“A Coffee-Plantation is a Thing that Gets Hold of You and Does Not Let You Go”: Plant-Writing in Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa*

Peter Mortensen

Summary

One of the powerful but mostly overlooked productive forces in and behind Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa* (1937) is *Coffea arabica,* the coffee bush of Arabia. In this article, I first discuss the dominant anti-pastoral tendency in recent Blixen-criticism, which has classified *Out of Africa* as a neo-colonial text and reduced Blixen’s interest in more-than-human nature to an expression of conservative ideology. I introduce two alternative concepts – “arabesque” and “phytographia” – that help me reposition *Out of Africa* and reconsider the significance of the text’s many plant-references. Blixen’s writing, in my understanding, holds a more timely interest and performs a more culturally productive function than is often assumed, especially insofar as it fore-grounds the life of many different plants and asks us to consider their powerful impact upon humanity. Read at a time when we are beginning to understand the disastrous implications of Western culture’s deep-rooted “plant blindness”, Blixen’s text helps question the insignificance of plants and problematise the powerful conviction that humans and plants lead separate and unrelated lives.

Opsomming

Coffea arabica, die koffiebos van Arabië, is een van die invloedryke kragte wat Karen Blixen se *Out of Africa* (1937) onderlê (hoewel dit meestal misgekyk word). In hierdie artikel bespreek ek eerstens die dominante anti-herderlike tendens in onlangse Blixen-kritiek, wat *Out of Africa* geklassifiseer het as ’n neo-koloniale teks, en wat Blixen se belangstelling in meer-as-menslike natuur reduseer tot ’n uitdrukking van konserwa-tiewe ideologie. Ek stel twee alternatiewe begrippe bekend – “arabesk” en “fitografie” – wat my help om *Out of Africa* te herposisioneer en die betekenis van die teks se vele verwysings na plante te heroorweeg. Blixen se skryfwerk, soos ek dit verstaan, is meer van aktuele belang en vervul ’n funksie wat meer kultureel produktief is as wat dikwels aanvaar word – veral in die rol daarvan om die lewe van baie verskillende plante na die voorgrond te bring en om ons te vra om oor hul kragtige invloed op die mensdom te besin. Gelees in ’n tyd wanneer ons die rampspoedige gevolge van die Westerse kultuur se diepgewortelde “plantblindheid” begin verstaan, help Blixen se teks ons om die onbeduidendheid van plante te bevraagteken en die kragtige oortuiging dat mense en plante afsonderlike en onverwante lewers lei, te problematiseer.

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Introduction

How did *Out of Africa* (1937), Danish author Karen Blixen’s (Isak Dinesen’s) memoir of her 17 years (1914-1931) in Kenya (then British East Africa), come about? We customarily think of literary writing as part of the humanities, as a valuable human activity, and indeed as something that decisively distinguishes human beings from other nonhuman creatures. We celebrate literary authors as exceptional individuals endowed with unique creative powers. Recent studies in ecocriticism, posthumanism, new materialism, multispecies ethnography, and biosemiotics, however, are pushing us towards realizing “that some ‘human’ cultural productions do not belong solely to human individuals and societies but in real and specifiable ways to a more-than-human community of humans and nonhuman others” (Ziser 2013: 10).

Among the agentic forces that we most habitually underestimate are plants, which a century- or millennia-long “socially and scientifically indoctrinated […] anthropocentric and zoocentric assumption” (Ryan 2012: 104) has reduced to lowly vegetating bystanders, or inert resources freely available for exploitation. Emergent work in critical plant studies, human-plant studies, however, encourages us to question the “backgrounding of herbality” (Houle 2011: 28) and envision plants as active players in history, society, culture and literature. At a time when climate change, deforestation and changing land uses place many plant species in jeopardy, it behoves us to remember how profoundly plants matter to the ecosystem’s and humankind’s survival and welfare.

One of the powerful but mostly overlooked productive forces in and behind *Out of Africa* is *Coffea arabica*, the coffee bush of Arabia. “We grew coffee on my farm”, writes Blixen in the book’s first chapter:

> The land was in itself a little too high for coffee, and it was hard work to keep it going; we were never rich on the farm. But a coffee-plantation is a thing that gets hold of you and does not let you go, and there is always something to do on it: you are generally just a little behind with your work. […] All the country round Nairobi, particularly to the North of the town, is laid out in a similar way, and here lives a people, who are constantly thinking and talking of planting, pruning or picking coffee, and who lie at night and meditate upon improvements to their coffee-factories.
>
> (1992: 5)

