1.3 Punktopia: An alternative to resistance?

James D. Let**son**[1]

✕ ~~Abstract~~

Despite a growing body of research investigating how older subculturalists engage with their communities, punk and other subcultures are still seen as primarily youth-based movements, with older members participating from the fringes. However, in Sapporo, the younger generation is greatly outnumbered by their seniors, with the largest and most active being those of an age (mid-to-late 30s) when they would often be expected to have left the scene – either temporarily or permanently – to concentrate on more 'mundane' concerns, such as career and family. My research shows that 'punk' in Sapporo is conceived, not as a space of 'utopic' resistance, but rather as a space of 'heterotopic' potentiality, within which members are free to construct meanings to suit their individual needs. It is this – as opposed to any focused ideology or practice of activism or resistance – that has afforded the community such longevity while not suffering any significant loss of membership from generation to generation. Japan currently faces issues of population decline and aging, economic disparity, dealing with the recent Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing recovery from the triple disaster of March 2011. The heterotopia of Sapporo's punks offers an alternative way of being: one that allows adherents to balance the person they need to be, with the person they want to be, and one from which there is much anybody – punk or not – can learn.

Keywords: punk, aging, heterotopia, subcultural resistance, Japan.

1. Introduction to the Research

1.1. Introduction and research aims

The city of Sapporo in northern Japan, the prefectural capital of the island of Hokkaido, plays host to an active community of punks. They form a close-knit group who not only enjoy socializing together, but also collectively express a specific set of subcultural values. As 'punks', they do so, in part, through the appropriation or subversion of popular material culture, and by deploying spectacular forms of fashion and music centred on a supposedly anti-capitalist ethos of 'Do it Yourself' (hereon, DIY) (Dale, 2012; Hebdige, 1979).

The definition of 'punk', like that of any (sub)cultural phenomenon, is plural and contested. For the purposes of this research, I consider punk to be a fluidly bounded subcultural community (Haenfler, 2014), at once both real and imagined, based around shared values and practices. These include – but are not limited to – distrust of authority, marginalization from and/or resistance to so-called 'mainstream' society, the encouragement of self-expression, and appreciation and/or participation in the aforementioned DIY aesthetic (Haenfler, 2014; Dale, 2012).

Despite its almost 50-year history, punk is still primarily seen as a 'youth' movement. It is widely perceived as an outlet for rebellious adolescence, one which most participants inevitably 'grow out of' as they reach

adulthood. The defiant spirit of subculture is considered no match for the pressures and responsibilities that maturity brings (Davis, 2006; Hall & Jefferson, 1975; Weinstein, 2000). While there are many who continue to draw meaning from their youthful subcultural practice (Andes, 1998; Bennett, 2006), those few who choose to remain active in their communities often do so in supporting roles or from the periphery. They prefer to make way for their more energetic juniors to take on the principal roles of subcultural performance (Andes, 1998; Klien, 2020).

Sapporo's punks, however, counter this trend. The predominant age-group in the scene are those in their mid-to-late 30s, followed by those in their mid-40s to early 50s. The younger 18-30 demographic tier – while present and active – constitute a minority. This suggests that the punk community in the city has not experienced the rate of adult dropouts which previous scholarship on subcultural participation infers is inevitable. This trend can also be seen to some extent in other punk communities elsewhere in Japan (Ishiya, 2020).

Sapporo's punks and their apparent achievement in breaking the cycle of generational boom-and-bust that has plagued similar groups elsewhere bring to light important questions. Namely, what lessons can be learned from them regarding the building and maintenance of intergenerational communities? This is particularly important in a country known to be at the forefront of global, post-industrial aging and shrinking demographics (Kavedžija, 2019). Moreover, what light can a theoretical framework which takes the Sapporo scene's specificities into account – specifically, 'heterotopia' (Foucault, 1998; Letson, forthcoming) – shed on the lacunae extant in current scholarly understandings of 'punk', 'subculture', 'aging', and so on?

