

**'My Sable Ingramina':
Queering Colonial Gender Roles in Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa***

By [Alice M. Kelly](#), The University of Edinburgh

<1>In Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) one is most often reminded of her femininity - of her potential vulnerability and the precariousness of her situation - through her encounters with Europeans, not Africans. A typically gendered exchange with a European takes place, for example, when she attempts to travel along the rapids of the Ogowé River; having recruited compliant African guides, she is obstructed by a French official:

I explain I will not hold any one responsible but myself, and I urge that a lady has been up before, a Mme. Quinee. He says "Yes, that is true, but Madame had with her a husband and many men, whereas [. . . you are] alone and have only eight Igalwas and not Adoomas, the proper crew for the rapids, and they are away up river now with the convoy."

"True, oh King!" I answer, "but Madame Quinee went right up to Lestourville, whereas I only want to go sufficiently high up the rapids to get typical fish. And these Igalwas are great men at canoe work, and can go in a canoe anywhere that any mortal man can go" - this to cheer up my Igalwa interpreter - "and as for the husband, neither the Royal Geographical Society's list, in their 'Hints to Travellers,' nor Messrs. Silver, in their elaborate lists of articles necessary for a traveller in tropical climates, make mention of husbands." (87)

With her characteristic wit, she defies the French official's expectations of the proper role and scope of unmarried women, literally and figuratively travelling outside the prescribed, gendered domestic bounds of nineteenth-century European culture. She places herself in a tradition of female explorers, and when she finds this doesn't persuade him, she appeals to her identity as a scientist: she does not want to travel along the river to be the first woman to do so, but 'to get typical fish' for her biological study. Crucially, her freedom to identify as a scientist and to travel outside the typical realm of most single British women, rests on the submission and compliance of her African crew, as well as her allegiance to Western ethnography and her invocation of the colonial lexicon of the British Royal Geographical Society. Though this scene is underwritten by imperial rules of trade and mobility, traditional colonial roles are here subverted by Kingsley's humor. She aligns herself with her crew, mocking the French official's idea that she is alone, and his apparent claim to be more knowledgeable

about the river than her Igalwa companions, positioning her Igalwa interpreter as in on the joke.

<2>This is one of many examples in the text where gender, Empire and race coalesce in surprising ways, and neither Kingsley's gender identity, nor her imperial role, nor her racial affiliations seem stable. This ambiguity is discernible in scholarship surrounding the text, which represents Kingsley, or the particular version of her that is constructed in the colonial landscape, as variously ultra-feminine or hyper-masculine. Laura E. Coilkowski argues that the text details Kingsley's attempts to conform to the ideal Victorian femininity that she was unable to convincingly live up to 'at home': 'By insistently noting the conventions of gender that organize Victorian bodies in space, Kingsley remakes herself in *Travels* in the image of the Victorian womanhood she routinely failed to be' (340). For Coilkowski, *Travels in West Africa* is a text that enacts the construction of gender coherence, in which the body of the sanctified, pristine, proper middle class Victorian woman is produced, its borders demarcated in the context of ever-present foreign invasion.

<3>However, for Alison Blunt the same text represents the assumption of masculine power by a previously disempowered female subject: '[. . .] once [female] travellers [such as Kingsley] were beyond the confinement of European colonial settlement, imperial discourses of power and structural inequality arguably came to supersede those of patriarchal discourses, and women travellers became increasingly able to share in the authority of male colonisers' (36). In Blunt's reading of the text, the wilderness of the African jungle affords Kingsley the freedom she is usually denied, and presents the sort of challenges that mean she must cultivate attributes traditionally described as masculine.

<4>Indeed, Kingsley is frequently regarded by her African companions, and happy to think of herself, as male: 'What the trader has got to do, is to be a "Devil man." They always kindly said they recognised me as one, which is a great compliment. He must betray no weakness [. . .]' (201). Kingsley is delighted to be considered 'devil man' by the Africans as it signifies her imperial prowess and authority as a trader. Her assumption of masculine power is specifically located in the colonial context, as is the case when she identifies as male when differentiating European and African cultural belief systems: 'This god [. . .] O Mburi [. . .] can transfuse with his own personality that of human beings, and also the souls of all those *we white men* regard as inanimate, such as rocks, trees, &c. [. . .]' (my emphasis, 131). The gulf between white and black is seemingly so substantial here that to distinguish herself further, in terms of gender, is unnecessary; the cultural and racial difference she establishes compels her to identify as male, one of the 'white men'.

