

MARY KINGSLEY'S
TRAVELS IN WEST AFRICA:
AN EXAMINATION OF GENDER'S ROLE
IN DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION

Grace Ryan

"Why did I come to Africa?" Thought I. Why, who would not come to its twin brother hell itself for all the beauty and charm of it!" — Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*¹

Mary Henrietta Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* offers readers much more than scientific analyses on, to use the words of the author, West African "fish and fetish." In truth, *Travels* reflects Kingsley's perceptions of African culture, European imperialism, colonial commercialization and Christian missionary work, making it as much a sociopolitical field guide as a scientific resource. Interestingly, much of Kingsley's rhetoric regarding these themes contradicts the prototypical Orientalist notions furthered by many nineteenth- and twentieth-century European male authors. However, when considering Kingsley's unique position on the periphery of the colonial identity, and what's more the discursive pressures associated with such an identification, this individuality appears logical and, importantly, representative of more generalized trends regarding gender and textual production.² Thus, *Travels*

¹ Mary Henrietta Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa: Congo Francais, Corisco and Cameroons*, 5th ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1897): 328.

² Importantly, Kingsley's work also reflects the intersections of race and the gendered experience, as she implicitly perpetuates racial tropes in her descriptions of West African indigenous peoples. However, a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between

can be used both to further existing suggestions that female writers often produced work that stylistically and contextually diverged from their male counterparts and be considered evidence for the necessity of a more gender-conscious rendition of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

BACKGROUND ON TRAVEL WRITING

Early travel literature was predominately male authored due largely to the gendered disparities in available travel opportunities. However, women authors were not entirely absent from the field and, in Great Britain especially, the Age of Imperialism ushered in additional — though still relatively minimal — opportunities for female exploration. So as nineteenth-century European imperial fervor and the associated “Scramble for Africa” increased the acreage of recently acquired yet uncharted territory under Western purview, the long perceived “dark continent” quickly transformed into an enticing escape for male and female travelers alike.³

For Victorian era (1837-1901) women especially, newly conquered British imperial sites were the perfect “controlled,” yet nevertheless exotic, destinations.⁴ While undoubtedly

race and gender is beyond the scope of this paper, as *Travels* contains countless passages ripe with examination-worthy material. Therefore, while meaningful and deserving of acknowledgment, Kingsley's treatment of race will not be confronted directly in the following pages.

³ Monica Anderson, *Women and the Politics of Travel, 1840-1914* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006); Catherine Barnes Stevenson, “Mary Henrietta Kingsley,” in *Victorian Women Travel Writers in Africa* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982): 1–12; 87–160.

⁴ Anderson, *Women and the Politics of Travel*; Alison Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994); Ulrike Brisson, “Fish and Fetish: Mary Kingsley's Studies of Fetish in West Africa,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35, no. 3 (2005): 326–40.

challenging both geographically and culturally, a woman's European identity provided her enough territorial legitimacy and security to make the embarkment appear a feasible undertaking.⁵ Resultingly, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw an increase in British women traveling throughout Africa and other Eastern territories, all the while recording and eventually publishing their observations. Mary Kingsley, Mary Gaunt, Flora Shaw, Isabel Savory, and Alexandria David-Neel represent just a small grouping of these women, and with each's journey came greater societal recognition of female travelers and their efforts.⁶ Mary Kingsley, for instance, was the first woman to travel West Africa alone, making her 1897 expedition and the correlated *Travels in West Africa* a landmark achievement for female expeditioners.⁷

Yet however remarkable these women's journeys and subsequent writings were, few were accredited the factual legitimacy granted to their male correlatives. In fact, women's narratives were oftentimes lost or ignored in early studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century travel writing, as a variety of social, cultural, and political pressures combined to silence female travelers' perceptions for the sake of popularizing the more main-stream sentiments expressed in male-authored literatures.⁸

ORIENTALISM: CONCEPTUALLY VALID OR GENDERED?

⁵ Brisson, "Fish and Fetish."

⁶ Sara Steinert Borella, "Travel, Gender, and the Exotic," *Dalhousie French Studies* 86 (2009): 133-42; Sally Ulmer, "British Women Travelers: Challenging and Reinforcing Victorian Notions of Race and Gender," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20 (1893): 1-38.

⁷ Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism*.

⁸ Anderson, *Women*; Blunt, *Travel*; Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991).

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Due to the legitimacy associated with the persona of the male traveler, male-authored writings were typically considered the default “factual” sources for Westerners to learn about “Oriental” lands. Female accounts, in contrast, were typically referenced less for their informative abilities and more for their colorful descriptions and narrations — oftentimes, women’s works were likened to personal diaries while male writing considered academic materials.⁹ This skewed accreditation of objectivity and authority had dangerous ramifications, the most detrimental being the creation of blatantly patriarchal, societal-wide echo-chambers of falsely espoused observations regarding the Eastern “Other.”¹⁰

By relying predominantly on the “knowledge” compiled in male-authored works, Europeans unwittingly fell privy to the epistemological trend Edward Said coins “Orientalism.”¹¹ Orientalism, Said claims, is a way of thinking that focuses on the “basic distinction between East [the Orient] and West [the Occident] as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on.”¹² For example, Orientalist ideas were often used to justify European colonization and intervention, for in creating a fictitious Oriental identity of backwardness and barbarity Western writers were able to validate the civilizing missions of their ascribed metropolises.

