Ghosts, or On the Beauty of Plants and their Names in Times of Ignorance

Although Ana Torfs has been fascinated by botany, gardens and horticulture for quite a long time, she first became involved with the classification system for nature in 2008, with her two-part work *Family Plot*. The impulse came from her stumbling upon the Swedish 'father of modern taxonomy', Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), during her artist-in-residency stay on Gotland in 2007. Linnaeus, commissioned by the Swedish Parliament, explored this island in the Baltic Sea for medical plants, textile dyes, as well as useful raw materials in 1741. In addition to Linnaeus' literary talent, displayed in his travelogue about Öland and Gotland, his binomial naming system captured Torfs' sustained interest.

On the basis of selected botanical genera, the 25 small prints in *Family Plot* (2009) refer explicitly to the nomenclature that Linnaeus introduced and the 'naming history' behind it. Prior to Linnaeus, many naturalists had given individual, arbitrarily amendable (Latin) names to the species they studied and described. The great number of exotic plants coming to be known in Europe as a result of world expeditions made a more practical naming system indispensable. Linnaeus was by no means the first naturalist to use double names, but he was the first to employ them consistently: following the given name and surname model, he propagated the systematic use of a two-part Latin genus name, with only one specific surname, the species name; the initial of the name-giving author completes the name. Thus, for example, the 'L.' in Homo sapiens L. (1758), stands for Linnaeus.

Linnaeus' naming system, although only a chance by-product of his enormous encyclopaedic efforts to identify and register genera and species concisely and precisely, is nonetheless his most influential contribution to science and remains the standard today. In order to create a system for the organization of the species that is simple to manage and easy to learn, Linnaeus consciously subdivided the species based on artificially selected traits and for the most part ignored natural relationships among them.

As a student, Linnaeus had dealt with the then new idea of the sexuality of plants, and he later concentrated on describing stamens (masculine) and pistil (female reproductive organs). Rather than including the entire plant and its construction in his taxonomy, he divided all plants into 24 corresponding groups, classes and orders based on these characteristics (their number, form, proportion and situation). This method led to a controversial debate and to

the accusation of botanical pornography. Contemporaries disagreed with the notion that nature could be classified taxonomically: it was simply too diverse and versatile to adapt to such a strict framework. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues that Linnaeus' classification method belongs to a tradition of the natural science that is content with seeing only a few things, systematically; that is, looking at them in isolation. Linnaeus' structures, because they describe only select characteristics, dissolve confusing similarities of Naturalia. (1)

Linnaeus' nomenclature – which in addition to specific characteristics such as colour, size, behaviour, and the location of discovery, derived the names of the genera and species group also from people – accompanied Europe's global expansion and colonization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many of the 'newly' discovered plants throughout the world were thus named after their – white, Western – discoverers, commissioners, regents, or sponsors, or they were dedicated to important personalities. Among many other things, existing indigenous names were ignored. This, and much else, makes it clear that naming is always an act of appropriation, one that raises questions of identity that determine the course of (hi)stories. But this is only one aspect resonating in Torfs' title, *Family Plot*. The word 'plot' can mean a narrative intrigue, a piece of land or family grave, a ground plan or a diagram. The hints contained in the meanings of the title provide access to essential aspects of the concept of this work.

Torfs' aesthetic analysis of Linnaeus' efforts to work out a uniform classification scheme, and the politics of naming this effort entails, focuses, for one, on the network of this linguistic imperium. *Family Plot* thus presents an imaginary community of Western elites. Other influential personalities followed Linnaeus, as for example Joseph Banks, President of the British Royal Society from 1778 to1826, was influential in propagating the binomial system. Solandra grandiflora Sw. is Swedish botanist Olof Swartz' homage to Linnaeus' student Daniel Carlsson Solander, who went to London in 1760 and promoted his teacher's classification and naming system in England. In the late nineteenth century, German botanist Hermann Wendland honoured the first president of the United States, George Washington, with the nomenclature Washingtonia robusta Wendl.

