

# **ADOPTEEES AND AMERICANS:** Exporting Hans Christian Andersen and Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen)

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## **Key words:**

Adoption, Hans  
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**Abstract:** Hans Christian Andersen and Karen Blixen (aka.) Isak Dinesen have been widely read in America, with Hollywood's *Out of Africa* adaptation adding to the attention. Both writers dramatized their alienation with adoption stories reaching across national and racial boundaries. They became iconic writers in the US for many reasons, but their preoccupation with adoption has been insufficiently explored. In fact, their transnational, transracial, transsexual, and cross-species adoption tales have entered US conversations about the Other, since the adoptee arrives in familial structures from "other" ideological, economic, or racial locations. Their adoption tales further fit American rights discourses, by insisting on the rights of belonging and conditions of freedom laid down by reason and law. They also subscribe to emotional discourses that evoke in the audience empathy and emotions related to dignity and humanity. Fairy tale adoptions fit the classic American quest narrative—Huck Finn-style—in which a heroic protagonist takes off into the unknown to find an identity, rooted in liberty, independence, and freedom. In a 21st-century world populated by migrants, refugees, orphans, adoptees, adoptive parents, and adopted or adoptive nations, Andersen and Blixen communicate with global adoption narratives the need for new ideological constellations of family, community, and nation.

In 1873, the 25-year-old Norwegian-American Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen met Hans Christian Andersen in his cluttered Copenhagen apartment. The young editor of *The Atlantic* and newly appointed Assistant Professor of North European Languages at Cornell University (Glasrud) visited the aging Andersen after a stint in his native Norway. Andersen greeted Boyesen with his wish to visit the United States, where he had friends and his translator Horace Scudder resided. If only Andersen could escape the sea voyage and be telegraphed over there, he would love to come. "It is strange," the famous traveler exclaimed, "that America has become so foreign to me. Up at the moon, I can easily imagine all sorts of fun going on, but in the big, cold and prosaic country to the West I would think that a poetic imagination would starve from lack of material." In response, Boyesen described the busy life of Manhattan and Broadway. Andersen finally stretched his long, spindly legs and laughed: "Indeed? I would certainly love to see that, though I would most likely be run over. There must be something colossal about life over there" (Andersen, *Andersen* 298).<sup>1</sup> In "Andersen's Tales and America" (1968), Erik Dal also quotes Andersen: "America! I shall never go thither, I have hydrophobia, but I was there with all my thoughts from the dunes at Tróia, the Portuguese Pompeii." Dal subsequently warns readers that Andersen in a few lines has exhausted his knowledge of the far-away continent (23).

<sup>1</sup> I have translated the quotations from Jens Andersen's biography of Hans Christian Andersen myself.

Some sixty years after Boyesen's meeting with Andersen, another famous Danish writer, Karen Blixen, had just published *Seven Gothic Tales* (1935), the Book-of-the-Month-Club selection that established her literary reputation, despite initial rejections by Danish and British publishers. Her younger brother, Thomas Dinesen, had used his American acquaintance Dorothy Canfield to get the volume out in the US and propel his destitute older sister, in the English-speaking world better known as Isak Dinesen, to fame. Two years later, she would publish *Out of Africa* (1937, in Danish *Den afrikanske Farm*), which in 1954 caused Ernest Hemingway to mention her, in a possibly performative gesture, as a competitor for the Nobel Prize he himself received that year. Unlike Andersen, who also loved attention, Blixen would go to the US to meet her readers and cement her iconic status in North America. On a February afternoon in 1959, she allowed herself to be photographed with Carson McCullers and Marilyn Monroe.

In "Teaching American Literature: The Centrality of Adoption" (2004), Carol J. Singley argues convincingly against the notion that adoption occurs in limited contexts in American literary canons and in American ideologies. She traces the imprints of orphans, homelessness, and adoption in a range of American texts, from the Puritans to William Faulkner. Yet she and other critics remain silent about the imported—adopted—canonical writers who have educated and entertained Americans about transracial and transnational adoption. Andersen and

Blixen have been widely read in American nurseries and classrooms, with Hollywood's *Out of Africa* adaptation adding to the attention received. Both writers lost their fathers in childhood, and both suffered from a restlessness that sent them into the world, where they never escaped their original sense of being outsiders and misfits. They dramatized their alienation, and the remedies they found, with adoption stories reaching across national and racial boundaries. In "The Ugly Duckling" (1843, original title "Den grimme Ælling"), Andersen tells a story of the identity crisis following a transracial adoption from the point of view of the adoptee, the swan hatched among ducks. This adopted protagonist is ostracized by those accustomed to conventional family patterns, and his success and happiness ultimately reside outside his adoptive family. The duckling becomes a swan and locates other swans, and his own self-worth, away from those who could not take the place of his blood relatives. This tale parallels the American adoption story *par excellence*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), published in the US in 1885.

Blixen also uses adoption to narrate herself and her destiny. Through adoption, she expresses her own dilemmas and ruptures, the biographical, psychological, social, and writerly schisms that accompany experimental motherhood and exile. Critics have debated the imperialist and class-based perspective with which Blixen met her African adoptees, since her autobiography seemingly echoes the racial ideologies of the American

South, from the antebellum plantation owners to Blixen's own time. Like southern planters (Fox-Genovese), Blixen describes her household as a family in black and white, but scholarship on her work has not focused on adoption. As Beverly Lyon Clark writes on troping adoption, "the metaphor [of adoption] has become almost transparent, almost invisible" (98). Yet adoption complicates stories of belonging and exile, home and homelessness, and transnational and transracial encounters. In the words of Jill R. Deans, who writes on adoption policies and practices in novels by Louise Erdrich, "fractured families . . . are not just domestic issues but symptoms of a cultural state of emergency" (239).

