

# **Mimicry and Mimetic Rivalry: The Case of Amputees in Sierra Leone**

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## **Introduction: Looking at Amputation and Mimicry through Mimetic Theory**

**(Curtis Gruenler)**

Ernest and I are still at an early stage of bringing together our areas of expertise, mine in mimetic theory and his in post-colonial theory and in the legacy of violence in Sierra Leone. In what follows we have kept our voices distinct, though with the goal of a conversation in which mimetic theory and Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry could be enriched, not only by each other, but even more by their application to a particular experience of violence: the amputation suffered by tens of thousands during the civil war of the 1990s in Sierra Leone. After my rather schematic proposal for how mimetic theory might provide a framework for thinking about this violence and the responses of its victims, Ernest gives more extensive consideration to rethinking Bhabha's theory in that context. As literary scholars, we are conscious of the challenges posed by trying to apply theories first developed with literary texts to the fullness of events known through living memory. We are also moved by the possibility of helping shape the victims' interpretation of their suffering.

I begin with the hypothesis that mimetic theory provides a good basic understanding of the nature of the conflict and the underlying desires behind the use of amputation. Mimetic theory would suggest that amputation, like other forms of violence, is a "signifier of ultimate desire, of divine self-sufficiency" (*Violence and the Sacred*

148), or what Girard elsewhere calls fullness of being. While amputation might in some situations be seen as an act of restraint, short of killing, I take it that in Sierra Leone the intended significance should be read as an enduring mark of the superiority of the persecutors. In this case, the stump then becomes for the persecutor and the victim alike a sign of the desire for power that drives the conflict and that they imitate in each other. The contagion of desire tends to make rivals into doubles of each other, each swallowed up in their imitation of the other's desire for the same object. This is the view from outside the system; from inside, however, the rivals see only whatever still marks their difference from each other. For those who perpetrate it, amputation could be seen as an attempt to assert and inscribe difference in an especially obvious and enduring way. The persecutors have written on the bodies of the victims their status as victims.

In the context of post-colonial civil war, amputation has the perverse effect of making the perpetrators into doubles of their former oppressors. Indeed, as an act of writing, amputation suggest a sort of imitation of the literate means of colonial power. Instead of writing documents on paper, the new oppressors write on bodies. The difference between the whole bodies of the persecutors and the deficient bodies of their victims repeats the difference between superior and inferior asserted by racist colonial discourse. Such imitative action seems driven by the more fundamental mimetic desire that drives the conflict. It is less a conscious mimicry than an unconscious continuation of the cycle of violence. Whereas Steven Weitzman, in "Mimic Jews and Jewish Mimics in Antiquity: A Non-Girardian Approach to Mimetic Rivalry," largely assimilates Girardian mimesis and Bhabha's mimicry, I would argue that mimetic desire happens primarily beneath awareness and in fact hides its unrecognized identity with the other behind

actions and signs intended to mark difference. Mimicry, on the other hand, involves conscious imitation in the face of markers of difference, with the result of introducing ambivalence and raising questions.

If amputation is not an ambivalent sign for those who perform it, can it become an ambivalent sign for its victims and the wider post-conflict community? Are they stuck inside the system, receiving the message marked on them by their persecutors, or can they transcend the system to reinterpret the sign? I can imagine the stump as a sort of scandal or stumbling block in Girard's sense, a continual sign of the victimizers' imagined fullness of being that the victim would be tempted to continue to desire, thus becoming trapped in resentment. Indeed, I can imagine amputees becoming possessed, as Girard suggests in *Violence and the Sacred* (165), by the desire of their persecutors, a desire for fullness of being that the loss of a limb will forever frustrate. Such possession might manifest in what could look like conscious imitation of the persecutors, but is dominated by an unconscious imitation of the persecutor's desire. The victim would then be another double caught in mimetic rivalry.

