You are a member of a project to curate a Black History Month UK music playlist to share with the Japanese public to expose Japan to Black British culture. Please select 2 songs by Black British artists to contribute to this playlist. As the aim of this project is to communicate to the Japanese public as a form of cultural diplomacy, you should be mindful to select songs that you



believe will be educational and appeal to a Japanese audience. Please write 250 words for each song about why you chose it for the playlist and why it may appeal to a Japanese audience. Additionally, please write up to 5 key words (for each song) to describe why you chose the song. Be prepared to briefly introduce (3-5 minutes) your selections and reasons in class.

Homework 2 – Readings & Reflection

In preparation for a class discussion about the playlist selections please read the assigned texts on blackness in Japan and think about the following questions:

- Reading 1: Russell, John G. 2012. "Playing with Race/ Authenticating Alterity: Authenticity, Mimesis, and Racial Performance in the Transcultural Diaspora." *The New Centennial Review* 12 (1): 41–92.
- Reading 2: Sterling, Marvin D. 2011. "Toward an Analysis of Global Blackness: Race, representation, and Jamaican popular culture in Japan," In *Racial representations in Asia*, edited by Yasuko Takezawa. Kyoto and Melbourne: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press.

Reflection Questions

- Based on the readings, what are some key themes in the representations of blackness in Japan?
- How is "Black culture" understood in Japan?
- How does the class playlist compare or contrast with the dominant representations as presented in the readings?
- How do the readings comment on the physical presence of Black people in Japan or contact between people of African descent and Japanese people?
- How has hip hop music been received in Japan?
- Do any of the playlist selections challenge dominant narratives or stereotypes?
- What image of Britain is desired in Japan?

In-Class Discussion (Rikkyo University Case Study)

The class should begin with the instructor presenting the pre-prepared word cloud and if relevant, a top songs/artists list, as a springboard for discussions. It would also be useful to distribute a playlist link or list to the students so that they can see the full playlist during the discussion class. I would suggest that the instructor can begin and develop the discussion by identifying the keyword/s that appeared most frequently in the word cloud and asking how they compare or contrast with dominant representations of blackness in Japan according to the readings. Below I will introduce the key themes that emerged in the class discussion at Rikkyo University and suggestions on how to guide the conversation.



Identity

I noticed that there were a few songs on the playlist that were by African American artists and not British artists as instructed for this specific assignment. I probed further why those students selected songs by African American artists, and they confirmed that their focus was on appealing to an existing market in Japan and the popularity of hip hop. This became a key opportunity to identify how blackness in Japan is overwhelmingly associated with the African American experience and hip hop cultures. The representational implications of which were pointed out in the assigned readings and so this was a chance for other students to chime in with their reading reflections. I also used this as an opportunity to lead the discussion to the question of how Japan imagines Britain and who is considered as a part of a national identity. As detailed further below (*Additional Lecture Notes: Theme 2*), Black and British identities have regularly been seen as mutually exclusive categories both within the UK and externally. What David Olusoga (2017) describes as a perception of an “impossible duality,” is also a useful framework for students to consider identities of mixed Black-Japanese “*haafu*,” and their imagined place within a Japanese national identity. To be sure, the term “*haafu*” that is suggestive of half-ness and one’s Japaneseness not being full is reflective of prevailing discourses of Japaneseness that frequently exclude mixed people and especially those who are phenotypically Black. Countering this, self-affirming terms of a dual identity and an inseparable bothness have emerged such as “*daburu*” (double) or “*mikkusu*” (mixed), as well as the appropriation of terms such as “Blasian” that have gained popularity in America.

Black Masculinities

A recurring theme that emerged from the students’ keywords was an emphasis on selecting songs and artists that were “not aggressive” but were “calming”. Words that consistently appeared to describe their selections were “soft”, “ballad-like”, “warm”, “calm”, “slow”, “high pitched”, “sweet”. Probing who these descriptions were referring to, several of the students mentioned that this was particularly about the male artists that they were selecting. This became a key opportunity for me to pose the question that I asked students to consider while doing the preparatory readings: “Do any of the playlist selections challenge dominant narratives or stereotypes?” The students were able to respond that an emphasis on apparently gentler images of Black men contrasted with the dominant representations of blackness in Japan as outlined in the readings as hyper-physical, hyper-sexual, violent and images of “beast” like men (Russell 2012). I further pointed out that these dominant representations of blackness in Japan often mirror that of how blackness has been represented in the West (hooks 1992), or the black “voice” that is desired is one that speaks of the “iconic ghetto” (Anderson 2012). Some students suggested that a Japanese audience would be drawn towards more “softer” qualities and that is why these artists/songs were selected as opposed to solely replicating existing representations of black male artists. Based on such comments it is possible for the instructor to extend the discussion further to critically consider whether these selections are radical in their liberatory



potential by diverting from hegemonic representations or if they are more reflective of a continuing consumable and commodifiable blackness? Moreover, as this task is about cultural diplomacy between Britain and Japan, do these selections merely reflect that the students are selecting these artists as “safer” options for promoting international exchange rather than artists that perhaps are more representative of sub-cultures or oppositional countercultures? For the Rikkyo class I focused the class discussion on the potentially radical nature of these alternative images of black men beyond existing essentialisms and connected it to historical instances of transnational Black-Japanese encounters such as Yasuke being welcomed as a samurai in the 16th century, and W.E.B Du Bois’ writings that emphasize the positive views that the Japanese have of Black people, in order to demonstrate broader histories of an imagined solidarity and an imagined “Japan” as a site to locate ideas of Black liberation. This particular expansion of the discussion was possible due to the fact that the students had already been exposed to these histories in previous classes as outlined above in the *Afro-Japanese Encounters Course Design* section.