Though she focuses on contemporary US adoption, Marianne Novy writes in her introduction to *Imagining Adoption* (2004) that adoption "exists at the intersection of many contested issues" (6). The social issues activated through adoption practices and narratives include the definition of family, the importance of heredity, and the dichotomies between insiders and outsiders. Adoption and stories about it constitute, in short, an experimental site, where what Claudia Castañeda calls "naturalized versions of national, racial, and cultural belonging" (284), and, we might add, sexuality, become destabilized or fluid. This site has utopian traits, in that adoption becomes a model for social alternatives, for "regrouping society" (O'Toole 18). Transnational or transracial adoption, and its literary representations, intensify these social potentialities by bringing together groups traditionally anchored

separately by race and ethnicity, sexual preference, economics, and nation. John McLeod explains in *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (2015) that “transcultural adoption writing confronts the discursive legitimacy of ideas such as race, national identity and cultural authenticity or purity by exposing the porous boundaries and precarious design as the product of myth rather than truth” (231). In an American context, adoption stories accordingly carry the potential for change, and for debunking old belief systems.

The material of writers may not necessarily be directly autobiographical, but nonetheless linked to their own experiences (Gish 175). Andersen drew in “The Ugly Duckling” on his own life story so obviously that his contemporaries nick-named him “The Danish Swan.” In his biography of Andersen, Jens Andersen states that the Danish writer of poetry, novels, travel accounts, dramas and fairy tales also had his life story to share, canonized in the fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling.” This tale was immediately translated into German and English and was to secure Andersen’s readership in aristocratic and academic circles, and, later, in America. But before and after this famous publication, Andersen’s life was already touched by adoption. He left his biological family in Odense behind at the age of fourteen and did not look back at this group of relatives. They counted his illiterate and alcoholic mother, his prostitute aunt, a stepfather, his half-sister Karen, whose low-life existence and requests for money disgusted him, and his mentally disturbed grandfather, who, like Andersen’s

mother, died in a poorhouse in the Danish city later illuminated in honor of its famous native son. His dreamy shoemaker father died early, and Andersen would in childhood indulge in fantasies of royal birth and subsequent adoption into the destitute family raising him, a myth he did not altogether abandon in adulthood (Andersen II, Chapter 7).

Upon arrival in Copenhagen, Andersen became the adoptive son of the illustrious Collin family, headed by Jonas Collin, who also secured Andersen the financial support of King Frederik the VI (Andersen 67), a prominent addition to the group of adoptive fathers in Andersen’s life. Other adoptive figures included the Danish scientist H. C. Ørsted, the Danish writer B. S. Ingemann, and the Moritz G. Melchior family, in whose summer residence Andersen expired in 1875, surrounded by those in whose midst he had become adopted as a brother and son (Andersen II, 385-95). Andersen himself adopted, so to speak, a long list of children in the families he himself inhabited, from little Ida Thiele, the daughter of the secretary of the Academy of Art for whom he wrote *Fairy Tales Told for Children* (1835, original title *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn*), to generations of Collin children, the daughters of Baron and Baroness Stampe of Nysø manor, and many godchildren. He also adopted a series of attractive young men, who doubled as brothers and paid-for travel companions throughout Andersen’s life. Among them were Viggo, Einar and Harald Drewsen, Edgar and Jonas Collin, Robert Watt, and William Bloch. Like Huckleberry Finn, Andersen enjoyed a male

travel companion, at times as controversial as Jim, the run-away slave who accompanies Huck on the raft going down the Mississippi.

Contours of adoption also emerge from Karen Blixen's autobiographical *Out of Africa*, which narrates the crucial part in her life when she decided to leave Denmark, marry her cousin Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke in 1914, and immerse herself in coffee production in Kenya. As she writes in the first line: "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills" (13). Like Andersen, she had a half-sister who now complicates the Dinesen family structure. On March 21, 2015, Danish newspapers carried the just-discovered story behind her father's suicide: Wilhelm Dinesen had impregnated a young maid working for his mother-in-law. A fourth, dark and shadowy sister now troubles the iconic portrait of the three Dinesen daughters and the aristocratic Dinesen family legacy (Ritzau), just as in many a Civil War diary, mixed-raced children populate the slave quarters of respected white plantation owners (Juncker).

Blixen used adoption to find her destiny. Soon after her arrival in Kenya, Bror infected her with syphilis, and she returned to Denmark for treatments. She had become infertile and would never have children of her own. Instead, she adopted informally the native children and servants with whom she surrounded herself, both as Bror Blixen's wife and Denys Finch-Hatton's lover. After Denys had died in a plane crash in 1931 and Blixen returned to Denmark, she continued to adopt. Clara Svendsen became her secretary,

mother, and child (Svendsen). More notoriously, Blixen adopted a series of young men, who would move in at Rungstedlund, her family residence, some more willingly than others. Especially the young Danish writer Thorkild Bjørnvig entered her life, house, and circle of influence, but he did not escape unscathed (Bjørnvig). Another of her young men, Aage Henriksen—later a respected literary critic, scholar, and professor—accused in a Danish national TV documentary Blixen of trying to break his neck on her deathbed, wicked stepmother-style (Mandal and von Lowzows). Adoption complicates Blixen's life as well as her story of home and exile, and transnational and transracial encounters, just as it had complicated the lives of southern women, uneasily writing themselves into racial scripts.