The European focus on male authorship is relevant to Orientalism in that, as argued by multiple scholars in the field, while male writers shared a tendency for conceptual reinforcement and consequentially typically only propagated the Orien-

⁹ Mills, *Discourses*; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3.

talist ideas popularized by earlier male authors, women consistently rebutted Orientalist narratives and instead worked to redefine European perceptions of the exotic and the “Other.”¹³ As Borella contends, women travel writers regularly produced materials that refuted the stereotypical notions common to male accounts and, in welcoming a “negotiat[ion] and re-evaluat[ion] [of] their own cultural (mis)understandings,” “represent[ed] and simultaneously reconfigure[ed]” typical European understandings of the exotic.¹⁴

However, Said’s original conception of Orientalism fails to distinguish between male and female writings. Therefore, while still valid the notion undoubtedly necessitates further exploration and perhaps reformulation “within a more complex model of textuality” that better encompasses the distinctiveness of female narratives and recognizes gender as “the determinate in the production and reception of both texts by men and women.”¹⁵

DISCURSIVE BOUNDARIES IN FEMALE WRITING

Those claiming female uniqueness predominantly attribute women’s authorial differences to the travelers’ positions on the periphery of colonial zones and, relatedly, the specific discursive pressures female writers faced as a result of time, place, and sex-role perceptions in the metropole.¹⁶ To speak on the former, being neither a “native” nor male imperialist left female travelers with no clearly delineated “function” within imperial structures, meaning they occupied relatively ambiguous roles within sociopolitical colonial ecosystems. However, this flexibility was oftentimes an asset

¹³ Anderson, *Women*; Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism*; Borella, “Travel, Gender, and the Exotic;” Mills, *Discourses*; Strobel, “Women’s History.”

¹⁴ Borella, “Travel, Gender, and the Exotic.”

¹⁵ Mills, *Discourses*, 57.

¹⁶ Pratt, “Imperial Eyes.”

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for travelers, as they were thus able to observe situations from the perspectives of outsiders as much as participants and subsequently gain a more holistic understanding of colonial zones. Textually, this awareness manifested in a stress on “personal involvement and relationships with people of other cultures” over the strict informational cataloguing or geographical commentary common to male accounts.¹⁷

Race is one subject in which the female focus on interpersonal interactions and relational reciprocity appears most blatant. Many contend that colonial settlements were binarily divided between an antagonistic colonized-colonizer relationship where mutuality between European settlers and black “natives” appeared non-existent. However, these perceptions fail to accommodate women in their understanding of colonial interactions and thus negate to consider women’s unique abilities to transcend or circumvent typical European-“native” interfaces.¹⁸

Inferior to white men due to gender yet treated as racially superior to “natives,” the flexibility of European women travelers meant they were able to emphasize distinctions between the “self” and the “Other” (“native”) in some cases while aligning with the “Other” against the white colonizers elsewhere. Essentially, these women maintained the freedom to approach interactions with “native” populations openly and without ascendent intentions, thereby recording more intimate and introspective “native” interactions that both rebutted male

¹⁷ Mills, *Discourses*, 21.

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Linda Lane and Hauwa Mahdi, “Fanon Revisited: Race Gender and Coloniality Vis-à-Vis Skin Colour,” in *The Melanin Millennium*, ed. Ronald E. Hall (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 169–81. Deborah Shapple Spillman, “African Skin, Victorian Masks: The Object Lessons of Mary Kingsley and Edward Blyden,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 2 (2011): 305–26.

descriptions and added to the exclusivity of female writing tendencies more broadly.¹⁹

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that female travelers, while falling outside the direct categorization of imperialist, certainly played a part in the colonial narrative. Again, use of the term “periphery” is quite helpful, for it recognizes the female traveler as one neither within nor outside the colonial sphere and thereby grants her a certain amount of agency in furthering the European imperial mission while not too heavily chaining her to said action.²⁰ As Strobel notes:

Control of information is one feature of imperialism: the colonizer collects information about the colonized; rarely does the latter have the power and resources to control the flow of information or the context of its use. European women collected and disseminated information about the colonial world for readers back home. In some cases this reporting aimed to create a climate favorable to imperial expansion or to bring public attention to purported abuses on the part of the indigenous peoples or European colonial officials.²¹

¹⁹ Borella, “Travel;” Mills, *Discourses*; Strobel, “Women’s History;” Ulmer, “British Women.”

²⁰ Pratt, *Discourses*; James Buzard, “Victorian Women and the Implications of Empire,” ed. Dea Birkett et al., *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 4 (1993): 443–53; Gerry Kearns, “The Imperial Subject: Geography and Travel in the Work of Mary Kingsley and Halford MacKinder,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22, no. 4 (1997): 450–72; Mills, *Discourses*; Spillman, “African Skin, Victorian Masks.”

²¹ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second Empire*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 35.

