In *Tropics of Savagery*, Robert Tierney develops a powerful critical account of the culture of Japanese empire in South East Asia. Through the simultaneous use of multiple theoretical positions—most notably conceptions of allegory, Hayden White’s theory of discursive “tropics,” and Homi Bhabha’s notion of “colonial mimicry” (here reworked as imperial mimicry)—Tierney argues that Japanese rhetoric, policy, and cultural production in the colonial period (1895–1945) functioned within a triangular structure in which Japanese practices of colonization relied upon the West’s economic penetration into Japan as an implicit reference point. Accordingly, and in contrast to the racialized binaries that characterized Western colonial practice, Japanese colonialists dually deployed rhetorics of difference and sameness to justify practices of domination. By considering ideological articulation in tandem with allegorical readings of several literary texts, Tierney reveals the ways in which discourses of purportedly “savage” lands and peoples laid bare a Japanese colonial unconscious fraught with anxieties regarding its own experience of “cultural colonization” (16).

Still, Tierney’s frame has inherent limits and its explication of postcolonial theory is uneven. Tierney rightly states that, “by neglecting to include the only non-Western colonial experience in the general critique of imperialism, they [postcolonial scholars] have forfeited a magnificent opportunity to broaden the scope of postcolonial studies. Instead they have tended to reproduce the Eurocentrism that they claim to combat” (13). However, this avenue of critique essentially dead-ends in the introduction. Further, Tierney’s category of imperial mimicry risks reducing the agential role of the Japanese with respect to its colonies, contradictorily replicating the very inadequacy that he identifies in postcolonial theory. Tierney writes only pages later, “[W]ithout the collision with Western imperialism and the mimicry of its forms, it is hard to conceive that Japan would have followed the expansionist and imperialist course that it did in the modern period” (18). If it is difficult to refute this out of hand (as is often the case with counterfactual speculation), its similarity to reactionary narratives of Japanese history should cause alarm for historians aware of that which Carol Gluck and others have described as Japan’s “memory problem.”
Tierney departs from this potentially simplistic narrative in the majority of chapters, situating an anxious colonial unconscious within a larger context of discrimination and violence, bringing to light lesser known histories and fictional writings in the process. Reading Japanese colonial penetration within the context of the contradictory rhetorics of difference and sameness, Tierney recounts the Japanese military’s bloody war against Taiwanese guerrillas and aborigines in the 1930 Musha Incident. In this context, Tierney finds ambivalence in Japanese ethnography, reportage, and fictional representations of the incident that simultaneously deride the lack of civility amongst Taiwanese rebels and admire the dedication and ferocity of their resistance. This approach crystallizes most clearly in the book’s discussion of Taiwanese aboriginal headhunting and its discursive relationship to the earlier samurai practice of taking heads. The parity here renders it impossible for Japanese ideologues to dismiss headhunting as barbaric without implicitly criticizing Japanese society before the advent of the West’s civilizing mission. Thus discourse could only note the proximity of a lost Japanese past to the Taiwanese colonial present. Similarly, colonial bureaucrat Mochiji Rokusaburō claimed that Taiwan was a problem of land and not people and, as such, that Japanese colonialists should recall their “warrior spirit” for the sake of pacifying Taiwanese natives (43). Here, the rhetorics of difference and sameness work simultaneously, overloading the “savage” with contradictory meaning and producing colonialist nostalgia for a past not yet tainted by Western modernity. Through this longing for lost warrior origins (and the purported prospect of their recovery) Mochiji effectively suggested that Japanese readers might find in Taiwan the opportunity to restore their fractured subjectivities through a practice of colonial violence which would connect them to an ostensibly untainted Japanese past.

Tierney hits his stride most powerfully in an allegorical reading of Satō Haruo’s short story, “Demon Bird.” Here, Satō’s narrator adopts an ethnographic style, in order to coolly describe social practices of scapegoating and exclusion within a Taiwanese aboriginal village, based upon the tale of the hafune (demon bird). According to the legend, all who gaze upon the bird are “certain to die,” save the mahafune (the magical savage manipulators of this bird), whose powers are handed down through family lines. When the family’s identity is not known, the mahafune can allegedly be identified by their strange facial expressions and through the “anxiety” that they cause other villagers (92). In light of its publication immediately after the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923, Tierney reads “Demon Bird” as an allegory for discriminatory assaults on Koreans who were subjected to language tests given by roving Japanese nationalist vigilante groups (listening for non-native pronunciation) in the disaster’s wake (105).