While there is a growing body of research on aging in subcultural communities, such research is still sparse, particularly when considering non-Western contexts. Furthermore, in contrast to the generational make-up of the scene in Sapporo, such aging subculturalists are more-often-than-not positioned as peripheral actors, participating behind the scenes or from the side-lines (Bennett, 2006; Klien, 2020; Fonorow, 2006). As such, this research is the first consideration of the role of subcultural participation in Japan that focuses not on youth, but on older members of such communities, while also positioning those older members as central to their community, rather than as marginal participants. Previous studies of Japanese subcultures almost exclusively deal with their related issues through the framework of youth, rebellion, and self-making in young people (for example Kawamura, 2012). Such research is, of course, vital in exploring non-normative paths to adulthood, especially in a nation that is all-too-often reductively described as traditional, conservative, or conformist. However, Japan is now unequivocally an aging, post-growth nation (Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017) at the forefront of the shifting cultural conceptions of age, youth, and maturity being experienced in post-industrial societies across the globe (Cook, 2013). This paper aims to provide an (albeit brief) opportunity to open a discussion on these issues from the viewpoint of Japan's thus-far most enduring subculture, punk.

In this paper I look at trajectories of aging and maturity both in contemporary northern Japan and in the current literature on punk and other subcultures. From this I go on to suggest a framework for study based on Foucault's (1998) concept of 'heterotopic' spaces. I also explore how, through the construction of punk-as-heterotopia, the city's subculturalists have imbued their community with a longevity that seems to have eluded many of punk's proponents elsewhere. Finally, I consider the implications these findings may have, not only for further research on punk and subcultures, but also for Japan and other societies with greying populations.

1.2. Methodology

Building on ongoing fieldwork begun in 2018, this paper uses ethnographic data gathered from participant observation, interviews, and *deep hanging out* (Clifford, 1997) in the Sapporo punk community. Thus far, my interlocutors have included members of the punk community whose ages range from 21 to 54, and who work in industries as varied as construction, care, nursing, education, and hospitality, as well as many who run their own small businesses or who identify as 'freeters' (people who work in part time or casual employment either out of choice or economic necessity and who harbour little or no desire to pursue traditional or stable career paths – (Allison, 2013).

There are five main age cohorts active within Sapporo's punk scene: late teens, mid-to-late 20s, mid-to-late 30s, mid-to-late 40s, and early 50s. While there are members of the community who do not fall neatly into one of these groups, or who move easily between them, these groups nevertheless shape how most participants interact. They influence who they with, and how they interact with other members of the community. Those

in their mid-to-late 30s comprise the largest and most active group in the community. As it happens, I also fall into this demographic tier.

This coincidence was on the one hand serendipitous. It gave me access to the group most currently involved in the production and performance of subcultural activity in the city more easily than may have been the case had I been younger or older. On the other hand, this close association with a particular cohort has in many ways shaped and defined my interactions with the community. It has become – for good or ill – the generational vantage point from which I view (and am viewed by) the city's punk community, as well as the central hub of the social networks built during my fieldwork (Letson, forthcoming; Klien, 2020).

During my initial research in Sapporo (Letson, 2021), this was a boon. I was able to gather data and form networks of interlocution with relative ease. A fact which enabled me to build a picture of the city's contemporary punk scene and its most active participants and gave me a unique insight into the current shape of the community. This led me to investigate the role of older generations and the multiple foundations on which this scene has been formed and shaped, as well as how it has shifted and transformed over the years. However, when my focus shifted away from those near my own age, I found extending my social and research connections to these older subculturalists to be more challenging.

These older punks were often skeptical when approached for anything that seemed too formal. Attempts to organise interviews were met with a barrage of questions: why did I want to speak to them? Why couldn't I just talk to them at a gig? Why couldn't I ask someone else? Or, sometimes, no response at all. My approach to older interlocutors soon became one of respectful deference, as a junior to a respected '*senpai*',[2] or, 'senior' (Letson, forthcoming). When I framed my requests as a young person seeking to understand how things were done, rather than as a researcher looking for data, I found older interlocutors were more likely to make time to speak to me (albeit, sometimes grudgingly).