Andersen's autobiography was originally published in Danish as *Mit Livs Eventyr* (1955), which means *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, and Blixen's *Out of Africa* might also be read as a fairy tale. The genre itself functions as a "theater of dislocation" (Leonard 118), where biographical and literary themes may be relocated and reenacted in a magic realm. Though neither Andersen nor Blixen addressed themselves primarily to children, the childish connotations of the fairy tale genre link up with adoption. Clark notes, accordingly, that "figurations of adoption often appear in contexts where childishness is figured too, one figure coupled to the other in a linguistic train of associations" (99). The fairy tale allows for the emotional impact of adoption stories, and, like stories of adoptees

and adoptive families, the genre highlights self-creation and absence, the expulsion of what M. Fish calls “the hereditary ghost” (qtd. VanStavern 153). Like adoption, fairy tales have heroes and villains, the repositories of the anger adoptees might unconsciously project onto fantasy figures and plots (Leonard 126). The fairy tale inhabits fantasyland, with soil ripe for adoption issues, since fantasy allows for comprehending the “unspeakable and incomprehensible situation” in which many adoptees find themselves (Backus 140). In fairy tales, we enter the “otherworld” (De Soto 193) of origin and alternative identities. The fairy tales of both Andersen and Blixen open a terrain in which to imagine the future, as hero-adoptees embark on journeys taking them to uncertain or scary destinations of belonging. As we learn early in *Imagining Adoption*, “the importation of the nonfamiliar” sets in motion plot and narratives (O’Toole 17). This plot would appeal to American readers familiar with colonial narratives of travels to the New World and classic American stories of adventurous heroes going West in search of fame and fortune.

“The Ugly Duckling” belongs among the three mythic stories Marianne Novy identifies as typical of European and American cultures: The disaster plot involving unhappy adoption and discovery, the happy detection and ending, and the happy adoption (1). As the ugly duckling leaves his informal adoptive family and gets immersed in hardships of all kinds, he nonetheless finds an identity and a happy home among his own, the white swans with which Andersen ends his famous fairy tale:

He thought of how he had been despised and persecuted, and now he heard everybody saying that he was the loveliest of all lovely birds. And the lilacs bowed their branches to him right down to the water, and the sunshine felt so warm and kindly. Then he ruffled his feathers, raised his slender neck and rejoiced from his heart: “I never dreamed of so much happiness, when I was the ugly duckling” (114). In the course of his journey, Andersen’s ugly protagonist ruffles major themes in adoption literature, though with characteristic Andersen twists that helped export his story to American audiences.

From the outset, Andersen stresses the connection between adoption and difference. As the ugly duckling finally tumbles out of his egg, the mother duck exclaims: “My! What a huge great duckling that is! None of the others look a bit like that” (108). He is met with cruelty and lack of understanding from those around him, and the mother duck “wished he were far away” (109-10). She shares the conflicted views of adopted children Beverly Crockett locates in 19<sup>th</sup> century adoption fiction and beyond (57). Mother duck tries to love her unusual duckling, but he is simultaneously discredited and despised, thus reflecting Andersen’s ambivalence and distance from his own biological roots. Given his proletarian background, Andersen inscribes in this fairy tale the notion that orphans or adoptees come from the dangerous classes. The other ducks pull together and condemn the outsider in their midst: ““There! Now we’ve got to have that rabble as well—as if there weren’t enough of us already! Ugh! What a

sight that duckling is! We can't possibly put up with him'—and one duck immediately flew at him and bit him in the neck" (109). Some fifty years later, Huck Finn embarks on his trip away from the respectable Widow Douglas wearing his tattered clothes, true to his proletarian roots. Both orphans encounter a hostile world threatening to destroy them, in the case of the duckling with guns going off, blood-hounds chasing him, water turning red, and frosty skies and whirling winds endangering his survival (110, 112). "Yes," Andersen writes, "the poor duckling was certainly having a bad time" (113).

As an orphan or an adoptee, the duckling inhabits a negative identity: "'It is no turkey, that's certain,' said the duck" (108). It is no cat or hen either, as an old woman, her cat and her hen make clear in the small farm cottage where the duckling seeks shelter: "'Can you arch your back or purr or give out sparks?' the cat asked. 'No,' responds the duckling. 'Can you lay eggs?' inquires the hen: 'No'" (112). As an adoptee, the duckling is open for inscription, a blank page upon which others may write their identities and stories. Andersen gives to the duck's relatives and acquaintances all discursive power to stress that to be adopted is to be excluded and silenced. As Crockett writes about children raised outside biological families, "notable is the reluctance—indeed the refusal—by some to talk about their histories at all" (63). Nonetheless, the ugly duckling's "no's" suggest a measure of resistance towards conventional scripts. In *Huckleberry Finn*, the child protagonist serves a similar function.

Traditional ideologies and discourses flow towards and through him, but he eventually resists by choosing the turn in the river that will not bring Jim back to the auction block.

The "gawky, peculiar" (109) duckling resembles his author, who was harassed and ostracized in many contexts before he arrived at fame and fortune. Andersen's persona enacts the search for identity that much adoption—and American—literature revolves around (Novy 8). It is the hidden hero of Western culture, a type that counts among its numbers Superman and Cinderella

