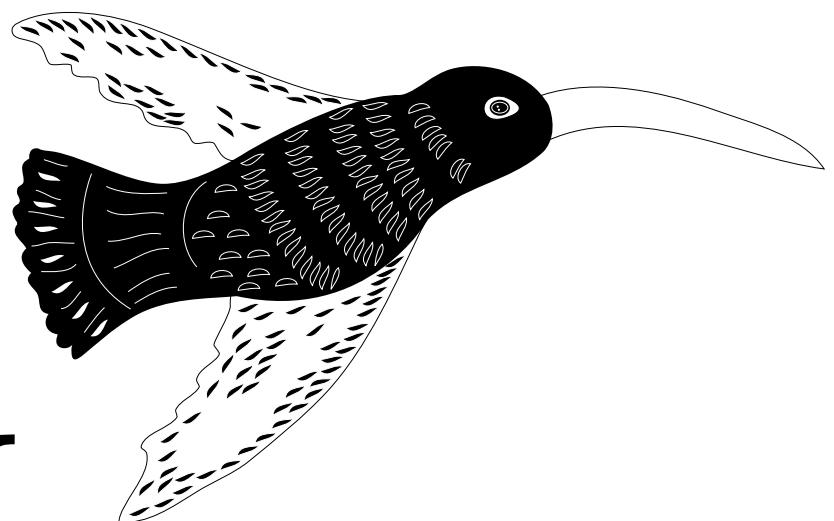


Nanna Debois Buhl & Brendan Fernandes

KAREN BLIXEN MUSEET

29.04–04.09.2011



IN
YOUR
WORDS

Hvilket sprog drømmer du på?

What language do you dream in?

Det er en stor glæde for Karen Blixen Museet at byde velkommen til billedkunstnerne Nanna Debois Buhl og Brendan Fernandes. Udstillingen *In Your Words* er blevet til hen over en længere tidsperiode, som har givet kunstværkerne god tid til at modnes. Til udstillingen har kunstnerne i fællesskab skabt en serie helt nye værker, der tager afsæt i Blixens hjem og forfatterskab. Flere besøg på museet og i fuglereservatet i parken er det blevet til, og denne udveksling med stedet og det nære kendskab, som kunstnerne har opnået med det lokale og detaljerede på Rungstedlund, afspejler sig i værkerne.

Når et sted pludselig bliver utsat for nye øjne, er resultatet ofte overraskende og tankevækkende, og det har været interessant at følge processen og lægge mærke til de nedslag, som kunstnerne har ladet sig inspirere af. Rungstedlund som mytisk, tiltrækende og fascinerende sted – ikke mindst i kraft af parkens identitet som fuglereservat – er omdrejningspunktet. Sagen er jo, at for Karen Blixen var Rungstedlund udgangspunktet, det sted, som Blixen rejste ud fra, og som hun kom tilbage til efter en årrække i Afrika. Verden var hendes hjem og Rungstedlund en del af det store puslespil, som blev hendes livs kulisse. Og netop her finder vi én af de mange røde tråde, der forbinder Rungstedlund med Afrika, fuglereservatet med trækfuglene og Karen Blixens tilværelse med vores. Litteraturen og billedkunsten spiller sammen, og ud af dette felt springer nye kunstværker.

Udstillingen beskæftiger sig med yderst nutidige temer, som rækker ind i vore liv – og som tager deres udgangspunkter i Blixens liv og værk: identitet, sprog, to-sprogethed, oversættelse, fuglenes og menneskenes frivillige og ufrivillige rejseruter. Sproget som stærk faktor i forhold til identiteten, det enkeltes menneskes aftryk og vilkår.

De to kunstnere Nanna Debois Buhl og Brendan Fernandes inkorporerer disse vilkår: Brendan Fernandes er født i Kenya, voksede op i Canada og bor nu i New York. Som barn talte han swahili i Kenya, men har nu stort set glemt dette sprog. Nanna Debois Buhl er født i Danmark, har rejst i store dele af verden og har boet mere end halvdelen af sit voksne liv i udlandet bl.a. i Amsterdam, Paris og New York. Kunstnerne mødte hinanden i New York – på afstand fra deres respektive hjemlande – og deres samarbejde opstår i dette krydsfelt. Selvom de kommer fra meget forskellige steder, er de nu fælles om at have hjemlandet på afstand, fælles om at høre

It is a great pleasure for us at the Karen Blixen Museum to bid welcome to the visual artists, Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes. The exhibition entitled In Your Words has come into being over an extended period of time. The consequence of this is that the artworks have had sufficient chance to ripen. For the exhibition, the artists have been working together to create a series of completely new works that take their point of departure in Blixen's home and authorship. The artists have made several visits to the museum and to the bird sanctuary in the park. This exchange with the place and the intimate knowledge of the premises and the appurtenant details at Rungstedlund that the artists have managed to acquire are reflected in the works.

When a place is suddenly exposed to new gazes, the result is often surprising and thought provoking. It has been very interesting to witness the process and to notice the features that have inspired the artists. Rungstedlund as mythical, attractive and fascinating site – especially by virtue of the park's identity as a bird sanctuary – is the center of rotation. The fact of the matter is that, for Karen Blixen, Rungstedlund was the point of origin, the place from which Blixen traveled away and the place to which she returned after spending a good many years in Africa. The world was her home and Rungstedlund was a piece in the vast puzzle that came to be her life's coulisse. And it's right here that we find one of the many leitmotifs that connect Rungstedlund with Africa, the bird sanctuary with the birds of passage and Karen Blixen's life with our own. Literature and visual art play in ensemble here and out from this field of potential, new artworks burst into bloom.

The exhibition is dealing with patently contemporary themes that reach into our lives – and take their points of departure in Blixen's life and work: identity, language, bilingualism, translation, the birds' and the human beings' voluntary and involuntary itineraries.

Language as a determining factor in relation to identity, the individual human being's footprint and conditions. The two artists, Nanna Debois Buhl and Brendan Fernandes, embody these very conditions: Brendan Fernandes was born in Kenya, grew up in Canada and now resides in New York. As a child, he spoke Swahili in Kenya. By now, however, he has more or less forgotten this language. Nanna Debois Buhl was born in Denmark, has traveled in a great many parts of the world and has been living more than half of her adult life abroad, in places like Amsterdam, Paris and New York.

The artists met each other in New York – far away

hjemme flere steder, fælles om at de skal udtrykke sig på et sprog, som ikke er deres modersmål, fælles om at de er flyttet ud og blevet fremmede – og at de måske risikerer at blive fremmede for sig selv, men at denne proces kan være øjenåbnende.

