

Article 1

[*POLITIKEN*; 2 September 2014; front page]

BLIXEN EXONERATED OF RACISM

NEW BOOK BY A LITERATURE PROFESSOR IN THE UNITED STATES PUTS TO REST DECADES OF CRITICISM OF THE DANISH AUTHOR.

LITERATURE

By CAMILLA STOCKMANN



ON THE FARM. KAREN BLIXEN PHOTOGRAPHED IN 1930 ON HER AFRICAN FARM WITH SOME OF THE NATIVES SHE LATER WROTE ABOUT. PHOTO: THE GRANGER COLLECTION.

Karen Blixen was unclear at best about her views of the Kikuyu, Masai and Somalis she got to know when she had a coffee farm in British East Africa. At worst, she was a racist. That has been the consistent criticism, particularly for the last 20–30 years in the United States.

“But no, Karen Blixen was not a racist, a Nazi, or a male chauvinist,” says Marianne T. Stecher, professor of Scandinavian literature at the University of Washington.

In her new book, *The Creative Dialectic in Karen Blixen’s Essays*, she puts that specific postcolonial criticism to rest by spotlighting a range of essays and lectures, which she believes have been overlooked in the international debate on Blixen. The texts are important, because Karen Blixen touched on some important twentieth-century trends such as Nazism, racism, and women’s issues.

The question of race comes up in Blixen’s 1938 essay “Blacks and Whites in Africa,” for example.

“If you do a thorough, close reading of this essay, you discover that Karen Blixen is progressive. She does not express condescending racist opinions, but to the contrary encourages people to rethink all racial and cultural hierarchies,” Stecher says.

The new book, which was written in English, is an important contribution to the scholarship on Karen Blixen according to Danish Blixen scholar and director of the Danish Society of Language and Literature (DSL), Prof. Lasse Horne Kjøeldgaard.

“In Danish scholarship, we have had a national approach to Karen Blixen and have been very preoccupied with her life’s story. When it comes to the difficult topics, we have been very cautious. We have been quick to become offended and jump to conclusions instead of asking open-minded questions about her authorship,” he says.

But in Kjøeldgaard’s estimation, Stecher takes a more rigorous theoretical approach to Blixen due to her academic qualifications and academic career in the United States. Dr. Kjøeldgaard says, “Marianne T. Stecher shows how Karen Blixen engaged difficult issues, and how she handled them. In that way Karen Blixen becomes part of a bigger context.”

CAMILLA.STOCKMANN@POL.DK

TWO VERSIONS OF AN INTERNATIONAL FIGURE, *Front Page of Section Two*

GENDER, NAZISM, AND COLONIAL DESIRE, *Book Review, Section Two, Page 4*

Article 2

[*POLITIKEN*; 2 September 2014; Culture Section, front page]

TWO VERSIONS OF AN INTERNATIONAL FIGURE

CRITICISM OF KAREN BLIXEN AS A NAZI, RACIST AND MALE CHAUVINIST RESTS ON SUPERFICIAL READINGS OF HER AUTHORSHIP, ACCORDING TO DANISH-AMERICAN BLIXEN SCHOLAR MARIANNE T. STECHER, WHO HAS STUDIED OVERLOOKED TEXTS.

LITERATURE

INTERVIEW

By CAMILLA STOCKMANN



KAREN OR ISAK. AFTER 17 YEARS IN BRITISH EAST AFRICA, KAREN BLIXEN RETURNED TO RUNGSTEDLUND, DENMARK, IN 1931. HER FIRST WORK, *SEVEN GOTHIC TALES*, WAS RELEASED IN THE UNITED STATES IN 1934 UNDER THE PSEUDONYM ISAK DINESEN.

Six months ago on the front page of *JYLLANDS-POSTEN* you could read that Karen Blixen “flirted” with Nazi Germany.

Documents showed that the Danish author endeavored to get her third book, *WINTER TALES*, published in Germany during World War Two. One explanation read that she hadn’t succeeded, because the publishing house in Stuttgart was bombed in September 1944. However, Karen Blixen did succeed in getting a short story published in a magazine featuring SS leader Heinrich Himmler on the cover.

The Danish national icon was thus drawn into a debate on Nazism. That wasn't the first time.

But now professor of Scandinavian literature and Blixen scholar Marianne T. Stecher says, "Portraying Karen Blixen as sympathetic to Nazism is going way too far. Karen Blixen consistently adhered to the notion of individual freedom and an existential outlook on life. You would have to contort everything she stood for to see sympathy with Nazi Germany."

Stecher is a professor of Danish and Scandinavian literature at the University of Washington in Seattle in the United States.

