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Chloe Bazlen
Scripps College

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**DEPICTIONS OF THE WESTERN ARTIST IN COLONIAL SOUTH
AFRICA: *TURBOTT WOLFE***

by

CHLOE BAZLEN

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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PROFESSOR MICHELLE DECKER

PROFESSOR AARON MATZ

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The colonial novel has frequently been the subject of study; for decades, scholars have considered the role of the white man in colonial spaces. While novels such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad have become staples in English literature classrooms, less has been written of *Turbott Wolfe*, written in 1926 by William Plomer. Like many other colonial novels, *Turbott Wolfe* may appear to merely be a cautionary tale of the white man's demise in Africa. However, Plomer takes a unique stance concerning the role of the Westerner in colonial spaces as he writes the novel particularly from the point of view of the artist. This thesis will use *Turbott Wolfe* to consider the expectations that the Western artist might have upon entering colonial South Africa, and the ways that the society breaks from these expectations. Further, it will place Wolfe in the art historical conversations of the 1910s and 1920s, considering the ways that he complicates ideas supported by the Primitivism movement. As the artist is a member of society who both partakes in daily life and responds to it through their art, we can see the ways that Wolfe is impacted by the exterior influences he encounters in South Africa, and how he grapples with unexpected emotions such as desire.

Turbott Wolfe was written by William Plomer and published by Hogarth Press in 1926. Plomer was born in South Africa in December 1903. Written when he was 19 years old, the novel is based heavily on Plomer's own experiences of growing up in South Africa. The eponymous hero is an Englishman and amateur artist who moves to South Africa to run a trading station in the fictional

Lembuland. Wolfe, wary of his white neighbors as he believes himself to be more liberal than them, befriends his black customers. When a new priest takes over a neighboring mission, Wolfe gets involved in Young Africa, a political group that sees miscegenation as the future of Africa.

As the artist plays several roles in society, it is essential to create a definition for what I mean when I say the artist's "role". Without minimizing the artist to a single role or mission, this thesis will primarily think of the artist as defined by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández in his article "The Artist in Society". For Gaztambide-Fernández, the artist plays three primary roles—the "Civilizer", the "Border Crosser", and the "Representator" (233). I will be focusing on the artist as a "border crosser". Not only is Wolfe literally crossing borders in this novel, but he is exploring the edges of societal boundaries as he interacts with black Africans and natives of South Africa. The theory of the "border-crosser" is based on the fact "that artificial and socially constructed boundaries are susceptible to tension" (Gaztambide-Fernández 251). By creating art in this colonial space, Wolfe is working in a place already rife with tension; anything he makes will test these boundaries. Further, the border crossing artist is not tasked to make beautiful art, but to use art to "to destabilize the hegemonic control of dominant ideologies towards a total reconstruction of society" (Gaztambide-Fernández 251). This is the role that the Western artist would most likely play in colonial spaces; even artists such as Gauguin, who contemporary art historians critique as an appropriator of culture, was innovative in his time as he was one of the first to accept Primitive influences in his art. Given the political tension and artificially

constructed boundaries that already exist, it will be examined how Wolfe fills or fails to fill this role.

Politically, the text was published at a critical time in South African history. Apartheid would not be official for another two decades; however, laws were in place that would later allow for it to come into existence. These acts privileged colonizers, supporting segregation and restricting “non-whites in every possible sphere,” such as land ownership and employment, creating powerful tension between black and white inhabitants (Beinart 3). The country had not yet declared its independence from Britain, and the temperate southern weather made diseases such as malaria less common, attracting a larger number of white settlers than other colonies. Even so, in 1910, only 20% of the population was white, and even in the height of their power white people were still the minority (Beinart 1-2). In the years leading up to the publishing of this text, the South African government passed a series of laws that allowed for legal segregation. These laws included the 1911 Mines and Work Act which allowed for segregation in the workplace, the 1913 Natives Land Act which allowed for segregation of land purchasing in the countryside, and the 1923 Natives Urban Areas Act which allowed for segregation of housing in urban areas (Beinart 3-4). Plomer, who was living and working in South Africa during these years, witnessed this increased segregation, and wrote *Turbott Wolfe* as a response.

In both South Africa and England, press reacted strongly to the novel. Plomer claims that only three South African newspapers did not take part in criticizing his text (*Double Lives* 189). An example he quotes, from an unnamed

and uncited South African source, says the book is “of shattered perspectives and perverse stimuli, of lascivious gods and outer darkness” (*Double Lives* 188). Publishing the text effectively closed Plomer off from British social circles in South Africa (*Turbott Wolfe* xix). The novel was better received in England and the United States, though still controversial. Prior to publishing, the manuscript of *Turbott Wolfe* was read by Virginia and Leonard Woolf who quickly agreed to publish the text through Hogarth Press. This connection, and the legacy of his novel, allowed Plomer to enter the progressive Bloomsbury circle later in life when he returned to England. Even though it was received better in the UK and United States, the book was undoubtedly controversial; Plomer claims that a critic from the *New York World* warned his audience to “look elsewhere for your bedtime story” (*Double Lives* 190).

“The Invisible Constructor”

Turbott Wolfe proves to be a unique example of the white man in non-Western spaces as he is an artist. This occupation and identity determines how he interacts with the space around him, and what is at stake for him. We see this identity forming in the depictions of his life prior to Africa. Even before it is learned that Turbott Wolfe is an artist, the role that art plays in his life is apparent. When speaking of his life in England, he says: “My life seemed to be then a structure that had grown without the least deviation from the architect’s plan” (*Turbott Wolfe* 4). His loneliness, sensitivity, and lack of money seem to be stones placed by an architect who dictates his life. Art plays the role that religion might play in another’s life; rather than having a god or other unseen actor directing his

life, Wolfe has an “invisible constructor” (*Turbott Wolfe* 4). Ironically, Wolfe uses one of the most religious periods of art to replace religion itself.¹ According to Wolfe, this invisible constructor “must have been Gothic, so intent was he upon his work,” showing the perceived inflexibility Wolfe feels has been placed on his life (*Turbott Wolfe* 4). By using the vocabulary of art to describe his life prior to Africa, Wolfe not only reveals the constriction he feels in England, but also the core role that art plays in his life, likening it to a religion.