Kunstnerne låner Blixens ord som udgangspunkt for værkerne, ligesom vi låner hinandens ord og bruger hinandens sprog. Sproget lægger op til at blive delt og bredt ud og indeholder vel i sig selv sindbilledet på det moderne netværk – og vel at mærke det gode netværk: mennesket påvirkes og påvirker og ønsker at agere indenfor en struktur, som er smidig, bevægelig og samtidig universel.

Sproget udgør noget af det mest intime hos et menneske. Modersmålet er kådet sammen med selve eksistensen og gør os i stand til at tilegne os nye sprog. Nye sprog, som giver os mulighed for at såge andre vidder: hvilket sprog drømmer du på?

En stor tak for generøs støtte til udstillingen skal rettes til Statens Kunstråd, Canada Council og Direktør Werner Richter og Hustrus Legat.

*Catherine Lefebvre
Direktør, Karen Blixen Museet*

from their respective native countries – and their collaboration has crystallized in this cross field. Although they hail from very different places, they now have something in common: they both have their native countries far off in the distance. What they also share are that they belong in several different places, that they are compelled to express themselves in a language that is not their mother tongue and that they have moved away and become foreigners – and also that they just might be running the risk of becoming strangers to themselves, even if undergoing this process can be eye-opening.

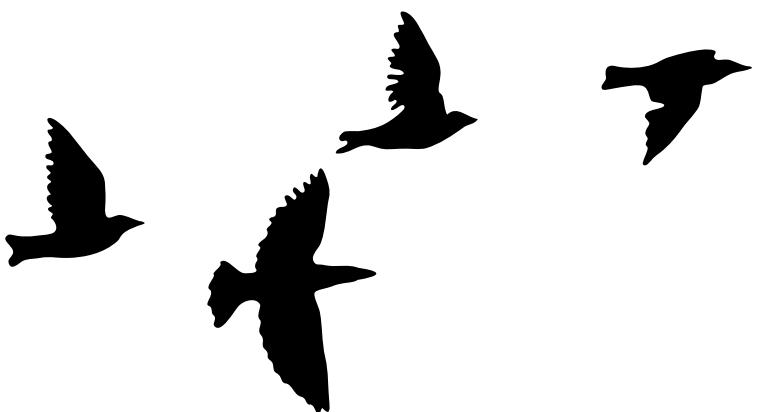
The artists are borrowing Blixen's words as the jumping-off point for the works in much the manner we ordinarily borrow each other's words and use each other's languages. Language provides material for being shared and expanded and presumably contains, in itself, the emblem of the modern network – and what's even more, the good network: the person is affected and affects others and wants to act within a structure that is supple, movable and, at the same, universal.

Language constitutes something that is the most intimate aspect of a person. The mother tongue is inextricably linked to existence, as such, and enables us to dedicate ourselves to learning new languages – new languages that offer us the possibility of looking to other plateaus: What language do you dream in?

For their generous economic support, which has made this exhibition possible, a resounding round of gratitude goes out to the Danish National Arts Council, the Canada Council and Director Werner Richter and Spouse's Found.

*Catherine Lefebvre
Museumdirector, The Karen Blixen Museum*

Translated by Dan A. Marmorstein



13 INDEX CARDS &

Fragments from 13 index cards with handwritten notes in different colors and languages written by 3 hands (Brendan & Nanna & Mette) February 16th, 2011, Copenhagen, edited by Mette Moestrup

BIRD

ndege is the word for a bird as well as an airplane & the pink flamingo on the table has no feathers & I noticed a yellow canary in the flock & the starling in the black sun is no natteravn & I prefer the nightingale & fuglen kan dø

FLEE

haraka haraka & what is happening that we must flee & where will we go & what will become of us & the minister turned off her microphone & he told me his father had to flee from Uganda & det omöjliga

FLY

et fly & to fly & it is impossible for me & the drunk man I sat next to in the plane spoke German & something is wrong & do you fly in your dreams & unseen observer & I glide

GHOST

to become undead & I wondered if the objects were haunting the space & stories, repressed, returning & a floating white shape & the other as the ghost & on the photo below the servant's face is barely visible

JOURNEY

safari in swahili & colonialism is a journey in two directions & slaves and sugar and donkeys were brought on the journey & the safari we both remember is not the same & we broke journey & I was laughing and crying at the same time

LETTER

Kamante would have his letters written by Indian letterwriters & they would use pens in different colors & dear, dearest, to whom it may concern & the language made no sense & he wrote on skype chat: show me your hands & I remember your handwriting & I heard these letterwriters still exist today & I miss envelopes a little & lyseblå luftpost, sommerfuglevingekonvolutter & chelelon means butterfly in an extinct Indian language not Indian & Blixen talks about Indians as scribes & is this a part of my legacy that is mine & it's easy to write a letter: B & B for brev og bogstav

MOTHER TONGUE

Mama, mom, mum & ambivalens & en poesi som saknar modersmål eller förstaspråk, men som därmed också ger plats för desto fler andraspråk, tredjespråk, fjerdespråk & she stopped speaking years ago & my mother doesn't like to write & I am a mother & those words are lost to me now & he plucked out the cameleon's tongue

NAME

or actually, that is what people believed & amen is an anagram & a part of the city was named after her & to be given identity & can a name direct one's existence in the world & vi satte vores efternavne sammen til ét (Monyuru) og tænkte på det som et midlertidigt sted & my name means chick, mint, lullaby, nine

PARROT

cool, I want to hear it speak & papegøjen imitierede far & the parrot was like a book containing fragments of lost languages & to speak without knowing what one says & ok, say something to it & he thought she would return & to repeat, repeat, repeat

SILENCE

shhh - - sha, sha, shhhhhh & Stilheit & I felt that the other women forced me to speak with their silence & the snow falls silently in the garden & the colonial relations have been silenced & det, som bliver fortjet & säg varför

SNOW

snön är svart & I didn't understand what snow would be like when I first moved to Canada & I am blank & blank var det ord, man under slaveriet brugte om den hvide dansker & the snow is absorbed by skin and tongues and sexes and becomes transparant & the bare branches looking like her shaky handwriting & the snow here is yellow or grey & I had only seen it on TV

STRANGER

a beatiful stranger in the subway & don't talk to strangers & at sige, man har fremmede, når man har gæster & to see a stranger's face live at skype but never meet the person in real life & fuglen kom fra en fremmed egn & don't let anyone see what you're doing & the one I want to know

WORD

w ord & in other words & in your words

VÆRKER / WORKS

Farah's Letter

Installation (2011)

0:55 min.

