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Material Gworls: Teaching, Travel and Agency from Jamaica to Japan

By

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"It was only COVID-19 that saved Jamaica from mass migration. Just before COVID-19, we had close to 500 teachers migrating from Jamaican shores, and if it were not for COVID-19, I can tell you that maybe thousands more would have left by now,"

-Owen Speid, past president of the Jamaica Teachers Association

I first encountered the subject of my research while working on my undergraduate research project on all-girls high schools and respectability in Jamaica. In an interview with a friend from high school on her experience of teaching at and attending this particular all-girls high school, she mentioned that her next venture would involve teaching English in Japan. It lingered in my mind so much that I ended up teaching in Japan myself, and reuniting with her in Tokyo.

After returning to the US due to situational complications spurred by COVID-19, I spoke with my aunt (who was visiting from Jamaica) about a mutual acquaintance who had also started teaching English in Japan. Upon further investigation, I realized that migration for the purpose of language instruction is more widespread than I had thought. The above quote from Owen Speid, then President of the Jamaica Teachers Association, reflects this well. Stagnant teaching salaries, inflation, and a lack of support for teachers as well as the growing popularity of teaching abroad seems to have driven young professionals to careers in education beyond Jamaican shores.

It is in this context that I examine the migration of Jamaican women to teach English in Japan. To that end this research asks the question: how do Jamaican women make meaning of and lay claim to their own version of 'the good life' through migrating to Japan? What are the factors that motivate and facilitate this migration? How does their migration reflect the values of

those migrating? What are the experiences of the women who migrate? How are they perceived racially, linguistically, ethnically and otherwise in light of their identity as Jamaican women? What their accounts reveal is Japan as a site of discovery, encounter and struggle, where women question their larger life goals, stake claims to a more fulfilling work-life experience than they previously felt accessible to them and negotiate different versions of themselves.

I focus on women because of the specific ways that migration is a gendered experience, but also because of the lack of focus on women in the history of migration studies (Pessar 1999). This research also serves to go against the grain of studies on women who migrate from the Global South to work, which often focus on women who migrate to take care of families and who work in unskilled, low-status labor such as domestic work or factory labor (Pessar 1999). The women in this study, in contrast, are mostly childless and migrate for their own gratification.

To chart their experiences my analysis considers the process of migrating through push, facilitating and pull factors. I focus on precarity as a push factor, the salience of migration in the Jamaican imagination as a facilitating factor, and the demand for English education in Japan as a pull factor. I engage with precarity as economic instability, a la Anne Allison, but also as a state of being emotionally unwell in which women feel that being a teacher and living in Jamaica threatens their emotional health. I then incorporate the context of migration in Jamaica. Migration in Jamaica has a history of being a natural response to economic precarity, but has also provided a means of taking part in commodity consumption as a way of aspiring to middle class sensibilities (Thomas 2008). These women engage in travel to Japan to escape economic and emotional precarity, but also to further appropriate travel as a cosmopolitan commodity and as a path to happiness in various forms. I then move to a discussion of English as a desired commodity in Japan. I foreground Jonathan Rosa's work on linguistic racialization to discuss the

history of English education in Japan and the ways that English is racialized there. I then connect this to women's experiences of racialization in Japan, and how they navigate racialization to find community. My goal is to further contextualize Jamaican migration and Jamaican women's migration as also being the domain of women in 'professional' fields, and as being specifically gendered.

Background

Migration is a longstanding feature of the Caribbean region. In the 19th and 20th century, Jamaicans and other anglophone Caribbean peoples emigrated for labor to Central and South America to work on construction projects like the trans-Isthmian railway and the Panama Canal. During the First and Second World Wars, the United States and the United Kingdom recruited Caribbean migrant labor for the wartime effort and post-WWII reconstruction in British metropolitan centers (Glennie and Chapell 2010). In 1962 Jamaica gained independence from Britain, amid immigration policy changes that occurred in the 1960s. The UK's immigration laws became more restrictive, while the US's laws prioritized education and skills of immigrants, leading to a shift in Jamaican emigration to the US (ibid.).

Traditionally, women's migratory labor is considered solely from the perspective of women's role as companions to male migrants. However, women's migration is multifaceted and encompasses a larger migratory context beyond familial and partner relations, (Pessar 1999). In the US, women are often recruited to work in industries such as service, healthcare, microelectronics and apparel manufacturing because of patriarchal and racist assumptions about the sectors of labor that women are fit for and excel at (ibid.). Specifically, employers perceive women as physiologically more suited to what they consider 'detailed and routine work' and are believed to be satisfied with smaller salaries and limited opportunities for career advancement

(ibid.). In the case of the Caribbean, women hesitated to emigrate prior to the 1970s due to domestic ties and familial responsibilities (Beckles and Shepherd 2006). In this period, men were more likely to be educated than women, and some countries enforced a literacy requirement for migration (ibid., 143). At the same time, growing tourism industries preferred women workers in other Caribbean countries. In the period after the Panama Canal was completed in the 1920s, younger women and women over 45 comprised the majority of Caribbean emigrants (ibid.). After the 1960s, female migration included professional and working-class women such as nurses, teachers, and domestic workers (ibid., 143).

In the decades since, women predominate in circuits of Jamaican emigration due to increased levels of education and changing labor markets abroad (Glennie and Chappel 2010). Increased access to education also affords greater levels of freedom in domestic family structure that allows women to travel for work and take on more financial responsibilities in their families (ibid.). Today, Jamaica boasts a large diaspora—with some numerical estimates equal or greater to the island's population—concentrated in the US, UK, and Canada (ibid.). Migration continues to be a means of social mobility through access to foreign capital and commodities as well as remittances to local family networks (Thomas 2008). According to a migration profile from the International Organization for Migration, most emigrants are skilled, able-bodied persons between the ages of 15 and 64 years since migration is tied to seeking socioeconomic and educational benefits (Thomas-Hope 2018, 58). Specifically, teachers and health professionals migrated in significant numbers since the 1990s, adversely impacting their respective industries on the island (ibid., 59). Taking the US as a point of reference, if permanent residence is included, more than 95 percent of Jamaican emigrants migrated through family reunification[1]

[1] This is for the period 2006-2015, with total emigration ranging from 24,538 in 2006 to 17,362 in 2015.

