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Robert Tierney

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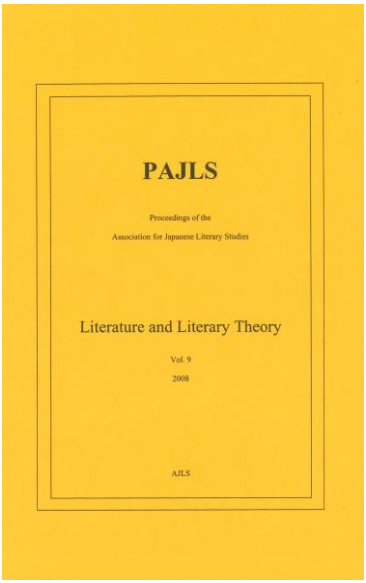

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Mimicry in Japanese Colonial Fiction

Robert Tierney
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Where does Japan fit within post-colonial theory, which is so deeply informed by the study of European colonial empires? And what would be the shape of post-colonial theory today if its most prominent practitioners had set themselves the task of explaining, say, the colonization of Korea by Japan rather than the British colonization of India? If one examines the works of prominent post-colonialist thinkers, one notices that Japan takes up a modest niche in this body of theory, even though it occupies a pivotal place in the history of modern empire. Let us recall this history for a moment: modern Japan came into existence through a semi-colonial collision with an expanding West in the 19th century, and it remained culturally colonized long after it renegotiated the so-called "unequal treaties" with Western powers. At about the same time, and paradoxically, Japan went on to become the paramount colonial power in East Asia. In this paper, I will use the case of Japan's non-Western empire to complicate the theories of Homi Bhabha, specifically, his notion of colonial mimicry. Next, I will consider the theme of mimicry in the South Seas fiction of Nakajima Atsushi.

In an essay titled "Of Mimicry and Man," Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable other *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite.*"[1] He goes on to argue that colonialism is haunted by ambivalence toward this colonial mimicry. The colonizer demands that the colonized resemble herself through a process of "narcissistic identification," but she also disavows this resemblance and even regards it as a "menace." Thus the colonizer both requires successfully colonized subjects and rejects them: they are, impossibly, required to be "*almost the same but not quite.*"

At first glance, Bhabha's notion of a "desire for a reformed, recognizable other" seems especially pertinent to Japan's assimilation policies (*dōka*) toward those it colonized. For the subjects in the Japanese empire were placed in a kind of double bind. On the one hand, they were encouraged to become "the same as the Japanese," to speak Japanese and adopt Japanese customs. On the other, they were refused rights as Japanese, never accorded anything more than second-class citizenship, and discriminated against during the colonial period.

While Bhabha's theory seems applicable to certain aspects of Japanese rule, his idea of mimicry only makes sense for a colonial power that posits itself as first-hand and "original" in the first place. But is this true in the case of Japan? Can we really draw such a clear line between imperial "original" and colonial "copy?" In his study of the colonization of Korea, Peter Duus argues that Japan's "imperialism, like so many other aspects of Meiji development, was an act of mimesis," adding that "what ultimately enabled the Japanese to mimic Western imperialism was their simultaneous mimesis of other aspects of Western 'wealth and power.'"[2] Before Japan insisted that its colonized people follow the example of the Japanese and take them as their master model, the Japanese copied the West, including late 19th century Western imperialism. As an illustration of imperial mimicry in action, consider the inaugural imperialist move made by the Meiji regime toward Korea. In 1876, the Meiji government dispatched a fleet

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[1] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.
[2] Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 424 & 423.

of warships to a Korean port and forced the Chŏson court to sign the unequal Kanghwa treaty, just two decades after Commodore Perry's black ships had entered Edo bay.

Japan's mimicry of Western imperialism was a multifaceted phenomenon that assumed many forms: historical, political, ideological, psychological, etc. In this paper, I will be concerned mainly with how mimicry is manifested in literature. To look at literary mimicry in greater depth, I will examine the works of Nakajima Atsushi, whom Kawamura Minato calls the quintessential writer of the Japanese empire.[3] In 1941, Nakajima left his job and family in Japan and traveled to Japanese-ruled Micronesia, where he worked as an editor of Japanese language textbooks in the Regional Section of the South Seas Agency. He stayed in Palau for eight months, was physically ill most of the time, and quickly grew disillusioned with his job. After he returned to Japan, he wrote two collections of stories on South Seas themes: *South Island Tales* (*Nantōtan*) and *Atolls* (*Kanshō*). Before looking at these two collections though, I will say a few words about a work he wrote the year before he left Japan.