What allows Wolfe to break from this architectural life plan is a doctor ordering him to Africa. Presumably, Africa will provide sun, helping him recover from an illness. Wolfe continues his analogy of architecture when he says that the “cruel building was suddenly ruined” by this intended move (*Turbott Wolfe* 4). Unlike many white settlers of colonial spaces, Wolfe does not go to Africa on his own caprice. It is an order that forces him to go, not altogether unwelcome as he is unhappy with his life prior, but also not of his own choice. Perhaps Wolfe imagines South Africa to be a place in which the white man can hold more power, therefore releasing him of the control of the “invisible constructor”. Continuing with the metaphor of his life as Gothic architecture, it is interesting that Africa destroys something as strong as a Gothic building. In a struggle between Western and non-Western art, this reveals the power that Africa has; Gothic buildings are markedly durable, and Africa destroying this Gothic building is certainly a foreshadowing of the effect Africa will have on Wolfe’s life. Literally, Wolfe is

¹ Gothic architecture, which is best known for its massive cathedrals, attempted to create a structural system that allowed for larger windows (Kidson). These windows let in light, a symbol of God, and required meticulous planning and sturdy stone construction materials, a clear metaphor for the restriction Wolfe feels in life.

dying of a fever he caught in South Africa. His time in South Africa did not merely alter the architectural plan of his life, but “ruined” it entirely.

In recounting his preparations to leave, Wolfe reveals his philosophy towards art before going to South Africa. He looks forward to running the trading station, as the business “would be like an instrument” (*Turbott Wolfe* 4). The business becomes a tool of art, musical or otherwise, as it is completely under Wolfe’s control. He reiterates this idea when he states that: “I thought then, as I think now, that trade is like art. Art is to the artist and trade is to the tradesman” (*Turbott Wolfe* 5). Historically, art is often contrasted with trade, as art is passion and aesthetics while trade is practicality and commerce (Shiner 5). To see them as one is a unique perspective of Wolfe’s that distinguishes him from artists of the day. This, however, raises the question—for whom does Wolfe create art or sell goods? While the artist is typically seen as creating for themselves, the tradesman caters to the needs of others.

Wolfe answers this question when he says: “If you are to be a success in trade, in art, in politics, in life itself you must *never* give people what they want. Give them what you want them to want” (*Turbott Wolfe* 5). This passage reveals the self-serving attitude Wolfe held towards art and trade as he enters Africa, not atypical from colonials. This attitude, which prioritizes the wants of the self before those of others, is inherent in the idea of the artist. Regardless of commissions or influence, the artist can only ever produce what they themselves create. Though beginning a career in trade, Wolfe’s ideas here reveal that he is ultimately a self-serving artist. Wolfe also introduces another idea central to the

artist—desire. As an artist, Wolfe is allowed to explore his own desires through art, a theme that will be explored further throughout the novel.

Primitivism and the Primitive²

Turbott Wolfe was published in 1926, which coincides with the end of the Post-Impressionism movement. Post-Impressionism is a broad term that folds in all artists heavily inspired by, yet going beyond, the work of the Impressionists. Included within Post-Impressionism was the Primitivism movement. This movement, which is based on 19th-century ideas such as Orientalism and Romanticism, sought an art form that was unhindered by history. It attempted to create more emotional art that had less of an emphasis on literal representation (Rapetti). To artists such as Gauguin or Cézanne, non-Western art embodied these qualities because its representation was more abstract. Non-Western was unimpeded by traditional Western rules such as perspective or shading, and because of this it was believed to have a larger emotional capacity, therefore becoming a source of inspiration to progressive Western artists. Oriental prints are seen in Matisse's paintings, while African masks are featured in the work of Picasso. Gauguin, who travelled frequently to the French Polynesian Islands and painted the Tahitian people, claimed to be “seeking a primitive world, unspoiled by any contamination from Europe” (Cardinal). Notably, these Western artists did not simply replicate the art of Africans, Native Americans, or other “primitive”

² As has been stated by a number of historians and writers before me, the terms Primitivism and Primitive are problematic, archaic remnants of the 20th century. I use the terms only for the sake of coherency, and fully support the creation of new terms to describe these periods that refrain from debasing the art they describe. A summary of the extensive debate on the validity of the term “primitive” can be found in Carolyn Dean's essay “The Trouble with (the Term) Art”.

groups, but appropriated the symbols, styles, form, and other elements into their art. The source of inspiration was seen as lesser than the Westernized version, as it lacked the “culture” that came with the Western art object.

One of the most avid proponents of Primitivism, as well as Primitive art³, was art theorist and Bloomsbury member Roger Fry. Friend of Virginia Woolf, who published *Turbott Wolfe*, Fry was one of the first art critics to praise Post-Impressionism and Primitivism. In 1910 he published his groundbreaking essay “The Art of the Bushman”, and later that same year opened the first Post-Impressionism show at the Grafton Gallery. Fry believed in significant form, an idea originally conceived by Clive Bell but expanded upon by Fry. Significant form is the separation of form and content within an art object; it is the belief that shapes and lines create an emotion and rhythm of their own that can be read in a painting, beyond its manifest content (Payne 34). The Impressionists began to touch on this with their blurred lines and emphasis on color, but it was the Post-Impressionists who truly seized this idea, at times abstracting their images beyond recognition. For Fry, the key to significant form was Primitive Art. Primitive Art was “singularly like that of children,” in which “we find a number of forms which have scarcely any reference to actual appearances, but which symbolize the most significant concepts of the form” (Fry 85). Primitive art, like children’s art, was

³ It is important to distinguish Primitivism from Primitive Art. Primitivism is the Western movement led by artists such as Gauguin and Cezanne which appropriated images of non-Western cultures. Primitive art, as defined by Fry in “Children’s Drawings” is any art that precedes purely representational art. This means that Western cultures also had a primitive phase in their art but, according to Fry, Western art advanced while some non-Western art is still in its primitive phase (Fry, 267). Protopopova says of Primitive Art: “At the start of the twentieth century, primitive was used as an umbrella term covering all types of the West’s cultural opposites: it also stood for so called “low” art, the latter including the folk or “popular arts” of any culture.” (87)

simplistic and did not rely on representational accuracy to convey its meaning, emphasizing form rather than content—much like Fry’s own ideas. A few years later in his essay, “Negro Sculpture,” Fry continues this idea in relation to non-Western art when he says: “Without ever attaining anything like representational accuracy [African artists] have complete freedom” (Fry 101). Though phrased as a compliment, Fry is implying that the African artists have not reached the same level of talent as trained Western artists. He sees this break from tradition, however, as a freedom.

