

KAREN BLIXEN'S CHALLENGES TO POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

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Abstract

Karen Blixen's Danishness, especially with regard to *Out of Africa*, becomes invisible or irrelevant to many who read her in a postcolonial context. In actuality, Blixen's status as a cultural hybrid, negotiating the cultural expectations of Denmark, Africa, and Britain, results in a fairly unique perspective on the colonial world she inhabited. This article examines some of the harshest readings of Blixen's intentions towards the Africans and evaluates the potential contradictions found in extra-textual evidence. The essay goes on to explore Blixen's own rebellion against Manichean aesthetics through the trope of hybridity. *Out of Africa* has been called a hybrid text and its narrator is also a hybrid, uniting the qualities of male/female, domestic/wild, north/south, European/African. Moreover, Blixen includes episodes that feature hybridity and challenge the notion of a fixed identity, such as "In the Menagerie" and "The Wild Came to the Aid of the Wild."

Karen Blixen, known in America as Isak Dinesen, is a Danish writer, but her Danishness seems to become quickly annulled when her work is discussed in the global arena. Blixen debuted as an English-language writer in the United States under a pseudonym. She continued to write the bulk of her work in English first, before casting it into Danish, and had a keen interest in addressing the special needs of her imagined English-language audience. Her nineteen years in British East Africa caused her to interact with and adapt to the British Empire. For these reasons, Blixen's Danishness, especially with regard to *Out of Africa*, becomes invisible or irrelevant to many who read her in a postcolonial context. In actuality, Blixen's status as a cultural hybrid, negotiating the cultural expectations of Denmark, Africa, and Britain, results in a fairly unique perspective on the colonial world she inhabited.

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According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, who coined the phrase “the intentional fallacy” back in 1946, “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”.¹ The concern with authorial intention is, however, apparently widespread in postcolonial studies about Blixen. Critics care deeply about what Blixen’s intentions were both regarding her book, *Out of Africa*, and her attitudes towards the Africans living on the farm. One of the challenges Blixen poses to postcolonial criticism is her own brand of multiculturalism: She was a Dane who lived in Africa and wrote in English. Many English-language critics make assumptions based on what little they know about her: A white European aristocrat running a farm in colonial Africa has to have behaved badly. She is often lumped together with British colonial writers, without consideration that her status in British East Africa as a woman and a foreigner might have given her a different perspective.

Danish scholars, with some exceptions, do not seem nearly as inclined to pass moral judgments upon Blixen. Why this is the case is a matter for speculation. Danish critics generally know more about her background, having access to extra-textual information, such as interviews and letters in Danish. Perhaps there is more willingness to consider the complexities of her situation because of her status in the Danish literary canon. Perhaps, among Danes, there is a keener awareness that Blixen was not raised in the British Empire and might not have been nearly as invested in it as those who were.

Postcolonial criticism itself can partake of Manichean aesthetics. The binary oppositions of evil versus good, colonizer versus colonized, and oppressor versus oppressed are so deeply ingrained in the minds of some critics, it is apparently all they can see. The moral charge given to these categories is also perfectly clear: colonizers are bad and the colonized are good. Given Karen Blixen’s role as a farmer in colonial British East Africa, there is no doubt then, in the minds of many, to which category she belongs. For example, in her dissertation, Hariclea Zengos characterizes Blixen as “a writer who strongly believed in colonialism”.² Contrast this with Blixen’s statement to Erik Egeland: “personally I believe

¹ W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, 1946, pp. 468-88.

² Hariclea Zengos, 'A World without Walls: Race, Politics and Gender in the African Works of Elspeth Huxley, Isak Dinesen, and Beryl Markham,' Ph.D. dissertation, Tufts University, 1989, p. 102.

the whites should leave Africa, also South Africa, even if it would take a number of years”.³ Susan Hardy Aiken shares some of these reservations about such speculations, arguing that “in condemning *Out of Africa* as nothing more than another imperialist text, they overlook precisely what they accuse Dinesen of overlooking in her treatment of Africans: the possibility of distinctiveness, difference, and specificity”.⁴ The suggestion here is certainly not that Blixen is perfect or somehow beyond critique. There are certainly elements of racism in her narrative of an enormously racist society, but at the same time, there is also resistance to racism and criticism of unjust colonial practices. The argument here is that colonialism and Blixen’s role in it is a complex phenomenon that may not always lend itself to snap judgments and clear binary oppositions. Expecting Blixen to fall in line with the well established role of colonial oppressor obscures a number of elements in her writing that do not fit the mold.