Therefore, it is vital to recognize the female traveler's ability to act both as an instrument and critic of the European imperial mission.

DISCURSIVE PRESSURES

While avoiding certain limitations due to their ambiguity within colonial systems, female travelers were alternatively constrained by various discursive pressures. Discourse, per Foucault, is "a historically, socially, and instructionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs" that sway author subjectivity.²² Discursive pressures, therefore, are the exact outside stimuli that inform the construction of written texts (be they political, social, or cultural factors) and consequentially vary depending on writer and background.²³ In the context of imperial travel writing, a female's navigation of these pressures can be seen as her final attempt to satisfy a unique combination of influences stemming from the sociocultural and political climates of both the metropole and the colony at the time of her trek.

Perhaps the most challenging influences facing Victorian female travelers like Kingsley were those of sex-role socialization and textual gender identification.²⁴ On the one hand, female travelers were uniquely positioned to defy gender stereotypes and assert a more masculine identity in their writings, as their journeys far removed them from the domestic realm and involved what were typically considered virile tasks. However, these travelers were simultaneously bounded by their readers' (English society and the English scientific

²² Mills, *Discourses*, 3.

²³ Mills, *Discourses*; Pratt, "Imperial Eyes."

²⁴ Sex-role refers to the range of attitudes and characteristics socially determined as acceptable, normal, or desirable for an individual based on their gender.

community) gendered preconceptions, and moreover the patriarchal metropole climate they would have to re-assimilate to upon return.

Women occupied a precarious social position in late-Victorian society. While social movements in the 1850s and 1860s had raised questions about a woman's role in the workforce and, more generally, the role of the Victorian bourgeois woman in society, the backlash of said movements had also catalyzed a reinforcement of typical feminine identity tropes. Resultingly, English society was polarized between those in support of the Victorian "New Woman" — females who defied gendered expectations by remaining unmarried longer, obtaining an education, or working outside of the home — and those who saw such women as lost "spinsters" in need of domestication.²⁵

Specifically for the more scientifically-oriented traveler, the pressures radiating from England's academic community were deeply impactful in shaping textual production. Highly gendered and misogynistic, Victorian academia made it incredibly difficult for women to establish professional legitimacy, as texts had to both declare factual authority *and* cater to the community's patriarchal prejudices to be accepted.²⁶ Such pressures were especially important for Kingsley; intent on providing an authoritative voice on fish and fetish in West Africa, she undoubtedly catered to a scholarly audience and was resultingly forced to determine the amount of expertise she could textually assert while still appearing feminine for, and thus acceptable to, her gendered audience. However, while those looking for a future in academia likely experienced exaggerated professional pressures, even writers targeting a broader, less academically inclined audience were forced to grapple with precarious gender perceptions that in-

²⁵ Harper, "Mary H. Kingsley: In Purist of Fish and Fetish;" Korte, "Travel Writing in 'The English Woman's Journal.'"

²⁶ Harper, "Mary H. Kingsley," 25.

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evitably influenced literary production. Caught between appeasing audiences at home and textually embracing their more adventuresome side, most nineteenth- and twentieth- century women's writings resultingly display contradictory expressions of the authorial "self" and vacillating gender identification tendencies based on factors like locality, time-period, or subject matter.²⁷

SCHOLARLY CRITIQUES

The subdued nature of most discursive maneuverings has, of course, spurred contention as to the actual existence of female identity conflicts. Regarding Kingsley specifically, Ciolkowski and Nnoromele both argue that the traveler had no trouble asserting a certain textual identity, though Ciolkowski believes Kingsley to be identifying with the prototypical Victorian woman while Nnoromele the imperial masculine figurehead.²⁸ However, the existence of these polarizing binaries seemingly refutes their very arguments, for if one author can so staunchly contradict the other than it is somewhat obvious that Kingsley's work adopts no clear viewpoint or identity. Moreover, certain authors refute female textual uniqueness in its entirety. For example, Buzard argues that gender-based generalizations are procedurally unfair, as theories presenting "multivocal 'gender-specific' (female) alternatives require the straw-man of noble dominant discourse against which to show the alternative's valuable divergence."²⁹

²⁷ Anderson, *Women*; Blunt, *Travel*; Mills, *Discourses*.

²⁸ Laura E. Ciolkowski, "Travelers' Tales: Empire, Victorian Travel, and the Spectacle of English Womanhood in Mary Kingsley's 'Travels in West Africa,'" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26, no. 2 (1998): 337–66; Salome C. Nnoromele, "Gender, Race, and Colonial Discourse in the Travel Writings of Mary Kingsley," *The Victorian Newsletter*, no. 90 (1996): 1–6.

²⁹ Buzard, "Victorian Women and the Implications of Empire," 447.