This work—*Light, Wind, and Dreams* (*Hikari, kaze to yume*)—is a fictional autobiography based on Robert Louis Stevenson's last years in Samoa, which Nakajima left with a publisher shortly before he went to Micronesia. What are we to make of this "fictional autobiography"? The critic Wada Hirobumi poses an intriguing question about this hybrid work: why did Nakajima choose to "appropriate" the writer Robert Louis Stevenson to himself?[4] While Wada answers his question by enumerating the resemblances between Stevenson and Nakajima, I would instead emphasize the similarities in the geopolitical position these two writers occupied. As writers living at the peak of their respective empires, Nakajima stood in a position toward the South Seas in 1940 that was analogous to Stevenson's in the 1890s. By telling the story of Stevenson in Samoa in the guise of a "fictional autobiography," Nakajima fuses himself with Stevenson and masters his perspective on the South Seas. To understand the novelty of this geopolitical similarity, I will compare the perspective of Stevenson in Nakajima's novel, which was written half a century after Stevenson's death, with that of a Japanese contemporary of Stevenson, Shiga Shigetaka.

Shiga wrote *Conditions of the South Seas* (*Nan'yō jiji*) in 1887, a year after spending ten months cruising the South Seas on a Navy training vessel. In a chapter titled "Dream Story of the God Tagaloa," Shiga offers an account of Samoa's loss of independence, which overlaps with the plot of *Light, Wind, and Dreams*. Both writers criticize meddling in Samoan affairs by European powers and show the devastating effects of European settlement on Samoa. The difference between these works lies not in the story they tell but in the position of the narrator toward this story. Shiga, in 1887, identifies not with the white settlers who came to Samoa but rather with the Samoan victims of Western imperialism. In Shiga's account, the god of Samoa appears to him in a dream and addresses him as follows: "Are you not a man of the yellow race? I will set before you the grievances that fill my breast."[5] That is, Shiga is addressed because he is not white and because he can empathize with the grievances of the Samoans. Addressed by the Samoan God, he is invited to consider Samoa as an example from which Japan can learn a lesson.

Narrating the same events in *Light, Wind, and Dreams*, a few generations after Shiga wrote about Samoa, Nakajima completely reverses the perspective from which the history of Samoa is told. Rather than give a Samoan perspective on Europe, he tells us about Samoa seen

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[3] Kawamura Minato, "Nakajima Atsushi," in *Iichiko*, no. 27 (1993), 19-20.
[4] Wada Hirobumi, *Tandokuno basho* (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1989), 154.
[5] Shiga Shigetaka, *Nan'yō jiji* (Tokyo: Maruya, 1887), 70.

from a European perspective: that of Stevenson. Samoa is no longer the example from which Japan can learn: instead, it is Stevenson, the exotic romanticist, who is the figure to be emulated. The works Nakajima wrote after traveling to Micronesia are written from a similar point of view, but with some significant changes: a Japanese narrator substitutes himself for Stevenson, and he writes about one of Japan's colonies rather than one ruled by a European power.

Was Nakajima conscious that he was copying Stevenson's romanticist vision of the South Seas? Did he know that he was looking for a South Seas that he had first discovered in Western fiction? In 1942, he wrote a short story called "High Noon" (Mahiru). In this short work, a Japanese narrator diagnoses his own vision problem, his inability to see anything but derivative and imitative images of the South Seas:

> Perhaps you think that you are gazing out at the glittering sea and sky at this moment. Or maybe you flatter yourself that you are looking at them with the same gaze as the islanders. What an absurd idea! . . . You're not even trying to look at the islanders. All you can see are copies of Gauguin paintings. And you are not looking at Micronesia either. All that you see is a pale reproduction of the Polynesia depicted by Loti and Melville. How can you discover eternity with those pale blinders (shells) you wear on your eyes? You pathetic (*awarena*) creature![6]

Though the narrator omits the name of Stevenson in this passage, he realizes that he has been viewing the South Seas through a kind of Western filter. He describes this filter by using the metaphor of shells over his eyes, and the shells stand for the mediated vision of Western exoticism. On the one hand, he accuses himself of being blind to the reality of the South Seas, since he can only apprehend it through mediated images. On the other hand, he feels alienation, since his eyes no longer belong to him and have been replaced by shells. If the images of Western exoticism copy an initial reality, Nakajima gazes only at faded and "pale" copies of copies. To use an apt if dated expression, he confesses to his "bad faith" and his sense of cultural colonization. The feelings he expresses stand in marked contrast to the narcissism and sense of ontological priority that Bhabha finds in the Western colonial cultures. In fact, the narrator of "High Noon" more closely resembles the "mimic men" depicted in Naipaul's famous book by the same title.

