Narrative Paths
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Karen Blixen’s (also known as Isak Dinesen, 1885–1962) *Out of Africa* (1937), set in the so-called British East Africa where the writer lived between 1914 and 1931, was an international bestseller. *Out of Africa* has been usually classified as a memoir, but the classification has not been unanimously accepted among critics. In part, this is due to the book’s fragmented, episodic form that distinguishes it from traditional memoirs or autobiographies and, in part, to the liberties that Blixen took in her book with some facts of her life in East Africa. Furthermore, Blixen’s narrative perspective, which is self-consciously retrospective and nostalgic, draws attention to the idealized reality of the object of description.1 Blixen points frequently in her memoir to the fact that the people and places that she writes about in her memoir have already disappeared:

> The colony is changing and has already changed since I lived there. When I write down as accurately as possible my experiences on the farm, with the country and with some of the inhabitants of the plains and woods, it may have a sort of historical interest. (1954, 28)

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1. Susan C. Brantly, among others, points out that Blixen took several liberties with the facts in *Out of Africa*, as Blixen’s letters also demonstrate (2002, 75). Brantly refers to *Out of Africa* frequently as a novel.
The Africa that she portrays in *Out of Africa* is a memory recalled through the writing, and the accuracy that she calls upon herself to attain is presumably only of historical interest. In fact, Blixen’s Africa was already becoming a place of nostalgia when she lived there: a place that, as she reports, was going to lose its rough qualities because of urban development in the rapidly growing city of Nairobi. Thus, the focus of her description in *Out of Africa* is a lost world, and Blixen’s (lost) home is the farm in Africa, to which she attaches herself retrospectively at the moment of narration. In the course of the book, Blixen’s farm at the foot of the Ngong Hills becomes a kind of transcendental point of comparison in regard to the present moment and place of narration, which is somewhere in Denmark in the mid-1930s but remains unspecified. In what follows, I will refer to Blixen’s work as a memoir, mindful of the complexity of this classification.

*Out of Africa* is divided thematically into five parts roughly equal in length. Parts one and two describe Blixen’s life at her coffee plantation and portray some occupants of her farm, such as a Kikuyu boy named Kamante, who was her medical assistant and helper. She also tells the story of a shooting accident on the farm, in which one native boy shot two others, killing one and seriously injuring the other. In Part three, Blixen writes about the visitors to her farm, who came from other parts of British East Africa, Europe, and Asia and concludes with a description of her aeroplane flights over Kenya, which she calls “the greatest, the most transporting pleasure of my life on the farm” (1954, 204). Part four, entitled “From an Immigrant’s Notebook,” consists of anecdotes, literary portraits, descriptions of landscape and animals, and some fictional tales. Blixen’s expansion of the scope of her memoir in Part four to include fictions will be of particular interest to us in this chapter. The memoir ends with Part five (“Farewell to the Farm”), where Blixen describes her departure from the farm.

My focus in this chapter is the relation between Blixen’s notions of Africa and storytelling, particularly in regard to the way in which these notions emerge in Part four of the memoir. I argue that Blixen’s “Africa” is to a significant degree a malleable sign, into which the writer projected a personal myth concerning the Africans’ innate nobility and their supposed sense of both unity with the environment and the meaning of stories. Blixen’s contacts with Africans who listened to her stories, in particular, offered her opportunities for reinvigorating the art of storytelling, beyond the confines of the physical book, private reading of books, and modernist poetics. The investigation

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2. See also Ekman 2002, 123–24, who argues that paradise before the Fall is the fundamental image of *Out of Africa*. 

begins with the story “The Roads of Life,” in which Blixen lays down certain principles of storytelling that are important with regard to the organization of her memoir as a whole. These principles are also echoed in a number of Blixen’s short stories that raise questions about the functions of narratives and the impact of storytelling.

The Narrative Paradox of the Stork

The fragment “The Roads of Life” enjoys a strategically important position in the beginning of Part four in Blixen’s memoir. The fragment starts with a fairy tale about a man who hears a terrible noise at night. The man in the story starts off from his house to find the cause of the noise. After falling into ditches, and taking a wrong turn, he then discovers that there is a big leakage in a nearby dam. He fixes the dam and sleeps peacefully again. The story closes with what seems like an apparition: in the morning, having just woken up, the man is surprised to see a stork in his yard. This is followed by Blixen’s interpretation of the story’s meaning, to which I will return shortly.

The story foregrounds its narrative design as both a spatially and temporally structured verbal composition. There are repeated geometric patterns within the tale. For instance, the protagonist lives in a round house with a round window that has a triangular garden in front of it. Some of these spatial forms are also made explicit by the storyteller in the tale. The storyteller draws a plan of the roads taken by the man in search of the source of the noise, “as upon a map of the movements of an army” (1954, 214). Much of the unfolding of the story takes place in the space of these roads, which the listeners supposedly see on a map that is drawn for them. The man runs to-and-fro first to the south, then back to the north, and finally back to the south and the north again. At the very end of the story he sees the stork in his triangular yard through the round window.

The repeated spatial patterns of the story suggest that the story may be understood as having a spatial and visual form but, at the same time, the relationship between text and image in the story is strained to the point of being almost absurd. Blixen’s retelling of the story does not include the map that is mentioned in the story but simple drawings of a stork. These are the only visual images in Blixen’s memoir. The drawings are not only divided into parts inside the text, but they are seemingly juxtaposed at random within the story, perhaps reminding us of the way the miraculous bird suddenly appears at the story’s end. Moreover, by giving us not just the narrative but also its illustration—an illustration, however, which is fragmented and not merely at
Out of Africa

In a little round house with a round window and a little triangular garden in front there lived a man.

Not far from the house there was a pond with a lot of fish in it.

One night the man was woken up by a terrible noise, and set out in the dark to find the cause of it. He took the road to the pond.

Here the story-teller began to draw, as upon a map of the movements of an army, a plan of the roads taken by the man.

He first ran to the South. Here he stumbled over a big stone in the middle of the road and a little farther he fell into a ditch, got up, fell into a ditch, got up, fell into a third ditch, and got out of that.

Then he saw that he had been mistaken, and ran back to the North. But here again the noise seemed to him to come from the South, and he again ran back there. He first stumbled over a big stone in the middle of the road, then a ditch, got up, fell into another ditch, got up, fell into a third ditch, and got out of that.

He now distinctly heard that the noise came from the end of the pond. He rushed to the place, and saw that a big leakage had been made in the dam, and the water had been running out with all the work and when this was finished, as dramatically as possible — what did he see? —

A stork!

Figure 8. The stork figure in the story “The Roads of Life” in Karen Blixen’s Out of Africa (© Karen Blixen).
the service of the text—the narrative makes the point of storytelling as a performance. The way the fragmented image appears to “cut through” the body of the text on the page points to a question: Where does the sense of the story come from beyond the coextension of the textual and visual parts?