Coffea arabica belongs to the genus *Coffea*, which consists of several dozen species whose native range spans equatorial Africa and Madagascar. The plant’s native home is in the temperate forests of southwestern Ethiopia, and French missionaries first introduced coffee plants to Kenya in the 1890s. Rich white settlers planted it for home use, but it soon spread in the Nairobi area and the Kenya highlands (Hill 1956). Blixen came to Kenya in 1914 to manage the 6000-acre coffee farm that wealthy Danish and Swedish relatives

had bought for her and her newlywed husband, Bror von Blixen-Finecke. With its 600 acres of coffee fields, the farm was part of the 4.5 million acres of land that had already been divvied out among 1,000 white farmers "as if it had been vacant" (Thurman 1982: 119). For various reasons, Karen Coffee Company Ltd. never made a profit. Following the 1929 stock market crash, the global arabica coffee market collapsed, forcing the farm owners to sell out and Blixen to return to Denmark in 1931.

Blixen was known for many years by an African nickname meaning "flower" (Brundbjerg 2000: 348), and according to her Kenyan neighbour, Ingrid Lindström, "[s]he *loved* that beastly coffee" (qtd. Thurman 1982: 199). In this article, I interpret *Out of Africa* as a coffee-farmer's text that brings plants and their key influence on human culture, society and identity to consciousness. I first discuss the dominant "anti-pastoral" tendency in recent Blixen-criticism, which has pigeonholed *Out of Africa* as a neo-colonial text and reduced Blixen's interest in more-than-human nature to an expression of conservative politics. In the interpretation favoured by many of Blixen's most sophisticated critics, *Out of Africa* speaks a green language merely to embellish its Eurocentric and reactionary social vision. To counter this claim, I introduce two alternative concepts – "arabesque" and "phytographia" – that help me reposition *Out of Africa* and reconsider the significance of the text's many plant-references. While *Out of Africa* is inevitably marked by its author's class, cultural background, and historical circumstances, I argue, the text's acute sensitivity to the dynamic vitalism of the natural world makes it more than pastoral ideology. Blixen's writing, in my understanding, holds a more timely interest and performs a more culturally productive function than is often assumed, especially insofar as it fore-grounds the life of many different plants and asks us to consider their powerful impact upon human lives. Read at a time when we are beginning to understand the disastrous implications of western culture's deep-rooted "plant blindness" (Wandersee & Schussler 1999), Blixen's text helps question the insignificance of plants and problematise the powerful conviction that humans and plants lead separate and unrelated lives.

The Life of Plants

Out of Africa collects descriptions, vignettes, anecdotes, philosophical reflections, and character sketches relating to Blixen's Kenyan years. Discussion centres on Blixen' cast of multi-ethnic and multinational cast of human characters who assemble on and around the farm, and critics particularly ask how her writing positions her in relation to (post-)colonial politics. Few readers, however, pause to register or consider that Blixen was a lifelong phytophile (plant lover), and that greenery sprouts on virtually

every page of *Out of Africa*. Already in the book’s opening paragraphs, Blixen draws her readers’ attention to the green side of life:

> The trees had a light delicate foliage, the structure of which was different from that of the trees in Europe; it did not grow in bows or cupolas, but in horizontal layers, and the formation gave to the tall solitary trees a likeness to the palms, or a heroic and romantic air like fullrigged ships with their sails clewed up, and to the edge of a wood a strange appearance as if the whole wood were faintly vibrating. Upon the grass of the great plains the crooked bare old thorn-trees were scattered, and the grass was spiced like thyme and bog-myrtle; in some places the scent was so strong, that it smarted in the nostrils. All the flowers that you found on the plains, or upon the creepers and liana in the native forest, were diminutive like flowers of the downs, – only just in the beginning of the long rains a number of big, massive heavy-scented lilies sprang out on the plains.
>
> (1992: 2)

In this passage, we witness how Blixen breaks away from the generalising clichés haunting many colonial representations of tropical flora. In *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joseph Conrad lets his narrator Marlow encounter the Congo jungle as a “great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight” that “was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence” (1995: 34). Blixen, however, figures tropical vegetality neither as a paradisiacal garden nor as a menacing green hell. Bringing a gardener’s or farmer’s sensibility to her African writing, she helps us perceive a richly differentiated variety of growing things that come in different sizes and shapes and have different colours, textures and scents.

