Rina Sawayama Is British:

Japanese-British Identity in *SAWAYAMA*

© Dirty Hit Cover Art *SAWAYAMA Deluxe Edition* CD [1]

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Abstract

This thesis analyses how Japanese-British artist Rina Sawayama's album *SAWAYAMA* (2020) articulates her complex identity as a Japanese-British person. She does so by infusing her genre-bending pop music with lived experiences in Japan and Britain regarding microaggressions, translocational positionality, and cultural appropriation. The album's exploration of belonging became even more resonant when Sawayama was deemed ineligible for prestigious British music awards due to her lack of British citizenship. This sparked public outrage with #SawayamaIsBritish trending on Twitter. Eventually, this campaign led to a change in the awards' criteria. The controversy surrounding Sawayama's Britishness mirrors the themes explored on *SAWAYAMA* itself, underscoring how her work and public reception together reveal the wider cultural tensions around belonging in an increasingly globalised world. This intersection of music and public discourse underlines the necessity of a translocational exploration of complex identity.

Keywords: translocational positionality, Rina Sawayama, Britishness, microaggressions, cultural appropriation, identity, intersectionality.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Rina Sawayama (リナ・サワヤマ) is a Japanese-British artist born in Niigata, Japan in 1990 who moved to London at the age of five. She self-released her debut EP *RINA* about her intersectional experience of being a Japanese-British woman. After signing to independent record label Dirty Hit, Rina released her debut studio album *SAWAYAMA* (2020) to widespread critical acclaim. She sings in both Japanese and English and reflects on the central theme of her debut:

> The album ultimately is about family and identity. It's about understanding yourself in the context of two opposing cultures (for me British and Japanese), what 'belonging' means when home is an evolving concept, figuring out where you sit comfortably within and awkwardly outside of stereotypes, and ultimately trying to be ok with just being you, warts and all.[2]

The album was very successful with over 100 million streams worldwide in 2020 alone.[3] Its most popular single, "XS", premiered as the "Hottest Record in the World" on Annie Mac's BBC 1 Radio show.[4] *SAWAYAMA* charted at number 5 on the UK Independent Albums Chart and was described by Elton John as "the strongest album of the year by far".[5] *Rolling Stone* predicted critical acclaim from music critics and listeners: "Get used to hearing Rina Sawayama's name in every conversation about what's hot in pop this year."[6] *The Skinny*'s Katie Hawthorne applauded the album's variety of music genres, stating "*SAWAYAMA* is the boldest British pop album in years – who else has the range?"[7]

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[2] Claire Shaffer, "Rina Sawayama Announces Debut Album, Shares Pulsing Club Track 'Comme Des Garçons'," *Rolling Stone*, January 17, 2020, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/rina-sawayama-comme-des-garcons-939377.
[3] Mark Savage, "Brit Awards: Griff, Pa Salieu and Rina Sawayama nominated for rising star prize," *BBC,* March 11, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-56357609.
[4] Angie Piccirillo, "Artist of the Month Rina Sawayama on Aughts Pop, Fan Projects, and Having the Hottest Record on BBC1," *Consequence,* April 13, 2020, https://consequence.net/2020/04/artist-of-the-month-rina-sawayama.
[5] Rina Sawayama, "Rina Sawayama," interview by Elton John, *Rocket Hour*, Apple Music, June 13, 2020, audio, https://music.apple.com/gb/station/rina-sawayama/ra.1518065180.
[6] Brittany Spanos, "Rina Sawayama is the Pop Moment on her Debut Album, 'SAWAYAMA'," *Rolling Stone*, April 17, 2020, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/review-rina-sawayama-debut-album-985177.
[7] Katie Hawthorne, "The Skinny's Top 10 Albums of 2020," *The Skinny*, November 30, 2020, https://www.theskinny.co.uk/music/opinion/albums-of-the-year/the-skinnys-top-albums-of-2020.

AllMusic's critic Neil Z. Yeung, who gave the album 4 out of 5 stars, commented on Rina's introspective and intelligent lyrics: "With such lyrical and stylistic density to absorb, it's a wonder that she executes it so flawlessly."[8] Other critics, like *Consequence of Sound* writer Jennifer Irving anticipated award nominations: *"SAWAYAMA* appears poised to be one of the best pop albums of the year and sets Sawayama up as a pop force to be reckoned with."[9]

Yet, despite the album's widespread acclaim and cultural impact, *SAWAYAMA* was controversially ineligible to be nominated for the prestigious BRIT Awards and the Mercury Prize. The British Phonographic Industry (BPI), the industry body that hosts both awards, has clear terms and conditions: solo artists must be UK passport holders to enter the competition.[10] Considering Rina does not have a UK passport, *SAWAYAMA* was not eligible for either award. However, Rina holds an indefinite leave to remain (ILR) visa, which allows for permanent residency, tax registering, the right to work in the UK, and in some cases voting, treating holders nearly identically to British citizens. [11]

Rina Sawayama approached the BPI explaining her visa status. She clarified that Japan does not allow dual nationality and described why she is reluctant to give up her Japanese citizenship: "I have no family in the UK, they all live in Japan. So getting rid of my Japanese passport genuinely feels like I'm severing ties with them."[12] She received a curt response from the BPI in July 2020, stating that the rules were not changing.[13] Subsequently, Sawayama expressed her discontent in an interview with editor in chief of *VICE* and fellow ILR holder Zing Tsjeng: "What I just want is for all the awards to look into indefinite leave and change the rules to what Britishness means to them."[14] The news of her ineligibility sparked public outrage in support of her nomination and her plight more generally. On Twitter #SawayamaIsBritish became trending worldwide, with people stating that the rules were exclusionary and contributing to the process of othering.[15] Following the trend, Rina launched a months-long campaign, igniting conversations about the exclusionary nature of Britishness:

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[8] Neil Z. Yeung, "Sawayama – Rina Sawayama," *AllMusic*, April 17, 2020, https://www.allmusic.com/album/sawayama-mw0003366662.
[9] Jennifer Irving, "Album Review: Rina Sawayama Reimagines Modern Pop on Debut SAWAYAMA," *Consequence*, April 21, 2020, https://consequence.net/2020/04/album-review-rina-sawayama-sawayama.
[10] Zing Tsjeng, "'It's Othering' – British-Japanese Artist Rina Sawayama Can't Enter British Awards," *VICE*, July 29, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en/article/mercury-prize-brits-rina-sawayama.
[11] Zing, "It's Othering."
[12] Zing, "It's Othering."
[13] Zing, "It's Othering."
[14] Zing, "It's Othering."
[15] Zing Tsjeng, "The Mercury Prize and BRITs Are Changing Their Rules, Thanks to Rina Sawayama," *VICE*, February 24, 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/rina-sawayama-bpi-changes-eligibility-rules.

"if u wanna see CHANGE in the eligibility criteria (…) tell [the BPI] u want them to revise the citizenship requirements NOW. remember this rule will affect immigrant artists who contribute SO much to the UK culture and economy." [16] Furthermore, a supporter tweeted the hashtag with the attached message, reflecting the frustration felt by many fans who saw the decision as an example of broader systemic prejudice: "It's completely unfair that she might not get the recognition she deserves just because some awards don't consider her British enough. This exclusion feels deeply rooted in xenophobia!" [17]

The #SawayamaIsBritish campaign led to the BPI revising their eligibility criteria in 2021, allowing artists who have resided in the UK for at least five years to be nominated, regardless of their citizenship status. [18] Rina expressed her joy: "In my 26th year of living in the UK, I'm so proud I can help make this systematic change for future generations.'[19] She added that this was "the proudest moment of her career."[20] Just weeks after the criteria revision, Rina Sawayama was nominated for the BRITS 2021 Rising Star Award.[21] The BPI nominates those who they believe will make the biggest impact on music in the coming year. Indeed, Rina Sawayama's second studio album *Hold the Girl* (2022) received critical acclaim and charted at number three on the UK Albums Chart.[22] With the album, Rina Sawayama became the highest charting Japanese artist in history in the UK.[23] Unfortunately, the album, again, was not eligible to be nominated for the Mercury's as the registration for 2022 had already closed.[24]

The #SawayamaIsBritish campaign underlined that belonging is not shaped by the legal status of citizenship, but rather by the experience of cultural identity. This aligns with

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[16] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama), "if u wanna see CHANGE," *X*, July 29, 2020, https://x.com/rinasawayama/status/1288395346092195840.
[17] Velvet (@velvetuniverse), "rina sawayama released," *X*, July 29, 2020, https://x.com/velvetuniverse/status/1288560368462237696?s=46&t=eYVUFALMJB3uZBG5w2wr8w.
[18] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Non-British citizens now eligible for Brit awards and Mercury prize," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/feb/24/non-british-citizens-now-eligible-brit-awards-mercury-prize.
[19] Eric Torres, "Rina Sawayama Sparks Mercury Prize and BRITs Eligibility Changes," *Pitchfork*, February 24, 2021, https://pitchfork.com/news/rina-sawayama-sparks-mercury-prize-and-brits-eligibility-changes.
[20] Will Richards, "Rina Sawayama on changing BRITs rules: "This is the UK I know – one of acceptance and diversity"," *NME*, February 26, 2021, https://www.nme.com/news/music/rina-sawayama-on-changing-brits-rules-this-is-the-uk-i-know-one-of-acceptance-and-diversity-2889950.
[21] Savage, "Brit Awards."
[22] "Hold The Girl by Rina Sawayama," Official Charts, accessed June 12, 2025, https://www.officialcharts.com/albums/rina-sawayama-hold-the-girl.
[23] Pop Crave (@PopCrave), "Rina Sawayama," X, September 23, 2022, https://x.com/PopCrave/status/1573400631934701568.
[24] Rina Sawayama, "Rina Sawayama wants to disrupt the music industry & fight for inclusion," interview by Lori Majewski*, Fierce Women in Music*, SiriusXM, June 22, 2022, audio, 23:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGuHlbTIUxg.

broader questions in identity studies about how belonging is constructed, especially for individuals with a migration background.