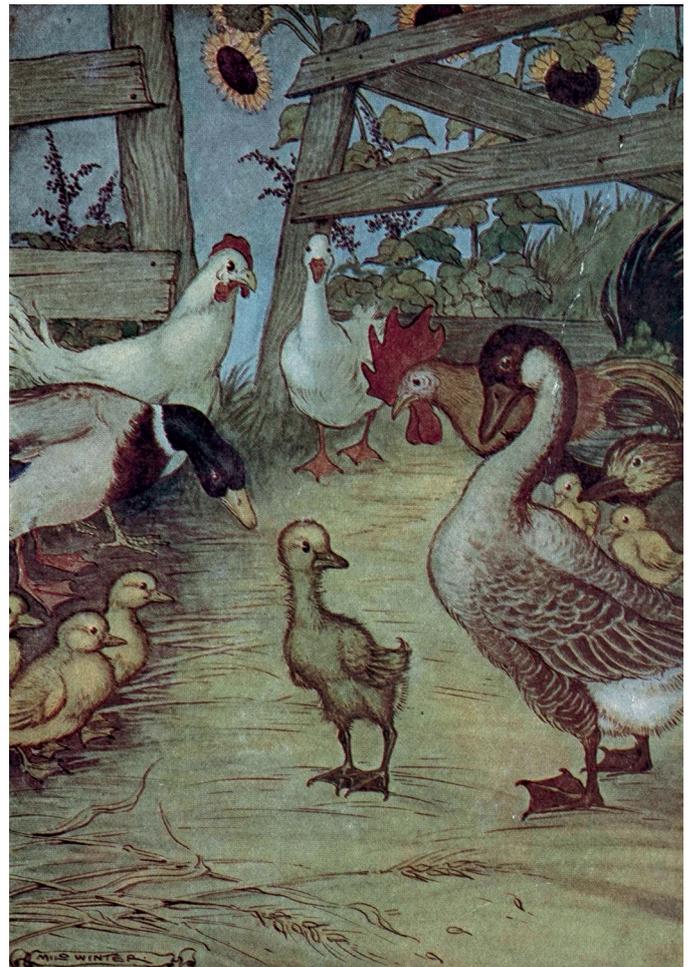


Illustration of the "Ugly Duckling" by Milo Winter. 1916.

(Crockett 71), other famous adoptees. Adoption protagonists show us the bewildering arbitrariness of all genealogy, "the fact," as Paris de Soto writes with Foucault, "that our identity is a product not of genes or fate or careful construction but of the arbitrary and the accidental" (204). The duckling accordingly engages in a project of self-discovery and self-creation. Andersen sums up: "It doesn't matter about being born in a duckyard, as long as you are hatched from a swan's egg" (114).

The duckling represents its author, since its biological parents remain erased, like Andersen's own, though his discovery of beautiful swans suggests a reservation about the adoptive project that complicates its author's identity. "The Ugly Duckling" enacts the "ontological anxiety" de Soto finds relevant for all of us in general and adoptees in particular (196-97). The swan has left the duck yard, traditionally read as narrow-minded and provincial Denmark. But the future of the new swan must be imagined, as he raises his slender neck and rejoices from his heart at the end of Andersen's fairy tale. Also Huck Finn meets with complications. He follows his own moral compass in not going downriver towards Jim's re-enslavement, but the long ending still has Jim locked up in a cabin for quite some time. And Huck makes explicit his misgivings: "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it" (229).

The complicated identity of the ugly duckling and the Danish swan also involves

the alternative sexualities of adoption plots, since adoption removes biological procreation from family scripts. The duckling is feminized. He is consistently the "poor duckling" who trembles in the face of danger and adversity; he is given to emotions and dramas associated with mid-19<sup>th</sup> century women. He is fearful, passive, and domestic, given to hiding in secret places: "All he wanted was to be allowed to stay quietly among the rushes and drink a little marsh-water." He has a nervous temperament: "It was terrifying for the poor duckling, who was just turning his head round to bury it under his wing when suddenly he found behind him a fearsome great dog with lolling tongue and grim, glittering eyes" (110). Also, the new swan seems "strange," like the duckling (111), "graceful" and "the prettiest," with a "slender neck" and a vanity fed by the mirror in which his new identity resides. Emotions overflow from his heart (115). In this respect "The Ugly Duckling" draws on Andersen's own life story and his own complicated sexuality. Andersen's homosexual or homoerotic attraction to young men and his life-long love for the unattainable Edvard Collin constitutes a major theme in Jens Andersen's biography of the Danish writer. Here again is a parallel with the Huck-Jim relationship, which some critics have defined as homosocial or homosexual (Nissen 59).

Transracial adoption plays a muted, though interesting part in Andersen's fairy tale. The ugly duckling begins his existence as non-white. Not only his "peculiar" frame and his different personality contribute to his

role as Other. His coloring plays an important role: he is an “ugly grey duckling” (108). The duckling’s journey and his arrival at final happiness include his entry into the whiteness he initially admires from a distance: “The duckling had never seen such beautiful birds, all glittering white with long graceful necks. They were swans” (113). Before he inevitably turns into a white swan, he seeks out whiteness. He attempts to cover himself in white when he blunders into the peasant woman’s domestic arrangements. First he flutters into a milk bowl, and then he flies into a butter-tub and eventually into the flour-bin. Chased outside, he lands in new-fallen snow. At this point, Andersen retreats from his story by writing that “it would be far too dismal to describe all the want and misery the duckling had to go through during that hard winter” (113-14). A thin layer of whiteness cannot cover the ostracized outsider, who associates whiteness with privilege and status: “And straight ahead, out of the thicket, came three beautiful white swans, ruffling their feathers and floating so lightly on the water . . . . I will fly across to them, those royal birds!” As the protagonist of Andersen’s fairy tale discovers his reflection in the water, he sees that he is “no longer a clumsy greyish bird, ugly and unattractive—no, he was himself a swan!” (114). His whiteness results in community approval, as “everyone” says: “The new one is the prettiest—so young and handsome” (115). He hears “everybody saying that he was the loveliest of all lovely birds” (115). His new skin color has paid off and ensures the happy ending of “The Ugly Duckling,” just as this muted racial script ensures the interest of American readers.