In the chapters that follow, Blixen proceeds to “herborize” (1992: 111) a great variety of African plant species and plant communities, from “flowers, vegetables and herbs” (1992: 302) to many different kinds of trees (thorn, mimosa, bamboo, acacia, olive, Cape-chestnut, mango, eucalyptus, grevillea and many others). The Kenyan highlands comprise different types of land-scape that each have distinct types of vegetation. There are the “park-like” savannahs and plains, where one finds “a mosaic of little square maize-fields, banana-groves and grassland” (1992: 5), “thorn-thickets” and a “bamboo-grove” (1992: 6). There are the lush “Virgin Forest[s]” of the “Ngong Forest Reserve” (1992: 61), where

> [t]he air […] was cool like water, and filled with the scent of plants, and in the beginning of the long rains when the creepers flowered, you rode through sphere after sphere of fragrance. One kind of African Daphne of the woods, which flowers with a small cream-coloured sticky blossom, had an over-whelming sweet perfume, like lilac, and wild lily of the valley. Here and there,

> hollow tree-stems were hung up in ropes of hide on a branch; the Kikuyu hung them there to make the bees build in them, and to get honey.
>
> (1992: 62)

At lower altitudes, one finds the "dry, moon-like landscape of the African low country" (1992: 5), where "the cactus grows" along with "woods of the mighty, wide-branching Mimosa-trees, with thorns like spikes" (1992: 6). Then, too, there are agricultural areas with "maize and wheat and fruit-farms" (1992: 299) and "shambas" (native gardens), where cultivated plants are made to grow. These include not only the "shining young coffee-plants" (1992: 6) with its "reddened [ripe] berries" (1992: 8), but also "beans ripen[ing] in the fields", "sweet potatoes, that have a vinelike leaf and spread over the ground like a dense entangled mat", and "many varieties of big yellow and green speckled pumpkins" (1992: 9). Flax appeals both to sight and touch, as "[a] sky-blue flowering flax-field is a marvellously pretty sight, – like a piece of Heaven on earth and there can be no more gratifying kind of goods to be turning out than the flax fibre, tough and glossy, and slightly greasy to the touch". Blixen devotes one section to Ingrid Lindström, a neighbouring female farmer who successfully transitions from "castor-oil bushes, and soya-beans" into other crops: "[A]fter she had slaved for twelve years at her market-gardening […] she saved her farm for her family and herself by planting pyrethrum, which is sent to France and is there used in making perfumes" (1992: 295). *Out of Africa* dwells on the forms of greenery that humans most prize and desire to see grow, such as the delphinium and the peony, which releases "a profusion of fresh sweet scent" and sprouts "a great number of dark carmoisin curvilinear shoots, and later a lot of delicate leaves and rounded buds" (1992: 199). However, Blixen also includes references to "the bold native weeds" that "grow up thick in the fields," such as "the black-jack, which has long scabrous seed-vessels that hang on to your clothes and stockings" (1992: 7).

Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral

The traditional term for nature-oriented literature is "pastoral", and *African Pastoral* was among the tentative book titles entertained by Blixen and her publisher Robert Haas in 1936.[1] Writing in 1964, Robert Langbaum characterised *Out of Africa* as "an authentic pastoral, perhaps the best prose pastoral of our time" (1964: 119). More recent critical writings on *Out of Africa* have crystallised an influential interpretation that gives "pastoral" a distinctly pejorative inflection, using the term to expose Blixen's complicity with colonial exploitation, Eurocentric hegemony, and social conservatism

1. In Sweden, the book appeared as *Afrikansk pastoral* (1937).

(Nixon 1986; Kennedy 1987; Knipp 1990; Lewis 2003; Irlam 2015). In these readings, the popularity of both Blixen’s original 1937 text and Sidney Pollack’s 1984 film version speak of little more than the tenacious hold of ruling-class ideology. Borrowing from Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* (1974) and other Marxist analyses, Blixen’s critics accumulate negative adjectives – “discomfiting”, “disquieting” (Nixon 1986: 219, 222); “paternalist”, “neo-feudal”, “archaic” (Kennedy 1987: 42, 45, 48); “nostalgic”, “oppressive”, “mythic” (Knipp 1990: 6, 8); “anachronistic”, “extra-temporal”, “extrasocial”, “exploitative” (Lewis 2003: 35, 118, 126); “escapist”, “narcissistic”, “self-aggrandizing” and “mystical” (Irlam 2015: 2, 5, 7) – around *Out of Africa*. They frame Blixen, once known as an independent woman farmer with an iconoclastic lifestyle, fraught relations with British colonial authorities, and bold “pro-native” (Brundbjerg 2000: 165) views, as a “Danish aristocrat” (Knipp 1990: 3), an outright apologist for “colonial modernity” (Irlam 2015: 13), and a modern writer “in line with the wider tradition of European pastoral” (Lewis 2003: 127).