Despite a growing body of literature investigating migration and identity in Britain, such as by Maria Sobolewska & Robert Ford and Gargi Bhattacharyya et al. [25], East Asians remain underexamined. Studies largely focus on communities with colonial ties to Britain such as South Asian and Black minorities. Additionally, East Asians are overlooked due to their stereotype as the professionally successful 'model minority'. This stereotype essentialises East Asian identity and disregards East Asian communities who face hardships.[26] Moreover, in UK government research East Asians are often forced to identify as "Chinese" or "Other Asian", making East Asians' unique experiences statistically invisible.[27] This creates a gap in the understanding of how East Asian migrants in Britain experience their identity and belonging.

The Japanese-British Rina Sawayama's *SAWAYAMA* provides a case study through which these dynamics of identity and belonging can be explored. The album explicitly engages with themes central to identity, such as microaggressions, shifting experiences of belonging across time and place, and cultural appropriation. This leads to the research question:

In what ways does Rina Sawayama's album *SAWAYAMA* use the concepts of microaggressions, translocational positionality, and cultural appropriation to articulate her complex identity as a Japanese-British person?

In the following chapters I will explore this question. In chapter 2, I will outline my theoretical framework discussing intersectionality, translocational positionality, microaggressions, and cultural appropriation. I will conclude chapter 2 with the methodology in which I will explain how I analysed *SAWAYAMA* and what guided my selection of the material. Chapter 3 is an analysis of Sawayama's song "STFU!" regarding microaggressions. Chapter 4 is an analysis of particular lyrics in Sawayama's songs "Akasaka Sad", "Tokyo

[25] Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108562485; Gargi Bhattacharyya et al., *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State* (Pluto Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1g6q8z4.
[26] Diana Yeh, "Contesting the 'model minority': racialization, youth culture and 'British Chinese'/'Oriental' nights," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 7 (2014): 1200-02, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.859288.
[27] Daniel Fujiwara, *Experiences of Racism Amongst East and Southeast Asian Communities in the U.K. and the Impacts on Health and Wellbeing* (Simetrica-Jacobs Limited, 2021), https://ceci.org.uk/experiences-of-racism-amongst-east-and-southeast-asian-people.

Takeover", "Tokyo Love Hotel", "Bad Friend", and "Chosen Family" regarding her family and identity, making use of the concept of translocational positionality. Chapter 5 is an analysis of Sawayama's song "Tokyo Love Hotel" regarding cultural appropriations. Finally, chapter 6 summarises and concludes the thesis with broader implications of the findings.

2. Theoretical Framework

To establish a framework through which *SAWAYAMA* can be analysed, it is important to examine how academic scholarship engages with identity formation, particularly in relation to the contested nature of Britishness as experienced by people with migration backgrounds. For individuals whose identities are shaped by multiple cultures, Britishness often becomes a site of tension. This thesis builds on Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality by drawing on Floya Anthias's concept of translocational positionality to better understand these dynamics. Crenshaw's intersectionality is an important analytical framework for understanding how different aspects of individuals' identities result in unique forms of discrimination. However, intersectionality is a broadly applied term, and for the purpose of this thesis its definition must be specified to make it applicable to *SAWAYAMA* and its cultural negotiation between Japan and Britain. I will do so by engaging with Anthias's intersectional framework of translocational positionality, which "refuses a fixing of identities"[28] and "flags the importance of shifting constellations of advantage and disadvantage across space, time and scale."[29] This will be complemented by Sue et al.'s conceptualisation of microaggressions, which provides a lens to examine how subtle, everyday forms of discrimination shape hybrid identity. The chapter will also draw on scholarship on cultural appropriation to unpack how *SAWAYAMA* addresses questions of ownership and representation in a translocational context. Together, these theoretical perspectives will form the basis for analysing how Rina Sawayama's album articulates her lived experience across multiple cultural spaces. This chapter will conclude with the methodology in which I will explain how I will apply the concepts above to analyse the album as well as why certain material was chosen.

2.1 Intersectionality

The origins of intersectionality lie in the work of Black feminists in the United States. Scholars of colour, such as bell hooks, described the exclusion of Black women from mainstream feminist narratives. Legal and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the

[28] Floya Anthias, "Translocationality, Difference, Capitalism: A Response," *Identities* 29, no. 1 (2022): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2022.2148947.
[29] Anthias, "Translocationality," 4.

term intersectionality in 1989 to help explain the reason for this exclusion: "Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both."[30] This stems from what she described as "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis." [31] Lindemann summarises intersectionality as the concept that "the same person can belong to several distinct groups, each of which is oppressed in some particular set of ways." [32]

While intersectionality has been an essential framework to understanding how overlapping systems of oppression shape lived experience, it has not been without criticism. Scholars like McCall, Yuval-Davis and Anthias have highlighted limitations that may reduce its analytical usefulness. Importantly, these critiques do not reject intersectionality, but rather refine and extend it.

One concern is the risk of reducing identities to static categories. Leslie McCall describes the importance of intersectionality, but argues that it lacks in its methodology: "What is restricting feminist research on intersectionality comes down primarily to methods—not substance, theory, or philosophy."[33] She asserts that the static approaches of scholars "are inadequate to the task of studying intersectionality in all its complexity." [34] Drawing on the psychoanalytical approach of Fuss, McCall emphasises that identity contains internal differences.[35] As Fuss argues, locating difference solely "in the spaces between identities"[36] ignores the poststructuralist view that differences also exist within identity. Theories of "multiple identities"[37] risk reinforcing the traditional understanding of identity as unity. Nira Yuval-Davis also critiques intersectionality's methodology. She agrees that trying to group several identities under one would "reinscribe the fragmented, additive model of oppression

[30] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.
[31] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139, no. 1 (1989): 139, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499142-5.
[32] Hilde Lindemann, "Intersectionality," in *Hilde Lindemann. An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 41, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190059316.003.0003.
[33] Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1795, https://doi.org/10.1086/426800.
[34] McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," 1794.
[35] McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," 1778.
[36] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (Routledge, 1989), 103.
[37] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking,* 103.

and essentialize specific social identities." [38] In other words, this approach risks oversimplifying the fluid and complex nature of identity and even enables stereotyping.

Another concern is intersectionality's lack of contextual grounding. Floya Anthias highlights the need for a more dynamic contextual approach, noting that "ethnic and cultural ties are increasingly operating at a transnational rather than merely national level." [39] Similarly, Yuval-Davis argues that intersectionality's application universalises specific experiences. As Yuval-Davis explains, "people are not just different categories of social location, with different contextual meanings, they also tend to have certain positionalities along axes of power that are higher or lower than other such categories. Such positionalities, however, would tend to be different in different historical contexts and are also often fluid and contested."[40] She also notes that "certain differences would not necessarily have differential power positionings but are only the markers for different locations." [41]

With regards to these concerns, I turn to Floya Anthias's intersectional framework of translocational positionality, which offers a more dynamic, processual, and contextually grounded way to understand identities.

2.2 Translocational Positionality

Translocational positionality shifts the focus from essentialised identities to dynamic processes. This is particularly important when analysing *SAWAYAMA*, as Rina Sawayama tries to understand herself in her self-proclaimed "context of two opposing cultures."[42]At its core, Anthias's theory of translocational positionality explains how individuals' identities and social positions are shaped by their shifting locations across time, space, and social contexts. The term translocational refers to the changing contexts, while positionalities are social categories, such as class, gender, and race, that refer to a person's position within a context. Positionalities intersect, creating unique experiences of advantage and disadvantage. Since

[38] Nira Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 205, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065752.
[39] Floya Anthias, "Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: An intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging," *Translocations: Migration and Social Change* 4, no. 1 (2008): 6, https://repository.uel.ac.uk/item/8656x.
[40] Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (Sage Publications, 2011), 21, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446251041.
[41] Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging,* 21.
[42] Shaffer, "Rina Sawayama Announces Debut Album."

contexts are always changing, positionalities are never fixed and can take on different meanings depending on the settings. [43]

Anthias explains that she introduces translocational positionality to account for identity as a complex process: translocational positionality captures "the complex nature of positionality faced by those who are at the interplay of a range of locations and dislocations in relation to gender, ethnicity, national belonging, class and racialization." [44] According to Anthias, individuals are shaped through multiple relocations across time and space. She explains translocation "opens up not only thinking of relocations but also of the multiplicity of locations involved in time and space, and in terms of connections between the past, the present and the future."[45] In other words, translocation considers how the many different locations people occupy over time shape how they understand themselves. [46] Anthias stresses that translocational positionality "flags the importance of shifting constellations of advantage and disadvantage across space, time and scale." [47] These advantages and disadvantages are situational and, at times, contradictory.

