

2015

British Women Travelers: Challenging and Reinforcing Victorian Notions of Race and Gender

Sally Ulmer

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ulmer, Sally (2015) "British Women Travelers: Challenging and Reinforcing Victorian Notions of Race and Gender," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 20 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol20/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rsroggin@scu.edu.

British Women Travelers: Challenging and Reinforcing Victorian Notions of Race and Gender

Sally Ulmer

British women travelers crossed geographical and cultural boundaries on their treks through the African colonies in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Their journeys can be seen as both unusual and innovative for women of their time, as seen in the experiences of four women: Mary Kingsley, Mary Gaunt, Mary Hall, and Flora Shaw. Kingsley traveled to West Africa in 1893 and 1895, writing about her travels in the late 19th Century. Gaunt also traveled in West Africa and wrote her narrative in 1912. In 1907 Hall wrote about her trek from Cape to Cairo. And Shaw traveled to several British colonies before writing about Nigeria in 1905. As these four women wrote accounts of their travels, they contributed to the flow of information that entered the metropole about the British Empire in Africa. They often wrote similarly about race and empire, but their writings were also influenced by differences in class, relation to the British Empire, and, later, martial status. Kingsley, Gaunt, Hall, and Shaw came to occupy a unique and contradictory space in the colonies where they both enforced and subverted gender roles, while also promoting imperialism through their writing. This paper will offer an analysis of the intersections between race and gender in the writings of female travelers. By looking back at travelers that have been studied in earlier scholarship, I will use their writings to show how controversial they

actually were, which is not drawn out in existing scholarship. The experiences of British women travelers in Africa were shaped by the gendered spaces that they occupied in both home and colonial society, which influenced how they challenged and maintained gender norms and race hierarchies in their colonial experiences and in their writing.

Introduction

In the early 18th and 19th Centuries Africa was a place where British men could escape the confines of Victorian society, seeking opportunity for social mobility and sexual exploration. European women were kept out of the colonies because they were seen as financially burdensome and would restrict European men from embarking on sexual opportunity in the colonies.¹ In their absence, male colonizers often took native concubines and established a sexual relationship that would later be seen as threatening to racial boundaries. As fear of racial mixing escalated into class concerns about racial degeneracy, it became beneficial to the imperial agenda for white women to enter the colonies because female settlers would bring European social norms and domesticity to the outposts of the empire.² In order to make lasting roots in the colonies by establishing a home and starting a family the presence of British women was required, which also supported stability and racial hierarchies

¹ Ronald Hyam, "Empire and Sexual Opportunity," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2009).

² Marie-Paula Ha, "French Women in Empire," in *France and 'Indochina': Cultural Representation*, eds. Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Ye (Boulder: Lexington Books, 2005).

in the empire. In the 19th and 20th Centuries, “the promotion of domesticity demanded fuller incorporation of colonial wives, and in general, a higher profile for white women in the colonies.”³ Yet, the empire was still gendered as a male sphere and women were not regarded as significant to empire building. The “work of empire was gendered work” where men discovered and explored, and women fulfilled their imperial duty through child rearing and domesticity.⁴

White women were crucial to defining white prestige in the African colonies, however; upholding racial dominance also meant following gender norms of respectable Victorian womanhood, which limited the mobility of female settlers. Their entrance into the empire complicated colonial power structures, adding a new gender dynamic to existing social systems. Most female settlers remained in the same domestic sphere that they occupied in the metropole, as “incorporated wives” and memsahib type women.⁵ Encased in the domestic sphere, their interactions with Africans were limited to servant classes and natives that they could exercise power over.⁶ Sexual anxieties about the colonized “other” were also heightened with the arrival

³ Barbara Bush, “Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century,” in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 80.

⁴ Catherine Hall, “Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century,” in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (New York: University Press, 2004), 47.

⁵ Cheryl McEwan, *Gender, Geography, and Empire: Victorian Women Travellers in West Africa* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2000), 2.

⁶ Nupur Chaudhuri, “Memsahibs and Their Servants in Nineteenth-Century India,” in *Women’s History Review* 3 (1994).

of British women.⁷ Black men were regarded as sexually threatening to vulnerable white women who may fall victim to the “black peril,” tainting their moral and racial respectability. As Timothy Keegan points out, white women’s assigned role in the construction of racial boundaries was the “guarantors of racial purity and standards,” and if this purity were to be penetrated by the ‘black peril’ then racial, and thus colonial, order would be disrupted. White women’s sexual morality not only fulfilled their gendered role, but was primary to their racial respectability.⁸ However, amidst this argument of ‘black peril’: sexually vulnerable white women were constructed to be dependent on male protection, while in reality women were used by white men as the grounds for expression of racial anxieties. Ann Laura Stoler notes that, “the term ‘Black Peril’ referred to sexual threats, but it also connoted the fear of insurgence, of some perceived non-acquiescence to colonial control more generally.”⁹ Colonizer males viewed the “black peril” as a threat to the system of racial dominance that upheld colonial order.