While well-intentioned, these arguments fail to recognize both the clear discursive divergences between male and female accounts of the Orient and the commonalities identifiable amongst same-sexed authors. In the same way that female-authored travel literatures *generally* express multiple syntactical similarities, male accounts similarly share certain discursive tendencies, for instance a stress on the tangible or focus on locality over culture.³⁰ Given that, “in comparison with accounts by Victorian men, women's travel narratives incline less towards domination and more toward discovery,” certain gender-based generalizations are useful when conducting larger intersectional analyses, as they highlight important sex-dependent discursive similarities.³¹

In summary, modern scholarship suggests that nineteenth-century female travelers, whether a result of their peripheral positions or discursive navigations, consistently authored texts that diverged from, or blatantly rebutted, the Orientalist themes common to male-authored works. Let us now consider Mary Kingsley and *Travels in West Africa* specifically to see where her work aligns with, or perhaps opposes, these suggestions, and to examine more broadly its positions vis-a-vie Said's *Orientalism*.

MARY KINGSLEY: A CONTRADICTION

Mary Kingsley is a well-studied nineteenth-century traveler, meaning *Travels* has been the source of much academic discussion surrounding discursive navigation and gender identification. However, while scholars generally conclude that Kingsley's text is one of many complexities,

³⁰ Anderson, *Women*; Mills, *Discourses*; Linda McDowell, “Introduction: Place and Gender; Displacements,” in *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1–33; 203–23; Pratt, “Imperial Eyes;” Strobel, “Women's History;” Ulmer, “British Women.”

³¹ Margaret Strobel, *European Women*, 39.

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disagreement abounds when considering what these intricacies reveal about the specific pressures she faced.

For example, Harper suggests that Kingsley's careful accommodation of male scientists in *Travels*, and moreover her continual struggle to both identify with, yet note herself inferior to, the character of the serious male academic displays her desire to simultaneously placate the gendered English scientific community *and* establish legitimacy as a scholar.³² Meanwhile, Anderson highlights gender conflicts through Kingsley's conscious and continual mentioning of clothing, for she perceives it as Kingsley's way of reinforcing typical ideals of Victorian femininity while undertaking objectively masculine tasks.³³ And while multiple authors advocate that Kingsley's complex employment of humor was in fact a tool to degrade her own legitimacy as both an author and explorer, many identify contrasting influences as the inspiration for such self-discrediting rhetorical moves.

Moreover, authors also clash when speculating on the influences behind Kingsley's unique treatment of "native" populations, opinions on imperial and commercial policy, perceptions of the self, and actions towards other travelers. Therefore, while there is apparent consensus regarding the nuance and exceptionalism of Kingsley's text, disagreement arises when contemplating the exact technicalities of these divergences, thus making *Travels* an opportune case study for further examination.

ANALYSIS: KINGSLEY'S ASCENT OF MOUNT CAMEROON

Although it is not the explicit goal of her expedition, Kingsley devotes several chapters of *Travels* to her southeast-

³² Harper, "Mary H. Kingsley."

³³ Anderson, *Women*.

ern summit of Mungo Mah Lobeh, or the “Throne of Thunder,” the highest mountain in the West African region (13,760 feet).³⁴ Being the first white person to ever complete the trek (male or female) her summit is an important event in both *Travels* and British expeditionary history and thus a special point of interest for British society at the time of publication — in sum, it was a section Kingsley crafted with audience perceptions top of mind. Additionally, given mountaineering’s symbolic ties to notions of imperial domination, English superiority, and masculine resilience, Kingsley’s descriptions of her ascent primely demonstrate her careful navigations of sexual, geographical, and even racial (her ascent was guided by black indigenous people) discursive pressures, all within the context of an already-gendered activity — mountaineering.³⁵ Resultingly, the undeniably contradictory nature of Kingsley’s authorial positioning in these chapters is hardly surprising. Wholly asserting neither a masculine nor feminine perspective, Kingsley’s unstable sexual attitudes manifest in everything from accounts of the surrounding topography to descriptions of “native” people, and perhaps most prominently in the excerpts focused on self-portrayal.

GENDER SELF-PRESCRIPTION IN TRAVELS

To claim that Kingsley adopted a singular identity in *Travels* is a misstatement, for she consistently switches between use of the male or female persona with little determinable strategy. The following sentence perhaps best captures her dichotomous assertions: “Now it is none of my business to go up on mountains...nevertheless, I feel quite sure that no white man has ever looked on the great Peak of Cameroon without a desire arising in his mind to ascend it;” while putting herself

³⁴ Kingsley, *Travels*, 286, 287.

³⁵ Kearns, “The Imperial Subject,” 459.

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in a subservient position from the onset by claiming no association with the European mountaineering mission or identity, she subsequently explains her desire to climb the mountain with justifications tailored to the metacognition of the white man.³⁶ Elsewhere Kingsley also reinforces her lack of “mountaineering spirit,” yet continues on with her troublesome quest to Mungo’s summit regardless — thus, her actions seem to invoke one ideal, that of the persistent explorer, while her self-reflections another, that of a directionless maiden.³⁷

However, not all sections of *Travels* are so dichotomously constructed; certain passages seem intentionally crafted to portray Kingsley as masculine and domineering. For instance, when reflecting on her motivation for summiting Mungo, Kingsley claims that her main objective is to “get a good view and an idea of the way the unexplored mountain range behind Calabar trends.”³⁸ This reasoning of geographical categorization appears designed to invoke the masculine identity, as topographical domination and organization were desires often associated with male explorers.