She received her doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1980s and after teaching and researching Blixen's authorship for two decades Stecher's assessment is that there are two versions of the author.

One is called Karen Blixen and is cultivated as a Danish national icon firmly ensconced in the Danish literary canon. The other is called Isak Dinesen and is a more controversial figure in the world of Anglo-American literary criticism.

Stecher makes these particularly controversial aspects of Karen Blixen's oeuvre the subject of her book, *THE CREATIVE DIALECTIC IN KAREN BLIXEN'S ESSAYS*.

In addition to accusations about Blixen's stance on Nazism, which has also been discussed in the United States among other places, Blixen has consistently been accused of both racism and male chauvinism by postcolonial and feminist critics.

In her book Stecher does close readings of Karen Blixen's lesser known essays and lectures that were published in newspapers and periodicals or given as radio talks. These texts are often overlooked; in them the author tackles some of the twentieth century's greatest challenges such as Nazism, colonialism and the women's movement. And Stecher's conclusion is that Karen Blixen was neither a Nazi, a racist nor a male chauvinist.

"The critics who came to those conclusions have read Karen Blixen too literally or too superficially," she says.

Infertility of Nazism

Karen Blixen was in Berlin in 1940 as a war correspondent and wrote among other things a series of feature pieces for three Scandinavian newspapers. These four "chonicles," which were later published under the title "Letters from a Land at War" in the periodical *Heretica*, lay in a drawer at Rungstedlund [Blixen's home] from 1940 to 1948. Stecher thinks that if one wants to gain insight into Blixen's conception of Nazism, one ought to read this essay.

"It shows that Blixen took a critical view toward German society even before the occupation of Denmark. It becomes clear that Blixen was quite disgusted with her experience of a totalitarian regime."

The critique of Blixen as undecided with respect to Nazism has been expressed before, by American literary scholar Judith Thurmann among others. But Stecher explains that the critics haven't appreciated that Blixen often utilizes a rhetorical method where she presents two opposing arguments before finally presenting her own argument last.

Stecher believes that contacting a German publisher does not make Blixen a Nazi sympathizer. In order for *WINTER TALES* to be released in England and the United States, the book had to go through Germany and German censorship.

"But Blixen and her lawyer took a long time to get it to Germany. The way I see it, she was working strategically to get the book published in the English speaking world," says Stecher.

Stecher thinks that it is worth noting that the book was never published in Germany [during the war], and that Karen Blixen's statements are anti-Nazi.

"Already in her 1940 essay Blixen describes how the racist and imperialistic rejection of other cultures is an implicit weakness that makes Nazism 'infertile' [sterile] and leads to self destruction," says Stecher. She adds, "It is remarkable how few people have read that essay."

American Repugnance

When Stecher teaches a University of Washington course in "Masterpieces of Scandinavian literature" and the students get to Isak Dinesen, she's not an author they recognize. Blixen is still being published by Random House in the United States, but she's no longer on the best-seller lists.

"All the same, I'm quite surprised at how much my students appreciate her irony, insightfulness, and the many narrative layers [in her tales]," says Stecher.

Stecher says she rarely tells the students about the stories about Blixen's life in Denmark and Africa.

"I've found that the biography can seem off putting to the American students. We have a very multicultural student population."

Karen Blixen's 17-year-long coffee plantation adventure in Kenya with Kikuyu servants is not interpreted as being quite so charming and heroic as it is to the Danes. *OUT OF AFRICA* has been called out as problematic several times in recent decades by postcolonial literary scholars. Kenyan writer and former University of California visiting professor [writer in residence] Ngugi wa Thiong'o contributed an extremely critical reading of this work.

"He calls Blixen a racist because of her descriptions of Africans," says Stecher.

But Stecher believes that postcolonialists do not see the subtle criticism of the British that is present in the work. A close reading of the essay "Blacks and Whites in Africa" from 1938 serves to refute the accusations of racism.

“The criticism of the British colonial masters is addressed directly here. Blixen encourages readers to rethink any hierarchy involving race and culture,” she says.

Blixen does the same with regard to gender. She has been criticized by feminists like American critic Susan Gubar for statements about men and women. But Stecher argues that Blixen breaks down the conventional gender hierarchy in her essay “Oration at a Bonfire, Fourteen Years Late.”

Interviewer: “You use the term dialectic and show how Blixen attacks different topics from opposite positions. Can we be sure that it’s not just because she’s undecided on the difficult issues?”