(ibid., 62). From 2006-2015, almost twice as many Jamaican women migrated compared to Jamaican men (ibid., 64). While this does not preclude migration for the purposes of work—with 2.6 percent of successful applications processed through employment accommodations—it indicates that family reunification based migration is the most accessible, reliable, and successful means of migrating to the US (ibid., 62). Of Jamaican permanent migrants to the US, 45 percent held a tertiary degree and a significant portion worked in professional and military careers (Thomas-Hope 2018, 65). While the US hosts the most emigrants from Jamaica by a wide margin (96, 435 over the period 2011-2015, compared to 12,547 to the UK and 13,190 to Canada for the same period), Canada hosts the most temporary labor migrants, 14,286 persons during the 2014/2015 financial year compared to the 4,702 persons hosted by the US in 2015 (Thomas-Hope 2018, 61,71,72). For context, there are four major labor programs run by the Jamaican government through partnership with US and Canadian governments from which these figures are obtained. The programs are: (i) the United States Farm Work Programme, (ii) the United States Hospitality Programme, (iii) the Canadian Farm and Factory Programme, and (iv) the Canadian Low Skilled Worker Programme (ibid., 71). Women are not widely employed by the United States Farm Work Programme, but make up 56.2 percent of those employed by the hospitality programme, and 4.1 percent of those under the Canadian Farm and Factory Programme (ibid., 72). Though none of these statistics include Japan or Asia more generally, they illustrate the extent to which migration is gendered. This migration spans permanent residence and temporary work permits, professional work and manual labor. As of December 2020, 961 Jamaican nationals live in Japan (Japan-Jamaica Relations (Basic Data) 2022).

Writing about Jamaican women who migrate for labor, Deborah Thomas (2008) discusses the ways that migration factors into social expectations and desires for social mobility. Thomas

(2008) focuses on the seasonal migration of Jamaican women in the mid-2000s sponsored by the US Hospitality Programme. She highlights how these women aim to maintain familial networks through the procuring and distribution of 'American goods' purchased abroad in Jamaica, but they also participate in commodity networks in the US that are marked by 'Jamaican-ness': They seek out and buy Jamaican goods procured through informal networks mediated by other Jamaicans in North America (Thomas 2008). Accordingly, these women are integral to the maintenance of a transnational Jamaican kinship network and a US-based network of Jamaican migrants. Both are based on the exchange and circulation of commodities. These commodities also reflect their aims to buy into a desired middle-class social status. Class status and consumption patterns go hand in hand. Thomas shows that these narratives extend as far as the Jamaican Government - members of various state bodies would admonish women to save the money they earned from working in the US to invest in things like education, land, and home improvement, with the implication that these investments would improve their socio-economic position (Thomas 2008). Migration also plays into a larger Jamaican imagination. Since post-emancipation Jamaica, migration has served as a means of socio-economic mobility, a mode of survival, and a signal of one's ability to engage with metropolitan spaces such as the US. In particular, this remains sutured to the concept of the American Dream, one that Thomas, following Inderpal Grewal, ties to "...the desire for consumption, for liberal citizenship and for work…" (Grewal 2005 quoted in Thomas 2008, 73). Thomas notes that migration is something of a 'rite of passage' - a salient part of the social landscape for Jamaicans that "...generate[s] new kinds of political consciousnesses and spatial imaginations." (Thomas 2008, 78).

Finally, the context of teaching as a career in Jamaica is informed by the impact of neoliberal policies on the Jamaican economy beginning in the 1970s. The first social welfare programs were launched by the colonial governments in British Caribbean colonies in 1929 as a part of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, but this act focused primarily on benefiting Britain (Reddock 2021). After labor riots across the Caribbean in the early 1900s, subsequent Colonial Development and Welfare Acts (1940 and 1945) were passed to focus more on providing support to citizens that lived in the colonies including "institutionalized state-funded social welfare programmes and pensions, women's welfare programmes, subsidized government housing, improved public health services, expanded education, scholarships in medicine (including for female doctors) and the social sciences, expansion of agricultural extension and, importantly in 1948, the establishment of the University College of the West Indies." (Reddock 2021, 59). These policies produced positive social and economic effects on the lives of citizens in the former British colonies until the 1970s when neoliberal policies were introduced (Reddock 2021). At the urging of bodies like the IMF, governments were made to cut back on social support programs because they caused market distortions which resulted in a more difficult living situation for many Jamaicans (Thomas-Brown 2013). The dismantling of these social and economic safeguards, as well as the liberalization of the market caused agriculture, manufacturing and peasant production systems to fail as they were no longer financially viable, and resulted in job loss as these industries failed (Reddock 2021, Thomas-Brown 2013). This has produced an economic climate in which even post-secondary degree holders face an extremely competitive job market (Wells et al. 2014), and women specifically experience reduced opportunities for employment and career advancement (Reddock 2021). As a result, migration, entrepreneurship, informal sector employment and squatter housing emerge as methods to cope

with rising rates of unemployment (Reddock 2021, Wells et al. 2014, Thomas-Brown 2013). Migrating to Japan then becomes one way of responding to the economic landscape produced by structural adjustment and neoliberal policies. To contextualize the environment of English education that Jamaican women migrants inhabit, it is useful to understand the history of English education in Japan.

A Brief History of English Education in Japan

Minoru Shimizu (2010) starts the history of English education before the Meiji period (1868-1912) when the Edo Shogunate ordered Dutch speaking interpreters to learn English for national defense. After Japan opened up to trade, the Tokugawa Shogunate established a school for studying Western documents in 1855, a school for the study of English in 1858, and a Center for the Study of English in 1861 (Shimizu 2010). The school for the study of Western documents initially focused on Dutch material with English as a minor area of study, but this changed when an English department was built in 1860 (ibid.). This school became the University of Tokyo in 1877 (ibid.). During the Meiji era, English language learning grew in popularity, but the study of English remained embroiled in controversy until the end of World War II (ibid). Interest in learning about Western cultures fueled the damaging sentiment that Japanese is a 'weak and incomplete' language that prevented 'civilization and enlightenment' (Shimizu 2010, 9). Conversely, others held that English language learning rendered Japan dependent on the Western world (ibid.). Another view held that foreign language education allowed for the spread and advancement of Japanese globally (ibid.). As tensions in East Asia and the Pacific rose, English came to be considered an enemy language banned in secondary girls' schools and business schools (ibid). This changed after WWII, when the American occupation of Japan popularized English again due to the advantages it conferred (ibid). Since the Heisei period (1989-2019)

interest in making English an official national language persists as supporters preach the importance of English fluency for maintaining Japan's position in the international community and global economy (ibid.).

Modern English education in Japan initially fell under the monopoly of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET). JET is a government sponsored teaching program established in 1987 that promotes internationalization by employing youth from around the world in foreign language education at government offices and schools (Haye-Matsui 2018, Introduction 2022). In 1999, deregulations in dispatch law allowed boards of education to recruit Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) without going through JET (Haye-Matsui 2018). As a result, a myriad of companies recruit and hire foreigners to teach English in Japan today. JET first incorporated Jamaican teachers in 2000, and based on the latest statistics, Jamaica claims the 8th highest number of ALTs participating in JET (behind the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and The Philippines) (Participating Countries 2022).