In order to back up my assertions about these tendencies in English-language Blixen criticism, I will look at some of the harshest readings of Blixen’s intentions and evaluate the potential contradictions found in extra-textual evidence. Lasse Horne Kjældgaard has already dealt with the 2006 comments of Dominick Odipo, so that is not necessary here.⁵ In particular, the episode of Kitosch in *Out of Africa* and its interpretation by some critics illustrates how pre-judgments of Blixen can skew a reading and lead to moral condemnation of Blixen’s reputed intentions. In short, “Kitosch’s Story” is the tale of an African boy who is severely beaten by an English settler and then chained in a store where he dies by morning. The subsequent legal inquiry tried to establish a “wish to die” defense for the settler, claiming that Kitosch had died because he wished to, not from his injuries. The story itself is about intentions and the danger of ascribing intentions to someone who, perhaps, one does not know enough about. Kirsten Thisted has offered a thought-provoking and detailed reading of the Kitosch episode in her article, “Dead Man Talking,” from 2004, in which she has no difficulty understanding Blixen’s irony: “The narrator is, of course, in agreement with the District

³ Erik Egeland, *Ansikt til Ansikt*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo, 1969, p. 92. “Personlig tror jeg de hvite mD forlate Afrika, ogsD Syd-Afrika, selv om det vil ta endel Dr”.

⁴ Susan Hardy Aiken, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 213.

⁵ Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, ”En af de farligste bøger, der nogen sinde er skrevet om Afrika? Karen Blixen og kolonialismen, *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, vol. 30, , no.2, 2009, pp. 111-35.

Surgeon that the argument of the whites is a horrible bunch of nonsense".⁶ Thisted's close reading of the tale fully supports this conclusion even without the need to appeal to biographical material. Is it Thisted's position as a Dane with better knowledge of Blixen's cultural context that opens her to these interpretive possibilities?

Others have made bold claims about Blixen's intentions in the Kitosch episode. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is particularly angry about this segment. What annoys Ngugi is that there is "Not a single word of condemnation for this practice of colonial justice. No evidence of any discomfiture".⁷ Further, because of this episode, he accuses Blixen of the "literary glorification of the settler culture of murder and torture".⁸ Ngugi is not satisfied with the distanced narrative of the story and reads approval where he cannot find any sign of outright condemnation. Interestingly, the Kenyan author is not alone in this reading of the story. Danish critic Harald Nielsen, back in 1956, was every bit as outraged by the same elements as Ngugi. Both Nielsen and Ngugi assume that Blixen approves of what has happened to Kitosch.⁹

One must resort to biographical evidence to illustrate the opposite is the case. In her letters, one can see that Blixen was deeply upset by the matter. She asked her friend Gustav Mohr to obtain for her the documents of the case without telling anyone who wanted them. She was concerned that the officials would not surrender them if they knew for whom and for what purpose the papers were intended, since she was generally regarded as "pro-native" by the British establishment. In an undated manuscript among her papers, Blixen expresses her thoughts upon the Kitosch case, evidently provoked by early misunderstandings of the segment:

It was my deepest hope that my race, by handing down a just verdict in the case, would make up for the shame that a single individual—who certainly

⁶ Kirsten Thisted, "Dead man talking – om tale og tavshed og repræsentationens ambivalens hos Karen Blixen og Thorkild Hansen", *Spring*, vol. 22, 2004, p. 111. "Fortælleren er naturligvis enig med retsmedicineren i, at de hvides udlægning er en horribel gang sludder".

⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, Heinemann, London, 1981, p. 36.

⁸ Ngugi, *Detained*, p. 37.

