

# **Exploring The Influence of Globalisation and Neoliberalism On Hybridised African Subjectivity in John Trengrove's the Wound (2017)**

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## **Abstract**

Considering the recent resurgence of polemical Afrocentric thought, the relationship between the global North and the African continent is once again under scrutiny. Globalising forces have been portrayed as tools of neocolonial imperialism, which limit and homogenise African subjectivity to resemble that of the North. However, this article challenges this notion by exploring the contribution of globalisation and access to the neoliberal marketplace in shaping a hybrid subjectivity that defies African and Northern notions of 'authentic' identity. Instead, it embraces agency and choice facilitated by these globalising forces. This study closely analyses John Trengrove's film, *The Wound* (2017), as a text that challenges geographical boundaries and promotes a more hybrid form of subjectivity. The article provides an overview of neoliberalism and its role in facilitating globalisation, highlighting the resistance faced by pockets of 'traditional' culture. Additionally, *The Wound* (2017) is examined as a cinematic expression of globalisation's transformative potential, as it subverts traditional cultural performances and offers an opportunity to embrace a globalised world for identity representation. Finally, the article emphasises the significance of representing diverse forms of subjectivity in media texts, moving away from normative or prescribed modes of identity performance.

**Keywords:** Africa; globalisation; neoliberalism; subjectivity; representation

## **1. Introduction**

With ongoing calls for decolonization throughout Africa and the diaspora, the interface between the global North and the African continent is once again being interrogated. One by-product of such renewed existential plumbing has been the emergence of a polemical Afrocentric ideology that asserts the existence of an 'authentic' African subjectivity which, it is maintained, was lost through the process of colonial contact. Through such a lens, globalisation is accordingly seen, as a medium through which neocolonial imperialism persists,

and African subjectivity is curtailed and homogenised—effectively made to resemble that of the North.

Contrary to this notion, this article will examine how the forces of globalisation as well as access to the neoliberal marketplace fosters a hybrid subjectivity in South Africa, one which adheres to neither African nor Northern notions of ‘authentic’ identity, but instead bears testimony to the agency and choice that is availed to one because of such globalizing forces. To this end, John Trengrove’s *The Wound* (2017) will be examined as a film that, within the transnational neoliberal marketplace of globalisation, undermines geographical demarcations and fosters a more hybrid form of subjectivity.

In this regard, firstly, an overview of neoliberalism will be provided. Secondly, how the neoliberal juggernaut has precipitated the process of globalisation, along with how the ensuing cosmopolitanism has been met with resistance from pockets of ‘traditional’ culture, will be elaborated upon. Thirdly *The Wound* (2017) will be analysed as a cinematic expression of the critical spirit of globalisation, on account of how it subverts notions of traditional cultural performance and presents the opportunity for a performance of identity that also draws from the larger context of the globalised world. Finally, the article will conclude with a reflection upon the importance of representation of differing forms of subjectivity within media texts that do not adhere to normative modes of identity.

## 2. An Overview of The Rise of Neoliberalism

To fully comprehend neoliberalism, one must first understand the conditions that brought about its predecessor, the Keynesian welfare state. The Great Depression, which occurred in 1929, is one of the major turning points in economic history. Indeed, the catalyst drove many to question the earlier liberal, *laissez-faire* economic policies that had been in place since the nineteenth century. In fact, in an inaugural address of Congress in 1935, Roosevelt stated that he believed excessive market freedoms had led to the social problem of the Great Depression, warning Americans to renounce the acquisition of wealth which, through excessive profits, creates undue private power” (as cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 183). His decrying of the defining feature of *laissez faire* economic policy, namely market freedom, marked a major diametric shift against the economic tide towards its nemesis—Keynesianism. This shift was, of course, not without opposition. Friederich Hayek emerged as a prominent critic of Keynesianism, levelling ire at it in a book called *Road to Serfdom* (Jackson, 2012, p. 780). This line of critique continued in his later work, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), in which he posited that the British welfare system is “leading to dependency, increasing public expenditure, enterprise-paralyzing taxation, and the growth of bureaucracy and loss of individual rights” (Hayek, as cited in Peden, 2017, p. 416).

Nevertheless, Keynesianism under Roosevelt’s New Deal established itself as a moderate form of the previous liberal, self-regulating market. As such, even though the core principle of its policies included capital controls and progressive taxes, Keynes himself

represented his economic approach as a kind of “middle way” between unregulated *laissez faire* liberalism and Marxism (Kirshner, 1999, p. 316). Spurred on by the belief that “neither of these nineteenth century philosophies were capable of sustaining economic progress in the twentieth century,” he envisioned an alternative, which he outlined in his four seminal texts: *Am I a Liberal?* (1925), *The end of laissez-faire* (1926), *Poverty in Plenty: is the economic system self adjusting?* (1934), and *Book VI of The General Theory* (1936). From these texts, four definitive themes emerge: the first is unregulated capitalism, followed by “the significance of the distribution of income, which is of positive, normative and practical significance” (Kirshner, 1999, p. 318). Third, there is a “strong respect for the market mechanism” and finally, “an anti-economistic philosophy rounds out the characteristics of the middle way” (Kirshner, 1999, p. 318). Essentially, these served as a cartography of the configuration of Keynesian economic policy.