Methods

In studying Jamaican women's experiences as English teachers in Japan I draw on my own experience as an English teacher in Japan, semi-structured interviews with Jamaican women currently teaching English in Japan, and social media accounts of Jamaicans living and working in Japan. I worked as an English teacher in Japan for over seven months between August 2019 and March 2020. I incorporate my experiences from this period and draw on journal entries from this time to contextualize the experience of teaching English in Japan as a Jamaican woman. I conducted three semi-structured interviews lasting an hour to an hour and thirty minutes with current English teachers in Japan, two medium-length surveys with short answer questions, analyzed videos from three YouTube channels of Jamaican women teaching in Japan, and

reviewed blog and interview posts on a range of websites (including the JET website, a personal blog, and interviews from alumni of the Jamaica chapter of the JET Alumni Association (JETAA)). To obtain interlocutors I reached out to friends, family and other acquaintances who I knew were working in Japan as English teachers. I searched for channels on YouTube chronicling the experience of teaching in Japan from a Jamaican woman's perspective and reached out to a few of those YouTubers for interviews. I also reached out to the author of a blog on the Jamaican experience abroad who was based in Japan. However, following up with them proved difficult so I utilized their online content instead (YouTube videos and blog posts) to understand their experiences, and supplement the experiences of the women I interviewed. I was also directed to other interlocutors by the blogger. I reached out to scholars studying the experiences of black women in Japan and the JETAA, and was directed to other interlocutors through these avenues as well. The time difference of 15 hours and my interlocutors' busy schedules made it difficult to find an opportune time for interviews, but they graciously made time to speak with me.

I rely on the JET and JETAA of Jamaica websites since JET is one of the best known options for teaching English in Japan. However, many of the women I consulted with (including myself) did not teach in Japan through JET. While I am sensitive to the ethical concerns surrounding online sources, I concentrate on content shared for public consumption by audiences of viewers and readers. To ensure this, I limit my analysis to profiles with large followings that encourage consumers to subscribe to and share their content. I intentionally use these women's names in lieu of pseudonyms and secured their permission to share excerpts from their social media accounts and promote their content in my research.

Nadine is a woman in her mid-forties who has taught in Japan for almost 9 years. She earned a bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management, but decided to teach in Japan as a compelling career change. Prior to that, she occasionally worked as a substitute teacher in Jamaica.

Abigail is a woman in her early forties who has taught in Japan for 10 years. Trained as a teacher, she taught History and Geography for 10 years at a Jamaican high school before moving to Japan to teach English. Abigail recounted her story as a natural progression of events. In her life story, she referred to a Japanese historical drama she watched in her youth, which complemented her general interest in history. Later on, she met a friend who studied Japanese in university and was enamored by Japanese language and culture. Through this friend she socialized at *bonenkai* and *nomihodai* (drinking) parties hosted by the Japanese teacher from her friend's Japanese class at the University of the West Indies, Mona. This facilitated closer interactions with Japanese culture where she met and socialized with Japanese people. Around the same time, her best friend's mother rented an apartment to a Japanese exchange student from Chiba. Her friend's mother would rent the apartment annually or biannually to a new Japanese exchange student working in primary schools or other projects around the island. She befriended this exchange student who later recommended that she visit Chiba, where she coincidentally ended up teaching. After she became a teacher, a friend working in Japan invited her to take a teaching post there based on her prior interest in, and familiarity with, Japan. She declined this opportunity until another friend alerted her to a newspaper advertisement in the *Jamaica Gleaner* recruiting English teachers to Japan. She applied to teach English in Japan through both JET and Interac and received a position through the latter.

Grace is a woman in her mid twenties who has taught in Japan for almost 3 years. With a BSc. in Environmental Studies, she taught Agricultural Science before moving to Japan to teach English. In narrating her move to Japan, she spoke about the intense environment at the school where she taught in Jamaica. She outlined her frustrations with her teaching situation, including the narrow age gap between her and her students, her lack of training in classroom pedagogy, and the heavy workload. During this time, a fellow teacher told her about her friends who were teaching in Japan and encouraged her to apply. She did, and later encouraged two of her friends from work to apply as well. They all went on to teach in Japan. Grace sparked my own interest in teaching English in Japan, which led to my own experience in Japan that forms the basis of this study.

Precarity, education and migration - Or, how and why Jamaican women end up teaching English in Japan

Teaching occupies a specific role in the Jamaican social landscape. During colonial rule and for a period thereafter, black Jamaicans could only reliably secure jobs in the commercial and tourism sectors (Evans 1993). Obtaining an elementary education meant that black Jamaicans could pursue careers as teachers in a comparatively stable and respectable profession[2] (ibid.). Teachers College provided the most accessible means to obtain a secondary education and advance in the profession (ibid). Even today, the teachers college remains a prominent part of the tertiary education landscape in Jamaica that continues to supplement secondary education in an accessible and affordable fashion. This grows more important in the neoliberal era in Jamaica where education is valued for its "educational value, a means to achieving a higher income and nothing more (Reddock 2021, 65) a shift away from a previous view of education as an "intrinsic value, worth having in its own right." (Reddock 2021, 65). Abigail's story reflects

[2] The other being religious ministry.

this when she recalls how she decided to become a teacher. She initially wanted to be a fashion designer, but lacked the resources and mentorship to successfully pursue this path. Teaching, on the other hand, was far more accessible.

Neoliberalism in Jamaica fueled a landscape of precarity. A tertiary degree is no longer a guarantee of employment (Wells et al. 2014). As a result, Jamaican people turn to informal economies, embrace entrepreneurial logics of uplift and self-employment, and seek employment off the island (Thomas-Brown 2013, Reddock 2021). In this context, teaching abroad is considered particularly lucrative (Thomas 2021) as teachers are afforded higher salaries and escape the dearth of resources and contentious relationships with parents and students at home. In a video detailing her move to Japan, Tomi recalls a story which involved an altercation between a student and teacher. Tomi decries the lack of accountability for misbehaving and disrespectful students and the violence directed by parents toward teachers because of their dissatisfaction with the latter (Tomi's World 2020). For Tomi, Japan allowed her to escape fraught parent-teacher and student-teacher relationships and make more money while doing so. The video opens with her singing a few lines from Tony Rebel's "Sweet Jamaica":

"What a nice place fi live, sweet Jamdown,
The only problem is, no dollars nah run,"

Tomi then lists five main reasons for her decision to pursue a position in Japan: (i) the salary (ii) a desire to 'experience life' (iii) the perceived safety of Japan (iv) better working conditions and (v) the need for money. She discusses salary in relation to the specificities of teaching in Jamaica. She outlines how upon graduating from a tertiary institution with a teaching

degree must wait until the physical certificate is available, which often takes a few months. In the meantime, teachers must work for approximately half the standard teaching salary. Citing student loans and the general cost of living, she remarks emphatically that it is impossible to live off of such a meager salary. Beyond that, she reveals that working in Japan allows her to do more with her salary. Despite a higher cost of living in Japan, she emphasizes that she is able to travel in ways that her friends in Jamaica, working for similar salaries cannot.