What further distinguishes this concept is Anthias's emphasis on the intersection of structure and agency. She argues that translocational positionality "combines a reference to social position (as a set of effectivities: as outcome) and social positioning (as a set of practices, actions and meanings: as process)."[48] These narratives are "actively participating in the very construction of subject positionalities,"[49] and "may be seen as forms of social action."[50] Put simply, belonging is not something one has, but something one does. This framework is especially useful for understanding an artist like Rina Sawayama, whose work not only reflects her structural positionality but also actively reshapes her position in the music industry and wider society through her creative choices and public narrative.

Ultimately, Anthias argues that her theory helps us understand how identities operate in processual ways. An analysis based on translocational positionality "stresses relationality, the spatio-temporal and the processual in social relations." [51] This kind of analysis explores

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[43] Anthias, "Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality," 15-16.
[44] Floya Anthias, "New Hybridities, Old Concepts: The Limits of 'Culture'," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 634, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870120049815.
[45] Anthias, "Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality," 15.
[46] Anthias, "Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality," 14.
[47] Anthias, "Translocationality," 4.
[48] Anthias, "Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality," 15.
[49] Anthias, "New Hybridities," 633.
[50] Anthias, "New Hybridities," 633.
[51] Anthias, "Translocationality," 4.

both contradictions and possibilities of identity. It "addresses the contradictory as well as reinforcing nature of intersections and the emancipatory potential within them."[52] Unlike approaches that only describe overlapping identities, it explores the meaning of those identities in different contexts.

In conclusion, Anthias highlights how translocational positionality reveals the complex process of negotiating identity across borders in ways that are often contradictory. She argues that this framework "contributes a broader scope of analysis of 'othering' processes, illuminating both the differential placing of actors within and across national borders and the often contradictory and complex processes involved."[53] This makes translocational positionality a powerful framework for analysing *SAWAYAMA*, which reveals identity as a complex negotiation across contexts.

2.3 Microaggressions

While intersectionality and translocational positionality provide the structural and contextual groundwork for understanding hybrid identities, it is also important to examine how these dynamics are reinforced in everyday life. The theory of microaggressions offers this lens, focusing on the subtle way in which systematic inequalities manifest in social contexts.

Microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination. Williams et al. argue that overt discrimination has given way to covert manifestations of prejudice in contemporary society. [54] In this sense, microaggressions can be understood as a form of passive discrimination: subtle, often unconscious acts of bias that perpetuate inequality. The term microaggressions was coined in the seventies by Chester M. Pierce as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders." [55] While Pierce's original focus was on anti-Black racism in American society, the definition has since expanded to

[52] Anthias, "Translocationality," 4.
[53] Floya Anthias, "Identity and Belonging: Conceptualizations and Reframings through a Translocational Lens," in *Contested Belonging: Spaces, Practices, Biographies*; ed. K. Davis, H. Ghorashi and P. Smets (Emerald Publishing, 2018), Toward a framing for belonging and social location: A translocational lens and translocational positionality, https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78743-206-220181007.
[54] Monica T. Williams, Matthew D. Skinta, and Renée Martin-Willett, "After Pierce and Sue: A revised racial microaggressions taxonomy," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 5 (2021): 991, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691621994247.
[55] Chester M. Pierce et al., "An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials," *Education and Urban Society* 10, no. 1 (1977): 65, https://doi.org/10.1177/001312457701000105.

include other marginalised identities in any societal context. Hilde Lindemann defines microaggressions as:

> Brief and commonplace behavioral, verbal, or environmental indignities used to communicate derogatory, hostile, or other negative racial slights and insults toward people of color, mixed-race people, transgender people, disabled people, and the elderly. [56]

According to Derald Wing Sue et al., "three forms of microaggressions can be identified: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation."[57]

First, a microassault is the most intentional type of microaggression. Sue et al. define microassault as "an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions."[58] An example would be when the perpetrator tells an individual to go back to 'their country'.

Second, a microinsult is more difficult for victims as its subtlety often leaves them uncertain about the intent behind it. [59] Sue et al. characterise microinsults by "communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity." [60] Microinsults are "frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient." [61] An example would be suggesting that an Asian person got accepted to university due to their race. The hidden insulting essentialising message is that Asians must be smart, perpetuating the stereotype of East Asians as the professionally successful 'model minority'. Sue et al. underline the complexity of the unclear intent of microinsults: "Such statements are not necessarily aggressions, but context is important." [62] Sue provides the example of the common microinsult theme 'Pathologizing cultural values'. Sue explains that this theme involves the assumption that White norms are the default, whereas a deviation is deficient. As Sue puts it, 'pathologising cultural values' is: "a belief that the cultural values/communication styles of White, male, and straight groups are

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[56] Lindemann, "Intersectionality," 46.
[57] Derald Wing Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," *The American psychologist* 62 no. 4 (2007): 274, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271.
[58] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 274.
[59] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 284.
[60] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 274.
[61] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 274.
[62] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 274.

normative and that those of people of color, females, and LGBTQ individuals are somehow abnormal."[63]

Third, a microinvalidation is, like microinsults, also often unknown to the perpetrator. Microinvalidations are "communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality". [64] One prominent theme of microinvalidations is what Sue terms the 'Alien in one's own land' experience. This occurs when individuals who are culturally rooted in a context are nevertheless treated as perpetual outsiders. He notes that Asian individuals in Western society are most likely to experience this microinvalidation.[65] Sue explains that when, for example, Asian Brits are persistently asked where they were born the metacommunication is that "You are a foreigner."[66]

The three previously discussed forms of microaggressions are all interpersonal, either verbal or non-verbal. [67] But Sue et al. emphasise that microaggressions "are not limited to human encounters alone but may also be environmental in nature."[68] These environmental operate on a systemic level.[69] According to Sue, environmental microaggressions reflect "long-standing hierarchies of dominance and oppression" [70]. Bond & Haynes-Baratz echo this, stating that these indignities are "embedded in institutional traditions, rituals, and policies perhaps established long-ago that have remained unquestioned despite their enduring marginalizing impacts". [71] Sue notes that these environmental microaggressions are reflected in "governmental leadership, educational systems, places of employment, health care settings, and the media." [72]

One of the defining characteristics of microaggressions is their ambiguous nature which allows them to be easily dismissed as minor or unintentional. [73] Sue et al. explain that

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[63] Derald W. Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2010), chap. 2.
[64] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 274.
[65] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 2.
[66] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 2.
[67] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 2.
[68] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 273.
[69] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 277.
[70] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 1.
[71] Meg A. Bond and Michelle C. Haynes-Baratz, "Mobilizing bystanders to address microaggressions in the workplace: The case for a systems-change approach to Getting A (Collective) GRIP," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 69, no. 1-2 (2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12557.
[72] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 3.
[73] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 3.

"the power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator".[74] Often, they perceive their actions as well-intentioned. Victims, on the other hand, wonder if it the microaggression was deliberate or unintentional. [75] If the perpetrator is confronted, they usually believe "that the victim has overreacted and is being overly sensitive".[76] For the recipient of a microaggression this results in the nagging question of whether it really happened.[77] This highlights the discrepancy between the perception of the perpetrator and victim. As Sue et al. put it, perpetrators do not have "multiple experiences, and they evaluate their own behaviors in the moment through a singular event." [78] While victims recognise the pattern.[79]

When a microaggression occurs, the victim faces the dilemma of how to respond. [80] This is the catch-22. Sue et al. explain that "the catch-22 means you are damned if you do, and damned if you don't."[81] The victim can either do nothing and quietly stew, or strike back and receive backlash. The most common response is deciding to do nothing, but this, according to Sue "has the potential to cause major psychological and physical harm." [82] It might cause "a denial of one's experiential reality, dealing with a loss of integrity, or experiencing pent-up anger and frustration likely to take psychological and physical tolls."[83] Alternatively, responding with anger might make the person feel better temporarily, but Sue stresses the negatives for victims as well: "They are likely to be accused of being racially oversensitive or paranoid or told that their emotional outbursts confirm stereotypes about minorities."[84]

In the context of this thesis, microaggressions are a crucial lens for understanding how Sawayama's identity is negotiated in social contexts. *SAWAYAMA* captures the different types of microaggressions and the theorised catch-22 that shape her identity. Through her exploration of microaggressions she makes the everyday experiences of hybrid identities visible.

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[74] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 275.
[75] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 279.
[76] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 278.
[77] Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major, "Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma," *Psychological Review* 96, no. 4 (1989): 608, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.96.4.608.
[78] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 279.
[79] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 274.
[80] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 279.
[81] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 279.
[82] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 3.
[83] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 279.
[84] Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions," 279.