Stecher: “No, I think it’s deliberate that she tackles them dialectically. It’s a rhetorical method that she uses in her essays and which meshes nicely with the classical aspect of her authorship. She herself uses the words “interaction” or “interplay,” following Kierkegaard. Without interaction life becomes sterile, so to speak.”

Interviewer: “You have roots in Denmark. Can you read Karen Blixen without being influenced by the lenient Danish take on her?”

Stecher: “Yes, I believe I can. My background as an American academic, educated at Berkley in the 1980s, plays more into my approach to Karen Blixen. I am very interested in close readings of her texts and am less infatuated with her life story than the Danes are.” She adds, “I see Karen Blixen more as an international figure than a Danish author.”

CAMILLA.STOCKMANN@POL.DK

Read the book review, Page 4

“You would have to contort everything she stands for to see the sympathy with Nazi Germany.” Marianne T. Stecher, Blixen scholar

Article 3

[*POLITIKEN*; 2 September 2014; Culture Section, page 4]

GENDER, NAZISM AND COLONIAL DESIRE

AWFULLY GOOD MONOGRAPH UNCOVERS A “CREATIVE DIALECTIC” ON A SERIES OF TOUCHY TOPICS IN BLIXEN’S WORK AS AN ESSAYIST AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL.

BOOKS

Marianne T. Stecher: *THE CREATIVE DIALECTIC IN KAREN BLIXEN’S ESSAYS: ON GENDER, NAZI GERMANY, AND COLONIAL DESIRE*. Museum Tusulanum Press, 276 pages, DKK 298.

♥♥♥♥♥♥ [review: 5 out of 6 hearts]



RECOMMENDATION. MARIANNE T. STECHER’S MONOGRAPH ON KAREN BLIXEN IS WRITTEN IN CLEAR, JARGON-FREE ENGLISH.
PHOTO: KAREN BLIXEN MUSEUM

Karen Blixen is certainly one of the greatest, if not the greatest, female public intellectual we have had in Denmark in the Twentieth Century. A hybrid of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir and a woman who was also different from and far more than just an author in a narrow and strictly literary sense. However that also means that she has been and remains controversial and interesting—and the Danish literary scholar and professor of Danish studies in

Seattle in the United States, Marianne T. Stecher has now taken on a series of immensely sensitive aspects of Blixen's role as an intellectual in a new study.

It pertains to questions of gender, Nazi Germany and desire and power under colonial rule.

Last spring *JYLLANDS-POSTEN* roused a debate, fueled by Poul Behrendt among others, about whether Blixen wasn't a little too eager to publish in Nazi Germany, even during the middle of the war years.

Was the intellectual Blixen harboring a secret sympathy for aspects of far right ideology, or was she somewhat too unscrupulous in her desire to make money off her writing?

And what about Africa and Denmark's postcolonial legacy there—did Blixen go further than too far in her depiction of the Kikuyu and Masai nearly as clever pets? And what about feminism—isn't it still conceivable that in the famous "Oration at a Bonfire" she really claims that men should *act* and women should just *be*? These are provocative questions.

Stecher steps into the arena and, on the one hand, discusses what are undeniably central but also potentially sinister sides of Blixen's works. But, on the other hand, she succeeds in demonstrating in a thorough, talented, and plausible manner that Blixen also definitely had a penchant for the demonic and the theatrical—as is clear from her novels and tales.

She can in no way be said to have sympathized with Nazism, neither as a political ideology nor as a cultural phenomenon. In no way was she a condescending racist. And, finally, she was very far from being a Christian national apologist for women's place being with the children, in church and in the kitchen.

Stecher performs her task by beginning with relatively obscure parts of Blixen's otherwise thoroughly analyzed authorship, namely her essays and many lectures and radio talks where—in the appendix and the essay "Blacks and Whites in Africa" newly translated into English—we receive a valuable addition to Blixen's works in the English language realm. Since unfortunately questions about race, gender and fascism have not just faded away into the past, it must be said that Stecher's renewed examination of these aspects of Blixen's work is highly pertinent and relevant.

Stecher's approach consists of unfolding her understanding of a "creative dialectic" in Blixen and, after that, limiting her analytic corpus to a small number of texts, which receive a thorough close reading in three sections: first the "Oration at a Bonfire" and "The Blank Page" (gender and feminism), then "Letters from a Land at War" (Nazism), and finally "Blacks and Whites in Africa" (colonialism) read together with *OUT OF AFRICA*.

The whole study is contextualized with respect to Blixen's other work, with respect to Blixen scholarship and with respect to contemporary economic, political and cultural history. And the goal is to bridge the Scandinavian and the Anglo-American understanding of Blixen and her legacy.