The video is an explanation of Tomi's reasons for moving to Japan, but it is also a way of responding to commenters on her previous content, who have accused her of disparaging Jamaica. She begins by expressing her love for Jamaica, but insists it is not conducive to her goals at this point in her life. The Tony Rebel lyrics are a reflection of these feelings – Jamaica is a nice place to live, one that she is proud of, but 'no dollars nah run'. The financial precarity of neoliberalism is off-putting such that Japan provides a refuge for her to pursue a career as a teacher without the financial hardship and relational difficulties that mark the Jamaican educational landscape.

This willingness to transgress national borders is written into the fabric of Jamaican society and culture. Migration is a longstanding answer to economic and financial hardship at home, an opportunity for social mobility, and a signal of one's ability to participate in spaces of perceived privilege and prestige such as the US (Thomas 2008). However, the women in this study forgo this American Dream to pursue work in Japan. This shift from to a new frontier is intentional.

Historically, the societies of the English-speaking Caribbean maintain ties to the UK through histories of colonialism, and to the US and Canada through imperialist spheres of economic influence. As a result, the US, UK, and Canada boast the largest diasporic

communities of Jamaicans (Glennie and Chapell 2010) sparked by a major wave of migration after the second World War (Sutton 1987). Migrating to the US carried with it the allure of an American Dream where Jamaican migrants are enticed by the possibility of attaining material goods and social mobility through participation in global flows of consumption (Thomas 2008). Specifically, in the field of teaching, migration to the US is facilitated by the BridgeUSA program. In this program, teachers from countries outside the US are recruited to “teach in accredited primary and secondary schools” in the US (Teacher 2022). The website emphasizes the benefits that teachers obtain from experience in American classrooms and how these benefits will positively impact the schools they will return to in their country of origin. Phrased as “educational and cultural enrichment,” this differs from the lateral interactions that the JET program provides, “aimed at promoting grassroots international exchange between Japan and other nations.” (JET Promotional Video 2022).

While the racial dynamics specific to the experiences of black English teachers in Japan often interrupt this lateral exchange, these quotes indicate a difference in the perception of teachers. The BridgeUSA program depicts itself as a magnanimous host, while the JET program understands itself in a relationship of equal partners in a grassroots exchange. This arguably forms a part of the perceived ‘toxicity’ of the US, Canada or the UK, along with the precarity which Jamaican seasonal workers face in the US and Canada (Wells et al. 2014, Thomas 2008), and the more blatant forms of racism women associated with the US. At the same time, English proficiency is viewed as expensive and advantageous in Japan by the general public and the state alike (Jones 2019, 24,26). Therefore, the Japanese government is eager to frame English teaching programs as being mutually advantageous to obscure their substantial benefits to the Japanese state. Despite these benefits, teaching in Japan involves fewer requirements, allows women more

agency, and provides a wider variety of opportunities for travel and extracurricular experiences than its US counterpart. These advantages are clear to Jamaican women teachers in Japan.

In Pursuit of Happiness - Or, how Staecha got her groove back

In her ethnography *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2018), Bianca Williams analyzes the transnational paths of black American women in their search for happiness and fulfillment through travel to Jamaica. She notes that the lives of these women in the US are marked by histories of racism and sexism and follows their efforts to transcend this trauma through emotional healing and spaces of free black womanhood (Williams 2018). Travel enables them to lay claim to these spaces. Similarly, a desire for travel as a form of fulfillment emerges from the narratives of Jamaican women teaching in Japan. In this instance, an initial event of travel from Jamaica to Japan serves as a springboard for travel to other countries. Since their teaching schedules are less demanding, they receive more disposable income, and find themselves proximate to a swathe of neighboring countries, migration Japan enables global encounters and exploration.

For Staecha, a Jamaican YouTuber, moving to Japan to teach English afforded her the opportunity to move away from home and a particular social construction of herself that had been written for her. Not only was she brought up in what she called a conservative household, this upbringing extended to the way she was perceived by others. When she started wearing makeup and piercings, acquaintances offered unsolicited advice about how she should be present and carry herself. To circumvent this, she looked to Japan as a space she felt she could discover herself and thrive in.

She says: “Don’t ask me why Japan. I get that question so often, and to be very honest I don’t have a specific answer to give you guys, except that I knew that I wanted to leave

Jamaica…but I did not want to go to any other of the first world countries to teach. I didn't want to go to the US, Canada or UK to teach because that felt like it would have been more of the same." (Staecha G 2020).

In the video comments, one viewer adds, "I left Jamaica because I needed to grow. Moved to USA and realized that just needed to leave the western hemisphere. Living in Asia has been very healing for the body mind and soul." Staecha responds, "I agree [with] the leaving of the western hemisphere. *It can be so toxic*." In addition to the spiritual dimensions of their decision, there is also an intentionality with which they avoid 'West' because it is no longer perceived as desirable or relevant. In the Jamaican migratory imagination, the West suffers a loss of appeal as a site of discovery and 'something new.' For some, it outlived its 'shinyness,' use, and relevance. In the retreat of the American Dream as a horizon of migrant aspiration, Japan emerges as a site of self-discovery and self-making to leave behind the toxicity of the West at large, to include the US, UK, and Jamaica in their embrace of a Western ethos informed by Euroamerican cultural and political hegemony. The Caribbean emigrant's experience in the US, UK and Canada is one of disappointment, an experience in 'back a foreign' (Thomas 2008, 72), a backward place completely unlike the 'foreign' portrayed in the media that is exemplified by modernity and desirable commodities (Thomas 2008). Coupled with other negative aspects of these countries, such as racism and xenophobia, subsequent generations of Jamaican women actively avoid these countries to pursue opportunities elsewhere. Among them, Japan is still perceived as a 'first-world' country, but one where access to material wealth and social safety nets avoids certain negative aspects associated with US, UK and Canadian society.