2.4 Cultural Appropriation

Finally, this chapter defines the concept of cultural appropriation as it will be used in the analysis of *SAWAYAMA*. Cultural appropriation is a subject which often provokes moral outrage within the media.[85] As such it is important to note that the term has gained significant traction in the United States, where discussions typically centre around the appropriation of Black cultural elements. However, when the concept is applied to the British context, particularly in relation to East Asian cultures, the dynamics shift. In the case of Japanese culture, persistent Orientalism rather than a history of slavery forms the framework through which cultural appropriation is understood. Rina Arya gives cultural appropriation's standard definition as it will be used in this thesis:

> Cultural appropriation refers to the taking of items (including ideas) from one culture by another culture. The taking occurs across a power dynamic, where the culture doing the taking has more power than the other.[86]

According to Susan Scafidi these items of ideas could be "intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge."[87] Arya insists the taking is unauthorised and often there is an asymmetry of power. She explains, often "the culture that has been taken from is marginalised, that is, either a minority or indigenous culture."[88] Rogers demonstrates that this asymmetry of power between the dominant and the marginalised culture advances the appropriation. He argues that the marginalised individuals "do not have comparable control over the use of their cultural heritage due to imbalanced access to resources".[89] Moreover, he notes that tourism and market demands push individuals "to participate in the alteration and commodification of that very heritage".[90] Jason Baird Jackson

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[85] Rina Arya, "Cultural appropriation: What it is and why it matters?," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 10 (2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12923.
[86] Rina Arya, "Teaching & learning guide for cultural appropriation: What it is and why it matters?," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 10 (2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12928.
[87] Susan Scafidi, *Who owns culture?: Appropriation and authenticity in American law* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 9.
[88] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 1.
[89] Richard A. Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation," *Communication Theory* 16 no. 4 (2006): 487, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x.
[90] Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation," 487.

stresses that in order for something to be cultural appropriation the manner of the adoption should be inappropriate. He explains that the harms experienced by the marginalised group are often overlooked or dismissed by the dominant group. He maintains that appropriations "are typically a source of pain and feelings of loss or violation for source communities, often resulting in concrete negative consequences, even as appropriating groups either do not perceive or refuse to attend to, these wider consequences."[91]

Commodification is an important and harmful subset of appropriation. Arya affirms that "central to the practice of cultural appropriation is the process of commodification."[92] She defines commodification as "the means by which cultural goods or ideas are transformed into commodities, or objects of trade." [93] Arya emphasises that the harm that results from cultural appropriation is mostly because of commodification. As she states, commodification "distorts and misrepresents the culture."[94] She illustrates that the authentic culture is manipulated by commodification through advertising where "individuals are drawn to unsustainable fantasies or manufactured desires."[95] Mari Matsuda et al. assert that culturally appropriated symbols in marketing further reinforce stereotypical representations.[96]

Building on this, theorist bell hooks explains that through the process of commodification the minority culture's individuals and their cultural history are disregarded in order to make the product consumable. She states that "the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption"[97] in which "whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism."[98] She argues that this "not only displaces the Other"[99] but also "denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization."[100]

This idea of the Other, anyone perceived as different from oneself, is also introduced in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. He introduces the idea that the West exoticises and fetishises

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[91] Jason Baird Jackson, "On Cultural Appropriation," *Journal of Folklore Research* 58, no. 1 (2021): 88, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.58.1.04.
[92] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 4.
[93] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 4.
[94] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 1.
[95] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 4.
[96] Mari J. Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, And The First Amendment* (Routledge, 1993), 129, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429502941.
[97] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992), 373.
[98] hooks, "Eating the Other," 373.
[99] hooks, "Eating the Other," 373.
[100] hooks, "Eating the Other," 373.

the East, imposing an Otherness upon it. This dangerous tendency is what he calls the Orient.[101] Emma Shi asserts that, while globalisation has reduced overt forms of Orientalism, the ideology persists today. The new forms of Orientalism carry "the same undertones of Eastern subservience, inferiority, and alienness."[102]

Shi explains that Orientalism, cultural appropriation, and commodification are linked. She asserts that a consequence of Orientalist commodification is the fetishised appropriation of Eastern culture: "One caveat of this superficial consumption of the East arose as a fetishized appropriation of popularized Eastern aesthetics".[103] This reduction of cultural elements to exoticised or sexualized objects of fascination is prevalent in popular culture. As Arya describes, "white female celebrities adopt 'ethnic' clothes and accessories in order to add to their mystique."[104] hooks notes this tendency to make majority culture more exciting by exoticising and fetishising ethnic cultures as well: "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull this that is mainstream white culture."[105]

In sum, the cultural appropriation and commodification of East Asian cultures, underpinned by Orientalist ideology, result in both distortion and erasure. This lens is crucial for the analysis of *SAWAYAMA*, and in particular the song "Tokyo Love Hotel", which confronts Western fetishisation of Japanese culture. The theory provides the foundation for her articulation of frustration at cultural appropriation as well as her own role in the matter.

[101] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978).
[102] Emma Shi, "A Modern Critique of Orientalism in Contemporary Visual Art," *International Journal of Humanities and Education Development (IJHED)* 5, no. 6 (2023): 67, https://doi.org/10.22161/jhed.5.6.8.
[103] Shi, "A Modern Critique," 66.
[104] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 4.
[105] hooks, "Eating the Other," 366.

2.4 Methodology

This analysis applied the theories of microaggressions, translocational positionality, and cultural appropriation to explore how Rina Sawayama's album *SAWAYAMA* articulates her complex identity as a Japanese-British person. The primary method used was close reading, with a focus on the lyrics. Songs and their lyrics were not selected based on popularity, but for their engagement with the themes outlined in the theoretical framework.

Translocational positionality was used as one of three central theories because it recognises identity as a shifting process, making it suited for analysing Rina Sawayama's articulation of her identity in Japanese and British cultural contexts over time.

Since *SAWAYAMA* as a whole is an articulation of Sawayama's complex identity, not every relevant lyric or song was analysed. Instead, only lyrics that resonated strongly with theoretical concepts and were direct examples of the outlined theory were chosen. Lyrics that lacked a strong link to the theories were excluded in order to prioritise deeper analysis.

After identifying the relevant lyrics through close reading, the analysis was contextualised through supporting materials involving Sawayama. These were annotations, interviews, reviews, music videos, live performances, and public controversies. These materials provided both contextual insight to Sawayama's lived experiences as well as a direct connection to academic debates. The supporting materials demonstrated how Sawayama consciously links her personal narrative to broader issues related to identity. She explicitly references microaggressions in her interviews, directly situating the album within academic discourse. While she does not explicitly use the terminology of translocational positionality and cultural appropriation, her reflections in the supporting materials and the lyrics themselves demonstrate a clear engagement with the ideas and experiences these theories describe.

This methodological approach ensured that the analysis remained centred on Sawayama's personal experiences while making connections to the broader theoretical framework.

3. Microaggressions

"I Was Quite Surprised You Sang… Y'know… In English"[106]

This chapter explores how Rina Sawayama's album *SAWAYAMA*, with a focus on the song "STFU!", articulates her complex identity as a Japanese-British person through its use of the concept of microaggressions. First, this chapter contextualises "STFU!"'s release within the rise of epidemic Orientalist anti-Asian violence in the UK in 2020. It then analyses how the song, which Sawayama has dedicated to "any minority who has experienced microaggressions," [107] dramatises the psychological catch-22 that victims face when deciding whether to respond to microaggressions. Then, it analyses how Sawayama challenges the model minority stereotype with this fantasy of retaliation against microaggressions. Finally, this chapter applies the four microaggressions to Sawayama's lived experiences.

Epidemic Orientalism

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Orientalist ideologies continue to shape how the East is perceived, even in modern contexts. Despite increased globalisation and cultural awareness, Eastern identities are still often depicted as exotic, subordinate, or fundamentally Other in relation to the West. These narratives may appear outdated, but crises, such as Covid-19 bring them back to the surface with renewed force. To explain this resurgence, Debanjan Banerjee et al. coined the term "epidemic orientalism". This phenomenon describes how portrayals of infectious outbreaks tend to stigmatise the East. Terms like "China Virus" and "Kong Flu" intensified the othering of East Asia and, by extension, Asians worldwide. In this way, the pandemic amplified Orientalist narratives, revealing how deeply embedded these ideologies remain.[108]

In the UK, the rise in anti-Asian violence is a testament to the resurgence of Orientalist ideas. Gram and Mau explain that "the spread of COVID-19 was accompanied by news

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[106] RinaSawayamaVEVO, "Rina Sawayama – STFU!," directed by Ali Kurr and Rina Sawayama, music video, November 21, 2019, Youtube, at 0:08-11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XojM2D3F-Dc&list=RDXojM2D3F-Dc&start_radio=1.
[107] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama), "STFU! is dedicated to any minority," *X*, November 22, 2019, https://x.com/rinasawayama/status/1197811498816548865.
[108] Debanjan Banerjee et al., "The 'Othering' in Pandemics: Prejudice and Orientalism in COVID-19," *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry* 36, no. 1 (2020):104, https://doi.org/10.4103/ijsp.ijsp_261_20.

reports of surging racism, xenophobia, and hate crime all over the Global North targeting individuals of East and Southeast Asian descent."[109] Their study documents a range of microaggressions experienced by Asian youth in London, from "strangers on the street avoiding or harassing them to classmates at school or university making racist 'jokes', comments or 'banter'." Amid this social climate, Sawayama reflects on the timing of her album's release. She states, "The project offers some much-needed celebration around a community currently at the center of a lot of hate."[110]

Catch-22

As seen in the theoretical framework, Sue et al. describe the experience of facing microaggressions as a psychological catch-22. Victims must choose between remaining silent, which often leads to emotional suppression, self-doubt, and long-term psychological strain, or speaking out and risking being dismissed, misunderstood or labelled as overly sensitive. Choosing not to respond can lead to internalised anger, a sense of compromised integrity, and psychological and physical distress. Alternatively, responding with justified anger might offer temporary relief but can reinforce stereotypes or provoke backlash.

Faced with these aggressions, the most common responses from victims, as found by Gram and Mau, were ignoring, and reporting the incident, with reactive strategies absent. This reactive strategy is exactly what "STFU!" explores. The *Rolling Stone* explains that the song is a deliberately exaggerated eruption of rage: the song's simple request to the perpetrator to *Shut the fuck up* [111] "is both incendiary and silly in its delivery."[112] The track abandons the common response of ignoring and instead stages a fantasy retaliation.