Contributors to the “anti-pastoral” (Gifford 1999: 116-145) school of Blixen-criticism read *Out of Africa* as a twentieth-century version of the classical pastoral or the neoclassical country house poems of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This type of critical discourse is “nature-skeptical”, in that it focuses “on the ideological functions of the appeal to ‘nature’ and on the ways in which relations to the non-human world are always historically mediated, and indeed ‘constructed’, through specific conceptions of human identity and difference” (Soper 1995: 4). In this interpretation, *Out of Africa*’s critique of “the advance of European civilization” (Blixen 1992: 241) and its valorisation of the “green world” (1992: 111), in other words, merely encode its author’s essentially con-servative social vision. Blixen has filled her book with landscape description and lovingly detailed reflections on nonhuman creatures to naturalise her own presence in Africa, to reduce African natives to features of the scenery, and to deflect honest discussion of the social inequalities and conflicts that truly matter.[2] When she writes that “[h]ere I am, where I ought to be” (1992: 3) and asserts that “[t]here is nothing in the world which to the Kikuyu holds the interest and importance of a cow with a heifer calf at foot” (1992: 138), Blixen constructs an idyllic, prelapsarian world where the colonist’s power remains forever unchanged and unchallenged. Anti-pastoral critics cast Blixen as a dangerous modern enchantress, whose “idyll […] continues to seduce modern readers” and “exert a fascination […] that remains hard to escape” (Irlam 2015: 2). Her writing’s “seductive” (Kennedy 1987: 37) powers must be sternly unmasked by (predominantly male) practitioners of skeptical hermeneutics, echoing and confirming each

2. I have discussed Blixen’s use of human-animal comparisons elsewhere (Mortensen 2018).

other in their efforts to resist the lure of "the Danish Scheherezade" (Brantly 2002b).

Arabesque and Phytographia

I suggest that the anti-pastoral Blixen-interpretation partakes of "plant-blindness", defined as "the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs" (Wandersee & Schussler 1999: 82). For Blixen's sociocentric critics, beings such as plants cannot count as a subject of interest in its own right, and to pretend otherwise, especially for a white, European, bourgeois woman, merely serves to camouflage how differently and unequally human groups are situated not by "nature" but by the forces of manmade history and society. Anti-pastoralism constructs human culture as an inescapable prison-house, and it reduces Blixen's topophilia, biophilia, and phytophilia to "ideological theater for acting out desires that have very little to do with any bonding to nature as such" (Buell 1995: 35).

Two theoretical concepts, the first traditional and the second more recent, can help us reframe *Out of Africa*'s environmentality. "Arabesque" originally refers to a biomorphic decorative pattern of flowing, twining and winding branches, tendrils and leaves, where one leaf or flower grows out of the other without beginning or end. Friedrich Schlegel, the foremost theoretician of early German romanticism, used the term to theorise an anti-classical literary aesthetic and an "organic" philosophy in which "the human being and the world […] are connected, and thought of as one" (qtd. Nassar 2913: 123).

For Schlegel, culture and nature are inextricably connected, and literature is suffused with the vital principle that animates all organic matter. "The world in total", he writes, "is originally a plant and should once again become plant. Humanity is in total a plant" (qtd. Nassar 2013: 149). "[T]he more divine a man or a work of man is, the more it resembles a plant […] And so the highest, most perfect mode of life would actually be nothing more than *pure vegetating*" (Schlegel 1971: 66). The arabesque was a key component of Schlegel's romantic organicism. In the "Prologue" to the literary disquisitions published as "Dialogue on Poetry" in the journal *Athenäum* (1800), he declares that he holds "the arabesque to be a very definite and essential form or mode of expression of poetry" (1968: 96) and "the oldest and most original form of human imagination". Schlegel uses "arabesque" to designate not a particular decorative pattern of a specific cultural provenance, but a complex literary work that in the creation of "artfully ordered confusion" (1968: 86) tries to imitate, and partake of, both the harmonious organism and the chaotic plenitude of biological life. Works like Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760), Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796) and Schlegel's own *Lucinde* (1799) obey no obvious generic rules, they lack a linear teleological narrative, and they have no clearly

demarcated beginning, middle, or end. Consisting of digressions and interruptions, such texts are permanently metamorphosing, in a constant process of becoming. Instead of relating a straightforward narrative, they bud, snarl, and sprout in different directions, wittily disturb their own momentum, self-reflexively loop back upon them-selves, and frustrate their readers' desire for neat resolutions. Arabesques, for Schlegel, are "plantlike novel[s]" (Nassar 2013: 156) that run counter to bourgeois frugality and the "mechanism" that "is certainly the evil principle in philosophy and reality" (Schlegel, *Lectures* 150). An arabesque is both a "work of art" (*Kunstprodukt*) and a "natural product" (*Naturprodukt*) (1968: 97), a cultural composition whose curvilinear swirls and flourishes manifest the wildness of the imagination and humanity's knotty entanglement with the natural world.