Because it had arisen out of dissatisfaction with its unregulated predecessor, the first theme was already fulfilled. The second would prove a little more complicated. Keynes conceded that some inequality was necessary for the market-based economy to function, but also recognised that rampant inequality would result in lower aggregate demand and therefore lower economic growth (Kirshner, 1999, p. 319). This came to inform the third theme, the need for a market mechanism, which arose from his acknowledgment of how unregulated markets distribute wealth arbitrarily and unjustly, so they need to be regulated (Kirshner, 1999, p. 319). Lastly, rather than pontificate, Keynes saw the role of the economist as having to “solve the economic problem: the struggle for comfort and the necessities of life.” furthermore, contrary to the general economist bent, he viewed wealth as a means rather than an end (Kirshner, 1999, pp. 320 -321).

Having been successful in the United States, Keynesianism was exported to the rest of the world, specifically in the Southern Cone of Latin America, in countries such as Chile, Argentina, and parts of Brazil (Klein, 2008). These countries became testing grounds for the applicability of Keynesian principles to the developing world. Soon these developmentalist pilot programmes saw success, and the Southern Cone began to resemble Europe—workers in factories organised into unions and negotiated salaries, their children attended the new public universities and, by the 1950s, Argentina had the largest middle class in Latin America (Klein, 2008).

However, the success of the Keynesian policy was short lived. The late 1960s saw a major decline in global capitalism, which was further exacerbated by the 1973 recession and the OPEC oil crisis (Harvey, 2007). The regulated market began to wane, providing ample opportunity for the rise of neoliberalism. In the 60s, as Keynesianism and the welfare state dominated economic policy in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in some parts of the rest of the world, a fervent neoliberal doctrine born from right-wing economists began to gain momentum. Among these dissenters were central figures in the Austrian and Chicago Schools of Economics, Friederich Hayek and Milton Friedman. It was not until the late 1970s that their anti-Keynesian policy was implemented as a strategic response to the declining profitability of

mass industry and counteracting the crisis of Keynesian welfarism (Peck et. al., 2009, p. 50). Right-wing politicians such as Reagan and Thatcher played an integral role in moving their doctrines from the realm of theory to practice. The former led reforms against taxation and the latter on Keynesian economic policy in the United Kingdom (Connell & Dados, 2014, p.119).

From this point on, the model of economic policy was “rolled out” and implemented in the rest of the world via the IMF and WTO (Connell & Dados, 2014, p. 119). A slight sense of irony is derived from the knowledge that one of these institutions was established in the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, in which the IMF had agreed to help stabilise other national economies that were suffering due to economic fluctuations but was now a purveyor of neoliberalism (Chorev & Babb, 2009, p. 465). The onset of the Third World debt crisis made it easier for neoliberal policies to take hold. Often, the IMF served as a middleman, a creditor between such countries and the World Bank, facilitating bailouts (Chorev & Babb, 2009, p. 465). In the specific case of the 1976 Mexican debt crisis, the IMF played a more involved role, parlaying for the country to accept a currency adjustment between the peso and the U.S. dollar in exchange for financial support (Kerhsaw, 2018, p. 295). The tactics employed in Mexico would become a staple manner in which the organisation responded to similar crises in the rest of the world (Kerhsaw, 2018, p. 295). Thus, the IMF began to resemble what Kindleberger refers to as a hegemon— a term appropriated by the economist from neo-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, as a means to describe the domineering role played by the United States in the world economy since 1945 (Mueller, 2011, p. 385).

However, this particular trajectory of the emergence of neoliberalism has garnered some criticisms. The first point of attack is the coherence of the concept of neoliberalism. Theorists such as Mudge (2008, p. 70) argue that scholars often treat disparate free market phenomena flowing from a singular source of “the supremacy market competitiveness” as synonymous. To highlight this, an example of Ordoliberalism is given. Commonly conflated with neoliberalism, the economic doctrine has its own discrete history. Born from the context of post-war Germany, it was espoused by a group of economists who emphasised “private property, enterprise, and competition” but were anti-monopolistic and unopen to corporate capital, which sets them apart from the highly monopolised and corporately funded neoliberal project of the Chicago School of Economics (Connell & Dados., 2014, p. 118). Thus, the importance of context in informing the features of economic policy is established, which informs the second point of dissent.

The most enduring accounts of neoliberalism privilege scholarship from the global North, thereby creating the implication that the global North is the leading producer of knowledge, perpetuating tropes of the South as a receptacle (Connell & Dados, 2014, p. 118). In a move to counteract these theorists, such as Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, in their book *Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution* (2004), present a different perspective, tracing the development of neoliberalism to the capitalist crisis that emerged in 1950s and 1960s in America and Europe, rather than the Great Depression (Connell & Dados,



2014, p. 118). Furthermore, the emergence of neoliberalism is framed as being a result of capitalist mechanisms (Connell & Dados., 2014, p. 118).