2. Aging punks in Japan and beyond

2.1. Aging Japan

It is widely recognised that post-industrial nations are facing dramatic and long-term demographic change as populations age and birth-rates decline (Vollset et *al*., 2020). In this regard, Japan holds the unenviable accolade of being the first nation in the world where the number of over-65s has surpassed 21% of the total population; the threshold required to be considered a 'hyper-aged' society (Muramatsu & Akiyama, 2011). In fact, the latest data puts the total of retirement-age citizens in the country at around 28% of the population (Statistics Bureau, 2020).

 Accordingly, since the turn of the millennium there has been a broad and ever-increasing body of scholarship on Japan's aging demographic; its origins, determinants, and consequences. Japan's 'hyper-aged' population has emerged from a complex confluence of social trends and changes, many of which are common across post-industrial nations. A post-Second World War baby boom was followed by a steady decline in the birth-rate, while ever-improving healthcare and hygiene has increased life expectancy. Simultaneously, increasing urbanisation and the adoption of a more individualistic life-view has led to a dramatic decline in the number of multi-generational households and a steady rise in divorce rates (Coulmas, 2007).

This, along with rising national debt and the increasingly precarious position of the national pension fund (Hirata et *al*., 2008), has resulted in ever more people in need of care, but who find themselves unable to rely on civic institutions to provide it for them (Allison, 2013). In addition, the rise of the nuclear family, and the tendency for those of working age to have social lives built around their workplace, means older people on retirement often find themselves abruptly severed from the social networks upon which they had relied throughout their adult lives. As a result, many Japanese people find themselves socially adrift upon retirement, forced to find new ways to build and maintain social networks that might support them as they age (Coulmas, 2007; Kato et *al*., 2017). However, recent statistics show that Japanese citizens of retirement age are becoming less likely to involve themselves in community-building activities such as clubs, neighbourhood associations, and volunteering (Cabinet Office, 2018; International Longevity Center, 2015).

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Scholarship on aging in Japan has done much to highlight the diverse and locally contingent ways in which older people in both rural and urban Japan deal with the trends outlined above (Kavedžija, 2019; Matsumoto, 2011). However, there is very little research which has considered the place of marginal communities in this process. Furthermore, there is no current scholarship which considers non-normative communities which are not based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, but rather on shared ideologies and practices in relation to material culture. One such example being Japan's active – yet largely unobserved – punk community.

At first glance, participation in a subcultural community seems to offer the kind of alternative social networks of which Japan's rapidly greying population is in desperate need. However, as I will discuss below, current scholarship depicts subcultures as primarily centred around the experiences and activities of youth. Those older participants who continue later in life tend to do so in a limited capacity, either working to support younger participants or excluded from them (Andes, 1998; Klien, 2020). By contrast, in the Sapporo punk scene, it is the older generations – aged from mid-30s up to early 50s – who engage the most assiduously. As can be seen in the next section, this form of longevity is unusual in subcultural terms. As such, Japan's punks provide a unique vantage point from which the possible roles of subculture as regards age, maturity, and wellbeing in a hyper-aged society may be considered.

2.2. Aging subcultures

There is currently a dearth of scholarship connecting subcultural participation with experiences of aging in Japan. This follows the general conception of subculture as primarily a 'youth' phenomenon (Bennett, 2006). There is, however, an increasing body of work on how older members of punk communities elsewhere in the world interact with younger participants, and how age affects the ideologies and practices connected to their subcultural identities (Bennett, 2006; Davis, 2006; Hodkinson, 2006; Weinstein, 2000). Despite this, it remains the broad consensus that punk communities are driven by youth. As each new generation ages, their population thins; either through disillusionment with the apparent 'failure' of their resistance (McKay, 1996), or because of the general pressures of 'growing up', such as employment, family, and so on (Bennett, 2006; Hall & Jefferson, 1975). As the senior generation fades away into the background, a younger group appears to breathe new life into the community. Those few older members who remain active in their community mostly do so from the fringes. They either take on positions of organisation and technical support within the community (Andes, 1998; Klien, 2020) or see themselves as advisors and mentors to the younger generation (Bennett, 2006). This peripherality even extends to their physical position at events, as music fans tend to watch performances from further towards the back of the venue as they grow older (Fonorow, 2006).