<5>Coilkowski argues that such moments of identification say nothing about her gender identity because racial identification overwhelms that of gender in these instances: 'If Kingsley is addressed as "sir" by many of the Africans with whom she comes into contact, it is less in this instance because she is acting like a man, as some readers have argued, than it is because she is white, and therefore, necessarily occupies a position of gender-coded authority' (343). For Coilkowski, unshaken in her reading of Kingsley's prevailing adherence to codes of femininity,

even the points in the text at which Kingsley renounces her gender and embraces masculine positions of power, 'we white men,' 'devil man', cannot be read as moments of gender confusion.

<6>Significantly, Coilkowski uses Kingsley's encounters with African women to support her reading:

The [gender-coded] authority Kingsley exhibits here [when addressed as 'sir'] is also strikingly evident in the ethnographic descriptions of African women in *Travels*. [. . .] Kingsley's detailed catalogue of the relative merits and charms of African women is not simply an expression of an English woman's unsanctioned exercise of the *gender-coded visual power* from which she is traditionally excluded; it is, in fact, one of the generic requirements of Western ethnographic descriptions of foreign peoples. [. . .] Kingsley's assumption of such [racial] privilege is one of the perquisites of her travels to Africa and, I would argue, one of the ways in which she labours to secure her place in an English culture that, back in England, did not immediately recognize her as one of its own. (my emphasis, 343)

For Coilkowski, Kingsley's descriptions of African women constitute a conscious invocation of canonical colonial discourse, an attempt to speak to the Western ethnographic tradition that ensures her social integration and acceptance 'at home'. While Kingsley's voice is persistently palimpsestuously underwritten by the imperial language of classification, signification and translation, Coilkowski fails to acknowledge the gender subversion I will argue is inherent in Kingsley's adoption of the role of white male colonizer. Kingsley's 'unsanctioned exercise of the gender-coded visual power' precisely and emphatically demonstrates the gender fluidity, rather than adherence, being staged in the text. Here, Blunt does not go far enough either; Kingsley's adoption of the masculine role in her descriptions of African women, I will contend, creates a deeply subversive undercurrent of eroticism between women.

<7>Critical debates on the effects of imperial codes on the white female body go beyond questions of gender identity, to ask of the racial discourses that afford freedoms or restrict movement to these women in colonial spaces. The mobility provided by Kingsley's financial and putative racial power over her Igalwa crew is one example of the shifting intersections of gendered and imperial discourses that guide her path through West Africa. She is emblematic of the ambivalent figure of the white woman of nineteenth century imperialism, who sits outside the default binary of the imperial matrix (white male coloniser: colonised female 'native'), and is thus an awkward figure to address, politically coded and politically charged in her own time and ours. Through the metaphor of imperialism as 'murder plot,' Helen Tiffin encapsulates the difficulties of accounting for the white woman of Empire:

But the Jane Doe I began with – the overdetermined yet unidentifiable settler-invader woman – cannot so neatly classify murderer, victim and murder weapon. Nor is *she* easily identified. For in this imperial murder story she is both killer and victim; writer,

reader, pupil and teacher; accessory to murder, yet often a (complicit) victim herself.
(emphasis original, 377)

The white woman of Empire is neither wholly murderer, subjugated by patriarchal codes that restrict her agency, nor wholly victim, complicit in the perpetuation of imperial rule.

<8>However, central to the ambiguity of the white woman in this imperialist murder plot, is the implicit heteronormativity of the colonial matrix of masculine, penetrative colonizing invader versus feminised colonised indigene. I propose that Kingsley's writing complicates this binary, even beyond virtue of her contradictory status as of 'superior' race but 'inferior' gender. Not only does she fulfil neither of the orthodox gender roles of nineteenth-century imperialism, but she also queers the dynamic, appropriating the traditional male colonizer role to articulate and emphasise a subversive desire for women.