But what does "creative dialectic" actually mean? Stecher takes as her starting point Blixen's own words about the history of humanity as a complicated and dialectic process, where intense oppositions are unavoidable and necessary and in the best cases can result in a "Creative Unity" where "true, creative unity arises where disparate forces or oppositions are brought together."

This seemingly innocuous claim suddenly becomes more problematic if it is used to describe the relationship between a colonizing master and her servant, between Nazi Germany and the allies, between men and women, between war and peace. But that is exactly what happens in Blixen—without it being possible to stamp her as an imperialist, a Nazi, or a male chauvinist.

That is Stecher's achievement, that she shows with great patience and thoroughness that we cannot equate A with B.

If one takes certain sentences from Blixen and pulls them out of context, and if one is also a poor reader operating in bad faith, then one might completely contort her image. Stecher shows that Blixen quite certainly was no anemic saint (she evidently went to great effort to be published, e.g. in a Nazi magazine), but fundamentally she was sharp and ironic, a great humanist.

She did this firstly by always mobilizing a Socratic dialectic, where opposing points of view were brought into play with one another; secondly by having a metaphysical and theological layer in her understanding of the world as composed of diametrically opposed forces and principles, and finally, thirdly, by acknowledging Kant and Hegel and showing that there is also a history of ideas and historical philosophical component to Blixen's use of the concept "dialectic."

"A valuable addition to Blixen's oeuvre"

MIKKEL BRUUN ZANGENBERG

MIKKEL.BRUUN.ZANGENBERG@POL.DK

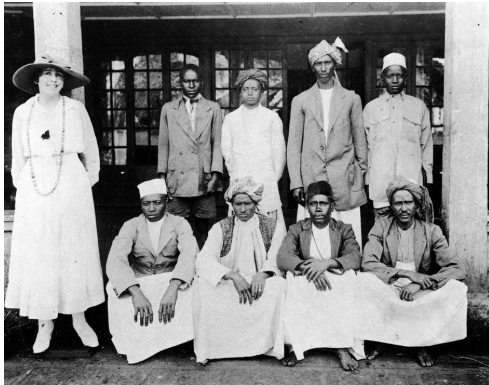
Article 4

[*POLITIKEN*; 6 September 2014; Culture Section, page 1]

LITERARY SCHOLAR: “OF COURSE BLIXEN WAS A RACIST”

THREE LITERARY SCHOLARS GIVE THEIR WORD ON WHETHER BLIXEN WAS A RACIST OR NOT.

AFTER A NUMBER OF YEARS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES ABOUT KAREN BLIXEN BEING A RACIST, A NAZI, AND MALE CHAUVINIST, DANISH-AMERICAN BLIXEN SCHOLAR MARIANNE T. STECHER CONCLUDES IN HER BOOK *The Creative Dialectic in Karen Blixen’s Essays* THAT BLIXEN WAS NONE OF ABOVE.



CRITICISM. KAREN BLIXEN MUST BE READ IN A NUANCED WAY, BUT SCHOLARS BELIEVE THAT CERTAIN PASSAGES CANNOT BE EXONERATED OF RACISM. THE AUTHOR IS PICTURED HERE WITH HER STAFF AT THE FARM IN KENYA IN ABOUT 1920. PHOTO: THE GRANGER COLLECTION.



EXPERT: "SKATING ON THIN ICE TO BELIEVE BLIXEN WAS A NAZI"

THE CRITICISM OF KAREN BLIXEN AS A NAZI, RACIST, AND MALE CHAUVINIST RESTS ON SUPERFICIAL READINGS OF HER AUTHORSHIP ACCORDING TO DANISH-AMERICAN BLIXEN SCHOLAR, MARIANNE T. STECHER, WHO HAS STUDIED OVERLOOKED TEXTS.

"The critics who reached those conclusions read Karen Blixen too literally or too superficially," she told *POLITIKEN* this week.

But there are many ways to read Blixen, and the director of the Danish Society of Language and Literature, Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, is not so certain in his assessment:

"Of course Blixen was a racist. However, she was less so than most people, and she did a lot to break down prejudices about other groups of people," he says and adds that it is therefore "unfortunate" that in some passages of her authorship, Blixen proves to be, "exactly as dumb as her contemporaries."

"You would be surprised if one of most of her contemporaries suddenly made a well-thought-out anti-racist statement. With Karen Blixen, it's the other way round. When you look at how sensitive and gifted she otherwise is in how she relates to the balance of power between whites and blacks, and it's also that that reinforces her racist statements," says Kjældgaard.