⁹ Harald Nielsen, *Karen Blixen: Studie i litterær Mystik*, Borgens Forlag, Copenhagen, 1956, pp. 89-90.

might have been upset—had brought upon us. But it did not happen that way, and the verdict itself, but particularly the testimony of the two doctors, which to me was so obviously meant to save his skin, was not only a source of sorrow, but filled me with a feeling of deep disgrace [...] I do not understand how the description of these shocking details could fail to give the reader an impression of my indignation over them. [...] After the book came out, I got a letter from one of the two doctors who had given testimony at the trial. He wrote that my story had gotten him to think more deeply than before about his own conduct in the case.¹⁰

Her stated intention for including the Kitosch episode was to embarrass the British colonialists and make them reflect upon their actions. She offers the doctor's second thoughts as a sort of validation for the strategy. In interviews with the Danish press, Blixen told the story of how she was asked to remove the Kitosch episode by her British publisher "or else it would break down the English prestige".¹¹ Blixen refused, insisting that it be included or the book would not come out at all. From her perspective it was one of her strongest political statements against colonial practices.

Blixen's style in this episode, and throughout the book, is subtle and restrained. She is not prone to outright statements of condemnation, having a strong distaste for what she called "propaganda," but expects the reader to perceive and share her indignation over the facts related. Both Ngugi and Nielsen, instead, read into the episode what they expect to find. Blixen, it is assumed, is a part of the colonial enterprise and, thus, must approve of all its methods.

¹⁰ Tove Rasmussen, "Karen Blixen og Afrika - endnu engang", *Bogens Verden*, vol. 65, 1983, p. 411. "Det var mit inderlige Haab at min Race ved en retfærdig Dom i Sagen skulde oprette noget af den Skam, som den Enkelte mellem os - der godt kan have været noget forstyrret - havde bragt over os. Men det gik jo ikke saadan, og Domen selv, men i særlig Grad de to Lægers Udtalelser, som for mig aldeles tydeligt gik ud paa at redde Skinnet, var mig ikke blot en Sorg, men fyldte mig med Følelsen af dyb Nedværdigelse. (...) Jeg forstaaer ikke, at ikke selve Anførelsen af disse rystende Enkeltheder har givet Læserne Indtrykket af min Indignation over dem. (...) Efter Bogen var udkommet, fik jeg Brev fra den ene af de to Læger, som havde afgivet Erklæring i Sagen. Han skrev, at min Beretning havde faaet ham til at tænke grundigere end før over hans egen Optræden i Sagen."

¹¹ Helge Ernst, "Det drejer sig også om menneskets værdighed," *Social-Demokraten*, 19 December 1954, p. 12. "ellers ville det bryde den engelske prestige ned"

In his 2003 book, *White Women Writers and Their African Invention*, Simon Lewis similarly spends quite a bit of time on the Kitosch episode. Lewis states that “Colonial fiction rarely presents violence as white on black”.¹² Therefore, the Kitosch episode is rather unique because of its description of a white settler using violence against a black servant. Both Blixen and the editor who wanted the passage removed understood how shocking it would be to depict a feature of colonial existence that normally would be passed by in silence. What seems odd is that Lewis does not perceive that just including such an episode is a political provocation and he also reads the Kitosch episode as an attempt to beautify something ugly and to reinforce Blixen’s own place in the colonial system:

Blixen’s account almost suggests that there is no need for active resistance, systematic resistance to colonial rule, since no matter how oppressive the rule, Africans will always have the freedom of “wild things” to “go when they like.” Thus, again, in reimagining Kitosch as having no less autonomy ultimately than Karen Blixen, the apparently autonomous and transcendent farmer, Blixen forgets her complicitous role as *fermier*, part of a system whose personal, ethnographic, and forensic knowledge of Africans was always put to nonreciprocal uses of control.¹³

Lewis would like for Blixen to have provided in this episode an encouragement for the black Africans to resist colonial rule, but the black Africans are explicitly not the intended audience for the messages of this piece. In the English version of *Out of Africa*, which both Ngugi and Lewis would have read, Blixen writes: “It seems to you, as you read the case through, a strange, and humiliating fact that the Europeans should not, in Africa, have the power to throw the African out of existence”.¹⁴ This is a shocking statement that reveals the hardened racist and pro-colonial audience she imagines. In the Danish version, it reads “Naar man læser...” (When one reads...) and “vi europæere” (we Europeans).¹⁵ The accusation is more direct in English: “It seems to you...” Neither Lewis, nor Ngugi, comment upon this sentence.

¹² Simon Lewis, *White Women Writers and Their African Invention*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2003, p. 129.

¹³ Lewis, *White Women Writers*, pp. 149-50.

¹⁴ Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass*, Vintage Books, New York, p. 282.