At the other extreme, mimetic theory offers the possibility for victims to see the system from outside, to recognize the rivalry that is the underlying cause of violence as a step toward choosing to forgive, which would mean choosing to imitate a model of forgiveness rather than acquisitive desire. Yet even if this is the ideal, the essential way to peace, getting there and living it out might seem to involve various strategies of coming to consciousness and reconfiguring the signs left by violence. Here, in the space between possession and the enlightenment of mercy, the notion of mimicry as revised by my colleague seems helpful both for understanding how amputees do respond and imagining

how they might respond to the sign of their loss. Thus, while mimetic theory suggests the binary possibilities of resentment or forgiveness, Bhabha's idea of mimicry opens up further, more ambivalent readings and responses. Mimicry could be a way of starting to talk about the territory that lies between unconscious repetition of violence, on one hand, and the conscious choice to follow the forgiving victim on the other.

### **Rethinking Mimicry as a Resource for Amputees**

**(Ernest Cole)**

The confounding image of amputated limbs defines the body as text for inscription of violence and trauma, domination and control. This image alludes to a master discourse of the amputated body that positions the amputee as a victim of a brutal circumstance out of which he or she is dehumanized and relegated to the level of the sub-human. The overwhelming picture in this discourse is one of handicap, self-pity, helplessness and loss of hope.

In this paper, I argue that through mimicry, expressed in part by a subtle process of irony, the amputated stump initially defined as text for inscription of violence and trauma, domination and control, goes through a process of deconstruction and assumes a new meaning—one that gestures towards resistance to the perpetrator's desire to inscribe violence, power and domination through mutilation of the body. In *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha conceptualizes mimicry as “at once resemblance and menace”: “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective it must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86). I want to use mimicry to re-appropriate the colonizer-colonized dialectic to the perpetrator and the

amputee whereby the latter deconstructs master discourse to come up with something new that “transforms what it resembles” and asserts agency. In so doing, the amputated body becomes a site that amplifies notions of power, control, and domination in the master discourse, while at the same time it denies, challenges, subverts, and transcends established notions of domination contained in that discourse. This ambivalent approach provides a complex reformulation of amputation based on mimicry and irony that re-casts the amputated stump as a form of transcendence rather than confinement. Through this discourse of resistance, history and memory return to haunt the perpetrator while the victim through the process of self-liberation and humanization is empowered.

Studies on amputation are not new; and indeed there have been numerous studies that have attempted to explore the significance of punitive amputation within the larger framework of power, domination, and control. Mark Twain’s work *King Leopold’s Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (1905) begins to tease out the significance of the amputation of limbs. Twain’s text speaks of mutilation of the Congolese, of “severing hands and unsexing men,” of “a young woman, shot in the back of the head [and] one hand was cut away,” and the narrator’s counting of “eighty-one [severed] hands” in one camp alone. In the context of the civil war in Sierra Leone, there is the use of amputation as a military strategy to send a signal or message to others, the state apparatus, or opposing combatants. However, the intention is clear: to use the body as site for engraving fear and to call attention to the desire for compliance with the demands and expectations of the perpetrator. Between 6 and 29 January 1999 in Sierra Leone, over 10,000 people lost their limbs to the machete of the rebels and in some cases, a written

note for the President, whom they were perceived to be supporting, was hung about their necks.

I posit that from the perspective of the victimizer, in this context the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone, the body is a site for the inscription of pain, fear, anger, vengeance, and revenge. The amputated stump becomes the text for interpreting violence, trauma, and desire. The full import of the intention of the victimizer is realized when one notes that amputation is permanent and so from the perspective of the victimizer whatever is inscribed on the body is meant to be always remembered. Thus, the stump of the amputee is intended to become a permanent marker of not only the excruciating pain of amputation but a lasting witness to the event—a reality the victim has to live with for the rest of his or her life.

From this perspective, the amputation is both a physical and psychological branding of body and soul. Further, I argue that the amputated limb could be read as a symbolic amputation of the body politic in Sierra Leone, a situation in which the body of the victim mirrors the nation. Thus, the amputated body then becomes an index of the state of society and an indication of social disembodiment and psychological trauma.

