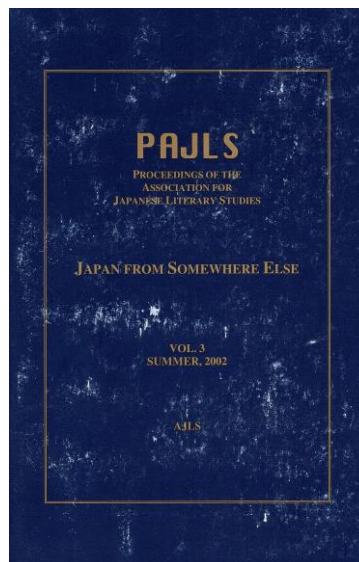


“Mystery Plane: Sakamoto Kyū and the  
Translations of Rockabilly”

Michael Bourdaghs 

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese  
Literary Studies* 3 (2002): 38–50.



*PAJLS* 3:  
*Japan From Somewhere Else.*  
Eiji Sekine, Editor; Joyce L. Detzner, Production Editor.

**MYSTERY PLANE:  
SAKAMOTO KYU# AND THE TRANSLATIONS OF ROCKABILLY<sup>1</sup>**

Michael Bourdagh  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

Naoki Sakai has argued that in the eighteenth century, intellectuals in Japan reached a previously unknown relation to the language they used: they discovered that they were using a hybrid language, one composed of Chinese and Japanese elements.<sup>2</sup> With this discovery, a movement arose to separate the elements of the newly discovered hybridity into distinct national languages. It was no longer legitimate to read Chinese texts in Japanese; one should read Chinese texts in Chinese, and – if there was a need to read them to a Japanese-speaking audience – they should be properly translated into Japanese first. What now appears as a heterogeneous linguistic realm was separated into two distinct realms, and what Sakai calls “the schema of cofiguration” was introduced, in which the discovery of a stable image of an Other – in this case, China – enabled the simultaneous discovery of an image of the self, Japan.

When two languages are separated in this way, the only permissible contact between them occurs by way of a certain representation of translation. Translation in this guise claims to serve as a technique for crossing a boundary, for linking two previously distinct realms, but in fact what this representation of translation actually achieves is the installation of that boundary, a reterritorialization of heteroglossic reality into distinct national languages.

Strictly speaking, it is not because two different language unities are given that we have to translate (or interpret) one text into another; it is because translation *articulates* languages so that we may postulate the two unities of the translating and the

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper began in an exchange of e-mails with Joseph Murphy, who first pointed out to me the complexity of “Sukiyaki” as a translation. I am also grateful for research assistance from Theresa Post. A longer version of this paper is forthcoming in a collection of essays on *Minor Transnationalism*, edited by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih.

<sup>2</sup> Naoki Sakai, *Voices of the Past: The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991).

translated languages as if they were autonomous and closed entities through *a certain representation of translation*.<sup>3</sup>

This new discourse of translation underwrote the notion of a single national language shared by all the members of the national community as a medium for supposedly transparent communication.

Such a representation of translation obscured the fact that all communication occurs by way of translation; no linguistic community enjoys transparent language. The schema of configuration produced the fantasy of a national community untroubled by internal difference. And yet the shared national language that all Japanese supposedly spoke did not exist: as Sakai notes, the newly discovered language arrived stillborn. Ueda Kazutoshi and other scholars in Meiji Japan bemoaned the diversity of dialects that threatened the very possibility of the nationwide communication they thought was essential to the process of building a modern nation. Institutional and ideological policies were enacted to bring into existence the national language that was supposedly already the birthright of every Japanese citizen. As a result, a standardized language did emerge and became the basis for the national education system, industrial publishing, and the other commercial and bureaucratic institutions of the modern capitalist nation. In the first half of the twentieth century, it also became the lingua franca in Japan's growing overseas empire: in Taiwan, Korea, and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

Other existing forms of speech simultaneously became nonstandard dialects: they were different from the hegemonic standard, and yet they were not foreign to the Japanese language. They became a kind of domesticated otherness that had to be regulated, but did not pose the same kind of foreignness that a competing national language such as Chinese did. They might even prove a beneficial resource to the nation. Although a Tokyo speaker might not understand all the words spoken by a rural farmer, nonetheless no translation was needed: they were both speaking Japanese, after all.