While "STFU!" does not offer a realistic or actionable response to microaggressions, its strength lies in its exaggerated portrayal of internal retaliation. According to Sawayama, the song is about what victims are thinking every time a microaggression happens: "internally we r screaming STFU!!!!"[113] She explained that the song was a release of pent-up anger: "It

[109] Lu Gram and Ada Mau, "'We are not the virus'–Experiences of racism among East & Southeast Asian heritage young people in London during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic," *PLOS Glob Public Health* 4, no. 1 (2024): 1, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0002016.
[110] Rina Sawayama, "Rina Sawayama's Album Couldn't Have Arrived at a Better Time," interview by Erica Gonzales, *Harper's Bazaar*, May 14, 2020, https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/a32478825/rina-sawayama-interview.
[111] Rina Sawayama, "STFU!," track 3 on *SAWAYAMA (Deluxe Edition)*, Dirty Hit; Avex Trax, 2020, Spotify.
[112] Spanos, "Rina Sawayama Is the Pop Moment."
[113] Sawayama, "STFU! is dedicated to any minority."

just really flowed naturally […] That anger was all stored up inside without me knowing."[114] In that way, the song captures the psychological cost of remaining polite in the face of casual racism.

Critics understood the song as a response to racism, often describing it as a purr "to her microaggressive haters"[115] or a reaction to "racist micro-aggressions."[116] However, few analysed the underlying dynamics. One exception is Kitty Richardson from *The Line of Best Fit*, who describes the draining effects of cumulative microaggressions. She describes "STFU!" as a song "that nails the exhaustion of experiencing racist micro-aggressions"[117] The song does not resolve the catch-22 but instead captures its emotional weight.

The catch-22 resurfaces explicitly in the following lyrics and Rina Sawayama's accompanying annotation on *Genius*, a database for song lyrics. Both echo the theory's central dilemma, which is the impossible choice between confronting microaggressions and risking social discomfort, or remaining silent and bearing the emotional cost alone. The lyrics capture the harm that repeated encounters have already done, while the annotation explores the internal conflict behind moments of deciding how to act. Together, they offer an illustration of the catch-22. Sawayama writes and reflects:

> *Not never naturally negative, no*
> *I don't wanna be that girl again 'cause*
> *I've been done and been through more friends*
> *Than I can count on my fingertips* [118]
>
> This is about the struggle of whether I confront the aggressor and make it awkward for the people around me, or I deal with things with a smile and pay for it with my own mental health afterwards. It's the fear that what you're dealing with is not a big deal and not worth kicking up a fuss about. [119]

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[114] Rina Sawayama, "'Rina Sawayama Wants Her Success To Make Space For Asian Women In Pop Music," interview by Michel Martin, *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 19, 2020, audio, 10:09, https://www.npr.org/2020/07/19/865752164/rina-sawayama-wants-her-success-to-make-space-for-asian-women-in-pop-music.
[115] Alex Rigotti, "The Gigwise 51 Best Albums of 2020," *Gigwise*, December 1, 2020, https://www.gigwise.com/features/3393272/the-gigwise-51-best-albums-of-2020.
[116] Hannah Mylrea, "The 50 best albums of 2020," *NME*, December, 11, 2020, https://www.nme.com/features/nme-best-albums-of-the-year-2020-2835612.
[117] Kitty Richardson, "The Best Albums of 2020 Ranked," *The Line of Best Fit*, December 3, 2020, https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/features/articles/best-albums-2020-ranked.
[118] Sawayama, "STFU!"
[119] "STFU!," Genius, last modified April 22, 2020, https://genius.com/Rina-sawayama-stfu-lyrics.

The final line of the annotation reflects the catch-22 due to the ambiguous nature of microaggressions. Microaggressions are deemed innocuous and insignificant by the perpetrator and a victim's response is seen as an overreaction. [120] This results in the nagging question, for the victim, of whether a microaggression occurred or if they were making a mountain out of a molehill.

We can link the lyrics *I've been done and been through more friends* to Sawayama losing a friend as a consequence of speaking out to microaggressive behaviour in 2023. Sawayama's labelmate and label shareholder Matty Healy mocked Afro-Latina rapper Ice Spice. He wrongly identified her as Chinese, Hawaiian, and Inuit. Moreover, he poked fun at her imagined accent and heritage. These actions are all microaggressions, subtle forms of discrimination that serve to reinforce social inequalities. His comments were condemned by ESEA Music, an non-profit led by UK-based East and Southeast Asian music industry professionals and artists. They claimed Healy encouraged "flagrant racism and complicity in laughing along at harmful Asian tropes".[121]

Sawayama echoed this. While introducing "STFU!" at Glastonbury Festival 2023, Rina Sawayama said, "this song goes out to a white man who […] mocks Asian people on a podcast. He also owns my masters. I've had enough."[122]

Singer Charli XCX fell out with Rina Sawayama after the latter called out Healy's racism. Charli XCX made the personal disagreement about the microaggressions public, inviting online harassment to come Sawayama's way. Sawayama shared in an interview with the *Independent* that since Glastonbury 2023 she has "felt intense racist misogyny in a way that I've never felt before."[123] She speaks about the backlash provoked by Charli XCX: "In public and private I feel as though I've been repeatedly gaslit, disrespected, ignored, even cyber-bullied for calling out blatant racist and sexist behaviour."[124] This perfectly aligns with the aforementioned annotation in which Sawayama expresses the fear of being labelled as overly sensitive when addressing microaggressions. This example encapsulates the losing of friends as mentioned in the lyrics as well as the dynamics that Sue's catch-22 explores.

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[120] Sue, "Racial Microaggressions," 278.
[121] Beaumont-Thomas, "'I've had enough'."
[122] Beaumont-Thomas, "'I've had enough'."
[123] Rina Sawayama, "'I'm constantly on guard': From Rina Sawayama to Nova Twins and Self Esteem, women share damning tales of misogyny in the music industry," interview by Roisin O'Connor and Chloe Little, *Independent*, March 8, 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/misogyny-music-industry-rina-sawayama-self-esteem-interview-b2508677.html.
[124] Rina Sawayama, interview.

Model Minority

This incident also illustrates that Sawayama actively resists the expectation that she as an Asian woman should stay quiet. Sawayama actively challenges the stereotype of the model minority by representing a reaction that society expects Asians to suppress. As Gram and Mau's study on East and Southeast Asian youth in the UK demonstrates, the most common response to microaggressions is to deal with them with a smile. The act of remaining silent or even smiling creates an environment in which Asian people are not expected to respond at all. Similarly, Kim et al. argue that "holding positive attitudes toward Asians based on the model minority stereotype can be counterproductive as it hinders a person's ability to see the negative effects associated with the subtlest forms of microaggressions." [125]

Sawayama confronts these distorted perceptions in her lyrics:

How come you don't expect me
To get mad when I'm angry?
You've never seen it done
I know I'm not the only one [126]

Rina Sawayama challenges the stereotype of the model minority by responding with fury and satire. Her lyrics give voice to the anger that is often suppressed, imagining a reaction that many feel but rarely express. By saying out loud what is usually silenced, Sawayama not only validates these emotions but exposes the societal expectation that Asian anger should remain invisible.

Types of Microaggressions

As outlined in the theoretical framework, there are four types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, and environmental microaggressions. A microassault is overt and deliberate, whereas microinsults and microinvalidations are more subtle and often unintentional. Environmental microaggressions, on the other hand, are systemic and institutional, reflecting broader patterns of exclusion. Sawayama makes clear

[125] Jennifer Kim et al., "How positive attitudes toward Asians influence perceptions of racial microaggressions," *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2020, no. 1 (2020): 22, https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2020.13187abstract.
[126] Sawayama, "STFU!"

that the microaggressions she references are ones she has heard: “This is based on real life.”[127]

Microassaults are intentional, explicit, verbal or non-verbal attacks meant to cause harm. They often take the form of mockery and name-calling. While they may be framed as jokes, the intent to demean or harm is typically clear to both the perpetrator and the target. Rina Sawayama revealed that an unnamed major label pulled out of negotiations after she played them “STFU!”. She afterwards found out an executive had been replacing her name with that of a Japanese-inspired British restaurant chain, calling her Rina Wagamama, a microassault.[128] This behaviour qualifies as microassault because it is an intentional verbal attack meant demean her cultural identity.

The “STFU!” music video contains microinsults and microinvalidations. The video starts with a seemingly casual conversation between Sawayama and her date, immediately highlighting the subtle form microinsults and microinvalidations take on. A clear example of a microinsult occurs when he asks:

Date*: Are women allowed to game in Japan?*

Sawayama*: Yeah, yeah!*

Date*: That’s great, I’m glad things are changing*

Sawayama*: I think it’s always been like that* [129]

This statement exemplifies a microinsult: subtle, often unintentional comments conveying rudeness and insensitivity and serve to undermine someone's identity. It falls under the common theme of ‘pathologising cultural values.’ This theme involves the assumption that White norms are normative, whereas a deviation is abnormal. In this case the deviation of women not being allowed to game in Japan is not even real but conjured up by ignorance and stereotypical assumptions. The date’s comment positions Western culture as the more progressive one by which to measure others. In doing so, it reinforces a sense of cultural superiority and positions Sawayama as part of an Othered society. The comment undermines Sawayama’s Japanese identity, making it a microinsult.