However, as critical as this reading of the body tends to be, it is counter-productive as it gestures to an identity that is based on established notions of the body as text, conflates and defines the victim within the confines and parameters of the mutilated body and seeks to trap him within those confines. I further contend that reading the body in this way disrupts notions of self, belonging and function of the victim in society. I suggest that the above reading puts the amputee in a position to internalize the body as essence, a site for deployment of power and control, out of which he is confined to a life

of handicap, subservience and shame. Instead, I attempt to posit a new discourse, a discourse of resistance whereby the body becomes a site for objection; and where, through irony and mimicry, the victim transcends the confines of his body in order to assert and reaffirm agency and achieve self-liberation and humanization.

Steven Weitzman's essay is suggestive in using post-colonial theory to examine, explore, and comprehend the dynamics of power relations as it plays out between victim and victimizer in post-conflict situations. Weitzman notes:

Writing of a different historical age, the post-colonialist theoretician Homi Bhabha has observed that the "final irony" of mimicry – by which he means the way in which the colonized subjects ape the manners of their imperial masters – is the subject's desire to emerge as authentic through mimicry, to seem real through imitation. Something like that irony can be detected in Josephus, for the very trait by which he seeks to convey authenticity of Jewish identity – his repeated emphasis of how willing the Jews were to die rather than betray their allegiance to God – seems itself to be an imitation of Roman culture in this period. (930)

While Weitzman's reading of Bhabha is insightful and its deployment in his analysis of Roman culture certainly helpful, it oversimplifies the complexity of the theory of mimicry and overlooks a number of crucial and significant facts. In the first instance, Weitzman reduces mimicry to "doubling" by linking the colonized to "flatterers" who in the quest for "authenticity" merely apes the masters in order to be like them. In essence, his point of mimicry is to be like their colonizers, something they are not and which they cannot be because, as Bhabha notes, the culture of the colonized is itself a partial representation of what it is. Therefore, mere "imitation" or aping of colonial culture does not produce the "authentic" colonized as what is produced is in reality what it is not. Second, the purpose of mimicry is not duplication but rather a process of appropriation or perhaps re-appropriation of the powers of the colonized by presenting an image of the

colonized that transcends what it resembles: it is what it is and yet it is not what it appears to be. This gap between what it appears to be and what it actually is, what Bhabha calls the moments of slippage and excesses, themselves defined and accentuated by irony and paradox, is crucial to understanding the role of the victim and his journey of transcendence through a psychological transformation and social re-appropriation of the metonymies of meaning that the colonial identity ascribes them. Thus, a reading of mimicry that attributes its operation and effectiveness to the victims being “imposters” of a different culture and values misses the complexity of its treatment.

Bhabha speaks to the ambivalence of what is always in place and already known – in this case, the amputee as victim, displaced, dispossessed, and rendered invisible – but as engaged in an act that transforms what it resembles. I read Bhabha’s theory in the context of the Sierra Leone civil war not in the sense of duplication of the power of the colonizer or the victimizer, but rather the potential of the victim to re-appropriate the power and authority that had once belong to the victimizer to himself. It is a process that necessitates a deconstruction of the master discourse by the supposed victim in order to come up with something new that “transforms what it resembles.” Thus, it transcends what it is through agency and remains both what it is, an amputated stump, and what it is not, a stump that physically and psychologically defines and constrains the victim within its limitations. The duality of this conception is critical to understanding the operation of mimicry and the ambivalence of the amputated stump.

Therefore, in this reading of mimicry, I want to re-configure the amputee as a subject who refuses to allow the site of violence to control him or her. He demonstrates tremendous resolve to go over and beyond the trauma and break into the realm of silence

and subjugation in which the victimizer wants to keep him. In this reading of the body, the stump achieves a new meaning, an indication of the power of the mutilated body to transcend the confines of the body and to assert itself in ways that cannot be controlled or dominated by and within the confines of that body.