On the one hand, the relation between the text of the story and the image has the potential to undermine the custom of being satisfied with a mere impression of a phenomenon. On the other hand, however, it is possible to find a meaningful correspondence between the visual and the verbal elements in the story. The word and the image “‘tell’” the same story in the sense that the narrative closure takes hold of the fleeting image of the stork, just as the image concludes the story. To see a stork first thing in the morning could symbolize, in traditional Western reading at least, a new birth. The stork of the story and the stork of the page might further indicate a fruition of some new idea, implied also by the man’s waking up from a dream. Blixen’s commentary, which concludes the fragment, affirms this interpretation: the stork is the man’s reward after he has completed the task, that is, solved the problem of the source of the noise, after having successfully kept his faith to go forward in his search. The stork, thus, also stands for a continuing belief in life, and in the pattern that one’s life has; it may even be, as Blixen suggests in her letters from Africa, “life itself” (1981, 50).

“The Roads of Life” raises important questions of storytelling that involve narrativity (What constitutes a narrative?), narrativisation (How to translate life experience into a narrative? Does one’s life have a narrative design?), the composition of narratives (What is required of a well-crafted story?), and the uses of narratives (What are narratives good for?). The complex dynamic between the image and the story both exhibits and generates strong narrativity. But this dynamic also associates narrative with a dream image that is difficult to turn into any simple verbal meaning, as in a narrative. The picture that the storyteller shows is, in Blixen’s words, a “kind of moving picture,” something that can only be seen as part of the narrative process, and the storyteller’s performance that translates the picture into a story. Yet, at the same time, a certain degree of hesitation in interpretation seems to be inscribed into the story and the accompanying pictures. There are, for instance, two images of the same bird or two similar-looking birds on the same page. The first image of a bird is dismembered and doubled. The “dissected” parts of the first bird can be seen in a temporal series so that they gradually become assembled into the second bird, the whole bird that we see in the left-hand

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3. “Narrativity” is understood here in the sense that Gerald Prince gives the term: “the set of properties characterising narrative and distinguishing it from nonnarrative,” and “the formal and contextual features making a narrative more or less narrative, as it were” (2003, 65).
corner of the page. This series reiterates the fact that the listening to or reading of the story must proceed through gaps in information, suggesting thus that the audience processes narrative information gradually. In listening to or reading narratives, we anticipate future events, fill in the gaps and test out hypotheses, and change our inferences when we confront new information, just as the protagonist is first deceived by the direction of the sound but then reorientates towards the true source of the noise. There is always also the option that the reader stumbles over gaps in narrative meaning, just as the man stumbles over a big stone and makes a wrong turn.

The discrepancy in the text-image relation points, moreover, to a more comprehensive design between the various parts of Out of Africa. Without being overtly self-reflective, the story explains the way narratives can be told, processed, and experienced and how they can capture their audience by means of suggestion. The narrative of Blixen’s African memoir, and in particular the fourth part of the book, is structured around narrative morsels, fragments, anecdotes, juxtapositions, and associative comparisons; it requires that the reader assemble the text from an overall tapestry of the tale. As an analogy and a kind of textual microcosm of Blixen’s global narrative, the story “The Roads of Life” thus mirrors in its form the gradually emerging sense of the complex African experience, intimately linked with the question about the meaning and potential effects of storytelling. The sense of renewed perception that Blixen associates with Africa, and that is reflected in the fragmented organization of her memoir, is also echoed in the title of her early poem, which refers to Pliny the Elder’s (A.D. 23–79) dictum Ex Africa semper aliquid novi, “Always something new out of Africa . . . ,” and gives the name to her memoir.

Blixen illustrates the meaning and the personal significance of the tale by way of comparison with the Aeneid and the Bible at the end of the fragment. Here she refers to the necessity to tell about unspeakable suffering, as depicted in the second book from Virgil’s Aeneid that includes Aeneas’s line “Infandum regina iubes renovare dolorem” (“You command me, O Queen, to revive unspeakable grief”). This is Aeneas’s response to Queen Dido when she insists that Aeneas tell her about the Trojan War. Furthermore, Blixen draws an analogy between the story of the stork and the second article from the Christian Creed of faith, which constitutes a short story in itself, speaking of Christ’s state of humiliation and the following exaltation. The protagonists of these three stories, Aeneas, Christ, and the man in the story, just like Blixen

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4. We may, furthermore, consider the fact that Blixen kept rewriting her African memoir also elsewhere, including her letters, the early poem “Ex Africa” (1915), and Shadows on the Grass (1961).
herself, have all faced hardships that appear to be beyond comprehension. Blixen explains that the question for all of them is: “What is to come out of it?” Associating herself with these figures, Blixen further wonders whether she will ever be able to see such a stork: “The tight place, the dark pit in which I am now lying, of what bird is it the talon?” (1954, 215). Her interpretation of “The Roads of Life” develops the personal meaning of the story also by thought report as she imagines what the man in the story must have thought and felt: “He must have thought: ‘What ups and downs! ‘What a run of bad luck!’ He must have wondered what was the idea of his trials; he could not know that it was a stork” (1954, 215). Blixen thus focuses on the man’s mental processes. These processes are not explicated in the story itself, however, but only suggested by what is said about the man’s actions and behavior. Blixen refrains from making the autobiographical meaning of the story explicit, but it is implied elsewhere in the memoir that the “tight place” and “the dark pit” to which she refers must involve the bankruptcy of her farm that forced her to leave Kenya and the death of her lover Denys Finch Hatton, both of which took place in 1931.

As has already become apparent, the figure of the stork symbolizes a number of related things—perseverance and the final reward (keeping one’s purpose in view), the sense of design and completion in one’s life—rather than directly pointing to or explaining any one thing. The mystery and suggestiveness of this bird figure repeats a typical trait throughout Blixen’s fiction, in Winter’s Tales (1943) and Last Tales (1957), but one which is already evident in Seven Gothic Tales (1934), the collection that Blixen started writing in Africa. That is, in response to difficult existential questions, Blixen’s characters often explain themselves by telling a story. In one of Blixen’s Last Tales, “The Cardinal’s First Tale,” the Cardinal asserts that the best way to answer the question “Who am I?” is to tell a story. In the Cardinal’s definition of the ancient art of the divine story, a story is always open to mystery and interpretation, and functions by way of suggestion, instead of giving a definitive answer to the question. In another short story from the same collection, “The Blank Page,” the storyteller, an old “coffee-brown, black-veiled woman,” explains that it is crucially important to be loyal to the story. This, again, requires telling the story by way of suggestion, rather than by explication: “Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak” (Blixen 1957, 126).

What is also noteworthy in this story and Blixen’s framing of it, and the parallel they draw between the man in the fairy tale and the author’s own trials, is the technique of embedded narratives so common to Blixen’s short stories. More precisely, this involves the use of embedded stories in a way that
they forge thematic and structural analogies with the frame story, thus accentuating the given themes. For instance, the inset Orientalist story of a double in “A Consolatory Tale” in Winter’s Tales illustrates and furthers the theme of duality, and the idea of interdependence between the artist and his audience, which the main characters in the frame narrative have discussed. In the fairy tale included in the fragment “The Roads of Life,” the sense of embedding and doubling is mirrored in the fact that there are two storytellers telling the same story: the narrator, who is situated within the tale, and Blixen, who retells the story in her memoir. The Chinese-box structure suggests that there may be a particular design to life that storytelling can make apparent, as in an image. This has further implications in terms of Blixen’s entire attempt to retell the story of her African life through various narrative fragments. Therefore, we may take the art of storytelling itself to be one of the possible meanings of the stork figure. Blixen turns “The Roads of Life” into a story of the telling of the story itself, and the stork figure implies how stories can give a certain design to one’s life (no matter how fragmented or suggestive). At the same time, the mystery of the bird—in association with Blixen’s puzzlement over the question “Of what bird is it the talon?”—points to the difficulty and perhaps impossibility of knowing the full story of one’s life. In the same way as Blixen had to leave her farm because of obstacles put in her way, the man in the story cannot assess the consequences of his actions and choices before it is too late to redo them. He can only see the whole picture of his situation (and story) in retrospect, as a chance occurrence, at the moment when he sees the stork.

