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## Detachment

### Response to *An African in Greenland* 2

The tone over the second half of the book evolves from fanciful and imaginative to that of ordinary life. We see this change in his reaction to and perception of several aspects of northern Greenland: the resistance to death, the acceptance of polygamic customs, and the willingness to return.

If the frequency of deaths were not evident enough in the first half of the book, this motif returns stronger in the second. The nature of the deaths also becomes more vivid, gruesome, or otherwise haunting – drunk parents falling on their baby, babies devoured by dogs, puppies devoured by dogs, a middle-aged man devoured by dogs, an execution of dogs suspected of manslaughter (as in Isabel's response, dogs feature quite prominently in the latter part of the book), able-bodied men falling through thin ice and drowning, a carelessly drunk murder due to a relationship dispute, an accidental gunshot through the leg in a canoe, and likely many more that are not mentioned in the story. We obtain a fairly objective story of each of these mishaps, but there doesn't seem to be a strong emotional reaction by Kpomassie evoked by any of them. Understandably, his perception conforms to match that of the native people after living with them so long: dogs become regular wild animals that are useful but dangerous, and the elevated mortality rate and the methods of death are not strange. It is not only a lack of fear, but also a lack of hatred or sadness. This reminds me of the "mind of winter" (Stevens 1) that Wallace Stevens refers to in "The Snow Man", the mindset that allows Kpomassie to "not to think \ Of any misery in the sound of the wind" (Stevens 7-8) and to "behold ... \ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens 14-15). I can imagine something that is "not there" may refer to the imagination or the memory of what is lost; the "nothing that is" refers to the physical absence of a

person. In other words, it seems like the Greenland people must detach themselves from others, and in this way protect themselves from sadness and fear of losing others. And Kpomassie has learnt this detachment, evident by his emotionless stories.

This detachment can loosely be considered one of the reasons for the polygamous ways of the Greenlanders. Kpomassie discovers that the wife-swapping custom (and the girlfriend-swapping that likely derives from this) is the result of “motions for survival” (Kpomassie 230) rather than idleness, and there is an implicit social structure and rules. They do this to essentially join families, increasing the chance of survival if one family suffers a casualty. There is the detachment from one’s own family in order to ensure stronger bonds overall; this sounds very similar to kingdoms marrying off their princesses to form alliances. A noble sacrifice.

We also see the evolution of detachment in eating habits. Thodoris mentions that there is a repetitive treatment of the bloody food eaten with bare hands – blood becomes prevalent as a sign of food and survival rather than that of death. There is so much blood, and occasionally it is human blood – but I believe that the connection to human mortality is largely lost. (What is lost with it?)

The final detachment is that of Kpomassie from Greenland and his fantasy of the Arctic. This is no minor feat; he knows that this is the height of his lifetime, and turning back may mean he may not have the chance to return. When he reaches Thule, and hears from Robert the story of his brother’s death and the story of Arnarnguangsaaq, the frequency of Kpomassie’s interjections connecting the stories to those of his homeland become more frequent. His dream of listening to these stories of the “true” Eskimo people is realized, and then he detaches himself from the completed dream in order to not linger on it forever. His journey has completed its natural course like that of a lifetime, and there is little regret as he leaves.

The question then becomes, what does he feel at the end of his journey? Is it a renewed excitement, to reunite with his family? As a reader, I feel a bittersweet wholesomeness, a gentleness, which contrasts with many aspects of his adventure.