Through a thoughtful blend of discursive analysis and historical research, Tierney identifies the limits of a “liberalist critique” built into the allegorical structure of “Demon Bird,” which encrypts a critique of anti-Korean violence in the metropole through the aboriginal legend. As such, Satō sacrificed the
possibility of a historically specific critique, displacing the extant locus of vio-
ience (in which he lived as a socially productive member) and transmuting the
narrative into a dystopian parable deriding a human tendency to persecute those
who are not understood. Though Tierney recognizes that this obfuscation of the
story’s content was likely a necessary precondition for its release in the increas-
ingly thought-policed Japanese publishing industry, he nevertheless concludes,
“While the narrator of ‘Demon Bird’ lucidly exposes the connections between
violence in the metropolis and violence in the colonies, he shares with the eth-
nographer a blind spot toward the violent expropriation that underlies his own
perspective. Colonial violence is not simply an object that one can safely observe
from the outside and then talk about; rather it is inscribed in the very place from
which colonial agents take up their stance” (108).

As Tierney demonstrates in each of his readings, the figure of the savage is at
once repulsive and alluring, violent and docile, innocent and opportunistic; even
works that are ostensibly sympathetic to the plight of colonial subjects might still
be implicated in the structure of their domination. However, the criteria by which
Tierney determines whether a text resists or collaborates with colonial discourse
is less clear. For example, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s revision of the children’s
story *Momotarō*, which imagines the Japanese hero as a violent aggressor against
an innocent and peace-loving population of ogres, deploys the image of the docile
savage (143). Here again, it would seem, the critique of Japanese imperialism is
displaced, this time onto a necessarily ahistorical fable, but Tierney lauds it as a
successful critique of Japanese imperialism.

Tierney effectively demonstrates the ways in which contradictory and descrip-
tive binaries of the savage disclosed a looming anxiety about how to code the
Japanese experience of “the modern” as cultural colonization, but his extrapola-
tions from that recognition are, at times, problematic. The chapter on Nakajima
Atsushi is case in point. Tierney’s discussion of Nakajima unmasks the struc-
tures of domination immanent to the aforementioned colonial nostalgia via the
critical frame advanced in the introduction. To start, Nakajima’s colonial works,
set in Micronesia, relied heavily on Robert Louis Stevenson’s travel writings
on Samoa. According to Tierney, Nakajima’s own descriptions and narratives
were refracted through Stevenson’s accounts, which he held up as a model for
his own work (156). In Tierney’s view, this replication colored Nakajima’s pro-
tagonists by positioning them as speaking subjects burdened with representing
colonial peoples, re-articulating through displacement the subordinate position
that Japan held vis-à-vis the West. Nakajima’s narratives of the South Seas thus
invoke a desire for lost Japanese origins that still appeared to exist in the colo-
nial periphery (180–181). Yet, as Tierney makes clear, such a possibility was
predicated upon an expropriative relationship to colonial peoples, whose lack of
subjective capacity in Japanese narrative mimicked a more general perception
of them as incapable of functioning in the modern world. In this way, Japanese
colonists mobilized the very triangular structure that ostensibly haunted them for the project of colonial expansion.

Tierney’s work has important strengths. Its diligence with historical detail allows for an impressive comparison of practices in different colonial territories, a methodology that remains woefully underused in the study of Japanese empire. And, at their best, Tierney’s allegorical readings build upon this historical foundation to provide meaningful substance to a theory of cultural flows between metropole and periphery that might otherwise remain merely intuitive. But the application of the book’s framework is somewhat uneven. The metaphor of “Western eyes” typifies the weaknesses of Tierney’s imperial mimicry, which risks reducing the first half of Japan’s complex and violent twentieth century into a lapse in judgment borne of its encounter with the West. Despite these issues, *Tropics of Savagery* is an important contribution to the study of Japanese empire and offers fertile ground for future scholars of varied disciplines and theoretical orientations.

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