In thinking about Sakamoto Kyu# and his translations of rockabilly music, I will explore the role translation plays in producing two kinds of otherness: first, the way translation according to the schema of configuration

---

<sup>3</sup> Naoki Sakai, *Translation & Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997), 2.

<sup>4</sup> On the invention of Japanese as a "national language," see I Yonsuku (Lee Yeounsuk), *'Kokugo' to iu shinjishu: kindai Nihon no gengo ninshiki* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1996).

establishes a boundary between two supposedly distinct languages; and second, the way that the supposedly homogeneous language community produced through this translation includes various marginalized dialects, forms of language that are exotic yet belong to the interior of the speech community. In the first instance, interlingual translation represents certain texts as belonging to foreign languages, and thereby situates the translator and his/her readers as belonging to a single homogeneous linguistic community, erasing the failures of communication within that community. If that is so, what techniques are used in the second instance, to establish a dialect as a kind of peripheral culture, but one that is still located within the boundaries of the speech community? What is the relationship between these two sets of techniques? How and when does the boundary line between foreign and peripheral culture shift? And, most importantly, what opportunities are created within this fluidity for minor literature in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari propose, of a literature that undermines existing power relationships?

Sakamoto Kyū's rockabilly presents a good field for exploring this problematic because as we trace through it, we see repeated instances of the processes by which minority discourses are both rendered peripheral and brought to the center of the social imaginary. We see the boundary between foreign and peripheral undergo fluid permutations. We also see repeated instances of translation, deliberate decisions made not to translate, as well as other instances that challenge the possibility of defining what translation is. In Sakamoto's music, we encounter what Deleuze and Guattari call a "blur of languages, and not at all a system of languages."<sup>5</sup>

\*

As I map out the connections between translation and rockabilly, I will deal primarily with two songs that were central to Sakamoto Kyū's career. The first is an Elvis Presley song, "G.I. Blues." Released in late 1960, shortly after Presley's stint as a U.S. G.I. stationed in Germany, it was the theme song for a film of the same name. It was an enormous hit in the U.S. and around the world – including Japan. The song, written for Elvis by Sid Tepper and Roy C. Bennet, is a sort of translation, as was all of rockabilly.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Plan (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986), 24.

<sup>6</sup> In *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, 1994), Peter Guralnick describes the reaction of Sam Phillips, head of Sun Records, to the first successful studio session with Elvis, when his debut single "That's All Right (Mama)" was recorded: "[Phillips] knew that something was in the wind. He knew

It claims in its title to reproduce an African-American musical genre, and it in fact does follow the traditional twelve-bar blues format, with lyrics structured around the usual call-and-response pattern. Yet the song is clearly a hybrid form, mixing a variety of musical genres into its blues framework, most notably military march cadences. The film soundtrack as a whole is similarly hybrid, including lullabies, romantic ballads, straight-ahead rockabilly numbers, and even a song adapted from German folk music (“Wooden Heart”) that includes lyrics sung in German by Elvis.

The translation that Elvis achieved in “G.I. Blues” and earlier singles seemed to erase a preexisting boundary: a minority cultural form, the blues, was brought to the center of mainstream popular culture. In the words of Sam Phillips, Elvis’ first producer, “I went out into this no-man’s-land, and I knocked the shit out of the color line,” a crossing that he credited at least in part to Presley himself, since “Elvis Presley knew what it was like to be poor, but that damn sure didn’t make him prejudiced. *He didn’t draw any lines.*”<sup>7</sup> Elvis’ performances in fact did blur boundaries – not just racial ones, but also those of class, gender, and sexuality. These transgressions provoked the sharply negative reactions to his early television appearances.