The embedded structure of “The Roads of Life” thus accentuates the themes of storytelling and narrativisation in Blixen’s memoir. These themes are intimately associated, specifically in Part four of her memoir, with Blixen’s notion of the African tradition of storytelling. This tradition is, supposedly, less constrained by the chronological organization of time, and more structured around repetition, sound, and suggestion, than modern written literature. The African natives, as Blixen explains in her letters, are like very young children, who find joy in hearing things repeated (1981, 159–60). This sounds condescending, but the emphasis on repetition and oral storytelling also explains some of Blixen’s own compositional choices in Out of Africa.

5. Tone Selboe has referred to the meta-level of meaning in the stork figure as a symbol of art (1996, 17) and underscored the importance of this anecdote in Out of Africa and for Blixen’s whole oeuvre (1996, 13).

6. See also one of Blixen’s last letters from Africa (dated March 17, 1931): “I am one of Africa’s favourite children—a great world of poetry has revealed itself to me and taken me to itself here, and I have loved it” (1981, 416).
The themes and structure of the story “Roads of Life” relate to Blixen’s wish, as expressed explicitly elsewhere in *Out of Africa*, to return to the origins of storytelling in a simple but well-crafted story and to continue a tradition. Such basic forms of storytelling, further, maintain their interest over time, even if the audience is already familiar with their turning points and denouement. In another fragment in the same part of the book, “Natives and Verse,” Blixen relates how the natives, who had no previous knowledge of verse, quickly understood the poetic function of mere patterns of sounds in rhymes and perceived that meaning in poetry was of no consequence. Such narrative comfort with and excitement about a performance with mere sounds of words, subsequently, requires a certain loosening of the distinction between narrative design and lived reality. The Africans’ name for rhyming and poetry, the simile “speaking like the rain,” associates the sounds of words with the natural phenomenon of rain, thus reaffirming Blixen’s notion of authentic storytelling situations that are motivated in part by her views about the sense of unity with the surrounding African nature. Blixen identifies storytelling as a common thread in the European and African relationship, as a form of social interaction that requires engagement from all participants, but in Europe, Blixen laments, the art of telling stories is lost: the white people take in their impressions by the eye and prefer reading to listening.

By this Blixen does not mean that she would prefer the Africans’ illiteracy to Western book culture, but that viewed over a long historical perspective the practices of writing and reading have undergone certain irrevocable changes in Western societies, changes that Blixen regrets and, in some sense, would like to challenge.

It is important to note how the problem of narrativisation relates to Blixen's notions of African pride, freedom, and the Africans’ instinctual relation with nature and God. “The Roads of Life” comes from Blixen’s childhood, and she heard it many times as a child; it is not an African tale. The story was familiar to her whole family, as becomes obvious in Blixen’s frequent references to the story in her letters to her mother and brother from Kenya,

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7. Tamar Yacobi has pointed out Blixen’s “deliberate throwback to oral storytelling”—for instance, in her preferred techniques of perspective and narration (omniscient storyteller) and her enactment of the process of narration: “So the superhuman frame combines with its insets to bring back (to mind; if possible, to life) the origins of narrative art in ‘story’: divine, not earthly, vision and management; telling, not writing” (1991, 451).

8. For instance, in a letter to her mother on June 14, 1917: “Just when one feels one is floundering in the deepest despair,—‘fall into a ditch, get out again,’—is when one is perfecting the work of art of one’s life . . . the greatest moments have been those when I have been able to glimpse the stork” (1981, 49). See also Blixen 1981, 269–70, 288, and 293–94. The story has been later published separately as a picture book and retold by Jette Ahm as *Storken: En berättelse av Karen Blixen* (Copenhagen: Opal, 1978). Another possible form of symbolism in the story is
in Blixen’s explanation at the very end of the fragment that “I am glad that I have been told this story and I will remember it in the hour of need” (1954, 215). Yet, at the same time, Blixen gives a new African dimension to this tale by placing it in the memoir with other stories about wild animals that function as a metonymic device for the nobility and pride of the whole of Africa. “The Roads of Life” is preceded, for instance, by a fragment on fireflies, which concludes with an emphasis on “a wild frolicsome life” that fills the woods, and is followed by an anecdote entitled “The Wild Came to the Aid of the Wild” that tells about a young wild ox that could not be domesticated. Before the manager of her farm and her ox-drivers were able to break the animal’s will, a leopard managed to eat off one of the bound animal’s hind legs and the ox had to be finished off. Part four of the book abounds with such stories of wild and captured animals, and also other birds and storks are mentioned. Blixen explains later in the same part of her memoir, in a fragment entitled “Some African Birds,” how storks have quite different habits in Africa than in Europe. By this she refers to the way in which the storks in Africa fly in large flocks, hunting locusts, mice, and snakes, seemingly enjoying their time, unlike in Europe where the bird has to mate and live like a “married” couple, which makes the stork a symbol of domestic happiness there (1954, 243). All these and other fragments on African animals and wildlife develop the same thematic oppositions between the wild versus the tame, and Africa versus Europe, which are important in “The Roads of Life.” The intertwined oppositions of traditional oral storytelling versus modern written literature (or mere reading), narrative design in life versus unpredictable and episodic modern life, and unity with one’s surroundings versus separation from nature also reemerge in other stories that follow “The Roads of Life.” Thus, in order for us to deepen our understanding of Blixen’s notion of the nature and power of storytelling, and her conception of the relationship between fiction and her memoir, we must discuss her depiction of African wildlife in more detail.

Metonymies of the Wild

In Out of Africa, the wild animals and birds, and the African landscape of her farm and the nearby game reserve, represent for Blixen what she calls the pride of God. The natives, as Blixen saw them, had preserved much of this natural nobility and their instinctual sense of unity with the natural world,

the gender of the stork: Blixen frequently described women in bird images in her oeuvre. See Cederborg 1986, 23.
unlike the Europeans. The sense of nobility that she associates with East African landscape becomes apparent right from the book’s famous opening. It is worth quoting it in full:

I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The Equator runs across these highlands, a hundred miles to the north, and the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. In the day-time you felt that you had got high up, near to the sun, but the early mornings and evenings were limpid and restful, and the nights were cold.