¹⁵ Karen Blixen, *Den Afrikanske Farm*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 1937, p. 280.

The episode is meant to hold up an uncomfortable mirror to her implied audience and imagine a reading of the situation in which the whites do not win despite their abuses of power.

I have argued in my book, *Understanding Isak Dinesen*, that *Out of Africa* is meant to be a subversive book, subversive to the British colonial enterprise, but that its subversions have been so subtle they have escaped the notice of many.¹⁶ There are several points at which she brings up unjust features of colonialism. Blixen presents the British Carrier Corps as an object of terror to the Africans; she portrays the arrogance of colonizers who think Africans should only be taught to be honest and work; she struggles valiantly to provide medical care to the Africans because no one else will; she speaks out directly against the hut tax which was simply a colonial device to compel the Africans to work; and she explicitly condemns the practice of driving the Africans off their own lands. These moments of protest, however, seem to fade in the memories of most readers, eclipsed by her descriptions of lovely landscapes and colorful people. Simon Lewis, in the book mentioned above, accuses Blixen of “erasing the historically specific conditions of labor on the farm”.¹⁷ This is not true. Apparently, Simon has simply read past these features since he did not expect to find them, or perhaps, Sydney Pollack’s movie is to blame.

In the eyes of the critical community, Blixen has an extra strike against her because she is an aristocrat as well as a colonialist, making her potentially the “bad guy” in terms of class as well as race. Rob Nixon is one of the critics who has characterized Blixen’s attitude toward the Africans on the farm as “*noblesse oblige*” with the apparent understanding that this is something horrible, the result of unforgivable class snobbery. Webster’s defines *noblesse oblige* as: “the inferred obligation of people of high rank or social position to behave nobly or kindly towards others”.¹⁸ How Blixen herself defined *noblesse oblige* in an interview is important to consider:

¹⁶ Susan Brantly, *Understanding Isak Dinesen*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC, 2002, pp. 72-100.

¹⁷ Lewis, *White Women Writers*, p. 126.

¹⁸ *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition, David B. Guralnik (ed.), The World Publishing Company, New York, 1978, p. 964.

The only really reliable principle in the relationship between parties, where one is technologically and economically superior to such a fantastic degree must be "Noblesse oblige" [...] Yes, if society was so democratic that white people could recognize the blacks as equals, a *modus vivendi* might possibly be found. But it is my experience, that the longer one comes in socially into a white democratic society, the stronger the whites feel and insist upon their race's superiority [...] Noblesse: It is nothing else or less than this: to keep one's word. It is to take responsibility for what one says and does.¹⁹

In this statement, Blixen demonstrates a completely clear-sighted awareness of the racial inequalities existing in Kenya, the fact that such inequalities are socially determined, and that it is the whites who are insisting on their superiority. "Noblesse oblige" becomes a way of operating responsibly under these circumstances, until conditions might change. Given a context, the idea does not seem quite that horrible.

In her book *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya*, Carolyn Martin Shaw writes as follows:

Blixen's romanticism never removed Europeans from their pinnacle. She delights in nature, and her belief that Africans had not quite severed the umbilical cord with nature results in both admiration and disdain for them. This is paternalism (maternalism), and it is racist.²⁰

It seems as if Shaw has only read *Out of Africa* and knows nothing further about the author and, so, reads into the book the person she thinks she should find. A similar view is held by Thomas R. Knipp who writes of Blixen's depictions of the Africans:

¹⁹ Egeland, *Ansikte mot ansikte*, p. 98. "Det eneste virkelig pålitelige prinsipp i forholdet mellom to parter, hvor den ene er den annen teknisk og økonomisk overlegen i så fantastisk grad, må dog være "Noblesse oblige." [...] Ja, hvis samfunnet var så demokratisk, at hvite folk kunne anerkjenne de sorte som likemenn, kunne der kanskje finnes en *modus vivendi*. Men det er min erfaring, at ju lenger ned man kommer sosialt i et hvitt demokratisk samfunn, jo sterkere føler og hevder de hvite deres rases overlegenhet. [...] jeg vil svare for, jeg vi ta ansvaret for, hva jeg gjør. – Noblesse: det er da intet annet og intet mindre enn dette: Å stå ved sitt ord. Det er å ta ansvaret for hva man sier og gjør."