Outside the punk subculture, but within Sapporo, Klien (2020) has noted a similar tendency among older generations of hip-hop practitioners. Here, too, it is common for members to step back from the scene as they age. In turn, scene elders are kept at arms-length by the younger generations, who treat them, "with a mix of respect, awe and derision" (Klien, 2020, p. 10). This perhaps points towards an uneasy meeting of Japanese cultures of seniority with a subculture that is perceived (by both insiders and outsiders) to primarily be the territory of youth (Letson, forthcoming).

While much of this can be explained by the physical and social changes that aging brings, the notion that the driving force of punk – or any other subculture – is 'youth' is also inextricably tied to the central focus of much subcultural practice; namely, the performance of resistance (Haenfler, 2014; Hall & Jefferson 1975). Notions of 'punkness' are often centred on ideas of the 'purity' of DIY production as a form of resistance to mainstream cultural and commercial forms (Dale, 2012; Pearson, 2019). Classic studies of punk and other subcultures assert that once a movement's creative DIY output has been assimilated into mainstream culture through the insidious processes of capitalist commodification, the resistive spirit of the community is effectively destroyed (Cohen, 2002; McKay, 1996). Those who become commercially successful are considered to have 'sold out', or to have lost touch with the ideals of the wider punk community (Pearson, 2019). The youth who had poured their creative efforts into the scene become disaffected and, in a sense, grow out of their punk phase. This is followed by a new generation who take up the punk ethos and begin the cycle of resistance again. Sometimes, they are even aware of a kind of generational time-limit attached to their activities (McKay, 1996).

Despite a concerted effort to move away from the classic subcultural theories of the 1970s-80s, the view of punk as a generation-based, youth-focused, and ultimately doomed cycle of resistance continues to haunt

punk studies to this day (Bennett, 2006). Moreover, this notion has had a strong influence on studies of other subcultures, particularly hip-hop. Scholars of hip-hop, too, often bemoan the commercialisation of the movement's resistive roots (Rose, 2008). Although, it is important to note that here, too, there is a growing effort to move beyond this narrow conception of the processes and practices of subcultural life (Maxwell, 2009). However, as such research focuses on the coexistence of aspects of resistance and conformity, it arguably remains broadly within the framework of the classic studies of subcultures, albeit with an emphasis on hybridity over purity. Like punk, hip-hop is constructed as a space for, and an object of struggle between the mainstream and the underground (Maxwell, 2009). This conception is a common trope within articulations of subcultural identity, both scholarly and from within the communities themselves (Dunn, 2016). Yet, it fails to account for those who continue to participate – albeit from the fringes – even after they have resigned their youthful aspirations of resistance (Davis, 2006).

Moreover, a community like that of Sapporo's punks, where older generations both outnumber and out-participate their juniors, calls this framework of resistance vs. cooptation even further into question. The generational makeup of the scene, along with its longevity, is completely at odds with the cycle of resistance and resignation outlined above. There are also a significant number of community members who do not actively participate in 'resistance' yet perform pivotal roles within the community (Letson, 2021). These people are largely absent from both classic and contemporary studies of subcultures, or are dismissed as mere walk-on actors, "playing at resistance" (Matsue, 2008: 49). A further complication is found in the oft-noted tendency for subcultures to mirror or even uphold some elements of mainstream culture even while resisting or rejecting others. One example being many music-based communities' propensity to uphold heteronormative ideals of masculinity and male dominance (Downes, 2012).

While I am by no means suggesting that scholars (including myself) are mistaken, Sapporo's punks highlight the partiality of current understandings of subcultural identity and resistance. Without addressing this, studies of subcultural communities are destined to be stuck in a dialectic tail-chase, unable to escape from the dichotomies of dominant vs. subaltern, DIY vs. commercialism, youthful subculture vs. the all-consuming hegemony of the 'adult' mainstream (Ertl & Hansen, 2015). In doing so, scholars may miss the chance to discover what subcultural communities like those in Sapporo have to share with and to teach us about possible responses to aging in the post-industrial world (Ingold, 2018).