And yet, Elvis’ crossing also redrew boundaries. More precisely, it showed that crossings could only occur in certain directions. To get Elvis’ early singles played on the radio and to get concert bookings across the South, Phillips repeatedly had to assure skeptical music industry figures that his new singing sensation was in fact white.

In early 1961, Sakamoto Kyu# released a cover version of “G.I. Blues,” with the lyrics translated into Japanese by Minami Kazumi. The song was one of the last gasps in the rockabilly boom that had begun in Japan in 1958, with the First Nichigeki Western Carnival – a concert series that became a national sensation, featuring local artists playing music in various genres of

---

from his experience recording blues, and from his fascination with black culture, that there was something intrinsic to the music that could translate, that did translate. ‘It got so you could sell a half million copies of a rhythm and blues record,’ Sam told a Memphis reporter in 1959, reminiscing about his overnight success. ‘These records appealed to white youngsters just as Uncle Silas [Payne’s] songs and stories used to appeal to me.... But there was something in many of those youngsters that resisted buying this music. The Southern ones especially felt a resistance that even they probably didn’t quite understand. They liked the music, but they weren’t sure whether they ought to like it our not. So I got to thinking how many records you could sell if you could find white performers who could play and sing in this same exciting, alive way’ (96).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Guralnick, *Last Train*, 134-135; italics in original.

American teen pop.<sup>8</sup> Later that year, the Third Nichigeki Western Carnival provided Sakamoto with his first taste of the national spotlight. In his performance there, as well as throughout his early career, Sakamoto was closely identified with Elvis.<sup>9</sup> His first public performance, for example, was at a club at a U.S. military base in Tachikawa in April 1958, where he sung a cover version of Elvis' "Hound Dog."<sup>10</sup> "G.I. Blues" seems to have had a special impact on its Japanese audience. A feature on recent "Music Fashions" in a popular magazine included a full-page spread on the "G.I. Blues" look.<sup>11</sup> At least three other Japanese rockabilly singers – Kamayatsu Hiroshi, Sasaki Isao, and Mickey Curtis – also released cover versions of the song. But it was Sakamoto Kyū's version of the song that became the definitive Japanese-language version: it entered the *Music Life* domestic hit chart at number three in January '61 (in fact, four of the eight songs listed that month are by Sakamoto), and remained in the charts until May.

In his version, Sakamoto adopts many of Presley's vocal mannerisms, including the slurring and hiccupy flourishes characteristic of American rockabilly. The singing style is quite distinct from that he had used on his previous hit singles, but is likely closer to what he had used in his early live performances. The band behind Sakamoto plays a swinging arrangement by Danny Iida, a tight rockabilly weave accented with jazz-influenced drumming and dueling guitar and piano fills; it runs circles around the staid arrangement on Elvis' original. The lyrics are translated into Japanese, except for a refrain that remains in English: "Hop two three four occupation G.I. blues." Although the Elvis version is clearly sung from the perspective of an American G.I. stationed in Germany, including references to the Rhine River, German food, and pretty *Fräulein*, these local references are erased from Sakamoto's version. In fact, Sakamoto's translation seems to relocate the speaker to Japan, so that the relevant Occupation is the U.S. Occupation

---

<sup>8</sup> On the Japanese rockabilly boom, see Kurosawa Susumu, ed., *Roots of Japanese Pops 1955-1970* (Tokyo: Shinko Music, 1995), and Kitanaka Masakazu, *Nihon no uta: sengo kagaku* (Tokyo: Shinchō, 1995), 93-101.

<sup>9</sup> See "Rockabilly no mochi: Sakamoto Kyū," *Shōkan Tokei* (23 May 1959), 64-65, where Sakamoto is quoted as saying "I became a rockabilly singer because I was attracted to Presley's songs. He's really the king of rockabilly. What people call my 'wild' movements, too, I think comes because I have caught just a little bit of Presley's feeling. But I'm still just an imitator, I'm afraid to say." All translations from Japanese-language sources are mine.

