

Babylon East: Performing, Dancehall, Roots Reggae, and Rastafari in Japan. Marvin D. Sterling. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010. xvi + 299 pp. (Paper US\$ 23.95)

Babylon East is about the global imagination of race. Marvin Sterling establishes early his interest in extending scholarship on race beyond the discussion of dialog between the West and the postcolonial non-West, to the race politics that emerge in Afro-Asian encounters. This he achieves admirably in his multi-sited ethnography of Japanese consumptions of Jamaica. Sterling's interpretations of Japanese dancehall, roots reggae, and Rastafari form a spectacular mosaic of identity politics that will bring new life to weary minds.

The book's material is both clearly framed and intricately interpreted. It opens, more or less, with an outline of the development of ideas of cultural difference in Japan. Much scholarship discusses how ideas of Japanese cultural peculiarity have conventionally emerged in conversation with the West. But, Sterling argues, in contemporary Japan, "the public discourse of Japaneseness . . . has come to invoke the world at large beyond the West" (p. 20).

For many, this process of invoking serves to reinforce ideas of Japanese uniqueness and cultural homogeneity. Disposable accessories, such as fake dreadlocks donned by audiences at reggae shows, alongside dream catchers and the like, join the global ethnic stew—the *esunikku*—"removed in time for work the next day" (p. 21). But the donnettes, DJs, and dreads that are the subjects of Sterling's book provide evidence of how such engagements can go beyond mere hedonistic consumption of the *esunikku*, to inspire Japanese people's deep personal investment in this culture from afar. The politics that motivate this investment are the main object of Sterling's analysis.

Discussion of an additional ideological thread—that of global discourses of race (the colonial-modern, the postcolonial and the global postmodern)—is wisely left until the closing of the book. This bookending, with discussion of the context of discourses of Japanese uniqueness at the beginning, and that of global discourses of race at the end, allows Sterling to explore a complex ideological environment without making his argument too convoluted to grasp. In *Babylon East* discourses of Japanese uniqueness and global ideologies of blackness overlap and intertwine in what

Sterling, with nods to Victor Turner and Judith Butler, refers to as spaces of “thirdness—not man or woman, not foreign or Japanese” (p. 52). Thirdness describes the spaces in which dancehall and Rastafari are performed.

Sterling’s presentation of his field materials kicks off with two victories. In 1999, the Japanese sound system Mighty Crown won at World Clash, the top global competition for dancehall sound systems. Three years later, the Japanese reggae dancer (donna), Junko Kudo, won the National Dancehall Queen Competition in Jamaica. Sterling frames his discussion of Japanese sound systems and donnas (Chapters 2 and 3) as one of the dramatic constitution of Japan as an “authentic node of . . . international dancehall culture” (p. 62). The question of authenticity is equally core to Chapter 4, in which Sterling brings readers to a rurally-based, Rastafarian community’s participation in a broadly-celebrated annual religious festival. But in all of the cases, the dramatic constitution of authenticity not only takes place at shows and festivals; it also proceeds through travel to Jamaica. Japanese donnas, DJs, and dreads travel to Jamaica in pursuit of subcultural capital, such as adeptness at speaking in Jamaican patois, a process Sterling deftly refers to as “seeking to prove their mettle at the artistic source” (p. 127). These pursuits, as well as dancehall performances and Rasta observances, create a realm of thirdness—a volatile space in which race is renegotiated but rarely divorced from structural racism. This perspective forces the analyst to persistently consider delicate questions of domestication and subversion.

For Sterling, the politics of race is never straightforward. *Babylon East* is so considered and so diligent that multiple possibilities often inhere in the discussion of any one phenomenon. For example, Sterling firmly insists that racism plays a part in Japanese consumptions of Jamaica. At the same time, he remains open to the possibility that such consumptions may contest racism:

It is reasonable to expect Japanese people to adopt reggae, this music they love, on terms they can understand . . . Yet this adoption is realized through structural racisms which facilitate the first world’s gazing at, and taking from, black people with little concern or need for black opinion . . .

Is there a realistic scenario in which Japanese today can avoid engaging in structural racism in their adoptions of Jamaican culture? For me, the short answer is no . . . However, I want to foreground the agency of the individual in structural racism in order to consider the possibility that individual Japanese, though to some degree necessarily

working within the order of structural racism, can still engage in reggae subcultural and Rasta religious practices that might undermine this racism. (p. 27)

What makes Sterling's study so rich? Is it perhaps that he, as a black Jamaican ethnographer casting his gaze at a powerful Japan, is personally attuned to the thorny politics of negotiating blackness as an Afro-Asian space? He is surely unusually positioned in this ethnography. But if both ethnography and race are to be seen as features of the colonial modern, then all ethnographers must be racially invested in their interpretations of the field, and Sterling not necessarily more or less so. He mentions his black Jamaican-ness only in passing, and does not make it central. He makes no explicit claims to write a postcolonial ethnography. One reading of Sterling's method, his dissatisfaction with easy theorizing, could be that it is self-conscious, but another could be that it is simply that of a restless writer.

Babylon East is a joy to read. It will not only inform scholarship on race, but can also be counted as one of the most vivid and eloquent ethnographies of popular music in Asia.

Emma Baulch

School of Culture, History and Language, Australian National University
Canberra 0200, Australia
ebaulch@gmail.com