Of the text excerpts that can be read at the left side of the page here, Kjældgaard considers one in particular to be "a clear expression of racism." In Blixen's memoir *SHADOWS ON THE GRASS* (quote number six), she compares Africans with children:

"That comparison can't be explained away. She has been criticized in the past for comparing Africans to animals, and in that criticism, I think people are overlooking that she is comparing all people, including herself, to animals. But this line of thought that native Africans are only capable of attaining a certain stage of intellectual development, the level of a white 9-year-old child, is absurd, degrading and disappointing. A racist discriminates and hierarchizes based on ethnicity, and that is exactly what Blixen is doing here," Kjældgaard asserts.

Conflicting Tendencies

Literary scholar at the University of Southern Denmark Bo Hakon Jørgensen is content to “give a little present-day smile” at the comparison. He thinks it is important to read Karen Blixen relative to “our own idiotic time,” and that one tries to understand why people in the past said and thought the way they did.

“Karen Blixen writes that Africans stopped developing because they did not receive sufficient schooling, and that is why she built her own school, to improve the situation for them. I wouldn’t call it racist to say that various groups of people, categorized by their appearance, have some commonalities, it’s only once it becomes political in that they shouldn’t have the same access as all others, that they would be diminished as people. I don’t read that in Karen Blixen’s texts and I can’t see how other people do,” he says.

If you ask Kjældgaard, however, the comparison has nothing to do with schooling. He says, “Karen Blixen differentiates between the various tribes and is very specific at assigning age equivalents. If there were external conditions determining their development, it ought to be the same for all of them.”

Associate professor at Roskilde University Charlotte Engberg also doesn’t think that one can defend or acquit the specified quotations, which she calls colonialistic and the comparison with children “perhaps outright racist.”

“However I would never call Blixen a racist. In certain places she assumes a colonialist discourse, but just as one can find quotes where she’s gone well beyond the mark, there are also many examples where she criticizes colonial power,” says Engberg.

Blixen Must be Read in Context

As an example of Blixen’s dialectical tendency to both praise and denigrate the native Africans, Kjældgaard points out another text excerpt from *OUT OF AFRICA* (quote number four).

“In the passage she writes, ‘We took over the blacks in East Africa thirty-five years ago.’ What’s interesting is the word *we*. By using that word she is accepting clear shared responsibility and identifying with the colonization project, something she does several times in *OUT OF AFRICA*.”

The subsequent passage, which has to do with the Africans not having any history and not getting it until the Europeans arrive, however is problematic, according to both Engberg and Kjældgaard.

“That is a typical colonial prejudice, which is idiotic and otherwise conflicts with what she writes in other places, where she acknowledges the long, fabulous history before the arrival of the Europeans,” he says.

Still, according to all three scholars it is important to read Blixen in the context of history and the era she lived in as well as her authorship as a whole. When for example Blixen draws

parallels between the power hierarchy between white inhabitants and natives in Kenya and the relationship between men and women in *OUT OF AFRICA*, that should not be understood to mean that blacks rank lower than whites:

“One must know that Karen Blixen had previously written a great deal about gender roles and marriage, where she expressed some very feminist viewpoints. She was definitely a person who fought for women to have the same rights as men, so there is nothing demeaning in that comparison,” Kjældgaard says, while Engberg answers “the question that will never die” with an invitation:

“Blixen thought in dialectics, and in the same way we as readers must also apply a more nuanced eye. Anything else is poor reading.”

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READ IN THE MAGAZINE SECTION, INTERVIEW

AS BLIXEN PUT IT

Selected quotes, written or said by Karen Blixen. Are they racist? Judge for yourself.

[6 Blixen quotations, not reproduced here]

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Expert: Skating on thin ice to believe that Blixen was a Nazi

READ ALSO

“Karen Blixen Exonerated of Racism”

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Awfully good monograph gives new insight into Blixen’s world

Article 5

[SVENSKA DAGBLADET; 9 September 2014]

“KAREN BLIXEN WAS NOT A NAZI”

WAS KAREN BLIXEN, THE DANISH NATIONAL ICON, A RACIST WHO FLIRTED WITH NAZISM? A NEW BOOK HAS PROVIDED NEW FUEL IN THE DEBATE ON BLIXEN.



KAREN BLIXEN, 1959. PHOTO: ROBERT GOLDBERG/AP

September 9, 2014 10:44 a.m.

Author Karen Blixen has been accused of Nazism, racism and male chauvinism. But in a new book, *THE CREATIVE DIALECTIC IN KAREN BLIXEN'S ESSAYS*, literature professor Marianne T. Stecher writes that the accusations are unjustified.