Geopolitical bias in scholarly literature is also addressed. In particular, the ideal of the South as a laboratory for Northern economic experiments. This ethnocentrism is rife within the work of Drake (2006, p. 26), who used the phrase “implantation of U.S. neoliberalism in Latin America” in one of his papers. Rather than address the rise of neoliberalism under Pinochet in Chile, expounding on how the conditions affect its permutations within the region, more time is spent extolling American hegemony. Alternatively, there are instances when the implementation of neoliberalism in countries in the global South has been used as a case study, as exemplified by Sackley (2015), who studied the development of neoliberal policies in India as an act of subversion, adding a different perspective to the field of study.

In summary, while academic inquiry into neoliberalism is prolific, it often exhibits the same themes. There is a pre-occupation with the configuration of power between the global South and North, as well as an over emphasis on the Northern case of its development, specifically in the United States and the United Kingdom. More scholarship should consider cases in the global South as objects of study to further develop critical literature and present new perspectives and ideas.

### 3. Globalisation

Globalisation can justifiably be characterised as one of the defining features of the twenty-first century (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 1). It is often described as being responsible for the deterritorial sense of connectivity across vast distances, undermining national and continental divides through the wonders of modern technologies such as social media and Web 2.0. Apart from aiding in social exchange, it is also cited as the reason for the increased ease in the flow of goods and capital across various marketplaces, facilitating the emergence of a global marketplace and world economy. In a sense, globalisation is catalytic and is the key ingredient in understanding related phenomena. This associative logic has made it “one of those tricky words that naturalized to the point of being indispensable” (Schirato & Webb, 2003, p. 97). In fact, Jan Arte Scholte (2008, p. 1472) even traces how the word has entered languages other than English over several decades, giving examples such as *lil 'alam* in Arabic, *mondialisation* in French and *utendawazi* in Swahili. All of this has resulted in a paradoxically specific problem: globalisation has become “pervasively known,” yet it remains unknown (Jones 2010, p. 1). Although much has been written about it, it remains one of the most elusive in the contemporary lexicon.

Besides the ‘what’ of concept, there is also much confusion regarding ‘when’ globalisation can be traced back to. In the vein of the sceptics, some scholars argue that the date of the inception of the phenomenon is as early as 1405, the year the first junk armadas left China, or in some cases 1492, the year Columbus set sail from Europe (O’Rourke & Williamson 2004, p. 109). These assertions are surprising considering the relatively recent usage of the term. First appearing between the 1930s and 1950s in a select few academic texts,

appearing in general dictionaries in 1960 and only coming into common usage much later, in the 1990s (James & Steger, 2014, p. 418). In addition to the semantic, temporal confusion, and lack of an originator, the term has taken on the air of timelessness and necessity of a buzzword. This is despite the fact that there is an entire discipline dedicated to the subject—the eponymous Globalisation Studies, which has been around for a few decades.

However, this is a bit of a misnomer because much of it focuses on the impact of globalisation, such as its effect on related phenomena such as migration, global economies, cultural exchange, political relations and internationalisation. More emphasis is often placed on globalisation and the interaction between the first and third worlds, giving rise to themes of inequality in the latter under the exploitation of the transnational class. Purveyors of this argument draw attention to the techno-economic framework of the phenomenon and thus argue that Western control of both technology and economic resources makes the interactions unequal. It is asserted that neoliberalism is the engine of globalisation and that it serves to usher in the new world order, which is cast in the likeness of the United States of America (Antonio, 2018, p.67). Antonio is not alone in this line of thinking. In fact, when considering the agendas that drive the process, Singh (2002) conflates the two terms, creating a compound term that encompasses his stance—“neoliberal globalism”. Both these scholars are an example of a sample of theorists who fall on the other side of the globalisation argument: anti-globalists. Rather than arguing about semantics and its origin, they focus on its impact on the world, particularly its economic impact. Notable examples of their dissent are the Zapatista Movement in Mexico and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. One of the movement’s most recognisable figures is Naomi Klein, whose seminal text *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) exposed the systematic erosion of Iraqi culture and the consequent invasive enforcement of American culture, values, and economic policy.

Although the source of dissent against globalisation is specifically economic, a similar logic and argument is employed when considering its cultural effects. A similar top-to-bottom approach is employed, and globalisation itself is synonymous with Westernisation, or more specifically, Americanisation. Instead of the usual neutral definitions of the phenomenon, theorists working within this critical framework also consider its ideological underpinning. In *The Liberal Virus* (2004), Samir Amin conflates globalisation with both liberalisation and Americanisation and goes as far as claiming that “liberal globalisation can nothing other than intensification of inequalities between people” in the global North and South (2004, p. 29). This may seem slightly polemical, but it is in some ways a more tactful rearticulation of what an earlier theorist asserted. For example, critics of cultural imperialism such as Said (1993) and Leclerc (2000) hold that even if one cannot equate globalisation as analogous to liberalisation, universalisation and even westernisation, one must then concede that it is a result of them.