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[127] Sawayama, interview.
[128] Mark Savage, “Rina Sawayama: Turning familial pain into pop gold,” *BBC,* April 23, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52380231.
[129] RinaSawayamaVEVO, “STFU!,” at 05:34-42.

The music video also provides a clear example of a microinvalidation. Microinvalidations are subtle communications that undercut or invalidate the ideas, emotions, or lived experiences of an individual. They erase or disregard individuals and the events that have shaped their lives. One clear example of this occurs when the date states:

Date*: I Was Quite Surprised You Sang… y'know… In English* [130]

On the surface, this may appear to be a harmless remark. However, it is loaded with assumptions that deny or question Sawayama's identity as a British person. This microinvalidation aligns with the theme of 'Alien in one's own land'. This theme involves being perceived as a perpetual foreigner in one's own country. By expressing surprise that Sawayama sings in English, the date suggests that English is not her natural language. Despite being raised in the UK, Sawayama is treated as though she is a foreigner. Of all the groups toward which such microinvalidations are directed, Asians in the UK are most likely to experience them.[131] The metacommunication of this statement is "You are not British".

Finally, environmental microaggressions are aggressions built into institutions and systems, reflecting long-standing patterns of power and inequality. Often they are rooted in policies that have gone unquestioned for years, even as they continue to marginalise certain groups. An example of an environmental microaggression is the BPI's exclusion of ILR visa holders as British. This microaggression was eventually addressed by Rina Sawayama. She was excluded from the BRIT awards and Mercury Prize despite having lived in the UK for over 25 years. Her campaign, #SawayamaIsBritish, went viral, sparking public outrage over the exclusionary and xenophobic undertones of the rule. In 2021, the BPI admitted to not realising how restrictive the rules were. [132] This aligns with the characteristic of environmental microaggressions to have gone unquestioned for years. The BPI revised its eligibility criteria to allow artists residing in the UK for five years to be nominated, leading to Sawayama's historic BRIT nomination and her paving the way for future immigrant artists. This incident exemplifies an environmental microaggression because the harm was embedded within a formal policy. The BPI defined Britishness through narrow rules, which Sawayama labelled a

[130] RinaSawayamaVEVO, "STFU!," at 00:08-00:11.
[131] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* chap. 2.
[132] Mitchell Kuga, "How Rina Sawayama Turned Pop Inside Out – And Built One of Its Fastest Growing Fanbases," *Billboard*, June 2, 2021, https://www.billboard.com/culture/pride/rina-sawayama-billboard-cover-story-interview-2021-9580420.

form of artistic "border control."[133] The metacommunication of this environmental microaggression towards long-term immigrant residents is that "They are not British".

Conclusion

In sum, this chapter analysed how "STFU!" engages with the dynamics of microaggressions. First, it situated the song within the surge of epidemic Orientalist anti-Asian violence in the UK. Then, it explored how Sawayama stages a fantasy of retaliation that challenges the model minority stereotype. Finally, the analysis identified the four types of microaggressions in Sawayama's lived experiences. Together, these examples reveal how Sawayama articulates her Japanese-British identity through the use of the concept of microaggressions.

[133] Zing, "It's Othering."

4. Family and Identity

"Where Do I Belong?"[134]

This chapter examines how *SAWAYAMA* articulates her complex identity as a Japanese-British person through its exploration of Sawayama's translocational positionality. As Sawayama describes, "the album ultimately is about family and identity. It's about understanding yourself in the context of two opposing cultures (for me British and Japanese), what 'belonging' means when home is an evolving concept".[135] Through this deeply personal record, she demonstrates the fluid and actively constructed nature of identity. This chapter will delve into "Akasaka Sad", "Tokyo Takeover", "Tokyo Love Hotel", "Bad Friend", and "Chosen Family" to illustrate how Sawayama navigates and actively shapes her identity across contexts. In the case of *SAWAYAMA*, translocational positionality reveals how Sawayama's record reflects her experience with shifting constellations of belonging and not belonging across Japanese and British contexts.

Displacement

"Akasaka Sad" encapsulates the core experience of translocational positionality. It is a song about how Sawayama's feelings of displacement never leave her, despite trying to escape them by moving across locations. This thematic intention was recognised by critics, as seen in Laura Copley's review for *Clash Magazine*. She writes that Akasaka Sad's lyrics specifically "explore those memories of growing up between two places (for Rina, Japan and the UK) and the conflicting emotions that must come with that challenge, the first being about feeling displaced wherever in the world." [136] A line that perfectly summarises that sentiment is:

Flew here to escape but I feel the same [137]

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[134] Rina Sawayama, "Chosen Family," track 12 on *SAWAYAMA (Deluxe Edition)*, Dirty Hit; Avex Trax, 2020, Spotify.
[135] Shaffer, "Rina Sawayama Announces Debut Album."
[136] Laura Copley, "Rina Sawayama – Sawayama," *Clash*, April 15, 2020, https://www.clashmusic.com/reviews/rina-sawayama-sawayama.
[137] Rina Sawayama, "Akasaka Sad," track 5 on *SAWAYAMA (Deluxe Edition)*, Dirty Hit; Avex Trax, 2020, Spotify.

As the theory describes, Sawayama's identity is not fixed, but rather an ongoing process shaped by her negotiation of different contexts. Sawayama's positionality shifts significantly between London, UK, and Akasaka, Japan, which is the "here" she describes flying to in the lyric. In London she is the 'alien in one's own land', as explored in chapter 3 on microaggressions. Whereas her positionality in Akasaka is that of the foreigner as well. For instance, *Vogue Japan,* when naming her one of the Women Of The Year in 2019, explicitly describe her as British. They write that the audience was "greeted in English" [138] and that she would "like to go to Wales". [139] Moreover, they introduced her as "the much-talked-about singer-songwriter who is attracting attention in London,"[140] who "has come to Japan for an awards ceremony."[141] This highlights how her identity is shaped by contrasting positionalities of belonging across contexts.

Anthias argues this is a common experience, "being categorized by others as not belonging to either group." [142] Sawayama voices this discomfort, saying she cannot deal with the shifting advantages and disadvantages of her identity:

Can't face who I can and can't be

Five thousand, nine hundred, thirty-eight miles between you

You make me [143]

The "five thousand, nine hundred, thirty-eight miles" refers to the distance between London and Akasaka. This distance symbolises the cultural dissonance in her identity. This distance produces a tension. It is both dividing and simultaneously shaping her sense of self. This tension is explored in the juxtaposition of "between you" and "you make me". This line captures the complexity of fluid identity: the contradictions within her positionalities are what shapes her translocational identity.

"Akasaka Sad" has lyrics in both English and Japanese. This not only shows Sawayama's bilingualism, but also reflects the internal conflict she experiences. She explains that "the way the English and the Japanese play off each other shows that struggle in my

[138] Rieko Shibazaki, "世代を超えた女性たちの美と個性が共演！ 受賞式の様子をお届け。【VOGUE JAPAN Women of the Year 2019】," *Vogue Japan*, December 10, 2019, https://www.vogue.co.jp/fashion/article/2019-12-10-woty-report; my translation.
[139] Shibazaki, "世代を超えた女性たちの美と個性が共演！," my translation.
[140] Shibazaki, "世代を超えた女性たちの美と個性が共演！," my translation.
[141] Shibazaki, "世代を超えた女性たちの美と個性が共演！," my translation.
[142] Anthias, "Where Do I Belong?," 506.
[143] Sawayama, "Akasaka Sad."

head."[144] This conveys the difficulty of navigating "opposing cultures".[145] In the following lines Sawayama describes a translocational search for happiness. In an annotation she roughly translated the Japanese lyrics to:

(Translated from Japanese)

From country to country
I hear tragic symphonies
Everyday searching
For a pain that turns into happiness [146]

These lines depict the emotional turmoil associated with contradictory translocational positionalities. Anthias's theoretical reflections accommodate the idea of "tragic symphonies" as disadvantages in positionalities. However, the imagery of a search for happiness aligns with Anthias's idea of actively negotiating social positions. This "searching" suggests that the state of Sawayama might currently be displacement and pain, but happiness can be achieved through actively reshaping her narrative. The song "Tokyo Takeover" does just that.

Actively Constructing Confidence

"Tokyo Takeover" is a Japanese bonus track that was overlooked by Western critics, because it was only released in Japan. It is a celebration of Sawayama's Japanese heritage, though it was written during a time in which Sawayama was struggling with her identity. As such, it portrays Anthias's idea that positionality is shaped through active engagement. As she explains: "Tokyo Takeover was written at a time a few years ago when I was feeling less confident about my Japanese identity and being in the UK." [147] This statement highlights the discrepancy between her experienced positionality and the narrative she constructed through the song. Sawayama admits: "The lyrics about feeling really confident and like a badass are a bit ironic I suppose?"[148]

The song's lyrics convey a sense of confidence in her cultural identity, despite Sawayama not yet having learned how to "to embrace both cultures"[149] at the time of writing.

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[144] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama_jp), "【SAWAYAMAリリースまであと1日】," *X*, April 15, 2020, https://x.com/rinasawayama_jp/status/1250439999260000256.
[145] Shaffer, "Rina Sawayama Announces Debut Album."
[146] "Akasaka Sad," Genius, last modified April 22, 2020, https://genius.com/Rina-sawayama-akasaka-sad-lyrics.
[147] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama_jp), "【SAWAYAMA."
[148] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama_jp), "【SAWAYAMA."
[149] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama_jp), "【SAWAYAMA."