Karen Blixen’s famous *Out of Africa* owes much to Andersen and appeals to Americans as well. *Out of Africa* may be read as a modern fairy tale, like some of Andersen’s set in a foreign land but with clear Scandinavian connections and American implications. She becomes the hero of her autobiography, since, as in the American Success Myth, she must go through a series of qualifying tests to win her status, her land, and her life story. Like many of Andersen’s characters, she is an outsider, often ignored by relatives and by the British colony in Nairobi, reminiscent of Andersen’s conventional figures and villains. She too suffers in Africa the loneliness of Andersen’s ugly duckling, but like him, she conquers the world in the end. Blixen presides royally over the numerous natives on her land and becomes their adoptive mother, her native children the Africans closest to her, reluctantly left behind upon her return to Denmark. But Blixen also employs someone like Farah, her Somali butler and confidant, as an Andersen shadow or a southern overseer. Like Andersen in “The Shadow,” Blixen represents with Farah her own conflicting dilemmas and desires. This split allows her to remain silent about what might be the absent center of *Out of Africa*: disappointment, disease, and death.

In Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” (1837, original title “Den lille Havfrue”), the protagonist has the witch cut off her tongue for the potion that will help her win the young Prince. Blixen sacrifices her tongue and suffers in silence as she moves closer to her own prince, the irresistible and irresponsible

Denys Finch-Hatton, who, in a modern turn, dies so that the Baroness might thrive. Blixen followed Andersen in using the things and the figures of her own life to write her African fairy tale. It has a happy ending of sorts, because she begins to write. Astrid Rode, who reads *Out of Africa* as a tragedy in five acts, writes that Blixen transcends the genre because her experiences in Africa supply her with material for many stories that immortalize her life at the farm (n. p.) As a writer, she arrives in a new place of fame, though not of fortune. This story echoes many a Confederate woman diarist, who also holds her tongue but gets a measure of relief as she fills her pages, though leakage entries indicate frustration, sorrow, or rage (Juncker 62-64).

*Out of Africa* engages its readers in Blixen's transnational and transracial adoption project and activates numerous themes in adoption literature, such as the notion of identity. Blixen left Denmark to reinvent herself as an independent, global woman, because she, like Andersen, resented the Danish duck pond. She married the aristocratic lion hunter Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke, the twin brother of Hans, whom she had loved and desired unsuccessfully. The emphasis on fantasy and imagination figures strongly in *Out of Africa*, as does the innovative notions of family and sexual difference associated with adoption. As Novy writes, literature becomes the site on which intricacies of adoption scenarios may be tested and investigated (12). Especially issues of race and gender participate in Blixen's self-transformation from bored Copenhagen debutante to coffee farmer and wild game hunter in Kenya.

Like Andersen, Blixen knew about gender trouble. American biographer Judith Thurman links hunting to sex in the passage on the safari with Bror, where the newly-wed European woman was "quite unprepared for her own blood lust." Thurman continues: "A week into the safari, drunk with it, she offered her apologies to all hunters for any prior scepticism toward their 'ecstasy'" (143). But in watching her first lion skinned, Blixen's position is bisexual. She identifies with the lion while simultaneously admiring its masculinity, its hardness, and its muscles. Thomas Dinesen reveals in his book about his sister, *Tanne* (1974), her gender confusion. On the one hand, his sister is the Lioness: she has fought nobly for her marriage to Bror, and for her African farm, with a lion's strength and determination. On the other, she is a phallic woman. In a letter to Thomas written January 8, 1919, she joyfully describes shooting a furious, grunting lion, charging at her "straight as a cannon ball" (63). In fact, Blixen becomes a soldier figure, fighting her war and winning her prize, like her father before her.

In the wilder parts of the Rungstedlund grounds, Wilhelm Dinesen had shared with his favorite daughter the secrets of hunting and nature. It had been the wilderness contrasting maternal complacency and conventionality inside, the freedom she later sought in Africa. A veteran of the Dano- and French-Prussian wars, Dinesen had in the early 1870s lived with Native American tribes and written up his experiences in *Letters from the Hunt* by Bogonis, the name the Chippewa of Wisconsin gave him. He had called his dog

"Osceola" after the leader of the Semioles, which his daughter used as a pseudonym for her early stories. She identified with the "quality of boundlessness" her father had sought in America, and though she never went beyond the East Coast during her only visit to the United States, she wanted to travel to Wisconsin and locate Frydenlund, the two-room cabin her father had owned in Wolf River county. Here, as Richard B. Vowles writes in "Wilhelm Dinesen in America" (1976), he grew indiscriminately intimate, in terms of hunting and love-making, with both the Sioux and their enemies, the Pawnees (369-70). Frydenlund was the last stop in Dinesen's two-year stay in North America, which had also included a time in Chicago, in the Milwaukee Avenue neighborhood where Emil Dreier, the founder of a fraternal association called "Dania," had declared: "Denmark is a marvelous country, but you cannot get bear meat there" (Vowles 371). Blixen may have adopted this lack of bear meat as a metaphor for her own impatience with Denmark. Vowles concludes about Wilhelm Dinesen's legacy: "He implanted in his talented daughter a *wanderlust*, a resilience, a curiosity about all things, and a very special dignity, in the bare ten years they had together" (381). This curiosity, resilience, and love of travel would later appeal to Blixen's American readers.

Some silences in Blixen's works might originate in the syphilis her father brought back from his American sojourn, or his suicide (Dinesen 13; Wivel 29-30), which accounts for his daughter's melancholy and the gender fluidity now associated with the Baroness.

Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Blixen's longtime friend and admirer, compares a photograph of Wilhelm Dinesen in his daughter's Rungstedlund study to one from the African farm, in which the daughter has turned into the father: Blixen in a riding suit stands with gun and dog at her side (Rasmussen 36-37). Many years later, Niels Carlsen, who grew up at Rungstedlund with his single mother, the cook, called Karen Blixen his father (Mandal and von Lowzows).