3. Punk as heterotopia

It is clear an alternative framework is needed to better understand punk identity and practice, particularly in a community like Sapporo's. In short, an understanding that seeks to move beyond the traditional resistance-cooptation binary (Hannerz, 2016; Hodkinson, 2015). Previously (Letson, 2021), I have suggested that Vinthagen and Johansson's (2013) notion of everyday resistance provides a possible alternative (Dunn, 2016; Moog, 2020). However, in much the same way as the studies noted above, this still relies on a conceptual model built around the assumption that it is 'resistance' which is at the heart of subcultural practice. In this section I argue that this may not necessarily be the case.

One of the defining features of punk in Sapporo is the inclusivity of the community. This includes not only acceptance of members regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and so on, but also tolerance of differing views regarding punk ideology and practice. In Sapporo's punk clubs and live venues, right-wing skinheads rub shoulders with left-wing anarcho-punks, and 'classic' punks, replete with brightly dyed mohawks, safety-pin accessories, and studded leathers, sit down for a drink with hardcore fans dressed in their plainer shorts, t-shirt, and baseball cap ensembles. While such disagreements have occurred in the past (a more detailed history of Sapporo punk is planned for a future publication), in the contemporary Sapporo punk community there are no arguments over what punk is, was, or should be (Pearson, 2019). Within the group it is tacitly accepted that each member has their own interpretation of punk and that they each put that into practice in their own manner.

It is my contention that this inclusive eclecticism is what has allowed Sapporo's punks to maintain their community membership even as participants have aged beyond when they would perhaps otherwise be expected to quit or, at least, scale back their activities. In creating such a social space, the punks of the city have constructed a site of *heterotopia* (Foucault, 1998). That is, a place of 'otherness', in which members are able and even encouraged to explore and express their difference from mainstream society, without it being necessary to sever their ties from it (for a more in-depth discussion of heterotopia, (Letson, forthcoming).

Heterotopic space allows those who gain entry to it to accept the impossibility of complete escape from their wider social bonds (family, work, civic membership, and so on), yet allows them to in some way disrupt those bonds spatially, socially, and/or temporally (Foucault, 1998; Johnson, 2006).

In short, constructing 'punk' as a space of heterotopia has afforded the Sapporo community a social and physical site (albeit a constantly shifting one) in which it is possible to resist without resisting. Simply by being a part of this space, one is actively participating in the building of a place of difference where one can express their distaste or disagreement with the perceived mainstream. However, one is able to do so without necessarily clashing head-on with society in the way that 'resistance' is commonly practiced (Dunn, 2016; Hall & Jefferson, 1975; McKay, 1996). This allows Sapporo punks to be accepted by the community as a 'punk', without needing to engage in more overtly resistive activities (demonstrations, political activism, and so on) (Letson, 2021). Simultaneously, those who do wish to engage in a more confrontational form of resistive are similarly free to do so without jeopardising community coherency through possible disagreements over political viewpoints or methodologies.

If we apply this view to wider punk histories, then the popular mainstream did not 'coopt' the 'resistance' of punk. Rather, in line with understandings of power relationships as complex, fluid, and intersectional (Foucault, 1978; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013), subculture and pop culture entered a mutually negotiated – if inherently uneven – relation of difference. Certain aspects of punk and other subcultures have indeed been integrated into mainstream material culture. Yet, they still maintain a degree of separation, allowing adherents to build identities and practices which diverge from sociocultural norms. In effect, they provide a liminal space "of contestations and alternatives... embedded in a broader urban fabric" (Faubion, 2008, p. 37) with the flexibility necessary for continual adaptation and longevity.