Kingsley’s depictions of herself as a serious academic and consciousness scientist also play a role in furthering her perceived masculinity. For instance, after leaving her men and proceeding to the summit of Mungo unaccompanied, she notes her taking of “careful compass bearing for future use regarding the Rumby and Omon range of mountains.”³⁹ In other words, she reminds readers that the focus of her activities in West Africa remains that of scholarship and knowledge-accumulation, tasks characteristically reserved for the identity of the male explorer.

³⁶ Kingsley, *Travels*, 286.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁹ Kingsley, 304.

Beyond portrayals of the self, Kingsley's treatment of others — specifically other women — in *Travels* seems deliberately formulated to cast her as patriarchal and stoic. While in a black Basel Mission camp, Kingsley describes the “melancholy coo-ing” of the “native” women as irritating and terms them “foolish creatures” for worrying about the whereabouts of their husbands.⁴⁰ Annoyed by their actions, Kingsley displays no empathy for the women and dismisses their concerns by noting that “those husbands who are not home by now are safely drunk in town, or reposing on the grand new road the kindly Government has provided for them.”⁴¹ Moreover, when a “bellicose” husband eventually returns and begins beating his wives, whose subsequent “squawks and squalls” stimulate the “silly things [other women] to go on coo-ing louder and more entreatingly than ever so that their husbands might come home and whack them too,” Kingsley describes this situation with a sense of its correctness — as if this is the proper behavior of a husband and wife.⁴² Females, one would speculate, would certainly identify more with the wives in this situation, yet Kingsley goes no further than noting mere irritation at their actions. Therefore, Kingsley seems, both in action and sometimes in dialect, to embrace many characteristics and tendencies typically associated with masculinity.

Yet elsewhere in the text, Kingsley is certain to emphasize her femininity. Upon meeting a German official in Buea, she promptly refuses the “trying” man's offer of a bath due to the lack of windows or door on the bath shack, communicating to readers her staunch adherence to female modesty norms even in the wild landscape of West Africa.⁴³ On another occasion, Kingsley refrains from describing her furious chastisement of the “native” crew due to a desire to be

⁴⁰ Ibid., 292.

⁴¹ Ibid., 292.

⁴² Ibid., 292.

⁴³ Kingsley, 295.

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“guarded in [her] language,” as her feelings are but “one degree below boiling point.”⁴⁴ In abstaining from fully detailing this tongue-lashing, Kingsley perfectly accentuates the stereotypical feminine preoccupation with societal perceptions and accentuates her aspirations to remain proper in the eyes of readers — essentially, by citing her unease with appearing uncouth or tyrannical, Kingsley reminds audiences that, though in West Africa, social graces were nevertheless upheld and maintained.⁴⁵

Nowhere is Kingsley’s adherence to the feminine identity more pronounced than in her descriptions of the envoy’s return to Buea post-ascent. Approaching the camp, Kingsley recounts:

I feel disgusted, for I had put on a clean blouse, and washed my hands in a tea-cupful of water in a cooking pot before leaving the forest camp, so as to look presentable upon reaching Buea, and not give Herr Liebert the same trouble he had [the last time]....and all I have got to show for my exertion that is clean or anything like dry is one cuff over which I have been carrying a shawl.⁴⁶

Having just accomplished a remarkable and dangerous summit, Kingsley returns to camp, not boasting of her feat or expecting exultation, but rather concerned over how she will appear to those around her, specifically the male official. Indeed, Kingsley’s frequent mentioning of her Victorian garb throughout the text only further highlights what appears to be an obsessive desire to maintain a feminine appearance. Oftentimes, Kingsley takes an aside mid-description to mention something about looks or appearances that, for several sentences, will

⁴⁴ Ibid, 307.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 307.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 324.

take precedence over all other present focuses. Functionally, these subtle yet impactful digressions surely indicated to Victorian readers that, regardless of activity, Kingsley was a woman of the period at heart.

Perhaps in direct response to the academic community's patriarchal assumptions, Kingsley also goes to great lengths to ensure self-deprecation is as common a theme in *Travels* as authoritative reinforcement. Whether it be emphasizing her mental limitations or physical missteps, several excerpts of her work seem designed to negate the little legitimacy she grants herself elsewhere and portray her as the helpless spinster many wished to view her as.

For example, Kingsley often emphasizes the many ways in which her womanly tendencies hamper her ability to lead — in one instance, she claims her “feminine nervousness” led to irrational and unstable decision making that eventually catalyzed an unfortunate and costly route miscalculation.⁴⁷ On another occasion, she elaborately describes the results of her “noble resolution” to keep watch over her sleeping African crew one night in such a facetious way that the passage merely highlights her own incompetence.⁴⁸ Kingsley recounts falling asleep, not once but twice, and subsequently undergoing a slumber-induced tumble into the fire, which she would have surely put “out like a bucket of cold water” had she not been rescued by her crew.⁴⁹ Later in the journey Kingsley describes that, while her men “slip[ped] and scramble[d] down” a dangerous tree, she instead took a “flying slide of twenty feet or so and [shot] flump under the tree on [her] back, and then deliberated[d] whether it was worth while getting up again to go on with such a world; but vanity forbi[d] [her] from dying like a dog in a ditch.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Kingsley, 326.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 322-23.