Torfs' title, *Family Plot*, also touches upon connotations of a 'complot'. Without wagging a finger, Torfs presents the reverse side of a family context, that is to say, the authority carried

by naming and the establishment of those who belong and those who are excluded from rational-hegemonic systems, in this case, the taxonomy and nomenclature of plants. In his *Systema Naturae* (1758), Linnaeus applied his classification system to humans as well, and he was the first to range humans with apes. Moreover, he subdivided the human species according to continents, a move that certainly stimulated racist views later on. No least because he used skin colour – and later other features, like the humours and attitudes – as a classificatory scheme. He characterized Homo Americanus as red, choleric and combative; Homo Africanus as black, cunning and negligent; Homo Asiaticus as yellow, melancholic and stingy; Homo Europaeus, on the contrary, as white, sanguine and inventive, as inclined toward tight clothing, and governed by law. Attentive readers can find this out from one of the speech bubbles on Linnaeus' large world panel in *Family Plot.*

In a structure akin to a family tree, the small prints in *Family Plot* present, alongside Linnaeus, 24 photographically reproduced historical portraits of name patrons and, set smaller than each of these, the names of the naming botanist, along with a diagram of the nomenclature process. Torfs positioned this 'documentation' under a black-and-white silkscreen of the plant or fruit on glass. For this reason, our gaze oscillates between a confrontation with the tradition of the portrait as an expression of power, recognition and importance, and the poetically diaphanous stylized beauty of nature. Torfs' close-ups of the reproductive units not only refer to Linnaeus' sexual categories, but also explore, obviously, the eroticism of the plants. The charisma of the photos lies subtly between the finely detailed closeness and sharpness of Karl Blossfeldt's photographs and the greatly enlarged, nearly abstract flower photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe. The fact that there were almost no women among the name patrons seems symptomatic of historical social relations, and pushes the idea of the traditional family tree into the absurd. Additionally, the selection presents nearly exclusively hermaphroditic and polygamous plants, whose reproduction demolishes conservative models of the family.

Although Torfs' starting point was her linguistic interest in plant names, and not the explorers and their stories, she was fascinated by these biographies from an era in which the order of things at the micro and macro levels was being systematized according to Enlightenment ideas. Starting from the plants, she became intensely preoccupied with the era of discovery, with research expeditions and conquests, as well as with the details slumbering within, and the often-ignored connections documented by, the names of the plants. (2) In this way, she

explored the cosmos of the scientific-political elite between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a year later produced a second, supplementary series of larger display boards, *Family Plot* (2010). Rather than the portrait photographs (albeit superimposed) for the first part of *Family Plot*, in the second part her sketch of the worlds of the naming explorers was framed by the question: how and under what ideological postulates was knowledge formed back then? Starting from the 25 reproductions of plants and portraits, she pursued further the history of global exploration and colonization in great detail.

The header 'The World of ...' indicates not only each of the known or interesting land masses, represented centrally and dominating the image with the help of marvellous, historic maps, but also aims at the connections and mutual relations of the contexts via illustrations and documents from archives and encyclopaedias. These 'mental maps' thus indicate, instead, the intellectual horizons of the epochs. Here, along with the extremely diverse charts, Torfs also collects book covers from travelogues and scientific literature, as well as plant depictions and other engravings, such as that of the first representation of North American 'Indians'. Such representations shaped Europe's view of the rest of the world at a time marked by the growing exchange of printed and illustrated information.

We can thus travel to Japan with Carl Peter Thunberg, to China with Jean Pierre Armand David, and we can explore Australia with Joseph Banks, Daniel Carlsson Solander and John Macadam. Graman Quassi, the only non-white explorer in the series, had been brought as a slave to Suriname while still a child, and, naturally, Alexander von Humboldt, direct our gaze towards South America, while George Washington towards North America. Among them are also a few monarchs, such as the Spanish royal couple Charles IV and María Luisa of Parma, who reigned over a large part of South and North America and Spanish East India, and controlled their natural and mineral resources. There is also Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz who, as Queen Charlotte at the side of George III, not only delighted at the flowers of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, but also received petitions against slavery directly addressed to her, as we learn from one of the speech balloons.