Furthermore, by taking heterotopia as a foundation from which to understand subcultural groups, we begin to find potential answers to some of the issues raised above. Older punks who continue to actively participate in their communities are no longer anomalies of 'arrested development', but rather people who have chosen to continue their negotiation of difference with mainstream culture. The processes of commodification are no longer a force of coercive cooptation, but rather a conversation between DIY producers, mainstream retail, and their numerous intermediaries (Laing, 1985). The conservation of heteronormativity or other societal norms that have been observed in many subcultural communities around the world (Downes, 2012) is no longer a blemish on the purity of underground resistance, but rather a reflection of the heterotopic bottom-line: however, much we might transgress from the norm, we can never fully escape our connections with the world(s) both in and around us.

It is undeniable that the spirit of resistance and rebellion associated with punk is what gives this subculture its energy and impetus to explore difference and contest norms. Unfortunately, as has long been observed, this struggle for a non-conformist utopia is ultimately doomed to failure (McKay, 1996). However, this resistive energy can carve out a space for heterotopia; the imaginative transgression and contestation of norms while simultaneously recognising that those norms can never fully be transcended. It is this aspect of punk in Sapporo which has allowed it to shift and adapt while still maintaining a coherent and cohesive community and which has afforded it such enviable longevity.

4. Conclusions

I am not suggesting that all of Sapporo's punks will continue their subcultural practice as they age (although my interlocutors all insist that they intend to do so). Neither am I inferring that Japan's elderly populace should become studded leather-wearing punk pensioners in an attempt to find life's meaning beyond retirement. What is clear from this study, however, is the usefulness – and perhaps, even, necessity – of heterotopic space. These spaces provide opportunities for the contestation and negotiation of sociocultural norms and the freedom to (re)interpret them in a way that best suits each individual and/or the groups with which they identify. Indeed, such processes are becoming increasingly prevalent in Japan's hyper-aged, hypo-social society (Kavedžija, 2019).

As they age and change, the different generations of Sapporo's punk community have employed the heterotopic qualities of punk to contest and transgress, not only the boundaries and norms of Japanese national society, but also the boundaries and norms of 'punk'. They have created a space where each individual, age cohort, generation, or social group may find their own lines of flight down which they may de/

reterritorialize what it means to be 'punk', 'hardcore', 'skinhead', 'Japanese', '50 years old', 'resistive', and so on. This has allowed them to maintain a space in which they can continue to contest commonly held norms even as their own personal ideals evolve with the flow of life's changing times.

Due to this, and despite many of them being employed in lower-paid or precarious jobs (Letson, 2021), none of my interlocutors in the community's older generations showed any of the concerns for their retirement which are common among Japanese seniors (Cabinet Office, 2016). Punk in Sapporo has provided them with a community which maintains many of the shapes and contours of the wider Japanese society with which they are all intimately familiar yet is different in some advantageous ways. The close-knit friendships of an age-based cohort provide a social safety net, but – unlike their peers outside the punk scene – this safety net is not based in the spaces of school and workplace which often become inaccessible after retirement (Coulmas, 2007).

Many of these benefits may be provided through other social activities available for Japan's retirees, such as club membership, volunteer activities, and so on (Matsumoto, 2011). However, the heterotopic nature of Sapporo's punk community produces a space in which people may age in transgressive ways. That is, they are able to contest how their aging affects and is affected by community expectations. Instead of being left to find 'age-appropriate' retirement activities, punks have access to somewhere they can safely navigate – and, indeed, have already navigated – the twists and turns of getting older both individually and as a social group. Thus, providing them with the means and the opportunity to (re)determine the balance point between self and community as their needs shift with age (Kavedžija, 2019). Furthermore, they may do so in a way that negotiates the fine, ever-shifting lines between their plural identities: punk, family member, employee, local, cosmopolitan, Hokkaidan, Japanese, and so on.

This view of a punk community as heterotopic, as opposed to something based purely on resistance, adds to understandings of subculture and its role in contemporary, transnational, urban space. In the case of Sapporo, it offers a vision of an inclusive ground for aging and inter-generational negotiation. This is a space in which both individuals and generational cohorts are free to reimagine the shape of their community as it befits them, while remaining grounded in their wider social relationships and identities. As the post-industrial world faces the challenges of hyper-aged, shrinking populations, the punks of Japan's northern frontier offer a viable approach for those who wish to maintain their wider social ties while aging (dis)gracefully.

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