Fuck 'em if they don't know what you're made of [150]

(Translated from Japanese)

You're lucky until you die (Wherever you go) [151]

These statements present a deliberate step away from her passive social position of not belonging. And instead she embraces the active social positioning. She reshapes her narrative, thereby speaking self-acceptance into existence. She also actively engages with the translocational in "wherever you go". Wherever she goes, no matter her positionality in that context, she will belong, because she accepts herself. These lyrics exemplify that identity is not only experienced but also actively constructed, especially as a positioning towards the outside world. In this sense, this song can be viewed as Sawayama actively reshaping her narrative in order to achieve happiness. She demonstrates the fluid and actively constructed nature of identity, aligned with Anthias's theory that belonging is not something one has but rather something one does.

Self-Acceptance

Finally, this process of active social positioning pays off in the bridge of a different song: "Tokyo Love Hotel". Sawayama's long translocational journey for belonging, as described in "Akasaka Sad", concludes in true love for Japanese culture.

If you've been through what I have
Then you know what is true love
Yes, I see, yeah, I see it now
All the years figuring out
Spent my life shutting you out
Yes, I see, yeah, I see it now [152]

After years of not embracing both cultures she finally arrives at self-acceptance that embraces all positionalities across contexts that make up her identity. This process accommodates Anthias's theory that identity is processual and negotiated across contexts. Sawayama moves from pain in "Akasaka Sad" to active self-positioning in "Tokyo Takeover"

[150] Rina Sawayama, "Tokyo Takeover," track 14 on *SAWAYAMA (Deluxe Edition)*, Dirty Hit; Avex Trax, 2020, Spotify.
[151] Sawayama, "Tokyo Takeover," my translation.
[152] Rina Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel," track 11 on *SAWAYAMA (Deluxe Edition)*, Dirty Hit; Avex Trax, 2020, Spotify.

to embracing her identity in “Tokyo Love Hotel”. Her positionality shifts across contexts, both spatial and temporal, and is documented through lyrics. In this way, *SAWAYAMA* not only documents Rina Sawayama’s passive translocational positionality but also demonstrates the emancipatory potential that Anthias describes identity has.

Contradictions

In Sawayama’s case, the active positioning of her identity initiates a transition that generates contradictions over time. The most obvious contradiction due to this transition can be observed in “Bad Friend” and “Tokyo Love Hotel”. In “Bad Friend”, Sawayama describes her graduation trip to Tokyo after Cambridge University where she is a wild tourist: [153]

We ran through the bright Tokyo lights, nothing to lose
Summer of 2012, burnt in my mind
Hot, crazy, and drunk, five in a room
Singing our hearts out to Carly, sweat in our eyes
Throwing drinks at each other
Making fun of our lovers
Getting kicked out on the street [154]

Contradictory, in “Tokyo Love Hotel” Rina Sawayama critiques that very Western tourist in Japan that she herself was in 2012. The inspiration behind the song was a frustration with tourists who say they love the culture but do not respect it at all. Sawayama explains the writing process for “Tokyo Love Hotel”: “I’d just come back from a trip to Japan and witnessed these tourists yelling in the street. They were so loud and obnoxious, and Japan’s just not that kind of country.” [155] Sawayama explained, “In Japan, everyone is quite reserved and keeping to themselves. It's quite impolite to be loud on the streets.” [156]

Sawayama is aware of the contradiction. She recognises that the song reflects her own past as described in “Bad Friend”. In an interview, she elaborates:

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[153] “Bad Friend,” Genius, last modified April 22, 2020, https://genius.com/Rina-sawayama-bad-friend-lyrics.
[154] Rina Sawayama, “Bad Friend,” track 8 on *SAWAYAMA (Deluxe Edition)*, Dirty Hit; Avex Trax, 2020, Spotify.
[155] Rina Sawayama, “SAWAYAMA,” interview by Apple Music, Apple Music, https://music.apple.com/us/album/sawayama/1493469433.
[156] Rina Sawayama, “Rina Sawayama Sings "Tokyo Love Hotel," Charli XCX, & Lady Gaga in a Game of Song Association | ELLE,” interview by ELLE, June 10, 2022, Youtube, at 3 min., 14 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBG-0Y34FUo.

> Then at the end of each verse, I say, 'Oh, but this is just another song about Tokyo,' referring back to my trip that I had in "Bad Friend" where I was that tourist and I was going crazy. [157]

By contradicting these two perspectives in time, she exposes the processual nature of identity that Anthias describes. For Sawayama, the consequence of her contradictory history is what she describes as: "feeling like an outsider in Japan, but also feeling like I'm really part of it."[158] This leads to the question with which "Chosen Family" opens:

> *Where do I belong?* [159]

Reframing Belonging

The song serves as a response to the tensions and contradictions explored throughout *SAWAYAMA*. This song shows Sawayama choosing a different approach in the impossible search of belonging. She detaches the search from her efforts to reconcile the two cultures, and instead attaches belonging to her relationships with her chosen family, as seen in the lyrics below.

> *We don't need to be related to relate* [160]

Anthias observes that the question of belonging is common for those who experience translocation, particularly children of migrants such as Sawayama:

> "'Where do I belong' is certainly a question that is posed by (and for) many people who have undergone migration or translocations of different types, whether of national movement or class movement, and is especially true for the children of such people."[161]

For Sawayama, this question arises from growing up between two cultures:

> I never felt like I fit in with my family, because they are very Japanese and I didn't feel like they understood my identity of being Japanese but living in the UK and

[157] Sawayama, "SAWAYAMA."
[158] Sawayama, "SAWAYAMA."
[159] Sawayama, "Chosen Family."
[160] Sawayama, "Chosen Family."
[161] Anthias, "Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality," 7.

> having completely different ideals and priorities. I just didn't feel like I fit. And when you don't feel like you fit in your family, it is the most isolating thing as a kid. [162]

The consequence of Sawayama's translocational positionality is estrangement from her Japanese family and a feeling of not fully belonging to either cultural context. "Chosen Family" presents the answer. Sawayama creates belonging by seeking out a chosen family, dedicating the song to her queer friends: "I know that I'm not the only one that's been saved by a chosen family." She insists chosen kinship is not inferior to biological ties, saying, "I think it's so important to tell young people also that chosen family is as good as a biological family, it's not inferior."

Critics interpret "Chosen Family" as a song about worthy familial ties found in friendship. Erin Bashford describes the song as the place in the album "where the familial subject matter comes most direct." Thus, Sawayama successfully reframes the meaning of family by performing Anthias's idea of doing belonging instead of having it.

Conclusion

By closing this chapter with "Chosen Family", we can see that *SAWAYAMA* documents the process of her translocational positionality. The journey goes from passive pain in "Akasaka Sad" to active positioning of confidence in "Tokyo Takeover". It also goes through the contradictions that stem from that transition in "Bad Friend" and "Tokyo Love Hotel". Finally, "Chosen Family" resolves the issue of belonging between the UK and Japan. In this sense, the conclusion of *SAWAYAMA* regarding family and identity is not about fitting translocational positionality into traditional moulds of fixed identity, but embracing that belonging can exist outside of frameworks of national or familial ties. *SAWAYAMA* documents identity as a fluid process. It embodies Anthias's theory of translocational positionality as both contradictory and emancipatory.

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[162] Rina Sawayama, *Keep It!*, interview by Ira Madison III and Louis Virtel, hosts, "Undoing the Right Thing" (with Rina Sawayama)," Crooked, December 2, 2020, 48:24-48:49, https://crooked.com/podcast/undoing-the-right-thing-with-rina-sawayama.

5. Cultural Appropriation

"People Don't Know What They're Taking Until Its Gone"[163]

This chapter explores how Rina Sawayama's album *SAWAYAMA* articulates her complex identity as a Japanese-British person through its engagement with themes of cultural appropriation. This chapter will specifically analyse the track "Tokyo Love Hotel" regarding its account of cultural appropriation.

The West's Obsession with Japan

Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison calls the West's obsession with Japanese cultural products the "current J-craze" [164]. This fascination also brings forth a problematic subculture. In the 21st century the derogatory slang term 'weeaboo' was first used to describe the subculture of people who are obsessed with Japanese culture. Their obsession is marked by ignorance and cultural appropriation. They reduce cultural symbols to tropes and attempt to become Japanese, thereby trivialising the culture they admire.

The Metaphor

Rina Sawayama's "Tokyo Love Hotel" captures this tension of love for a culture being marked by cultural appropriation through the title's metaphor. The title refers to love hotels (ラブホテル, rabu hoteru), which are by-the-hour hotels operated primarily for the purpose of allowing guests privacy for sex. Love hotels originated in Japan in the 17th century and began springing up in sizeable numbers in the 1950s. Ho Swee Lin explains that love hotels are now an integral part of the cultural landscape in urban Japan.[165] Japanese love hotels also have great cultural significance abroad with Japanese-influenced love hotels opening their doors worldwide.

In an interview with magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, Rina described "Tokyo Love Hotel" as one of the most important songs on the album. She also explained the intended meaning:

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[163] Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel."
[164] Allison, Anne. (2006). The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism. Mechademia. 1. 11-21. 10.1353/mec.0.0048. MOET ANDERS
[165] Ho Swee Lin, "Private Love in Public Space: Love Hotels and the Transformation of Intimacy in Contemporary Japan," *Asian Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2008): 31, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820701872094.