²⁰ Carolyn Martin Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 192.

The result is a gallery of subordinated, subtly dehumanized black African characters inhabiting a world of European ascendancy [...] *Out of Africa*, for all its—and its author's—affection, is subtly oppressive of Africa and Africans.²¹ (8)

Raoul Granqvist, a Swedish scholar who has written a great many sensible things about postcolonialism, paints Karen Blixen with the same brush as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary. He is convinced that “The African’s exist for her fulfillment and gratification” and even goes so far as to refer to her as a “white supremacist”.²² Contrast these statements, with that of Brenda Cooper and David Descutner:

Her affirmative depictions of the Kenyans and their ways of life, juxtaposed with her negative depictions of the Europeans, work in combination to fracture the imperialist hierarchy on which rests the justification for colonialism.²³

One could hardly believe these critics had read the same book. The fact that these critics can come to such radically different conclusions suggests that perhaps the issue is more complicated than binary oppositions will allow.

As another example of critics disagreeing, Carolyn Martin Shaw quotes in full Blixen’s anecdote about the peony that she grew and then cut off, thereby destroying any possibilities that peonies could be introduced to Africa, and uses it as an emblem of “the desire to make something European out of Africa”²⁴ The fact that Blixen has failed at exactly this does not seem to matter, nor the many sections of the book where she undermines the prestige of European culture. Lasse Holme Kjældgaard argues contrastingly that Blixen is not subject to the Robinson Crusoe impulse: “It is not a world that should be recreated that she

²¹ Thomas R. Knipp, “Kenya’s Literary Ladies and the Mythologizing of the White Highlands”, *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 55, no. 1, 1990, p. 8.

²² Raoul Granqvist, *Stereotypes in Western Fiction in Africa: A Study of Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary Ernest Hemingway, Karen Blixen, Graham Greene and Alan Paton*, Umeå Papers in English, Umeå, 1984, pp. 22-3.

²³ Brenda Cooper and David Descutner, “Strategic Silences and Transgressive Metaphors in *Out of Africa*,” *Southern Communication Journal*, vol. 62, no. 4, 1997, p. 340.

²⁴ Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions*, p. 182.

comes to, but a world that to a high degree presents itself as finished and created".²⁵ This is a disagreement fundamentally about intentions and Shaw is speculating based on what she assumes must be the case given Blixen's participation in the colonial enterprise.

As we have seen, it can be risky to leap to conclusions about Blixen's intentions without actually having investigated them. There are some critics, however, who have not fallen into this trap, but instead, have applied a more even-handed approach. For example, Abdul R. JanMohamed provides an exemplary approach to Blixen in his book *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Understanding the principle he uses as a title, he does not fall prey to the use of Manichean aesthetics himself. He speaks of Blixen's "inherited attitudes" about the noble savage and, in doing so, acknowledges her tendency to romanticize the African's as part of her history and culture and avoids the urge to judge this as "wrong," as if she should have behaved differently.²⁶ He does not expect that she could somehow, miraculously, divest herself completely of the attitudes of her place and time and express herself in a way that the Twenty-first Century might approve of. JanMohamed is good at highlighting that which is different about Blixen within the context of colonial writing in general, attributing to her "an unusual understanding of their colonial problems",²⁷ and "anomalous concern for African education",²⁸ which earned her "rare respect from later African nationalist leaders".²⁹ In an often quoted line, he declares her "a major exception to the above pattern of conquest and irresponsible exploitation".³⁰ On the other hand, he is able to point out instances of her "colonialist narcissism," but finds that her own self-irony disarms the impact. She is, after all, a colonialist, but in a move rare for colonial literature, she is at least open to trying to understand Native culture.

Another good example among postcolonial critics is Rashna Brattilawa, who in a short essay takes Blixen to task for her animal metaphors, but puts this in context, showing even

²⁵ Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, "Efterskrift" in Karen Blixen, *Den afrikanske Farm*, Lasse Horne Kjældgaard (ed.), Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 2007, p. 124. "Det er ikke en verden, der skal omskabes, som hun ankommer til, men en verden, der i høj grad fremstår som færdig och skabt"

²⁶ Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1983, p. 48.

²⁷ JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 57.

²⁸ JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 58.

²⁹ JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 59.