This circuit of Jamaican migration differs from others that center on the family unit, whether through migrant women's aims to purchase household goods to approximate

middle-class sensibilities and maintain family ties (Thomas 2008), or migrant men's desires to provide for their families' material and educational needs (Wells et al. 2014). For these Jamaican women, the family is secondary to the experience of realizing oneself, meeting individual needs, and reaching individual goals. When I asked Abigail if she had second thoughts about moving to Japan, she emphatically said, "No! Nope, no, no. I had no chick, no child, no boyfriend, no nothing to hold me back. I had my family, they knew I was that person who would just get up and go somewhere." She also mentioned her friends already in Japan to combat loneliness and homesickness, her openness and interest in Japanese culture and history, and her extensive research and positive attitude about the move. She ended by punctuating her comments: "I made up my mind! And from I make up my mind, it's all go." When the family is invoked, it is to flag its absence. Or for Staecha, it is discussed as a push factor, not in an effort to support the family, but to escape it.

The pressure from Staecha's family and community members to live a particular way (be religiously conservative, dress modestly, be demure) is tied to a Jamaican construct of respectability, one that privileges colonial ideas of femininity for those gendered as female and a corresponding propriety (Thomas 2004, Ulysse 2007). Moving to Japan is a way to say no to these pressures and narratives, and to become her own person on her own terms. Japan functions as a sort of cultural 'no man's land'. It is a space outside of Jamaican cultural expectations, but also a space that Jamaican women don't necessarily belong to. Because the space does not claim them per se, the hold of cultural expectations is little to non-existent. This coupled with communities (like the Black Women in Japan Facebook group) of persons that share a similar sensibility - that of leaving expectations behind to embrace their individual identities - creates a space conducive to the self-discovery that these women seek.

Migration to Japan also does not foster the same kinds of bidirectional flows as routes to the US, Canada and UK. Movement between these countries and the Caribbean is often marked by a back and forth traffic of people and ideas facilitated by strong connections between established Caribbean community groups in both the Caribbean and the US, UK and Canada (Sutton 1987). There is an aspect of kinship with black diasporic communities in the US, through which political and intellectual ideas develop and feed into these bidirectional flows (ibid.). Migration to Japan is different in this sense. There is not a comparable population of the African diasporic peoples that possess economic and social capital in Japan. When Caribbean people migrate to Japan they often stay for extended periods of time, unable to engage in the frequent returns home facilitated by proximity and affordability of travel to and from the US, UK and Canada. However, when Jamaicans are in Japan, they are able to take part in local networks such as the Facebook group Black Women in Japan and Jamaican cultural events such as the One Love Jamaica Festival held yearly since its launch in 2004. But these local networks are more firmly rooted in space and time, separated by a great geographic and temporal distance - Japan is almost 13,000 km from Jamaica and there is a 14-hour time difference. The communities formed by Jamaican women are grounded in local, as opposed to international, networks.

Finally, their role as teachers shapes their experience of migration. Teaching English in Japan requires at least an undergraduate degree. The accounts I analyzed included women already trained as teachers who decided to migrate, and others who pursued training as teachers in Japan because of their desires to migrate. Even among the women previously trained as teachers, most were not trained to teach English specifically. Teaching English in Japan provided a vehicle for achieving the work and life expectations that these women imagined for themselves.

Another woman, Nadine, reveled in the freedom to engage in particular hobbies without being judged and critiqued by other people after her arrival in Japan. Like Staecha, in Jamaica, she felt overly scrutinized in her pursuit of 'un-Jamaican' hobbies. In Japan, not only did she enjoy access to new interests, but she also felt that she no longer had to fit into a preconceived idea of who she should be or what a Jamaican woman should behave like. Instead, she felt that she was able to "poke holes in the box and extend [herself]." Like Williams' African American interlocutors, these women find healing and fulfillment in their move to Japan where they are able to discover themselves.

Migration also emerges as a way to exercise control over their working lives and the kinds of futures they wish to inhabit. In the same video, Staecha shares how her teaching background at a high school in Jamaica pushed her to move to Japan to teach English. While she says that she wouldn't express regrets about her time at that high school, teaching there was taking a heavy toll on her mental health. "Dealing with toxic teachers, who were colleagues, dealing with toxic students, dealing with toxic parents…I felt saturated in that kind of environment and it was just not working out for me. So I had to do what was best for me as a person, and as an individual. And I knew that I was outgrowing the place to a large extent and I needed to put myself in another environment where I was forced to grow in a different way." She goes on to describe how the heavy workload and attitudes of the students negatively affected her as well:

"...being a teacher in Jamaica is no joke…when it came on to exam time I had a lot of anxiety because I had to be marking 500 plus papers per term… [I]magine having 2 weeks…to mark 500 papers,... and to read 3 essays per student …And [I was] a form teacher so [I had] to make sure all the other grades [were] uploaded for my students."

"[And because of the] students' attitude [pauses meaningfully] I found myself becoming super aggressive and super angry and I had to escape that because I didn't want to be the kind of teacher that was known for being angry for no reason. There were days when I woke up, I didn't want to go to work, and while I was at work I checked out so many times emotionally." (Staecha G 2020).

Grace also mentioned being similarly frustrated by the behavior of her students—even though she does not blame them—and by the amount of labor she was expected to perform as a teacher. For these women, Japan allows an escape from a harried and emotionally destructive work-life and gives these women to breathe and grow.

In fact, women faced an opposite problem - often feeling that Japan did not allow them to do enough work. In a video on her experience as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), Natay shares the following:

"The workload is very light and it can get very boring…for me I don't like not having anything to do. But when you're doing it for a long time then it gets boring and then you wonder if you're really making use of your degree. Because you know, just sitting there your expertise is just being used in class to tell students to repeat after you is [pause] it gets crazy at times….And so my job is very boring, but guess what? You going, you leaving, you making your money. At month time you can smile. I'll take it." (NATZNIFICENT 2020)

There is a clear disparity in status between ALTs and Japanese teachers of English. According to Avril Haye-Matsui (2018, 238), scholars think this divide might have been intentionally fabricated by the Ministry of Education to mollify Japanese teachers of English, who would have been worried about losing their teaching positions. As a result, foreign teachers are only employed as assistants to Japanese teachers of English, work on a temporary basis, and

enjoy few opportunities for promotion or professional development (ibid.). ALTs are hired for their native English speaking abilities, but are viewed as less qualified than Japanese teachers of English (ibid.).

Natay's account illustrates this through a dissatisfaction with her work environment where she is not challenged professionally . She feels her education at teachers college is being wasted on a low stakes job. The language barrier makes it difficult to build camaraderie with her Japanese coworkers. Tomi also speaks about the unfulfilling nature of jobs where her skills as a teacher are underutilized and the language barrier prevents her from engaging with her students meaningfully outside of lessons. At the same time, Natay insists it is worth it because she is able to support herself and contribute to her household. In her case, this is important because she moved to Japan to be reunited with her boyfriend, who she later married. Even as the experience of teaching in Japan proves disappointing because it feels like they are not able to live up to their potential, these women find ways to shape the experience into one that fulfills larger life goals and modes of self-making.