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Though humorous and wonderfully truthful, Kingsley's conscious decision to include and lengthily discuss both missteps emphasizes her incompetence as an explorer and, further, allows readers to distinguish her from the rarely stumbling characterization of the male imperial figure she self-identifies with elsewhere. Thus, Kingsley's overt failure to claim one authorial gender in *Travels* clearly highlights her awareness and navigation of gendered metropole pressures, as she caters to both the patriarchal and the more progressive audiences at home.

DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH DESCRIPTION

As noted earlier, women's unique circumstances led them to produce works more descriptive and observational than their male counterparts.⁵¹ *Travels* only buttresses this sentiment, as in it Kingsley artfully describes her surroundings to the point of inspiring awe amongst readers. However, Kingsley's descriptions do more than grant *Travels* additional vivacity — rather, Kingsley's careful employment of topographical observations also provide additional commentary on her perceptions of gender and acceptable sex-role delineation. Going beyond mere examination, Kingsley employs captivating personifications to give surrounding, inanimate objects their own personalities, agency, and verve. Take, for example, her characterization of a thunderstorm on Mount Cameroon:

The thunder, however, had not settled things amicably with the mountain. It roared rage at Mungo, and Mungo answered back, quivering with a rage as great, under our feet. One feels here as if one were constantly dropping, unmasked and unregarded, among

⁵¹ Strobel, *European Women*; Mills, *Discourses*.

painful and violent discussions between the elemental powers of the Universe.⁵²

As seen above (and elsewhere in *Travels*), Kingsley tends to employ very gendered adjectives when describing her environment. While plants are typically observed in overtly romantic, and frankly feminine, ways, the weather and topography, which notably give Kingsley consistent trouble, are usually labeled in masculine terms. For example, while she describes “rich soft green moss and delicate filmy-ferns” and vegetation “to the point of its supreme luxuriance,” she portrays the clouding mist as a “savage monster.”⁵³ In fact, Kingsley seemingly attributes all passive entities, be they the plants along the way or the moon — which she describes as “young and inefficient” due to “her” dimness — feminine temperaments, and all active and forceful factors masculine characteristics.⁵⁴

Kingsley’s descriptive gendering is perhaps most pronounced regarding Mungo itself, which could easily be seen as its own character given her treatment of it. Consider the following excerpt, which refers to a tornado brewing on the mountain: “I only hope *he* will not overdo it, as *he* does six times to seven, and make it too heavy to get out on to the Atlantic...”⁵⁵ Not only does Kingsley refer to the mountain as “he,” but she also employs harsh and domineering language when describing “his” emotions, desires, and reactions, as also evidenced by the thunderstorm quote included earlier.⁵⁶ Indeed, Kingsley consistently describes Mungo as a force working against her, an incredibly volatile and imposing one at that.

⁵² Kingsley, 310.

⁵³ Kingsley, 323, 317.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 300; Italics not original to text.

⁵⁶ See page 16.

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Given Kingsley's clear association of Mungo and masculinity, her eventual summit of the peak could be read as an attempt to convince readers of her equality to the male persona. Persevering despite difficulties to eventually conquer the peak, Kingsley's description of her summit could very well be read as a subtle reference to her own struggles with, and eventual domination over, male patriarchy.

Yet continuing the earlier trend of vacillating authorial attribution, Kingsley's relative disappointment at the summit due to the mist (ironically male-gendered elsewhere) lessens the masculinity she invokes by accomplishing her summit and could even be seen as symbolic of her continual submissiveness to the masculine identity. Following similar sentiments, Kingsley's infatuation with Mungo, it being her "greatest temptation" that moves one to "bow down and worship," could also be evidence of authorial attempts to display a simultaneous obsession with and submissiveness to the male person.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the messages hiding within Kingsley's interesting associations of gender and the inanimate, her descriptive and elaborate focus on the natural surroundings undoubtedly functions to remind readers of her feminine identity, for it consistently portrays her more as a wondrous observer than a determined expeditioner. No male explorer would have been expected to produce as vivid of accounts, nor would it have been considered acceptable for them to do so. By emphasizing the details, be they the "velvety red brown" of the earth or the "canary-colored, crimson, and peacock-blue liveries" of the butterflies, Kingsley reminds readers of her feminine eye and successfully distances herself from the male imperial persona.⁵⁸ Therefore, from the actual depictions

⁵⁷ Kingsley, 286, 287.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

themselves to her frequent employment of lengthy characterizations, Kingsley undeniably uses observations to further explore notions of gender and self-identification in *Travels*.