In an August 25, 1926, letter to her brother, Thomas, Blixen theorizes about modern love as "homosexuality" (101). This "homosexual" view of love owes much to Denys Finch-Hatton, who backed away from traditional relationships and may himself have been bi- or homosexual. Wivel links her view of marriage and destiny to Denys, who refused paternal responsibilities in the famous telegram from London that either recommended abortion or single motherhood to the woman who believed herself pregnant. He excuses Denys, who was "both impeded by a dubious sexual identity and the relationship-free attitude Karen Blixen made her own over the following years" (80). Susan Brantly notes in "Karen Blixen, Hybridity, and Some Challenges to Postcolonial Criticism" (2013) that "Blixen thematizes in her book the notion of the hybrid, of the unstable identity" (42). Much could and has been made of the Baroness's homoeroticism. In his analyses of sexuality, gender, and identity in her works, Dag Heede queers the whole Blixen canon and argues that her characters constitute textual nomads who travel among sexualities and

genders in infinite constellations (33), much like Andersen and even Huck Finn before her.

In *The Creative Dialectic of Karen Blixen's Essays* (2014), American critic Marianne T. Stecher-Hansen disagrees with Heede's arguments for Blixen's performative sexualities. In her analysis of Blixen's "Oration at a Bonfire," delivered in 1953 and translated into English in 1978, Stecher-Hansen locates Blixen's "entreaty to modern women to repossess today's spheres of male dominance . . . with another mode of existence . . ." (71). To absorb and communicate the fullness of human existence, the artist needs, as Stecher-Hansen reads Blixen, to activate both masculine and feminine principles, since "both life forces are necessary for the fully integrated persona" (64). In her chapter "On Feminism and Womanliness," Stecher-Hansen links Blixen with New French Feminism as a precursor to Hélène Cixous, who asked women to write in white ink, with body fluids as modes of experience and communication (67). Other critics focus more literally on Blixen herself and speculate on anorexia, with its fear of femininity and female forms, and her identification with Diana, not Venus. Bror Blixen complained about his new bride's hunger diets and her (ab)use of laxatives to stay slim (Arnold 122-23). All critics agree, however, on immersing Blixen in gender trouble, whether constructed, performative, essentialist, psychological, or physical, and thus consolidate the adoption plot and its alternative sexual dramas.

Blixen's adoptions evoked the colonialism or racism familiar to American audiences. Though the Baroness knew the names of Kikuyus and Masais—Kamante, Saufe, Kitau—Africans became "her" natives. In what Marie Louise Pratt calls a "contact zone" (4), Blixen inhabits the space of the imperialist, whose gaze aims at control. As in early southern literature, such as John P. Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), natives turn up in anonymous plurals and often remain invisible, their work linguistically absent from Blixen's script, as when she describes the troubles of a coffee farmer: "I had six hundred acres of the land with coffee; my oxen dragged the cultivators up and down the fields, between the rows of trees, many thousand miles, patiently, awaiting coming bounties. (*Out of Africa* 16-17). The drivers of the oxen have disappeared, as Blixen focuses on her cattle, apparently struggling on their own. The natives on her land become anonymous field hands, either because she "watch[es] the plants set" or has them shaded by an invisible work force. Her panoramic gaze across the fields suggests the position Pratt associates with colonial and cultural dominance. Blixen withholds from the natives a linguistic presence also by having them merge with the landscape: "The Natives were Africa in flesh and blood. The tall extinct volcano of Longonot that rises above the Rift Valley, the broad mimosa trees along the rivers, the elephant and the giraffe, were not more truly Africa than the natives were—small figures in an immense scenery" (28).

For Blixen, the Africans populated a pre-historic landscape, where European and

American sins had yet to arrive. Blixen's sojourn among the Masai provoked the British colony in Nairobi, usually not given to moral outrage. The Baroness did not care. She saw the Africans as representatives of wisdom, sincerity, and community, but first and foremost as messengers from a pre-cultural original state of life and mind: "They came into my life," she writes in *Essays*, "as some sort of response to a call in my own nature . . . or to feelings and instincts deep down in my mind" (12; Wivel 50). The Baroness never gave up calling the Africans "her" natives, though this habit made people uncomfortable as the decades passed. In introducing two paintings of Africans, she elaborates on their pre-historic quality: "They express in color, lines and movement a perfect unity and harmony. The inner nature and soul of Africa had here, through thousands of years, created for itself a human form, as clear and truthful in style as that of the lion or the leopard" (Lasson, [Drawings] 32).

In his analysis of Blixen's "dangerous book," Lasse Horne Kjældsgaard complicates Blixen's colonial perspective by noting that in her writings, comparisons to animals suggest primitivism or animalism, not racism (113). He concludes that in *Out of Africa*, Blixen joins the colonial project as a witness, a participant, and an accuser, and that she cannot be reduced to any one of these roles (135). Karen Thisted finds, moreover, that Blixen's text transcends the colonizer's ambivalence with her intelligent awareness of mimicry as a resistance strategy employed by the colonized, narrated through her personal

experiences with the native Africans (106ff). Both Kjældsgaard ("Death from Torture") and Thisted zoom in on the Kitosch episode in *Out of Africa* and argue for Blixen's condemnation of white settler justice, as does Brantly, who adds that "she was generally regarded as 'pro-native' by the British establishment" (32). Brantly acknowledges, however, that "Blixen's own powerlessness as a woman might help her sympathize with the Africans, but the central paradox remains that she is still the oppressor as well as the oppressed" (40). Thurman sums up the complicated relationship between the Baroness and the Africans: "There was something of a lonely child playing with her doll in all her relations with the Africans: the extreme tenderness, the maternal solicitude, the sense of power and responsibility that distracted her from her own feelings of helplessness and despair" (269). To this list, Thurman might have added Blixen's flight from history, and from Denmark, an escape that allows her to ignore certain benefits the colonizers had gained from the asymmetrical division of power in Kenya.