Neonskilt og lyd / Neon sign and sound

Stemme / Voice: Irungu Mutu

En papegøje i neon blinker i takt med en lydoptagelse af et brevfragment fra Blixens husassistent Farah Aden. I brevet beskriver han en papegøje, som han har købt til hende efter hendes afrejse fra Kenya. Han forklarer, at papegøjen er fra Fransk Congo og kun i stand til at tale fransk, men at den med tiden vil glemme sit modersmål og begynde at tale engelsk og swahili i sine nye omgivelser. Værket berører de koloniale hierarkier, hvori sprog forandres gennem et subjekts fjernelse fra et sted og tilpasning til et nyt.

A flickering neon parrot pulsates alongside an audio excerpt from a letter written by Blixen's servant Farah Aden. The letter recalls a parrot that he bought for her after she left Kenya. He explains that the parrot is from the French Congo and only able to speak French, but that in time the bird will forget its original tongue and begin to speak Swahili and English in its new surroundings. The work addresses the colonial hierarchies in which language is transformed through one's removal from one space and immersion into another.

To flee / To fly

HD video (2011)

3:33 min.

Animationer / Animations: Hisao Iharo

16mm optagelser / 16mm footage: Ellehammers

Første forsøg med Aeroplán, 1908

Benyttet med tilladelse fra / Used with permission from Nordisk Film, Substanz

Det danske ord *et fly / at fly* oversættes på engelsk til *an airplane / to flee*. Ordet deler etymologisk rod med det tilsvarende engelske ordpar *to flee / to fly*. Denne korte film spiller på ordenes dobbeltheder og overlappende udspring, og sammenstiller historiske optagelser af et fly med en animation af en fugleflok, der svæver i et tomt rum. Værket reflekterer over flyvning og flugt som middel til at opnå frihed; i begge tilfælde er det usikkert, om flyet og fuglene vil blive i stand til at sætte af.

The Danish term *et fly / at fly* translates into English

as *an airplane / to flee*. The term shares etymological roots with the similar English pair *to flee / to fly*. Playing on the duality of the words and their overlapping origin, this short film depicts historical footage of an airplane juxtaposed with an animation of a flock of birds hovering in an empty space. The work reflects on the notions of flying and fleeing as a means to attain freedom; in both instances the airplane and the migrating birds may never gain the full ability to take flight.

In Your Words

HD video (2011)

10:27 min.

Animationer / Animations: Hisao Iharo

Lyd / Sound: Pejk Malinovski

Stemmer / Voices: Karen Blixen, Nanna Debois

Buhl, Brendan Fernandes, Irungu Mutu

Uddrag fra "Rungstedlund – En radiotale" / Excerpt from "Rungstedlund – A Radio Address"

Benyttet med tilladelse fra / used with permission from Rungstedlundfonden

I et visuelt landskab beboet af animerede fugle og svævende ord udfolder en historie sig på swahili, engelsk og dansk – Blixens, Buhls og Fernandes respektive sprog. I en sammenstilling af biografisk materiale, fragmenter fra Blixens forfatterskab og navne på fugle, der trækker mellem Kenya og Danmark, undersøger værket sproglige migrationer, hvor ordforråd kan mistes og læres på ny.

In a visual landscape inhabited by animated birds and drifting words, a polyphonic story unfolds in Swahili, English, and Danish—the respective languages of Blixen, Buhl and Fernandes. Interweaving biographical material, fragments from Blixen's writing, and names of birds that migrate between Kenya and Denmark, the work explores lingual migrations where lexicon can be forgotten and learned again.

At Sea

HD video (2011)

3:11 min

Animationer / Animations: Hisao Iharo

I bogen *Den afrikanske Farm* skriver Blixen om en rejse ombord på et skib med et hundrede og halvtreds flamingoer, der skal fragtes til en zoologisk have i Frankrig. Hun beskriver deres dårlige leveforhold, og hvordan mange af dem dør på den lange sørejse. I denne korte film udgør optagelser af havet ved

Rungstedlund en baggrund, hvorpå sætninger dukker op og forsvinder og således udfolder Blixens fortælling. Værket berører begreber som tilpasning og lidelse, der udholdes under den ufrivillige udvandring.

In her book *Out of Africa*, Blixen writes about a journey on board a boat with one-hundred-and-fifty flamingos that are being taken to a zoological garden in France. She describes the poor conditions that they live in, and that many of them die during their long travel at sea. In this short film, footage of the ocean outside Rungstedlund serves as a background upon which sentences appear and disappear, telling Blixen's tale. The work addresses the notions of adaptation and hardship that are endured through forced migration.

Kama Ndege

Installation (2011)

Gardin og lyd / Curtain and sound

Et tekstil med et mønster af grafiske fugle-tegninger hænger draperet i udstillingsrummet med henvisning til gardinerne i Blixens stue på Rungstedlund. Af og til høres lyden af fugleflojt. Fuglestemmerne tilhører trækfugle som flyver mellem det afrikanske kontinent og fuglereservatet på Rungstedlund. Gennem trækfuglen som figur reflekterer værket over begrebet hjem; med sin nomadiske eksistens har fuglen hjemme mere end ét sted.

A textile with a pattern of graphic bird drawings hangs and drapes in the exhibition space indicative of the curtains in Blixen's living room at Rungstedlund. Every so often the spontaneous sound of birds fills the space. The birdcalls belong to the bird species that migrate between the African continent and the bird sanctuary at Rungstedlund. Through the figure of the migratory bird, the idea of home is questioned; in its nomadic existence home is not one place, but several.

13 INDEX CARDS &

Tekstværk til udstillingsmontrer og publikation /
Text piece for exhibition cases and
publication (2011)

Redigeret af / Edited by: Mette Moestrup

Dette værk er baseret på fragmenter fra tretten indekskort med håndskrevne noter i forskellige farver og på forskellige sprog, skrevet af kunstnerne i sam-

arbejde med forfatter Mette Moestrup. I teksten sammenvæves personlige associationer med generelle overvejelser om sprog, og værket kan ses som en associativ ordliste for udstillingen.

This work is based on fragments from thirteen index cards handwritten in different colored inks and languages, scribed by the artists in collaboration with poet Mette Moestrup. The text merges personal associations with reflections on language as such, and the piece can be seen as an associative glossary for the exhibition.