Unearthing Afro-Asian Connectivity

For students that selected fast-paced or dance music songs, several comments referred to how the songs sounded like K-Pop tracks or could be catchy/danceable for use on social media platforms such as Tik-Tok, which are popular amongst Japanese youth. They asserted that this would be an effective form of cultural diplomacy as it is a way of connecting the Black British artists with the lifestyle and entertainment of young Japanese people in a relatable way. The rapidly growing popularity and spread of K-Pop music across the globe, known as the “Korean Wave”, is especially pronounced among young Japanese people. I flipped the dynamic to ask the students why they thought the songs they were commenting on sounded like K-Pop music by way of guiding them to think about the globalization of Black popular music and how K-Pop regularly cites and draws inspiration from Black music cultures (Anderson 2020). The students seemed surprised at K-Pop’s eclectic origins and especially the influence of African American hip hop and R&B. I pointed out that the case of K-Pop’s hybridity is a great example of the importance of unearthing hitherto hidden transnational Afro-Asian connectivity (Prashad 2002) and how we can extend this approach to Afro-Japanese encounters.

Additional Lecture Notes

If time allows, the instructor can introduce one or more of the following additional themes to the students to demonstrate the wider significance of their engagement in an “Afro-Japanese” transcultural activity.

Theme 1 – Afro-Japanese connectivity beyond existing narratives of separation

The creative approach to this assignment is also theoretically meaningful and links to the core objectives of the *Afro-Japanese Encounters Course Design*, which seeks to illuminate Black-



Japanese connectivity beyond prevailing narratives that emphasize separation. In an edited collection on Afro-Japanese cultural production, William Bridges IV and Nina Cornyetz (2015, 4) argued that there is an “overrepresentation” of race and representation in examinations of Afro-Japanese interactions, which unintentionally leads to discourses that reify assumptions of Black and Japanese as mutually exclusive categories – perceptions of “an unbreachable rift” in the words of Russell (2012, 44). By getting the students to act as producers in creating a future Afro-Japanese encounter, this task can be used to highlight the existence of longer histories of Afro-Japanese or Afro-Asian transnational interactions and solidarities (Kearney 1998; Gallicchio 2000; Prashad 2002). In other words, by developing their own form of cultural exchange through a music playlist, the students were embodying this “connectivity” element, which has been a central and consistent feature of Afro-Japanese encounters, especially from the early 20th century, but yet is often overlooked or hidden behind scholarly narratives of Black-Japanese disconnect, appropriation, racism and misunderstandings.

Useful references

- “Introduction – Work It: Traveling Texts and the Work of Reading Afro-Japanese Cultural Exchange.” In *Traveling Texts and the Work of Afro-Japanese Cultural Production: Two Haiku and a Microphone*, edited by Bridges IV, William H. and Nina Cornyetz. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Theme 2 – Public Diplomacy and Race

The assignment can also be used to highlight discussions surrounding international public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. In particular, questions of who gets to represent a nation, what is included or excluded from nation branding, what are considered as soft power resources? In this specific example of showcasing Black British culture to a Japanese public through music, the students can critically consider how Japan’s image of the UK has been shaped by internal and external discourses that frequently conceal the UK’s ethnic and cultural diversity. As David Olusoga (2017) argues, Black and British are often positioned as mutually exclusive categories, or what he terms an “impossible duality”. On a global stage, this results in a dynamic where Black British life is often excluded from serving as the representative of the UK in terms of cultural diplomacy and exchange (Southern 2021). As Paul Gilroy (2002) famously wrote, “There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack”. Further, as I have argued elsewhere (Stanislaus 2021b), as much of Black life in Britain has been articulated and given a voice through sound, creating sonic narratives of Black Britishness through a digital music playlist can also be used to prompt students to consider methods of cultural exchange that are most relevant to communicating the stories of specific communities. The instructor can then use these examples exploring Britain’s nation branding to prompt the students to similarly consider who or what is included or excluded from Japan’s own nation branding strategies such as “Cool Japan” (Watanabe and McConnell 2008; Snow 2016).

Useful references



- “Introduction – Years of Distant Wandering.” In *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, edited by David Olusoga. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Watanabe, Yasushi and David L. McConnell, eds. 2015. *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Snow, Nancy. 2016. *Japan’s Information War*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace.

