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**TRAVELLING PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY, GENDER
AND COLONIALISM: WHITE WOMEN'S WRITING ON AFRICA**

by

Julie Harrison, B.A. (Hons)

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate
Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Institute of Comparative Literary Studies

Carleton University
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The undersigned recommend to the Faculty
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Submitted by Julie Harrison, B.A.,
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Abstract

This thesis analyzes, from a feminist and post-colonial perspective, the effect of place upon individual identity. The introduction examines recent critical theory on travel writing, autobiography and the locating of “self” and “other.” It argues that women's memoirs are a unique axis point from which to explore the transitional boundaries of race, gender and class and their relation to the colonial system in Africa. Four white women's memoirs on Africa, spanning the time period 1883 to 2001, are considered in light of feminist and post-colonial theories about the relationship between place and identity.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abbreviations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: <i>The Story of an African Farm: The Impossibility of Travel</i>	16
Chapter Two: <i>Out of Africa: Creating an Identity, Creating an Africa.....</i>	30
Chapter Three: <i>The Prophet's Camel Bell: Journey to an Other, Journey to Self.....</i>	46
Chapter Four: <i>Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: Getting On with It.....</i>	62
Conclusion.....	81
References.....	88

Abbreviations

AF *The Story of an African Farm*

OA *Out of Africa*

PC *The Prophet's Camel Bell*

DL *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*

Introduction

Travel seems to have become an all-consuming desire in present Western societies, at least if the proliferation of advertisements and travel guide books are any indication. Seeking an escape from the familiar, middle-class Westerners scramble to save their pennies on the advertisers' promises of warm weather, relaxation, and sexual relations. These days, *where* you travel to, is remarkably unimportant as travel havens develop hotels, menus and service standards identical to those at home. We know these travellers as tourists. Another form of modern-day traveller also exists: the adventure traveller, who seeks "authentic" experiences in faraway lands and encounters with "authentic" others, rather than with the uniform-clad bartender of the tourist hotel. These travellers lust for excitement and strive to visit areas of the world few others have experienced. In recent decades, travel has evolved into almost an end in itself, as young people clamour to travel after graduation as a rite of passage and a means to "find themselves." Why this fascination with travel? And why is travel so intricately tied to self-identity? As someone fiercely addicted to the notion of travel, these are questions I ask myself.

Travel has captured the imagination of the Western public since the very first European explorers set sail. As the British Empire consolidated, Victorians at home eagerly awaited news from the explorers, as Patrick Brantlinger notes: "As headline, best-selling reading, the 'penetration' of Africa provided a narrative fascination that has been likened to excitement

about space exploration today" (Brantlinger 175). The explorers' narratives often took the form of a quest-romance, with the explorer/author as the brave hero facing the unknown, "blank" areas of the map. The Victorian reading public had an insatiable appetite for these narratives, as the number of published copies confirms.

Through these narratives, authored by the likes of Livingstone, Stanley and Burton, the European public was acquiring a knowledge of the "other," as mediated through the perspective of the white male explorer, who was generally travelling on behalf of the imperialist powers. But while each explorer's character and the landscapes described varied, the descriptions and characteristics attributed to the encountered "other" maintained a "sameness" with a consistent underlying message: the other was inferior to the European self. The "other" did not generally speak or interact with the narrator, but was instead a silent being available for European examination and representation. Variations of the "other's" inferiority emerged in direct relation to political events. For example, during the period of British involvement in the slave trade, the African other was represented as "savage," whereas during the period of abolition, the African was represented as "child-like."¹

This discourse that evolved to describe the "other" is intertwined with the history of imperial power and domination. Edward Said argues that, despite the end of direct imperial power, a discourse of domination—termed

¹ For more, see Peter Brantlinger's "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 12 (Autumn 1985), pages 166-199.

“Orientalism” —that privileges the West over the East, still pervades our current ways of thinking and communicating. Said’s groundbreaking study *Orientalism* (1978) outlines a monolithic, all-engaging Western discourse that locates the East in an inferior binary opposition to the West.² This discourse is materially supported by “institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines” (Said 2). So pervasive and powerful is this discourse, claims Said, that it is impossible for an individual to think or speak of the Orient independently.

Abdul R. JanMohamed, a scholar of colonial literature, has broadened Said’s concept of Orientalism to include all colonial relations, and most specifically, literature dealing with Africa. He argues that literary criticism tends to overlook the political:

Despite all its merits, the vast majority of critical attention devoted to colonial literature restricts itself by severely bracketing the political context of culture and history. This typical facet of humanistic closure requires the critic systematically to avoid an analysis of the domination, manipulation, exploitation, and disfranchisement that are inevitably involved in the construction of any cultural artifact or relationship. (59, 1985)

Using Frantz Fanon’s description of the colonizer/colonized relationship as “Manichean,” JanMohamed maintains that all colonial relations are structured according to the Manichean opposition of a supposed European superiority and a supposed native inferiority. This opposition, he argues, is the foundation for all colonial thought and representation, including the binary

² It is equally important to note that the East employs a parallel discourse to Orientalism. In their article “Occidentalism,” Buruma and Margalit note that Occidentalism tends to characterize the West as arrogant, feeble, greedy, depraved and decadent. For more, see “Occidentalism,” in *The New York Review of Books*, Volume XLIX, Number 1 (January 17, 2002), pages 4-8.

oppositions that Said denounced: black and white, good and evil, civilized and savage. Like Said, JanMohamed cautions that this Manichean opposition is extremely powerful because of its “invisible” relation to political and economic power structures. He points out that writers are also caught up in it, inevitably producing texts which affirm the Manichean opposition of colonized and colonizer: “even a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it and who may indeed be highly critical of imperialist exploitation is drawn into its vortex” (63, 1985).

Some critics who have followed Said have critiqued his concept of Orientalism, however. For example, Ali Behdad, while acknowledging the importance of Said’s work, argues against his insistence on the inevitable nature of binary oppositions, claiming that it leaves no other alternative than for the East to be inferior to the West:

To argue that all representations of the Orient are always produced according to the discriminating strategies of a hegemonic cultural discourse is to remain within the limits of the old metaphysical binary structure on which the discourse of Orientalism is predicated. [...] Indeed, the formalization of Orientalism as a coherent and stable system of representations unwittingly functions as a reification of unequal power relations between Europe and the Orient. Said’s inadequate attention to the complexities of power relations between the orientalist and the Oriental makes him reaffirm in a sense an essentialist epistemology that derives its authority from the dichotomies that it puts forth. (11)

Behdad argues that Said’s lack of an alternative theoretical position to that of binary oppositions marks his concept of Orientalism as a “postcolonial discourse of victimhood” (12). As an alternative, Behdad calls for a theoretical approach to Orientalism that moves away from essentialist binaries and is

instead acknowledged as heterogeneous, with its heterogeneity as key to its power and ongoing existence.

Like Behdad, Mary Louise Pratt believes in the heterogeneity of colonial discourse and traces its existence in the genre of travel writing. She notes that the ideology of colonial discourse survives through proliferation:

Partly because it has never been fully professionalized or “disciplined,” travel writing is one of the most polyphonous of genres. It therefore richly illustrates the fact that, in practice, ideology works through proliferation as well as containment of meaning. (141, 1985)

Unlike Said’s essentialist binaries, Pratt’s argument locates colonial discourse through “multiple sets of differences, multiple fixed subject positions, multiple ways of legitimizing and familiarizing the process of European expansion” (141, 1985).

What all these critics insistently remind us of is that writing is not only an aesthetic but a political activity. Travel writing—despite its general categorization as “low brow” and therefore until recently, unworthy of scholarly interest—is a particularly rich locale for an exploration of how the political affects, or is embedded within, the aesthetic. Behdad calls on postcolonial critics to link their work to the present:

...to restore to the science of colonialism its political significance in the current global setting. What would emerge out of such a reading is not a specialized knowledge of Europe’s guilty past but the provoking rediscovery of new traces of the past *today*, a recognition that transforms belatedness into a politics of contemporaneity. (9)

Gillian Whitlock, in her comparative study of colonial women’s autobiographies, suggests that contemporary critics can contribute to the work of “decolonization”: “If binaries [...] are fundamental to colonizing

discourses, then the work of decolonization is to return [sic] ambivalence and duplicity, and to look to intersubjectivity in cultural formations and texts" (6).

As mentioned earlier, travel writing was first introduced to the European public through the narratives of male European explorers, generally working on behalf of the imperial powers. The texts were therefore written with a specific audience in mind: the imperial public and its governing powers. As such, these texts unquestioningly reinforced the validity and righteousness of imperial expansion. And while the ideological foundation may be highly pronounced in some of these texts, the vast majority employed more subtle means of communicating their underlying ideology, as for example, a narrator's objective, distant stance:

The explicit project of these explorer-writers, whether scientists or not, is to produce what they themselves referred to as "information." [...] To the extent that it strives to efface itself, the invisible eye/I strives to make those informational orders natural, to find them there uncommanded, rather than assert them as the products/producers of European knowledges or disciplines. (Pratt 125, 1985)

Following the explorers, other middle-class Europeans took to adventure, employment or missionary work as part of the expanding colonial project. Despite the Victorian positioning of women as part of the private sphere, as "angels in the house," many women did travel and write about their experiences. But, as Rana Kabbani notes, "the very essence of Victorian travel writing remains an intrinsic part of the patriarchal discourse, for it fed on and ultimately served the hierarchies of power" (7). Women's identities were intimately related to both their positioning in patriarchal society and the colonial system, a fact which in turn affected the kind of writing voices

available to them. As Whitlock comments, “[t]he intimacies of identity formation, the connections between colonial encounters and located subjectivity, are fundamental to both colonialism and resistance” (4). In a writing genre that silences the colonial “other” (the African), how was a silenced patriarchal “other” (the woman) to find a voice? And how would this voice, that of a subaltern, differ from that of the dominant colonial discourse?

Sara Mills addresses these questions in *Discourses of Difference*. She notes that women’s travel writing shares both similarities and differences to men’s, and that the issue and role of gender in colonial discourse has been ignored by critics such as Said. The differences stem not from a biological determinism, but from the fact that women as authors had to negotiate different textual constraints from men, in both the production and reception of their texts. In particular, women of the Victorian era had to not only negotiate a voice distinct from that of a male-dominated colonial discourse, but also from the prescribed discourse of femininity, which sought to define women as pure, domestic and more prone to personal expressions than men. This discourse of femininity did not easily align with the existing conventions for travel writing: an authoritative narrator who was public hero and master of his environment, including the encountered “other.” To exist as an author, Victorian female travel writers tend to adopt the conventions of colonial discourse and discourse of femininity and at the same time resist them.

According to Mills, feminist critics have tended to fix female travellers into a proto-feminist mould, attempting to demonstrate their successful

resistance to and isolation from not only the discourse of femininity but also the discourse of colonialism. To do so, she claims, these critics have employed selective readings of the texts and have avoided aspects of the works that, on the contrary, support colonial or femininity discourses. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also identifies this tendency in feminist analyses of colonial literature and argues for the necessity of “wrench[ing] oneself away from the mesmerising focus of the ‘subject-constitution’ of the female individualist” (149). Examined in their entirety, Mills observes, the texts of female travel writers are often a perplexing mix of resistance and conformity:

...a strange mixture of the stereotypically colonial in content, style and trope, presenting the colonised country as naturally part of the British Empire, whilst at the same time being unable to adopt a straight-forwardly colonial voice. For a feminist reader in the 1990s, the texts are a mixture of the thoroughly enjoyable (adventure narratives depicting strong, resourceful, women characters in situations rarely found in literature of the period) and the almost impossible (the racism, the concern to present the narrator as feminine, and the lengthy descriptions of the domestic). (4)

Like Mills, I consider the difficulty of interpretation, the ambiguities and the ambivalence, in the work of female travel writers to be among their most fascinating aspects. In this thesis, I aim to explore the complexity and contradictions found in women's writing on Africa—a writing that is distinguished not by any essentialist female traits, but rather by historical and political influences that apply to all colonizing writers, and in specific ways to the female gender.

However, unlike Mills, who focuses solely on travel writing texts written in the dominant phase of colonial discourse. I will broaden my scope to

include texts from both the dominant and the residual phases of colonialism. In doing so, I hope to compare how the discursive frameworks of a dissolving colonial discourse as well as the progression of the feminist movement affect the production and reception of the later texts and how all of the texts negotiate the issues of race, gender and class. As well, I include in this study two texts written from *within* Africa—writing from the children of African colonial immigrants. With the inclusion of these texts, I hope to provide further insight into the effect of travel, or place, on concepts of self—to speculate as Susan R. Horton does in her study of Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen's pen name³), what they “*got out of* their particular encounters; to consider the part Africans played in each woman's psychic economy; and to regard their “Africa” as one piece of the very artful bricolage that was their work of self-construction” (xii). This comparative literary study builds on the work initiated by Said, but also aims to move beyond binary constructions by exploring the heterogeneity of colonial discourse in colonizing women's writing from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

While travel has always represented a privileged form of escape from the familiar, it took on an even greater meaning for early women travellers who were escaping not only the confines of the home, but the restrictive societal expectations imposed on middle-class European women. As colonial expansion progressed in Africa, more and more middle-class women travelled as wives, missionaries or adventurers in their own right.

³ Karen Blixen, the author of *Out of Africa*, is also widely known by her pen name Isak Dinesen, which was used to publish the very successful *Seven Gothic Tales* in English in 1934.