The geographical position and the height of the land combined to create a landscape that had not its like in all the world. There was no fat on it and no luxuriance anywhere; it was Africa distilled up through six thousand feet, like the strong and refined essence of a continent. The colours were dry and burnt, like the colours in pottery. 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 full-rigged ships with their sails furled, 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-myrtles; 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. The views were immensely wide. Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom, and unequalled nobility. (1954, 13)

Blixen’s description of the landscape, the geography, and the flora of and around her farm evokes the themes and features that she associates with Africa throughout her memoir: the sense of vast space and renewed perception, the privileged view from above, the heroism and romanticism of African trees, animals and people, their innate nobility and aristocracy, and freedom, in contrast with European modern civilization. With regard to the traditional Africanist dual evaluations of monstrousness and nobility, the latter being for instance evident, as Christopher L. Miller suggests, in Pliny’s “newness,” Blixen’s notion of Africa prioritizes the side of the noble—the demonic that she associates with African nature and the Africans is another manifestation
of their nobility and innate aristocracy. The description is in the past tense, which further accentuates the impression of a lost and idealized world.

A similar pantheistic view of the unity between people, animals, their environment, and God can be found in many places in Blixen's memoir, including the fictional story “In the Menagerie” about Count von Schimmelman, a Danish traveller to Hamburg who visits an itinerant menagerie, in Part four of the book. In this story, the proprietor of a menagerie, who is also called a showman, explains his philosophy about the hyena and the wild animals to Count von Schimmelman. The Count is driven to the show by some inexplicable inner necessity; the menagerie responds to “something within his own mind” (1954, 259), but he is unable to understand what the proprietor explains to him. The proprietor’s speculation about whether the hyena’s supposed hermaphroditic nature—“because he unites in himself the complementary qualities of creation” (1954, 259)—doubles the animal’s suffering in captivity leads the conversation to the question as to whether life amongst the wild animals is somehow unique. The self-satisfied Count doubts whether it can be said that wild animals like the giraffe see each other at all—that is, whether they are at all conscious of each other as creatures. The proprietor, in contrast, much in line with the views that Blixen voices elsewhere in Out of Africa, assumes that the giraffe and the hyena are seen directly by God. To the proprietor, these wild animals are a possible proof of the existence of God and, therefore, to love them is to love God: “The wild animals, your Excellency, are perhaps a proof of the existence of God. But when they go to Hamburg [. . .] the argument becomes problematic” (1954, 260). The showman finds it quite possible to see beauty in snakes as well since, he explains, God will mostly give us those—unlike the Count who believes that an aversion to snakes is a sound human instinct.

The fantastic atmosphere of the story relates closely to the short stories included in Blixen’s Seven Gothic Tales and, in fact, the character of Count von Schimmelemann is familiar to Blixen’s readers from two stories in this collection, “The Roads Round Pisa” and “The Poet.” The inclusion of the story “In the Menagerie” in the memoir thus points out how fiction, and the narrative conventions of fiction to present a character’s mind, such as the narrator’s report of some character’s thoughts, may deepen the themes in the memoir—in this case, the themes of suffering in captivity, the captors’ greed and insensitivity, and the Westerners’ inability to understand the beauty in the wildlife. Count von Schimmelman’s thoughts and mental reactions, which are rendered visible to us by thought report—his absorption in his own thoughts, incapacity to pay attention to others, and the conformism of his thinking—
deepen Blixen’s caricature of Western prejudices about wild life and the Africans by showing us a narrow-minded Westerner partly from the inside.

The theme of captured wild animals emerges in several stories in Blixen’s memoir around and after “The Roads of Life,” including the tales of the captured giraffes, waiting to be sent to a zoo in Hamburg, and of the caged flamingos that are shipped to Marseilles. In the story “The Iguana,” Blixen also advises against shooting the iguana, since the lizard loses its beautiful colors at death, recalling a hero’s saying in some book that the author had read as a child: “I have conquered them all, but I am standing amongst graves” (1954, 221). What is remarkable in most of these stories is the intimate connection between the Africans and wild animals. The metaphors and similes that Blixen employs in “The Iguana,” for instance, make this evident: just like the colourful bracelet that only looks good on the black skin of a native girl—“No sooner had it come upon my own arm that it gave up the ghost” (1954, 220)—the iguana will maintain its beautiful colors only when it is alive and free. The story of the native called Kitosch, similarly, who is flogged and humiliated to death by whites for some slight misdemeanour (riding the mare of his white employer), also embodies for Blixen

the fugitiveness of the wild things who are, in the hour of need, conscious of a refuge somewhere in existence; who go when they like; of whom we can never get hold. (1954, 243)

Kitosch suffers from similar injustice as the bound, wild oxen in the story “The Wild Came to the Aid of the Wild,” in another analogy between African animals and people. However, it is important to note that by including Kitosch’s story in her memoir against her English publisher’s wishes, Blixen also made a conscious decision to depict violence committed by the settlers against the Africans and, thus, to point out the disgrace of the colonial system that tried to conceal such incidents.9

9. Blixen’s constant praise of African wild nature, and the pride of the wild animals, did not prevent her, however, from hunting the giraffe or the lion and describing her enjoyment of the hunt. In effect, participation in hunting provided her with extraordinary sensations that were sometimes associated with feelings of unconditional love. This is revealed, for instance, when a shot with Denys Finch-Hatton’s rifle equals to her “a declaration of love” (1954, 198). Blixen found many other forms of hunting or killing wild animals repulsive, however. For instance, she casts in an ironic light a Swedish scholar who wanted to kill fifteen hundred monkeys for scientific reasons. Blixen’s relationship to hunting changed in the last ten years of her stay in Africa to the extent that she started to see all hunting, as she explains in Shadows on the Grass, as unreasonable, ugly, and vulgar (1985, 306).

10. See, for instance, Rasmussen 1983.
In another story entitled “The Parrot,” which is the last of the fragments included in Part four of the memoir, it is revealed that a certain parrot in Singapore had for many years cited a stanza by Sappho in classic Greek while its owner, an old Chinese woman, had thought that the bird was perhaps speaking some words in Danish, another language that she or her visitors had not understood. The story is told by an old Danish shipowner, who visited the Chinese woman as a young boy and recognized the parrot’s lines as Greek. The lyric that the parrot kept citing came from the distant past; it was something that the woman’s lost lover had taught the bird: “The moon has sunk and the Pleiads, And midnight is gone, And the hours are passing, passing, And I lie alone” (1954, 272). These lines are a message sent from the lost lover, with the help of the parrot, but the poetry of the lines, which the Chinese woman wants to hear repeated, also suggests that even if the words are finally translated and understood, a sense of mystery still surrounds them (they give voice to the dead). We must also note that the story of “The Parrot” is ambivalently placed between fiction and nonfiction. The man who tells the tale could be Blixen’s actual visitor, the old Dane Knudsen, who, as we are told, is fond of telling stories about himself that are partly invented. There is, however, no other indication of the storyteller other than that he is Danish, and there is no certainty either whether the story is fiction or nonfiction. What is certain, however, is that Sappho’s stanza is another literary allusion in the memoir that develops Blixen’s central themes of loss and natural pride (or wisdom).