³⁰ Jan Mohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 57.

worse incidents in the writing of Maude Diver, and acknowledging that not relegating the Africans to the background is a rare move in colonial literature.³¹ Again, it is the attention to special differences and contextualization that is admirable. Annie Gagiano has written an intriguing essay tracing resonances between Blixen's depictions of Kenya and, surprisingly, those of Ngugi wa Thiong'o:

Ironically, both the Danish and Gikuyu author choose English to recount, one might even say translate, Kenyan realities. [...] Notwithstanding Ngugi's condemnation of her role, Blixen's writing seems to me as undismissable as his criticism of it. Obviously, these authors fight different adversaries, but both Blixen and Ngugi eloquently say "This Kenya must not die".³²

Elisabeth Oxfeldt writes of the subversive humor in *Out of Africa*: "Dinesen possesses the great humor that allows her to think in terms of equality between herself and the Africans rather than in terms of inferiority and superiority".³³

Dane Kennedy and Sidonie Smith can be quite strict with Blixen, but their critiques of some of the elements in *Out of Africa* are both contextualized and thoughtful.³⁴ Smith is interested in the parallels between the colonial ideologies of race and the patriarchal ideologies of gender. Blixen's status as a woman within colonialism complicates things:

As a result of in/corporation, woman and African remain other-than-fully human, on the one hand childlike and on the other monstrous. And always, they require some kind of "parental" oversight.... [White women] shared a marginal positionality in relation to white men, caught as they were in their

³¹ Rashna Battliwala, "Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*", *The Literary Half-Yearly*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1980, pp. 109-12.

³² Annie Gagiano, "Blixen, Ngugi: Recounting Kenya" in Charles Cantalupo (ed.), *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts*, Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, 1995, pp. 95-110.

³³ Elisabeth Oxfeldt, *Journeys from Scandinavia. Travelogues of Africa, Asia, and South America, 1840-2000*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2010, p. 138.

³⁴ Dane Kennedy, "Isak Dinesen's African Recovery of a European Past", *Clio*. vol. 17, no. 1, 1987, pp. 38-50 and Sidonie Smith, "The Other Woman and the Racial Politics of Gender: Isak Dinesen and Beryl Markham in Kenya", in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992, pp. 410-35.

embodiment; and this embodiment they shared with the Africans, who vis-a-vis Europeans were cast in the essentialism of race as surely as the women were cast in an essentialism of gender. (I do not mean to imply here that they experienced the same degree of marginalization as the Africans. They did not.)³⁵

Smith's reservation is significant, because even if white women were marginalized in colonial society, they still outranked the Africans. Blixen's life on the farm liberated her from even greater strictures imposed upon her as an upper-class woman back in Denmark, but this freedom came at the expense of the Africans. Blixen's own experiences of powerlessness as a woman might help her sympathize with the Africans, but the central paradox remains that she is still the oppressor as well as the oppressed. *Out of Africa* resists categorization on many levels. As Tone Selboe notes: "The colonial project is both undermined and reinforced at the same time".³⁶ Lasse Horne Kjældgaard writes that Blixen "acts both as a witness to, participant in, and accuser of this colonial project".³⁷

Freeing *Out of Africa* from the "blame game," opens up interpretive possibilities. In line with how Kirsten Thisted used Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry to open up hitherto unnoticed depths to Blixen's text, I want to explore Blixen's own rebellion against Manichean aesthetics through the trope of hybridity. Both Selboe and Kjældgaard, with a nod to Susan Hardy Aiken, have remarked that in terms of genre *Out of Africa* is a hybrid text. Selboe describes it as a mixture of "autobiography, poetic reminiscence, travelogue, pastoral, novel".³⁸ Kjældgaard observes in his afterward to *Out of Africa* that the book "is a compound text—a hybrid like the peculiar animals of which Aristotle thought Africa was full".³⁹ The figure of the hybrid, something that is not one thing or the other, is also a means of moving away from the binary oppositions of Manichean aesthetics. An interest in binary oppositions,

³⁵ Smith, pp. 412.

³⁶ Tone Selboe, *Kunst & Erfaring. En studie i Karen Blixens forfatterskap*. Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense, 1996, p. 43. "Koloniprojektet blir både undergravd och opprettholdt på en gang".

³⁷ Kjældgaard, "En af de farligste bøger", p. 135. "optræder både som vidne til, deltager i og anklager i forhold til dette koloniale projekt".