Olive Schreiner and Karen Blixen experienced and wrote about Africa during the dominant phase of colonial discourse, whereas Margaret Laurence and Alexandra Fuller experienced Africa in phases of residual colonial discourse. Spanning almost a full century, the works of these women demonstrate varying degrees of conformity to, as well as subversion of, both colonial discourse and the discourse of femininity to which Mills refers. Each woman's piece of writing defies the traditional definitions of its particular writing genre, whether it be travel writing, novel or memoir. In their refusal to conform to established genres, each woman's writing subverts the expectations for colonial discourse and raises awareness over issues of gender, class and race. As Horton notes in relation to Schreiner and Blixen, but in words that are applicable to all the writers in this thesis:

In their production of works that are not travel literature and not not-travel literature; not memoir but not-not memoir, they managed to produce life-works that could be at the same time more self-revelatory and more powerfully political than could have been produced in generically more determinate works. Self-defined as both not European and not African, they take pains to construct themselves as not *not*-European and not *not*-African either, representing themselves also as not male/not female but also not *not*-male and not *not*-female; they are not white/not black; not colonial/not *not*-colonial. If we consider their lifeworks in toto, it becomes abundantly clear that living on the slash became their line of flight from construction of gender, race and nationality they found too confining. (28)

A child of missionary parents, Olive Schreiner was raised in South Africa. Her text *The Story of an African Farm*, while difficult to come by today, was a bestseller at its time of publication in England in 1883. As a woman in the early nineteenth century, Schreiner was denied an education and a right to the "public" sphere. In taking up the pen, she challenged both of these

constraints. To do so, she used the male pseudonym of “Ralph Iron” and employed the genre of the fictional novel, as opposed to a more outwardly autobiographical genre, generally allocated to the public sphere of men.⁴

The Story of an African Farm takes a problematic stance in relation to colonial discourse. While on the one hand, the text adopts an unquestioning acceptance of the racial domination of white over black, it attacks the rigid binary social divisions of gender and class and the power structures aligned with them. The text also takes a problematic stance in relation to the Victorian discourse of femininity, which confined women to the realm of the “private” and upheld them as chaste and morally superior to men.

Schreiner’s work carries the underlying theme of travel—a desire to travel beyond the boundaries of social divisions. Physical travel, however, does not allow the protagonists to escape their inferior social classifications. Unable to be free from these classifications, each protagonist finds his/her self-identity literally and figuratively suffocated.

In chapter two, Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa* is explored. Unlike Schreiner, she was well-educated and raised in a bourgeois European family in Denmark. *Out of Africa* was first published in 1937 and describes the narrator’s experience as a colonial farmer in the Kenyan highlands from 1914 to 1931.

⁴ A number of feminist critics have commented on the androcentric origins and resulting nature of the autobiographical genre. Carolyn Heilbrun notes that the genre of autobiography “long defined by men, has until now not served most women as they undertake to describe the stories of their lives. Those forcefully influential early writers of male autobiography, Augustine and Rousseau, have provided us with inadequate patterns” (44, 1999).

Drawing from the same colonial assumptions as Schreiner's work, *Out of Africa* does not question the division of power between white and black races. However, unlike most colonial literature of this time period, Blixen locates the African people not as "all the same," but rather as members of individual tribes, and provides names for individual Africans. The constraints of colonial and femininity discourses reigning at this time period create a text which is impossible to categorize as the author struggles to mediate a position that will be acceptable to the public and to herself. For example, Blixen's narrative persona, while drawing on events in the author's own life, is also a fictional creation allowing her certain freedoms denied to her in reality.

Out of Africa's story thus used the convention of the travel narrative to "imagine" the narrator into a space free from the constraints of binary gender classifications, through actual physical travel away from the confines of Europe. Travel to Africa is depicted as a way of crossing the gender boundaries of a rigid European society, even at the cost of participating in the maintenance of racial boundaries. But, as in Schreiner's novel, the idealized expectations of travel are shown to be misleading. The narrator is forced to move back to Denmark, leaving behind "her" Africa, which was intimately related to her own identity as an independent woman.

Margaret Laurence's *A Prophet's Camel Bell* was published in 1963 and describes her experience living in Somaliland from 1950 to 1952. Unlike *Out of Africa's* imaginative rendering of Africa, Laurence's narrative reveals her self-doubts and struggles as she tries to "fit into" Africa as a white woman.

Greater awareness of racism and the ill effects of colonial rule mean that Laurence does not perceive Africa through the same lens of colonial discourse as her predecessors. Despite her failure to entirely subvert colonial discourse, her writing makes a significant advance from that of her predecessors—by listening, she is able to give voice to the Somali people. Laurence, in fact, translated the work of a number of Somali writers while in Africa, thus subverting her position as peripheral “other” in colonial Africa by taking on a role and “work” otherwise denied to women.

Unlike *Out of Africa*, which tends to illustrate travel to Africa as a means to escape rigid gender classifications, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* does not find Africa to be a locale of freedom. Instead, Africa is seen to possess rigid gender and racial boundaries which are so strong that even Laurence's intellectual rejection of them cannot entirely allow her to cross them. Despite the boundaries, travel is nonetheless portrayed as a means to greater self-awareness.

Alexandra Fuller's very recently published book *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*, describes her life growing up in a white colonial farming family in rural Rhodesia, Malawi and Zambia from 1972 to 1990. Despite the nine decades separating their dates of composition, Fuller's memoir, with its rigid boundaries of race, gender and class, is reminiscent of Schreiner's novel. Like Schreiner, Fuller is incapable of and uninterested in “imagining” Africa as an Edenic locale. Instead, her memoir

presents a remarkably objective description of the collapse of colonial power and its resulting psychological and social impacts.

Emblematic of the white farming community, Fuller's family defines its identity in ways that are intricately tied to the colonial boundaries of race, class and gender. Using the double perspective of a child witness and an adult narrator, Fuller illustrates (through the child's perspective) how desperately her family clung to its identity as colonials, at the same time as she overlays (through the adult narrator) a post-colonial perspective onto the text.

Some of the most powerful passages of Fuller's memoir deal with place and identity, and in particular, the sense of "home" that her family often lacked as white immigrants in Africa. Constantly searching for a place to call home and thus a sense of belonging, her family travels to numerous different farms stretching across three different African countries. Eventually coming to terms with their own personal losses as well as the political loss of white power, Fuller's parents are able to re-create their sense of identity and settle in Zambia.

As writers, Schreiner, Blixen, Laurence, and Fuller are contributors to the general Western consciousness of Africa, which has shifted over the decades. As readers, each was influenced by the literature available to her. We know, for example, that Blixen was influenced by Schreiner. Each writer was influenced by the literature and discourses of her time period as well as by her own personal relation to the issues of gender, race and class. In their

own way, using the sources available to them, each of these women challenged the status quo of the politics and/or writing conventions of her day.

Chapter One

The Story of an African Farm: The Impossibility of Travel

"I had a farm in Africa" ... long before these opening words from Blixen's *Out of Africa* hypnotized Western consciousness (especially as echoed by Meryl Streep in the Hollywood rendition of the book into film), Olive Schreiner had introduced European and North American readers to life in colonial Africa through *The Story of an African Farm*, first published in London in 1883 and shortly thereafter in the United States. Schreiner's novel represented a marked break from the traditional novel genre through its inclusion of dreams, letters, stories and monologues. Readers responded by making it a best seller. Critics have noted its influence on later writers, particularly feminist and colonial writers, including Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer and Isak Dinesen (Monsman xi).

The Story of an African Farm was, however, not received with open arms by all. It was condemned for its strong feminist and anti-religious themes, as well as for its unconventional narrative structure and autobiographical tendencies. The characters of *The Story of an African Farm* are widely seen to be personifications of the author's own views (Monsman 77). For example, the character of Lyndall is generally considered to be a mouth-piece for Schreiner's own feminist opinions and biographical speculation on Schreiner suggests that she, like Lyndall, became pregnant as an unwed woman and that the Boer woman's character was largely based on

the Boer woman Schreiner was working for as a governess at the time. While these autobiographical tendencies can be argued to weaken the aesthetic value of the novel, they make *The Story of an African Farm* an interesting source for comparative study with the travel memoirs considered in this thesis. Gerald Monsman confirms my interest in Schreiner's work as an exploration of identity formation:

...*An African Farm* has much the same fictionalized autobiographical relation to its author's life as does, for example, Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, part of a tradition of hermeneutical autobiography that is more directly focused on self-interpretation than on self-presentation, more concerned with understanding events than with narrating them. In other words, Schreiner's narrative is an autobiographically colored novel of ideas—a novel of radical ideas, difficult concepts, perplexing actions, and controversial characters. ... Yet what in Schreiner's time was merely unconventional or morally beyond the pale becomes a century later in hindsight a strong, original, and farseeing perspective on the formation of self-identity within the societal context. (49)

While the travel memoirs discussed in this thesis often demonstrate the liberating nature of travel precisely because it allows the traveller to escape his or her own societal context, Schreiner's text demonstrates the suffocation of individual identity as a direct result of the societal construct the characters are born into—a patriarchal, colonial system.

The Story of an African Farm presents the colonial system as a world firmly structured according to power binaries of domination and submission: white over black, male over female, upper-class over lower-class. Each individual's identity is formed in relation to these power lines. JanMohamed explains, in relation to white over black, how identity is formed in a colonial society:

The colonial society, then, embodies a rejection of the colonizer by the colonized and vice versa. This opposition, however, is accompanied by an equally profound dependency, particularly on the part of the colonialist. For while he sees the native as the quintessence of evil and therefore avoids all contact because he fears contamination, he is at the same time absolutely dependent upon the colonized people not only for his privileged social and material status but also for his sense of moral superiority and, therefore, ultimately for his very identity. (4)

Schreiner uses her characters to demonstrate the absurdity of power relations. Gregory Rose, for example, embodies the power of the white colonizer that JanMohamed describes, but also the power of a male in a rigid patriarchal system. Gregory derives his sense of identity and superiority from his awareness of the inferior status of women, similar to the pattern of the colonizer with the colonized. Upon his first arrival on the farm, Gregory is appalled at the lack of respect that Lyndall, a woman, shows him. In a letter to his sister, he notes his shock with her refusal to obey the binary power structure of the society they live in: "She [Lyndall] drove past just now; I was sitting on the kraal wall right before her eyes and she never even bowed" (AF 151). Gregory grows to love Lyndall and wants to be able to care for her when she is ill, but cannot fathom how to do that as a man, so he dresses as a woman and acts as her caregiver (without her knowledge) until her death. Gregory's psychology is entirely trapped in society's binary codes of power, so much so that he is unable to move beyond—or travel past—the dominant male role he is dictated to play. Similarly, the characters trapped in submissive societal roles, such as Lyndall as a woman and Waldo as a lower-class worker, despite both being of the white dominant race, find that they too

are utterly trapped and unable to travel outside of the power divisions that define their colonial society.

Travel is a key theme of the novel, despite the static location of the farm Schreiner describes. As a microcosm of colonial Africa, the children living on the farm have parents of different European heritage, but know only of life in Africa. Just as the African people did not have the choice of travel that the colonial pioneers who travelled to their land did, the children on the farm do not have the means to leave the farm, yet they are exposed to the positive and—more often—negative influence of visitors. The most compelling example of such a visitor is Bonaparte Blenkins, who savagely beats Waldo for eating pears in the attic when the young boy was actually reading and expanding his intelligence, and destroys Waldo's sheep-shearing invention, which the boy had laboured on for nine months, while at the same time claiming to be Waldo's surrogate father and God. The character of Blenkins serves to portray the power handed over to white men in the colonial structure of Africa, as well as the abuse of this power upon those in marginal positions in society. Monsman notes that the marginal position of the children is, by extension, representative of the African people under colonial rule:

[Schreiner's] insight is that society cannot have just one "story," that of the colonial master, but must listen to many stories told by the voices of children, women, and by extension, the land and all its inhabitants.
(xiv)

Schreiner's text portrays the complexity of the power relations involved in race, gender and class identities. Waldo, for example, has the advantage of being a white male in a colonial society but is under the will of the Boer

woman because she is a farm owner and therefore of higher class and power. Each individual has his or her own “story,” which is highly determined by where he or she happens to sit in relation to other power structures.

Cherry Clayton notes that the relationships of the farm inhabitants serve another function: “[t]he narrative sets up complex, individual relationships with truth that simultaneously reveal truth as a function of quest, journey, and process” (55). The central characters of Waldo and Lyndall manage to leave the farm and undertake journeys, but both characters’ journeys end in a circular pattern with their life goals frustrated by their marginal positions in a colonial system. This colonial system is entrenched in a farming way of life that is determined along patrilineal lines, suggesting that the orphaned nature of both Waldo and Lyndall is an overt symbol of their marginal positions (Clayton 56). Their marginal positions limit their ability to form a true self-identity, uncontrolled by societal constructs.

Schreiner presents the interconnectedness of gender, race and class domination in *The Story of an African Farm*. In her own life (after the publication of *African Farm*), she studied Social Darwinism and concluded that it was flawed by “its rationale in defending race, gender, and class inequality” (Berkman 77). Joyce Avrech Berkman states that “[Schreiner] alone realized in its logic the interconnectedness of all three modes of domination” (77). The societal constructs of gender, class, and race are such oppressive forces in the characters’ existence that when characters such as Lyndall (marginalized by gender), Waldo (marginalized by social class) or the

African farm servants (marginalized by race), attempt to move beyond the margins, they are harshly reprimanded by those in power and taught that only by compromising their ideals may they survive.

Trapped by gender

Lyndall is the central character of *The Story of an African Farm*, followed closely by Waldo, and an early draft of the manuscript reveals that Schreiner had titled it "Lyndall," demonstrating the key role of this character. The intense focus on the character of Lyndall allows Schreiner to voice her feminist opinions and challenge the societal structure of patriarchy, in which a woman is totally dependent on men for social standing, income and education. The lengthy monologues given to Lyndall, despite being somewhat "preachy" and too obviously a mouth-piece for the author, remain important as one of the first powerful feminist voices. Claudia Roth Pierpont concludes:

Schreiner, who had little ability for characterization, spoke directly through her heroine, and whatever the artistic failings of the method, the result for the reader was a startling access of self-consciousness, a woman's voice newly direct and insolent and bitter. (6)

Lyndall and Em are young girls who live on the farm, under the guardianship of the Boer woman. While Waldo, the son of the German farmhand Otto, passes his day tending the sheep, the young stepsisters generally pass their days in boredom since there are African servants minding the duties of the farmhouse. From a young age, Lyndall desires to leave the farm and to escape its drudgery by being sent away to school. In contrast, Em hasn't really ever considered leaving the farm. Lyndall mocks Em's

assumptions and says, with her lip trembling scornfully, "And you think that I am going to stay *here* always?" (AF 10). Lyndall claims that she will make the Boer woman send her away to school so that when she is older, "'there will be nothing that I do not know'" (AF 11). Lyndall makes good on her promise to get sent away to school and, after three years, returns to the farm. She explains to Waldo how her schooling lacked substance because it was a school for girls:

...I have discovered that of all cursed places under the sun, where the hungriest soul can hardly pick up a few grains of knowledge, a girl's boarding school is the worst. They are called finishing schools, and the name tells accurately what they are. They finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate. They are nice adapted machines for experimenting on the question, 'Into how little space can a human soul be crushed?' (AF 132)

Lyndall is passionate on the subject of women's subjugation and expresses her frustration to Waldo that no one else seems to think about it or want to talk about it. She tells Waldo that boys and girls are born with equal ambitions but that society shapes their destinies according to gender:

"...the world tells us what we are to be, and shapes us by the ends it sets before us. To you it says – *Work*; and to us it says – *Seem*! To you it says – As you approximate to man's highest ideal of God, your arm is strong and your knowledge great, and the power of labor is with you, so you shall gain all that human heart desires. (AF 135)

Lyndall possess society's greatest advantage for a women: exceptional beauty. She admonishes society for valuing only beauty in women: "Look at this little chin of mine, Waldo, with the dimple in it. It is but a small part of my person; but though I had knowledge of all things under the sun, and the wisdom to use it, and the deep loving heart of an angel, it would not stead me

through life like this little chin" (AF 135). Lyndall continues to strongly criticize patriarchy in lengthy monologues, which effectively provide a feminist platform for nineteenth-century readers of *The Story of an African Farm*.