In many places in her memoir, Blixen may use animal and bird metaphors to make a distinction between the conduct of various African tribes and nations. For instance, she sometimes portrays the Masai, the Somali, and the Swaheli as birds of prey, in contrast to other native peoples who appear to be more easily subjected to a stronger tribe or nation (1954, 132–35). In this comparison, echoing Victor Hugo’s poem “Joie hors du château” that describes ruthless birds of prey feeding on carrion at night (“Tout les tristes oiseaux mangeurs de chair humaine”), the freedom of the wild birds again functions as an ennobling trait. The African domestic animals, in contrast, like the sheep and the cow, with which the Kikuyu are associated, make a different case. Blixen’s association between the Kikuyu and domestic animals relates to what she saw as an age-old division of labor in East Africa, that is, the Kikuyu tradition of taking good care of animals. To Blixen, the Somali were the “young illegitimate half-brothers” of the Arabs, whereas the Kikuyus’ relationship with the Somali was like that of the sheep to the sheepdog (1954, 132). This hierarchy, however, is to be imagined as having an ancient and mythical foundation that is not based on subordination or unidirectional cultural
exchange involving imitation of the stronger but on mutual agreement and conscious role-play.

The inevitable racist undertone in Blixen’s associations and comparisons between African people and wildlife has been one of the most hotly debated features in *Out of Africa*. Predominantly, Blixen’s use of animal metaphors for the Africans, or for the white settlers for that matter, is descriptive: the comparison that is made between a certain animal and an individual (or in some cases a tribe/nation) is supposed to describe that individual’s characteristics. Moreover, while these comparisons between animal species and Africans appear condescending, we must remember that many Westerners are compared to animals in her memoir and that they fare worse than the Africans in this respect. The Kikuyu, unlike the majority of the white men, are “adjusted for the unforeseen and accustomed to the unexpected” since they are, supposedly, at home with their destiny (1954, 29–30). Blixen sees, furthermore, that the Kikuyu, in their own passive way, also resist assimilation. A Kikuyu called Kinanjui, whom Blixen compares to an old ram, had the capacity to transform himself, “in a single movement, into lifeless matter” (1954, 137).

Yet, as Susan C. Brantly, for instance, has remarked, the racially charged context in which Blixen employed these metaphors renders them easily misunderstood (2002, 85). In the fragment “Of Pride,” for instance, which includes one of the few direct references that Blixen makes to colonialism, she explains, at the very end of this fragment, that one must love the pride of the conquered nations and let them honor their own father and mother. However, Blixen’s description of the pride of the African people, and their supposed love of the destiny that is granted to them, is again motivated in this fragment by Blixen’s understanding of the surrounding landscape of the big game reserve and the wild animals that live in it.11

Likewise, the portraits of the Kikuyu boy Kamante and the forest antelope Lulu, in Part one of the memoir, are built around subtle associations between the boy and the animal;12 even if Blixen depicts them as anything but lovely, cute pets. Kamante, who becomes her dog-boy, later a houseboy, a trusted cook, and a medical assistant, who converts to Christianity, still maintains in his manners, as Blixen explains, a certain “demonic” quality that will always

11. As yet another example of the way in which the anecdotes and fragments in Blixen’s memoir develop each others’ themes, the story “Of Pride” makes more apparent something that is only implied in “The Roads of Life”—that is, the importance of an instinctual understanding of one’s fate and the definition of pride as “faith in the idea that God had, when he made us” (1954, 224).

12. As in the beginning of the subchapter on Lulu (“A Gazelle”) when Blixen writes: “Lulu came to my house from the woods as Kamante had come to it from the plains” (1954, 63).
remain partially unpredictable and incomprehensible. For Blixen, Kamante was always “a fantastic figure” who was “half of fun and half of diabolism” (1954, 37). As a cook, she claims, Kamante was a genius whose work precluded all classification. Similarly, the bushbuck Lulu that is found as a fawn in the bush “was not really gentle, she had the so-called devil in her” (1954, 69). The young antelope symbolizes for Blixen the sense of unity that she thought the farm and its inhabitants had with the African landscape; she regards her close relation with the animal as a very special “token of friendship from Africa” (1954, 75). At the same time, the story of Lulu is also a tale of loss that relates how a wild animal slowly withdraws from the farm to return to the wilderness. In this sense, Lulu’s story shadows Blixen’s grand narrative of loss, the nostalgia for her lost farm, and lost contact with Africans like Kamante.13

An Ancient Form of Storytelling

Blixen had started writing fiction before her marriage and departure to Africa, but the early stories had not attracted much attention. She first came to wider public attention under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen in 1934 with the publication of her first collection of stories, Seven Gothic Tales. As Blixen was unable to find a publisher in England or Denmark, Seven Gothic Tales was published by Random House in the United States. It was originally written in English, the language that Blixen had most used at her Kenyan farm, and Blixen then translated the book into Danish. The same pattern was repeated with the publication of Out of Africa in that Blixen first wrote the memoir in English and then translated the book into Danish. As Blixen explains in September 1935, in the forward to the Danish edition of her first collection of stories, Syv fantastiske Fortællinger, much of the book was “thought of, and some of it written in Africa.”14 All seven stories are set in mid-nineteenth-century Europe and none in Africa.

13. In Out of Africa and in her letters from her farm, Blixen makes use of Western classical literary tradition, writers such as Virgil, Sappho, Shakespeare, Shelley, and Huxley; fairy tales and fables; and the Bible. Her emphasis in these references is the theme of loss and rise and fall, as in King Lear and the Book of Job. The first and the last part of her memoir have mottos from Shelley’s “Hymn of Pan” that tells the story, in Pan’s voice, of the changed mood of Pan’s piping, having been deluded by the nymph Syrinx. The motto of Part five in Out of Africa, “Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!” reiterates the theme of loss, as does also the motto of Part three, “Post res perditas” (“After lost things”).

Blixen frequently discusses the meaning of literature and stories in *Out of Africa*, for instance, in reference to her favorite books and readings, such as the story of the stork, the Arabian Nights, the Book of Job, or various Western classics. She also writes about listening to her visitors’ stories and telling them stories in return. One of these visitors, a blind old Dane called Old Knudsen, often told her about the tragedy of losing his fishing business, but always in the third-person voice (except once in the first person when he had suffered a heart attack) and changing details of the story whenever he retold it. Blixen told Denys Finch-Hutton long stories, since, as she explains, Finch-Hutton preferred hearing stories to reading them.

Moreover, Blixen describes her own habits of writing in *Out of Africa*, explaining that she started to write stories at her African farm in the evenings in her dining room, and later also in the mornings, partly because of her strong sense of work ethic, as she was not able to “acquire the absolute passivity of the Native, as some Europeans will do, who live for many decennaries in Africa” (1954, 47). Another reason for writing fiction was the need to exercise the imagination: “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” (1954, 47). Blixen’s houseboys, like Kamante, took an interest in her writing, thinking that it was her last attempt to “save the farm through the hard times” (1954, 48). These African responses to storytelling, Western literature, and poetry play a seminal role in illustrating Blixen’s views about the value of storytelling. On one occasion, Blixen relates how her young cook Kamante, who had come to her dining room to see her writing with the typewriter, asked her if she was able to write a book of her own. Kamante was doubtful whether Blixen could ever make a book similar to the copy of the *Odyssey* that was in her library and that Kamante greatly admired for its impressive binding and size. When Blixen answered that she did not know if she was able to write a book, Kamante then inquired what was there inside the books. To this question Blixen responded by telling the story of Odysseus and the Cyclops, Polyphemus, and how Odysseus had called himself Noman. This is yet another instance in Blixen’s oeuvre where a storyteller lets a story explain something, such as a difficult existential question, by suggestion and insinuation.