Victorian gender conventions shaped how women were able to participate in the colonies, and in 19th and 20th Centuries “white women became increasingly important as boundary markers, maintaining racial

⁷ Timothy Keegan, “Gender, Degeneration, and Sexual Danger: Imagining Race and Class in South Africa, ca. 1912,” in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27 (2001).

⁸ Keegan.

⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia,” in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan W. Scott, 229.

authority.”¹⁰ British women settlers’ colonial presence made the invisible race line more distinct, while also blurring gender boundaries at the same time. However, not all white women participated in the colonies as settlers and wives. British women travelers occupied a unique space in the colonies that allowed them to disregard some traditional gender roles. This juxtaposes the space they occupied in their home society, where they were strictly bound to gendered roles. Dea Birkett notes that most women travelers were “torn between the two conflicting landscapes of self-fulfillment and duty” when they decided to leave for Africa.¹¹ This struggle between leaving home to gain new experiences and staying to fulfill one’s familial duty shows how much gender roles were at play in Victorian society. Where women travelers’ independence would have been restrained at home as they fulfilled gendered duties of domesticity, many of them had an adventurous spirit, and the fact that some of them were unmarried “spinsters,” a social plague at home, would serve them abroad by allowing them to travel and explore without familial constraints. But just because these “spinsters” were able to travel abroad on their own, subverting dominant gender roles in this way, didn’t mean that they were exempt from maintaining the Victorian respectability that upheld white prestige and racial superiority. In this way, British women travelers still had to subscribe to their womanly duty as they sought travel and adventure in Africa.

¹⁰ Hall, 70.

¹¹ Dea Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers* (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 27.

Through independent travel and writing, some women travelers transgressed “spatial boundaries of gender, power, and patriarchy” in the colonies that would have been difficult to do in the metropole.¹² British women traveler writers made a new space for themselves in Africa, where they could disregard Victorian gender conventions and gain more social power as they entered the male dominated sphere of colonial travel and exploration. As white women travelers claimed a place in a white male space of exploration, they were claiming a freedom from the gender restrictions of their home societies as they assumed a temporary white male status in Africa.¹³ Although British women travel writers disregarded gender roles by being travelers and writers in the colonies, they still had to subscribe to some gender norms, like dress and in interactions with men. Even when they were “away,” ideas from “home” followed them into their travels and they had to work within Victorian conventions of femininity. Views on race and colonialism in Britain also influenced their writing as they used imperial language and imagery. “All women travelers were aware of this dichotomy of being a woman with temporary male status, and the resulting [race and gender] tensions were manifested in many ways.”¹⁴

White women’s authority when traveling was also “grounded in constructions of racial difference” rather

¹² Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900-Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2012), 8.

¹³ Birkett, 140.

¹⁴ Birkett, 137.

than their merit as adventurous, boundary crossing women.¹⁵ As British women travelers accepted their “temporary male status” and racial superiority, they simultaneously “disregarded and reinforced Victorian gender norms” in order to display white respectability.¹⁶ White women travelers were given authority by natives because of their race and were also restricted by their gender as writings by British women travelers were regarded differently, associated with the “passive femininity of travel.”¹⁷ Margaret Strobel points out that “in comparison with accounts by Victorian men, women’s travel narratives incline less toward domination and more toward discovery.”¹⁸ They wrote about Africa with a sense of wonderment and curiosity as they encountered exotic customs and people. In British women travelers’ writing, also, “in equally contradictory fashion, they echoed the ethnocentrism of their society while questioning aspects of imperial policy and opening popular minds to the nonwestern world.”¹⁹ They were often pro-empire, but “mixed endorsements of empire and accounts of personal experience that undercut it.”²⁰ Race and gender

¹⁵ Alison Blunt, *Writing Women and Spaces: Colonial and Post Colonial Geographies* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994), 68.

¹⁶ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 39.

¹⁷ Alison Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 32.

¹⁸ Strobel, 36.

¹⁹ Strobel, 39.

²⁰ Susan L. Blake, “A Woman’s Trek: What Difference Does Gender Make?,” in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel

hierarchies influenced what it meant to be a traveler in the colonies and as British women travelers intersected these two boundaries, contradictions arose as they simultaneously traversed and maintained race hierarchies and gender norms.