Abigail notes that when she initially moved, the difference in responsibilities and community involvement overwhelmed her. In Jamaica, her responsibilities as a teacher gave meaning to her life. When she moved to Japan and no longer had these responsibilities, she felt she had lost something. She then started thinking of her time in Japan as a holiday, a time to take the break she never took (or couldn't take) while attending school or working in Jamaica. Abigail cited the ability to travel extensively as an advantage of teaching in Japan. Her decision to teach in Japan grew out of her desire to leave the school where she had taught for nearly 10 years. She was tired of dealing with the principal who, in her words, had a "very backward way of thinking." But she also valued change and longed to experience new environments. She

continues, “I have this thing where I won’t stay in any place for more than ten years. After ten years I move, I find a new experience, find something else to do. So that was always my thing when I started teaching. That even if I do teach,...in the tenth year, I’m going to move to another school.” This personal narrative that values travel, along with the internal pressures from her work environment, pushed her to seek employment elsewhere.

Since living in Japan Abigail has traveled to 27 countries and shared an anecdote from her trip to South Africa. When she visited, she felt particularly welcomed by an Uber driver who grew excited when he found out she was Jamaican. For the two weeks she was there, he showed her around and introduced her to his family. She recalls him saying, “Auntie don’t leave!” when her trip came to an end. In telling this story, she illustrated her positive experience with travel, particularly as it related to her Jamaican identity, and wished that other Jamaicans would do the same: “Because [pause] everywhere that I’ve gone, my god! The reception that I get, I feel like a queen everywhere I go. I feel like a queen!...Nice! No sah! The reception that I get [in] the different places…I just hope more Jamaicans would experience this.”

The ability to travel recurred in other favorable reflections on living and teaching in Japan. They emphasized access to travel facilitated by the money earned from working in Japan and Japan’s proximity to a wide variety of foreign countries. YouTuber Tomi discusses how, while a teacher’s eventual wages in Jamaica are decent, they do not afford the opportunity to “live happily and freely and do all the things I really want to do to enjoy my life.” (Tomi’s World 2020). Even though she enjoys teaching, experiencing life is just as important. In a video, Tomi shares a photo montage of her in the different locations she has visited since migrating to Japan, pictured with landmarks and scenic views, next to cultural figures, enjoying events, plays while she speaks, providing a visual for the experiences she speaks about. In doing so she invokes a

cosmopolitanism attained through the privilege of travel that pushes back against the barriers to leisure that black, non-wealthy women traditionally face (Williams and Nwankwo 2017). While it refutates of the stereotype that black women lack the cultural, economic and social capital to travel for leisure (Arthur 2021), it also displays the worlds that teaching in Japan opens up to stake claim to a 'black girl international' aesthetic of cosmopolitan travel and leisure. Inhabiting the frame of a Material Gworl 💅🏾 ala Saucy Santana, her travel-based consumption signals her worldliness to an audience of viewers.

Saucy Santana's song 'Material Girl' debuted on his album *Imma Celebrity* in 2020, but rose to fame on Tik Tok in late 2021 most popularly superimposed with clips of femmes showcasing a taste for finery (Carey 2022). Santana himself has gotten involved, posting a Tik Tok with the combined sounds of his 'Material Girl' and Madonna's 'Material Girl', with the caption "Inspired by the Original Material Gworl @madonna💕 " (Harris 2021). Santana's 'Material Girl' not only queers Madonna's 'Material Girl', it exceeds it. Santana's 'Material Girl' is ostentatious, unapologetic and consumeristic, invoking name-brand possessions, globe-spanning travel and other forms of living large. Not only is it a way of taking up space as a queer, feminine man in a heteronormative world, it is also an assertion of black femmes' right to a lavish existence in a world that denies them this. This is achieved through the graphic invocation of luxe consumerism. Though not as opulent as the picture Santana paints, Tomi postures as a 'Material Gworl' in her showcasing of cosmopolitan consumption via travel and new experiences.

Tomi says "Listen [pauses for effect] I've just experienced so much life, and that is one of the main reasons why I love that I moved to Japan. Because there's so much to see outside of your own country, and to be honest, if I didn't move to Japan I couldn't afford to do most of

these things. I couldn't just afford to take a trip to Japan whenever I want…I left Jamaica because I want to experience life and I will not apologize for that."(Tomi's World 2020).

As these women gain financial and emotional advantages, they mobilize their linguistic capital of the English language as a desired commodity to carve out new frontiers of Jamaican emigration. In doing so, their bodies are mapped onto mediated understandings of race and language that impact how they live and teach while in Japan.

Racialization and Linguistic Capital - Or, all foreigners speak English and all English speakers are foreign

In *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* (2018), Jonathan Rosa discusses the ways that Latine youth in a Chicago high school navigate social perceptions at the crux of language and looks. Specifically, he shows how both linguistic and racial categories are constructed and equated such that specific persons are expected to speak Spanish because of an ambiguous 'brownness' and expected to possess this ambiguous 'brownness' because they speak Spanish (Rosa 2018). 'Hispanic' is conceptualized both as an intermediate category between black and white, and as an ethnic rather than racial construction (ibid.). Rosa critiques this understanding, showing that those who identify as Latine are also racialized as "Indigenous, Afro-Latinx, White, Asian, and/or some combination thereof," (Rosa 2018, 4). Rather than being a simple bounded category of ethnicity or race, or nebulously lying between black and white, he shows how the category Hispanic is a construction that is a product of histories of white supremacy, Indigenous erasure, and anti-Blackness as well as a settler colonial project to create racially-bounded groups that are essentialized and differentiated in the interests of colonial power (Rosa 2018). Rosa (2018) discusses the ways that Spanish is used and perceived differently by his interlocutors depending on its association with Mexico and Puerto Rico, but

also how students create and reproduce narratives about what it means to be Puerto Rican and Mexican in Chicago.