KOLOFON / COLOPHON

IN YOUR WORDS

Nanna Debois Buhl & Brendan Fernandes
Karen Blixen Museet
29.04 – 04.09 2011

Publikationen er produceret i forbindelse med udstillingen
/ This publication was produced in conjunction with the
exhibition In Your Words

REDAKTION / EDITING

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TRYK / PRINT

Centertryk A/S

OVERSÆTTELSER / TRANSLATIONS

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FOTOS / PHOTOS

Pasfoto af Karen Blixen / Pass photo of Karen Blixen
Alle andre billeder / All other images
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www.blixen.dk

KUNSTNERNE ØNSKER AT TAKKE / THE ARTISTS WISH TO THANK

Marianne W. Asmussen, Catherine Lefebvre & Maria
Hesselager, ansatte på / staff at Karen Blixen Museet,
Rungstedlunfonden

Dorte & Jimmy Buhl, Matt Congdon, Pil Dahlerup, Nynne
Hauggaard, Hisao Iharo, Jesper Juul, Otto Debois Juul, Niko-
laj Kilsmark, Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, Joachim Koester,
Jacob Korczynski, Liz Linden, Otto B. Lindhardt, Ann
Lislegaard, Jill Magi, Pejk Malinovski, Dan Marmorstein,
Mette Moestrup, Krister Moltzen, James Muriuki, Irungu
Mutu, Jeremy E. Steinke, Anni Vestergaard, Morgan Watt.

UDSTILLINGEN ER REALISERET MED STØTTE FRA /
THE EXHIBITION IS REALIZED WITH SUPPORT FROM
Statens Kunstråd / Danish Arts Council, Kunststyrelsens
DIVA residency program / The Danish Arts Council's
DIVA residency programme, Statens Værksteder for Kunst
/ Danish Art Workshops, Direktør Werner Richter og
Hustrus Legat, Canada Council for the Arts, Louisiana
Museum of Modern Art

BIOGRAFIER / BIOGRAPHIES

Brendan Fernandes (f. 1979, Kenya) bor og arbejder i New York og Toronto. Han deltog i The Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, New York (2006-07) og modtog sin MFA fra The University of Western Ontario (2005). Hans arbejde repræsenteres af Diaz Contemporary i Toronto.

Brendan Fernandes (b. 1979, Kenya) is based in New York and Toronto. He participated in The Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, New York (2006-07) and received his MFA from The University of Western Ontario (2005). His work is represented by Diaz Contemporary in Toronto.

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Nanna Debois Buhl (f. 1975, Denmark) bor og arbejder i New York og København. Hun deltog i The Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, New York (2008-09) og modtog sin MFA fra Det Kongelige Danske Kunstudemi (2006).

Nanna Debois Buhl (b. 1975, Denmark) is based in New York and Copenhagen. She participated in The Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, New York (2008-09) and received her MFA from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (2006).

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Identitet og mobilitet – og Karen Blixens aktualitet

Hvem er jeg?

Der findes et fotografi af Karen Blixen, der efter sigende blev taget til det første pas, hun skulle have lavet, efter at hun i 1931 var vendt tilbage til Danmark. Hun har tørklæde både om halsen og på hovedet, det sidste foldet som en slags turban. Hendes blik er mørkt, og smilet udgrundeligt. Ansigtet stråler af visdom og erfaring.

Interessant er det, at fotografiet skulle fungere som pasbillede. For et pas er jo et officielt dokument, som man bruger til at bevise, hvem man er – hvad man hedder, og hvor man kommer fra – når man rejser over grænser. Det er interessant, fordi spørgsmålet “hvem er jeg?” jo er et omdrejningspunkt for Karen Blixens forfatterskab, ikke mindst i den samling af fortællinger, som hun var i færd med at nedfælde, da fotoet blev taget, *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934). Derfor er det også værd at overveje, hvilken identitet man kan læse ud af billedet?

Ser kvinden på billedet dansk ud, ser hun vestlig ud, eller ser hun snarere lidt afrikansk eller måske mellemøstlig ud?

Lidt af hvært, kan man vist godt sige. Og for så vidt er pasfotoet et udtryk for den sammensatte identitet, som Blixen kom hjem med fra Afrika. Hun var ikke kun dansker eller europæer, endslige afrikaner, men en blanding. Billedet vidner om hendes loyalitet over for sin afrikanske baggrund, som antrækket gør synlig. Sammenligner man portrættet med de fotografier, der findes af hende før tiden i Afrika, er der store forskelle – forskelle, som ikke kun kan forklares med tidens gang. Det samme gælder for hendes forfatterskab.

Karen Blixen skrev til sin mor i 1917: “Jeg tror, man maa opleve noget, førend man kan samle sin Personlighed i nogen slags Kunst”¹. Det kom hun til fulde til at bekræfte med sit forfatterskab. Det var oplevelsen af Afrika, som gav hende nogle af de væsentligste erfaringer, som forfatterskabet bygger på.

Uvirkelighed

Rungstedlund var rammen om Karen Blixens liv. Her blev hun født i 1885, og her døde hun i 1962. Hendes liv var i den forstand en sluttet cirkel, hvilket var lidt usædvanligt dengang og langt sjældnere i dag. Alligevel man kan også se på Karen Blixens

Identity and mobility – and Karen Blixen's topicality

Who Am I?

There is a photograph of Karen Blixen which, according to what has been reported, was taken for the first passport she was said to have applied for after returning to Denmark in 1931. She has one scarf wrapped around her neck and another over her head, around which the fabric has been folded to form a kind of turban. Her gaze is dark and her smile inscrutable. The face is beaming with wisdom and experience.

The interesting thing here is that the photograph was supposed to function as a passport photo. For a passport is, of course, an official document that you use to prove who you are – what your name is and where you come from – whenever you cross international borders. This is interesting because the question, “Who am I?”, is certainly a pivotal point for Karen Blixen’s body of work, especially in the collection of short stories, Seven Gothic Tales (1934), which she was busy writing at the time the photograph was taken. For this reason, it is also worth considering the kind of identity expressed in the picture.

Does the woman in the picture look Danish to you? Does she look Occidental? Or does she rather appear to be, somehow, a little African or maybe Middle Eastern?

A bit of everything, you could presumably say. For that matter, the passport photo is a manifestation of the composite identity that Blixen came home with from Africa. She was not only a Dane or a European and even less was she an African; she was rather a hybrid. The picture offers testimony to her loyalty to her African background, which the outfit renders visible. When we compare the portrait with the extant photographs we have of Blixen taken before her emigration to Africa, there are considerable differences – differences that cannot be explained merely by the passage of time. The same can be said about her authorship.