Plant theorist Patricia Vieira coins the complementary term "phyto-graphia" (plant writing), using Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida to discuss "the myriad ways in which all beings leave imprints of themselves in their environment and in the existence of those who surround them" (2015: 208). Plants, according to Vieira, do not simply vegetate, nor do they form a passive and sessile backdrop to human culture and civilisation. Rather, plants materially write themselves on the world, shaping the landscape, renewing the atmosphere, and enabling human and animal lives in countless ways. Powerful philosophical narratives and cultural traditions have con-spired to make this plant-script all but illegible, creating the conviction (or myth) that humans write their own existence in solitary majesty. Vieira, however, views creative literature as a cultural "inscription" that contains "traces" (2015: 209) of more primordial forms of writing.

Examining different literatures, moreover, one discovers powerful examples of "phytographic" texts, whose formal architectonics and thematic emphases make the presence and power of plants visible and knowable in human writing. Vieira's own preferred examples of plant-inflected literature come from Latin American "jungle novels" such as José Eustasio Rivera's *The Vortex* (1924), where writers struggle "to interpret the forest's imposing inscriptions so as to express them artistically" (2015: 219). *Phytographia*, then, rests on the assumption "that a continuum extends from plant to human forms of inscription, which necessarily interact and get entangled in each other" (2015: 208-209). Like Schlegel, Vieira believes that humans communicate with plants, and that plants make themselves meaningful to humans, through literature: "*[P]hytographia*, or plant writing, denotes […] the coming together of the wordless, physical inscribed language of plants with an aesthetically mediated form of human language in literature" (2015: 213). Such texts highlight and foreground (rather than downplay and background) the more-than-human phenomena and processes that enable human creativity and productivity.

Plant-Literature

In *Out of Africa*, Blixen repeatedly suggests that nonhuman creatures have expressive capacities, and that human communications resonate with a multiplicity of more-than-human voices. At one point, she remarks that "when [Denys Finch-Hatton] came back to the farm, it gave out what was in it; it spoke, – as the coffee-plantations speak, when with the first showers of the rainy season they flower, dripping wet, a cloud of chalk" (1992: 206). Blixen also connects her own literature to plants, when she attributes her interest in writing to worry about her coffee plants during a period of drought: "I had to collect my energy on something, if I were not to be whirled away with the dust on the farm-roads, or the smoke on the plain. I began in the evenings to write stories, fairy-tales and romances, that would take my mind a long way off, to other countries and times" (1992: 40). To interpret *Out of Africa* as a phytographic arabesque, I suggest, is to read it as a plant-person's text and a site of interspecies entanglement, where different voices and agencies come together.[3] The text both channels the vital power of plants and reflects upon the facts and shapes of human-plant inter-involvement. Plants inscribe themselves on the form of *Out of Africa,* on the social world that it narratives, and on the human characters that it depicts.

As several critics have noted, *Out of Africa* lacks the linearity common to most autobiographies and the strong, central, enterprising persona characteristic of colonial literature (Brantly 2002a: 91-92). Susan Aiken finds *Out of Africa* "discontinuous, fragmentary, and associative rather than linear, geometric, and stable" (1990: 217) and argues that the text resists generic classification:

> Situated between the discourses of history and myth, fact and fiction, prose and poetry; partaking generically of forms as diverse as pastoral elegy, classical tragedy, autobiography, memoir, and travel tale; compounded of narrative, philosophical speculation, aphorism, parabolic reflection, and song, *Out of Africa* eludes all single, unitary classifications.
>
> (1990: 229)

Blixen's text deliberately defies rational order to proceed by association, whimsy, and fancy. It moves achronologically and digressively, beginning with a panoramic introduction to the landscape and inhabitants of Ngong, exemplified by the Kikuyu boy Kamante and the bushbuck kid Lulu. The second chapter concerns the shooting accident and the protracted and intricate negotiations that it triggers. The third chapter accentuates the portrayal of charismatic "wayfarers and wanderers of the world, [...] sailors, explorers and vagabonds" (1992: 184) like Old Knudsen, Emmanuelson, Berkely Cole, and Denys Finch-Hatton. The fragmentary fourth chapter is composed of short

3. For a discussion of arabesque elements in *Out of Africa*, see Bøggild 2012.

philosophical deliberations, dream sequences, historical vignettes, and character sketches interspersed with critical reflections on modern society. The fifth chapter revolves around the deaths of Kinanjui and Denys Finch-Hatton and the subsequent loss of the farm.