'Interpretive paralysis', Sublimity and Comeliness

<9>Christopher Lane has also written of the limitations of a binary understanding of a gendered colonial matrix. He considers the ways in which queer readings of Kingsley's writing may transcend the 'interpretive paralysis' (93) that constricts scholarship concerned with white female explorers' imperial complicities: '[. . .] Kingsley's fascination with West African women voices a demand for intimacy escaping some of the "containment" strategies of colonial discourse. Accordingly, her fantasies push us beyond existing interpretive deadlocks [. . .]' (95). Lane urges critics to move past the debates asking whether the white woman is 'murderer' or 'victim,' and instead consider the particularities of interracial closeness to which Kingsley's writing might give voice. He contends that Kingsley's writing about African women evokes a proximity between culturally and racially divergent bodies that are kept separate in a colonial discourse that thrives upon their distinction and differentiation.

<10>For Lane, this intimacy is part of a broader trend in Kingsley's work to defy the binaries upon which Victorian British colonial culture relies, be those dichotomies of gender or race. He argues 'Kingsley's fantasies open an imaginary space beyond gender, where conventional identities stop making sense' (107). Transcending the gender debate represented by Coilkowski's ultra-feminine version of Kingsley and Blunt's hyper-masculine one, Lane proposes Kingsley's writing on desire positions her in a genderless imaginary space in which traditional identity categories hold no meaning. He also argues this imaginary space transcends the racial and cultural distinctions of colonial discourse: 'Alternating in imaginary terms between England and Africa, she often chose an interesting third option: nothingness or – more precisely – the sublime [. . .]' (94). Bridging the imagined space between English and African society, between which Kingsley's identity oscillates, is an immaterial, blank space, according to Lane, engendered by the sublimity Kingsley experiences. Where Lane writes of the limits to dualistic identity categories in discussing Kingsley's writing, he always returns to the sublime as the central theme he believes dismantles these divisions.

<11>It is no surprise then that Lane discusses queerness in Kingsley's writing also in terms of her personal interaction with the sublime, or rather how her personhood, her sense of herself, is affected by sublimity. He approaches a queer reading of Kingsley's narrative by focusing on her use of the word 'comely':

The adjective "comely" derives from the Middle English *cumelich* meaning "fair, pleasant to look at," itself modifying the Old English *cymlic*:glorious, almost seraphic. This etymology would be unremarkable if in *Travels* Kingsley didn't use the adjective so often when admiring African women. [. . .] Kingsley applies the adjective to women only; she says that her male crew comprises "a miscellaneous lot of M'pongwe, black but not comely." (104-105)

Lane argues Kingsley's use of this word has implications for her interaction with the sublime, and suggests that it thus works to support her integrated subjectivity: 'Describing such women as "comely", she imbues them with the allure of a fetish, as if they were one step removed from the sublime, one means of protecting her from the joy and distress of abrogating identity' (104). According to Lane, these women act as tangible symbols for Kingsley that mediate between her and the sublimity of a landscape that threatens to engulf her; Kingsley's desirous descriptions cohere her identity.

<12>In Lane's reading of Kingsley's descriptions of African women as 'comely', this word has most significance for him as a signifier of 'almost seraphic'. Lane presents the African women as markers of the sublime for Kingsley, rather than as sites, bodies or objects of her attraction and desire in their own right. This emphasis on an ethereal, non-human component to Kingsley's identity is indeed warranted, as it proliferates consistently throughout the text, but so too does a material appreciation for 'comeliness': '*the comeliness of [the Port of Sierra Leone's] women*' (emphasis original, 9); 'The [Bubi] women indeed are very comely' (41); '[long pins of river ivory attached to beaded plaits of hair] are exceedingly becoming to these black, but comely ladies [Igalwa and M'pongwe], verily, I think, the comeliest ladies I have ever seen on the Coast' (127). Kingsley uses 'comely' in terms of geography and culture, to classify bodies on the ground, and with an emphasis on the detailed texture, appearance and appeal of hair and skin. Lane's move away from the materiality of these encounters, his insistence on reading these moments as intermediary, transitory or ancillary symptoms of greater philosophical debates in the text, forecloses discussion of the text's explicit, visceral sexuality. If, as Coilkowski argues, Kingsley is evoking a Western ethnographical tradition in order to be heard, she is also queering that lexicon and changing what the colonial roles she enacts might mean. I contend that the intimacy produced by Kingsley's emphasis on form, skin, hair and bodily shapes creates spaces in her writing of, what Sara Ahmed calls, 'Queer pleasures' that 'put bodies into contact that have been kept apart by the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality' (165). Her descriptions of African women reflect the erotic gaze of the male colonizer being performed and parodied by a woman, and reconfigured to hint towards a reciprocity between gazer and gazed upon. This emphasis on desire between women indicates the unique nature and subversive possibilities of Kingsley's colonial gaze, and evokes a queered racial exchange that rewrites nineteenth-century interracial sexuality.