In 1917, Karen Blixen wrote to her mother: “I think that one must have a certain amount of experience before one can assimilate one’s personality in some kind of art.”¹ Eventually, she managed to confirm this in the fullest sense through her authorship. It was the experience of Africa that gave her some of the most important experiences upon which her body of work is based.

Unreality

Rungstedlund was the frame around Karen Blixen’s life. It was here that she was born in 1885 and it was here that

liv på en anden måde: som en forestilling i to akter. I en anden forstand var det nemlig brækket over på midten og adskilt i to separate dele.

Karen Blixens liv var slet ikke stillestående, og Rungstedlund var ikke det eneste sted, hun var bundet til. 17 ud af de 77 år Karen Blixen levede, tilbragte hun i Kenya – i distriktet Ngong lidt uden for Nairobi – som kaffefarmer. De år forandrede alt og gav hende et andet perspektiv på alt, endda i sådan en grad, at det allermest hjemlige, Rungstedlund, blev uvirkeligt.

Om sin første tid i Danmark efter tilbagekomsten fra Afrika skrev Blixen mange år senere, i essaysamlingen *Skygger paa Græsset* (1960), at hun havde ”vanskeligt ved at se noget som helst som Virkelighed”.² Et brev fra den tid bekræfter det. Ét år efter at Blixen var vendt tilbage til Danmark, i juli 1932, skrev hun til sin ven Gustav Mohr i Kenya: ”mit Hjerte ligger begravet i Ngong Hills, og det er en Slags Skyggebevægelser, jeg her præsenterer... Det er vist kun en Gang i Tilværelsen, at man lever... alt, hvad man bagefter tager op, – det løber som Sand gennem Fingrene”.³

Karen Blixen havde levet i Kenya. I Danmark skrev hun. Hun skrev videre på den samling af fortællinger, hun var påbegyndt i Kenya, og som i april 1934 udkom i New York som *Seven Gothic Tales*. Det blev hendes debut i bogform og hendes internationale gennembrud, men det var ikke hendes første udgivelse. Tidligere havde hun udgivet fortællinger, digte og en marionetkomedie i danske tidsskrifter, dog i et helt andet kunstnerisk format end hvad hun udgav efter tilbagekomsten. Der er en verden til forskel på hendes udgivelser før og efter, og den verden hedder Afrika.

En af de ting, som *Out of Africa*, den berømte titel på Blixens erindringsværk fra 1937, kan betyde, er ”skabt af Afrika” eller ”kommer fra Afrika”. Det kan man udmærket hævde, at Karen Blixens forfatferskab er.

En dansk emigrants fantasier

De handler ellers om Europa, de *Seven Gothic Tales*, som Blixen brød igennem med. På nær en enkelt undtagelse foregår fortællingerne i Europa og hyppigst i Danmark. Da de året efter udkom i en fordansket udgave, under titlen *Syv fantastiske Fortællinger*, føjede Blixen et forord til dem, hvor hun understregede udlændighedens betydning: ”En stor Del af ‘Syv fantastiske Fortællinger’ er tænkt, og noget af den er skrevet, i Afrika, og de Steder i min Bog, der handler

she died in 1962. In this sense, her life formed a closed circle. This was somewhat unusual at the time and is even more exceptional today. Nonetheless, one can also look at Karen Blixen’s life in a different way: as a performance in two acts. In another respect, her life was actually broken in two, divided into two separate parts.

Karen Blixen’s life was not at all static or stagnant and Rungstedlund was not the only place to which she was bound. Seventeen of the seventy-seven years that Karen Blixen lived were spent in Kenya – in the Ngong district just outside Nairobi – as a coffee grower. These years changed everything and gave her a different perspective on everything, to such an extent that the most familiar home environment, Rungstedlund, took on the status of being unreal.

*About the first period of time she spent in Denmark after the return from Africa, Blixen wrote, many years later, in her collection of essays known as *Skygger paa Græsset* [Shadows on the Grass] (1960) that she had “difficulty regarding anything whatsoever as reality.”² A letter from the time corroborates this. One year after Blixen had returned to Denmark, in July 1932, she wrote to her friend Gustav Mohr in Kenya: “My heart lies buried in the Ngong Hills, and it is a kind of shadow movement I am presenting here ... There is, I dare say, but one time in one’s life that you are really living ... everything, that one takes up after this – it runs like sand through the fingers.”³*

Karen Blixen had lived in Kenya. In Denmark, she wrote. She proceeded writing the collection of stories she had begun in Kenya and which, in April 1934, was published in New York as Seven Gothic Tales. This was her debut in book form as well as her international breakthrough. But it was not her first publication. Earlier, she had published short stories, poems and a marionette play in a number of Danish magazines, albeit of a completely different artistic caliber than the work she published after her return from Kenya. There is a world of difference between her published writings before and after ... and that world is called Africa.

Two of the things that Out of Africa, the well-known title of Blixen’s memoirs from 1937, can be taken to mean are “created by Africa” or “coming from Africa”: it can very cogently be claimed that Karen Blixen’s oeuvre was and did.

A Danish emigrant’s fantasies

Otherwise, the Seven Gothic Tales, with which Blixen made her breakthrough, generally have to do with Europe. With one single exception, the plots in these short stories are set in Europe and most often in Denmark. When the tales appeared the following year in a volume translated into Danish, under the title, Syv fantastiske Fortællinger,



om Danmark, maa tages mere som en dansk Emigrants Fantasier over danske Temaeer end som noget Forsøg paa Virkelighedskildring?⁴

Med disse ord præsenterede Blixen sig selv for sine danske læsere – som en forfatter, der havde forladt sit fødeland og været på afstand af det, da hun skrev bogen. Forordet giver et fingerpeg om Afrika-opholdets store betydning for Blixens fortællinger. De var tænkt i Afrika, og et par af dem var også skrevet der. Det vil altså sige: på afstand.

Denne – fysiske, men også mentale – afstand fungerede som en kunstnerisk energikilde for Karen Blixen. Eksilet, som i hendes tilfælde var selvvalgt, var øjenåbnende. Der findes en programmatisk erklæring af Georg Brandes, fra hans berømte indledningsforelæsning til *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur*, hvor han taler om den indsigt, man vinder ved “at nærme det Fremmede til os, saaledes at vi kunne tilegne os det, og at fjerne vort Eget fra os, saaledes at vi kunne overskue det.”⁵ Det var sådan Brandes gerne ville skrive sammenlignende litteraturhistorie – og det var sådan Blixen skrev litteratur. Det var den kunstneriske opskrift, hun benyttede sig af i *Syv fantastiske Fortællinger*.