However, the issue with this line of critique is that while asserting the hegemony of America and the larger West over the rest of the world, the latter is stripped of any agency within the interaction. In this regard, academics such as Robertson (2012) add much needed nuance to the debate. In his paper, ‘Globalisation or Glocalisation?’ Robertson asserts that

globalisation is often characterised as homogenisation and counters this assertion by drawing attention to the concept of glocalisation, which refers to its heterogeneous aspects (2012, p. 191). The term glocalisation is a neologism constructed from the words global and local. It is derived from the Japanese *dochakuka*, which was originally an agricultural principle of adapting farming practices to local conditions (Roudometof, 2016, p. 3). Closer to the modern form, the phrase global localisation is attributed to Sony Corporation CEO Akira Morita and was employed in corporate branding and advertising strategy. This process is especially exemplified by fast food culinary outfits such as McDonald's, which has standardised menu items across all of its flagship restaurants, but has local variations of specific foods according to the specific locale. Another example is how, in some instances, the Big Mac is served without cheese in accordance with *kosher* dietary requirements as well as providing a separate *halaal* menu (Kolmakova, 2017).

While this may seem like progress, a concession on the part of a multinational corporation, an acknowledgement of the local culture and customers in the countries in which these restaurants are established, anti-globalists still view it as an extension of global commercialisation. It plays into the trope or archetype of McWorld or, in some cases, McDisneyfication. To theorists such as Ritzer (2004), the act of glocalization merely cloaks the covert project of growth and accumulation; thus, in the lens of growbalization, glocalization is a means to an accumulative end (as cited in Holton, 2011, p. 197). Furthermore, in third world countries, McDonald's is not as cheap and affordable as in America, but falls within the reach of the middle class who have access to disposable income; thus, the presence of the fast food chain within the country highlights and exasperates inequality.

Essentially, the globalisation and glocalisation argument hinges on one's interpretation of the fact at hand. Although the interaction between the global North and South is rife with inequality and power imbalance, it is important to consider that it is not unilateral. The top-down approach to globalisation, which often characterised the subject from the global South as a mere receptacle, ignores the ingenuity of these subjects who take on Western languages and religions and tailor them to meet their own needs and environments. One needs only look at the variations of Christianity across continents and the various creole forms of European languages. To characterise globalisation as a Western project of cultural homogenisation ignores the Southern impact and participation within it.

## 4. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research design, and thereby seeks to provide “deeper insights into real-world problems” (Tenny et al., 2022: np). As such, this article utilises the qualitative approach to critically probe Trengrove's *The Wound* (2017), to uncover how the themes of neoliberalism and globalisation are reflected in the film, and how these overarching *dispositifs* affect how certain characters perform or enact their African subjectivity. Additionally, it explores how these enactments veer away from and therefore subvert essentials ideas of what African subjectivity is and can be in globalised, neoliberal milieu.

## 5. Discussion of Trengrove's *Inxeba*

The following section discusses and critically interprets Justin Trengrove's film *Inxeba* using the aforementioned *dispositifs* as thematic cues to analytically plumb and uncover how these are reflected by or affect the subjectivity of certain characters in the film, notably, our central characters Kwanda and Xolani. The analysis begins with an initial exploration of the reflection of traditional culture within the film as reflected by the character of Xolani, and its subversion, which is exemplified by Kwanda. Prior to this exploration, this section begins with a narrative overview of the film, recounting its synopsis as well as major themes reflected within. Thereafter, the reception of the film is explored. Finally, the analysis is presented.

### 5.1 Overview of *The Wound (2017)*: Synopsis and Major Themes

*Inxeba (2017)*, otherwise known as *The Wound (2017)* is a film by South African director John Trengrove. Prior to commercial exhibition, the film was screened at various festivals around the world, including, but not limited to, *Sundance Film Festival*, *The Berlin International Film Festival* as well as the local, *Durban International Film Festival* (URUCU Media, 2019). Narratively, the film revolves around and is focalised by Xolani, a lonesome Xhosa factory worker tasked with taking care of the initiates as they undergo their rites of passage (URUCU Media, 2019). While undertaking these caretaking activities, Xolani also reunites with Vija, who also is a caretaker. The two engage in a clandestine romance, which they only engage in during this time of year, as Xolani's counterpart is married with children. During this particular season, a middle-class gay initiate named Kwanda witnesses their dalliance and thereby threatens to expose their unspoken desires and actions to the world (South African History Online: nd; Trengrove, 2017). Thematically, the film considers a wide array of things, most notably, the age-old question of *what makes a man a man* (Trengrove, 2017). The film also explores the lived-experiences of queer Africans, considering the complex quandary that is navigating the expectations of Xhosa culture and adhering to tradition, whilst also being exposed to modernity and globalisation (Trengrove, 2017). The film also poses salient questions about class and socio-economic status, and how this affects one's ability to transgress or subvert traditional expectations of what an 'authentic' performance of masculinity and African-ness is. For the purposes of this article, only specific themes will be analysed – namely, the tension between tradition and modernity as precipitated by historical processes and globalisation, as well as the influence of neoliberalism *via* class and socioeconomic difference, and the subversive potential offered by it.

However, before the analysis is undertaken, the context of the release and reception of the film will first be explored.



## 5.2 Release and Reception of *The Wound* (2017)

Trengrove's *The Wound* (2017) was released to critical acclaim internationally and was lauded for its brave portrayal of a young man valiantly pushing back against the tyranny of tradition and culture. However, this congratulatory sentiment was not shared by local audiences. In fact, the release of the film sparked much furore on social media platforms such as Twitter, which further erupted into protests outside the cinemas that were slated to exhibit the film. Due to such powerful opposition, the film was consequently reclassified as pornographic by the local film distribution board, causing its theatrical release to be discontinued, until it was later reclassified.