Race and gender also played an important role in British female travelers' relationships to the colonized "other." Distinguishing differences between "self" and "other" was crucial to the colonial social system as it was based on dominance and racial difference. For white male travelers this relationship was that of subject to object. For white women, there were similarities between themselves, "self," and native men and women, "other," because they were both white men's objects. To an extent, women travelers had to put themselves on the same level as the "other" because of gender dynamic within the colonies.²¹ Simultaneously, the identity of white women was defined by their difference from African women. And according to white colonizer males, "there [were] two types of figuration of women: the British memsahib (colonial housewife), in need of protection from potential sexual threat; and in direct contrast, the sexually available colonized women."²² And so "the 'other' is the antithesis of the self."²³ British women had white prestige so

(Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 1992), 20

²¹ Blake, 22.

²² Sara Mills, *Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 59.

²³ Patricia M.E. Lorcin, "Women's Travel Writing," World History Sources, Accessed March 15, 2015, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/d/146/whm.html>.

they were superior to natives, but they remained inferior to white men because of their gender. Gender dynamics complicated the racial binary between colonizers and colonized. So British women travelers “exploited differences in race over differences in gender” as they traveled the continent and used their writing to redefine the “self” that was otherwise assigned to them.²⁴

The writings by female British travelers display how gender norms and racial perceptions shaped their travel experiences and interactions with African populations. As Strobel points out, their writing also served a purpose beyond just going against gender norms. They contributed to the flow of information going to Britain about the colonies:

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.²⁵

British women travelers’ writings informed how readers in the metropole imagined the colonies and the

²⁴ Birkett, 140.

²⁵ Strobel, 35.

natives that inhabited them. As Nupur Chaudhuri has shown in India, British memsahibs that wrote advice manuals, articles, and letters home about native servants contributed to the information in Britain about the colonies. They entertained notions of racial superiority and legitimized imperialism as they wrote about the physical, moral, and sexual inferiority of Indian servants, which was absorbed by British readers.²⁶ Like these British women in India, it was possible for women in the African colonies to enter the public sphere and influence colonial discourse through writing. As mentioned previously, in this paper I will analyze the writing contributions made by four British women travelers, Kingsley, Gaunt, Hall, and Shaw, and their perspectives on racial difference by exploring what it meant to be a traveler in Africa in the late 19th early 20th Centuries, and how Victorian gender conventions swayed the experiences of these female travelers.

Mary Kingsley

In Mary Kingsley's account of her travels she aims to bring information about native culture and customs to her readers. However as she writes about Africans, it is also clear that she believes in British imperial ideology. Kingsley grew up in Cambridge, United Kingdom where she belonged to a working class family. For most of her adult life, she performed her daughterly duty of staying at home taking care of her sick mother. Although isolated in the domestic sphere, Kingsley was unmarried and would remain a "spinster" for the rest of her life. After her mother and father passed away in 1893, Kingsley finally felt as though

²⁶ Chaudhuri.

she could give in to her sense of adventure and decided to go abroad to West Africa.²⁷ She sought advice from British doctor friends, others who had traveled to West Africa, and scoured missionary papers in order to have some idea of what she would be getting herself in to. Despite warnings Kingsley set off for West Africa for the first time in 1893. Kingsley describes herself as a “diligent pupil, who honestly tried to learn the lessons [that the Coast] taught me so kindly, though some of those lessons were hard to a person who had never previously been even in a tame bit of tropics, and whose life for many years had been an entirely domestic one in a University town.”²⁸ During her travels Kingsley came to love West Africa, feeling like it was her home and continuously called her back even when she left.

As she traveled the coast Kingsley went off the beaten path of a European traveler and interacted with many different groups of Africans. In her book *Travels in West Africa*, written in 1897, she chronicled her journey along the coast, recorded the customs of the natives she interacted with, and provided her reactions. In Kingsley’s descriptions of people and places she took on an ethnographic approach as she got to know Africa by getting to know the natives. As Kingsley experienced the colonies, she writes, “one by one I took my old ideas derived from books and thoughts based on imperfect knowledge and weighed them against the real life around me, and found them

²⁷ Birkett, 238.

²⁸ Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (London: 1897), 26.

either worthless or wanting.”²⁹ Although she used imperial language in her writing to describe Africa and its people, she also shows an appreciation and wonderment for the continent that she explored.

Through her writings on West Africa Kingsley contributed to the information that made up popular ideas about the colonies in the metropole. Kingsley appreciated the natives and their culture in *Travels in West Africa*, yet also promoted imperialism in her language and ideologies, as was a dominant theme in colonial era writing. When speaking about African men and clothing she perpetuates dominant notions of savagery:

Now it is an ingrained characteristic of the uneducated negro, that he cannot keep on a neat and complete garment of any kind. It does not matter what that garment may be; so long as it is whole, off it comes. But as soon as that garment becomes a series of holes, held together by filaments of rag, he keeps it upon him in a manner that is marvelous, and you need have no further anxiety on its behalf.³⁰

However, Kingsley also made distinctions between different native cultures and did not simply classifying everything as African. This shows that she was interested in providing readers with information on African life. Kingsley individualized Africans and their culture: “African culture, I may remark, varies just the same as European in this, that there is as much

²⁹ Kingsley, 27.