Kingsley's Queer Gaze

<13>Her descriptions of African women signify an erotic visual encounter between women:

A market-woman with her jolly brown face and laughing brown eyes - eyes all the softer for a touch of antimony - her ample form clothed in a lively print overall, made with a yoke at the shoulders, and a full long flounce which is gathered on to the yoke under the arms and falls fully to the feet; with her head done up in a yellow or red handkerchief, and her snowy white teeth gleaming through her vast smiles, is a mighty pleasant thing to see, and to talk to. (14-15)

Kingsley focuses on the market-woman's body, her 'ample form', the way in which the fabric falls from it, but she also suggests the African woman has a voice, a laugh, gleaming white teeth (a smile that can bite) and a penetrative, dark gaze of her own. Obviously, Kingsley is the more active agent here, the nameless African woman made to occupy the object-spectacle position to Kingsley's appraising subject, a 'mighty pleasant *thing* to see', and 'talk *to*' not *with*. Significantly, however, Kingsley situates herself alongside this woman; she is not gazing at her from afar, not adjudging her as specimen or creature from the privileged position on high, but is apparently face-to-face, in conversation, beguiled by her shining eyes.

<14>For Mary Louise Pratt, this perspective is typical of Kingsley's visual contact with Africa. She argues that rather than gazing down upon the colonial landscape in the trope of 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' (197), Kingsley is 'The Lady of the Swamp' (209), 'like a mole [. . .] peer[ing] through roots and stems' (210): 'Kingsley depicts herself discovering her swamps not by looking down at them or even walking around them, but by sloshing zestfully through them in a boat or up to her neck in water and slime[. . .]' (209). Kingsley's viewpoint, according to Pratt, is viscerally base, coarse, grubby and muddy. The significance of this subterranean perspective, for Pratt, is that it is emblematic of Kingsley's particular approach to the role of colonizer: '[. . .] she builds her own meaning-making apparatus out of the raw materials of the monarchic male discourse of domination and intervention. The result [. . .] is a monarchic female voice that asserts its own kind of mastery even as it denies domination and parodies power' (209). Though Kingsley treads in the footsteps of white male colonizers, though she experiences the colonial landscape through gazing, hers is a more tactile, reciprocal encounter, from her entrenched position deep among the mangroves, one that undermines traditional power structures of colonial encounters.

<15>The distinction of Kingsley's gaze is further highlighted when compared to what David Spurr terms 'the commanding view – the panoramic vista' (15), resonating with the monarch-of-all-I-survey stance because of its reliance on 'a position of visual advantage' (16). Spurr argues 'the commanding view' 'conveys a sense of mastery over the unknown' (15), and 'is an originating gesture of colonization itself, making possible the exploration and mapping of territory which serves as a preliminary to a colonial order' (16). Spurr contends that the gaze in the colonial context enables the neutralisation, interpretation and signification of the foreign terrain, and is thus, primarily, an act of conquest.

<16>In the context of the conventional visual encounter of colonization, 'the commanding view' and the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey', then, Kingsley's eye-level contact with the market-woman is indicative of a more equal exchange. Furthermore, the racially determined subject/object positions in archetypal interracial visual exchange are realigned through the market-woman's access to an animated, penetrative, returned gaze of her own. Describing the journalistic presentation of black farm workers of the segregated American South of the 1930s, Spurr posits the right to gaze as a sign of racial power: 'They are obligated to show themselves *to view* for the white men, but they themselves lack the privilege of the gaze; though looked at, they are forbidden from looking back' (emphasis original, 13). Though the context of which Spurr writes is of both a different time and place to that of Kingsley, it demonstrates the way social encounters governed by colonial discourse may be characterised by a racially imbalanced access to 'the gaze'. Unlike these farm workers, Kingsley's African market-woman is depicted as such a 'mighty pleasant thing to see' precisely because of the vital expression, the 'touch of antimony', of her eyes.