Karen Blixen fjernede “vort Eget fra os”, det vil sige, at hun vendte eksotismen om og anskuede Europa og Danmark som fremmede og fortryllende steder – som kulturelle provinser i en rigt varieret og vidt omspændende verden. Det lagde visse kritikere

Blixen added a preface to the collection of stories where she underscored the significance of being a foreigner: “A considerable portion of ‘Seven Gothic Tales’ was conceived – and some of it was written – in Africa and the places in my book that have to do with Denmark must be understood more in the manner of a Danish emigrant’s fantasies on Danish themes than as any attempt at depicting reality.”⁶

With these words, Blixen presented herself to her Danish readers – as a writer who had left her native country and had been living far away from when she wrote the book. The preface offers an indication of the overwhelming influence of the African sojourn on Blixen’s short stories: they were, as she says, conceived in Africa and a few of them were also written there. That is to say, at a distance.

This – physical, but also mental – distance worked as a source of artistic energy for Karen Blixen. The exile, which in her case was self-chosen, was eye opening. There is a programmatic declaration by the Danish critic and scholar Georg Brandes, from his famous introduction to the series of lectures known as *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* [Main Currents in 19th-century Literature], where he speaks about the insight that is gained by “bringing the unfamiliar closer to us so that we can understand it and distancing the familiar from ourselves so that we can survey it”⁷ This speaks volumes about how Georg Brandes would go about writing comparative literary history – but also about how Karen Blixen wrote literature. This was the artistic recipe she made use of in *Seven Gothic Tales*/*Syv fantastiske Fortællinger*.

Karen Blixen moved “the familiar away from ourselves”, which means to say that she turned exoticism around and perceived of Europe and Denmark as strange and enchanting places – as cultural provinces in a richly varied and widely encompassing world. Certain critics took note of this: “It’s as if somebody, while standing inside Versailles, chanced upon an interior that had been removed from the Folk Museum in Lyngby. Danish Export Beer, Denmark, our mother [country], internationalized,” wrote Hans Brix, with a profound sense of astonishment, when he reviewed *Seven Gothic Tales*.⁸ His comment might not have been meant all that kindly, but it was right on target.

What the period of residence in Africa had given Karen Blixen was a distance from the country and the continent and the culture she had come from. The difference between life in the suburban town of Rungsted and on the farm at the foot of the Ngong Hills was enormous. In the letters that she wrote in Africa, this distance was rendered palpable and became an object of contemplation. In her letters, Blixen tells about how life in Kenya and in Denmark appeared to her to be “two different existences” that made each other dreamlike and unreal.^⁹

også mærke til: "Det er, som om man i Versailles fandt hensat et Interiør fra Folkemuseet i Lyngby. Danish Export-Beer, Danmark, vor Moder, internationaliseret", skrev Hans Brix med stor forundring, da han anmeldte *Seven Gothic Tales*.⁶ Det var nok ikke venligt ment, men det var fuldstændig rigtig set.

Dét, som opholdt i Afrika, havde givet Karen Blixen, var en distance til det land og det kontinent og den kultur, hun kom fra. Forskellen mellem livet i udflytterbyen Rungsted og på farmen ved foden af bjerget Ngong var enorm. I brevene, hun skrev i Afrika, blev afstanden gjort håndgribelig og til genstand for overvejelse. I brevene fortæller Blixen om, hvordan tilværelsen i Kenya og i Danmark forekom hende at være "to forskellige Existenser", der gjorde hinanden drømmeagtige og uvirkelige.

Også der meldte uvirkeligheden sig. Men uvirkeligheden forvandlede sig efterhånden til et kreativt frirum for Karen Blixen, som gav hende mulighed for at folde sit litterære talent fuldt ud – i form af en "dansk Emigrants Fantasier".

Det er værd at bemærke, at personerne i Blixens forfatterskab hyppigt er rejsende, rastløse væsener. Det gælder både de mylord-agtige typer, der befolkner hendes fiktive fortællinger, og de omstrejfende skikkeler, hun fortæller om i *Den afrikanske Farm* – vagabonder, aristokrater og andre frie fugle, der på farmen finder et fristed. I Blixens forfatterskab er det nærmest et vilkår at være i bevægelse, at vandre omkring og udveksle fortællinger med fremmede – ofte for at meditere over, hvem man egentlig er. Sådan som hun selv havde gjort under sit ophold i Afrika.

In other words, a sense of unreality set in and came to the fore. However, the unreality was gradually transformed into a creative free zone for Karen Blixen, which gave her the opportunity to unfold her literary talent all the way out – in the form of a "Danish emigrant's fantasies".

It is worth noting that the characters in Blixen's writings are often itinerant, restless souls. This applies both to the milords that populate her fictional short stories and the wandering characters that she talks about in Out of Africa - vagabonds, aristocrats and other free birds that find their safe haven on her farm. In Blixen's writings, being in motion is nothing short of a preliminary condition, existing in a state of wandering around and exchanging stories with strangers – often for purposes of meditating on who you really are, just as she herself had been doing during her stay in Africa.

Identity

The words "dream" and "freedom" recur again and again in Blixen's various descriptions of her experience of Africa. In 1938, she held a lecture at Lund University about her meeting with the Africans, who had regarded her as a stranger – and caused her to look at herself as a stranger and to ask the question: "Who am I?". The question pushed its way forward, as previous conceptions about – and her own conceptions of – herself had ceased to make sense, as the social codes and conventions that had defined her from childhood were no longer valid.

The experience was so compelling that Blixen mentions it as a revelation in her lecture – and tells: "Here one could, at long last and once and for all, cease to give



Identitet

Ordene "drøm" og "frihed" går igen i Blixens forskellige beskrivelser af sin oplevelse af Afrika. I 1938 gav hun et foredrag ved Lunds Universitet om sit møde med afrikanerne, der havde set på hende som en fremmed – og fået hende til at se på sig selv som en fremmed og til at stille spørgsmålet "hvem er jeg?". Det spørgsmål trængte sig på, da hendes hidtidige forestillinger om – og fremstillinger af – sig selv holdt op med at give mening. Da de sociale koder og konventioner, der havde defineret hende fra barnsben, ikke længere gjaldt.

Oplevelsen var så stærk, at Blixen omtaler den som en åbenbaring i foredraget – og fortæller: "Her kunde man da endelig engang give Fanden i alle Konventioner; her var en ny Slags Frihed, som man hidtil kun har haft i Drømme. Det var som at komme ud og svømme, hvor man kan strække sig i alle Retninger, som at komme op og flyve, hvor man synes at man har lagt Tyngdeloven bag sig". Så ekstatisk var frihedsfølelsen, men læg mærke til illusionsbevidstheden i Blixens ordvalg: Tyngdeloven gælder ikke mindst for den, som er oppe og flyve, selv om det kan opleves som om, den er sat ud af kraft.