In these universes, Torfs' text bubbles arrange biographical building blocks and historical sources, which are provided with no additional identification. Anonymous quotes of world knowledge. Also, she mainly uses 'official' sources, as opposed to personal memories, in order to introduce 'The World of…'. Yet, central to each are historic world maps, with pictures and

word clouds circling around them. Torfs thus presents, in this extremely condensed form, more than just an outline of these various cognitive maps. She traces the careers of the name givers, their discoveries, ideas and ideologies, suggesting that the history of mentalities is inevitably shaped by cultural history: colonization, exploitation and slavery. In this context, cartography as well as name giving imply authoritative appropriation. Torfs presents history through the personal cosmos of each 'character'; she shows it to be, on the whole, individually and subjectively experienced and, at the same time, as something told – indeed, by anonymous narrators. Those who speak are made no more explicit than their interests and goals.

The second part of Family Plot intensifies the focus on each of the figures. While the first part of *Family Plot* Torfs chose people who were central to the history of naming exotic plants, in the second part of *Family Plot* she shows how deeply involved they were with political and economic lobbies. As in the first part, Linnaeus is the centre and starting point of this family archaeology. As in his own system of classification, Torfs chooses 24 other plants, and these act as the glue relating their 'discoverers' to Linnaeus in one way or another. In her arrangement, they are all looking toward Linnaeus, who is placed in the middle. Her installation follows the alphabet and has the courage to reveal gaps. She begins with French botanist Michel Adanson (1727-1806), who was unsuccessful in asserting his own classification system, which uses also the plants' indigenous names, against Linnaeus, and ends with Friedrich Martin Josef Welwitsch (1806-1872), from Klagenfurt, whom Queen Maria II sent from Portugal to Angola.

Here, too, Torfs prefers the alphabetical arrangement of encyclopaedias to the chronological one. This means that it is not immediately apparent that forerunners to Linnaeus certainly play(ed) a role in this history and in Torfs' reception of it. One is the botanist Otto Brunfels (1488-1534), whom Linnaeus regards as the 'Father of Botany', and to whom he dedicated the genus Brunfelsia. Matthias de L'Obel (1538-1616), born in Lille, provided the first accurate description of African and American species, including tobacco. In addition, many speech balloons contain references to Christopher Columbus, whose journeys, view of self and perspective on the world most likely served as the foundation for a Babel-like confusion of tongues. The association with an ancestral gallery is thus present in more than just the size and the hanging. Beyond the reading, exemplarily sketched out here, is a series of images whose very perfection sows a seed of doubt about the strict beauty of their surfaces, even for

the casual viewer whose study goes no deeper.

This broadly sweeping series astonishes through a central stylistic means that is characteristic of Torfs' work. With an artist's authority, she sets her own system atop these cosmoses, standardizing the diverse materials as well as the colourfulness of the floral splendour in a graphic black-and-white aesthetics. In addition, she reproduces her finds as negatives. Slavery, one of the subliminal thematic strands here, is a possible reference for this black metaphor. The reversal process of classical photography, in which the positive of the print first arises in the darkroom through the exposure of the paper, is another possibility. In the context of this text on the thematization of the confrontation of cultures, one cannot avoid pointing out that at issue is a so-called 'contact copy'.

These worlds do not exude revolution or enlightenment, but instead appear as history's dark hours. What prohibits an innocent enjoyment of the historical – but by no means idyllic – images from the past Torfs has collected in her pictorial atlas is not only the extensive information that accompanies them, but also the type of reproduction she chooses to present the whole. The most obvious is the reverse of the background and figure in the depiction of people with black skin, who appear white as a result of this technique. Primarily, however, the people and the depicted objects appear incorporeal. The white floats like a phenomenon on the dominant black. Inversion abstracts the gathered documents and harmonizes extremely diverse sources, times, countries, languages and dimensions. It suggests the association of a fluoroscopy or a blueprint, that is, a model or a plan for something to be realized later. Therein is the haunting political aspect of this collection of materials. I will never be rid of them, of the ghosts I have summoned.

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), p. 146; 137
2. Ironically, these research expeditions also spread sexual diseases, such as syphilis.

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