“The critics who came to those conclusions read Karen Blixen too literally or too superficially,” Stecher told *POLITIKEN*.

Karen Blixen lived in Kenya for many years, something she chronicled among other places in *OUT OF AFRICA*, which was published in 1937. In Kenya, she was called a racist for her depictions of Africans. In Denmark, the author was accused of having flirted with Nazism.

Marianne T. Stecher believes that, among other things, those who accuse Karen Blixen of racism overlooked the author's criticism of British colonial power. And according to Stecher, who is a professor at the University of Washington, the author's view of human beings was far from the Nazi's ideal.

Karen Blixen was in Berlin as a war correspondent in 1940.

“Karen Blixen had a critical view of Germany even before Denmark was occupied,” Stecher says and adds that Blixen poked holes in the Nazi ideology in an essay in 1940.

Reactions to Stecher’s book in Denmark were mixed. Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, the head of the Danish Society of Language and Literature, says “obviously Blixen was racist.” However he adds that she was racist to a lesser extent than most other people. The author also did a great deal to break down prejudices about other groups of people, he points out. But in some portions of her authorship, Blixen was “exactly as dumb as her contemporaries,” according to Lasse Horne Kjældgaard.

On the other hand Charlotte Engberg, associate professor at Roskilde University, says she would never call Blixen a racist.

“In certain places she assumes a colonialistic discourse,” Engberg says, but points out that Karen Blixen simultaneously criticizes colonial power.

ELISABET ANDERSSON

ELISABET.ANDERSSON@SVD.SE

Article 6

[*POLITIKEN*; 14 September 2014; Politiken Opinion, Front Page]

“BLIXEN & THE BLACKS”

THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM IS NOT A FIGHT AGAINST RACISTS.

Karen Blixen was an important Danish author. Her portrait is printed on Danish monetary notes, her life was performed in a Hollywood movie, and her stories have enchanted readers around the world. We are proud of Blixen. But after the publication of scholar Marianne Stecher's new book about Blixen, the debate has begun again about whether we also ought to be ashamed of her. She was quite concerned about democracy, she problematized the women's movement, and her views on blacks might seem scandalous:

“All blacks have in their nature a deep, indomitable swath of schadenfreude, a true glee at seeing something go wrong, which can do nothing but aggravate and hurt a European,” she writes in *OUT OF AFRICA*. In another place she writes that the blacks stopped at a stage corresponding to that of a European child of nine. There are other alarming quotes in Blixen, which cannot be explained away simply as a tendency of the era she lived in. She wrote things that are racist. But Blixen also wrote things that were anti-racist, and she fought in Kenya against the old colonialists for the blacks to become the masters of their own house. Her project was not to elevate whites over blacks, but to pay homage to the interplay between different genders and cultures.

THE OBVIOUS question is whether Blixen should be denounced as a racist or acquitted as an anti-racist. The inclination to divide the world into good and bad people is just as understandable as it is reductive. What is interesting here is actually not the author, but the notion of the racist. It assumes that some people are pure, ideological racists, whom it is up to the rest of us to identify, reveal, and convert. But the vast, vast majority of people are ideological anti-racists who may nevertheless say something racist or adopt a racist view. There are relatively few ideological racists and rarely does the challenge come from there. What is essential is not to fight racists, but to understand and combat racism as a social mechanism. There can easily be a great deal of racism in a society with very few racists.

RI (by Rune Lykkeberg)

Article 7

[*POLITIKEN*; 14 September 2014; Politiken Books Section, Front Page]

BOOKS

BLIXEN AND RACISM

SO WHAT WAS BLIXEN, THEN? AHEAD OF HER TIME

MARIANNE T. STECHER'S CURRENT BOOK ABOUT KAREN BLIXEN HAS BREATHED NEW LIFE INTO THE OLD DEBATE ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT BLIXEN WAS A RACIST. BUT BLIXEN "TOPPLES CONVENTIONAL WESTERN CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS WHEN IT COMES TO CLASS, GENDER AND RACIAL HIERARCHIES," SAYS THE AUTHOR OF *The Creative Dialectic in Karen Blixen's Essays* IN THIS COMMENTARY ON THE DEBATE.



THE BARONESS. KAREN BLIXEN CAN STILL GET THE LITERATI UP OUT OF THEIR SEATS. ARCHIVE PHOTO: ERIK GLEIE

Marianne T. Stecher

I appreciate *POLITIKEN*'s attention to Blixen in connection with my book *THE CREATIVE DIALECTIC IN KAREN BLIXEN'S ESSAYS: ON GENDER, NAZI GERMANY, AND COLONIAL DESIRE*. In response to the piece "Of Course Blixen was a Racist!" in the September 6 Culture section, I would like to follow up with a couple of comments.