Kamante’s reaction to the story of Odysseus is sketched through a series of questions and comments that Blixen summarizes or quotes. In these comments, Kamante tied the story to familiar things in his own life, presupposing that the race of Odysseus’s sheep must be the one he personally had seen at a cattle show, or that Polyphemus’s fear of Noman was the same fear that the boys on the plain, like him, were familiar with. Kamante also assumes that
Polyphemus was black and Odysseus was of Blixen’s own tribe or family. All in all, as Kamante understood it, the story is intimately related to his own life.

At some level in Blixen’s depiction of the Africans’ reactions to bound books and the typewriter, together with the act of writing, literary culture is made to seem somewhat ridiculous in the African context. The books and writing at her desk are objects of curiosity for the Africans, similar in some sense to the old German cuckoo-clock on Blixen’s wall, which attracted the attention of all those who did not understand the clock’s purpose. At the same time, however, Blixen’s description of the Africans’ responses to her stories implies that the Africans had a specific sensitivity to and almost instinctual way of relating to stories. Even if Kamante confuses the time and space of the story with his own time and space, the spontaneity and intensity of his response suggests for Blixen the continuity of an ancient tradition of storytelling. First of all, it appears that the reactions of Blixen’s audiences to stories can be curiously literal in nature, in the sense that her listeners are able to live out fictional stories and make their events, situations, and choices directly relevant in their own lives. For them, in other words, the stories relate directly to their daily struggles and thus have inestimable worth. Moreover, Blixen’s African audiences respond to her stories in more spontaneous, imaginative, and profound ways than is possible for most Europeans. She explains, for instance, that when the Africans speak of the personality of God, “they speak like the Arabian Nights or like the last chapters of the book of Job; it is the same quality, the infinite power of imagination, with which they are impressed” (1954, 30). The Africans’ powerful and imaginative reactions to stories suggest to Blixen, furthermore, their ability to understand the common fate through stories, not just the personal struggle. The Africans, then, are still in touch with the origins of storytelling and the art of listening, similarly to some of Blixen’s later fictional characters, including the Cardinal in “The Cardinal’s First Tale” and the black storyteller in “The Blank Page” in Last Tales and young Ibsen, who is collecting folktales in the Norwegian mountains in the story “The Pearls” in Winter’s Tales. Secondly, the African responses to literature highlight the importance of immersion in the story and the subtle means of suggestion that make this immersion possible. In other words, the Africans recognize and know how to appreciate a well-crafted narrative and

15. Two forms of story are opposed in the Cardinal’s and the Lady’s conversation: on the one hand, the divine or true story, with ancient roots in the human history and myths, that is still able to depict luminous, heroic characters and, on the other hand, the “new art of narration” that focuses on modern individuals with whom the readers can easily sympathize. Both kinds of story seem to be valued in this tale but for different reasons.
a good performance of a story, as if by instinct, without any knowledge of the conventions of written literature and a literary tradition. All of these qualities are required of the kind of traditional culture of storytelling that Blixen promotes in her memoir: the capacity to engage meaningfully with the story as a listener, to think that the story is in some sense alive, and, equally, to retell and perform the story in a suggestive and attentive manner.

Blixen depicts another African response to a Western story in a fragment entitled “Farah and the Merchant of Venice,” where she relates how she told the plot of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice to her Somali servant Farah, who, “like all people of African blood, liked to hear a story told” (1954, 22). Farah’s response was surprising, however, in that he had much sympathy for the Jewish moneylender Shylock, objecting to the man’s defeat in the play. Farah wished that the moneylender had found some means to resolve his difficult situation, for instance by having found a way to take little bits of Antonio’s flesh, piecemeal as it were (one pound of flesh was the condition that Shylock had given in case Antonio was unable to repay the debt at the specified date). Blixen concludes two things from Farah’s reaction. First, she claims that the Africans are first and foremost interested in imaginative, well-made plots: “coloured people do not take sides in a tale, the interest to them lies in the ingenuity of the plot itself” (1954, 222). Blixen suggests thus that Africans like Farah listen to literature differently from the Europeans since they appear to be able to better submerge themselves in the fictional world, unconditionally as it were or by instinct, and to live out narratives in a fuller sense. Second, Farah also appears to be a natural storyteller himself. At some point when listening to her story, Farah takes on a dramatic and dangerous countenance “as if he were really in the Court of Venice, putting heart into his friend or partner Shylock” (1954, 222). In Europe, by contrast, Blixen believes that such imaginative engagement in stories is lost:

Fashions have changed, and the art of listening to a narrative has been lost in Europe. The Natives of Africa, who cannot read, have still got it: if you begin to them: ‘There was a man who walked out on the plain, and there he met another man,’ you have them all with you, their minds running upon the unknown track of the men on the plain. But white people, even if they feel that they ought to, cannot listen to a recital. (1954, 194)

White people, Blixen claims, are accustomed to taking in their impressions by the eye, becoming easily absorbed “in any kind of print handed them” (ibid.). The African response to stories, meanwhile, is not only attentive and imaginative but also engaging at an emotional as well as dramatic level.
Blixen portrays Farah’s reaction to the play in terms of his strong dramatic presence.\textsuperscript{16}

The reading of Western classics to Africans functions in \textit{Out of Africa} as a kind of testing ground for varieties of literary response and communication. What is essential in these stories about reading and listening, however, is not any “civilizing” imposition of Western classics on illiterate Africans but the capacity of the stories to capture and amuse the audience and, furthermore, the imaginative modifications that the texts undergo in their retelling and the Africans’ appropriations of these narratives as their own. The Africans’ responses to Homer and Shakespeare, whose stories Blixen transforms into oral narratives, manifest the importance and pleasure of being fully immersed in a story, while the Africans’ literary asceticism, that is, the necessity of living with no written literature, seems to further accentuate the effects of these stories. The Africans at Blixen’s farm were mostly illiterate and did not have a written literature of their own, a matter of concern to Blixen, who had plans to translate Aesop’s fables into Swahili, a lingua franca in the region, but, as she explains in \textit{Out of Africa}, never found the time to do it (1954, 37).