Though being one of the earliest Western advocates for Primitive Art and Primitivism, Fry clearly saw Primitivism as superior to Primitive Art. Primitive Art was a helpful tool, an inspiration for Western artists to seize upon. Of African art, Fry states that the “people who produced such great artists did not produce also a culture in our sense of the word,” as to have culture “there must be, of course, the creative artist, but there must also be the power of conscious critical appreciation and comparison,” (Fry 103). While Africa may be able to produce art, in his eyes it did not have the mental capacity to produce a culture. It is through comments such as these that we see the hierarchies Fry has accepted in his supposedly liberal outlook. Darya Protopopova, in her essay on British Modernism, says that Fry’s writings “provide a powerful example of how even liberal, revisionist work on the primitive often served colonialist interests” (305). Though he admires the art, his statements support the hierarchies that place Western art and culture above non-Western art and culture. In his admiration we see patronization, and the conquest of the West in colonial spaces.

Though our contemporary perspective views the Post-Impressionists as guilty of cultural appropriation, for their time they were indeed border-crossers. They found beauty and grace in African people and often refuted colonialism, and as such were frequently regarded as liberal rather than racist (Torgovnik 305). Further, they were among the first to view non-Western art as worthy of consideration, as most others dismissed it. By including its influences in their art, they were intentionally challenging the definition of art as set by the West. Of course, they did so in a way that clearly placed Western artists as the creators, and non-Western natives as voiceless subjects. As Frantz Fanon notes, even in their admiration they were reproducing racism: “Literature, the plastic arts, songs for shopgirls, proverbs, habits, patterns, whether they set out to attack it or to vulgarize it, restore racism” (37). Even when these artists were creating from well-meaning, liberal intentions, they were confirming and reproducing racism by placing the native as the subject and misrepresenting their culture.

“The Unavoidable Question of Color”

Unlike the Primitivists that preceded Wolfe, Wolfe does not go to Africa in search of the “unspoilt” world. In fact, it seems to take Wolfe some time before he realizes that this other world even exists. This realization occurs when, early in Wolfe’s time in South Africa, Wolfe goes to the Schonstein’s Better Shows, a fair hosted in the slums of Dunnsport. It is here in this fairground that Wolfe first becomes awakened to the effects skin color has on society in South Africa. Amidst the overwhelming lights and music of the fair, Wolfe says that: “It came upon me suddenly in that harsh polyglot gaiety that I was living in Africa; that

there is a question of colour” (*Turbott Wolfe* 8). Wolfe had been living in Africa for a short period of time before this, but it is here at the fair that “the question of colour” arises for the first time. To understand why this setting makes a difference to Wolfe’s understanding of race, it is important to consider carnival and the carnivalesque. The word carnival describes a period of feasting or indulgence, and its etymological roots come from carnal, a word that means corporeal, sexual, or of passion (“carnival”, “carnal” OED). The concept of carnival, as it relates to society, has best been explored by theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who says that “the structure and order of ordinary...life are suspended during carnival” which allows for the creation of a “new mode of interrelationship between individuals” (251). Here in this half-real, half-play world social structures are broken down and normal taboos are replaced by uninhibited action. Carnival can take on many forms, but it is ultimately marked by desire guiding decisions, and a sense of freedom from repercussions.

Schonstein’s *Better Shows* affects Wolfe so strongly because it is the first time he sees the carnival acting in South Africa. Prior, Wolfe had had an orderly and structured existence in which he was the owner of the trading post and interacted with the Lembu as customers or art subjects. His identity and role had never been questioned. When analyzing carnival in *Turbott Wolfe*, Gareth Cornwell says that Wolfe “has up to this point unreflectively absorbed the colonial discrimination of identity according to skin colour, which is also inevitably a hierarchic division between high and low, superior and inferior” (“The Fairground Scene” 10). Thus far, Wolfe had created the binaries of

owner/customer, artist/subject, white/black that has allowed him to live comfortably in South Africa. Historian Sander Gilman points out that “because there is no real line between self and Other, an imaginary line must be drawn” (18). Wolfe has drawn this line and maintained it so far, but the carnival scene is the first in a series of events that will prove to trouble his sense of security. The carnival, with its grotesque “polyglot gaiety” breaks down these binaries which everyone, regardless of race, color, or class, takes part in. Now, he sees people of all colors and class interacting with each other in taboo, sexual ways, desiring each other without restraint. No longer is he able to be the all-knowing artist, giving people what he wants them to want; in the carnival, they have desires of their own that he has no control over. Desire has the effect of revealing complexities in a structure that was based on firmly constructed binaries.

Significantly, Bahktin notes that “in carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act” (250). This means that along with everyone else attending the fair, Wolfe himself is an actor in carnival. Others have argued otherwise, such as Gareth Cornwell who says that Wolfe “is an onlooker rather than a participant, a middle-class voyeur fascinated and disgusted by the uncouth antics of the ‘polyglot’ rabble” (“Fair Scene” 7). While I agree that Wolfe is primarily looking at, rather than participating in the carnival, I think there is more to Wolfe’s experience at the fair than simple observation. He goes to the carnival willingly, out of curiosity and in search of entertainment. Though in his journal he uses negative words such as “din”, “tawdry misery”, “garish”, “ribald” and “lascivious” to describe the fair, he also immediately after says that it

was this experience that caused him to “concern [him]self with the colour of people’s skin” (*Turbott Wolfe* 8-9). He may not act immediately at the fair, but it begins his obsession, his desire for color. Wolfe cannot help but be influenced and controlled by the carnival.

Significantly, it is his role as an artist that confirms his role as an actor, rather than a mere observer at the fair. I believe that Wolfe’s critical attitude at the carnival is because, as an artist, he is an active participant while maintaining the self-critical distance of an observer. The artist interacts with society and creates work that is inspired by or responds to the society they are exposed to. Wolfe’s disgust of the fair is not because he is not interacting in it, but because he is able to look at it as an artist while partaking in it. He is active in his observations. He undeniably is using an artistic eye during this scene; his journal entry reveals a very visual description of the fair, using phrases such as a “dollish woman”, “custard-yellow hair”, faces “set like masks”, or a “mulberry pink, derisive tongue” (*Turbott Wolfe* 8-9). His visual recordings of the event prove that he was observing as an artist might, and it is this very role that makes him active.

The product of his observation is apparent immediately after the fair scene when Wolfe begins to study the black Africans with the eye of an artist. Rather than seeing black Africans as individuals, he reduces them purely to the artist’s subject, often dehumanizing them in the process. Dehumanizing black Africans is not an uncommon move made by colonists as it removes the binding link of humanness between the West and the Rest, justifying the West’s rule over its colonies. Wolfe follows this trend, and complicates it. This is apparent when he

says: “My eye was training itself to admire to excess the over-developed marvelous animal grace of each Lembu individual” (*Turbott Wolfe* 17). Rather than intentionally reducing black Africans to animals, he says that his eye is “training itself” to notice these qualities. This makes the reaction corporeal and reflexive, done not by choice but automatically. Perhaps this is because, as a Western artist in this space, he cannot help but be attracted to exoticism of the black Africans, and he feels an inherent need to represent this much like the Primitivists. Additionally, the carnival awakens Wolfe to the power that color plays in this society, as he describes the fairgoers as “marionettes”, a puppet which is controlled by strings (*Turbott Wolfe* 9). Wolfe sees the ways that color controls this society, and the increased power that this could offer him as a white person. This realization, coupled with his artistic desire, causes his eye to begin the process of othering through dehumanization.