<sup>10</sup> Ei Rokusuke, *Sakamoto Kyū monogatari: Roku-Hachi-Kyū no Kyū* (Tokyo: Chuō Kōron, 1990), 165-168. I also rely on another biography, written by Sakamoto's widow: Kashiwagi Yukiko, *Ue wo muite arukō* (Tokyo: Fuji Terebi Shuppan, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> "Music Fashion: G.I. Blues," *Heibon* (May 1961), 176.

of Japan.

Sakamoto's "G.I. Blues" raises a number of questions. What did it mean, just months after the massive anti-American protests that accompanied the 1960 renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Pact, for a Japanese singer to sing lyrics mostly in Japanese but adopting the enunciative position of an American G.I., complaining of homesickness, the squalor of barracks life – but also suggesting himself as an object of desire to local (Japanese) residents? The problem becomes more complex when we note that up through the mid 1960s, Japanese rock 'n' roll musicians – including the early Sakamoto – found their most stable source of income in performances at clubs on U.S. military bases.

We should also consider the question of whether Sakamoto's version of the song – or any of his earlier translated covers of American pop music (including songs by Paul Anka, Bobby Darrin, and others) – could have been hits in the U.S. I suspect the answer is no.<sup>12</sup> A Japanese singing American pop "straight" was certainly acceptable in Japan, but in the U.S., it could only be viewed as an exotic joke, one that would elicit appeals to the supposed "authenticity" of Elvis' original version. Sakamoto the Japanese rockabilly singer of "G.I. Blues" could only produce laughter – laughter in the Bergsonian sense of a technique for the violent disciplining of materiality that jams up the smooth functioning of the social machinery. But if that was so, why was there no resistance to Elvis singing in German, or, for that matter, to his singing a song that claimed to be an African-American blues number? Elvis, singing from the supposedly universal position of an American white man, could cite the particular of German folk music without raising eyebrows. Likewise, Sakamoto as a particular Japanese could invoke the universal of American rockabilly within the context of Japan. But Sakamoto singing rockabilly in America would result in cognitive dissonance, a discomfiting confusion of hierarchies between universal and particular, one that might even suggest that the universal was simply another particular.

As Greil Marcus notes, rockabilly in the U.S. was above all a white genre.<sup>13</sup> But American rockabilly was not merely racially segregated; it was also almost exclusively gendered male. Despite the presence of many well-

---

<sup>12</sup> Although most of Sakamoto's early singles in Japan were covers of American pop hits, only two were included among the twelve songs on his U.S. album, *Sukiyaki and Other Hits* (Capitol Records, 1963): "Good Timing" and "Goodbye Joe." The lyrics for both were translated into Japanese, and neither was released as a U.S. single.

<sup>13</sup> Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'N' Roll Music* [1975] 4th rev. ed. (New York: Plume, 1997).

known female voices in both country and blues, virtually all of the successful rockabilly singers were men.<sup>14</sup> Within the Japanese market, Sakamoto was able to perform the masculine role of an American soldier, projecting himself as an object of desire for Japanese youths. But to achieve success in the West, as we will see, he had to take on a more feminized, non-threatening “cute” role.<sup>15</sup> Sakamoto’s translations of rockabilly showed that borders could be crossed, but only in certain directions, at certain times, and by certain people.