My interlocutors spoke about 'always being a foreigner', even when one is not. Being foreign exists in many ways and at the intersection of multiple identities. There is foreignness coded as "English-speaking," where non-Asians are perceived as native speakers of English. Beyond this, Asians who are not Japanese are regarded as different and often discriminated against. To illustrate this, two of my interlocutors reflected on how even if one is half Japanese (*hafu)*, born and raised in Japan, and speaks Japanese, the larger Japanese population (i.e. those who are ethnically Japanese and speak Japanese fluently) still may consider that person to be foreign. This is part of a broader matrix of ideas surrounding race and perception in Japan. Central to this is a concept of Japaneseness, or *nihonjinron* (Kimura 2020, Sterling 2006). Translated literally as 'theories of Japanese people,' historically it has been associated with an emphasis on the uniqueness of Japanese culture and a distinguishing of Japanese culture from other cultures (Kimura 2020). Today, it is understood through a Japanese national identity, central to which is the homogeneity or purity of Japaneseness (ibid.). In a chapter on race in Japan, Yuko Kawai discusses the ways that two Japanese concepts of race, *jinshu* and *minzoku* are integral to conceptions of race and nation in modern Japan (Kawai 2015). *Jinshu* is used to engender one-ness with a larger Asian identity, and express united opposition to the West, while *minzoku* connotes a difference between Japanese and other Asians and a specific kind of Japaneseness that marginalizes native minority groups (ibid.). As such, *nihonjinron* promotes a kind of Japaneseness based on phenotypic ideas about what a Japanese person looks like (and sounds like), but correlates particular phenotypic traits with language - if you look Japanese, you speak Japanese and if you look foreign, you speak English. This is illustrated in one of the

accounts from Keisuke Kimura's analysis of the film *Hafu: The Mixed-Race Experience in Japan*.

The experiences of *hafu* show that even if one is Asian (but not Japanese), or if one is if non-Asian and Japanese, *nihonjinron* insists that you will never be Japanese. Kimura (2020) shares the story of Fusae Miyako whose Japanese mother raised her without revealing that her father was Korean to protect her from experiencing discrimination because of her Korean identity. This mirrors the historical relationship between Koreans and Japanese (paralled by the relationship between Chinese and Japanese) informed by conflict and colonization that manifests discrimination against Koreans and Chinese in contemporary Japan. Even though Fusae is able to phenotypically pass as Japanese, she lives with the embodied struggle of having to conceal her halfness (and Koreanness) to be accepted in Japanese society (ibid.).

Kimura also relays the story of David Mitsuaki Yano who is born to a Ghanian mother and Japanese father, but because of his African features is treated as a foreigner despite living in Japan for more than 20 years (ibid.). Similarly, one of my interlocutors invoked *hafu* identity to show how physical appearance renders one perpetually non-Japanese and Japanese language is mapped solely onto phenotypically Japanese bodies. Speaking of her own experience as a foreigner, then comparing it to that of *hafu* she said:

G: "You'll never be Japanese…even if you're half Japanese, you're not Japanese."

RD: "I saw this [Japan Times] piece…about a couple of people who were half [Japanese] and they were talking about how people just don't perceive them as Japanese."

G: "[emphatically] They don't."

RD: "Born there, speak Japanese…

G: “Some of them only [emphasis] speak Japanese, and they’re not Japanese. Like, they will never be accepted as Japanese. … no matter how much they try, on first glance they’ll just think “Oh, foreigner.” And then even if they speak to them, they’ll be like “Oh, are you really Japanese?! You’re really Japanese?! Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!” Like really? It’s 2022.”

Another person interviewed in the film shared the story of how he was bullied in school for his foreign sounding name ‘Alex’ and was told “You are not Japanese. You are eigo-jin” (used to denote foreignness; literally ‘English-person’) (Kimura 2020, 11). According to Kimura, Alex physically appears Japanese, but because he has a foreign name, he is bullied for being different. Moreover, Alex’s non-Japanese parent is his Mexican mother whose native language is Spanish, not English, but Alex feels pride in being able to speak English and perceives speaking English well as integral to his identity as *hafu* (ibid.). Kimura (2020) ties this to the hegemony of Western values, specifically, the privileging of English which that entails, as well as the ways that English-speaking is mapped onto foreignness. Specifically, when it comes to the relationship between English and whiteness, Kako Koshino (2019) shows how the prominence of English in Japan is rooted in white and Western supremacy. Koshino (2019) traces the adoption of English as an official language in Japan to the era of Civilization and Enlightenment which took place shortly after the US Navy directive that Japan open up to trade in 1853. The Japanese era of Civilization and Enlightenment drew heavily on principles of the European Enlightenment, that centered a ‘white, male, rational subject’ operating with great power, but under the narrative that ‘he escaped the confines of time and space’ (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1991, quoted in Koshino 2019) (Koshino 2019). Japan took hold of a European ‘wisdom’ based in imperialism and expansion undergirded by white supremacy. The resulting internationalization, or *kokusaika,* emphasized open-mindedness in word, but privileged Eurocentric intellectuality and the ability

to speak English (ibid.) leading to the conclusion that in Japan, globalization and whiteness are inextricable. At the university Koshino studies (which at the time was focused on internationalization), white English instructors are automatically viewed as capable and occupy most of the instructional posts while there is a noticeable paucity of black instructors (ibid.). As one of Koshino's interlocutors muses "I always wondered why there were only… White people. Are there any Black teachers on this campus?" (Koshino 2019, 65,66).While black persons in Japan can capitalize on the linguistic capital that speaking English affords, it is only borrowed capital, as the ultimate power lies in the perception of whiteness. Despite this, these women appropriate a history of hegemony and colonization at the hands of England to wield English as capital of their own.

Black in Japan - Or, 'Are you Lil Nas X?'

Instead, blackness in Japan comes with its own specific associations. Black people in Asia are often associated with popular figures, usually African-Americans such as Michelle Obama or Lil Nas X, the default being that black people are American and speak English. Perceptions of blackness in Japan can be positive and involve curiosity about black American popular culture, but can also be negative, informed by Western hegemonic ideas of race and white supremacy (Haye-Matsui 2018, Russell 2020). Anti-black racist ideas are perpetuated by uncritical media coverage of blackness in other contexts, as well as racist content posted on social media (Takeda 2020, Russell 2020). Marvin Sterling links Japanese expressions of anti-blackness to the preservation of *nihonjinron* as well as the desire to separate a 'civilized' Japanese subject (proximal to a white 'civilized' subject) from the 'uncivilized' black subject (Sterling 2006, 7). This is further illustrated by the ways that Japanese mainstream media feeds into stereotypes about black people in America, evident in an NHK segment on the killing of

George Floyd that typecast black people in America as violent aired a mere five days after an interview with white nationalist Jared Taylor in which he justified the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown (Russell 2020). Japanese representations of blackness include "[t]elevision programmes, dolls, figurines of doting, heavyset "Mammy" and grinning "Sambo", corporate product labeling, print advertising, novels and manga" that "casually represent black people as golliwog-like figures, as grass-skirt wearing cannibals, as oversexed studs and as prostitutes, as superathletes and violent criminals." (Sterling 2006, 16).