In an interview, Blixen quoted a line by the English romantic poet Walter Savage Landor: “Nature I loved; and next to Nature, Art” (Brundbjerg 2000: 121). We can read the apparent “structure(lessness)” (Aiken 1990: 217) of *Out of Africa* as manifestation of this principle (art following nature) and consequently as a textualisation of botanical life. Blixen writes of “the wildness and irregularity of the country”, the European “yearning” for “geometrical figures”, and the desire to convert into “a piece of ground laid out according to rule” (1992: 5-6). At another moment, she likens the experience of riding through an ancient equatorial forest to an absorption into a “green world”:

> An African Native Forest is a mysterious region. You ride into the depths of an old tapestry, in places faded and in others darkened with age, but marvellously rich in green shades. You cannot see the sky at all in there, but the sunlight plays in many strange ways, falling through the foliage. The grey fungus, like long drooping beards, on the trees, and the creepers hanging down everywhere, give a secretive, recondite air to the Native forest.
>
> (1992: 59)

Out of Africa itself is expressly designed as a literary manifestation of such free organic development. The natural world is filled with inscriptions, and *Out of Africa*’s meandering and sinuous “*capriccio*” (Aiken 1990: 272) is reminiscent of, and reinscribes, the proliferating organic webs and riotous vegetal shapes and patterns found in the African landscape. Thus, if *Out of Africa* lacks generic consistency and regular plot structure, this is not due to writerly confusion or ineptitude. Rather, the text takes its inspiration from, and tries to make textually present, the tangled forms found in the African forests and fields. Blixen weaves “a dense entangled mat”, a vinelike *poiesis* where different themes, problems, characters, and storylines intertwine in serpentine convolutions. Her text exists in a state of becoming, sending forth leaves, branches, and roots in different directions.

Plant-Worlds

The species of aquatic and terrestrial fauna appeared on earth only after flora covered the planet with green pigmentation. Almost all life depends upon sunlight via the photosynthesis of the botanical world. We rely on plants for air, food, shelter, fuel, and fibres for clothing, as well as for our gardens, landscape, and aesthetic inspiration. But human civilizations also exist because of plants. *Out of Africa*’s narrative explicitly foregrounds some of the

many ways in which plants impinge upon human life-worlds and co-orchestrate specific social beliefs and practices.

Blixen touches on the socially productive, world-making power of plants, when she relates the ritualistic distribution of snuff – "*tombacco* the Natives say" (1992: 31) – on Sunday mornings and the social gatherings of Europ-ean expatriates sipping "exquisite vintages" of "rare burgundy" (1992: 181). She also devotes an entire chapter to Ngomas, or "big Native dances", which can go on for several days and attract "up to fifteen hundred or two thousand guests" (1992: 143). While Blixen welcomes and enjoys these festivities, the British colonial authorities frown upon the sexually-charged gatherings of large native groups. Ngomas, Blixen points out, are held in the autumn, "after the maize-harvesting" (1992: 146), and they derive much of their Dionysian power from "tembu, a deadly drink fabricated from sugar cane" (1992: 143).

Coffee is shaped by, but it also shapes, the social worlds in which it lives:

> Coffee-growing is a long job. It does not all come out as you imagine, when, yourself young and hopeful, in the streaming rain, you carry the boxes of your shining young coffee-plants from the nurseries, and, with the whole number of farm-hands in the field, watch the plants set in the regular rows of holes in the wet ground where they are to grow, and then have them thickly shaded against the sun, with branches broken from the bush, since obscurity is the privilege of young things.
>
> (1992: 6)

Although plants pertain to the natural kingdom, many plants have been altered in their distribution, reproduction and morphology by the methods that people have used to develop and manage them. Therefore, many cultivated plant resources represent cultural as well as biological organisms that highlight the intimate connection between people and their local environments. Coffee plants for commercial use were (and are) domestic-ated cultivars that have been selected and bred for specific characteristics valuable to humans. Although they are living things, they are also plant artefacts that would not thrive or reproduce without human assistance and habitat maintenance. Coffee farmers transplant plants from their native habitat to new environments, trying to secure optimal growing conditions (1992: 295):

> To bring the coffee on we tried to manure the fields. […] When the squatters of the farm heard of the project they came forward to help me, and brought out, from their cattle and goat bomas, the manure of decades. It was delicate peaty stuff that was easy to handle. We ploughed up a furrow between the rows of coffee-trees, with the small new ploughs with a single ox to them that we had bought in Nairobi, and, since we could not get a cart into the fields, the women of the farm carried the manure in sacks on their backs, and spread it in the furrow, a sack to the tree, so that we could lead back the oxen and ploughs, and cover it up.