\*

On the second song I will deal with here, Sakamoto was backed by the Toshiba Recording Orchestra (the stable of studio musicians under contract to Sakamoto’s Japanese record label). “Ue wo muite aruko#” was released in Japan in late 1961, after Sakamoto performed the song to great acclaim on nationwide television. The song’s title might be translated as “I will keep my head up as I walk.” The music was composed by Nakamura Hachidai, the lyrics by Ei Rokusuke, a duo that composed many hit songs for Sakamoto and others. “Ue wo muite aruko#” immediately became an enormous domestic hit. The single sold more than 300,000 copies in Japan, but did not win the coveted “Nippon Record Taisho#” award because, in the mind of at least one member of the prize jury, the song sounded too American.<sup>16</sup> This is the same song that under the title “Sukiyaki” became a number one hit in 1963 when it was released by Capitol Records in the U.S., the first Japanese-produced record to sell a million copies worldwide.<sup>17</sup> The

---

<sup>14</sup> Wanda Jackson was a rare exception. Her 1959 visit to Japan, after her version of “Fujiyama Mama” unexpectedly became a hit there, created a sensation among Japanese rockabilly fans. See “Wanda Jackson wo terebi show ni mukaete,” from the Mar. 1959 issue, and “Wanda Jackson to kyō#ev shite...” in the Apr. 1959 issue of *Music Life*, both reprinted in Kurosawa, *Roots*, 68-71.

<sup>15</sup> On the gendering of relations between Japan, the U.S., and Asia in more recent Japanese popular music, see my “The Japan That Can ‘Say Yes’: Bubblegum Music in a Post-Bubble Economy,” *Literature and Psychology*, 44:4 (1998), 61-86. See also Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–1970* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> See Take Hideki, *Yomu J-POP: 1945-1999 shiteki zenshi* (Tokyo: Tokuma, 1999), 54-65.

<sup>17</sup> The origin of the “Sukiyaki” title remains obscure; according to a 1981 interview with Sakamoto, a British DJ who liked the song but knew only three words of Japanese – Fujiyama, geisha, and sukiyaki – was responsible for the choice of “Sukiyaki” as the song’s title in the English-speaking world. See Aikura Hisato, “Sukiyaki song de zenbei wo sekken shita Sakamoto Kyū” *Bungei Shunjū* (October 1981), 179-181. The song had already become a hit in a number of European



song's success was widely reported in the Japanese media. One critic was quoted as saying that the song's breakthrough in the West shows that "our eighteen years of struggle in the postwar have not been in vain."<sup>18</sup> When Sakamoto arrived at Los Angeles International Airport in August '63 to perform the song on *The Steve Allen Show*, he was met by thousands of screaming teen-agers, foreshadowing what would happen the following February when the Beatles arrived in New York City.

Ei Rokusuke's lyrics in the original Japanese version of "Ue wo muite aruko#" present a man who is determined not to allow loneliness to overcome him; he vows to fight back tears, keep his chin up, and walk forward. The melancholic lyrics stand in odd contrast to the cheerful melody, which (particularly in the passages whistled by the singer) seems to take an active role in buoying his spirits. But most American listeners could not know this, because when Sakamoto's single was released in the U.S., the lyrics were left in the original Japanese, with no translation. Yet as I have already noted, the song was given a new title.

"Sukiyaki" is not a translation of the original title – and then, yet again, in another sense it might be the ultimate translation. Sakamoto was quoted at the time as saying, "At least 'Sukiyaki' is a Japanese word," and of course

---

countries in 1962, either as "Sukiyaki" or under a number of other titles, including "Unforgettable Geisha Baby" (Belgium). The song was originally introduced in England through an instrumental version recorded by the Kenny Ball Orchestra, after Pye Records President Louis Benjamin heard Sakamoto's original while on a trip to Japan. The popularity of the cover version prompted Pye to issue Sakamoto's original version in the U.K., also under the title "Sukiyaki." In early 1963, deejays at West Coast stations in the U.S. began playing the Sakamoto version to great response, and another cover version by Billy Vaughn and his Orchestra began to enjoy chart success. These developments led Capitol Records to release the original Sakamoto version in the U.S. The single entered the *Cashbox* hit charts on May 4, 1963, and reached #1 seven weeks later; it remained at #1 for four consecutive weeks. Numerous cover versions were also released, some with English lyrics. By July '63 the song had been released in 23 different versions in 13 different countries, including one by Masako, a Japanese-American singer from Hawaii. The above account includes information from "Zenbei de dai-hitto no 'Ue wo muite arukō,'" in the Jul. 1963 issue of *Music Life*, reprinted in Kurosawa, *Roots*, 237; the entry "Sakamoto Kyu" in Mark Schilling, *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1997), 215-217, and Ed Hogan, "Kyu Sakamoto" entry at "All Music Guide" ([www.allmusic.com](http://www.allmusic.com)). In subsequent years, countless cover versions of the song have been released. The most successful was a sultry English-language version by the soul group, A Taste of Honey, which became a major international hit in 1981. Another English-language version by the vocal group 4PM reached the *Billboard* Top Ten in 1994.