Wolfe’s language reveals the tension he feels between admiration and hierarchical power. Though it may be “animal grace”, they do display grace, an inherently positive quality that is bolstered by the fact it is “marvelous”. Further, he describes his gaze as one of admiration, and that he admires them “to excess”. Though it may be animalistic it is significantly more positive than his neighbors who see the black African as a “mad wild animal” (*Turbott Wolfe* 15). In the very same sentence that calls the Lembu animals, Wolfe describes them as “individuals”, recognizing their autonomy in a way that his bigoted white neighbors do not. By describing the Lembu in animalistic terms and noting their differences from white people, Wolfe creates a hierarchy that undeniably places

the native subject below himself as a white man. However, he does so in way that indicates an admiration. Like the Primitivist, he admires their culture in a way that establishes both interest and power.

Unlike the Primitivist, however, Wolfe seems to recognize the complexity of the Lembu people rather than reducing them completely to a fetishized stereotype. For example, Wolfe claims he builds friendships with the black Africans, often including them in the art making process. He says: “One afternoon at Ovuzane I had been intensely occupied, with four natives, in working out some Lembu folk-tunes. We had been at it, I suppose, three or four hours without a break” (*Turbott Wolfe* 13). Wolfe has a fascination with the culture of the Lembu people, and in his work, tries to understand and replicate their art. This undoubtedly aligns him with the Primitivists, as a white artist who has entered another culture and uses it as inspiration. However, unlike the Primitivists, Wolfe is working alongside black Africans in what seems to be a collaboration. Specifically, he is trying to learn how to play the folk tunes, which are notably a “low” art rather than a “high” art.⁴ Rather than dismissing or simplifying these songs as kitsch, Wolfe reveals the labor that goes into them.⁵ They are working for “three or four hours,” and the music is keeping them “intensely occupied” (*Turbott Wolfe* 13). One would not expect this much effort to be required of an artform that is characterized by Fry as having “barbaric crudity and simplicity”

⁴ Low art is usually based in craft, serving utilitarian purposes or made for the uneducated masses. An artisan, as opposed to an artist, makes low art. High art is made by an artist and is what we understand today to be “fine art,” such as painting or sculpture, and is of a higher culture. For more information on this, read Larry Shiner’s “The Invention of Art.”

⁵ For more on kitsch and the distinction of high and low art, read Clement Greenburg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.”

(Fry 87). By revealing the complex nature of the music, a reflection on the nature of the people, Plomer refuses to let Wolfe fit neatly into the role of the Primitivist. Although Wolfe does indeed express interest in replicating Lembu art, he complicates his role by refusing to simplify it.

As William Plomer was writing about a decade after the peak of Primitivism, *Turbott Wolfe* could almost be seen as a response to Fry and others. Never is this clearer than when Wolfe, towards the end of his early days in South Africa, states:

I remembered that every civilized white man, who considers himself sensitive, in touch with native peoples in his daily life should hold in his heart an image of the failure of Gauguin. Was it a failure? I asked myself: and in the question itself thought I suspected danger. I found myself all at once overwhelmed with a suffocating sensation of universal black darkness. Blackness. I was being sacrificed, a white lamb, to black Africa. (17)

Wolfe referring to Gauguin as a failure raises the question of what exactly Wolfe considers to be the failure, as well as the danger. Is it that Gauguin never found a purely primitive world, or that he became too attached to the subjects he studied? Could it be that in seeking this primitive world Gauguin literally met his doom as he died on one of his many trips to French Polynesia, just as Wolfe dies of a fever caught in South Africa? What danger can come to the artist when working in different lands, and what harm can they do? Wolfe feels threatened by the “universal black darkness”, for he sees himself as “being sacrificed”. It is possible that what Wolfe is really feeling is the realization that he cannot come

into Africa and simply “give them what you want them to want” (*Turbott Wolfe* 5). Though he imagined South Africa to be a blank slate in which he could exercise his own ideas of art, he is realizing that artforms and culture already exist in this place. Further, skin color dictates this society in a way that he cannot have control over. Though he can depict and critique his own desires in his art, he cannot control the desires others. The sacrifice he speaks of could be the notion of the belief of the simplistic black African. The black Africans are far more complex than he imagined, both in their art and culture, and in the rules of their society which he imagined to be so binary.

“A Living Image”

Wolfe’s inability to control his own desires, and his implicit participation in carnival, is exemplified when he falls in love with the Lembu woman Nhliziyombi. Prior to falling in love, Wolfe never quite fit the role of the Primitivist, though aspects of their admiration still infiltrated his vision. Unlike Gauguin and others who had several native mistresses, Wolfe remained celibate while in South Africa, earning himself the nickname of Chastity (*Turbott Wolfe* 29). At this time, miscegenation was not illegal in South Africa but was discouraged. Despite this, many of the white settlers in the novel such as Flesher keep native mistresses. Though Wolfe’s relationship with Nhliziyombi is different than these purely carnal relationships, it is at this point in the novel that Wolfe becomes most like the Primitivists.

Nhliziyombi is a local girl who shops at Wolfe's trading station, and at first Wolfe fears she was sent by competitors to seduce him (*Turbott Wolfe* 30). This fear highlights the paranoid attitude Wolfe begins to adopt towards desire, and a latent fear of not being able to control one's own desires. After hearing of her positive reputation, Wolfe begins to fall in love with her, describing her as a "fine rare savage, of a type you will find nowhere now: it has been killed by the missions, the poor whites and the towns" (*Turbott Wolfe* 29). Her value lies in her authenticity as an African woman, the sort that seems to no longer exist because of white settlers. It is as if contact with white civilization will taint her, reducing her value in Wolfe's eyes. As he describes her, his language is very objectifying, referring to her as a "savage", a term which was less controversial at the time but still invoked violence and fear. He also refers to her as an "it" and a "type", stripping her of autonomy as an individual and turning her into a representation of her people. Nhliziyombi represents what the Primitivists were searching for when venturing into these colonized lands; she is the untouched ideal which Gauguin seeks, and she is where Wolfe becomes a Primitivist.