Planters try to secure a higher yield by selecting the hardiest and most productive plants, knowing well that “[s]ome of the trees have been badly planted with their tap-roots bent; they will die just as they begin to flower.” Domestication promises “coming bounties” (1992: 6), but it also entails increased exposure of plants to weeds, cold spells, parasites, droughts, grasshoppers, and “bad coffee-diseases like thrips and antestia” (1992: 295).

If humans alter and manipulate plants with various techniques and technologies, however, plants also co-shape the experiences and life-worlds of the people who work with them, and who get tied up in relationships of “coevolution” (Pollan 2001: 4-5). Coffee, in other words, inscribes itself not only on the physical landscape, but also on people’s daily lives, rituals, behaviours, and interactions. Humans grow coffee because they enjoy the aroma and taste of roasted coffee beans, but coffee in turn enlists humans in their care and propagation. Coffee co-produces a particular social milieu with a particular way of life and a particular rhythm centred on the seasonal activities of planting, pruning, weeding, harvesting, and drying. The reality of living as a coffee-farmer or -picker is directly related to the materiality of the crop that is grown. People who walk through “the flowering and dripping coffee-fields” (Blixen 1992: 252) will be ensnarled by “the black-jack, which has long scabrous seed-vessels that hang on to your clothes and stockings” (1992: 6). Similarly, people who become involved in coffee farming will find themselves entangled in a complex multispecies relationship: “[A] coffee-plantation is a thing that gets hold of you and does not let you go” (1992: 5).

Plant-Humans

In *Out of Africa*, plants are both outside and inside, adjacent to but also part of human existence. Plants imprint themselves upon human lives, human bodies, and the human character. Plants help make us the humans we are, and indeed it is difficult to see how we are or could ever truly be separate from plants. Coffee, Blixen writes, engenders a specific kind of plant-person: a woman dressed in the planter’s uniform of “old khaki coats and trousers” (1992: 343), who scans the sky for signs of “the long rains” (1992: 2), who lives in fear of seeing “the coffee-trees drooped and the leaves turned yellow” (1992: 295), who is “constantly thinking and talking of planting, pruning or picking coffee”, and who “lie[s] at night and meditate[s] upon improvements to [her] coffee-factor[y]” (1992: 6).

In addition, Blixen uses many defamiliarising figures and tropes that seem to posit a “constitutive vegetal” (Keetley 2016: 16) element at the heart of both the animal and the human being. Camels, for example, are figured as “haughty, hardened products of the desert, beyond all earthly sufferings, like cactus” (Blixen 1992: 11). Monkeys sit in trees “like fruits on the branches” (1992: 60), while a tower of giraffes is said to move with a “queer, inimitable,

vegetative gracefulness, as if it were not a herd of animals but a family of rare, long-stemmed, speckled gigantic flowers slowly advancing" (1992: 13). "A male bushbuck […] at the outskirt of the forest" appears "immovable like a tree-stem" (1992: 69).

Blixen is fascinated by the human body's biodegradability, and she repeatedly imagines herself dead and become sustenance for animals and plants, "made one with Nature and […] a common component of a landscape" (1992: 313). She characteristically represents sick, dead and dying human bodies in terms of vegetal characteristics, as when she figures "mothers with their feverish children, like little dry flowers, hanging upon their necks" (1992: 22). She also writes of human "skulls, which look like some kind of dusky nuts" (1992: 125), and she narrates how "when we had the Spanish flu on the farm […] I would find a brown smooth skull in the long grass of the forest, like a nut dropped down under a tree, or on the plain" (1992: 313). She describes the mortally ill Kinanjui "look[ing] like a huge dark wooden figure roughly cut with a knife" (1992: 310). Such imagery represents our inescapable intertwinement with nature, suggesting that despite our language, reason, and cultural achievements we "will always become vegetal matter, matter for vegetation" (Keetley 2016: 3).

Yet even when people are alive and well, Blixen's writing often depicts them in ways that make the human and the vegetal seem indissociably entangled. We see this when she imagines an "infant […] swaddled like an acorn" (1992: 170) and young girls looking "like large flowers on the grass" or resembling "dolls of dark wood" (1992: 145). We notice a similar effect in the two sections devoted to her Kikuyu cook, Esa:

> Esa was my cook, but he did not like to cook, he wanted to be a gardener. Plants were the only things for which he had preserved a real live interest […] I had promised him that he should go back to his garden-work, but I kept him off from month to month. Esa on his own had dammed in a bit of ground by the river, and planted it as a surprise to me. But as he had been alone at it, and was not a strong man, the dam was not solid enough, and in the long rains it went away altogether.
>
> (1992: 265-266)

In *Out of Africa*, humans live off plants, depend on plants, take after plants and in some instances almost seem to *become* plants. More clearly than any other character in the text, Esa represents a vision of the human person not as pure, separate, or unified being, but as an assemblage of human, animal, and vegetal characteristics. Esa has been influenced by his work "plant[ing] vegetables and flowers" (1992: 268) even to the point where plant features have come to seem dominant traits in his own character. Blixen also notes she was afraid that "he might imperceptibly die on me, like a plant that has its roots cut through" (1992: 265). Her fears prove justified when Esa's young

wife poisons him with a “native poison similar to strychnine” (1992: 268), a plant-derived alkaloid with a molecular structure similar to caffeine.