As such it is unsurprising that Japanese people view black people as perpetually foreign, otherworldly figures. During my seven month stint in Japan, I was stared at often. A child approached me in a grocery store and stared at me for an extended period before I smiled and waved at her and walked away; a little boy practiced his English with me while I was out having lunch at an okonomiyaki shop with some staff members from the English school I was working at. All of these occurred in one of the more populous cities in Japan. One woman shared how she overheard her coworkers referring to her as 'the exotic girl' and in the same blog post wrote: "Being *exotic* in Japan meant a seat left vacant in the train, no matter how crowded it got, as people refused to sit beside me. It meant cameras pointed at my face trying to sneak a quick pic. It meant small children rubbing my skin to see if the color would come off. It meant local men asking me to *play* — using the code word for sex as if asking for entry to my body was merely a game. It meant being told I cannot use the local gym because I wasn't fluent in Japanese. It meant being compared to *Monchhichi*, a stuffed toy monkey.
It meant furtive glances and blatant stares. It meant un-asked for hands trying to touch my hair." (Brissette 2020). In another instance she visited an *onsen* where an older woman exclaimed

‘*Kokujin!* (‘Black person!’) before staring at her, and then reached out to touch her breasts while saying ‘*Kyonyu.’* (‘Big breasts’) (Brissette 2021a).

Not only is this indicative of a general ignorance about black people (and people who do not appear phenotypically Japanese), there is also an essentialization of blackness (‘all black people are the same’), a dehumanization of blackness (‘in order for my curiosity to be satisfied, it is okay to treat this entity as a thing and not a person’) and a hypersexualization of blackness. There are also specific ethnic associations that intersect with perceptions of blackness. One language teacher shared “Once I say I’m Jamaican they tend to loosen up. They kind of relax more. Or if some of them don’t know where Jamaica is they go, ‘Jamaica, Africa?’ Once I say no, they kind of sigh and relax.” (Haye-Matsui 2018). There is an apprehension about Africa in the Japanese imagination, but not Jamaica. Jamaica instead is often perceived as a site of culture, one that many Japanese resonate with. This too comes with linguistic notions of ethnicity.

Nadine shared the story of how one of her students told her that his mother thought it was nice that the students would be learning ‘Jamaican’ from their Jamaican English teacher. In her recreation of the conversation, her student says “I told my mom [my teacher] is Jamaican and my mom says it must be so nice that her students are learning Jamaican. The students must be so happy to know Jamaican English.” She expected that they would have particular ideas about her because of her ethnicity as Jamaican, but she didn’t think that would involve the expectation that she would teach ‘Jamaican’. She said “I don’t know what that means, I’m tired of correcting them, there’s no such thing as ‘Jamaican’.” She was surprised by the ignorance of the student’s mother. “Your mom must know there’s no such thing as Jamaican and we speak English there. That caught me off guard. That kind of [pause] naïve expectation? Or uninformed expectation.”

Here, there is a clear conception of Jamaica as possessing its own language and an underlying concept of the variety of English that Nadine teaches as 'Jamaican English' and not an unmarked 'English' as British, American or Australian English is understood. At worst, the former fails to consider over 300 years of British colonization of the island, and at best it indicates a knowledge of patois, but fails to separate it from the English spoken on the island, giving the impression that the existence of patois irreparably corrupts the English spoken in Jamaica. This reflects attitudes that render English the linguistic capital of global whiteness, and vice versa. As a result, countries like the US, the UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa are prefered as sources of English teachers (Koshino 2019, Parsons 2021).

At the same time, women made connections with Japanese on the basis of their Jamaicanness, and with other black women on the basis of shared experiences, a small but meaningful counter to the negative modes of racialization. Abigail shared a story of how one day a coworker of hers gave her a ride during which the coworker played dancehall music. Surprised, Abigail started a conversation with the teacher about Jamaican music in which her coworker explained that she liked dancing, specifically, "Jamaican winey winey dance!" She and the coworker are still friends today, and Abigail is the godmother of her son. Another teacher, Stacey-Ann Witter, writes about how reggae music facilitated some of her closest Japanese friendships during her 5 years teaching English in Kagoshima (Witter 2022). Women also mentioned growing close to community members when they lived in rural areas, likening the way that they were taken care of to the ways that rural communities in Jamaica assume collective care for their residents.

In a different instance of community building, Keisha Brissette (2021b) shares how a friendship she forged with a black woman she met in a supermarket changed her life. Initially when she met ‘Supermarket girl’, the connection stalled because the demands of Japanese work meant neither of them found the time to connect with each other. But with the changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, she found herself physically and mentally worn out. She began frequenting the supermarket as a respite from the oppressive monotony of online teaching and ran into ‘Supermarket girl’ again. She and ‘Supermarket girl’, whose name was Julia, made plans to take a long walk on Saturday morning to combat the anxiety and isolation that plagued them both. That Saturday morning walk turned into a weekly ritual of experiencing nature, getting a physical workout, and sharing their experiences as black women navigating the world. From their weekly walks emerged a sisterhood, an experience of kinship founded on their shared identities as black women. She had found a ‘sistah’.

I experienced another instance of this during my interview with Abigail. While I asked her questions and she shared stories, she was also engaged in the process of braiding a Zimbabwean friend’s hair. At one point she even got her friend to share some of her own experiences as a black woman in Japan in response to one of my questions. Hair braiding is a quintessential part of African and African diasporic fashion, and conducting an interview with Abigail as she braided her friend’s hair revealed an intimate moment of kinship among black women.

Conclusion

The act of migrating to Japan to teach English is facilitated by a number of factors: the desire for English language education in Japan and the corresponding linguistic capital held by

these women, the ubiquity of teaching as a career in the Jamaican landscape that enables women to see it as a career of choice, the economic precarity fueled by the island's response to the demands of neoliberalism and the salience of migration in the Jamaican imagination. But to focus only on these factors would do their narratives of migration a great disservice. Of equal, if not greater importance is the way that these Jamaican women fulfill their desires to negotiate what they want from life and how they go about achieving it. They take charge of their work lives, engage in globetrotting, construct their own ideal versions of their lives and become what they consider to be better versions of themselves. In all of this, even the locales of Jamaica and Japan take a secondary position. When I asked about the ways Japan fits into their larger career and life plans, only one person seemed content with Japan 'for the foreseeable future' as she said. For others, instead, Japan was temporary. Comparisons pitted Japan's safety, cleanness and efficiency against Jamaica's danger, dirt and unpredictability, but also the sense of community found in Jamaica against societal conditions that produced a norm of loneliness and aloofness in Japan. The result was that, for these women, neither Japan nor Jamaica are considered places to live permanently. Instead, comparing the experience of living in both countries became a way to think through what these women wanted out of life, and the ideal situations they sought to inhabit. The bigger picture reveals an experience of migration shaped and molded by those undertaking it, not simply the other way around, with agents making themselves, even as others attempt to make them. Like the Dominican peasants that Trouillot writes about in *Peasants and Capital* (Bonilla et al. 2021) these women are not simply led by market forces, but take the journey in hand to realize themselves and make their own lives.

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