In addition to Bhabha, G. Prakash argues in *Social Postmodernism* that power exists in a form of relationality in which the dominance of one is never complete. In terms of the master discourse of domination, the image depicted is one of submission and control where the victim is helpless and dehumanized. This state of dehumanization of the amputee incorporates the dehumanization of the victimizer as well, for as he uses the body of the victim to inscribe fear, hate, anger, violence, and power, he too loses his human qualities and becomes dehumanized in the process. Thus, a state of mutual dehumanization ensues in which victim and victimizer are trapped in the negotiation of power and identity.

However, in Prakash's theorization of power, the domination of the victim is never complete, and there are, in Bhabha's words, moments of "slippage, excess, and difference" that create a sense of duality and ambivalence. Thus, by incorporating the ambivalence and indeterminacy of power into these positions, a situation of fluidity between categories ensues and this allows for the possibilities of deconstruction of the categories and their conception as absolutes. In this construct, then, the amputee may no longer be seen as a victim, but as one who transgresses the victim-victimizer dialectic and becomes a resister to domination and control.

Therefore, in taking the spirit of Prakash and Bhabha's theory and deploying it in the context of post civil war Sierra Leone, I suggest that this discourse of resistance

illustrates the difference between essence and existence. It gestures to the point that amputation could be construed as a construct rather than essence for, based on the active agency that follows from the position out of which the subject may be constituted, they are not wholly determined by it. This position, within the context of post-colonial theory, attempts to re-work and re-define issues of Self and Other, identity and power, alterity and difference, and responds to theories of over-determination and displacement of constituted subjects.

To Bhabha, mimicry involves a repetition or doubling of the image of the colonizer by the colonized. He states that “mimicry repeats rather than re-presents” in that in the act of repeating, originality is lost, and centrality is de-centered. Therefore, the outcome of mimicry is the trace of what was once the original or rather the replacement of the original by the artificial. In this regard, the colonized mimics to mock and undermine the originality, authenticity, and stability of the colonizer.

My theory of mimics draws from and re-works Bhabha's theory to hypothesize that to mimic is to re-present in the sense in which it mimics to re-present. The repetition is one with a difference in that the purpose of repeating is not to ape or merely produce a double but rather to re-appropriate authority and power to the victim so that he can re-cast himself outside of the confines of the master narrative and its sets of determinates that seek to contain, define, and confine him to dependency. Thus, operating outside of its location, the victim operates around a sense of ambivalence that makes it possible to create, in Bhabha's words, "a third space," that would allow for re-invention of self. This hypothesis extends and deepens Bhabha's theory by seeking to combine the binary of

repetition and representation articulated in his theory of mimicry, for it makes the case that mimicry is both repeating and re-presenting.

In this discourse, the amputee embraces a new sense of self and is liberated and humanized. His liberation seeks to contest and defeat the metonymies of meaning associated with the mimetic theory of violence that depicts victims as objects caught in a potential cycle of violence and disorder. From liberation and humanization, the path towards empowerment, forgiveness and reconciliation is laid out.

Thus, I would argue that the residual limb through agency deconstructs the master narrative of domination and re-enters into the mainstream discourse as a new phenomenon and the amputee becomes a different and empowered subject. The ambivalence of the residual limb offers the amputee the opportunity to create a counter-narrative to the hegemonic discourse of the perpetrator and to re-present himself as the double of the perpetrator but one with a difference: he has appropriated the power of the victimizer unto himself not to perpetuate the cycle of violence but to rise above the physical as well as psychological challenges occasioned by the loss of his limb. He moves away from the angry aggressive and violent amputee on an Ahab-like mission of revenge to one who forgives and reconciles because he has transcended the metonymies of meaning associated with his condition. This discourse then produces a partial vision of the victimizer's power, de-stabilizes his authority, unsettles his hegemonic control, and contests the significance of the linguistic labels attached to himself and victim. It is in this regard that the residual limb of the amputee becomes in Bhabha's words "not a resemblance" but "a menace" to the victimizer because it has transcended the objective of the victimizer.

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