To better understand the ambiguities and intricacies of the narrator's imperial mimicry, I will consider his short work "Mariyan," a portrait of a well-educated Palauan woman the writer met while he was working in Micronesia. Mariyan is described as an exemplary product of Japan's (*dōka*) assimilation policies. She has attended a higher girl's school in Japan and is a voracious reader. She is introduced to the narrator as the Palauan language teacher of an ethnographer referred to as H: she stops by regularly to help him transcribe ancient Palauan narrative poems and translate them into Japanese.

"Mariyan" begins as follows: "Mariyan is the name of a woman that I got to know quite well in the southern islands." But what, in fact, does he know about her? The narrator first describes her as a member of a backward race, a Kanaka. After mentioning that she is "very much the intellectual," he adds "the contents of her brain have nothing whatsoever Kanakan about them." Later he writes: "There is nothing you can do about the limitations of her race, but if you keep these limitations in mind . . . she has a truly natural and full face." When the narrator

[6] Nakajima Atsushi, *Nakajima Atsushi zenshū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2001), 278-79.

assigns Mariyan to membership in an inferior and backward race, he assumes the perspective of a member of a superior race, that is to say, those Japanese or Western races that are free of the aforementioned "limitations."[7]

In an earlier version, the statement "the contents of her brain have practically nothing Kanakan about them" read "the contents of her brain were like those of a civilized person, more than half Japanese, and had almost nothing Kanakan about them."[8] Without speculating on the reasons behind the author's decision to omit the word "Japanese," I would suggest that the effect of this change is to endow the narrator with a universal point of view rather than one linked specifically to a Japanese national identity. By deleting any reference to Japan in the final edition, the narrator apparently stresses a seamless identification with the West. But was Nakajima's identification with the West so seamless and unproblematical?

As the story progresses, we find the narrator adopt a much more ambivalent view of her. In one scene, the narrator stops by Mariyan's house on a stroll with his friend H. The house is built with bamboo planks in the Palauan style; the cries of chickens can be heard underneath the flooring. Entering the house, he picks up two books that are lying on a small table near Mariyan's bed:

> One was a selection of English poetry edited by Kuriyagawa Hakuson, and the other was the Iwanami edition of *The Marriage of Loti*. A woman, probably a relative of Mariyan, was sleeping in a slovenly posture in a corner of the room; when we came in, she cast a suspicious glance in our direction and then turned over and fell right back to sleep. In fact, I thought there was something odd to come across Kuriyagawa Hakuson and Pierre Loti in such an environment. I would even say that I found something painful about the place, but I cannot say for sure whether it was the books that pained me or if it was Mariyan.[9]

What are we to make of this strange confession that the narrator is pained by his discovery of these books in Mariyan's home? He insists on the "pain" he feels by the use of the word *itamashii*. To hammer home this point, he gives another example of the same "pain" when he sees Mariyan dressed up in white dress, wearing high heels and carrying a parasol, in her Sunday best. I will argue that the narrator's "pain" suggests that he feels quite close to Mariyan and unwittingly identifies with Mariyan. If we recall that Japanese imperialism was also an example of mimicry, we can understand why: this mimetic colonizer cannot help but see an image of himself in the cultural mimicry he finds in her. He identifies with the colonized Micronesian woman not because she resembles him but insofar as he considers her a mimic.

In the scenes I have described, the narrator chooses Western artifacts as standards of civilization. He is pained by the incongruity of Mariyan reading a book by Loti or wearing Western clothes. But here we as readers encounter a strange contradiction, the blind spot in his vision. With respect to the Western cultural standards he invokes, the narrator of "Mariyan" does not stand in relation to her as original to copy. In this case, both colonizer and colonized are culturally hybrid and products of mimicry.