RACE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND RECIPROCITY

Kingsley begins her ascent accompanied by an all-“native” crew and, though she eventually reaches the peak alone, her relationship vis-a-vie the indigenous population features prominently in her descriptions of the event. Interestingly, Kingsley never asserts outright authority over “natives;” rather, power and influence seems to shift parties depending on situation and context. Therefore, *Travels* again furthers earlier espoused observations supporting female textual particularity, specifically those claiming that female writers tended to depict “native” relationships more in terms of reciprocity than domination. Yet importantly, Kingsley’s descriptions of her party’s power dynamics — as with many other themes in *Travels* — also work to reinforce and contradict traditional sex-role stereotypes, thus bringing gender to the forefront of discursive analysis once again.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Kingsley’s relationship with the men is their term of reference for her, one she readily embraces: “ma.”⁵⁹ Yet it is a fitting descriptor, for Kingsley often displays motherly attitudes and actions towards the largely chaotic grouping of men, whom she reciprocally refers to as “my boys.”⁶⁰ She is careful to make sure they are well fed, accounted for, and looked after; often, she even imperils her own well-being for their safety or comfort. In one instance, though still stewing at them for their desertion of her earlier, she notices the men have no food to eat — notably because they themselves sent it back — and thus shares “a few

⁵⁹ Kingsley, 301.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

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tins of [her] own food” with them, obviously taking less for herself at the expense of her seemingly incompetent companions.⁶¹

Kingsley also frets about her possible imperilment of her crew for the imperial project, debating if she is “justified in risking the men” while simultaneously worrying little if she herself perishes on the mountain, as “no one will be a ha’porth the worst if I am dead in an hour.”⁶² And despite continually disappointing her in their fear of the mountain and refusal to climb higher, Kingsley nevertheless ensures their safety and even forgives their seemingly frequent mistakes. Occasionally, she even paints herself as inferior to the men, whether it be in their leading capabilities or their acceptance of the elements. During one particularly heavy rainstorm, upon seeing her crew embrace the rain without a second thought Kingsley laments that “shame comes over me in the face of this black man’s aquatic courage,” thereby indicting an element of equality inherent in their relationship.⁶³

Overall, Kingsley’s emphasis of her motherly capabilities seems directly intended to heighten readers’ perceptions of her femineity, as womanhood and motherhood were so closely linked as to appear synonymous in Victorian England (and indeed today). Additionally, by implying elements of sameness between herself and the “natives” Kingsley again appears to consciously separate herself from the persona of the male imperialist, as the deep chasm between colonizer and “native” was one acknowledged and upheld by most in Victorian Britain.

However, Kingsley’s motherly instincts or submissive behavior towards her crew only go so far, again displaying her dichotomous approach to gender identification. She often refers to the men as “perfunctory,” “lazy,” and “listless,” noting

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 317.

⁶³ Kingsley, 286.

their refusal to complete any task at an acceptable speed.⁶⁴ In these instances she usually describes her subsequent taking of the helm, whether it be in making fire or continuing along the upward trek, as a result of their idiocy or indifference to the mission's success. In such cases she becomes observably authoritative — few decisions are made without Kingsley's direct say-so, and she becomes the clear delineator of tasks for the group.

On the topic of task division, it is worth noting that, while Kingsley has no problem making fire, scrapping wood, or doing other necessary camp chores, she never cooks; in every instance, she calls on Cook to begin the cooking, even if he is in an inebriated state. Given its feminine associations, cooking would have logically been one of the main tasks Kingsley felt comfortable undertaking, yet she abstains. Thus, Kingsley's avoidance of cooking seems intentionally mentioned to distance herself from the feminine identity, and moreover her delineation of the task to Cook perhaps included to show her machismo over him.

But again, the dichotomies of *Travels* must be continually emphasized, for many passages will invoke conflicting ideals of authority or gender even between correlated phrases or sentences. These sharp binaries can be seen in what appear sections designed to enforce notions of cultural, and thus individual, superiority. There, Kingsley details how her European tendencies diverge from those of the "natives;" for instance, while she insists on tea as her beverage of choice (other than water) the "natives" always elect rum as theirs, and never do the parties swap beverages. Moreover, Kingsley sleeps on a camp-bed while the "natives" the floor. However, while both of these traits functionally remind audiences of her "Europeanness," and thus superiority over "natives," they also appear designed to invoke notions of fragility and womanhood,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 297.

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as each denotes a certain adherence to domestic lifestyles and preferences common to the traditional female sex-role.

Yet Kingsley does disregard concerns over formality when speaking to the “natives,” as she reverts to “their” form of English — when questioning Xenia, she says “Where them Black boy live,” to which he replies, “Black boy say him foot be tire too much.”⁶⁵ This leveling of speech could be interpreted in two ways; either a patronizing inclusion to highlight a lack of “native” intellect or an excerpt intended to show Kingsley’s considerate and empathetic side, as she attempts equal communication no matter the means. Given the lack of associated degrading descriptors it appears a communication style adopted out of comfort, not humiliation, thus emphasizing her capacities for consideration and accommodation.

In short, Kingsley’s describes a complicated relationship with the indigenous West African people with whom she travels. While motherly and empathetic in certain passages, she also asserts obvious dominance over the Africans and displays her frustrations with their ways of life in others, again only further convoluting sex-role self-identification in the process. Yet regardless of gendered innuendos, Kingsley’s copious mentioning of the “natives,” and moreover her in-depth descriptions of them, point to the unique female ability to transcend notions of domination and rather embrace a more cooperative mindset when approaching “native” relationships.