Despite her passion and remarkably articulate nature, Lyndall is not able to overcome the restrictions imposed on the female gender. While away at school, she revolts against the restrictions on female sexuality and engages in pre-marital sex with a man. But back on the farm, she realizes she is pregnant. From here, she spirals to her tragic downfall. In desperation, she asks another man, Gregory Rose, to marry her—but only on the condition that he will never ask anything of her, essentially creating an unconventional marriage where the woman is the dictator. Gregory quickly agrees to submit to her request. However, Lyndall's lover arrives on the farm and, although she does not want anything to do with a traditional marriage, she cannot resist her feelings for him and they decide to leave town together and live unwed with the baby. The events leading up to and after the birth of Lyndall's baby are deliberately left unclear to the reader, but Gregory embarks on a search for Lyndall and finds that her baby died shortly after birth and that Lyndall is now alone and on her death bed.

Lyndall's downward spiral should not be seen as a conventional literary retribution for her "sins" of pre-marital sex and the birth of an illegitimate child because she does not express the conventional feelings of guilt or remorse. Instead, this tragic downfall is a strong statement on the impossible situation of being a woman and of fulfilling independent ideals in a dominant patriarchal

society. Her refusal to compromise her feminist ideals leads to her tragic end and underscores the dominating theme of *The Story of an African Farm*: “the crushing suppression of possibility in women’s lives” (Pierpont 6).

Trapped by social class

Waldo’s life mirrors the tragic life of Lyndall. The son of a poor man, whose inheritance is stolen from him by the Boer woman his father worked for, Waldo discovers that his life is determined by his social standing, just as Lyndall’s is determined by her gender. More than anything, he wants to escape the farm and go travelling: “I like to see it all; I feel it run through me; it makes my little life larger, it breaks down the narrow walls that shut me in” (AF 158). The narrow walls around Waldo include his inability to become educated. From a very young age, Waldo has had an insatiable appetite for books and for learning. In particular, he has demonstrated an aptitude for science with his inventions. But with his inheritance stolen from him after his father’s death, he has no money for school nor any to invest in his inventions.

Based on her own experience away at school, Lyndall strongly cautions Waldo against his lofty ideals for travel. She underscores the need to accept societal boundaries and to work within them rather than against them. For Waldo, this means he should concentrate on achieving one small thing rather than striving for too much and achieving nothing. She says,

When the fever of living is on us, when the desire to become, to know, to do, is driving us mad, we can use it as an anodyne, to still the fever and cool our beating pulses. But it is a poison, not a food. If we live on

it, it will turn our blood to ice; we might as well be dead. We must not, Waldo; I want your life to be beautiful, to end in something. (AF 160)

Neither Lyndall nor Waldo, however, are able to give up their aspirations and both lives end tragically.

Once off the farm and in the city, Waldo soon finds that he is judged by his tattered clothes and lack of possessions. He is taken advantage of several times and loses the meager possessions and money that he did own. In less than one year, he returns to the farm penniless and possession-less. But he recognizes his love for Lyndall and this seems to provide him with some happiness and hope for the future—just knowing that she exists. Em breaks the news to Waldo that Lyndall is dead. The book ends with Waldo's death, as he lies down on the farm enjoying the sunshine. His early death repeats the early death of Lyndall; both are characters whose identities are trapped in a rigid societal construct that they find they are unable to move beyond. It seems, then, that the suffocating nature of the societal construct of South Africa metaphorically and literally suffocates the life from Lyndall and Waldo.

Trapped by race

Women's marginalized position in South Africa, rather than race marginalization, is given precedence throughout *African Farm*. Joyce Avrech Berkman, in *Oliver Schreiner: Feminism on the Frontier*, notes that the Women's Movement was the most persistent crusade of Schreiner's life (4). Schreiner's gender limited her life's possibilities and writing was her release, says Berkman:

As a woman she was denied the pulpit instrumental to her missionary father; and the politician's podium exercised by her brother, Will, the first South African born Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. Irrepressible, she resorted to the pen, and into her writing she poured her deepest convictions, her most painful experiences, her passion for a better world (1).

Schreiner's passion for the Women's Movement is evident throughout the novel, but Nadine Gordimer, in "The Prison-House of Colonialism," criticizes its precedence over the issue of race in South Africa:

...the women issue withers in comparison with the issue of the voteless, powerless state of South African blacks, irrespective of sex. It was as bizarre then...as now...to regard a campaign for women's rights—black or white—as relevant to the South African situation. (Barash 225)

Indeed, Pierpont notes that Schreiner's "feelings about native Africans—not her official late-in-life position but her frequently and publicly expressed feelings of condescension and aversion—offer a problem to anyone seeking to award her a medal for human or political enlightenment" (29).

The Story of an African Farm offers an exceedingly marginal position to the black characters, who are only noted on the sidelines of scenes and instead of being named are referred to generally by their race, such as "the Kaffir girl." In addition, some of the adjectives used by the narrator in reference to the black Africans are problematic, such as "stared stupidly" (AF 15) suggesting an inferior intelligence, and "lips hideously protruding" (AF 46), suggesting an inferior physical appearance. In addition, the servants are often seen to be laughing at the expense of the white characters and, while this might be seen as a form of subversion on the part of the Africans, it also tends to imply a devious or disloyal nature. For instance, when the German

farm hand Otto is being reprimanded by the Boer woman, he is confused and seeks help from a Hottentot woman. Her response to the old man seems cruel, especially since he is a sympathetic character and has just demonstrated exceptional generosity to a destitute Kaffir woman and her newborn baby:

She was his friend; she would tell him kindly the truth. The woman answered by a loud, ringing laugh.
"Give it him, old missis! Give it him!"
It was so nice to see the white man who had been master hunted down. The coloured woman laughed, and threw a dozen mealie grains in her mouth to chew. (AF 49)

This section does, however, share the thoughts of a black person and the absurdities of power relations on the farm—a microcosm of South African society. Schreiner's text presents the suffocation of individual identity by power relations in that Otto is perceived solely as the "white man" or "master" through the black servant's eyes, but also the absurdity of power relations in that a white man is master one moment and in the next is but a "Kaffir's dog" (AF 48).

The characters of *The Story of an African Farm*—black and white—are trapped on the farm and, by extension, South Africa and its power dichotomies. Throughout the text, the nature of domineering power over others is exposed as absurd. For instance, the Boer woman revels in her power, lashing out indiscriminately at the children and servants, yet maintains her submissive role as a woman with Bonaparte. And yet, despite the absurdity of the power divisions, the characters are more comfortable when the power lines are clearly drawn and understood. When the lines are clear,

each individual knows his societal role and what is expected of him, but when they are crossed—even by only one individual—all members become nervous. This is the effect Lyndall has upon the inhabitants of the farm when she orders Bonaparte to move out of her way:

“Move!” she said to Bonaparte, who stood in the door; and he, Bonaparte the invincible, in the hour of his triumph, moved to give her place.
The Hottentot ceased to laugh, and an uncomfortable silence fell on all the three in the doorway. (AF 50)

Schreiner’s overarching vision of domineering and submissive power relations in *African Farm*, while not focusing specifically on race relations, does expose the absurdity of power “over” others and extends to a societal critique on *all* power dicotomies: male/female, upper-class/lower-class, and black/white. The characters who embrace and choose to employ these power relations on the farm are shown to be particularly ridiculous: Gregory Rose demands deference from women and ends up cross-dressing to avoid being a submissive male; the Boer woman thrives on the power she has over the farm inhabitants and yet is easily duped into submission by Bonaparte; and Bonaparte revels in his power on the farm but loses it by being caught red-handed by the Boer woman trying to seduce another woman. The characters who accept their societal role as submissive, such as Em, Otto and the servants, are depicted as trapped on the farm for life and continually exposed to the whims of the power-hungry characters. And finally, the characters who try to move beyond the societal role designated to them—Lyndall and

Waldo—are portrayed as tragic characters, overcome by the oppressive power of societal constructs (gender, class, race). The intense focus Schreiner gives to Lyndall and Waldo underscores the importance of their struggle against a suffocating system which does not allow individuals to seek their own identity and emphasizes in their defeat that escape is impossible. At least for now.

Chapter Two

Out of Africa: Creating an Identity, Creating an Africa

Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* stands in striking contrast to the grimness of Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. While Schreiner sets out specifically to provide a realistic portrayal of colonial life in Africa, where individual identity is confined to the social boundaries of race, class, and gender, Blixen constructs an Africa that is a locale of freedom, where one can escape the social boundaries of "real" life in Europe. While Schreiner's "realistic" portrayal of life in Africa generates a sense of constriction, a suffocation of individual identity and of life itself, Blixen's narrator Baroness Blixen describes the abundance of air in "her" Africa, implying that living in Africa is like living in the Heavens: "Looking back on a sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by the feeling of having lived for a time up in the air" (OA 13-14).

While some of Schreiner's readers were disappointed with her failure to provide them with "ravening lions, and hair-breadth escapes" (Schreiner xiv), Blixen's readers are given precisely this sort of exoticism: lion hunts, noble savages and courageous yet romantic men. As Susan Hardy Aiken notes, even the contemporary reader is easily captivated by *Out of Africa's* literary beauty, despite its problematic political position:

One of the gravest difficulties facing a contemporary reader is the conflict one must negotiate between the sheer lyric beauty of this book

and the disconcerting knowledge of the historical circumstances that formed its conditions of possibility. (8, 1994)

The exotic Africa that Blixen creates falls within a mainstream tradition that portrays Africa as a “secular utopia” (JanMohamed 49). Edward Said defines such constructed portrayals as part of the discourse of “Orientalism,” noting that the “Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). Blixen's Africa is an esthetic construct, an Africa that will not only satisfy the need for exoticism in her North American and European readers, but also allow her to escape the restrictive boundaries of her colonial and gendered identity. Kristjana Gunnars notes, however, that in creating this construct Blixen not only risks appropriating the country of Kenya for the benefit of her story, but also her own voice:

The writer becomes like the Colonist and the subject [Blixen] becomes the helpless, resigned Native who, like a prison, entertains private, subversive thoughts that are never spoken. The subject/Native/prisoner's voice is appropriated by the dominating writer. (34, 1994)

Both *The Story of an African Farm* and *Out of Africa* refuse to sit squarely in one category of writing, crossing back and forth between the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction.⁵ Schreiner's writing achieves what her characters are not able to: it crosses the boundaries of a patriarchal tradition and stands as one of the first novels of the “Women's movement.” Despite the

⁵ Feminist critics, such as Mary Jacobus, argue that the transgression of literary boundaries, while sometimes perceived to be a form of literary weakness, is actually a form of defiance, an act of subversion.

political achievement of Schreiner's work, she has been criticized for a lack of literary ability, and in particular for the autobiographical tendencies of her novel. This criticism stems from a male writing tradition which confines "good" writing to the established genres and structures of a male-dominated canon. Fifty years later, critics applaud Blixen's writing for its un-categorizable nature, in contrast to the attacks that plagued Schreiner's work. Aiken summarizes why *Out of Africa* defies easy classification:

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

Out of Africa shares with *The Story of an African Farm* the theme of travel—a desire to travel across the rigid boundaries set by society, which are intricately related to individual identity formation. But while *The Story of an African Farm* portrays the impossibility of travel, *Out of Africa* illustrates the liberating potential of the ability to cross boundaries. Travel allows the narrator to cross the boundaries of her European society and to enter a world where Western assumptions are dissolved. While Schreiner's characters are trapped in the binary structures of male/female, white/black, and upper-class/lower-class, Blixen's narrator transports her readers to a locale where such Western binary structures no longer hold true—where even "God and the Devil are one" (*QA* 27). *Out of Africa* can be seen to be "simultaneously disclosing and dissolving the ideology of absolute boundaries" (Aiken 211, 1990).

In transporting herself to Africa, Karen Blixen is able to shed her European identity and create a preferable persona. No longer does she need to be a “proper” woman constricted by formal dress and also by the lack of power resulting from her female gender. In Africa she is able to assume entitlements normally reserved for men—dressing in androgynous safari wear, roaming the wilderness holding the power of a gun, and managing her own farm. No longer will she be the meekest of society, as were European women; she will be the “master” of hundreds of farm servants in Africa. To make this identity transformation a reality, Karen Blixen (then Karen Dinesen) agreed to a marriage of convenience with Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke in 1913. After their marriage in Africa, they began to make Blixen’s dreams come true—camping, hunting and starting their own coffee farm with money funded from both families. The later details of Blixen’s life in Africa did not, however, meet her idealized expectations. Blixen soon found herself coping with the loneliness of her life in Africa (especially since her philandering husband was rarely home), with managing a doomed coffee farm, and with dealing with a severe case of syphilis contracted from her husband.