<17>There are further instances of Kingsley's appreciation for African women that emphasize the returned gaze:

I prefer an Elmina, or an Igalwa, or a M'pongwe, or - but I had better stop and own that my affections have got very scattered among the black ladies on the West Coast, and I no sooner remember one lovely creature whose *soft eyes*, perfect form and winning, pretty ways have captivated me than I think of another. The Nanny Po ladies have often a certain amount of Spanish blood in them, which gives a decidedly greater delicacy to their features - delicate little nostrils, mouths not too heavily lipped, a certain gloss on the hair, and *a light in the eye*. But it does not improve their colour, and I am assured that it has an awful effect on their tempers, so I think I will remain, for the present, the faithful admirer of my sable Ingramina, the Igalwa, with the little red blossoms stuck in her night-black hair, and *a sweet soft look* and word for every one, but particularly for her ugly husband Isaac the "Jack Wash." (my emphasis, 49)

Light eyes and a sweet soft look 'captivate' Kingsley, who gets carried away, out of control in her commoditizing list of African women. Her rambling tone is pulled up short and there is an implication that she is transgressing somehow, being too personal, deceptive in not 'own[ing]' how much (and how many of) these women arouse her affections. She is anxious about her over exuberance, about the extent of her admiration, her narrative voice as captivated as she is by the 'perfect form[s]' and 'soft eyes'. Perhaps it is a symptom of her enthrallment that she relies on familiar patriarchal language of desire, objectifying the 'lovely creatures' with their 'pretty ways'. Her itemizing list slips into the destructive lexicon of love - fragmentation, tinged with racial prejudice: 'delicate little nostrils, mouths not too heavily lipped, a certain gloss on the hair, and a light in the eye.' Her voice becomes colonial as well as patriarchal as she indicates that European countenance - 'a certain amount of Spanish blood' - constitutes desirability. Significantly, however, this is immediately undercut, as, rather than evoking a superior European beauty, she declares her enduring admiration for '[her] sable Ingramina' with 'night-black hair', 'sable' invoking the dark brown fur of the animal.

<18>Kingsley turns from generalized, objectifying descriptions of African women in terms of their tribe, rhetorically positioning them as specimens, to one particular Igalwa woman, Ingramina. One woman who is 'sweet' and 'soft', and who, though Kingsley thinks of her above all the 'captivating' women of the West Coast, is only concerned with her ugly husband. Again, an equality may be traced in this exchange as Kingsley is attracted by Ingramina's words and returned gaze. That Kingsley returns to the safety of desiring the married Ingramina (who may give her 'a sweet soft look' but will not reciprocate her desire, because her sweetest, softest look is for her husband), can be read as a safe release for her transgressive desire, a transmutation of the almost out of control rambling list of her 'prefer[ences]'. Most significantly, acknowledging this affection for one particular woman troubles the readings, of both Lane and Coilkowski.

<19>Where Coilkowski de-eroticizes Kingsley's gaze by interpreting it as an exercise of 'gender-coded visual power,' Lane, who does notably acknowledge the queer component to Kingsley's encounters with African women, inscribes these moments in terms of Kingsley's experience of sublimity, transcendence, immateriality and *disembodiment*. As much as Kingsley's encounters confound material restrictions of race and gender, as Lane argues, they are also shaped by a bodily desire for other women. While Lane's reading speaks to pervasive currents of identification in Kingsley's writings, her infatuation with Ingramina *matters*: it is decidedly material. It is therefore worth accounting for these moments in terms of what takes place between these bodies. Ingramina's sable skin and night-black hair are the racially coded surfaces and sites of Kingsley's attraction towards her. When Lane sublimates them into the theme of the sublime, no matter how prevalent that discourse may be, he detracts from the intensity of the female homoeroticism that is also prevalent in Kingsley's writing, when she then describes the person from whom she implicitly wants the sweetest, softest look.