As Wolfe has demonstrated before, however, he refuses to simplify the black African. Rather than describing her physical beauty and painting it as an artist might, Wolfe reflects upon the power that she holds, both against him and in her own society. Nhliziyombi is "an ambassadress of all that beauty (it might be called holiness), that intensity of the old wonderful unknown primitive African life [...] She was a living image of what had been killed by [...] our obscene civilization that conquers everything" (31). Much happens in this short passage.

Wolfe gives power back to Nhliziyombi by likening her to an ambadress, a political actor that the Oxford English Dictionary defines as an envoy or messenger (“ambassador” OED). Much has been written about the powerlessness of the art subject, but here Nhliziyombi is a messenger, not a subject.⁶ This implies a willingness; Nhliziyombi is telling, and Wolfe is listening. Further, she is a messenger of beauty and holiness, remarkably positive traits to be the ambadress of. The lure of “the old wonderful unknown primitive African life” still exists for Wolfe, but he admits his lack of knowledge, recognizing that Nhliziyombi has more. He further calls his own civilization “obscene” for its desire to “conquer everything”, admitting the faults of his people, and implying that he does not intend to conquer Nhliziyombi. It will not be a relationship of force, but more like a conversation as might be conducted by an ambadress. This stays true as Wolfe and Nhliziyombi never have physical relations, their relationship peaking at sitting in a field for an hour (*Turbott Wolfe* 39).

In his liberalism, however, Wolfe demonstrates his own biases. By believing that his civilization, the Western world, has destroyed the pureness of Africa and its native people, Wolfe is indicating how much power he believes his people to have. As Frantz Fanon describes, a culture is not destroyed by another culture; it is mummified (34). Rather than dying out completely, a colonized culture is “closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yoke of oppression” (34). When Wolfe describes Nhliziyombi and her culture as a “type” that has been “killed” by white colonization, Wolfe is refusing to see that a modern variation of

⁶ For power relationships in art, see *The Force of Art* by Krzysztof Ziarek or *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger.

this culture still exists; instead he wants the “traditional” version of the culture available whenever and however he wants. Wolfe insults his own culture for destroying the culture of Nhliziyombi, yet the very act of viewing her culture as killed is a continuation of the very same oppression Wolfe is criticizing. In his liberal attitude Wolfe reveals his hierarchical view, seeing his own culture as powerful enough to destroy another.

Though complicating the role of the white man in colonial spaces, by falling for Nhliziyombi he is falling for the appeal of the primitive. Wolfe cannot abandon his inherently Western background; this is most obvious when he calls her a “living image” (31). A Renaissance concept, the living image was based on belief that some artists were so talented they could render an image that is beyond lifelike; instead it became a living thing.⁷ Images were thought to have literal power over viewers, influencing things such as reproduction and childbirth (Mussachio 177-179). Though the power of the image has become less literal in modern days, the concept of the “living image” has remained throughout art history and would have been one that Wolfe, as a presumably trained Western artist, would have been familiar with. Referring to Nhliziyombi as a living image works in two different ways. On one hand, it strongly positions Nhliziyombi as the subject of a piece of art, rather than a person. By giving Wolfe both access to the native subject as well as the education of the Renaissance, he becomes a true Primitivist. According to Fry, Cezanne’s genius came from “the struggle within him between the Baroque contortions... and the extreme simplicity, the Primitive

⁷ For more on the living image, read Fredrika Jacobs *The Living Image in Renaissance Art*.

or almost Byzantine interpretation which he gave naturally to the scenes of actual life” (Fry 12). By combining his Western knowledge and Primitive influence, Cezanne became the ultimate artist. Wolfe likewise has an internal struggle between the Primitive and the Renaissance, giving him power as an artist.

On the other hand, referring to Nhliziyombi as a living image restores autonomy to her as paintings were believed to have worldly power. Nhliziyombi has the power to cause desire within Wolfe, stripping him of control. Relevant to this is the emphasis on the carnal within carnival. As a “living image”, Nhliziyombi’s corporal existence is emphasized, and is indeed a necessary component to the desire he feels. Her power, and the importance of the body, is fortified by the bodily pain that Wolfe feels because of his love for her. He describes his nights as being “fatal” because he is kept awake, tormented by thoughts of her (*Turbott Wolfe* 32). Further, he subjects himself to aggressive physical exercise such as chopping wood and going on long walks (*Turbott Wolfe* 34). Nhliziyombi is simultaneously minimized to the subject of a painting and elevated to a woman with the power to be “fatal”, showing the complicated nature of Wolfe’s feelings. Notably, Wolfe was not her artist; he merely recognized her as a living image.

Indeed, his love for Nhliziyombi quickly becomes one of the greatest stressors he has experienced in South Africa thus far. He admits: “I was in love with Nhliziyombi not only against my conscience, but against my reason; against my intellect; against my plans; *against myself*” (*Turbott Wolfe* 33). This remonstrance is applicable not only to his love for Nhliziyombi, but to many

aspects of his journey thus far. Wolfe did not go to Africa on his own accord as was previously discussed—in fact it was firmly “against [his] plan.” In his self-critical stance at the carnival he resisted participation even though it was inevitable. He likewise did not set out to be fascinated by the black Africans—it was an automatic function of his “eye training itself”. His experience with Nhliziyombi is much like his experience at the carnival, where he was an actor in something that caused moral shock. He feels this moral shock now in the influence she has over him, and though he wants to stop he is unable to. This speaks to the danger that the artist faces—the artist absorbs and responds to society. When this society is at conflict with the artist’s moral compass, they cannot help to be influenced by it, even if aware of and against the changes occurring.

“In Living Flesh”

Wolfe’s love for Nhliziyombi is cut short as she was engaged to her cousin and leaves for her new husband’s town. Shortly after, Wolfe returns home from a dinner and finds himself in a poor mood, while outside a storm rages.

I felt also a sudden fear that I too might be sacrificed, a victim to the inexorable Mumbo-Jumbo: and I swore proudly to myself that Africa should never master me. I felt a sudden impulse to swift and dangerous political action: Zachary, somewhere at the back of the house, should be a pivot. He had seemed an omen; he should become a tool, or a symbol, or a weapon. (56)

In this passage Wolfe makes a significant change in his approach to art. He makes explicit his desire to utilize the black man as a tool. Prior in his career as an artist in South Africa, Wolfe has depicted the black body through artistic mediums such as paint or sculpture. Now he turns to political action and the corporeal body as his medium. Other Western groups in Africa such as missionaries and colonials likewise utilized the native population as a means to an end. Whether that be the conquering of land and resources or the spreading of ideology, white people came to Africa and used the black body for labor and baptisms. Wolfe began using the black body for his benefit when he started noting their animalistic grace and depicting them in his art. He now continues this more literally in saying that he will begin using the body to create his art.