Out of Africa represents an idealized realization of Karen Blixen’s expectations, or as Judith Thurman suggests, “a sublime repair job” (283) of her actual lived experiences. The hypnotizing rhythm and distancing effect of a traditional story’s opening words “Once upon a time” are echoed in *Out of Africa*’s opening words “I had a farm in Africa.” Rather than choose, as Schreiner did, to describe the painful and oppressive role that societal

constructs have had upon her life, Blixen chooses to tell the readers a “story” rather than to present a traditional memoir. The complexity of the narrative construction in *Out of Africa* lies in the interplay between what seems to be a non-fictional account of a woman’s life in Africa and the storytelling devices that Blixen employs throughout. Her narrator assures the reader of the text’s accuracy: “When I write down as accurately as possible my experiences on the farm, with the country and with some of the inhabitants of the plains and woods, it may have a sort of historical interest” (OA 28). Robert Langbaum notes, however, that the story-like nature of *Out of Africa* forces the “real” Africa as well as the “real” Karen Blixen to conform to the needs of the story:

...it takes place in an Africa which is at once so “real”, so different from us, and yet, miraculously, the materialization of European myths about otherness—about nature, the past and the unfallen world. To render all this, the facts about Africa and about Isak Dinesen’s life there have had to pass through a very special imagination to be set forth with a great deal of conscious art. (121)

Every story needs its hero/heroine, and *Out of Africa* offers to its readers the narrator Baroness Blixen. Using this narrative persona, Blixen portrays to her readers an idealized version of herself: a self that prefers an ambivalent stance on colonization, despite being an active participant in the colonial farming of African land; a self that is an independent woman, capable of managing a large farm and all its workers; and a self that, although powerful, is also compassionate and recognizes the individuality of those she is “master” of. It is the locale of Africa that enables her self to meet its full potential because in Africa she finds a place of belonging: “Here I am, where I ought to be” (OA 14). This self is a construct, a part of the complex blending

of fiction and non-fiction in Blixen's narrative structure. In this chapter, we shall see how the narrator Baroness Blixen is what the author Karen Blixen wanted to be, and what she wanted others (her readers, the public) to perceive her as: an ambivalent colonizer, an independent woman and a compassionate master.

An ambivalent colonizer

The text opens with “I *had* a farm in Africa” [emphasis mine]—immediately placing the narrator, Baroness Blixen, out of Africa, and the farm in the past. Throughout the text, the narrator expresses ambivalence towards the colonial project in Africa, which included the establishment of farms, and swings back and forth between the perspectives of colonizer and anti-colonizer. Baroness Blixen moves, for example, from reveling in the immense views and beauty of untouched nature to admiring how the clear-cut squares of farms are attractive amidst the “wildness and irregularity of the country” (OA 16). She suggests that her farm is a natural human progression, thereby justifying the colonial farming system that she is part of: “I was filled with admiration for my coffee-plantation, that lay quite bright green in the grey-green land, and I realized how keenly the human mind yearns for geometrical figures” (OA 16). These “geometric figures” represent the “imprint [of] ownership, domination, and static difference” (Aiken 211, 1990) of colonialism in Africa. In another example, the narrator describes how beautiful Africa is because of its natural landscape that had “no fat on it and no luxuriance anywhere” (OA 13) but then moves on to note that it is human nature to long

for the city: "it draws your mind to it, by a mental law of gravitation" (OA 19).

Simon Lewis argues that Blixen attempts to naturalize her ownership of a farm in Africa as a "part of the natural order of things" (64) as a means of avoiding direct attention to the actual "violent social displacement" (68) of the Gikuyu people in the Ngong Hills. Aiken argues, however, that this movement back and forth between what seem to be disparate perspectives is a conscious strategy on the part of the author:

In so far as the reader identifies with the Anglo-European perspective, one of the crucial projects of *Out of Africa* is to disrupt our ordinary ways of seeing and reading, a progressive estrangement inseparable from the text's exploration of its own problematic position in relation to the colonialist, phallogentric frame of reference. (Aiken 229, 1990)

Does Blixen intend her text to be a disruption of the dominant colonial perspective, as Aiken argues? Neither the text nor Karen Blixen herself provide any easy answers. Clearly, Blixen did not want to be perceived as entirely "pro-colonial," despite actively participating in colonialism. And yet, she stated that she was drawn to Africa precisely because of the power structures embedded within the colonial system:

Life out there was, I believe, rather like 18th century England: one might often be hard up for cash, but life was still rich in many ways, with the lovely landscape, dozens of horses and dogs and a multitude of servants. (Johannesson 127)

Visiting Africa immediately provides the white visitor with power over others, implicit in the "multitude of servants." But while Blixen suggests she is drawn to Africa because of its colonial system, the text of *Out of Africa* suggests that colonialism, with its rigid structures of gender, race and class, is doomed to fail.

As the text progresses, the narrator distances herself from the dominant colonial perspective. At the beginning of the text, Baroness Blixen clearly identifies with her position as the farm owner and sees the natives as her farm workers. She is the master, or “superior squatter” (OA 18), who has taken over a plot of wild African land and tamed it into a geometrical figure by establishing a coffee farm. However, as the text nears the end, her role as master is reversed into servant as the farm’s inhabitants tell her she must find them some land to live on: “With this began for me a long pilgrimage, or beggar’s journey which took up my last months in Africa” (OA 320). Now, rather than the “superior squatter” role she had assumed earlier, she acknowledges that the white colonizers took the land away from the Africans and recognizes the harm it has caused to these people: “It is more than land that you take away from the people, whose native land you take. It is their past as well, their roots and their identity” (OA 319). The farm, symbolic of the whole colonial project in Africa, is destined to be taken away from her:

Just as the farm exists only as a precarious, progressively deteriorating, marginal enterprise whose plots bear ever-dwindling harvests, so these dominant Occidental plots of sameness and difference also break down... . (Aiken 221, 1990)

In the inevitable failure of the farm, despite Baroness Blixen’s intensifying efforts to enact control over the coffee crops, Aiken perceives Blixen’s acknowledgement of the inevitable failure of colonialism to control the African people: “Disclosing the futility of her effort to have ‘a farm in Africa,’ Blixen also insists on the necessary relinquishment of the desire to control, order, and shape within our own constructs an Other being...” (230).

An independent woman

Born in Denmark in 1885, Karen Blixen was acutely aware from an early age that being a woman limited one's possibilities of self-realization. Blixen's father encouraged her to challenge this societal positioning, which Blixen remarked offered little beyond "*Kirche, Kinder, Küche*—the church, the children and the kitchen" (Dinesen 68, 1979). As we have seen, to escape the confines of Europe, Blixen joined her cousin the Baron Bror von Blixen-Finecke in a marriage of convenience in Africa. In 1927, at a time when Blixen's marriage was clearly failing and she had been ill for some time with syphilis, her resentment for the treatment of women in a patriarchal system is clear in a letter written to her brother, in which she alludes to a system which "allowed practically all my abilities to lie fallow and passed me on to charity or prostitution in some shape or other" (Dinesen 315, 1981).

Blixen uses her writing to rail against this suffocating system for women. Stambaugh states that "in spite of the many more or less esoteric themes and subjects attributed to her, Blixen's central concern was the situation of women, particularly the restrictions they faced" (2). As the storyteller for *Out of Africa*, Blixen constructed a tale around an independent woman—Baroness Blixen—who was free from the restrictions women faced in a European society. The narrator, from her first words, suggests that she alone is owner of the farm, a feat generally unheard of for a woman in Europe at this time: "*I had a farm in Africa...*" (QA 13, emphasis mine), and this

singular possessive language continues throughout the text: “my farm” (OA 16), “my squatters” (OA 18), “my house” (OA 36). In fact, Karen Blixen’s husband Bror was the owner of the farm. To diminish his role in her life and emphasize her independence, Blixen has her narrator mention her husband only once, and that is nearly three-quarters of the way into the book: “After the war broke out, my husband and the two Swedish assistants on the farm volunteered...” (OA 228). Horton notes, with respect to both Schreiner and Blixen, that “they believed themselves to be in Africa as *independent* women rather than as wives, at least in their own self-constructions” (33, emphasis in original).

The narrator moves away from traditional “womanly” roles as she participates in hunting expeditions, manages a farm and distances herself from her role as wife. And yet, she also portrays herself in traditional “womanly” roles, for example in taking pride in having the best table in Africa and preparing a comfortable house for her close friend Denys’ return from safari. As Aiken notes, this ambivalence of the narrator towards her role as a woman parallels her ambivalence towards her colonial role:

The dogma of culture versus nature, “us” versus “them” that structures the logic and ideologies of imperialism also structures the logic and ideologies of gender, which subordinate woman in the name of the father just as colonialist enterprises have sought to subordinate the colonized in the name of civilization—a construct commonly represented as the peculiar property of “the White *Man*.” (Aiken 211, 1990)

By assuming roles traditionally delegated for the “white man,” such as that of farm owner, Baroness Blixen subverts the patriarchal system. In

swinging back and forth between actions associated with man and actions associated with woman, Blixen suggests that women can subvert the system without giving up their essential female nature. By writing a woman into roles traditionally held by white men, she is able to question the validity of gender boundaries and transport the reader to a place where these boundaries can be crossed. For example, after the war breaks out, while other women are being herded into “a concentration camp for the white women of the country; they were believed to be exposed to danger from the Natives” (OA 228), Baroness Blixen rejects her role as a white woman and instead undertakes a safari to bring supplies to the troops (OA 229-230). Aiken states that in doing so, the narrator “becomes, both literally and symbolically, an agent of transport” (234, 1990).

Karen Blixen demonstrated the ways in which women could create power in a system that granted them none. In creating *Out of Africa*, she manipulated the patriarchal system she found herself trapped within by empowering a female narrative persona to travel beyond the boundaries that she herself was not fully able to cross. As well, the text portrays the strength of women who, unable to cross such boundaries, create power by manipulating the system from within. In the chapter “The Somali Women,” the narrator describes in great detail the women’s demure dress and comportment, which conforms to strict societal standards. And yet she notes that, while outside appearances suggest the women’s compliance with the patriarchal system, a Somali mother could inspire her children to subvert the

system in discreet ways: “in her hands education was no compulsion and no drudgery, but a great noble conspiracy into which her pupils were by privilege admitted” (OA 157).

In Blixen's fictional tales, the witch embodies “the characteristics Dinesen associated with ideal womanhood: friendship with other women, masculine independence, the rebelliousness associated with Lucifer, housewifely skills, seductiveness, and a strong attraction to men” (Stambaugh 2). In *Out of Africa*, these characteristics are attributed to Somali women. The Somali mother is compared to a witch running a “small High-school of White Magic” and her daughters are described as the “three young witches” (OA 157). This witch-like power ascribed to the Somali women in the memoir is a conscious construction on the part of Blixen, just as the power given to the narrator Baroness Blixen is a construction. In fact, Blixen's letters home reveal that she did not admire the Somali women for their power, but instead felt disgust for their role in society: “All of their customs, going veiled, seclusion, the harem system, and the rest, repel me so much that I find it hard to appreciate the really interesting and fascinating aspects of this world...” (Dinesen 397, 1981). In projecting this power onto the African women in the text, Blixen is thus moulding the reality of the African women to fit the texture of the exotic story she wants to tell.

A compassionate master

While relishing the greater powers afforded to her by skin colour in a colonial system, the narrator wants to ensure that she is perceived as a “good

master” who has compassion for “her” natives. She explains, for example, that she has a natural affinity with the African people:

As for me, from my first weeks in Africa, I had felt a great affection for the Natives. It was a strong feeling that embraced all ages and both sexes. The discovery of the dark races was to me a magnificent enlargement of all my world. (QA 25)

On the other hand, she imputes to herself an unquestionable “natural superiority” over the African people. Emphasizing her mastery by comparing herself to a commanding officer over troops, she recounts an anecdote from her father to explain the relationship between master and subaltern:

“Back in Duppel I was officer to a long column. It was hard work, but it was splendid. The love of war is a passion like another, you love soldiers as you love young women folk—to madness, and the one does not exclude the other, as the girls know. But the love of women can include only one at a time, and the love for your soldiers comprehends the whole regiment, which you would like enlarged if it were possible.” It was the same with the Natives and me. (QA 25)

As a white person, the narrator assumes a superior role to the African people and casually accepts the formal term “Msabu” given to her by the African people. Unquestioningly positioning herself in a role of master over the African people (despite her paternalistic kindness), Blixen seems interested in overturning only one binary power structure—man/women—while ignoring or benefiting from other structures, such as white/black. Thus, despite her appearance of being more progressive than Schreiner on the “race” question, she is similar to her in privileging gender over race.

Indeed, the African people in Blixen’s work are presented as simply an extension of the African landscape or, more generally, of the natural realm. To underscore this position, they are continually compared to animals. An old

woman raking is compared to an ostrich (OA 18), the natives “behaved like ants” (OA 26) and were like fishes (OA 27), Kamante is like a “foal” trotting along beside the narrator (OA 35), and a group of African women waiting at her home remind the narrator of a “poultry yard” (OA 39). Also, the narrator relates her wildlife hunting skills to her mastery of the African people:

When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find that it is the same in all her music. What I learned from the game of this country was useful to me in my dealings with the native people. (OA 24)

These animal metaphors serve to emphasize the “otherness” of the African people in relation to the narrator and to strip them not only of their individuality but also of their humanity. Olga Pelensky argues that this “othering” of the African people demonstrates Blixen’s use of these people as emblem:

It is ultimately as *emblem* that the native African’s greatest appeal is felt by her. They are felt to be in connection with and extensions of a nature no longer available to the European, a connection made impossible to the European through the accumulation of thought. (97)

Throughout the text, there is no clear distinction between the narrator’s self-described natural affinity with African nature and her supposed natural affinity with African people. As an example, Part 1 of the text is entitled “Kamante and Lulu.” By this title, Blixen seems to equate Kamante and Lulu—but Kamante is a boy and Lulu is an animal. Both Kamante and Lulu arrive at the narrator’s house from the African landscape: “Lulu came to my house from the woods as Kamante had come to it from the plains” (OA 63). Commenting on Blixen’s treatment of Africans in the text, Whitlock states:

Much has been made of the fact that [Blixen] individualizes black Africans; for example, they are named as characters in *Out of Africa*. Yet the operation of racism in Kenyan settler polemics is not to deny

the presence of African people but to deny them integrity, authority and agency. (125)

Unlike Schreiner, Blixen does not deny the African people a presence in the text, but the presence she gives them is problematic in that she equates them with the African landscape. Just as Blixen's narrator portrays the African animals in admiring terms, so too does she portray the African people in admiring terms, but both the African wildlife and the African people are considered available for white man's use as either food or labour.