<20>Of course, what is equally prevalent in Kingsley's writing in this passage is the fact that Ingramina does not seem to reciprocate her desiring gaze. That her sweetest, softest look remains reserved for her husband suggests there is a difference in the way she and Kingsley are looking at each other. There is a discernible imbalance in this passage, whereby one woman refuses, rejects or fails to acknowledge the erotic gaze of another in favor of her husband. The lesbian eroticism of this moment is not foreclosed by this imbalance, however, nor is the potential subversion of colonial roles. The very fact that Kingsley frames this encounter around this imbalance redraws the typical colonial structures of a Western ethnographic tradition that privileges the white gazer as meaning-maker. In this moment, Kingsley writes of Ingramina as equally entitled to her own desiring gaze, regardless of Kingsley's sexual narrative; Ingramina is not simply a site of Kingsley's desires, she is a subject with desires of her own, over whom Kingsley has no power.

Heterosexual Femininity and Female Homoeroticism

<21>Ingramina's heterosexuality does not preclude the lesbian erotics of this moment either, as Sharon Marcus' work suggests. Marcus argues the culture of the male gaze insists only men

take pleasure from looking, and this has implications for any assumptions about Ingramina's sweetest, softest look:

That an active pleasure in looking *at women* could be a requisite element of heterosexual femininity has been a logical impossibility for a theory that declares active spectatorship and desire to be masculine and limits women to passive identification with the feminine image or active identification with the male gaze. (emphasis original, 112)

Marcus argues heterosexual femininity has only been imagined as a preclusion to female-female erotic gazing by the socio-cultural discourses that imagine sex, agency and looking to be masculine concerns, whereby women access erotic gazing by assuming the position of either male gazer or female spectacle. She proposes an intersection between heterosexual femininity and female homoeroticism in *Between Women*, where she reads for '[. . .] the everyday homoeroticism of a Victorian ladies' world in which women's magazines and girls' literature sound remarkably like the pornography that proliferated alongside them' (112). Marcus shows that Victorian femininity was constructed through a lexicon that facilitated, produced and relied upon the circulation of erotically charged contact between women.

<22>For Marcus, writing on narratives surrounding fashion, dolls and the maternal or matronly corporal punishment of girls, this contact is marked as visual and tactile:

Victorian commodity culture incited an erotic appetite for femininity in women, framed spectacular images of women for a female gaze, and prompted women's fantasies about dominating a woman or submitting to one. Victorian society accepted female homoeroticism as a component of respectable womanhood and encouraged women and girls to desire, scrutinize, and handle simulacra of alluring femininity. [. . .] Victorians organized heterosexual femininity around women objectifying women [. . .] (112).

Where fashion and dolls produced images of idealized, appealing femininity, and descriptions of mothers disciplining their daughters evoked pornographic constructions of sexual power, Marcus contends relationships between women in Victorian culture were inflected with an eroticism that coincided and corresponded with heterosexual ideals. Victorian heterosexuality, in Marcus' formulation, invited, rather than prohibited, women to gaze queerly at each other.

<23>Significantly, it is *through* the lexicon of heterosexuality that Kingsley articulates her appreciation for Ingramina's 'sweet, soft' looks. She is able to say it not only because Ingramina is safely married, and it is therefore an erotic admission, rather than a sexual possibility, but also because she can identify Ingramina's sweetest, softest look because she has seen the way she gazes at her husband. The heteronormative institution of marriage structures Kingsley's articulation of queer desire.

<24>Crucially, Marcus's emphasis on the visual, the circulation of images and commodity culture all suggest female homoeroticism is emphatically material, represented by intimate, physical, fleshy contact between proximate bodies. As well as stressing the importance of reading Kingsley's descriptions of African women through the heteronormative structures that govern them (rather than in spite of them), Marcus's work also reiterates the need to remember these moments in terms of their embodiment and physicality. The power dynamic at play in Marcus' assessment of female homoeroticism is also significant for Kingsley and Ingramina, as their erotically charged stratified roles evokes the female 'fantasies about dominating a woman or submitting to one' Marcus finds in the corporal punishment discourse. This resonance begs the question of who is dominant between Kingsley and Ingramina, because while the former may be empowered by imperial ideology and racial hierarchy, the latter is the one with the sexual agency to accept and refuse the eroticism of the encounter.