Conclusion: The Plantationocene and the Planthropocene

Karen Blixen was ambiguously implicated in colonial agriculture, a system that she “simultaneously participated in, benefited from, despised, and repeatedly sought to subvert” (Aiken 1990: 213). Early coffee farmers in tropical regions cleared and burned ancient forests to make space for their farms and increase production. They “benefited from the humus accumulated over centuries”, and they often “treated these tropical soils as non-renewable resources and abandoned their farms once the soils were exhausted” (McCook 2017: 1). In Kenya, European coffee farmers relied on cheap labour from the very native people (now reduced to “squatters”) who had been dispossessed in the colonial takeover (Zelaza 1992: 173-174). Blixen grew coffee as an understorey crop, in the shade of larger plants. As noted by the French developer who purchased the farm in 1931, she refused to cultivate more than a fraction of her estate “on a commercial scale” (qtd. Thurman 1982: 199), lest she displace more of the African families who lived there. In *Out of Africa*, she reflects on the costs of colonial deforestation, writing that “[t]o my mind it was a sad thing when the old forest was cut down” (1992: 31), and she imagines playing a role in the ecological restoration of the region:

> If I had had the capital, I thought, I would have given up coffee, have cut down the coffee-trees, and have planted forest-trees on my land. Trees grow up so quickly in Africa, in ten years’ time you walk comfortably under tall blue gum trees, and wattle trees, which you have yourself, in the rain, carried in boxes from the nurseries, twelve trees in a box. […] It is a noble occupation to plant trees, you think of it many years after with content. There had been big stretches of Native forest on the farm in the old days, but it had been sold to the Indians for cutting down, before I took over the farm; it was a sad thing. I myself in the hard years had had to cut down the wood on my land round the factory for the steam-engine, and this forest, with the tall stems and the live green shadows in it had haunted me, I have not felt more sorry for anything I have done in my life, than for cutting it down.
>
> (1992: 296)

Criticising the ahistorical, apolitical, and isolationist discourse that surrounds the concept of “the Anthropocene”, Donna Haraway claims that the term “Plantationocene” can better indicate the scale and scope of “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially trans-ported labor”. The “Plantationocene”, Haraway argues, “continues with ever-greater ferocity in

globalised factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multi-species forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike" (2015: 162). In my reading, *Out of Africa* speaks more optimistically to the "planthropocene", which can conjure the more hopeful realisation that "*we are of the plants*; that our futures hinge on creating liveable futures with the plants" (Myers 2017: 297).

The cover of the first Danish edition of *Out of Africa*, *Den afrikanske farm* (1937), features a hand-drawn image of a large tree flanked by two smaller bushes or shrubs, whose trunks, branches, and leaves are covered in minuscule Arabic writing.[4] Although the illustration may represent the family tree of the Moslem prophet Muhammed, the precise significance of these serpentine and sinuous letters, words, and sentences has proved hard to decipher (Kjældgaard 2007: 463). As explained in the narrative, the image was given to Blixen by her cook Esa, when he returned to the farm after employment elsewhere:

> Esa's present was a picture, framed and under glass, of a tree, very carefully penned down in ink, every one of its hundred leaves painted a clear green. Upon each leaf, in diminutive Arabic letters, a word was written in red ink. I take it that the writings came out of the Koran, but Esa was incapable of explaining what they meant, he kept on wiping off the glass with his sleeve and assuring me that it was a very good present. He told me that he had had the picture made, during his year of trial, by the old Mohammedan priest of Nairobi, it must have taken the old man hours and hours to print it down.
> (1992: 235)

I interpret the first edition's arabesque cover image both as Blixen's "present" to her readers and as a self-conscious visual illustration of the text's emphasis on human-plant "interimplication" (Myers 2017: 298). Human writing and other cultural activities, the image suggests, take place within, and cannot be separated from, their natural context. Plants and other nonhuman creatures enable the inscriptions, themselves somewhat plant-like, that we make. There must be leaves on trees for there to be leaves in books.

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4. The image is reproduced in *Karen Blixen illustreret* (Asmussen 2006: 15) and can also be found online.

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Peter Mortensen
Aarhus University, Denmark
engpm@cc.au.dk