This passage continues, revealing the results of using Zachary as a tool:

I had begun by feeling sad and ended by feeling violent. The rain poured down incessantly, clamorous with thunder, seared with lightening. Ah, would that it might batter down this studio, this churchlike temple of my past, flood it and spoil it, that I might step forth free with Zachary and Caleb, with moral violence, to conquer Africa! (56)

In this section Wolfe begins to turn his back on art, opting instead to be a political actor. Whereas Wolfe had previously called white civilization “obscene” for its desire to conquer everything, now he himself is proposing to conquer Africa (*Turbott Wolfe* 31). However, unlike white civilization which “took away everything from the natives,” Wolfe instead proposes to shed his own history to unite with the black Africans (*Turbott Wolfe* 29). He desires for the raging storm

to destroy his studio, the “churchlike temple of [his] past,” so that he “might step forth free with Zachary and Caleb...to conquer Africa!” The symbolic destruction of his studio marks his break from the arts, and invokes the previous destruction of the Gothic building of his life in England. Leaving art and his past will allow him to proceed freely. Interestingly, his argument is similar to an argument made by Roger Fry. Just as Wolfe wants to be unhindered by his past, Fry too saw this to be a necessary move within art. When asked why the artist should study Primitive art, Fry responded: “The answer is that it is [...] simply necessary, if art is to be rescued from the hopeless encumbrance of its own accumulations of science” (Fry, Reed 86). For Fry, art and art history had built upon itself so much that all emotion was lacking. By returning to Primitive art, one could bypass years of art history to achieve a purer piece of art. Wolfe is desiring the same when he hopes the storm of Africa will erase his past. Unlike Fry, however, he is modifying art as well in the process, channeling his beliefs into using the body as political action. Perhaps this is the omen that Zachary carries—the end of Wolfe as an artist, the beginning of his explorations into politics.

Wolfe continues his thoughts in this same passage, now considering his larger goals:

I thought of what Van Gogh once said about Christ: “...artiste plus grand que tous les artistes, dédaignant et le marbre et l’argile et la couleur, travaillant en chair vivante.” Without seeking to put myself on the level of Christ, yet I too would work in living flesh. (56-57)

It is interesting that in this passage Wolfe compares himself specifically to Christ. In Christian tradition, Christ is a physical incarnation of the son of God. Christ forgave sins and performed miracles on the human body. More often, God is described as an artist because he created the world, so what does it mean when Wolfe refers instead to Christ? While living, Christ did not necessarily use the human body to create, but did however perfect those that were already living by actions such as giving sight to the blind. However, Christ wasn't using the body as a "weapon" as Wolfe intends to. Rather, as much as Christ perfected other bodies, his own body too was used. Christ's body was a vessel intended to die for the forgiveness of sins; in the eucharist, Christ metaphorically gives his body and blood for others to consume, and in crucifixion, according to Christian tradition, he literally gives his body. Wolfe clarifies that he does not propose to actually become Christ when he says: "Without seeking to put myself on the level of Christ", but he does intend to work with the human body as Christ does. However, while Christ is working *in* living flesh, as in has a body, Wolfe intends to work *in* living flesh, as in with the bodies of others. He will use them as any other artistic tool, such as a paintbrush or chisel, but this time for political action.

Just after seeing Zachary, and just before comparing himself to Christ, Wolfe himself considers his role as an artist. He walks up and down his studio and "caresse[s] [a sculpture] as though it were human" (*Turbott Wolfe* 54). He also notes that "All about me were my tools and mediums and instruments", everything he uses to make his art (*Turbott Wolfe* 54). Significantly, Wolfe caresses the sculpture "as though it were human", indicating that it is indeed not

human. Before, when describing Nhliziyombi as a living image, he was referring to a living human. Now he is interacting with a sculpture imagining it to be human. In this interaction Wolfe reveals both his desire, and his frustration. He caresses the sculpture, a physical action of corporal desire and want, wishing it were a body, perhaps revealing the desire he feels for others such as Nhliziyombi and Zachary. However, he also realizes the lack of life that exists in art. He sees the deficiency of art and its limitations, and therefore seeks a medium that has more power, more force. He finds this new medium in political action, as the political actor creates a society just as the artist creates art. Wolfe has already conflated art with politics previously in the novel when he says: "If you are to be a success in trade, in art, in politics, in life itself, you must *never* give people what they want" (*Turbott Wolfe* 5). This philosophy suddenly seems more sinister when human bodies are at the will of Wolfe's wishes and desires. By caressing the statue "as though it were human", Wolfe simultaneously shows his passion through the touch, and his frustration with the medium in that it is not and never can be truly living.

Shortly after the scene with the storm, Wolfe meets a new priest, Friston. The two begin to discuss the future of the black African, and become friends. Together, along with Caleb and Zachary Msomi and Mabel van der Hoost, they create Young Africa, a political organization that considers the future of Africa. Interestingly, while Wolfe has just claimed to be like Christ, Friston as a missionary is supposed to be doing the work of Christ. Wolfe's friendship with Friston, which helps him achieve political action, is representative of this

interaction. While Wolfe knows that he wants to take political action, it is Friston that instigates it and makes it come to reality, much like a missionary spreading the word of Christ. Quickly, the group begins to focus on miscegenation. Friston and the others believe “the world is quickly and inevitably becoming a coloured world,” and they plan to be prepared and welcome this change (*Turobott Wolfe* 59). If miscegenation is the answer, then indeed Wolfe would be working in living flesh. In Renaissance art theory, the act of reproduction is not unlike the process the artist goes through. Conception is the flash of inspiration, the gestation period is the artist contemplating an idea, and birth is the creation of the work.⁸ With the enthusiasm of the others around him, Wolfe gets consumed by this dialogue of miscegenation, even though this was previously one of the factors holding him back from having a physical affair with Nhliziyombi. This shows the multiplicity of his character, and the ways that living in South Africa is being absorbed by his artistic mind and eye, changing his previous notions.