<sup>18</sup> An unnamed critic, quoted in "Kyū-chan hoshi wo mitsuketa," *Mainichi graph* (14 Jul. 1963), 22-27.

that was the whole point.<sup>19</sup> “Sukiyaki” was chosen because the word included a strong sense of Japaneseness or foreignness – an effect that literal translation would have spoiled. Somewhat incredibly (or predictably?), the single Sakamoto released in the U.S. to follow up “Sukiyaki” was a cover version of the old warhorse, “China Nights (Shina no yoru),” an Orientalist fantasy about romance between a Japanese man and a Chinese woman that had first scored as a hit in Japan in 1939.<sup>20</sup> An article from a 1963 Japanese magazine retracing Sakamoto’s trip to Los Angeles quotes him as saying

“Next we’ll see if I can get ‘Shina no yoru’ to catch on. With ‘Ue wo muite aruko#’ becoming a hit, we know that Japanese teen-agers and American teen-agers are the same. Japanese pop songs are no longer an underdeveloped country. With my generation, at last Japan has become an international power.”<sup>21</sup>

He is also quoted as saying that the best part of the trip was when an executive for Capitol Records told him that if he could produce two more hits, he would get his own star on the sidewalk in front of Graumann’s Chinese Theatre. Given the Orientalist nature of the follow-up single, the location was perfect. But “China Nights” peaked in the low 50s on the charts, and Sakamoto never got his star on Hollywood Boulevard.

Japanese music journalists in 1963 were well aware of the exoticization involved in re-titling Sakamoto’s song as “Sukiyaki.” The song’s lyricist, Ei Rokusuke, too found this translation a jarring experience. He happened to be traveling in the U.S. just as the song was becoming a hit. In a travel diary published at the time, he describes the envy he felt for the song’s composer, Nakamura Hachidai. Nakamura’s music can be appreciated by anyone, no matter what language they speak, because it is not trapped in any one language.

When he sits down at a piano, he doesn’t need any words. But my work uses the Japanese language.

When I write poetry, when I write prose, only people who can read Japanese – no, really, only a part of those who can read that language – understand my work.

<sup>19</sup> Sakamoto as quoted in “Rising Son,” *Newsweek* (1 Jul. 1963), 64.

<sup>20</sup> See Miriam Silverberg, “Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Western Woman: A Picture Story,” *positions* 1:1 (1993), 24-76.

<sup>21</sup> “Kyū#-chan America wo seifuku su,” *Shū#kanjosei* (4 Sept. 1963), 120-122.

In New York, I heard “Ue wo muite aruko#.” The melody was exactly the same, but the title written on the record label was “Sukiyaki.” In the lyrics were words like “Geisha baby” and “Fujiyama.”