<25>Marcus's primary contention regarding the prevalence of erotically coded encounters between Victorian women is that it was very much a social norm: 'Precisely because Victorians saw lesbian sex almost nowhere, they could embrace erotic desire between women almost everywhere. Female homoeroticism did not subvert dominant codes of femininity, because female homoeroticism was one of those codes' (113). Marcus persuasively argues that normative heterosexual femininity involved and recirculated female homoeroticism, so that erotic desire between women was not the transgressive, rebellious talisman we might hold it to be when it disrupts our assumptions about Victorian culture. I would argue, however, that in the case of Kingsley's descriptions of African women, her avowedly homoerotic gaze (with her focus on fleshy sites of surface pleasure), is innately subversive, because it flips the script of an ethnographic tradition that privileged the sexual agency of white men as a driving force of colonialism and a main determinant of racial roles.

<26>It is precisely this revision of prescribed colonial sex roles that is at stake in the moments I have been writing about. Ingramina is not mentioned again in *Travels*,⁽¹⁾ and these erotic encounters with African women, however potent and worthy of acknowledgement, do not dramatically alter Kingsley's primary identification as a 'wandering scientist' (180). She writes as an ethnographer, a traveller, a biologist concerned with 'typical fish' (87), not under the lesbian sign my argument might gesture towards. But, to borrow Marilyn Farwell's evocative phraseology, Kingsley does not have to be 'the locus of the lesbian in the lesbian text' (7), for *Travels* to be read as 'the lesbian text'.

<27>Her focus on Ingramina's beauty juxtaposed with the dismissal of Isaac, is emblematic of the gendered imbalance in her admirations: 'The personal appearance of the men does not amount to much when all's done, so we will return to the ladies' (127). Indeed, she is emphatic in her appreciation: 'I will back my Igalwa or M'pongwe belle against any of those South Sea Island young ladies we nowadays hear so much about, thanks to Mr. Stevenson[. . .]' (128). Kingsley directly invokes the eroticized figure of the native woman in late nineteenth century literature of Empire, supporting Coilkowski's reading of her gaze as part of her cultural adherence to Western discourse. It is clear that there is an ethnographic register to Kingsley's narrative, and that she does rely on the established lexicon of sexually inflected imperial power

structures. However, the relevance of Kingsley's use of this vocabulary and appropriation of this gaze, is that it creates a racially modulated sexual paradigm from which men are excluded. From the racialized language of Western ethnography, emblemized by Kingsley's descriptions of African women, emerges a queer colonial register in *Travels* that gestures towards a different kind of imperial sexuality.

A New Imperial Sexuality

<28>Roland Sintos Coloma and Ann L. Stoler have both argued that the colonial role of white women was invariably one of sexual regulation, in which they functioned as appropriate partners for white male colonial agents, and were thus charged with maintaining racial purity and, as Stoler contends, decency: 'Male colonisers positioned European women as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality' (Stoler 640). Coloma argues that, in the context of US imperialist presence in the Philippines in the early 1900s, sexualized 'brown' female bodies induced and specified this moral role of white women: 'Within US–Philippine colonial encounters, the discursive and visual circulation of naked Filipina bodies, especially her brown breasts, fuelled not only white heterosexual male desires and fantasies, but also white women's active participation in colonial governmentality to rescue and regulate both white men and brown women' (252). Coloma reconfigures the Spivakian narrative of imperialism, '*white men saving brown women from brown men*,' (emphasis original, Spivak, 33) into "*white women are saving white men and brown women from each other*" (emphasis original, 247). The sexual role of white women that Coloma posits here, is one of de-eroticized, moral intervention. In this formulation, white women are moved by the preservation of racial purity rather than attraction or arousal; this is what is at stake in Kingsley's erotic gaze.