Thurman approaches the adoption theme in *Out of Africa*, but instead of a child playing with dolls, Blixen becomes an adoptive mother with transracial children. This relationship fits into discourses of racism and colonialism, but it might be taken further. Blixen enters a maternal discourse and comes together with her adoptive children through the land. She explains in a book of her drawings: "Only the African highlands have spoken to me immediately, without an interpreter, in a language that went straight

to my heart. There must have been an original, mythic understanding between them and myself, for at our first meeting I took possession of the land, or the land took possession of me, and we became one" (Lasson, [Drawings] 28). Through the land, and through an emotional, almost physical relationship with the landscape around her, the strong colonial "I" of her first sentence—"I had a farm in Africa"—dissolves. After the trip to Kijabe and three months on the Masai Reserve, famously included in *Out of Africa* on film, she says: "The grass was me, and the air, the distant visible mountains were me, the tired oxen were me. I breathed with the slight night-wind in the thorn trees" (233). As Thurman points out, this passage is poetically condensed from real events and suggests the artist at work on herself through the land (146).

Danish literary critic Sten Pultz Moslund finds in this passage "an Othering that de-subjectifies, even de-anthropomorphizes the self, turning it into vegetation and animal or a mode-of-being that is fundamentally produced by Otherness: a being-created rather than a being that creates" (148). Moslund includes Blixen in discussions of "sensuous geographies," but the passage also fits an adoption plot, where Blixen takes on the role of adoptive mother, a maternal role "being-created rather than a being that creates." As Moslund notes, "when Blixen reflects on her encounter with Africans (in her novel or in her non-fiction), she frequently stresses the encounter as a powerful disintegration of her individual identity or socioculturally induced senses of self" (148).

This "powerful disintegration" occurs when mother and child or children merge, when Blixen takes on the maternity without giving birth, when she through "smell, color, shapes, movements, and the skin's tactile sensations" becomes part of what Moslund calls "the place's own totality" (147). In this sensuous reading of *Out of Africa*, Blixen engages with adoption by including nature and body, her own and those of the adoptees she meets on their own terms, as Africans, as innocents, as people absorbing nature and other bodies through physicality, movement, and sensuousness. Through a transnational and transracial adoption plot, Blixen communicates with herself, her country of origin, her adopted country and the children and adults living in it. In this intersection of identities, and of alternative structures of being and living, Blixen writes herself into modernity and out of established socio-cultural arrangements. She also writes herself into American dilemmas and debates about race.

Blixen investigates though an adoption plot "the mutual workings of influence without privileging any of the differentiated terms" (Clark 98), such as self and other, European and African, parent and child. The interracial family in *Out of Africa* functions, then, as "vanguard of interracial relations" (Satz 273), though Castañeda problematizes this vision of racial harmony (284) by pointing to its "evacuation of histories of domination and resistance" (286). Like Andersen, Blixen works with cross-species adoption ("the tired oxen were me"), what Clark identifies as "a powerful figure for all adoption, the biological

difference of adoption figured as difference in species." Adoption, she argues, allows for independence and hybridization, for "connections among races, species, kingdoms (animal, vegetable, mineral)" (100). The tensions in both Andersen's and Blixen's adoption identities and plots appear as "a metaphoric of distancing, or more precisely, of distancing and connecting" (Clark 105). Readers of adoption narratives such as Andersen's and Blixen's identify with an adoptee or adoptive parent and grasp alternative human relationships across a distance that enables them to connect from afar, not least across the Atlantic Ocean.

Andersen and Blixen have become iconic writers in the US for many reasons, their preoccupation with adoption among those insufficiently explored. Their transnational, transracial, transsexual, and cross-species adoption tales have entered US conversations about the Other, since the adoptee enters familial structures from "other" ideological, economic, or racial locations, and since adoptive motherhood remains "other" to those who arrive at motherhood through biological birth (Berebitsky 87). These conversations connect with the institution of slavery, which, like adoption, is based upon a contract not signed by the enslaved—or adopted—person at its center (Modell 218-19). With family narratives involving involuntary intimacy, Andersen and Blixen have developed modes of verbalizing links between dominance and dependency, between center and margin, between black and white in American history. The two Danish writers allow from afar—from

fairy tale land, from Denmark—Americans to approach their own interpersonal and inter-racial relations and, in the process, point to the silences and gaps in American discussions of family, race, and gender.

The famous Danish writers appeal to both American minds and hearts. Andersen and Blixen's adoption tales fit into American rights discourses, by insisting on rights of belonging and conditions designed by reason and law. The Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, LGBT\* activism, or the Black Lives Matter community all target legal documents, rulings, institutions, and decision-makers. Rights activists in all camps seek as well to problematize what they consider unfortunate cognitive patterns or modes and the literary and linguistic choices they influence. As McLeod asks in *Life Lines*, "What new modes of being—singular and interdependent—might be figured for all through the recounting of transcultural adoption? Which new narrative forms does transcultural adoption require and create?" (5). Both Andersen and Blixen subscribe to the "tactical uses of passion" that evoke in the audience empathy and emotions: "human rights, dignity, autonomy, and freedom" (Modell 224). With their insistent stories of outsiders making their way in, they help cement the rights of all, regardless of gender, class, race, sexual preference, or other divisive categories in US history and society.