Despite noting earlier that the African people see her as "a master or a doctor or [a] God" (OA 30), the narrator suggests that the relationship between the white immigrant and the African native is founded on mutual dependence:

If they [white immigrants] had been told that they played no more important part in the lives of the Natives than the Natives played in their own lives, they would have been indignant and ill at ease. If you had told the Natives that they played no greater part in the life of the white people than the white people played in their lives, they probably never have believed you, but would have laughed at you. (OA 227)

The narrator's perspective on race relations, however, is just as much a construct as the independent woman construct explored above. JanMohamed exposes this passage as a dishonest representation on the part of the narrator:

...in fact, Dinesen is the leader and the natives are the followers, for she equates their relationship to that between Napoleon and his troops. Her central position as the leader provides an organizational basis for her world without disturbing its dynamic balance; the egocentric organization produces a world that is simultaneously subjective, that is, defined by Dinesen's idiosyncratic perceptions, and objective, that is, non-egotistic and full of empathy. (64)

Baroness Blixen perceives herself as different from other colonial masters, but this is only a matter of degree. While the other colonial masters may not adopt the same paternalism that the Baroness does, both the Baroness and the other colonial masters enact absolute control over the lives of their farm workers and expect that the workers will obey the power binary of white/black without question.

By transporting her female narrator to a world of “others,” Blixen is able not only to feed the West’s appetite for exoticism, but also to subvert familiar gender assumptions. In this unfamiliar locale, her Western readers are more likely to accept the characteristics she attributes to her female narrator: financial and physical independence, power over others, mastery over wildlife and the subaltern. While Schreiner uses the locale of colonial Africa to expose the absurdity of power dichotomies, Blixen employs the power afforded to white skin in colonialism as a means of empowering the female gender. By comparing *The Story of an African Farm* with *Out of Africa*, not only do we see the similarity in gender privileging by each author, but also the powers attributed to travel: in both texts, the protagonists perceive travel as a means to escape the social boundaries that restrict their self-realization. However, the desire to escape the boundaries of our own social systems leads us to create mythical visions of “others.” As a result, we see the very same African continent portrayed on the one hand as a locale of entrapment (Schreiner) and on the other as a locale of freedom (Blixen).

Chapter Three

The Prophet's Camel Bell: Journey to Other, Journey to Self

Margaret Laurence's travel memoir *The Prophet's Camel Bell* describes the time she spent in Somaliland with her husband Jack from 1950 to 1952. While both Olive Schreiner and Karen Blixen published their works under male pseudonyms, Laurence takes no pseudonym and makes no distinction between herself as author and herself as narrator in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. Despite the text's presentation as a traditional travel memoir, George Woodcock argues that *The Prophet's Camel Bell* represents "an intermediate genre between the novel and the ordinary travel narrative" (24).

In this sense, Blixen's and Laurence's travel memoirs display similarities. Both women leave their home countries on an idealized quest for a "different" life in Africa, a life that stands in contrast to the one provided by their industrialized societies. Each text portrays a land and its people with the aesthetic skills of a novelist and employs a loose structure with several chapters dedicated to describing the "characters" each narrator meets. But as we saw in the previous chapter, Blixen's tale is seamless, with the narrator, the Kenyan landscape and the people all conforming to the needs of the "story" the author wishes to recount. Laurence's work, however, is more like Schreiner's in its insistence that society cannot have only one "story," but instead must listen to its many "stories." Laurence embarks on her journey to Africa prepared to listen to these stories. By taking on the role of listener as

opposed to the more traditional travel writer's role of storyteller, Laurence portrays a more "real" Africa to Western readers than her predecessors had done.

Laurence's text illustrates a transitional period—an Africa where the people live between two worlds, that of their tribe and that of working for the colonial power using advanced technology such as tractors; a colonial power also in transition, where dissenting voices such as Laurence's are starting to be heard; and, finally, a period of transition for writers, in which new perceptions are emerging, but the language of postcolonial and feminist discourse has not yet developed. In this chapter we shall examine how Laurence negotiates a position for herself within and between the discourses of imperialism and the women's rights movement. And finally, we will observe the way in which this negotiation leads to a greater self-awareness.

The anti-imperialist

Unlike Blixen's, Laurence's experience of Africa takes place at a time when the word "imperialism" is in common usage and the negative effects of colonialism are becoming well known. As a Canadian, she holds anti-imperialist feelings and makes a strong distinction between herself and the British men and women in Africa, who could all "properly be classified as imperialists, and my feeling about imperialism was very simple—I was against it" (PC 25). Growing up in Canada, Laurence had experienced what life was like living in a British colony, and took offence at the English imperialists who

believed that they had a “divinely bestowed superiority over the lesser breeds without the law” (PC 25).

And yet what is striking about Laurence's attitude to race and colonialism is the way she sees the humanity and complexity of individuals *behind* the labels of “colonizer” or “colonized,” “white” or “black.” Referring to the foreman Alf, the first Englishman she meets in Somaliland, she notes his difficulties in communicating with his Somali labourers and observes:

It is easy enough to label someone from a distance, but how could you possibly think of a man as an imperialist when he told you, sorrowfully and in perplexity, that he tried to start a football team but the Somalis didn't seem to take to the game? (PC 28)

And, after initially scorning the banality of the memsahibs' (English women's) tea parties, she comes to realize over the course of time that these women had “looked upon [her] with a greater generosity than [she] afforded them” (PC 32). She later realizes that these tea parties were one way in which the women coped with the boredom of their lives and of having been transplanted to Africa: “Nor did I perceive the need many of them felt to create a small replica of England here in the desert and the enormous effort they put into a task that must inevitably fail” (PC 32). In another example, she and Jack consult a local doctor after Jack went suddenly blind and are told that it is sunstroke and will probably pass in an hour. Frustrated and afraid for Jack, Laurence reverts to stereotyping and questions the doctor's competency:

What if it didn't? I had the momentary unreasonable conviction that every doctor in Djibouti was incompetent, irresponsible and probably alcoholic. Later, when all was well, I recalled this feeling with some shame, and could no longer maintain the same comfortable scorn at the Hargeisa memsahibs' delusions about the country... . (PC 133)

As a Canadian, participating in the imperial colonization of Third World nations, Laurence is then not only colonized, but also a colonizer. In Africa, she actively takes part in this colonization by briefly working as a secretary for the Colonial Office and in her role as wife of a Colonial Office engineer. Despite her stated position as anti-imperialist, she does not question the rightfulness of her husband Jack's work on the *bellahs* (water reservoirs), despite the Somalis' reservations about and, in some cases, strong opposition to the project. Gunilla Florby notes Laurence's faith in the rightfulness of the colonial projects she witnesses:

She [Laurence] notes with satisfaction that roads are being built and that Africans learn to operate the trucks trafficking these roads. She is pleased that water flows out of the taps and that new bungalows are put up. She is convinced that Jack's reservoirs, built to store water during the dry season, will save lives. She appreciates the work of the veterinary officer who tries to persuade tribesmen to have their animals vaccinated and the work of the Desert Locust Control, who set poisoned baits for locusts. (166)

In addition to her tacit agreement with official colonial activities, it does not take long for Laurence to adopt the less official activities of colonials such as the hiring of African people as servants. Immediately upon arrival, Jack hires a young Somali man to be their "houseboy" and to unload their bags off the boat. She tries to argue with Jack, but he makes their situation clear: "This isn't Winnipeg or London. You don't tote your own luggage here. It just isn't done. Maybe we don't agree with the system, but there it is" (PC 23). Now she is part of the "system." The new houseboy Mohamed automatically refers to her as "memsahib," and—unlike Blixen who accepted her authoritative title

without question—Laurence is distressed by it: “I could not face the prospect of being called a “Memsahib,” a word which seemed to have connotations of white man’s burden, paternalism, everything I did not believe in” (PC 23). But Laurence is stuck with this unavoidable term of reference, denoting an authority over the African people and categorizing her generically with all other white women in Africa.

As a “memsahib,” Laurence can never be “one of them,” and instead must deal with the boundaries of the social system she now finds herself within. As seen in Schreiner’s text, individuals on both sides of the boundaries generally feel more comfortable when divisions and role expectations are kept clear. For example, Laurence notes the discomfort that Mohamed experiences when she departs from her role as master over servant:

In the relationships of servants and employers here, the patterns of behaviour were formal, clearly laid down. If one broke with the traditional patterns, how could anyone know what to do or how to respond? It was not easy for us to become accustomed to colonial life, and it was not easy for Mohamed to get used to our departures from it. (PC 31)

Laurence expresses a genuine desire to cross the binary boundary of white/black, but discovers that she cannot escape being perceived, first and foremost, by her skin colour. The race divisions established through colonialism, which assigned all African people to an inferior status based on their skin colour, now turn against Laurence as a white person: “I did not then know how much the Somalis resented the Christian conquerors, or if I suspected it, I felt somehow that I would be immune from their bitterness, for did I not feel friendly towards them? Surely they would see it” (PC 34)

Before departing for Africa, Laurence had “ferreted out from libraries” (PC 12) all the information she could on Africa, and more specifically, on Somaliland. Her research led her to the infamous travel memoir of Sir Richard Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa*, first published in 1856. Burton's book, and the others she came across, were disappointing to her in their overwhelming reliance on colonial discourse and its binary oppositions. She notes that Burton arrived in Somaliland with a preconceived opinion of the Somali people and that his travel memoir simply affirmed his own set notions that Somalis were “stupid, dirty, and most damning of all, poor Muslims”⁶ (PC 25). As Said has noted, texts such as these contribute to the Western consciousness of Africa, largely founded on binary oppositions. Laurence's *The Prophet's Camel Bell* aims to contribute complexity and greater understanding to the Western consciousness of the “other.”

In spite of her awareness of Western assumptions and projections upon the “other,” Laurence is subject to their influence. For example, her memoir begins with a description of her fantasies of Africa, instinctive to her because of the deep entrenchment of these “exotic” projections in Western psychology:

May they not just possibly be true, the tales of creatures as splendid as minotaurs or mermaids? Will there be elephants old as forests, white peacocks with crests of azure, jewel-eyed birds as gaudy as the painted birds in the tombs of pharaohs, apes like jesters, great cats dark and secretive as Bast, men who change into leopards at the flick of a claw? (PC 9)

⁶ While Laurence's comment might sound oversimplified, it is difficult to dispute. Burton describes the Somali people in derogatory terms throughout his memoir. As a general classification, he refers to the Somalis as a “savage race,” and attributes their choice of religion to this “savage” or “barbarous” state.

This passage mocks her—and our—Western assumptions by associating them with elements from children’s tales, but at the same time admits the author’s intimate desires for adventure in a strange land. In doing so, Laurence makes it clear that all travellers—even those who cannot admit to it—carry their own fantasies and project them upon the “other.” Laurence’s initial fantasies are quickly dissolved when the first thing she sees upon arrival is one of the most recognizable American symbols: “Port Said, and my first view of the mysterious East was a Coca-Cola sign in Arabic” (PC 15).

The “mysterious East” that Laurence refers to is an example of Said’s concept of “Orientalism”: “[t]he Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (PC 1). This European invention was not an innocent one, as Laurence suggests in her chapter title “Innocent Voyage.” Said contends that Orientalism was, and is, used by Europeans as a means to dominate, restructure, and have authority over the Orient (3). Unlike Blixen’s exotic Africa, which is an example of this tendency, Laurence’s Africa in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* is the expression of a conscious struggle against the process of exoticizing that continent.

Nevertheless, Laurence cannot escape being subject to the insidious influence of colonial discourse. For example, she and her husband believe that life in Africa will be simpler and less complicated than life in England or Canada: “It may have been a desire to simplify, to return to the pioneer’s uncomplicated struggle” (PC 11). Laurence explains that Africa represented

for her and her husband a means to experience a place untouched by European and American industrial advances, echoing the desire of Karen Blixen to return to the eighteenth century through *her* sojourn in Africa. This desire to experience an “uncomplicated” life by going to Africa is an example of an Orientalist discourse which imagines Africa as a primitive Edenic locale.

Laurence finds that life is not so simple in Africa, however. In contrast to Blixen, she does not present a neatly constructed Africa, but rather an Africa full of contradictions and complexity, which she accepts that she cannot fully understand. As Patricia Morley comments, “[m]any of the Somalis described in the memoir are not fully understood—Laurence freely acknowledges her deficiencies in this regard—but are nevertheless valued for their ability to endure incredible hardships with dignity and courage” (11). At times, however, Laurence does describe the African landscape in romantic tones similar to those of Blixen, as in the following passage, which is remarkably like the opening passages of *Out of Africa* in its description of the landscape as heavenly:

I rose and looked out the window—the whole valley was filled with clouds. The dawn light was still wavering and uncertain, and the sun had not yet climbed Sheikh Pass. We walked out to explore our territory, and found that the early clouds swept so low that we were actually walking through them. They billowed around us like cloaks or gusts of smoke, and I was amazed that such a thing was possible, to walk in the clouds. (37)

While Laurence does not generally extend these romantic tones to the African people, as Blixen tends to do, she does occasionally stray into traditional

colonial discourse, as for example when she describes some Somali girls as having the “same timeless quality as the hills and the sand” (PC 115).

Despite her failure to completely avoid participation in colonial discourse, Laurence plays an important historical role as a vocal opponent to colonialism/imperialism. A staunch anti-imperialist at the beginning of her memoir, she gradually becomes aware of her inability to fully escape her participation in the imperial project. She notes, “This was something of an irony for me, to have started out in righteous disapproval of the empire-builders, and to have been forced at last to recognize that I, too, had been of that company” (PC 251). Behdad's term “parasite,” describing those who “piggyback” onto the colonial system as a means of experiencing Africa, can be applied to Laurence. Behdad notes that it is the parasite who disturbs the colonial order with his or her “discourse of discontent”: “The noise in the colonial system is therefore produced by the included third party: the parasite who feeds on the system and produces a discourse of discontent in exchange” (121). While the term parasite might initially suggest a negative or passive role, the parasite maintains an identity that is not wholly absorbed by colonialism, and thus plays a crucial role in the process of decolonization.