Ei goes on to analyze the situation: “Even if someone were to translate my Japanese,” he writes, “it still wouldn’t be my words, because it would be a translation.” His article concludes emphatically, “‘Ue wo muite aruko#’ is *not* ‘Sukiyaki!’”<sup>22</sup> Ei, like many others caught up in neo-colonial power relationships, had inadvertently discovered that translation was “a significant technology of colonial domination” and that the colonial subaltern “exists only ‘in translation,’ always already cathected by colonial domination.”<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, the dish “sukiyaki” chosen here for its exotic resonance was a modern creation, a product of the Meiji period and the reintroduction of beef eating into Japan after a thousand-year-long prohibition due to the influence of Buddhism. In Meiji, the dish “sukiyaki” signified the ingestion of Western modernity, not the preservation of Japanese tradition. Obviously, these overtones had faded by 1963, and it was for the signification of Japaneseness that the word was chosen and the song lyrics left untranslated. It should also be noted that one reason the word “sukiyaki” had entered the vocabulary of many Americans was the large number of returned American soldiers who had encountered the dish during their tours of duty in Japan and Okinawa.

Why were the lyrics left untranslated? Perhaps we can speculate that, whereas Sakamoto singing in English could only produce a sense of alienation, Sakamoto singing in Japanese could be consumed and enjoyed. Paul Gilroy notes that the “discourse of authenticity has been a notable presence in the mass marketing of successive black folk-cultural forms to white audiences”; with “Sukiyaki” Sakamoto discovered that Japaneseness too could function as a commodity.<sup>24</sup> What was to be communicated was not the semantic content of the song’s lyrics, but the semiotic content of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Ei Rokusuke, “Rokusuke America noshiaruki,” *Fujin ko#rov* (May 1963), 244-250. It is unclear which version of “Sukiyaki” Ei heard in New York.

<sup>23</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: U California P, 1992), 21 and 43.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 99. On “authenticity” in Japanese popular music, see E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).

music and the ethnicity of the performer and his language.<sup>25</sup> To borrow Naoki Sakai's words, Sakamoto singing in Japanese to an English-speaking audience provided a reassuring "*experience of understanding the experience of not comprehending*."<sup>26</sup> English-speaking listeners could represent their incomprehension tidily through the schema of configuration: they did not understand Sakamoto because he was singing in a foreign language. Rather than a troubling experience of discommunication, they were then permitted to enjoy what was quite literally a harmonious misunderstanding. Sakamoto could even be the object of great praise. It was a different sort of misunderstanding from, for example, the panic set off by the cryptic English-language lyrics of the Kingsmen's 1960 hit single, "Louie Louie," or by any number of Little Richard singles from the 1950s, when parents feared that the slurred lyrics might contain obscene passages.

Moreover, given the Cold War context of 1963, I would like to argue that only by singing in Japanese could Sakamoto demonstrate that he – and the nation of Japan, which had so recently exploded in violent protest against the U.S. – was in fact singing in our language all along. "Sukiyaki" signified a Japan that was ready to take its place within the U.S. dominated security order for East Asia. It was an exotic peripheral member of this community, a kind of marginal dialect – and yet nonetheless a member. In the schema of configuration that became common sense during the Cold War, Japan was "one of us," unlike Red China or North Korea. Performing this role was, it seems, the precondition for Sakamoto to enjoy global fame as a pop singer. It is also true, however, that by singing in Japanese Sakamoto – unlike, for example, the Beatles – condemned himself in the West to the status of a one-hit wonder, more specifically an ethnic novelty act, akin to Chinese acrobats, even as his global success helped pave the way for the Beatles.

\*

Given the racializing and gendered tendencies of Orientalism in its Cold War guise, whatever potential Sakamoto Kyū# had for creating a disruptive minor discourse within the U.S. lay not so much in a translation like "Sukiyaki" as it did with one like "G.I. Blues." "A minor literature

---

<sup>25</sup> On Orientalist exoticism in Japan-related popular music, see two articles by Shuhei Hosokawa in Philip Hayward, ed., *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music* (Sydney: John Libbey, 1999): "Martin Denny and the Development of Musical Exotica," 72-93, and "Soy Sauce Music: Haruomi Hosono and Japanese Self-Orientalism," 114-144.