The Africans’ responses to stories and poetry, as related to us in the fragments on Kamante and the \textit{Odyssey}, Farah and \textit{The Merchant of Venice}, and “Natives and Verse” seem to suggest to Blixen a kind of adaptive truth: how stories and poetry can help make sense of one’s environment and destiny. What she saw as the Africans’ instinctive response to and retelling of the story enabled Blixen to redefine the relationship between literature and its material form as well as narrative form and the potential design in one’s life (fate). In her description of her own responses to the fictions that she read at the farm, Blixen shows, moreover, how she was herself profoundly affected by these considerations. At the end of her memoir, Blixen explains that her books in a colony, and by this she means works of fiction in particular, played a different role in her existence than they did in Europe or elsewhere in so-called civilized countries. More precisely, Blixen felt she was more affected by literature at her Kenyan farm than ever before, and that her own response to her readings was stronger than ever, according to the quality of a given book, feeling for instance deeply grateful to books, or strongly indignant with them. Fictions became intimately tied to her everyday life at the farm: “there is a whole side of your life which they alone take charge of” (1954, 309). The experience of reading fiction in the Kenyan colony was more intense for

\textsuperscript{16}. In \textit{Shadows on the Grass}, Blixen draws a comparison between the Somali, such as Farah, and the Icelanders of the old Nordic Sagas: “I had read the old Nordic Sagas as a child, and now in my intercourse with the Somali I was struck by their likeness to the ancient Icelanders” (1985, 285).
Blixen also in that it came naturally to her in this environment to imagine that fictional characters inhabited her farm: “The fictitious characters in the books run beside your horse on the farm, and walk about in the maizefields. On their own, like intelligent soldiers, they find at once the quarters that suit them” (1954, 309). Blixen thus tells about meeting with Aldous Huxley’s, Walter Scott’s, and Racine’s characters at her farm, as well as Odysseus and his men and Peter Schlemiel. In this sense, Blixen experienced fictions in the same way and with the same intensity and instinct that she thought was typical of the Africans’ responses to well-crafted and performed stories.

The Africanist Field of Texts

The popular, early-twentieth-century ideas of Africans as undifferentiated, pre-rational beings, determined by their “primitive mentality,” belief in the occult, and lack of individuality, do not resonate well with Blixen’s memoir, where she portrays differences between various African cultures and traditions and often focuses on Africans as individuals. Her frequent use of the term “native” is problematic, however, to the extent that it represents one unified nation or people, who functions as a kind of frozen metonymic device for the whole of Africa. JanMohamed has claimed in this respect that the mythical structure of Blixen’s narrative is constituted by this radical metonymy: the Natives who “were Africa in flesh and blood” (1983, 53–55). Blixen’s occasional sweeping generalizations are revelatory of this tendency, for instance, when she writes that the Natives “have no sense or taste for contrasts; the umbilical cord of nature has, with them, not been quite cut through” (1954, 145). However, while Blixen uses the general term “native” to refer to black East Africans, she also frequently employs the tribal denominations like the Kikuyu, the Somali, and the Masai to point out ethnic and cultural differences.17 Furthermore, her generalizations are simultaneously contrasted and undermined, both in Out of Africa and her later African memoir Shadows on the Grass, through her portrayal of various individuals, such as Kamante and Farah, who elude any simple classification, be that their Africanness or their ethnic identity as a Somali or a Kikuyu. It is important to note, moreover, that the many African words and names that are mentioned in her memoir do not function as simple markers of primitivism, exoticism, or Africanism but are also indexes of the Africans’ experience, speaking to the effect that the familiar Western lexicon is inadequate to describe this experience.

17. It is also worth asking whether there were any less unifying terms than “native” that were available at the time.
Blixen’s literary portraits of various African individuals suggest that, as was the case with many French colonialist writers of the 1920s and the 1930s, earlier forms of picturesque exoticism were to her an unreal proposition, detached from real life in the colonies. Absent from Blixen’s colonial memoir are clichéd images of the white man’s grave, colonial decadence, and the madness-inducing forests. In stark contrast with these images, Blixen’s African landscape connotes nobility, innate aristocracy, and natural pride, and the Africans in her descriptions share the same characteristics. The possibility and even the necessity of learning from African nature and the Natives is a theme running throughout Out of Africa and one that is underscored already in the book’s opening. Things to be learned from Africa also include the ability to accept one’s destiny, that is, to not fear the risks in life, which is one of the messages of “The Roads of Life.” Furthermore, Blixen thought highly of what she understood as the natives’ great skill in the “art of mimicry,” which is related to their art of storytelling, listening, and the ability to be immersed in a story. The notion of African “mimicry” does not, however, refer just to the Africans’ ability to mislead (especially Europeans) by appearances but to a way of adapting to one’s environment, to be one with the surrounding nature in a way that the Europeans have forgotten. This means, equally, a worldview according to which one does not divide God and the Devil into two persons or substances (1954, 26–27). Both the African tradition of storytelling, and the art of mimicry, are related to the ability to experience unity with nature.

In Blixen’s version of the exotic, African wildlife has identity-endowing properties precisely because it enables the restatement of identity as the assertion of cultural and creative origin. Such an assertion also involves establishing a system of “othering” whereby the African is invented as a kind of mythological other, that is, an untameable noble savage or a mystery. Blixen emphasizes in her memoir that she never quite understood the Natives even if she regarded them as her friends (1954, 27). A similar sense of Africa and the Africans, which remain to an important extent beyond rational explanation

18. Roland Lebel claimed in his Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France (1931) that the French colonial literature of the early twentieth century, which sought to describe the colonial experience from within, contributed to the acquisition of a new realism, “colonial consciousness,” providing the colonial enterprise and experience with psychological depth. For some of these writers, the rejection of exoticism was also a reaction to the values of literariness in modernism and what was thought to be its excesses of subjectivity, detachment, delinquent aestheticism, and pessimism (see Lebel 1931, 79, 82–83, 140; Moura 1998, 116).

19. “Africa, amongst the continents, will teach it to you: that God and the Devil are one, the majesty coeternal, not two uncreated but one uncreated, and the Natives neither confounded the persons nor divided the surface” (1954, 27).
and language, becomes evident also in Blixen’s portrayal of Africa’s adorable music and “rhythm”: “When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find that it is the same in all her music. What I learned from the game of the country was useful to me in my dealings with the native people” (1954, 24). While the African “music” thus makes possible a total experience of life and love, the analogy with music also lets Blixen position herself: as a passive but loyal listener to an (organic) orchestra and its all-encompassing music. Setting out the routine of her daily life “to the orchestra” (1954, 25), this connoisseur of native lifestyle and mentality is also, metaphorically, a conductor of an orchestra of natives, even if she may never fully control them.

In the beginning of Out of Africa, Blixen formulates her relationship with the native Africans as a form of unconditional love. She explains that her “discovery of the dark races” led to a “magnificent enlargement” of her world, comparable to someone who, with an inborn sympathy for wild animals, first comes into contact with animals, or a person with an instinctive taste for woods first enters a forest, or someone with an ear for music hears music for the first time (1954, 25). Her affection for the Africans is thus intimately associated with a sense of renewed perception—another central theme in Out of Africa, also underscored by the memoir’s title. In contrast, modern Europe is often cast as a place of pathology, and most Europeans, such as Count von Schimmelmann, epitomize a closed, narrow-minded worldview. In the story “Fellow-Travellers,” for instance, Blixen tells about her encounter with a Belgian and an Englishman on a boat from Europe to Africa. These two Europeans, whose languages Blixen first accidentally mixes up, confusing the verb travaille to mean “to travel,” are similar types of Western colonizer and traveller, who are reproachable for their condescending attitude towards the Africans and all non-Europeans. The Englishman is a hunter who is travelling to Africa to shoot rare animals and who enjoys telling jokes about the ignorant natives in Mexico. One of his jokes is about an old Spanish woman in the mountains of Mexico who, unable to conceive of the idea of an aeroplane that she has never seen, wonders whether the fact that the man has learned to fly means that the men fly “with their legs drawn up under them, like the sparrows, or stretched out behind them, like the storks” (1954, 262). In Blixen’s retelling of the story, the butt of the joke is not the old Spanish woman, however, but the Western teller, who, for his narrow-mindedness, is only able to find ignorance in the Mexicans. The reference to storks, and the insight about different kinds of birds, in the woman’s reply may also suggest that there is hidden wisdom in her response, unnoticed by the hunter. The Belgian, in turn, is a fervent believer in the Belgian civilizing mission in the Congo. This meant for him, however, the conscious effort of keeping the Africans ignorant:
to teach the Negro to work honestly and nothing else, *rien de plus*—not, for instance, to build schools.