The “other” woman

Laurence finds that the social divisions of gender are strictly observed in Somaliland, and that women are allocated to a lower status than men. While as a white person she is a member of the colonizing power, as a woman she is lower in power than the colonized men. When some African

elders arrive at the house looking to discuss the *ballehs*, they insist on discussing the project with Jack and not with her, because, as her servant explains to her, the men “could certainly not discuss any serious matter with a woman” (PC 41). As a woman and a wife, her role is to “stay well in the background,” which she notes is against her nature (PC 41). As wife in Somaliland, her primary role is to bear children—preferably male children—as insistently emphasized by the commonly spoken phrase “Allah grant you a son” (PC 73). As well, a Somali woman comments that Laurence must be relieved to be pregnant, because otherwise her husband would have had to divorce her (PC 255). And finally, a Somali man observes, on learning that Jack does not beat his wife, that he is “carrying consideration too far” (PC 197).

Laurence is thus an “other,” not only in her Western patriarchal society, but also in the patriarchal system of colonial Africa. As a Western “other,” she is a peripheral observer of white man’s adventures and accomplishments. As she notes, white men arrived in Africa with a purpose, either government employment or a piece of land to farm, while white women lived “pointlessly and in a vacuum,” struggling with “really desperate boredom” (PC 32). As a woman traveller as well, Laurence is relegated to the status of “other”: “the female traveller is the excluded Other who is included only as the token exception in a field defined as masculine” (Behdad 110). Indeed, Laurence was not initially granted permission to travel with her husband to Africa and it was only after his insistence to his superiors in the Colonial Office that she

was very much like a man, a “kind of Daniel Boone,” (PC 11) that she was permitted to accompany him. Forced into a role as “other,” she becomes acutely aware of the interconnectedness of colonial and patriarchal systems. Wendy Roy notes Laurence’s growing recognition of these systems and her problematic position as a woman in colonial Somaliland:

She [Laurence] discovered that colonial rule is paternalistic; that colonialism can exacerbate pre-existing patriarchal institutions such as forced prostitution; and that colonized land is often represented by travellers and writers as a woman to be raped and silenced, while the colonized woman is represented as virgin territory to be conquered by the European man. (35)

Because Somali women were so strictly segregated to the realm of the “private,” Laurence had very little interaction with them. Her interaction with Somali people was almost entirely with the male workers on Jack’s crew, and she therefore tended to rely on these men to inform her about Somali women. She does learn enough, however, to conclude that “the status of women was low, according to both tribal and religious traditions” (PC 103).

When Laurence first arrives in Somaliland, she is eager to gain as much knowledge about women’s rights and roles in Africa as she can. She freely questions two young male teachers:

What did the Somali bride-price actually involve? Did men love their wives or merely regard them as possessions? Could a woman divorce her husband for infidelity? [...] Did the clitoridectomy make it impossible for Somali women to enjoy sex? (PC 47)

Their lack of response gives her pause, and she concludes that perhaps she has no right to interrogate the Somali people regarding their culture. Her desire not to adopt Western assumptions and judgements upon “others”

leaves her hesitant to intervene on behalf of Somali women. On the one hand, she considers herself an advocate for women's rights, but on the other, she is a silent witness to what Westerners generally consider to be practices of abuse: child prostitution, domestic violence, and genital mutilation. In this regard, Fiona Sparrow approves of Laurence's refusal to make judgements on Somali culture, noting:

Somali women lived according to customs totally different from her own, and she would never understand the reasons for circumcision and infibulation. It was not, indeed, right that she should criticize the practice openly. (37)

Laurence is intensely affected by the situation of women in Somaliland, and struggles to find an appropriate role in which she can interact with them. When a "tea shop" begins to follow the camp, it becomes clear that it is a brothel serving the men of their group. Laurence says that she and Jack "did not mind" (PC 156) and that the so-called tea shop "provides amenities of one kind or another" (PC 157). But when Laurence observes that one of the prostitutes is an eight-year-old child with a "curiously vacant and withdrawn look," her conscience starts to play upon her. However, she avoids "meddling" (PC 157) and rationalizes that at least the child receives enough water by following the *balleh* camp. Nevertheless, this child's face stays in her memory as "a reproach and a question" (PC 158). Wendy Roy notes that a later fictional piece by Laurence, "The Rain Child," resurrects this same child prostitute, enabling Laurence to imagine an intervention in fiction that she was incapable of negotiating in real life (45).

Becoming a listener, becoming a storyteller

To avoid “meddling” in Somali culture, and thereby participating in a colonial discourse, Laurence adopts the role of the patient listener: she will be ready to listen when someone is ready to share, since “[p]eople are not oyster shells, to be pried at” (PC 51). In addition, she learns the Somali language. Through Somali poetry, Laurence comes to understand more about the Somali people. The poetry is a common ground that she, even as outsider, can share with them. For example, Laurence had found it difficult to communicate with Musa, one of the men working with Jack, and there was a sense of discomfort between them. Not only was she white, but she was a woman and “he was not accustomed to women who talked as much as I did” (PC 113). But poetry bridges the gap between them:

Now, one evening, discussing a long *gabe* by Salaan Arrabey, who was reckoned to be one of the best Somali poets, I was all at once aware of how easily we were talking and arguing. Tomorrow, probably, we would once again feel ill-at-ease with one another. But for a while, discussing this *gabe* which interested both of us greatly, the awkwardness was forgotten. (PC 114)

In taking on the passive role of listener rather than the more active one of storyteller, Laurence finds that she can learn and understand a great deal about Somali culture. Rather than telling the Somali people about herself and her own “stories,” she encourages them to tell their own. Through the project of translating Somali poetry into English, Laurence succeeds to some extent in crossing the boundaries of white/black social constructs and in demonstrating the intelligence and complexity of Somali culture to the Western world. While many English texts such as the Bible had been

translated into African dialects, her book of Somali poetry translated into English was one of the first texts to reverse the direction of knowledge that colonialism was founded upon. As well, by translating, she subverts her role as peripheral “other” in the male/female social construct of colonialism, creating an integral role for herself in Africa.

As Clara Thomas notes in the Afterword to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, Laurence successfully takes her readers on a dual journey, both into Somali culture and into herself:

[...] it is also a journey into awareness and understanding of the Somalis across a cultural chasm that might well, and excusably, have seemed unbridgeable. Most of all, though, it is the record of the maturing, the coming-of-age of Margaret Laurence herself. (PC 268)

In her opening chapter, Laurence reflects that the traveller ends up learning more about herself as an “other” than about the *actual* other (the members of the culture she is entering): “And in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself” (PC 10). She learns that she and Jack can be seduced by colonial power, for “[i]s there a woman in the world who would not like to be told she is queen, or a man who would not like to be told he is strong and just?” (PC 200), and by a desire for admiration: “perhaps we had needed him [Mohamed their cook] to like us, more than we knew” (PC 189).

On her trip out of Africa, Laurence comes to a conclusion about the nature of travel: that one seeks out travel as a means of experiencing being an outsider and that travel is therefore a desire to increase self-awareness,

not necessarily to know an “other.” She notes that only travel can allow us to escape the familiar identities attributed to us since birth: “One can never be a stranger in one’s own land—it is precisely this fact which makes it so difficult to live there” (PC 249). While Laurence struggled with being an outsider in Africa, she was able to experience struggle in and of itself—a life challenge. And finally, by listening to the storytellers she met in Somaliland, Laurence learns that she too is a storyteller. Her challenging experience in Africa sparked her writing career, which later moved from an African focus to a wholly Canadian one.

By peripherally participating in the colonial project in Africa, Laurence is able to discover an Africa other than the exoticized one that she had found in Western literature, and in turn to share a more real Africa with Westerners in her memoir and in her translations of Somali poetry. Despite the challenges of being an outsider by her skin colour and gender, she adopts a listening strategy to gain insight into a culture vastly different from her own. While accepting differences—an “awareness of the world of Others, a world in which Others have to be respected” (PC 250)—Laurence clearly expresses the shared humanity of the white and black races. Like Schreiner, she is able to use her experience in Africa to expose the absurdity and cruelty of the power dichotomies in patriarchal colonialism, while underscoring what these dichotomies ultimately contribute to: an inability to fully experience and understand the “other” (whether that be an “other” in relation to gender, race,

or class). While Schreiner provides a voice for the stories of those less powerful—white children, women, and members of the lower class, Laurence gives voice to the stories of the African people, long silenced by the projected Western exoticism regarding Africa. In striking contrast to the very confident narrator of *Out of Africa*, she appears to the reader as more human and fallible—emotional, given to mistakes and misgivings, never certain with an answer, and dependent on her husband and on the Somali people for a sense of belonging. As we have seen, *The Story of an African Farm* and *Out of Africa* present the failed expectations of travel as a means of completely crossing societal boundaries. In *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, travel also fails to free the author from the constraints imposed by race, gender and colonialism, but, more than in the case of the previous authors, it provides a greater awareness of the nature of those constraints. Most importantly, Laurence succeeds in listening to the “other,” which is the only way one can begin to deconstruct the power relationships of genders, races and nations.

Chapter Four

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: Getting On with It

Alexandra Fuller's very recently published memoir *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (2001) describes the collapse of the colonial system in Africa, with particular focus on Rhodesia, and the resulting psychological and social effects upon her family. Like Schreiner's novel, in which the farm and its inhabitants can be seen as a microcosm of the larger situation of South Africa, Fuller's description of how her own family refused to accept the reality of emerging black power in Rhodesia can be read as emblematic of the reaction of the nation's white farming community. While Schreiner's novel demonstrates the suffocation of individual identity as a direct result of the societal constructs the characters are born into within a patriarchal, colonial system, Fuller's memoir illustrates how desperately the white farming community tries to cling to that system, incapable of imagining an identity outside of its rigid but protective borders.

Fuller's memoir describes her childhood and adolescence in rural Rhodesia, Malawi and Zambia from 1972 to 1990. As in the case of Schreiner, Africa was all that Fuller had known, so a mythologized or imagined Africa was not an option, as it was in the case of Karen Blixen and Margaret Laurence. Fuller, in fact, distinguishes her vision of African life from that of people who have only spent brief sojourns in the country, and "who

long ago returned to the ordinariness of England where they now remember (with a fondness born of distance and the tangy reminder of a gin-and-tonic evening) the imagined glory of sunburnt gymkhnanas and white-clothed servants" (DL 262). This "imagined glory" characteristic of colonial discourse is what Fuller aims to avoid in her unflinching portrayal of her life and that of her family in Africa. She recognizes the tendency for whites to imagine Africa as something that it isn't and notes that Rhodesia "has more history stuffed into its make-believe, colonial dream borders than one country the size of a very large teapot should be able to amass in less than a hundred years" (DL 149). The colonial dreams of whites in Africa come crashing down during Fuller's childhood, however, as blacks win the civil war for independence in Rhodesia (named after the imperialist Cecil Rhodes), thus transforming the country into present day Zimbabwe.

Fuller's text is noteworthy in our era of heightened political and racial sensitivity because of its unapologetic nature and its refusal to rely upon "politically correct" idealism. She presents the *reality* of postcolonial Africa: the good, the bad and the ugly of both white and black residents' reactions to black ascension to power. She has no qualms about positioning her family on the "politically incorrect" or "bad" side of Africa's struggles. Indeed, her memoir creates such an impact precisely because of its explicit descriptions of just how racist the colonial farming community was (for example, black Rhodesians are called "gondies," "boogs," "toeys," "zots," "nig-nogs," "wogs," "affies," (DL 26) and "bloody baboons" (DL 15) by white Rhodesians). The

children of this white farming community are indoctrinated with their parents' racism and become de-sensitized to the violence surrounding them: "We cheer when we hear the faint, stomach-echoing thump of a mine detonating. Either an African or a baboon has been wounded or killed" (DL 56). While Fuller's parents were active participants in white racism and were committed to living in a country "where white men still ruled" (DL 24), she avoids falling into a one-dimensional portrayal of a racist white farming community by also illustrating its courage, hard work and sheer determination to survive. As well, black Africans are presented with a similar objectivity. Rather than being portrayed as simply victims or spectators of white racism, they are also seen to be active in racial and tribal violence and, once they have achieved independence, subject to corruption and abuse of power:

People who disagree with His Excellency, the President for Life and "Chief of Chiefs," are frequently found to be the victims of car crashes (their bodies mysteriously riddled with bullets); or dead in their beds of heart attacks (their bodies mysteriously riddled with bullets); or the recipients of some not-quite-so-fresh seafood (their bodies mysteriously riddled with bullets). (DL 222)

To achieve this remarkably politically conscious memoir, Fuller uses the double perspective of the adult narrator and the child's direct experience of events. While the child acts as witness and innocent participant in the white racism of her community, the adult narrator is able to interject historical and political fact throughout the text to contrast with or create relevant context for her family's one-sided perspective, as for example in the following passage:

Between 1889 and 1893, British settlers moving up from South Africa, under the steely, acquiring eye of Cecil John Rhodes, had been...What word can I use? I suppose it depends on who you are. I could say:

Taking? Stealing? Settling? Homesteading? Appropriating? Whatever the word is, they had been doing it to a swath of the country they now called Rhodesia. (DL 26)

The integration into the text of both white and black Africans' strengths and weaknesses portrays a real sense of humanity on both sides. This objectivity, combined with the adult narrator's infusion of historical facts and context, creates a remarkably realistic portrayal of African life in the transitional period between colonialism and independence. In doing so, Fuller successfully moves away from the Orientalist projections onto the "other," which the previous texts in this thesis have tended to rely upon in varying degrees.

The achievement of the book, according to critic Stephen Clingman, is that the family's "private anguish mirrors the larger lunacies in which they are involved" (Clingham 26). This chapter will explore this mirroring effect between the family's situation and the situation of colonial Africa at large by examining the themes of identity and place, as well as the overlapping issues of race, gender and class embedded within the colonial system.

Identity and place

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, place can have a profound effect upon individual identity. In Schreiner's novel, the protagonists are unable to secure their own sense of individual identity in a locale which operates under an oppressive social system that categorizes individuals according to race, gender and class. In Blixen's memoir, the narrator escapes the gender constraints of Europe by moving to Africa where she is able to live

an independent lifestyle as the manager of a farm. And finally in Laurence's memoir, the author discovers that by leaving behind a familiar locale and living in Africa, she is able to recognize her own place as a colonial dominator and thus not only enhance her own self-awareness, but begin to listen to the colonized "other." Fuller's text also provides insight into the intricate relationship between identity and place by illustrating how tied her parents' identities were to the colonial system of power in Rhodesia and how, when that power collapsed, her parents' sense of identity (particularly that of her mother) also dissolved.