> ["Tokyo Love Hotel"] is about being frustrated that people are using Tokyo to have "casual sex" with a culture, and then coming back raving about it, but not really treating it with that much respect.[166]

The metaphor in the song is straightforward:

> *Use you for one night and then away they go* [167]

The metaphor of Tokyo as a love hotel for tourists to have "casual sex" with a culture, as seen in the line above, highlights a deeper issue: cultural appropriation. As outlined in the theoretical framework, cultural appropriation refers to the unauthorised taking of cultural elements from one culture by another culture. Central to this concept are the power dynamic across which the taking occurs, as well as a lack of understanding or respect to the source culture.

This thematical intention was not recognised by most critics. Most critics, like Alex Rigotti for *Gigwise*, thought the song was an "ode to the struggles of dating as a Japanese woman"[168]. Alexis Petridis, who wrote a review for *the Guardian*, was one of the few who recognised the intended meaning. He argued that *SAWAYAMA* delves "into areas that pop music previously hasn't, [such as] Tokyo Love Hotel's examination of the western fetishisation of Japanese culture."[169]

This lack of recognition from critics demonstrates how subtle the manifestations of cultural appropriation are. This blind spot underscores the need to examine how such appropriation is not only present, but systematically embedded through mechanisms like commodification.

Commodification and Decontextualisation

As discussed in the theoretical framework, commodification, the transformation of an object or idea into something owned, bought, and sold, is a harmful subset of cultural appropriation. During this transformation the cultural element is often altered in ways that misrepresent the original culture. Both the marginalised culture's individuals and its cultural history are dismissed in order to make the product consumable. Arya describes the issues that

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[166] Sawayama, "Rina Sawayama's Album."
[167] Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel."
[168] Rigotti, "The Gigwise 51 Best Albums of 2020."
[169] Alexis Petridis, "The 50 best albums of 2020, No 3: Rina Sawayama – Sawayama," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/dec/16/the-best-albums-of-2020-no-3-rina-sawayama-sawayama.

come from lost ownership: "The use of their culture by others destabilises ownership that has adverse impacts on the protected culture including distortion through trivialisation and oversimplification." [170] This highlights how commodification undermines an individual's control over their own heritage.

We see this process of decontextualisation and thereby displacing individuals from their own cultural narrative returning exactly in "Tokyo Love Hotel". The song opens with a recitation in which Sawayama describes the alteration of cultural elements through commodification:

People don't know what they're taking until its gone [171]

In the annotation, Sawayama explains her discomfort due to excessive appropriated Japanese iconography in Western media:

> I've always been very careful of how much Japanese iconography I include in my visuals, because it's been done over and over again by people who are not Japanese. It didn't feel right – too basic perhaps – for me to use my culture in my music, but this felt totally unfair. Why can't I express my culture? This song is about my selfish frustration with people taking and using my culture and not leaving any for me.[172]

She concludes that this frustration and, as she puts it, "not feeling like I've got an ownership of my own culture" [173] were the basis of the song.

Nevertheless, on "Tokyo Love Hotel" she takes ownership of her Japanese culture. *The Skinny's* critic Andrew Wright describes the song as the most obvious reference to Japan: "Tokyo Love Hotel marks the most overt reference to Sawayama's Japanese heritage." [174] She explicitly references her Japanese roots, though not without this persisting sentiment of displacement from her own cultural narrative. This aligns with the findings from the previous chapter on Family and Identity. Sawayama wonders if she, as someone who grew up in the West, is perpetuating the commodification of Japan by expressing her culture. As Rina says,

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[170] Arya, "Cultural appropriation," 4.
[171] Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel."
[172] "Tokyo Love Hotel," Genius, last modified April 22, 2020, https://genius.com/Rina-sawayama-tokyo-love-hotel-lyrics.
[173] Rina Sawayama, *Sodajerker on Songwriting*, interview by Sodajerker, host, "Episode 163 - Rina Sawayama," June 12, 2020, 37:58-38:02, https://www.sodajerker.com/episode-163-rina-sawayama.
[174] Andrew Wright, "Rina Sawayama - SAWAYAMA," *The Skinny*, April 13, 2020, https://www.theskinny.co.uk/music/reviews/albums/rina-sawayama-sawayama.

"by writing an English song about Japan I wondered if I was simply writing "just another song about Tokyo""[175] Both the pre-chorus and the chorus conclude:

Thought I was original, but after all
I guess this is just another song 'bout Tokyo [176]

These lyrics underline her self-critical reflection and the tension between celebrating her heritage and feeling displaced from it.

Orientalism

Orientalism explores the concept of the Other by arguing that the West constructs the East as an exotic and fetishised Orient. This process allows the West to define itself by imposing an Otherness onto the East. Orientalism, cultural appropriation, and commodification are closely intertwined. Through the lens of this concept, cultural elements of the East are often reduced to exoticised or sexualised objects of fascination, stripped of their original meaning. One clear example is the appropriation of traditional Japanese symbols in Western tattoo culture. The symbol's historical significance is removed and instead it comes to represent that the wearer is "hip". In the following lines, Rina Sawayama reflects on how cultural significance is often disregarded to make a product, such as a tattoo, more appealing and consumable. She contextualises the lyrics stating: "Lots of tourists love Japan, get Japanese tattoos and use Tokyo as a creative concept, but I wondered if they cared about Japanese people."[177] She describes the Japanese tattoo trend and the consumers' ignorance in the following lyrics:

You got them askin' to have you on their skin
Even though they don't know [178]

The song concludes with Sawayama repeating:

Yeah, your fascination's my world [179]

With those lyrics she establishes the song as a reminder that "there is a certain responsibility that comes with being fascinated with a culture." [180] The song suggests that

[175] Rina Sawayama (@rinasawayama_jp), "【SAWAYAMAリリースまであと2日】," *X*, April 15, 2020, https://x.com/rinasawayama_jp/status/1250255244715425793.
[176] Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel."
[177] Rina Sawayama, "【SAWAYAMA."
[178] Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel."
[179] Sawayama, "Tokyo Love Hotel."
[180] Genius, "Tokyo Love Hotel."

there is another way for people to love Tokyo that exceeds the superficiality of “casual sex”. A fascination for a culture should come with respect for its context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rina Sawayama’s “Tokyo Love Hotel” not only challenges the superficial consumption of Japanese culture, but also explores the complexity of cultural appropriation for the source culture. The song’s metaphor of Tokyo as a love hotel captures the frustration the source culture feels when their culture is reduced or altered to something consumable and exotically Other. Importantly, Sawayama reflects on her own role in this dynamic as a Japanese-British artist who could be viewed as part of either culture in this dynamic of cultural appropriation.

6. Conclusion

SAWAYAMA demonstrates how popular music can articulate the complexities of Japanese-British identity in different contexts. Across the album, Rina Sawayama navigates microaggressions, translocational positionality, and cultural appropriations. In “STFU!” she channels the suppressed rage of microaggressions into a fantasy retaliation. The song embodies Sue’s catch-22 of staying silent and experiencing psychological harm or speaking out and possibly receiving backlash. The song critiques the model minority stereotype and highlights how microaggressions complicate her identity.

The analysis of Sawayama’s translocational positionality shows a shifting sense of belonging across time and space. From the pain of displacement in “Akasaka Sad” to active self-positioning in “Tokyo Takeover” to finally reframing belonging outside biological borders in “Chosen Family”. This progression reflects Anthias’s theory that belonging is a practice and that identity is a continuous process. “Bad Friend” and “Tokyo Love Hotel” show that identity is not fixed by making the contradiction and development in translocational positionality visible.

In the analysis of “Tokyo Love Hotel” Sawayama addresses cultural appropriation. She critiques the consumption of Japanese culture by Western audiences while reflecting on her own position as a Japanese-British artist. The song demonstrates the complexity of cultural ownership in the context of migration. She shows that art can serve to reclaim heritage as well as perpetuate commodification at the same time.

These analyses together show that *SAWAYAMA* functions as social commentary and as self-reflection on her complex identity. By engaging with themes of microaggressions, translocational positionality, and cultural appropriation she shows how popular culture can challenge existing notions about identity. The #SawayamaIsBritish campaign demonstrates that a cultural product can also be a catalyst for change. In sum, the album articulates a complex Japanese-British identity and contributes to a nuanced understanding of identity shaped by migration.

It is important to note that this thesis has solely focused on Rina Sawayama’s work and her articulation of a Japanese-British identity. Research into other artists representing second and multi-generational Asians globally may provide additional insights into how

migration shapes artistic expression on identity. Asian-Western artists, such as Rina Sawayama, Mitski, Japanese Breakfast, and beabadoobee, forge spaces outside national borders in which they articulate and represent their unique identities. Future research may therefore explore the works of those artists to examine how similarly or differently the dynamics of microaggressions, translocational positionality, and cultural appropriation inform their musical expression of identity.

This would not only contribute to the growing body of literature that investigates the complexities of translocational Asian identities, especially as articulated through self-positioning. But it would also engage with broader debates on cultural globalisation and the discussions of representation in popular culture. It would contribute to understanding how diasporic Asian artists negotiate the tension between authenticity and commodification. This positions popular culture, and especially music, as a space for self-positioning and social commentary. Ultimately, *SAWAYAMA* reveals how music can serve as an articulation of complex identity shaped by migration through the exploration of lived experiences.

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