Fairy tale adoptions fit the classic American quest narrative—*Huck Finn*-style—in which a heroic protagonist takes off into the

unknown to find an identity, a life away from home, liberty, independence and freedom. Samuel L. Clemens wrote the orphaned Huckleberry Finn into being, and his raft and eventful trip on the Mississippi set the mode for innumerable American heroes to come. In a sense, the United States is itself an orphan, as Kristina Fagan suggests, "a young society cut off from its European parents and searching for an identity" (252). The first pilgrims arriving at American shores fled from religious persecutions in the Old World, and as an orphaned community, they had to find their own destinies in the wilderness William Bradford and others encountered. Ultimately, as Bradford complains in *Of Pilgrim Plantation* (1630-47), later generations in the New World preferred, like the fairy tale heroes, to go it alone and break religious and communal ties in favor of individual decisions and solutions. Americans will recognize themselves in the duckling's becoming a swan and in Blixen's flight from Rungstedlund to her coffee farm, since they are accustomed to individualistic modes of solving personal and national issues. Both Andersen's and Blixen's tales might also read as rags-to-riches stories, their protagonists starting with nothing and winning if not everything, then more than most.

Both writers have empowered those struggling with gender conventions and restraints. Through an ugly duckling trembling in front of dogs, hunters, old women in comfortable cottages, and traditional conceptions of beauty, Andersen has imagined a gender continuum where everyone might find a position. In his life and his writings,



H. C. Andersen with Charlotte Melchior. 1875.

he has constructed a new masculinity that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century appears enabling, or inevitable. The 1985 adaptation of *Out of Africa* and the Meryl Streep character fueled female empowerment scripts in the US. Blixen's special blend of daring adventures, romantic difficulties, search for independence, and possibly also her aristocratic air appealed to a generation of American women struggling to envision themselves inside or outside patriarchal systems of power (Banner, Chapter 6; Friedman *et al.*, Chapter 24). Blixen's "The Blank Page" remains constant in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, as editors, professors and generations of students decipher female communities and silences. Blixen

herself is adopted as an American writer into this popular anthology, a status *Out of Africa* had already granted her.

Adoption articulates the moral conflicts at the heart of American law, life, and literature, the conflicts “irresolvable without remainder” that Martha Satz discusses in the context of adoption and race (271). In adoption scenarios, problematic issues remain, be it the situation of the birth mother, the contractual transfer of human beings unable to speak or decide for themselves, or the inequality involved in transnational or transracial adoptions. But Americans have also taken to Andersen and Blixen and their adoption tales because both writers, and especially Blixen, have dared dream about racial and cultural harmony. Andersen’s swan becomes himself and thinks fondly back at the mother duck raising him, while Blixen suggests that white settlers may co-exist, or even adopt, the Kikujus and Sudanese they live among. Both Andersen and Blixen promise oblivion. Instead of historical sins—war, slavery, genocide—they suggest with their fairy tale adoptions that the past may be created and reinvented, as it is in adoptive families, where origins, certificates, ethnicities, and genetic and reproductive failures are absorbed into more manageable narratives.

The hope that Andersen’s and Blixen’s fairy tales hold out to readers resides, however, in the writing itself. Their search for identity—among swans, among lions and Africans—becomes a search for narrative, a disturbing story of adoption, and of deviance.

De Soto links in “Genealogy Revised” efforts to conceal the illegitimacy of the child in adoption practices with the illegitimacy of the adoption narrative (195). In structuring and writing their autobiographical texts as adoption plots, Andersen and Blixen argue for change, for otherness, and not least for art. Both writers ultimately locate their identities in literature and thus give themselves and their readers access to other selves, the multiple identities located within and around us. Especially Andersen refuses in “The Ugly Duckling,” as Margot G. Backus puts it, to observe the “discursive interdiction—the ‘burden not to tell’” (139) that may create or deepen psychic wounds. In the process, he gives birth not only to his birth mother—the uneducated and poverty-stricken Anne Marie Andersdatter from Odense, transformed into the kind-hearted but limited mother duck—but to himself as a writer. He does not finish his new creation, whose journey into adulthood is only just beginning as the story ends, but Andersen gives his swan a voice. Instead of the adoptee’s blank page, Andersen’s gives his protagonist the last word. In the final paragraph of “The Ugly Duckling,” the new swan feels, thinks, hears, and feels again, but finally speaks to the world: “I never dreamed of so much happiness, when I was the ugly duckling” (115). His voice is new, in that speaking adoption, as Gish writes, is “experimental by virtue of foregrounding suppressed identities” (184). “The Ugly Duckling” might be read as a traditional rescue narrative in which a lucky adoptee finds a home and material and emotional privilege, but Andersen makes sure, nonetheless, that a swan and a writer

have been born. He helps articulate what McLeod terms “alternative ontologies of the self” and struggles towards “paradoxical and approximate identities,” what the author of *Life Lines* calls “adoptive being” rather than “being adopted” (23).

Hans Christian Andersen and Karen Blixen share not only their fame as the best-known Danish writers in American contexts. They also broke traditional Danish molds in suffering, or benefitting, from the restlessness that sent them both abroad. From this marginal perspective, they took on traditional customs and Danish provincialism. Both writers sought to perform and communicate to audiences at home and elsewhere their own bravery and resistance, the narrow-mindedness of conformity, and, above all else, the importance of literature, with the Arts and the artist as a bulwark against melancholy, alienation, and despair in the modern world. Their adoption stories served this purpose. By speaking adoption, they broke the discursive and social silences of gender, class, and race, though future writers and (adoption) activists would push this agenda further, not least in the US. Still, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world populated by migrants, refugees, orphans, adoptees, adoptive parents, and adopted or adoptive countries, Hans Christian Andersen and Karen Blixen communicate with archetypal or global adoption narratives the need for new ideological constellations of family, community, and nation.

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