A sense of place or nationality is often a crucial building block in an individual's identity, and for Fuller, this is problematic. While she grows up in Africa and knows no other existence, she does not feel comfortable stating her identity as "African." As a child, she began to realize that she didn't quite fit into Africa, and that others did not perceive her as "African":

My God, I am the wrong colour. The way I am burned by the sun, scorched by flinging sand, prickled by heat. The way my skin erupts in miniature volcanoes of protest in the presence of tsetse flies, mosquitoes, ticks. The way I stand out against the khaki bush like a large marshmallow to a gook with a gun. White. African. White-African. "But what are you?" I am asked over and over again. "Where are you from *originally*?" (DL 10)

Bobo's (Fuller's name as a child) lack of a clearcut nationality creates a gaping hole in her sense of identity, and she notes that "Mum doesn't know who she is, either" (DL 11). Despite having lived in Africa all of her life, with the exception of three years, Fuller's mother identifies herself as Scottish and when Fuller challenges her on this, her mother breaks down in tears (DL 11).

And yet the Fuller family feels an instinctive belonging to Africa as its home—a home which Fuller evokes throughout her memoir in sensual descriptions of the African landscape. In particular, it is the smells of Africa that she recognizes as “home,” beginning with her introduction to the country by her mother when she was just a baby:

When the ship veered into the Cape of Good Hope, Mum caught the spicy, woody scent of Africa on the changing wind. She smelled the people: raw onions and salt, the smell of people who are not afraid to eat meat, and who smoke fish over open fires on the beach and who pound maize into meal and who work out-of-doors. She held me up to face the earthy air, so that the fingers of warmth pushed back my black curls of hair, and her pale green eyes went clear-glassy. “Smell that,” she whispered. “That’s home.” (DL 39)

Having briefly lived in rainy England, the Fuller parents fully appreciated the beauty of the African landscape. As young parents, their hopes and dreams for the future were firmly planted in African land:

When they had stood where the new veranda would one day be built on the front of the old farmhouse and when they had seen the innocent-looking hump of the farm stretched out at their feet toward Mozambique, it seemed to them like this farm could hold their dreams in its secret valleys and gushing rivers and rocky hills. (DL 47)

Despite the hardships that they endure, each family member is committed to Africa. For example, Bobo’s resolve to live in Africa is strengthened rather than weakened after she nearly dies in the bush from unclean water: “I make a vow never to leave Africa” (DL 179).

The Fuller family’s sense of identity and belonging is almost entirely dependent upon the colonial system—a system which recognizes their rightful place in Africa as white farmers, their position as masters over black servants, and the role of man in the public sphere and woman in the private. The

colonial system is, however, under siege, and eventually collapses. Unlike the characters in Schreiner's novel, who find themselves trapped by the colonial system and therefore seek out travel as a means to secure an identity outside of its boundaries, Fuller's family uses travel as a means to maintain its identity as colonials. In 1966, the Fullers first moved to Rhodesia because Ian Smith, a white man who came into power in 1964, declared that there would never be majority rule in Rhodesia. Fuller's mother makes the rationale of their move very clear: "'We were prepared'—Mum's voice grows suitably dramatic—'to take our baby into a war to live in a country where white men still ruled'" (DL 24). The civil war in Rhodesia which followed lasted thirteen years, and to the whites' disbelief, they lost the war.

As the power transfer to black Africans takes place, the country seems to be falling apart as it struggles with social problems of epidemic proportions. Mirroring this process, the Fuller family seems to fall apart as it struggles to deal with the tragic deaths of three babies. While the family seemed capable of recovering from the first death, that of Adrian, the following two deaths propel the family, and in particular, the mother, into a seemingly incurable state of anguish. The death of Olivia, Bobo's younger sister, marks a dramatic changing point in the family's life, and Bobo realizes at the tender age of nine that: "I will never know peace again. I know. I will never be comfortable or happy again in my life" (DL 88). She notes that her parents are no longer the same, their "joyful careless embrace of life is sucked away, like water swirling down a drain" (DL 95). Similarly, the power the whites once used to enjoy is

also “swirling down a drain,” never to be the same again. Bobo quickly finds her privileged life in boarding school transformed, as the white children become minority members in an almost all black school. Shortly after Robert Mugabe takes power as Zimbabwe’s first Prime Minister in 1980, the Fuller’s farm is put up for mandatory auction as part of the land redistribution process and sold to a black Zimbabwean. Bobo connects the death of her baby sister with the loss of the farm, using a myth she once heard of dead babies haunting families—“Our farm is a gift of the Dead Mazungu Baby” (DL 151)—and then, relating the finality of death to the loss of the farm, she says: “Our farm is gone, whether we like it or not” (DL 151).

With few options before them, the Fullers insist on a life in Africa and travel to a remote location in Zimbabwe, considered in earlier days “Not fit for White Man’s Habitation” (DL 161). This new location does not, however, free the family from their problems and again, their personal troubles are related by the narrator to the larger political situation of the nation. As the mother begins to have difficulties with her pregnancy, she claims “her problems are caused by the stress of independence” (DL 168). The degenerating health care system, a part of the nation’s social fabric, is now “beginning to thin and tear,” just as Bobo’s mother is showing signs of wear as she undertakes an extended bed rest in hospital before the birth of her fifth child:

Mum sighs and turns onto her side and her face falls long and old and yellow into the government-issue sheets (left over from the days of Rhodesia, but beginning to thin and tear). She starts to cry again. (DL 169)

A baby boy is born, but dies shortly after birth, after which Bobo's mother falls into a deep depression and is unable to function. Then Thompson, their cook, is beat up; Oscar, one of their dogs, is found sliced up and half dead; and finally, Burma Boy, their horse, contracts horse sickness and tetanus. Fuller relates the family's grief and madness to the situation in the larger outside world:

It [her mother's condition] is a contained, soggy madness, which does little more than humidify the dry, unspoken grief we all feel. But then the outside world starts to join in and has a nervous breakdown all its own, so that it starts to get hard for me to know where Mum's madness ends and the world's madness begins. It's like being on a roundabout, spinning too fast. (DL 196)

Bobo's father relates their problems to place and decides that by moving the family, things will get better, especially the mother's health: "The change'll do her good. She'll be fine once we're in a new place" (DL 208). The Fullers then move to Malawi where they live on a tobacco farm. Still restless, her parents decide two years later to move to Zambia, where they eventually settle, just as independent Africa also settles and finds its footing.

When facing the crises described above, members of the Fuller family turn inward to protect themselves, metaphorically constructing their own familial borders and reinforcing the race, gender and class borders of the colonial system. But as personal and political events intensify and accumulate, the family finds itself imploding under the pressure of its own self-contained borders. No longer able to identify themselves with the colonial powers of Rhodesia, the parents move the family from one location to another in an attempt to find a place where they feel at peace. Eventually, as we shall

see, the family comes to terms with its loss of colonial identity, which is tied to issues of race, gender and class.

Race: no longer divided

In *The Story of an African Farm*, we saw how the colonial system was firmly structured according to power binaries of domination and submission: white over black, male over female, upper-class over lower-class, and how each individual character's identity was formed in relation to these power lines. Fuller's memoir, describing Africa nearly nine decades later, illustrates how these same power binaries are still deeply entrenched in the colonial mind-set. But unlike Schreiner's text, which suggests the hopelessness of the situation, Fuller's work describes a transformative time in African history where the power binaries of white over black are overturned:

But all [white] denominations, all the time, focus prayers and singing and scripture on the War and we all ask God to take care of our army guys and keep them safe from [black] terrorists and we assume that God knows this means (without us actually coming right out and saying it) that we want to win the War. Which is why it is such a surprise when we lose the War. (DL 141-142)

The white children grow up indoctrinated with the belief that white naturally holds power over black. It is standard practice, for example, that the white farmers of Rhodesia, despite their failing farms and poverty, keep black servants in the house. Bobo threatens to fire her black nannies, and calls upon the black children on the farm to play imaginary games with her, in which she is the master and they are all her "boys" (DL 137). The black Africans are considered "dirty" to Bobo, so despite living in an unkempt, flea-

infested house, she is concerned that she might drink out the same cup as a black person (DL 65). The school system rigorously upholds colonial race divisions by placing white children in “A” schools, Indian or mixed race children in “B” schools, and black children in the lowest of the low, “C” schools. The “A” implies that a substantially higher quality of education is provided, with extra-curricular activities mimicking those found in England: “a rugby field, a cricket pitch, hockey fields, tennis courts, a swimming pool, an athletic track, a roller-skating rink” (DL 139). The town is similarly divided:

The police station is out toward the African part of town, in the Third Class district which is less than the Second Class district (with the Indian shops and mosques) and less again, by far, than the distant First Class district where the Europeans shop and live. (DL 62)

Like Laurence, Fuller, at the age of five, can feel the resentment of the black Africans towards her: “Africans whose hatred reflects like sun in a mirror into our faces, impossible to ignore” (DL 59). But unlike all previous texts discussed in this thesis, Fuller’s text describes an African uprising where the real threat of violence against whites looms large. As race relations are intensified through the civil war, the children grow to accept violence as part of everyday life. Fuller and her older sister have to be careful not to wake their parents up in the middle of the night in case they mistake their children for black intruders and shoot them. The children learn how to clean and shoot a gun, and grow accustomed to their mother carrying an “oozie” around the house. As well, they learn to believe in the myths of cannibalism, since black terrorists are said to “chop off the ears and lips and eyelids of little white children” (DL 52). This environment of violence takes its toll on the child Bobo

and is still experienced by the adult narrator: "I startle awake, in the quick, gasping, suddenly alert way of all people who have lived in a war (and for which there is no cure, ever, not even now)" (DL 132).

This environment of violence is softened by war propaganda which instills in the Fuller girls an unshakeable confidence that the whites will win the war. They sing along happily to the words: "*We'll keep them north of the Zambezi till that river's runnin' dry! And this great land will prosper, 'cos Rhodesians never die!*" (DL 95). After Olivia dies, however, the family succumbs to the reality that Rhodesians do die. As the blacks gain independence, Bobo's mother slips into greater depths of despair, losing her grip on reality and becoming paranoid that people are out to get her. And the more drunk, or the more delusional she gets, the more racist she becomes. One morning, feeling particularly irritated that the blacks have won the war and that squatters are moving onto her farm, the mother heaves her pregnant body onto a horse and charges at the squatters, screaming, "You fucking kaffirs!", "Fucking, fucking kaffirs" (DL 155).

Independence forces Bobo to acknowledge a shared humanity between the two races, however. In her boarding school (no longer the "A" school, but a public school for all races), she learns that Africans actually have full names and that the colour of skin doesn't matter: "Skin is skin" (DL 147). Also, for the first time, she recognizes the reality that whites are not a majority, but a minority in Africa:

Within one term, there are three white girls and two white boys left in the boardinghouse. We are among two hundred African children who

speak to one another in Shona—a language we don't understand—who play games that exclude us, who don't have to listen to a word we say. (DL 146)

At the age of fourteen, Bobo finally gains true insight to the lives of black Africans when she is invited into a black African home for the first time to share a meal, which she notes is “not the same as coming uninvited into Africans' homes, which I have done many times” (DL 235). Here, she experiences the generosity of an African family despite its extreme poverty and afterwards the tenants' houses “no longer feel like an anonymous, homogenous row of grass-fronted, mud-stiffed huts” (DL 239). From this experience, Bobo successfully crosses the boundaries of race and becomes fully aware of black Africans as people, rather than simply farm workers or servants.

Gender: leaving the home

The guilt and distress that Fuller experiences in the relationship with her mother demonstrates what Carolyn Heilbrun sees as a recurring trait in women's memoirs: “[m]others are the single greatest problem in women's memoirs and stories” (86, 1999). According to Heilbrun, the mothers in women's memoirs generally prefer to suffer or cope with society's conventions or expectations for women rather than to affront them (54, 1999). As a result, if the daughters want to live a more liberated life in terms of gender expectations, they “must individuate themselves as *not like her*” (Heilbrun 49, 1999). Although Fuller is unable to find a role model in her

mother, she is nevertheless able to acknowledge her mother's strengths throughout the memoir. This kind of acknowledgement is an emerging trend in recent women's memoirs, notes Heilbrun: "What is remarkable in these recent memoirs is that the mother is seen not only in her inadequacy as a model, but also as the secret bestower of possibility. It is a mixed, not to say double message[...]" (52, 1999).

Growing up during a war, it becomes clear to Bobo that men have a more powerful role in society and that women are considered to be dependent on men for safety. Women are generally always guarded by a man, otherwise they are termed "women-without-men, which is supposed to be a weakened state of affairs" (DL 69). To ensure that this "women-without-men" situation does not happen while the men are in the bush fighting the civil war, a man classified as a "Bright Light" is appointed to the Fuller household:

When Dad is away, we are given a Bright Light—an armed man deemed unworthy to fight the actual war, but worthy enough to guard European women and children—to take care of us. Our Bright Light is called Clem Wiggins. He has tattoos from head to toe; his eyelids read "I'm" and "Dead." His feet are labeled "I'm Tired" and "Me Too." He comes to breakfast late, rumpled, having slept soundly through his watch. He has fiery red eyes, wafting marijuana. He is kind to the dogs, but if we ever get attacked, Mum says, "it's just one more kid to take care of." (DL 107)

Fuller's mother certainly does not need "taking care of" by the Bright Light and frequently sends him away to other farmhouses. In fact, the women living in these farming communities perform "unfeminine" activities regularly, echoing the sense of liberation and strength that Blixen expressed as a European

woman freed to go on safaris and manage a farm. Bobo, for example, participates fully in fishing trips with her father:

We bash them brutally, headfirst, on rocks; still they thrash and squeal. [...] Dad and I take turns to jump on them, but they slither out from underfoot. Then we wrestle them to the ground [...] and one of us holds them down while the other smashes rocks on their heads. (DL 216)

Despite the sheer strength that she and the women of her family demonstrate, Bobo absorbs society's categorization of women as weak, and instead wants to "be like an army guy" (DL 74).