At the same time Wolfe is embracing miscegenation, he tells Friston: “I am become the complete Colonial” (59). Initially this seems contradictory, as typically colonials would be against miscegenation as it would be seen as unnatural for a white and black person to have children. What Wolfe might mean by this, however, is that he has become consumed by race relations like the colonial, and is unable to see otherwise. Wolfe wants to have power in this society

⁸ Renaissance art historian Fredrika Jacobs writes extensively on this topic in *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, particularly on pages 34-36. She uses the term “(pro)creative” to discuss the terminology that was used in the Renaissance to discuss both art and reproduction, such as *genio*, from *genius*, *gigno*, *gignere*, which means “to beget,” “to bear,” “to bring forth,” and “to produce” (35).

that he expected to be so binary, and when his power is challenged by the desires and wants of others, he seeks a stance that will continue to give him power. Miscegenation itself might not lead directly to power, but being among the first to support what he sees as the future of Africa might. Politically, this liberal opinion positions him ahead of the more conservative white colonials, where biracial relationship indeed to become the future. Further, as an artist Wolfe wants to be able to control the desires of others and have his desires seen by others. By politically supporting miscegenation, which he sees to be the future, Wolfe gets to see his own desires and art carried out through it. After all, he desired Nhliziyombi; now, with others influencing and supporting him, he can more openly accept these desires.

At the same time, Wolfe's claim to be a colonial could also indicate his struggle to maintain power and his European identity in South Africa. Wolfe was losing too much of his white British self by being an artist in a colonial space. The "living images" that he found in Nhliziyombi and others had too much influence over him, had the ability to be "fatal" and to control his emotions. Meanwhile, the actual art he was creating forever remained inanimate, unhuman, not quite a living image. The limitations caused by the medium were forever restricting, not giving him the control he wanted. As Cornwell explains, this change in character records "Wolfe's sustained moral shock at his incipient loss of a stable and coherent sense of identity, and... his attempts at first restoring, then reconstructing his sense of self via identification with those characters" ("Fair-Scene" 11). By turning to political action Wolfe is redefining his relationship with others in a way that gives

him power over their lives and their bodies. Previously, he has disdained the structure created by the “invisible constructor” of his life. Now Wolfe advocates for and acts as that control for the black Africans and the future of South Africa through political action, showing his retreat into order as he undergoes moral stress.

At the fair, Wolfe drew the imaginary line between himself and the Other. Now we see that “this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self” (Gilman 18). Though miscegenation has remained present throughout, carnival desire is replaced by political desire, all the while keeping its emphasis on the carnal. As an artist, Wolfe feels the need to express himself through a physical product, be that art or the human body. Here we see Wolfe very clearly as a “border crosser”, as discussed previously. He is using his art—the product of miscegenation—to push societal boundaries. Rather than simply desiring a black African, Wolfe is crafting a specific kind of black African, a kind of subject that will test society through miscegenation. Turning to politics is a move that both takes him away from the traditional production of art, and yet allows him to fill the role of the border-crossing artist.

“The Enormity of Nature”

The haven that political action seemed to provide is quickly ruined for Wolfe as he realizes that Mabel van der Hoost, a white woman and fellow member of Young Africa, is in love with the black man Zachary Msomi. Though previously advocating for miscegenation, seeing the reality of it collapses any acceptance

Wolfe previously expressed. Upon learning of Mabel and Zachary's relationship, Wolfe responds in markedly physical way:

I did not seem so much to be seized with a mental realization of a plain fact as with a cold physical terror. I was intestinally sick, as at a catastrophe [...] It was one thing to talk glibly about miscegenation, to fool about with an idea, and another to find oneself face to face with the actual happening; it was the difference between a box of matches and a house on fire.

I found myself detached, and I knew myself powerless [...] I felt myself to be like a scientist who watches some enormity of nature through a microscope." 76

In this passage, Wolfe sees theory brought to praxis, and can no longer support it. The political front that he has attempted to protect himself with dissolves as Wolfe grapples with the reality of miscegenation. The consequence of miscegenation is undeniably physical. Though art likewise creates a physical product, it is purely representational, being a physical manifestation of a specific view of the world. Yet again, the body is at the center of this passage, only this time it is his own body reacting. His response to realizing Mabel and Zachary's relationship is purely physical; he feels "a cold physical terror" and is "intestinally sick". When working in theory, Wolfe could imagine using the bodies of others. Now, in praxis, he realizes his own lack of control over the situation, and his response is physical rather than emotional. Perhaps he reacts so strongly because he himself refused to act on his own desires for Nhliziyombi. Now, seeing others go through with their own desires, he realizes that the bodies he thought he had

possession over have desires and act on their own, mirroring his disgust at the carnival that he was not able to control. His own body reflects the fear he feels at losing the ability to control the desires of others.

In this passage, Wolfe deems himself a scientist, rather than an artist. He says he is “like a scientist who watches some enormity of nature through a microscope.” Notably, science is often placed in contrast to the arts (Gaztambide-Fernández 242). While the arts are imaginative and creative, science is based on observable phenomena. However, though Wolfe self-identifies as a scientist, there is little to support him actually being a scientist other than his metaphorical reference to a “microscope”. Rather, in my opinion, Wolfe is distancing himself emotionally from the situation, opting instead for a matter-of-fact inventory of the situation. The artist is sensitive and receptive to society; as a scientist, however, he can be “detached” and “powerless”, merely “observing” rather than producing or interfering as an artist might. However, though Wolfe may be powerless, his corporal reaction proves that he is far from “detached” from the situation, and only describes it as such to justify his inability to influence the situation.

Notably, this shift makes Wolfe more critical of the black African than ever, confirming that he feels threatened by miscegenation coming to praxis. He becomes “increasingly irrational and racially paranoid” after Zachary and Mabel’s affair comes to light, making observations that would have been unthinkable to the supposedly progressive Wolfe that originally came to Africa (Cornwell 50). For example, when visiting his neighbor Soper, he sees Soper’s child playing with a Lembu child and states that the boy’s “small mean soul [was] getting coloured

with the monstrous intangible darkness of the native point of view. The child was in danger” (*Turbott Wolfe* 85). As a character that previously prided himself on his friendship with native people, this comment is uncharacteristic to say the least. He stops attempting to be the border-crossing liberal artist who sees the complexities of black Africans. For the remainder of the novel, Wolfe never again mentions the making of art. Though he may not be the scientist he claims to be, he also begins to shut off his artistic eye, reverting to a more typical colonial attitude that is skeptical of black Africans.