CONCLUSION

While seemingly immune to the physical dangers of West Africa, Mary Kingsley was nevertheless susceptible to the discursive pressures facing female writers in the Victorian era and thus expressed conflicting authorial identities in *Travels*. However, her dichotomies are strikingly similar to those expressed by other nineteenth- and twentieth-century female

⁶⁵ Kingsley, 304.

travelers. Whether it be her contentious relationship with gender — which is reflected in her every phrase — descriptive tendencies, or interactions with “natives,” Kingsley displays many of the authorial “oddities” identifiable in other female accounts.

Therefore, *Travels* proves that individual travel accounts necessitate context-specific analyzation and cannot simply be generalized as one part of a larger, monolithic genre. This conclusion impacts both male and female discursive analyses, for it stakes that over-arching categorizations, while helpful at times, need to be situationally established and verified.

In light of this deduction, Said’s attribution of Orientalist thought to centuries of authors and travelers appears all the more inaccurate, as neither gender of writers can be expected to consistently and unvarying produce narratives following the same foundational notions while existing in divergent and changing geopolitical contexts. Therefore, it is clear that Orientalism as a concept must be re-evaluated for its truthfulness and validity, and perhaps deconstructed to better reflect the complexities of gender, place, identity, and authorship.

Beyond highlighting the shortcomings of Orientalism, Kingsley’s account also speaks to the antagonistic gender ecosystem of nineteenth-century Britain. Ever-evolving, societal perceptions of gender played a major role in deciding how and in what manner female travelers relayed information to the metropole. Kingsley’s tempestuous relationship with gender in *Travels* proves the difficulty in appealing to such a wide range of opinions and further speaks to the specific discursive pressures faced by British female travelers. Moreover, the scientific community’s reaction to her work — despite Kingsley’s clear attempts to appease said audience — highlights the staunchly rooted patriarchal elements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century academia and thus questions the validity of scholarly information stemming from such periods.

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Excerpts on Kingsley from *The Journal of African History*, *African Affairs*, *The Journal of the Royal African Society*, or *Scientific American* all speak to the stilted academic environment at the time of Kingsley's writing.⁶⁶ Though refraining from outright slander or debasement, scholarly critiques clearly adopt the larger community's misogynistic mentality and consequentially seek to feminize and delegitimize Kingsley, their consummate Victorian "spinster," whenever possible.⁶⁷

A nineteenth-century newspaper excerpt in *Scientific American* perhaps best exemplifies academia's gendering tendencies; beginning with "had it been written by a man, it would have been a monumental performance," the text progresses to detail Kingsley's expedition without accrediting her a shred of autonomy.⁶⁸ Instead of hailing her bravery in the face of West African dangers, it describes her trek as a brilliant showing of Great Britain's civilizing capabilities, for it claims that the very fact that an unaccompanied female successfully traveled the "savage" lands of Africa is purely a reflection of English imperial efforts, not Kingsley's intellect — as the article brazenly stakes, "the British make the best colonists."⁶⁹ Recognizing the gendered conditions of nineteenth- and twen-

⁶⁶ John E. Flint, "Mary Kingsley-A Reassessment," *The Journal of African History* 4, no. 1 (1963): 95–104; John E. Flint, "Mary Kingsley," *African Affairs* 64, no. 256 (1965): 150–61; Alice Stopford Green, "Mary Kingsley," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 1, no. 1 (1901): 1–16; Stephen Gwynn and R. S. Rattray, "The Life of Mary Kingsley," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 31, no. 125 (1932): 354–65; Caroline Oliver, "Mary Kingsley," *African Affairs* 70, no. 280 (1971): 222–35; "Miss Kingsley's Travels in Africa," *Scientific American* 76, no. 23 (1897): 361–62.

⁶⁷ Flint, "Mary Kingsley," 151, 159.

⁶⁸ "Miss Kingsley's Travels in Africa," *Scientific American* 76, no. 23 (1897): 361.

⁶⁹ "Miss Kingsley's Travels," 361.

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tieth-century England is important for any female textual analysis dating from a similar period, as it is only after accounting for these conditions that the candor and subtilities of a text can be best understood.

Moving forward, the conclusions of this paper will hopefully prompt more thorough and comprehensive textual analyses that regard context and situational influences in higher degrees. Moreover, by highlighting the exceptionality of female production this work aims to increase academic support for women's studies more generally, as it speaks to the treasure trove of unique commentary that awaits examiners in female-authored works.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The limitations of this paper stem predominantly from the small section of *Travels* examined. While many of the trends identified above are highlighted by other authors in different sections of *Travels*, this paper's conclusions can truly only speak to Kingsley's descriptions of her summit, not her entire trek throughout West Africa. Moreover, this paper did not directly examine a male travel account to draw unique conclusions on the divergences in gendered production. Though using the works of accredited scholars in the field to inform conclusions on male tendencies and authorial traits, future works could include a direct comparison of male and female writings to further develop claims regarding observable differences.

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