In my book I do not reach a conclusion as to whether Karen Blixen was a racist or not. I do not actually believe it is a pertinent or fruitful approach to her authorship or literary criticism

as a whole. Because what does the racism accusation actually mean? Are we talking about racism or political correctness according to contemporary norms? Can there be a definition of racism that will apply to the entire twentieth century and that can be used for meaningful purposes in literary scholarship at all? Indeed, one can certainly pick a few quotes out of Blixen's works, i.e. pull them out of their broader contexts and conclude from them that she was a "racist," at least by contemporary measures! But then where does the debate go from there? Does that mean that her entire authorship was racist and should be thrown out? If that is the case, we would lose a sea of world literature, from the writings of Shakespeare and Hans Christian Andersen to Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain and William Faulkner. I do not think that is a good solution.

As a matter of fact in my book I discussed the unfortunate quote [see *The Issue in Brief*, -Ed.] that Lasse Horne Kjældgaard points out, in which Blixen compares "the dark nations of Africa" with children. The comparison is unfortunately typical of colonialist literature, but it is practically an exception in Blixen's work. One should not try to explain it away. Although one could add that in Blixen's artistic universe, which she expresses through her *fiction*, wild animals and natives (of any age) are closest to God and destiny; the rest of us Westerners and "civilized" people belong further down in the hierarchy—the author herself seems to stand closest to the devil!

The Issue in Brief

STECHER AND BLIXEN

September 2: Politiken reviewed *The Creative Dialectic* in Karen Blixen's *Essays: On Gender, Nazi Germany, and Colonial Desire* and Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg gave it five hearts. There was an interview with Marianne T. Stecher that same day.

September 6: three literary scholars discussed her points in an article in the culture section. Blixen was quoted and the sixth quote read, "The dark nations of Africa, strikingly precocious as young children, seemed to come to a standstill in their mental growth at different ages. The Kikuyu, Kawirondo and Wakamba, the people who worked for me on the farm, in early childhood were far ahead of white children of the same age, but they stopped quite suddenly at a stage corresponding to that of a European child of nine. The Somali had got further and had all the mentality of boys of our own race at the age of thirteen to seventeen." From *Shadows on the Grass*, pages 11-12.

I DO NOT CLAIM in my book that previous Blixen scholars were mistaken on this point nor that they wrote poor interpretations. Quite the contrary. There have been many talented Blixen

scholars (both Scandinavian and North American) for many decades, and without them I would not have made it as far as I did. In terms of the race question, many literary scholars have analyzed Blixen's *OUT OF AFRICA* in the context of postcolonialism. I follow that line of inquiry farther with close readings of her lecture "Blacks and Whites in Africa" and the story "Barua a Soldani" ("Letter from a King"), which was published in *Shadows on the Grass*. Starting with the concept of colonial desire in the subtitle of my book, I begin by saying that Blixen is a colonialist writer and that *OUT OF AFRICA* and *SHADOWS ON THE GRASS* must be read in the context of other works of Western colonial literature and that at times Blixen expresses racist views about her life in Kenya in her literary authorship. But if one views Blixen's statements and texts in relation to the 1938 conceptions of race or "tribe" one can quickly conclude that she was far from the worst. She was actually rather broadminded. The fact alone that she publically cultivated an awareness of racial relations in the 1930s makes her an exception. Just read the quotes from her lecture and radio address "Blacks and Whites in Africa" (1938) in the box to the right. I would assert that she was *ahead* of her time. That is, for example, what Abdul JanMohamed thought, an English professor at U.C. Berkeley, who in 1985 assessed *OUT OF AFRICA* very positively compared to other Western colonial works.

Which is to say that it is not my intention to either denounce or exonerate Blixen's activity in Kenya as a coffee farmer (or manager) and her participation in the whole colonization project (and Blixen actually does assume clear co-responsibility in this by frequently using the word "we" about the white residents). I have instead studied Blixen's narrative style and point of view to elucidate how she depicts the *power relationship* between the white inhabitants and black natives, between masters and servants, between Europeans and Africans—and between women and men. How does she depict the natives (whom she called "my people") compared to herself as the colonial master (mistress)? How should one actually interpret the quote, "The relation between the white and the black race in Africa in many ways resembles the relation between the two sexes." And what does Blixen mean by "power that is merely external is inadequate. It is an *illusion...*" and "a barren glory"? Then a more interesting critical approach presents itself here, and one discovers that Blixen is an unusual author for her time.