“A Bucket with no Bottom”

Much happens in the remainder of the novel. Mabel and Zachary are wedded, leading to the demise of Friston. Friston, who has a breakdown involving a hallucinogenic drug, runs off to Swedish East Africa and is there murdered for political reasons. Friston’s death, which may be a warning to Wolfe about the dangers of getting too involved politically, spurs Wolfe to leave South Africa, around the same time that his trading license is revoked for his involvement in Young Africa. Dejected and seeing his time in Africa as unsuccessful, Wolfe leaves as lonely as he arrived. As he gives Caleb his three months’ notice, he reflects: “My life, Caleb, is like a bucket with no bottom [...] Once I thought Africa could fill it [...] Once I thought fame could fill it [...] With Young Africa I allowed myself to be cheated into the idea that politics would give me what I sought [...] Caleb, I am an egoist” (*Turbott Wolfe* 125). Wolfe is recounting the many different moves he made, the different roles he attempted to fill while in Africa. From artist to colonialist to political actor to “scientist”, Wolfe constantly

shifted his identity to maintain power in South Africa. In his typical self-reflective way, he admits that he is an “egoist,” more interested in himself than others. As the famous Leonardo da Vinci quote goes, “ogni dipintore dipinge se,” every artist depicts himself. In the end, Wolfe’s admittance of being an egoist proves his continued belief in what he stated from the beginning, that you must give others what you want them to want. Each action of his has been a matter of self-interest. Wolfe’s desires and his wish to control the desires of others has been one of the few consistencies in Wolfe’s experience in South Africa, and he leaves saying that he is an egoist just as he entered with an attitude of superiority.

All that Wolfe is left with, at the end of his time in South Africa, is himself. His move back to England is out of necessity to make sure that he does indeed leave with a self at all. As Cornwell says: “His various attempts to realize himself in engagement with the Other – Africa, Nhliziyombi, the collectivity of political activism – have all failed; he is left to confirm his own despised existence reflexively, in the mirrored prison of the self” (“Emotional” 48). Friston’s death more than anything instigates this move. Seeing Friston so destroyed, both mentally and physically, by Africa made Wolfe aware of the potential danger. Wolfe sees the death of his friend and understands that his own self is at stake. As an artist, it could be argued that all he ever had was himself; each individual artist is reliant on their own self to produce what they understand and see. But his time in South Africa shows how he desperately tries to keep this self intact, despite exterior influence, in order to maintain his identity as an artist and as a Westerner. When he realizes the impossibility of remaining unchanged by society as an artist,

he claims to be a detached scientist. And finally, when he realizes that his own life is at stake, he sees the necessity of returning to England.

Ironically, Wolfe's life post-Africa is much the same as before he left. Previously, he was frustrated with the precise, unvarying plan his life was taking. The "invisible constructor" was restrictive, and Africa was a chance to break from this plan. Now, as he returns to England, he plans to continue the rigid solitary life he previously held. He tells Caleb that he will "go and live quietly in England [...] I shall not make many friends" (*Turbott Wolfe* 125). By repeatedly shifting his identity to isolate himself from others, he experienced Africa without ever experiencing those that live there. His retreat to England will only secure this, removing desires that were first witnessed at the carnival and experienced through his love for Nhliziyombi. As Cornwall notes, "His life has come full circle to the condition of terminal isolation [...] in which he languished at the outset of the narrative" ("Emotional" 48). Previously Wolfe tried to free himself from the invisible constructor by going to South Africa; then, through political action Wolfe tried to instill this structure upon others. Wolfe now welcomes this mundane life as it guarantees his safety and lacks moral questioning that challenges his conception of self.

Notably, Wolfe still plans on including art in his life, but in a different manner than before. No longer is he an explorative artist searching for a way to combine all of the arts, or to document an unknown Africa like the Primitivists. He tells Caleb that instead he "shall dabble in archaeology, in church architecture perhaps" (125). He has turned to archaeology, a discipline that focuses on the

reconstruction of the past. Previously Wolfe was concerned with the future and the creation of new materials. Now, he is fixated on the past, preferring to reconstruct than to construct. It is a meticulous subject that catalogues and categorizes the facts it finds. It is the opposite of creating or interacting with a “living image,” or “living flesh”. Indeed, it is more scientific in its approach. Architecture, with its basis in engineering, is similar. Before Africa, he criticized living a life dictated by an “invisible constructor”. Now he plans to create this himself by studying architecture. His desires for his own life are simple, with a wish to have few friends and live without distinction (*Turbott Wolfe* 125). He implements for himself a gridded, structured life, secure in ways that were not possible in Africa. His art is now less about creating, and more about studying and understanding.

And finally, in the end, Wolfe sits and recounts this story in a Conradian manner to the narrator “William Plomer”. Perhaps his confessional story is shared out of his need, as an artist, to share his experience with others. What it reveals, however, is the role that desire plays for the artist, particularly in a colonial environment. Brought to South Africa because of a doctor, his move was not premeditated but was a welcome escape from his restricted life in England. Once in South Africa, he was surprised both by the carnal desire that existed in this society, as well as the complexity of black Africans. Expecting to find a clear, binary structure that provided him with more power than in England, these complications were a revelation to Wolfe. He becomes further surprised to see his own desires influenced by his environment when he falls in love with

Nhliziyombi. This marks the moment where he, as an artist, is being influenced and changed because of the society he is interacting with and responding to in his art. Afraid of losing the ability to control his own desires, he turns to political action, transferring his work from that of art materials to the bodies of others. Wolfe turned to political action in the hopes that it would yield more palpable results in society than his art did. Instead, however, he experiences a corporal disgust when his political theories actualize, causing him to detach from the situation. Finally, he returns home to England, not intent on creating art anymore but in studying it. He seeks to willingly instill the structure that he previously detested; the reader also knows that he is dying of a fever he caught while in Africa that must have become known after his return to England, as it is not included in his own retelling, but that signals his ultimate death.

Turbott Wolfe could be read as yet another story of the white man being destroyed by the power of Africa, and in many ways, it is. Wolfe is challenged in Africa, goes through moral tests, and in the end returns to and dies in his native land, afraid of the power held by this other space. However, his role specifically as an artist allows us to see aspects that other colonial narratives do not explore. The artist functions both inside and outside of a society, partaking in day to day life and yet producing objects that respond to these experiences. Wolfe is able to be influenced by the society he moves to, and remain critical of it. His craft is dependent on his own desires, and as they begin to shift because of the influences of others, he retreats, seeking more power over and distance from others, including black Africans. Wolfe could have been a successful artist in this space,

were he willing to allow it to influence him. But it is in his necessity for control that he meets his demise; unable to allow this influence, he instead repositions himself in South African society, hoping to find a place in which he, as an artist, can impart his desires onto others without receiving or being affected by theirs. Oftentimes a critique of the Primitivist movement, *Turbott Wolfe* offers an alternative telling of how the Western artist interacts with colonial spaces. Turbott Wolfe ultimately shows how the artist, seeking a space freed from the Western art historical tradition, meets not a blank slate in South Africa, but a civilization full of its own complexities and desires. Instead, he finds the power that production has, be that in art or in human bodies, and the responsibility that comes with producing in a society that is not one's own.

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