Underscoring what Bobo has learned from society, her father tends to reinforce a notion that women are of less value. For example, when he loses his patience trying to teach Fuller's sister Vanessa how to strip and clean a gun, he shouts: "*Fergodsake* don't just stand there, do something! Bunch-of-bloody-women-in-the-house" (DL 75). So while this colonial farming society insists that women stay in the private sphere of the home, the role is not valued. Bobo reacts by trying to prove to her father that she is the binary opposite of "bloody women," that is, "as good as a boy": "I'll do it. I'll do it," I say. I want to do it to show my dad that I'm as good as a boy. I don't want to be a bunch-of-bloody-women-in-the-house" (DL 75).

Women's lack of power in this society is made violently clear to Bobo and her sister through the reality of sexual assault, which is portrayed as a common occurrence. Fuller recounts two episodes where she was attacked as a child, and notes that her sister was often preyed on because she was a "conversation-stopping beauty" (DL 72): "old men try and kiss her and ask her

about her boobs" (DL 72). The most serious incident, where it is suggested that Vanessa is raped, occurs under the "care" of a white neighbouring farmer. When the girls' parents arrive to pick them up, they are unwilling to confront this man for what he has done to their daughters and instead tell Vanessa "Don't exaggerate" (DL 73), reinforcing the lower status and rights of her gender.

Fuller's mother has no other role in colonial farming life than that of housewife, which leaves her isolated and unsatisfied. As a result, she passes her days getting drunk rather than attending to household duties. When Bobo visits other houses, she marvels at the contrast between her mother and other mothers, such as Pru Hilderbrand, who makes homemade breads and butter, and whose boys "do not have itchy bums and worms and bites up their arms from fleas." Also, Pru, unlike her mother, "doesn't like to drink beer or wine and she hates the Club." Pru's house smells of "disinfectant and clean sheets" and "there are soft, secret places in that house for a child to feel comfortable and safe" (DL 117). Despite her mother's failings as a housewife, Fuller acknowledges and admires her mother's strength under pressure, as for example when she used her medical knowledge to single-handedly save the servant Violet's life after she had been viciously attacked. Generally, however, her mother sinks deeper and deeper into depression in her isolated life as a housewife on a rural farm.

An important component of her mother's traditional role as farmer's wife is to bear children, and the death of three of her babies significantly

contributes to her despair and sense of isolation. Bobo, who feels responsible for the death of Olivia, also feels responsible for her mother's deteriorating mental and emotional health. As a result, she anxiously prays for her mother to get pregnant again after Olivia's death and grows exceptionally attached to the unborn child and the possibilities of healing that she feels it can bring. When this baby dies after birth, Bobo is enraged that the family is not acknowledging her grief. Later, however, she acts as a secret source of strength for her mother:

Mum has to say, "We lost him."

"*Ohmygod*, I'm so sorry."

"Yes." Mum's eyes are shiny glazed. She's holding on to my hand so tightly that her rings bite into my flesh. I hold on to her back. (DL XX)

Bobo grows to accept that she cannot fix her mother's mental health and that she and Vanessa must "move on" if they hope to establish their own independent lives. The next baby born into the family is Vanessa's, named Jayne in memory of Olivia Jane. As Fuller notes, this milestone in the family does not signal a "full circle," but instead a move forward: "It's Life carrying on. It's the next breath we all take. It's the choice we make to get on with it" (DL 301).

Class as a fading facade

The issue of class plays a role in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* because of its relation to the Fullers' sense of identity. As we have observed in *Out of Africa*, life in Africa is often perceived as attractive because of the elevated level of class associated with living a life surrounded by servants, a

status which is virtually unaffordable in industrialized nations. Accustomed to a certain type of life in Africa, the Fullers consider themselves to be of a certain class, as evidenced during their brief sojourn in England: "To begin with they lived in a semidetached house in Stalybridge, Cheshire. But it was unthinkable to either of my parents to continue living in such ordinary lower-middle-class circumstances" (DL 36). Despite their lack of finances, Bobo's parents insist that they possess a certain level of class that distinguishes them from others. This is a concept which Bobo finds difficult to grasp, and which her mother, when challenged, is unable to adequately explain:

A pause. "What sort of people are we, then?"

"We have breeding," says Mum firmly.

"Oh." Like the dairy cows and our special expensive bulls [...].

"Which is better than having money," she adds.

I look at her sideways, considering for a moment. "I'd rather have money than breeding," I say.

Mum says, "*Anyone* can have money." As if it's something you might pick up from the public toilets in OK Bazaar Grocery Store in Umtali.

"Ja, but we don't."

Mum sighs. "I'm trying to read, Bobo." (DL 6)

While Fuller's mother insists that they are of a certain class, Bobo perceives that this is not in harmony with the way others view the family and its children. For example, Aunt Sheila does not treat Bobo like an upper-class child, and instead refuses to let her sit on the chairs and insists that she eat her snack sitting on the floor. When her Aunt questions why Bobo is able to eat so much, she replies: "It's because I have worms in my bum" (DL 70), which seems to confirm that her Aunt's perception of the family as "lower" than her own is an accurate one.

In summary, Fuller's memoir describes a family clinging to the colonial constructs of race, gender and class, even as these constructs are collapsing around them. The Fuller parents felt a sense of belonging in colonial Rhodesia, but in an independent Rhodesia, their sense of belonging quickly disintegrates and travel is used as a means to cling to the colonial boundaries of race, gender and class. Initially the family tries to psychologically move on by physically traveling to a new locale. But the collapse of colonialism cannot be escaped, and the Fuller family is therefore forced to create a new identity for itself, one that is not reliant on being "colonials."

Conclusion

In writing about their experiences in Africa, each of the women writers whose work is analyzed in this thesis has confronted, in varying degrees, the boundaries of gender, class and race, highly magnified in a colonial environment. To do so, each has forced the boundaries of the traditional colonial memoir to shift by subverting the rigid divisions of fiction and non-fiction or by exploding the borders of colonial discourse by moving the “other” away from the periphery and into direct narrative focus.

As “others” in Western social structures, these women write from a position which does not wholly grant them access to the dominant discourse or to the public sphere of the political. And yet, each of them has written a highly political text, one that questions the reigning system of white power in Africa as well as the oppressive divisions of race, class and gender so integral to the colonial structure.

A common theme in these works is the effect that an African locale has upon each individual’s perspective. For example, Waldo in *The Story of an African Farm* is able to draw upon the natural beauty of the South African sunshine to garner a sense of peace despite his hard working-class life: “There will always be something worth living for while there are shimmery afternoons” (AF 231). In *Out of Africa*, Blixen describes the Kenyan sky and how it provides her with a sense of belonging:

In the middle of the day the air was alive over the land, like a flame burning; it scintillated, waved and shone like running water [...]. Up

in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands, you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be." (OA 14)

Laurence is struck by the serenity of her new Somali home, where "[a]t night we went to sleep to the shushing sound of the wind, and in the morning it was the only sound we heard when we awakened," in contrast to her perpetually busy life back in England with "doom-shrieking newspapers and the jittery voices of radios" (PC 37). And Fuller, barely recovered from intense vomiting and diarrhea, is comforted by the beauty of her campfire surroundings:

I can hear the men around the campfire singing softly, taking it in turns to pick a tune, the rhythm as strong as blood in a body. The firelight flickers off the blue and orange tent in pale, dancing shapes and there is the sweet smell of the African bush, wood smoke, dust, sweat. (DL 179)

These texts demonstrate the effect of place not only upon perspective, but upon one's entire sense of identity. As a result, travel is often perceived within them as a means of salvation or escape from the labels of race, class and gender which restrict an individual's sense of autonomous self. By travelling, one can become an "other" in a different culture, providing the opportunity to view self from new perspectives. In thus disrupting one's perception of self, one is also able to transform one's perceptions of "others," which have generally been developed according to a dominant discourse.

In chapter one, we saw how Olive Schreiner, raised in colonial South Africa in the late nineteenth century and denied access to education as a woman, challenges the power structures of colonialism by writing her novel

The Story of an African Farm. More political than literary, her text blazes a trail for future feminists and illustrates the grim reality of white working class farmers who immigrated to South Africa under the illusions offered by pamphlets promising easy wealth and free land. Her novel blurs the boundaries of the traditional genre by heavily integrating autobiographical elements from her life as well as lengthy monologues that voice her rage against woman's subjugation. The text portrays second-generation colonial immigrants clinging to their only source of power: the land. Poor and barely able to live off the land, these farmers (such as the Boer woman) are nonetheless in a position of power provided to them under the colonial rule, which privileges land owners with the labour of black Africans. This power construct of white over black is shown in the novel to be intimately linked to the power binaries of male over female and upper-class over lower-class. The protagonists Lyndall and Waldo rail against these power binaries and try to escape from them through travel, but to no avail. So oppressive and rigid are these structures that those who challenge them are suffocated, their voices unheard. And yet, they are heard, because Schreiner has brought them to life for eternity in a written text.

While chapter one examined a perspective from within Africa, chapter two analyzes the temporary immigrant's perspective as *Out of Africa's* author Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen describes, from Europe, the time she spent managing a coffee farm in Kenya in the early years of the twentieth century. Unlike Schreiner and most of her predecessors, Blixen moves the traditionally

“othered” black African away from the periphery and into the centre of her memoir, for example by naming individuals and distinguishing different tribes. In addition, her narrator expresses a genuine compassion and concern for the workers on her farm. This compassion, however, is generally paternalistic and does not move past the power relationships assigned to various groups by the colonial system. In contrast to the tragic destiny of Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm*, Baroness Blixen's Africa is a locale of freedom for women, where they are granted far more independence than in Europe. This Africa, as described by the Baroness, is, however, an “imagined” space which does not accurately correspond to the lived experience of Karen Blixen in Kenya. In order to write of female independence, Blixen creates a “story” from her own life and in doing so, forces the Kenyan landscape and its people to conform to the needs of the story. Creating an idealized female persona, she also creates an Africa, silencing both her own “real” voice as well as that of the “real” Africa in order to do so.

Margaret Laurence's *A Prophet's Camel Bell*, examined in chapter three, is a conscious attempt to move away from exoticized perspectives of Africa such as Blixen's, in which Africa is imagined as a secular utopia in waiting for Westerners. Unlike Blixen, Laurence does not escape her lower status as a woman by moving to Somaliland in Africa. Instead, her status as a female is intensified in Somaliland, where Western women are marginalized by isolation and lack of employment opportunities as well as by African expectations as to their role. As a woman in the early 1950s and as a

Canadian, Laurence demonstrates a deep sensitivity to those under the power of others. Like Schreiner, she underscores the need to recognize and listen to the many voices within a society, not only the dominant one. Unlike Blixen, who relishes the role of the omniscient storyteller, Laurence is reluctant to speak on behalf of the “other” and instead opts to take on the role of listener. Her text is thus full of hesitations, explanations, and self-doubts rather than confident conclusions about her participation in the colonial project and regarding how the Somali people perceive her and how she perceives them. Writing in a time frame where neither a feminist nor post-colonial discourse had been developed, Laurence carefully negotiates positions of liminality⁷ on the issues of race, class and gender as a means of breaking down boundaries and avoiding traditional colonial, or Orientalist, discourse. Demonstrating a sincere interest in crossing the cultural boundaries, she learns the Somali language and translates a number of Somali poems into English so that the Western world may come to appreciate the complexity and depth of Somali culture. In doing so, she does not claim to speak for the Somali people, but instead provides an opportunity for them to speak for themselves.

The final text examined in this thesis, Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, was published just recently, in December 2001. It is quickly gathering appreciative critical attention for its blunt, unapologetic narrative style, a marked departure from memoirs such as Laurence's. Fuller,

⁷ I use the term “liminality” in reference to Carolyn Heilbrun's work *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold* (1999). In this work, she argues that to be in a state of liminality is to stand on a threshold

unlike Laurence, has the advantage of a post-colonial perspective to draw upon. Like Schreiner, she was raised in a rural colonial environment in Africa and so a projected or imagined version of Africa was not an option, as it was for Blixen and potentially for Laurence. Fuller's text is similar to Schreiner's in its illustration of the entrenchment of colonial structures within individuals' sense of identity: her family desperately clings to its colonial identity, despite the collapse of the colonial structure in Rhodesia.

In all the texts examined in this thesis, place contributes to each individual's sense of self: without a place to live in which one feels a sense of belonging, one's sense of self is displaced. In *The Story of an African Farm*, Lyndall and Waldo are not able to experience a sense of "wholeness," given their marginal societal positions in a colonial farming locale. In *Out of Africa*, Baroness Blixen is only able to feel the sensation of "home" when in Africa, where she is liberated from the gender restrictions of her European bourgeois society. In Laurence's memoir, the author describes how living in another culture forced her sense of self to be displaced, thus creating a greater sense of self-awareness. And finally, in Fuller's memoir, we see how her family, desperate not to lose its identity as colonials, travels from place to place in an effort to secure a sense of belonging, once assigned by the colonial structure but no longer available in an independent Africa. Unlike Blixen and Laurence, who had home nations they could return to, the Fullers have no home but Africa, and the family is forced to recreate a sense of identity separate from

and contain "irreconcilable oppositions" and that "the essence of liminality is revealed in women's experience once they are willing to move from convention to another form of self-expression."

the power binaries of race, gender and class if it hopes to once again feel at "home."

By examining these texts, in historical order, we have seen how each woman's writing contributes in some way to the deconstruction of a dominant colonial discourse. By comparing texts from within and outside of Africa, and from dominant and residual phases of colonialism, even in a small sampling such as this thesis has used, we have seen that societal boundaries such as race, class and gender are indeed transitional rather than static, and that writing is one means of effectively pushing the boundaries and bringing about change. But these texts are also literary accomplishments in their eloquent expression of the contrasting aspects of life in rural Africa: on the one hand, the awe-inspiring natural beauty and the possibility of freedom suggested by the expansiveness of the landscape, and on the other, the hardships caused by the extreme climate and the suffocating effect of colonial powers upon both whites and blacks. Read as a whole, we can feel the intense emotional attachment possible with this continent, which like a flower, "[w]e hardly dare pick [...], but we feel compelled to do so; and we smell and smell until the delight becomes almost pain" (AF 90).

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