Much of the resistance is informed by two qualms: the first is the depiction of sacred rites performed by the AmaXhosa to initiate young men from adolescence to manhood, and the second is a subscription to the insidious notion that homosexuality is un-African, a sentiment popularised by former Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. The former seems somewhat unfounded considering that there have been numerous instances where details of the practice have been divulged, the most notable of these being in Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). These revelations are incredibly detailed and include a vivid description of the traditional circumcision procedure (1994, p. 31). An act that was avoided in the lie action film version of the film, starring Idris Elba. Rather, the director opted for a fleeting shot, of barely 5 seconds, featuring an initiate adorning himself in white ochre. Trengrove's film is not different, as it does not explicitly revel in the intricacies of the rites. A more subtle approach is employed by depicting a young goat being slaughtered, its pristine white cloak of fur suddenly tainted by a growing, ever-darkening shade of crimson (Trengrove, 2017). Rather than explicitly rendering the act of traditional circumcision, the figure of the initiate is visually linked to the goat, which represents their loss of innocence. This symbolic relation was established earlier in a short film called *Ibhokhwe* (2014), which is essentially a predecessor to the feature film. In this shorter incarnation, an initiate is deserted because of his sexuality and is left to fend for himself. In a Kafka-esque twist of fate, the initiate transforms into a literal goat (Trengrove, 2014).

In the second justification of dissent, the sexual and the national are conflated. In many countries across the African continent, the passing of anti-homosexuality bills and criminal ascription to the act of same-sex relations is often justified by one statement: homosexuality is un-African. This is exemplified by countries such as Uganda, which recently passed anti-homosexuality bills that prohibit sexuality. While South Africa constitutionally allows for the marital union of same-sex couples, there appears to be a cultural lag as constitutional equity is not reflected in intrapersonal relations.

Together, these two points of discontent reflect a greater fear of homogenisation through acculturation. Because South Africa has historically been under the aegis of colonial occupation by the British, Dutch, and Portuguese, the resultant fear of external control and erasure of indigenous culture is reemerging. When considered in relation to this context, a specific custom such as *ulwaluko*— that is, traditional circumcision by the amaXhosa takes on

more import. It is not a mutually exclusive act but is linked to larger themes of tradition and the persistence of a related way of life. Interestingly, Mhlahlo (2009, p. 43) argues that some 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists have identified some cultural practices as responses to specific political conditions. The example of the practice of paying bride wealth is given and contextualised within the political milieu of apartheid, which required men to relocate and work far from their homes for long periods of time. In such a period, the act of paying bride wealth is said to have been strictly enforced to solidify the union, as the spouse is less likely to stray having literally invested in their relationship. This is also supported by the assertion that cultural identity became integral during apartheid as it aided in the act of classification. In fact, within the barracks in which miners resided during their tenure, they were segmented according to ethnic grouping—the amaXhosa together, the amaZulu together, etc. (2009, p. 45). Through these examples, it is evident that culture can be used instrumentally, for political and ideological ends and to justify specific power relations.

However, even though they are underpinned by a common fear, there is nevertheless a contradiction between them. As highlighted above, cultural mores and customs effectively construct a specific cultural identity, whether it is Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho. Therefore, considering this, how is it then possible to have a homogenous continental identity that is African? In response to this, Achille Mbembe (as cited in Hoad, 2007, p. 15). asserts

What is called Africa is first and foremost a geographical accident. It is this accident that we subsequently invest with several significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives.

In this regard, the moniker ‘African’ is constructed in and of itself in contradistinction to European subjectivity, to which the African subject is cast as a foil. Of course, this is a common theme in much of the early European literature about Africa, in which intelligent European men travel to the continent and encounter apparently incoherent, Dionysian-like figures who are slaves to impulse rather than Cartesian subjects; in this regard, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is a case in point. However, today we also see a reversal of this conceit, when African leaders advance the figure of the European, cast as a nefarious external influence that is a threat to an innate African identity. Through this line of rhetoric, it becomes possible to curtail any deviation from a normative mode of African subjectivity, as anything that challenges or transgresses against the norm is cast as un-African and therefore problematic on the continent. What this illustrates is that it is not only globalisation that has the power to homogenise, but African tradition and culture can also work to achieve the analogous aim.

## 5.3 Reflections of Traditional Culture and Transgression in *The Wound* (2017)

Figure 1



Note. Frame capture from Trengrove's *The Wound* (2017),

In the opening scene of the film, Xolani is seen working in a factory. As shown in **figure 1**, Xolani is clad in overalls and is operating a forklift (Trengrove, 2017: 01:17). The look on his face can be described as stoic or disinterested. In the following scene, he is seen sitting at the back of a van alongside a group of men, who load a crate of beers and a goat on board (Trengrove, 2017). Interestingly, during this time, the other men speak, but Xolani does not (Trengrove, 2017). Taken together—his silence, stoic and removed disposition, his occupation and work attire—it can be advanced that Xolani is coded as a traditional masculine everyman, as he appears as what is colloquially termed the ‘silent type’ and has a job which require some form of manual labour. Conversely, Kwanda is introduced as the foil to Xolani’s traditional masculinity. This is evident upon the first meeting between Kwanda’s father and Xolani, where the former ask Xolani to be firm on his son, as “the boy is too soft” (Trengrove, 2017). The father goes on to place the blame squarely on the boy’s mother, suggesting that how he turned out is due to her spoiling him. He also states that his mother was against him undergoing the traditional rites of passage, opting for him to be circumcised in the hospital. This can be seen as the first instances of the tension between modernity and tradition.