³⁸ Selboe, *Kunst & Erfaring*, p. 34. "selvbiografi, poetiske erindringer, reiseskildring, pastoral, roman".

³⁹ Kjældgaard, "Efterskrift", p. 437. "er en sammensat tekst – en hybrid ligesom de mærkelige dyr, Aristoteles mente, at Afrika bugnede af".

such as male/female or North/South, their dynamic interactions and frequent subversion, comprise a common theme throughout Blixen's writing. In recent years, some postcolonial criticism has moved away from the somewhat predictable analysis of power relations between the colonizer and the colonized, especially since binary oppositions tend to reinforce themselves. Instead, they ask why a group would want to imagine itself as coherent, whole, or pure.⁴⁰ Robert Young, the author of *Colonial Desire*, has posited: "Fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change".⁴¹ The more threatened a group is by the possibility of change, the more it will insist on fixed identities. To such groups, "hybrid" forms "embody threatening forms of perversion and degeneration".⁴²

Certainly, the British colonizers in general were a group that felt threatened by the possibility of change, and thus they were compelled to insist on a fixed identity as well as their superiority. Carolyn Martin Shaw explains:

An imperative for the British middle class was to maintain the prestige and standing of the white race, to protect white privilege through control of morality and control of the means of production. But such a neat moral order could not be maintained in the face of aristocratic dissoluteness, Afikaner degeneracy, middle-class downward mobility, and the demands of Africans for more land and cultural autonomy.⁴³

Blixen transgressed this neat moral order at every opportunity. She entertained the dissolute aristocrats of the "Happy Valley Set," gave shelter to downwardly mobile figures like Old Knudsen and Emmanuelsen, and allowed the Africans on her farm greater autonomy and use of the land than was generally deemed proper. Judith Thurman tells the story of how Lady Macmillan brought two elderly American ladies by for an unexpected visit. They spoke of the Countess de Janzé as the worst of Kenya's debauched sinners: "At that moment Lord Erroll's car drove up; he and the countess were announced, and [Blixen] noted with great satisfaction

⁴⁰ Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001, p. 200.

⁴¹ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 4.

⁴² Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 5.

⁴³ Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions*, p. 8.

that the Devil himself could not have caused greater consternation. The scene amused her so much that she sat up in her bed that night, still laughing over it".⁴⁴ Within the limits imposed on her by being both Danish and a woman, Blixen enjoyed subverting the stuffy British colonial order whenever she could.

In addition to challenging British moral order, Blixen thematizes in her book the notion of the hybrid, of the unstable identity. Susan Horton has described Blixen's frontier experience as "living on the slash" between masculine/feminine, white/black, European/African.⁴⁵ Hybridism, the ability to experience both sides of the slash, is empowering, but also fraught with peril. This theme is developed in the segment titled, "In the Menagerie," where the hyena is presented as a hermaphrodite, a hybrid of both male and female qualities. This section is one of the deliberately fictional insertions into her otherwise "autobiographical" novel. The fictionality is signaled by the figure of Augustus von Schimmelman, a character from *Seven Gothic Tales*, and the fact that the episode is set 100 years in the past. The obvious fictionalizing of this segment functions as a safety valve, a deliberate distancing of the topic from the "real" world of Blixen's Africa. The topic of hybrids or hermaphrodites destabilizes the notion of a fixed identity. The threat to her implied British colonial audience might seem less because of the fictional frame.

In the section, Schimmelman seems to adopt the role of a chauvinistic European when he argues that the inhabitants of Africa only exist insofar as Europeans have seen, named, and found a use for them. The showman from Hamburg informs Schimmelman: "All Hyenas, you will know, are hermaphrodites, and in Africa, where they come from, on a full-moon night they will meet and join in a ring of copulation wherein each individual takes the double part of male and female".⁴⁶ Schimmelman reacts with disgust: Such a breaking down of binary oppositions and hierarchies is repellent and threatening. The showman then asks Schimmelman whether it would be harder for a hyena to be shut up alone in a cage: "Would he feel a double want, or is he, because he unites in himself the complementary qualities of

⁴⁴ Judith Thurman, *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1982, p. 225.