What I've contributed is a close reading of some important essays, e.g. "Blacks and Whites in Africa" and "Oration at a Bonfire, Fourteen Years Late," which were previously overlooked or read superficially; Blixen's essays are not particularly well known, especially in the English-speaking world. Secondly, I have positioned Blixen's views on race relations relative to her overall philosophical outlook on life, which also impacts her view on gender roles. To put it another way: Blixen has a tendency to overturn conventional hierarchies in Western culture (hierarchies of class, gender and race) and question these ideas, i.e. male vs. female, poor vs. rich, good vs. evil, black vs. white, etc. I have studied the pattern in her essays and situated it in the context of important trends in the Twentieth Century. This approach brings something new to light about Blixen.

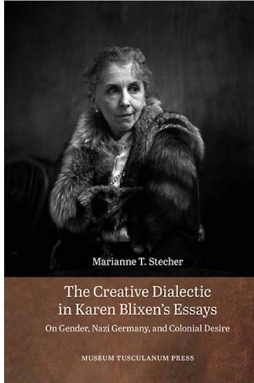
The evidence that, as an author, Blixen ought not be viewed as a racist (or Nazi!) is to be found in her own words in her essays, radio talks and letters, which should be interpreted as

observations of a public intellectual. I believe it is something different and more in a *political* context than what she writes in her tales and short stories. People ought really to read “Blacks and Whites in Africa,” her letters, and other material before they begin accusing Blixen of being a racist! By the way, I believe that an author who is regarded as a feminist by literary scholars today (cf. the chapter in my book) can hardly be accused of racism at the same time. Sympathy with the marginalized or subjugated in a society generally goes along with compassionate understanding. At any rate, I believe that in the case of Blixen it does.

IF ONE IS also going to accuse Blixen of being a Nazi, one ought to look at her works, statements and newspaper articles in the context of those of her noted contemporaries, e.g. Knut Hamsun in Norway. There is still some debate as to whether Hamsun was actually a member of *Nasjonal Samling*, but there is no doubt that he was a Nazi sympathizer and collaborator. In Blixen’s case, she is nowhere near that ballpark either politically or philosophically. On the other hand, Blixen’s opinions and public statements in a political context are no match compared to those of committed anti-Nazi Sigrid Undset, who lived in exile in New York during the war. Everything is relative, and literary scholars need to take a deep interest in *nuances* and close readings to avoid painting everything either black or white.

In “Letters from a Land at War” Blixen clearly distances herself from Nazism, I think. She was decidedly not thrilled with Nazism’s mass idolatry and the totalitarian power of the government, which she experienced in Berlin in the wartime winter of March 1940. It was really not something for an individualistic writer! Blixen’s views on “the new Germany” are often sarcastic and also strikingly prophetic, e.g. Blixen’s comment on the racism of the German Nazis. She writes, “But the cultivation of race gets nowhere, and even its triumphal progress becomes a vicious circle. It cannot give and it cannot receive [...] the vista of Nazism has a limited perspective.” She believed that Nazism was infertile or sterile and would therefore end in self-destruction. Every culture should enjoy the interaction or interplay, as Blixen put it, which happens when opposing forces meet. In my estimation, based on her texts and statements, Blixen was neither a racist nor a Nazi. She was a gifted humanist, artist and writer.

I conclude in my book that in her essays and radio talks Blixen utilizes a dialectical method (i.e. a rhetorical strategy), and she often turns a conventional perception of Western culture on its head when it comes to hierarchies involving class, gender and race. Blixen does this in a way that I think is relevant and worth reading in our contemporary era as well. In my view Blixen was neither “undecided” nor racist. At times she is a very convoluted narrator, but in her thinking and artistic view of life she is both consistent and perceptive. That is my message. My book was written in English in order to reach a more international audience since Blixen’s authorship is a part of world literature.



MARIANNE T. STECHER IS A PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, DEPARTMENT OF SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES, SEATTLE, U.S.A. *THE CREATIVE DIALECTIC IN KAREN BLIXEN'S ESSAYS* WAS PUBLISHED BY MUSEUM TUSCULANUM.

Judge for yourselves: Blacks and Whites

*Marianne T. Stecher's selected quotations from Blixen's essay, "Blacks and Whites in Africa," are found in her book *The Creative Dialectic in Karen Blixen's Essays*, translated by Tiina Nunnally. The Danish are taken from Karen Blixen's "Sorte og hvide i Afrika" (1938), *Samlede essays*, Gyldendal, 1985.*

[see newspaper for 6 quotations in Danish from Blixen's essay]