<29>Though written for a different context, the paradigm offered by Coloma, echoing Stoler's work, may be applied to Kingsley's West Africa. Particularly pertinent is the contention that the 'brown' body of the subjugated 'native' woman stirs the agency of white women. Coloma argues that seeing or conceiving of the sexualized 'brown' object-body engenders agency in the white woman subject. In the case of Kingsley's gaze, and her appropriation of the white male colonizer role, this interaction between white woman subject and erotically coded 'native' female body is subversive rather than conservative. In Coloma's paradigm, though the white woman has agency, the roles are all defined by men: 'brown' woman as sex-object to be desired and gazed upon; white woman as angelic moral saviour (with no sexual desires of her own, her sexuality determined in relation to the preservation of the race). In contrast, Kingsley's 'captivat[ion]' with African women explicitly excludes men, European and African alike, from imperial sexuality. In other words, *Travels in West Africa* presents a version of Empire in which sex is defined as an exchange between women, and though it is still imbalanced, weighted heavily in favour of the white subject with her appraising gaze, the sexual agency of particular African women, Ingrams and the market-woman, is respected, as they are presented with gazes and desires of their own, and valued for their words as well as their appearance.

<30>Fundamentally, by reading Kingsley's descriptions of African women more closely it is clear that her ethnographic register, her assumption of the position of white male colonizer, allows the expression of a lesbian desire that is rarely articulated so explicitly in Victorian literature. This dramatically alters the traditional discourse of the white male colonizer, if stepping into his shoes allows the white woman of Empire to give voice to the 'queer pleasures' of an alternative imperial sexual paradigm. *Travels in West Africa* presents mutable gender identities as Kingsley adopts and warps the role of the white male colonizer by appropriating his erotic gaze. Her assumption of the white male colonizer role distorts that position in the binary, demonstrating that it can allow subversive female sexuality. Thus, whilst her voice is never free from the colonial discourse that affords her the right to speak, Kingsley's position in the colonial context exposes and rewrites the gendering and sexualization inherent in the foundational structures of Empire. Over and through the palimpsest of Western ethnography, Kingsley writes a fleshly desire for women that recodes the gendered binary of the imperial matrix.

Endnotes

(1)Kingsley does make reference to an Ingramina in 'Black Ghosts' (1897) when she describes 'a peculiar haunt' in which a Bantu lady visiting a trade depot 'return[s] home after dark to her house' and discovers upon lighting her paraffin lamp that everything is covered in damp, sticky blood (246). When the Bantu lady first returns home, before she identifies the substance coating her home as blood, she blames her slave girls for the mess everywhere: '[. . .] she sat down on her wood bed, and found there was a lot of nastiness there. This was not be stood; so, dismissing from her mind the commercial considerations with which it was full when she came home, she rose up, and went to the door and called "Ingramina" and others, in a state of high rage' (246). Just as in *Travels* this is a fleeting reference that could suggest more contact between Ingramina and Kingsley, and even the sharing of this story, if there was any evidence to indicate that the slave girl Ingramina of 'Black Ghosts' is the same woman who Kingsley fantasises about in *Travels*. Again, Kingsley uses the name 'Ingramina' to identify one person out of a collective group, but does not elaborate further on this person's significance, so while this scene could certainly speak to queer contact *outside* of the text, there is little to no textual evidence to support these theories. Similarly, while there may be much to say about the gothic imagery of the confined feminized space oozing blood, and the imagined monstrosity of female bodily, material functions, that is a topic for another paper.(^)

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second edition. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

Blunt, Alison. *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa*. Guildford Press, 1994.

Coilkowski, Laura E. 'Travelers' Tales: Empire, Victorian Travel, and the Spectacle of English Womanhood in Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa*.' *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998, pp.337-366.

Coloma, Roland Sintos. 'White Gazes, Brown Breasts: Imperial Feminism and Disciplining Desires and Bodies in Colonial Encounters.' *Paedagogica Historica* vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 243-261.

Farwell, Marilyn R. *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. New York UP, 1996.

Kingsley, Mary H. *Travels in West Africa*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002.

---. 'Black Ghosts'. *Empire Writing: An Anthology of Colonial Literature 1870-1918*, edited by Elleke Boehmer, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 234-248.

Lane, Christopher. 'Fantasies of "Lady Pioneers," between Narrative and Theory.' *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*, edited by Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 90-114.

Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton UP, 2007.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Second edition. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, second edition, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 28-35.

Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Duke UP, 1993.

Stoler, Ann L. 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th Century Colonial Cultures.' *American Ethnologist* vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, pp. 634-660.

Tiffin, Helen. "'The Body in the Library": Identity, Opposition and the Settler-Invader Woman.' *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, edited by Gregory Castle, Blackwells, 2001, pp. 375-388.