Karen Blixens fortællinger kredser netop om det spørgsmål, som Karen Blixen var blevet tvunget til at genoverveje: "Hvem er jeg?". Kulturmødet i Afrika er derfor også tæt integreret i Blixens måde at skrive på, også når hun ikke skriver om Afrika. Og hendes fortællinger er fantastiske ikke mindst, fordi de formår at fremkalde en opløftende frihedsfølelse, som svarer til den, Blixen beskriver i foredraget, en slags ophævelse af den kulturelle tyngdelov. Man kan tænke på Blixens fortællinger som litterære genopførelser af den eksistentielle udfordring, hun havde mødt i Afrika, da hun "ene og alene" havde stået ansigt til ansigt med mennesker, der var anderledes og alligevel ikke væsensforskellige.

Selvoversættelse

Læg også mærke til det svar på spørgsmålet "hvem er jeg?", som Karen Blixens litterære sprog giver. Før *Seven Gothic Tales* havde hun skrevet og udgivet på dansk. Men da hun sadlede om og ville gøre forfattervirksomheden til sit levebrød, omlagde hun sproget til engelsk – med stort stilistisk overskud og opfindsomhed, men også med flere vendinger og sætningsbygninger, der røber hendes danske baggrund. Når hun efterfølgende oversatte sig selv, gik der omvendt anglicismer i hendes danske sprog.

a damn about any of the conventions; here was a new kind of freedom that one had previously enjoyed only in dreams. It was like coming out and swimming, where you can stretch out in every possible direction, like coming up and flying, where you get a sense of having put the law of gravity behind you.⁷⁸ That is how ecstatic the sensation of freedom was. But please take note of the awareness of illusion in Blixen's choice of words: the law of gravity applies no less to those who are already up and flying, although one sometimes might be tempted into thinking that is has been annulled and put out of commission.

Karen Blixen's short stories revolve precisely around the question that Karen Blixen had been forced to reconsider: "Who am I?". The cultural encounter in Africa is thus also inextricably integrated into Blixen's way of writing, even when she is not writing about Africa. And her short stories are fantastic especially because they manage to conjure up an uplifting sensation of freedom that corresponds to what Blixen describes in the lecture: a kind of annulment of cultural gravitation. One could choose to regard Blixen's short stories as literary revivals of the existential challenge she had been facing in Africa when she, "all by herself", had stood face to face with people who were not like her and yet not essentially different from her.

Self-translation

*It is also prudent to pay careful attention to the answer to the question, "Who am I?", that Karen Blixen's literary language discloses. Before *Seven Gothic Tales*, she had been writing and had published her work in Danish. But because she changed her mind and wanted to establish her authoring activity as her livelihood, she switched to writing in English – with great stylistic surplus and inventiveness but also with a great many turns of speech and sentence constructions that divulge her Danish background. When she subsequently went about translating her own work, Anglicisms conversely popped up in her Danish texts. As far as that goes, there was no pure and natural language to fall back on but rather a hybrid language, a borrowed language. In Africa, she had been a foreigner but she was also foreign when she came "home" to Rungstedlund. The body of writing she created and which still appeals, even today, to thousands of readers all over the world, is based largely on this experience of foreignness.*

In Your Words

In the meantime, this experience has most certainly not become less general. One of globalization's most immediate manifestations is the increased mobility – voluntary, but all too often also involuntary – and contact between people that

For så vidt var der intet rent og naturligt sprog at falde tilbage på, men derimod et blandingspros, et lånt sprog. I Afrika havde hun været en fremmed, men fremmed var hun også, da hun kom ”hjem” til Rungstedlund. Det forfatterskab, hun skabte, og som fortsat i dag appellerer stærkt til tusindvis af læsere over hele verden, er i høj grad baseret på denne erfaring af fremmedhed.

In Your Words

Denne erfaring er bestemt ikke blevet mindre almen i mellemtíden. En af globaliseringens mest umiddelbare udtryk er den tiltagende mobilitet – frivillig, men alt for ofte også ufrivillig – og kontakt mellem mennesker på tværs af nationale og kulturelle grænser. Mobiliteten udfordrer identiteten, på godt og ondt, og aktualiserer den erfaring, som Blixens forfatterskab bygger på. Spørgsmålet ”Hvem er jeg?” bliver i den grad vedkommende. Udviklingen medfører ikke mindst ubekvemhed ved at blive placeret i de båse – i de identitetskategorier – som tilfældigvis står til rådighed, når man nu befinner sig imellem dem eller ved siden af eller helt andre steder. Som Karen Blixen på pasbilledet.

Alle disse højaktuelle aspekter ved Karen Blixens liv og værk – i forhold til mobilitet og identitet, sprog og oversættelse – genlyder i Nanna Debois Buhls og Brendan Fernandes’ udstilling *In Your Words*. Den udforsker det kreative terræn, som også Blixens kunst bevæger sig i – i mellemrummene mellem sprog, nationer, kulturer, som i sig selv er flydende langt mere end faste og uforanderlige størelser. Den bekræfter, at migrationer også kan skabe æstetisk bevægelse og kunstnerisk opdrift.

Trækfuglene billedliggør denne bevægelse, henover grænser og imellem kontinenter. De fleste danskere ved fra St. St. Blicher, at trækfuglene ”haver andensteds hjemme”, men det er forkert. Grundlæggende har de vel ikke mere eller mindre hjemme det ene sted frem for det andet.

Mursejleren opfatter vi som indbegrebet af dansk sommer, med deres hvinende skrig og opklistrede rede. Men i Afrika, syd for ækvator, har mursejleren også ”hjemme” og er en del af den fauna, som skaber hjemlighed for menneskene der. Kan et menneske på samme måder tilhøre flere verden, ligesom mursejleren, og ligeså ubesværet? Kan hjertet være bundet til Rungstedlund såvel som til Ngong Hills?

I modsætning til trækfugle befinder papegøjer sig ofte i bur, på grund af deres pragt og den forkær-

transpires across international and cultural borders. The mobility poses a challenge to identity, for better or worse, and actualizes the acquired experience upon which Blixen’s writing is based. The question, “Who am I?”, becomes key. The development brings about an increasing degree of inconvenience by being placed inside whatever compartments – inside whatever identity-categories – that happen to be available at the moment, when people find themselves situated in between them or beside them or somewhere else entirely: like Karen Blixen in the passport photo.