<sup>26</sup> Sakai, *Translation & Subjectivity*, 6. Italics in original.

doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language."<sup>27</sup> Sakamoto's "G.I. Blues" was a major hit in Japan, where it only reinforced hegemonic notions about America and Japan. But had it been released in America, the same song might well have unleashed the sort of troubling force that Deleuze and Guattari associate with Kafka and his ilk. It could have become what Tejaswini Niranjana calls a "disruptive translation," a form of colonial mimicry that undermined notions of the authenticity of Elvis' (and America's) claim to rockabilly. Sakamoto's ability to adopt the posture of an honorary white man had one effect in Japan, but it also had the potential to produce a different effect on American listeners. But the song remained unheard beyond Japan, its potential unrealized.

There is, then, something tragic about the story of Sakamoto, who in America is remembered as a one-hit wonder, because his numerous hit records in Japan don't count. With "Sukiyaki," Sakamoto finally chose to represent Japan rather than rockabilly music. It was the price of success.<sup>28</sup> In subsequent years, he would be trotted out again and again whenever Japan needed an "official youth spokesman" for international expos and the like. And, like Elvis in the early 1960s, Sakamoto as a singer drifted away from the marginal genre of rockabilly and into mainstream pop ballads. Eventually, he became better known as a television personality than as a singer – although Sakamoto tried more than once to revive his music career. In 1975, timed to coincide with the first visit to America by Emperor Hirohito, Capitol Records invited Sakamoto to return to Los Angeles to record new material, mainly English-language versions of songs that had been hits for other artists in recent years in Japan. A single, "Elimo" backed with "Why," was released in the U.S. in October '75. Although it received some media coverage in Japan, it sank without denting the American charts. Unlike Elvis, Sakamoto was never going to have his great comeback.

Still, along with tragedy, there is also something astonishing about Sakamoto's story, the pimply-faced Japanese teenager who went from singing "Hound Dog" to U.S. soldiers in Japan to worldwide fame in just five years. No one told him that he couldn't become a rockabilly star, and so, for a brief moment, he did. In the hands of the subaltern, as Lydia Liu reminds us, translation can sometimes become a weapon for the production

---

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Other singers from the late '50s rockabilly boom, including Mickey Curtis and Kamayatsu Hiroshi, would retain "rock" credibility through the turbulent '60s and beyond. They, on the other hand, never enjoyed anything like the international success accorded Sakamoto, although their '60s bands, The Spiders (Kamayatsu) and The Samurais (Curtis) would tour in Europe.

of agency and for disrupting the hierarchies that divide “original” from “copy.”<sup>29</sup>

\*

What can we learn from all the translations Sakamoto performed – and that were performed on him? For starters, that translation does not always take place from one national language to another. The translation that was “Sukiyaki” became a major international hit despite – because of – its being in the exotic language of Japanese. Translation takes place in many guises, and the boundaries it draws can be ideological rather than linguistic. Secondly, Sakamoto shows us that what makes a text minor or major depends as much on its historical situation as it does on any internal quality belonging to the work itself. During the back and forth movements of translation, minor and major can swap places fluidly.

In translating rockabilly, Sakamoto crossed national, ethnic, and racial boundaries, but some lines he could not cross. A few years before his death in the JAL jet crash in 1985, Sakamoto looked back on his trip to Los Angeles in 1963.

On the way back from Los Angeles, we stopped in Hawaii. There was this really pretty beach there. But when I tried to go there with my friends, they told us no coloreds allowed. I went, ‘Huh? Oh, I get it – I’m colored.’ I was just stunned. I felt like I had yet again brushed against the hugeness, the complexity of America.<sup>30</sup>

This is Hawaii, Elvis’ home away from home and the only American state whose population in 1960 included a *majority* of persons of Asian ancestry, and where Japanese constituted the single largest ethnic group. In translating rockabilly, Sakamoto crossed the color line, only to find that the color line stood intact – even in Hawaii. To become an international star, he was required to perform as an “authentic” Japanese, and that meant staying to one side of the color line.

---

<sup>29</sup> Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity: China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Aikura.