Theme 3 – Digital Projects and Public Engagement

Finally, this assignment can be used to highlight the importance of incorporating digital tools into the teaching of humanities subjects, as well as seizing opportunities to merge assignments with public engagement of research initiatives. As argued by Tristan Grunow (2020) in a piece on digital scholarship in Asian Studies, “public facing and digital projects” are scholarly contributions in their own right and should not be considered as “distractions” from traditional forms of productivity. As has been highlighted throughout this lesson plan, this digital music playlist assignment is multifaceted in its pedagogical value for considering issues of representation as well as practicing Afro-Japanese cultural exchange. Furthermore, if the instructor can create an opportunity to share the playlist with the public then it can also contribute to fostering intercultural understanding and anti-racism work. For example, in the Rikkyo University case study introduced in this lesson plan the playlist was shared with a Japanese public via a web article and social media in collaboration with the British Embassy. Especially, with a lack of resources available in Japanese that introduces Black life and culture in the UK, this Black British playlist plays an important role in beginning to fill this gap in developing contact points for cross-cultural exchange.

Useful references

- Grunow, Tristan R. 2020. “Making it Count”: The Case for Digital Scholarship in Asian Studies.” *#Asia Now Blog*, June 9, 2020.

Adapting the Lesson Plan

Although the lesson plan was originally designed for an EMI Japanese university classroom and examines representations of “blackness” in Japan through considering how a Japanese audience gazes at Black Britain, I would like to suggest that this lesson plan and content can be adapted for use in other teaching contexts. Firstly, within a similar Japanese university context, instead of focusing on Black British artists, the instructor can guide students to create a digital playlist of African American artists or artists from other African diaspora populations by way of exploring discourses of blackness in Japan through popular music.

In order to shift the focus of the learning outcome to illuminating histories of Afro-Japanese connectivity and solidarity, students could alternatively be instructed to curate a playlist that gathers examples of songs where African American hip hop artists cite Japanese pop culture.



This digital playlist would then focus instead on the Black “gaze” on Japan and could be used to prompt discussions of the popularity and uses of Japanese pop culture among Black audiences (Botz-Bornstein 2011; McLeod 2013), as well as explore issues of Black cultural appropriation of Asian cultures (Whaley 2006).

Finally, I would suggest that the playlist activity can also be adapted for use in other English-based classrooms in East Asian countries such as South Korea for example, where there is a growing presence of Black people in the mainstream media and K-pop music and fashion cultures have been heavily influenced by African American musical traditions (Anderson 2020). However, similar to the Japanese context discussed in this lesson plan, representations of blackness are often limited to consumable stereotypes of “black cool” or media images of hyper-physicality and violence (Kim 2017).

Figures and Links

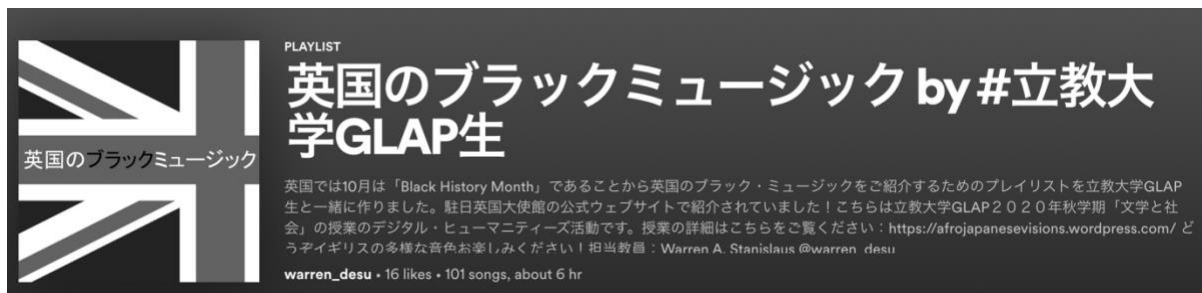


Figure 1: Spotify Playlist for Black History Month UK in Japan produced by Rikkyo University GLAP students

Link to Black History Month UK in Japan Spotify Playlist:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4VB9vny2EFBkm1UdFI7kG?si=kpQS8xUWQ6-ljqMTtvqoeA&nd=1>

Link to Black History Month UK in Japan article on British Embassy Tokyo website (in Japanese):

<https://www.events.great.gov.uk/ehome/ukinjapan/get-to-know-uk/sports-and-diversity/bhm>

Author Biography

Warren A. Stanislaus
University of Oxford, Faculty of History
warren.stanislaus@gmail.com

Warren A. Stanislaus is a DPhil Candidate in History at the University of Oxford where he researches transnational, cultural and intellectual histories of modern Japan. As an Associate Lecturer at Rikkyo University’s Global Liberal Arts Program, Warren designs and delivers courses



that explore Afro-Asian encounters and Japan in the wider world, while actively incorporating digital humanities and cross-sector public engagement approaches. In 2019, he was named No.3 in the UK's Top 10 Rare Rising Stars awards. You can learn more and get in touch via his website www.warrenstanislaus.com or Twitter [@warren_desu](https://twitter.com/warren_desu).

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