It is interesting that the father not only identifies the female figure in his life as the reason for Kwanda’s difference, but also notes that it her showering him with material possession – spoiling him—that has resulted in his subversive performance of masculinity. In fact, this is a theme that occurs in one consequent statements, where he admonishes the types of friends his son brings home; noting their strange behaviour and how they often lock themselves in his bedroom (Trengrove, 2017). For Kwanda’s father, this too, is due to money,

as he remarks that “something is wrong with these rich boys from Joburg” (Trengrove, 2017). Here, the financial is underscored once more and cited as the reason for Kwanda’s subversiveness.

For his father, the only way to quell this difference in performance is for Kwanda to undergo his rites of passage. Thus, the case of Kwanda, the cultural custom of *ulwaluko* does not merely seek to preserve indigenous culture, but also works to homogenise the individual by casting them in the same mould and mode of life of their predecessors. Arguably, however, this is a perversion of the Bantu concept of oneness, *ubunye*; a notion that is communal in orientation and geared towards producing community (2010, p. 234). As in the case of the film, this is achieved through the negation of the difference. As illustrated by Xolani and Vija’s duplicitousness, their private transgressive same-sex affair, and their public display of the acceptable mode of masculine Xhosa performance (Trengrove, 2017).

Importantly, however, this insistence on tradition and sameness can be read as a formal resistance to engaging with the dynamism of globalisation and its cosmopolitan hybridisation. In a sense, the film itself is an incarnation of this diversity. In terms of production and financing, the film is an international co-production. Though the writing, directing, and production are undertaken by local talent, some of the funding comes from external sources, specifically Germany and the Netherlands. Narratively—in terms of genre—the film is also categorised as a ‘coming of age’ film, which is popular in both the American and European markets. Indeed, many pundits have also identified iconographic similarities with other films, specifically *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a cinematic adaptation of a short story by Annie Proulx. In this cinematic adaptation, two hypermasculine men find love with one another, but are unable to express it in their stifling environment. However, they do so in the wilderness, where there are no prying eyes. Trengrove’s *The Wound* (2017) treads similar ground and presents lover Vija and Xolani as being free among the elements, as illustrated by a visually striking love scene in which both are nude before a cascading waterfall and are tenderly embracing (Trengrove, 2017). While firmly rooted in a culturally specific, local milieu, the film borrows symbols and themes from global cinematic works to appeal to both local and international audiences. This, in turn, links to the hybridising potential provided by access to globalised neoliberal marketplace, which offers pockets of subversion that can challenge traditional ideas of culture, indigeneity, masculinity and its performance.

## 5.4 Kwanda as an example of Hybridised African Identity

The character of Kwanda can also be seen as representative of this hybridity, and the tension towards him, exhibited by both his initiate counterparts and caregivers, echoes the tenuous relationship between the purveyors of culture and tradition and those involved in film production. Kwanda is depicted as a bourgeois subject whose father’s wealth affords him access to a global marketplace and the influences that come with it, as conveyed by his Nike sneakers, standard English accent, nose ring, and confessions of having an iPhone and access



to satellite television (Trenrove, 2017). His cosmopolitanism is at once aligned with globalisation and the neoliberal marketplace, which thrives on difference and novelty. However, with the economic aspects of his character, a new tension that is entirely economic also emerges. Since Kwanda has confessed to possessing luxury items that most members of the population do not have access to, and because his father drives an expensive BMW SUV and is seen handing Xolani a considerable amount of money, he is part of an elite class of black South Africans who have come into possession of more disposable income in the post-apartheid era. This newfound money allows access to new realities, specifically those of spatial nature. During apartheid, access to space was determined by skin colour and ethnicity, so suburbs and Model-C schools were reserved for the fairer skinned. This, however, is not a reality for some born after apartheid, namely a generation that has come to be known as born-frees— a generation to which Kwanda belongs. With these two aspects in mind, the difference between Kwanda's unapologetic outward expression of queerness and Xolani and Vija's converse, i.e., its containment, is a function of both age and class. While this alone works to destabilise the notion of homogeneity, particularly across generations, through tensions arising from customs and traditions, Kwanda's subjectivity suggests that a more benign relation with globalisation is possible, which speaks to the new global way in which African youth are constructing their subjectivities. This goes beyond the traditional idea of globalisation of homogenisation, cultural imperialism, Americanisation and/or Disneyfication, but towards and understanding t as a disorganised relation that lacks the intent of imperialism and is not unilateral. As illustrated by the initial example of Afrobeat and the rising influence of traditional African sounds and aesthetics on world culture, globalisation is not necessarily synonymous with homogenisation of Africa; however, globalisation provides an opportunity for the continent to impact upon the larger world— an aspect that is highly neglected within academic discourse.