In a later scene, the narrator talks to Maryian about Pierre Loti's *Marriage of Loti*. While he only occasionally cites her words, he allows her to voice her opinions about this book quite

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[7] Nakajima, *Nakajima Atsushi zenshū*, vol. 1, 282.
[8] Nakajima Atsushi, *Nakajima Atsushi zenshū*, vol. 2, (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2001), 529.
[9] Nakajima, *Nakajima Atsushi zenshū*, vol. 1, 285-86.

freely. Loti's novel tells the story of an English naval officer who travels to Tahiti, has a brief affair with a 14 year-old Tahitian girl, and then abandons her at the end to return to England. Mariyan does not hesitate to criticize Loti. "Mariyan aired her dissatisfaction about the *Marriage of Loti* and criticized its author for misrepresenting the reality of the South Seas. She argued, 'Naturally, I don't know anything about what went on long ago and in Polynesia, but even so, it is hard to believe that such things could really have happened.'"[10]

In this passage, Mariyan talks back to Loti and tells him what an educated Micronesian thinks about his exotic fantasies of the South Seas. One would need to recall here that Loti is also the author of *Madame Chysanthème*, which might be described as the Japanese variant of *The Marriage of Loti*. Translated as *Kikusan* by Nogami Toyoichirō in 1915, Loti's novel was widely read and is certainly much better known in Japan than his novel about Tahiti. Though he does not explicitly mention *Kikusan*, the specter of this work seems to haunt Nakajima's text.

The reference to Loti also complicates the narrator's relationship with Mariyan and institutes a triangular relationship among Loti, Mariyan, and the narrator. A contemporary of Stevenson and Shiga, Loti treats Japan and the South Seas indifferently as exotic décor against which his European protagonists pursue their erotic conquests. Here I do not mean that the Japanese and South Sea islanders in his works resemble each other but rather that both are apprehended as objects of a hierarchical gaze. Offended by Loti's novel, Mariyan directly criticizes the French writer for "misrepresenting" the reality of the South Seas. Indirectly, she points to the blind spot in the narrator's perspective toward her, refracted through these same Western "misrepresentations." By citing Mariyan's critique of Loti approvingly, the narrator expresses his solidarity with her: both reject becoming the objectified "other" for a citizen of a European imperialist power. By the same token, he seems to allude to his own dissatisfaction with his own "imperial mimicry," a sentiment which Nakajima expresses more forthrightly in his story "High Noon." The narrator is torn between his identification with Mariyan and his sense of superiority over her, between being observer and observed, between colonizer and colonized.

I would conclude by saying that the narrator of "Mariyan" portrays the Micronesian woman who fascinates him as a cultural hybrid who amuses him as a colonial mimic. But he reveals his own identification with Mariyan when he writes of the painful ambivalence she arouses in him. Nevertheless, he has trouble recognizing his resemblance to her in the mirror that Mariyan so graciously holds up to him. Instead, like the author Nakajima himself, he prefers to view the South Seas vicariously through Stevenson's eyes, though at the same time he attends to and accepts Mariyan's criticism of Loti. In this welter of contradictions, I will argue, we find the aporia of Japanese imperial mimicry.

Although the Japanese were "mimics" of Western imperialism, their imperialism was not simply a "copy." Indeed, Japan's mimesis produced a distinctive imperial culture that departed in significant ways from its model. To understand this imperial culture, one needs to supplement Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry with the idea of imperial mimicry: that Japan explicitly and self-consciously mimicked other empires. I will mention two structural peculiarities of Japanese imperial culture that are evident in Nakajima's stories. Most post-colonial models are based on a dyadic model of colonizer and colonized, West and non-West, white and non-white. In Bhabha's text, which concerns itself with the British case, it seems natural and normal to slip from "almost the same but not quite" to "almost the same but not white."[11] In Japan's case, that is the first non-Western empire of the modern period, this "dyad" was, in fact, a triangle that

[10] Nakajima, *Nakajima Atsushi zenshū*, vol. 1, 286.
[11] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, op.cit., 89.

included the West as its third term. We have seen such a triangular relationship in *Light, Wind, and Dreams* (where the narrator identifies with Stevenson's attitude toward Samoans) or in "Mariyan" (where the narrator cites Mariyan's criticism of Loti approvingly). Secondly, perhaps a corollary of the above, just as Nakajima identifies with Mariyan because he thinks of her as a mimic, Japanese colonial discourse often stressed the sameness and similarities between the Japanese and the colonized—I would refer to this aspect of Japanese discourse as the rhetoric of sameness. Though this rhetoric was often belied and betrayed by the actual policies of colonization, it fostered a kind of psychological identification between colonizer and colonized unlike Western colonial projects founded on otherness and difference.