Blixen’s depiction of her relationship with the Africans around her is deeply ambiguous. In relation to her workers, squatters, and neighbors, Blixen casts herself in the role of a doctor, a lawyer, a landowner, and a “superior squatter.” The agricultural, nomadic people of the Kikuyu, whose land had been appropriated by the British colonial government to be handed over to British settlers, or other Europeans like Karen Blixen and her husband Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke, epitomize for Blixen the conquered but proud nation. Some of the Kikuyu, as she describes them, continued to live in the new farms as squatters over whom the owner of the farm exercised power.

Blixen acknowledges that she inhabited their land, for instance, by pointing out that many of the Kikuyu of her farm, whose fathers had been born on the farm, “very likely regarded me as a sort of superior squatter of their estates” (1954, 18; see also Brantly 2002, 76–77). Later, after the bankruptcy of her farm, Blixen successfully defended her squatters’ right to their own land. 20

At the same time, the identity-breaking qualities in some of Blixen’s stories in *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass*, where she associates herself with her servants or projects them as inseparable elements of her existence, can be directly linked, as JanMohamed argues, to her experience as a stranger in the colonies. 21 As a woman settler, farmer, and writer, Blixen had to negotiate different constraints and social conventions than most of the Europeans around her. The limitations set by the middle- and upper-class European lifestyle in the colonies dictated, for instance, that women define themselves through family, not work. Blixen’s situation was always somewhat precarious for this reason while, moreover, the Empire did not necessarily mean authority, efficiency, and, even less so, national faith in her memoir and letters. What Blixen called her outspoken “pro-nativeness” (1981, 283), which she differen-

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20. JanMohamed has defined Blixen’s paradoxical use of the signs of Africans’ alterity as a dynamic of centripetal and centrifugal forces (1983, 63–70). This is based on the observation that Blixen ceaselessly moved between, on the one hand, a sense of absolute ownership, even a God-like role as a kind of doctor–judge of a native village, and, on the other hand, a sense of humility, respect, and absolute responsibility for her workers and squatters, her passionate and unconditional love for the Natives—a relationship that she also likened to her officer father’s love for his soldiers at the time of war (Blixen 1954, 25). In *Shadows on the Grass*, Blixen compares her relationship with her servant Farah Aden to the great literary unities of master and servant, such as those between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, or King Lear and the Fool (1985, 282, 300).

21. JanMohamed argues, more precisely, that “the prevalence of disguised identities and the repeated hints of the absence of a ‘true’ or ‘permanent’ self in *Out of Africa* can be linked directly to her experience as a stranger; the subservience of character to plot can be related to her admiration for the African's ‘friendliness’ with destiny, and so forth” (1983, 74).
tiated from predominant notions among the British settlers, further emphasized her identity as an outsider.

What Mary Louise Pratt has called the “seeing-man” in her analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writing, meaning the main protagonist of the anti-conquest travel narrative, is relevant with regard to certain passages but not the entirety of *Out of Africa*. The “seeing-man” is someone, typically a male traveller, whose “imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (Pratt 1992, 7). The kind of nostalgic storyteller persona whom Blixen constructs for us in her memoir shares certain key characteristics with this passive anti-hero, particularly when she describes her visual experiences of the African landscape from the aeroplane or when she assimilates the Africans to their landscape. The experience of the African visual field as seen from above was something that Blixen always found exciting, but that she could not, as she explains, fully recapture in words. It is as if the Western storyteller were dependent on the encounter with the *absolute* and ultimately untranslatable alterity of the wildlife and the vastness of the landscape, in order to be able to learn how to return to a tradition and compose a story that might endure through difficult times. In the description of the Kenyan mountain landscape in the beginning of her memoir, likewise, Blixen foregrounds the experience of astonishment and awe, while she is still very much in possession of what she sees, by assigning value to what she perceives in terms of her notions of African nobility, pride, and freedom, and her personal sense of exaltation through the mystery of nature. The highland landscape around her farm, Blixen thought, was unique in Africa since it displayed, through some kind of metonymy, what she thought to be the essence of African space: “There was no fat on it and no luxuriance anywhere; it was Africa distilled up through six thousand feet, like the strong and refined essence of a continent” (1954, 13). The panorama of the landscape and its people, and their conversion into a personal memory and a myth—instead of a conversion into natural history as happens with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traveller-writers, whose work Pratt has investigated (1992, 51)—forms the narrative and descriptive scaffolding in the opening of *Out of Africa*.

**Conclusion**

The analysis here has served to demonstrate how Blixen’s notion of “African” nobility, pride, and freedom, and the Africans’ supposed instinctual response

22. For Pratt, the term “anti-conquest” means “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (1992, 7).
to storytelling and inclination to appropriate stories and retell them, is associated with her redefinition of literary norms, concerning in particular the kind of storytelling tradition in which she wanted to join. In Blixen's memoir, thus, “Africa” is a malleable sign that enables the writer to redefine a persisting tradition of storytelling and explore the relationship between a modern memoir and a mythical story. The mythical nature of this tradition can be understood in at least two senses. First of all, Africa suggested to her an authentic and instinctual form of storytelling. Blixen's contacts with African audiences and narrative traditions, in particular, offered her models of how stories may help make sense of the environment and one's destiny and, moreover, provided her with opportunities for literary extension, renewal, and reinvigoration. Africa connotes for Blixen the power to renew perception, concerning for instance the sense of unity with nature but also with regard to the way in which the storyteller sees the relationship between narratives and lived experience. The most extensive treatment of this question is given in the story “The Roads of Life” and its frame that recontextualize an old Danish fairy tale. Secondly, as Blixen frequently argues in her memoir, Africa or Africans as such cannot be fully understood but may perhaps best be conceived of in and through stories. The best stories, in turn, work by suggestion, according to the notion of storytelling that emerges in Blixen's memoir and particularly in relation to the important role of anecdotes in Part four of the book. The various anecdotes, memories, and short fictions in this section of her memoir, and the many meaningful continuities and connections between them, accentuate the central themes of the book (loss and renewal, the pride and wisdom of nature). The organization of Out of Africa thus acts out the implications of the metonymy of Africa—a metonymy that is enacted both spatially and temporally in Blixen's memoir but that will always remain, to some extent, evasive and untranslatable.