## 6 Conclusion: 'African-ness' and Existential Internationalisation

Before advancing a conclusion as to how to critically approach the tensions outlined above in the analysis of Trenrove's *The Wound* (2017), between the external, global spectre and the indigenous cultures it places under siege, it is important to locate said tension within an historical context. Once placed within such a context, the isolationist Afrocentric rhetoric will be countered, and a new form of relation will be proposed—one that consists of tenets such as openness to the global other.

It can be argued that the resistance to Trenrove's film as well as the larger process of globalisation is residual, arising from a deeply rooted mistrust of the global North in the wake of different waves of colonial occupation of the African continent by various European nations. In South Africa, this began with the Portuguese sailing to the Cape under the aegis of Vasco da Gamma in 1497. This was followed by the arrival of the Dutch in the seventeenth century and the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century. Throughout these different periods of occupation, indigenous cultures suffered greatly as their colonial

counterparts viewed them as a tabula rasa, a palimpsest to be written over, re-encoded with values that resembled their own. This dehumanising attitude that strips African subjects of agency is best articulated by Achebe in an essay entitled “An Image of Africa,” in which he suggests that the continent is reduced to:

Setting and backdrop that eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril (as cited in Brooker & Widdowson 1996, p. 267).

This disposition is shared by the commissioner in Achebe’s postcolonial magnum opus, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), in which he muses on how he would compose a monograph on his travels to what is now present-day Nigeria and dedicates only a paragraph to the decimated tribes, arrogantly ascribing it the title of “The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger” (Achebe, 1996, p. 147). Here, as in the case of Conrad, ala Achebe, the paternalistic relation between the European subject and the African is characterised by a destructive imbalance that casts the latter as a child that needs to be guided and pacified. This attitude is expressed more explicitly in the theologian Albert Schweitzer’s reference to the African as his “junior brother,” which once again places the European in a position of superiority over his African counterpart (Firschow, 2000, p. 47). Such a view dismisses the fully formed nature of African societies with a complex system of intellectual, spiritual, ethical, and communal values that inform their existence.

It is in the wake of such a violent history of suppression and erasure that Africans in the post-colonial moment find themselves and must somehow negotiate and grapple with this legacy. However, as indicated in the analysis of *The Wound* (2017), the effects of such a past linger on and inform how contemporary African subjects interact with the global world, specifically the global North.

However, it is important not to simplify the tension and definitively locate it as only a result of the colonial encounter and imperialism, but to acknowledge how it is amplified, exacerbated, or undercut by other historical phenomena. An example of such a phenomenon is apartheid. Following the colonial withdrawal from South Africa and the consequent transformation from a territory of the commonwealth to a republic, apartheid and its separationist racial structure were implemented. At the core of the apartheid regime is the notion of separate development, an ideology punted by the National Party government as a justification for racial segregation. This ideology rests upon the assumption that people identified and classified as belonging to different racial groups must develop separately. That is, it must have different amenities, infrastructure, and residential areas. Granted, this was a shrewd rhetorical means to justify unequal division of resources, favouring those classified as white, but the separationist discourse is relevant to the current tension. In this regard, it can be argued that the separatist discourse of the apartheid regime further exacerbated the mistrust initially created by colonisation by drawing boundaries between groups within the country. This created an environment fraught with identity politics, where difference is the focal point rather than any shared or common characteristics.

Having provided a larger historical context, it is necessary to introduce a caveat. The interdependent contexts provided above serve to contextualise the present tensions and contentions that arise as a response to the global interface facilitated by technology and the neoliberal marketplace. These historical instances do not justify the myopic isolationist discourse, but rather provide a better understanding of how it has developed through the presentation of the larger international relations, such as colonialism, that have fostered bad faith between Africa and the “global” as well as the more intra-national example of apartheid, which provides insight into how this relation transforms into a more separatist discourse that functions or divides on ethnic or racial lines.

This is important to express because these contexts, particularly that of colonialism, are often used as a means to justify an unwillingness on the part of the African subject to engage with any ideas that disrupt or upset what has been established as normative. This is quite evident in the film, where the threat is a Xhosa adolescent—an African subject, who by virtue of his sexual orientation is stripped of this subjectivity and is ascribed to that of the other and is thus treated with the same ambivalence reserved for the figure of the global subject. The underlying logic here is that homosexuality in Africa is a by-product of the colonial encounter; it did not exist on the continent before the arrival of those originating from the global North.

While it is simple to dismiss this as a case of unfounded bigotry, as is made evident by the existence of anthropological monographs and scholarly literature concerned with same-sex relationships in indigenous African contexts, it is important to critically consider the disposition in order to fully understand what it is informed by. In this regard, the assertion that homosexuality is a product of the global North should be appraised and problematized.