⁴⁵ Susan R. Hornton, *Difficult Women, Artful Lives: Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, In and Out of Africa*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Dinesen, *Out of Africa*, p. 301.

creation, satisfied in himself, and in harmony?"⁴⁷ The question is not answered directly, but it seems that experiencing both sides of the slash might be both an asset and a liability. It can imply a sense of harmony and balance, but lurking beneath may be a yearning for whatever is not present at the moment, a sense of incompleteness. *Out of Africa*'s narrator is also a hybrid, uniting the qualities of male/female, domestic/wild, north/south, European/African. The implication is that, although her world is immeasurably enriched by living on the slash, discontent is always near, and she fears confinement in a world where only one set of values prevail.

Blixen most commonly employs hybridity as a metaphor implying a richness of spirit and the ability to experience life from all sides. As Blixen wrote to her brother, "I believe that life demands of us that we love it, not merely certain sides of it and not only one's own ideas and ideals, but life itself in all its forms, before it will give us anything in return, and when you mention my philosophy of life, I have no other than that".⁴⁸ Blixen, however, does not specifically raise the issue of racial hybridity in *Out of Africa*: This would have been a topic too hot to handle in 1934. A person of mixed race is the offspring of the sexual union of two people from opposite sides of the slash, a blurring of the distinctions so important to maintaining the power hierarchy. Robert Young persuasively presents the English colonial enterprise as riddled with desire for the colonized Other at the same time it feared the wild and threatening desires of the colonized. Blixen acknowledges that there are sections of Nairobi where African women practice prostitution. Although some of their customers may be white, Blixen only mentions specifically that Esa's homicidal wife consorts with native soldiers, thus avoiding a flat-out invocation of miscegenation. It was common knowledge in Kenya that her husband Bror Blixen was color-blind when it came to his womanizing. Even if white men might consummate their desire with African women, the desire of African men for white women was absolutely taboo. Dag Heede has noted that this very rule is an element Blixen's gothic romance novel, *The Angelic Avengers (Gengældelsens Veje)*.⁴⁹ In *Out of Africa*, the fear of male African desire lies behind the suggestion that white women be placed

⁴⁷ Dinesen, *Out of Africa*, p. 290.

⁴⁸ Isak Dinesen, *Letters from Africa. 1914-1931*, Ann Born, (trans.) and Frans Lasson (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Dag Heede, *Det Umenneskelige. Analyser af seksualitet, køn og identitet hos Karen Blixen*, Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense, 2001, p. 214.

in a concentration camp during World War I. The white women had to be protected from the sexual threat of the Africans even at the cost of their liberty. Blixen responds to this impending confinement by going on safari as the sole white woman among a party of black men, completely disregarding the colonial fetishizing of sexual and racial difference.

In the segment, "The Wild Came to the Aid of the Wild," Blixen writes about a biological hybrid, but elevates the mixture, once again, to a metaphor for the spirit. This segment tells the story of an ox, said to be a hybrid mix between Masai cattle and the water buffalo. The result is a mixture of wild and domestic that does not easily submit to the plow. This ox becomes a stand-in for the possibility of rebellion, for the prospect that the Africans might not always meekly submit to servitude and remain on their side of the slash. If the English colonizers insist on stable identities, then they will be the masters and the Africans will remain their servants. In this segment, the Manager takes the role of English colonialism, insisting on breaking the heart of the ox by force, so that it may become a beast of burden. He ties the ox's four legs together and leaves him lying overnight in the paddock. During the night, a leopard eats one of the ox's hind legs off him, and the ox must be shot. On the surface, this seems a tale of defeat: rebellion will end in death. However, one must recall the title of the segment, "The Wild Came to the Aid of the Wild." Blixen's sympathy is with the ox and the leopard that saved it from a life in the yoke...better rebellion and death than a life of servitude. The violent methods of the farm manager earn him nothing, certainly not Blixen's approval.

In sum, *Out of Africa* is not just another colonial text, and its complexities are worth exploring. The differences most likely stem from Blixen's identity as a woman and a Dane living in colonial British East Africa. Are there elements of racism and colonial prejudice in *Out of Africa*? Absolutely. Given the historical circumstances under which it was written, anything else would be astounding. What is more surprising is the genuine effort Blixen makes to advocate for Africans and their culture to her implied British colonial audience. *Out of Africa* has much more to offer postcolonial criticism if it is not merely dismissed and relegated to the category of racist, colonial romanticism. There is more to it than that.