Review
Reviewed Work(s): Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism by Naoki Sakai
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For the past several years in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, literature, regional studies, and history, there has been a growing revolt against the constrictions imposed by what Naoki Sakai calls “configurations”: the oppositions—Japan/West, individual/collectivity, traditional/modern—that have proven so dominant in empowering and limiting the ways people articulate ideas about Japan and Asia. However, this revolt has generally been limited to individual disciplines and Sakai’s collection of previously published essays is, to my knowledge, the first major work to problematize from the perspective of intellectual history a variety of methodologies relying on these oppositions for “coexistence” through “codependence.” Sakai’s critique is aimed at breaking down the conceptual distinctions between “us” and “them.”

The introduction argues that “The emergence of Japanese language and Japanese ethnicity was irreparably associated with the problematic of translation” (p. 2). The national language, in turn, is a historical and intellectual construct by which internal language diversity is repressed in favor of homogeneity and unity: “[W]hat characterizes the emergence of the national language is that generic differences that can be represented configuratively in the regime of translation are all subsumed under the generality of the national language . . . ” (p. 16). Translation thus reinforces national language, national culture, and the state and “plays . . . an important role in the formation of the Japanese as a national subject” (p. 17).

Sakai’s conceptions of translation and language are so broad as to make them almost meaningless, and his introduction is, to my way of thinking, the weakest part of the book. The reader should press on, however, for chapter 1 offers a fascinating discussion that follows up on but also contradicts the introduction. In his treatment of the book-length poem Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Sakai describes the breakdown of borders between national languages and through his analysis introduces poetry of great eloquence. This poem is not performed in the manner of Pound’s Cantos or with the pretension of academic classicism, but rather with the easy multilingualism that is the product of colonialism, revolution, and the modern disasters that create diaspora. As Sakai argues, the poem’s effect is not of foreignness or exoticism but of the extraordinary language complexity involved in even the most basic remembrance. Sakai concludes that its relation to the concept of national language in its yearning for a mother tongue is ambivalent because “[T]he need to fight against imperialist oppression . . . is far from diminished in the world today, and, on the other hand, the homogenization of that national community could too often lead to the tremendous victimization of those who are culturally and linguistically heterogeneous” (p. 39).

The possibility of a multilingual “liminality,” where one can read a poem rather than its nationality, leads Sakai in chapters 2 through 5 to explore how such delimiting categories as the “West” and “Japan” came into existence and their present dimensions of significance (p. 44). He then returns in the conclusion, chapter 6, to modern poetry. “Japanese thought,” he maintains, is dependent for its origin on changing concepts of the West (p. 62). This is ego-reinforcing for those who define themselves in terms of this fictional geographic space: “Only too frequently have we encountered those who happen to be from the so-called West (whose geographic, if not racial, identity is extremely obscure) and who . . . delude themselves into believing
that the entirety of ‘Western thought’ is subsistent in them” (p. 49). For some Japanese intellectuals, in this discussion chiefly Maruyama Masao, the formation of the West as a “idealized readership” provided a point of objective transcendence of “Japan,” a “universality [that] seems open and nonexclusive to those who are outside the West” (p. 70).

Chapters 3 and 4 provide a very intelligent treatment of Watsuji Tetsuro’s thought. Sakai first documents the influence of Marx and Heidegger on Watsuji’s theory of Japanese cultural unity embodied by the Emperor, and he concludes that it is largely the creation of Western philosophy. In Sakai’s account Watsuji provides the intellectual framework for the postwar growth industry of the nihonjin ron, theories of Japanese uniqueness. Watsuji’s influence is pernicious not because of his nationalism, anti-Semitism, Sinophobia, or contemptuous characterizations of other Asian peoples—reprehensible as these were—but rather because “What he did was to stigmatize and destroy any social relation that was not confined by the dictates of nationality, of an identity sanctioned by the state” (p. 138).

As Sakai argues throughout the work, but especially in chapter 5, the literature on Japan in English is replete with patterns of argument similar to Watsuji’s. “Culturalism that endorses nationalism in terms of national language and ethnic culture is as persistently endemic in Japanese Studies in the United States, Europe and elsewhere as in Japan today” (p. 17). It becomes clear in Sakai’s critique of David Pollack’s The Fracture of Meaning that claims to a transcendent position through “critical theory” do not prevent critics from playing “the Japan vs. the West game” in which Japan always comes out in the inferior position. One can conclude from Sakai’s argument that—as in the age of imperialism so in the present—the seemingly insatiable need to feel morally superior to Asia is reinforced through repeated assertions of variations on this mode of argument, which cumulatively demonstrate that the Asians lack just about every identifiable feature that would make people rational, functioning adults.

This study is dense and difficult, but extremely important, and it should be read by anyone with an interest in modern intellectual history. Because Sakai’s method would reduce complex disciplines—historical linguistics, for instance—to manifestations of nationalism, and because he does not acknowledge that other individuals have criticized “cultural essentialism” as fervently as he, his book creates the impression that “Asian studies” (whatever that is) is a monolith. Nonetheless, on the whole, this work constitutes the most serious, coherent, and resonating statement in English about the ways in which imperialism and nationalism continue to shape our intellectual worlds.

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The true critic aspires not simply to pass judgment on individual works of art, but, by virtue of the way he or she conceptualizes them, to affect the course of artistic history. A list of the critics who have exerted this kind of influence on modern theater would include writers like William Archer, who helped introduce Ibsen to the