Because it has already been established that same-sex sexual relations were practiced before the colonial encounter, there is not much left to consider. However, this is not the case. In fact, if one looks closely, one will find that there is some morsel of truth to the assertion, but it is hidden as it is expressed in reactionary and dismissive language. If one looks beyond the expression itself, beyond the act of same-sex relation towards the very figure itself, the figure of the homosexual—this subject whose very identity is informed by their sexuality, one will find the heart of the matter. With this in mind, if the initial assertion is revisited, it becomes clear that same-sex sexual relations in Africa in the pre-colonial period were not classified as such. In fact, they were not classified at all. What was present was something akin to what is described by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality* (1998) as *ars erotica* (1998, p. 70). That is, a more fluid and accommodating attitude towards sexual activity, which is in stark contrast to what he terms *scientia sexualis* (ibid). The latter is a more a rigid categorical approach that medicalises, locating the realm of sexuality securely within the domain of medical discourse, where it can be documented and thus turned into a knowable thing, an object of knowledge. It is within this context, the advent of bio-power, that the figure of the homosexual emerges; as a discursive construct, resultant from medicalised discourse which served to individualise and thereby control subjects through the reduction begotten via documentation and examination.

Thus, with an understanding of this context, it is apparent that there is some truth to the idea that homosexuality does not originate from the African continent, as the figure that informs the very phenomenon is a result of the medicalised discourse of bio-power. With that said, it is important to note, however, that this does not serve as a justification for the denial sentiments. In fact, it allows for more critical attention to be devoted to unpacking them. In this regard, an interesting perspective emerges—the very people decrying homosexuality as un-African are basing their ideas of African-ness on bourgeois ideals, the very ideals that informed bio-power, and which it sought to protect by labelling and thus codifying deviance, making it knowable and therefore refutable. By locating authentic African subjectivity within the realm of sexuality and co-opting the language and mandate of bio-power, the purveyors of this argument negate their own cause. To dismiss homosexuality and Westernness in order to arrive at an authentic African identity, they then use western discourse to mount a counter argument and case for what is deemed authentic African-ness.

Interestingly enough, this is not the only place where one can find contradictions. In fact, the much-vaunted traditional customs themselves also feature aspects of global contact and consequent cultural hybridity through the incorporation of western cultural products into local traditional practice and milieu. An example of this is the incorporation of brandy, specifically Viceroy, into cultural occasions in place of traditional fermented beer, umqombothi. In fact, there seems to be more of a preference for brandy rather than the traditional option as it is seen as a sign of opulence and sophistication.

Another example is the use of western dress in the final stages of *ulwaluko*, where the inmate is then reintegrated into society. Rather than wearing traditional dress to signify that they are indeed Xhosa men, more western attire is worn—namely, blazer, slacks or formal trousers, dress shoes, and a cap. This western clothing contrasts sharply with the cane and red ochre, which are specifically Xhosa cultural markers of newly acquired manhood. Thus, while these cultural mores are militantly defended against erosion and mutation at the hands of an acculturative global North, there is already evidence that they have changed because of contact with different cultures. Indeed, this is true of the language itself, as contemporary isiXhosa is rife with loan words, especially from Afrikaans. An example of this is the isiXhosa word for a window, *ifestile*, which is a modified version of the Afrikaans word *venster*. This is a result of cultural contact between isiXhosa and Afrikaans-speaking miners. This, on a micro/local level, illustrates cultural change due to cultural contact and exchange, similar to earlier examples of changes in isiXhosa customs due to colonial contact.

What these examples illustrate is that despite the strong urge to live in accordance with the ways and mores of one's ancestors, it is quite impossible as one cannot return to a pristine, untouched Africa where colonialism has not occurred. Such a reconstructive, retrogressive mindset is not only futile but also dangerous as it prevents one from inhabiting the present time in which one finds oneself—where globalisation, neoliberalism and instantaneous cultural exchange are salient features. Rather than turning away from the present circumstance and the existential angst it creates, one must face it head on and rather than cast oneself as a receptacle



of the global interface from the North, Africans should see and conduct themselves as equal participants and contributors to global culture.

This can only be achieved through the deconstruction of the aura of African-ness, constructed to keep the world at large at bay, by characterising the global North as the enemy and the African subject as its victim. Although relations between North and Africa have been instrumental, favouring the former, the current global configuration allows for a more balanced interaction. In a globalised world, where the nation-state is falling into disrepute and the world is no longer divided in terms of space and geography, it is limiting to define local subjectivities securely in terms of geography. In place of this isolationism fuelled by a fear of the unknown, a different approach is advanced—what Sanderson (2004, p. 14) refers to as “existential internationalisation.” This consists of an openness towards the global “other” and a welcoming of the changes fostered by its interaction. In the article, the Japanese word *kokusaika*, which means self-change or self-reform, is used to further explain this idea. According to Sanderson (2004, p. 17), this word communicates the core of existential internationalisation, as it is less of an externally induced change, as in the case of acculturation, but more of an internal process that generates locally. Sanderson further refers to it as “internationalisation of the self.” In the case of amaXhosa, this is already exemplified by the incorporation of western products such as brandy and clothing into traditional customs. These are self-imposed changes, especially brandy, which are a result of preference, rather than enforced alterations imposed by an external party. Therefore, as exemplified by these examples, it is possible to retain African subjectivity while participating in a global interface. This will result in the construction of a transgressive African identity that problematises traditional ideas and separation between African subjectivity and that of the global North, showing them to be in constant dialogue rather than discrete analogues. By acknowledging these pockets of hybridity generated from within indigenous culture, through the substitution of traditional products with western equivalents, the neat separation between Africa and the global North, ‘us’ and ‘them’ is overturned, and an opportunity for the construction of an African subjectivity that interacts with the global world is possible.

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