All these highly topical aspects of Karen Blixen’s life and work – in relation to mobility and identity, language and translation – resound in Nanna Debois Buhl’s and Brendan Fernandes’ exhibition, In Your Words. It explores the creative terrain within which Blixen’s art moves, also – within the intervals situated between language, nations and cultures, which are in themselves far more fluid than they are fixed and immutable dimensions. It confirms that migrations can also give rise to aesthetic motion and artistic buoyancy.

Migratory birds render this movement visible across borders and between continents. Most Danes know from Steen Steensen Blicher’s poem that the birds of passage ”have no abiding-place”. But this is wrong! Basically, they are no more or no less at home in any one place than they are in another.

We perceive the swifts as being the epitome of the Danish summer, with their screaming calls and their pasted-together nests. However, in Africa, south of the Equator, the swifts are also ”abiding” and are part of the fauna that generate a familiar sense of hominess for the people dwelling there. Can a human being, in the same way, belong to several worlds, like the swifts, and in just as unencumbered a way? Can the heart be bound to Rungstedlund as well as to the Ngong Hills?

In contrast to birds of passage, parrots are often found to be living in cages, especially because of their magnificent splendor and the predilection many people have for bearing these colorful creatures imitate human sounds and human speech. There is something inscrutable about everything the parrots are saying because it is only to us that the sounds make any sense or can be coupled with any meaning.

You feel like a parrot when you set out to learn a new language. What does it really mean to speak a language? The foreign words are being borrowed – as sounds that you can try to learn by rote and rummage about in your mind for in search of a meaning. In the meantime, we are reminded that this is also pretty much the case as far as our mother tongue goes.

The voices in the exhibition’s film, In Your Words, fluctuate between English, Swahili and Danish – three of

lighed mennesker har for at høre dem efterligne deres lyde og sprog. Der er noget uudgrundeligt ved alt, hvad de siger, fordi lydene kun for os hører sammen med en betydning.

Man føler sig som en papegøje, når man lærer et nyt sprog. Hvad vil det egentlig sige at tale et sprog? De fremmede ord er til låns – som lyde, man kan forsøge at lære i remser, og som i bevidstheden leder efter en betydning. I mellemtiden mindes vi om, at det vel egentlig også gælder vores modersmål.

Stemmerne i udstillingens film *In Your Words* veksler mellem engelsk, swahili og dansk – tre af Karen Blixens sprog. Hvis man ikke forstår swahili, udgør ordene et betagende klangunivers – som dansk gør, hvis man ikke forstår dansk, eller engelsk, for den sags skyld, som alle efterhånden mener at kunne forstå. Det er en sammenstilling af stemmer og sprog, ikke en oversættelse, ikke en privilegering af det ene sprog frem for det andet. Det skaber en tankevækkende fremmedgørelse af det sprog, som man regner for at være det grundlæggende, hvad end det så er engelsk, dansk eller swahili.

Det er forbundet med et identitetstab og et ansigtstab at tale et fremmedsprog. Aldrig føler man sig lige så fri og formuleringsdygtig som på sit modersmål. Men Blixens eksempel viser, at der findes en anden frihed, på den anden side af identitetstabet, og for hendes vedkommende en stor kunstnerisk frihed og en gevinst.

Ordene er egentlig aldrig vores egne – og altså bliver vi rigere, når vi låner dem af hinanden.

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1 Karen Blixen: *Breve fra Afrika*, 1, udg. af Frans Lasson, 1978, s. 21.

2 Karen Blixen: *Skygger paa Græsset*, 1960, s. 109.

3 Karen Blixen: *Karen Blixen i Danmark. Breve 1931-62*, 1, udg. Frans Lasson m.fl., 1996, s. 89.

4 Isak Dinesen: *Syv fantastiske Fortællinger*, 1935, s. 5.

5 Georg Brandes: *Samlede Skrifter*, 4, 1900, s. 1-2.

6 Hans Brix: "Baronesse Blixen-Fineckes "Gothic Tales"" , Dagens Nyheder, 3. juli 1934, citeret fra *Blixeniana* 1980, s. 179.

7 Karen Blixen: *Breve fra Afrika*, 1, udg. af Frans Lasson, 1978, s. 70.

8 Karen Blixen: "Sorte og Hvide i Afrika. Et foredrag, holdt for studenterne i Lund den 4. november 1938" i: *Blixeniana* 1979, s. 28.

Karen Blixen's languages. If you don't understand Swahili, the words form an enthralling sound universe – as does Danish if you don't understand Danish or English, for that matter, even though everybody, it seems at this time, thinks they understand this tongue. What we have here is a veritable juxtaposition of voices and languages, not a translation, no privileging of one language over the other. What is being evoked is a thought-provoking and distancing estrangement of the language you might count on as being the basic one, whether that happens to be English, Danish or Swahili.

Speaking a foreign language is connected with a loss of identity and with losing face. You never feel as free or as adroit in formulating yourself as you do when communicating in your native language. However, Blixen's example evinces that there is another freedom to be found, on the other side of the identity loss, and as far as she is concerned, a great artistic freedom and a gain.

The words are never really our own – and yet we become enriched when we borrow them from each other.

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Translated by Dan A. Marmorstein

1 Isak Dinesen: Letters from Africa, 1914-31, edited for the Rungstedlund Foundation by Frans Lasson. Translated by Anne Born. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 41.

2 Karen Blixen: Skygger paa Græsset [Shadows on the Grass], 1960, p. 109.

3 Karen Blixen: Karen Blixen i Danmark. Breve 1931-62 [Karen Blixen in Denmark. Letters, 1931-62], 1st edition, edited by Frans Lasson, et al, 1996, p. 89.

4 Isak Dinesen: Syv fantastiske Fortællinger [Seven Gothic Tales], 1935, p. 5

5 Georg Brandes: Samlede Skrifter, 4 [Collected Writings, vol. 4], 1900, p. 1-2.

6 Hans Brix: "Baronesse Blixen-Fineckes 'Gothic Tales'" , Dagens Nyheder, July 3, 1934, quoted in *Blixeniana* 1980, p. 179.

7 Karen Blixen: Breve fra Afrika [Letters from Africa], 1st edition, edited by Frans Lasson, 1978, p. 70.

8 Karen Blixen: "Sorte og Hvide i Afrika. Et foredrag, holdt for studenterne i Lund den 4. november 1938" [Black and White in Africa. A lecture, held for students in Lund on November 4, 1938], in: *Blixeniana* 1979, p. 28.