The Japanese “Ghetto-gangsta”: Searching for Prestige in Kansai Hip Hop Performance

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation treats emergent, outspoken class consciousness among performers of what I call “ghetto-gangsta” hip hop in Japan’s Kansai region. Musicians, including Anarchy from the public housing projects in Mukaijima (Kyoto) and Shingo Nishinari from the day-laborer neighborhood of Nishinari Ward (Osaka), are earning prestige in spite of, but also in part because of their humble origins. My ethnography of Kansai hip hop culture demonstrates that “marginality” is a source of prestige for performers who embody keywords including “ghetto,” “gangsta,” and “Korean,” and who critique Japanese society using language typically associated with right-wing ultranationalists (uyoku).

Chapter One traces the history of hip hop culture and performance in Japan, emphasizing the differences between Tokyo and Kansai as urban locales and as hip hop scenes. Chapter Two describes the ghettos of Higashikujo (Kyoto), Mukaijima, and Nishinari Ward, discusses the terms in which ghetto populations are stigmatized, and analyzes the ambivalence that local musicians express towards their marginalized neighborhoods of origin. Chapter Three shows how Anarchy and Shingo Nishinari use ghetto-gangsta cultural capital to overcome socioeconomic marginalization and to “move up” (haiagaru”). Chapter Four considers the role of “zainichi” (Korean long-term “residents”) in hip hop performance, and the discrimination that persists against them despite the “Korea boom” (“Hanryû”) of 1990s Japan. Chapter Five demonstrates that performers view “the nation” with as much ambivalence as they do their home neighborhoods. Some musicians critique contemporary politics and society using tropes associated with right-wing ultranationalists, while others use Kansai identity to mediate between personal and national identity, positing Kyoto and Osaka as the symbolic “center” of Japan. I conclude by discussing the importance of Kansai ghetto-gangsta hip hop for Japan studies and cultural anthropology, emphasizing how “mainstream” identities are contingent on those of the lowest socioeconomic classes. By revealing the importance of class, “race,” and marginality to Japanese
identity, I demonstrate that Japan is far less “other” than has usually been presumed in anthropological studies.