³⁰ Kingsley, 57.

difference in the manners of life between, say, an Igalwa and a Bubi of Fernando Po, as there is between a Londoner and a Laplander.”³¹ She also commented on the character and morals of each peoples she interacted with. For example, Kingsley comments on the character of Bubi people and their moral code: “theft is extremely rare and offences against the moral code also, the Bubi having an extremely high standard in this matter, even the little children having each a separate sleeping hut. In old days adultery was punished by cutting off the offender’s hand.”³² Amidst pro imperial language in her writing, Kingsley notes her liking of African tribes, like the Fan who she says, “are brave and so you can respect them, which is an essential element in a friendly feeling. They are on the whole a fine race.”³³ Despite some of the interesting ideas she learned from West Africans and their different fetishes and odd behaviors, Kingsley recognizes that “these Africans have often a remarkable mental acuteness and a large share of common sense; that there is nothing really ‘child-like’ in their form of mind at all.”³⁴ As Kingsley commented on the character and customs of the natives she encountered, she employed imperial language to describe Africans both positively and negatively.

As an unmarried woman traveling alone, Kingsley went against traditional Victorian gender roles. Traveling gave her a space outside of the home, and a place in the colonies that would have been very differ-

³¹ Kingsley, 279.

³² Kingsley, 115.

³³ Kingsley, 495-60.

³⁴ Kingsley, 512-513.

ent from other British women settled there. Traveling also allowed her entrance into the male dominated career of travel writing, which would also influence her gendered place at home. Upon her return, Kingsley had a celebrity status of sorts and popularity on the lecture circuit because of her groundbreaking trek through parts of Africa that no European had gone before.³⁵ Interestingly, some natives also saw traveling alone as outside of the norm. Kingsley recounts one interaction where a native man questioned why she was traveling by herself:

‘Where be your husband, ma?’ was the next conversational bomb he hurled at me. ‘I no got one,’ I answer. ‘No got,’ says Samuel, paralyzed with astonishment; and as Mrs. S., who did not know English, gave one of her vigorous drives with her paddle at this moment, Samuel as near as possible got jerked head first into the Ogowé, and we took on board about two bucketfuls of water. He recovered himself, however and returned to his charge. ‘No got one, ma?’ ‘No,’ say I furiously. ‘Do you get much rubber round here?’ ‘I no be trade man,’ says Samuel, refusing to fall into my trap for changing conversation. ‘Why you no got one?’ The remainder of the conversation is unreportable, but he landed me at Andande all right, and got his dollar.³⁶

³⁵ Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter, eds., *Archives of Empire Volume II: The Scramble for Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 439.

³⁶ Kingsley, 273-274.

As a woman traveling alone Kingsley accomplished many feats on her travels, like how she was the “first European to cross from the Ogowe to the Rembwe rivers by the route she followed and the first to ascent Mount Cameroon by the south east face.”³⁷ Kingsley was not just an ordinary traveler, but also became a self-taught explorer and ethnographer.³⁸

However, Kingsley is noted as abiding by some gender ideals like how she always wore Victorian dress. In one instance on her journey, Kingsley “insisted that she walk in the pouring rain behind her male companion on the trek because the black boot laces with which she had laced her corset would be visible through her sopping wet blouse.”³⁹ Cheryl McEwan notes that, “Kingsley’s ‘liberation’ as an independent traveler in West Africa was constrained by the demands of social etiquette imposed at home.”⁴⁰ In the introduction to *Travels in West Africa*, conventions of her home society entered Kingsley’s comments about the “natural” role of women and their disposition to hate politics, which influenced her writing, as it does not express her political opinions directly. Even though Kingsley gave a pretty favorable account of African culture, “she had inherited the common Victorian assumption that white skin meant racial superiority.” This makes some

³⁷ Blunt, *Writing Women*, 59.

³⁸ Strobel, 43.

³⁹ Strobel, 37.

⁴⁰ McEwan, 30.

aspects of her writing ironic because she relied on constructions of racial difference while also defending African peoples and their culture.⁴¹

As Kingsley contributed information about African life in *Travels in West Africa*, she also wrote other texts to influence British policy in the colonies. In a chapter entitled “The Clash of Cultures” of her book, *West African Studies*, Kingsley critiques British colonial administration for not trying to understand African culture and instead just reaping financial benefits from the colonies. Kingsley writes, “I own that I hate the humbug in England’s policy towards weaker races for the sake of all the misery on white and black it brings” and then goes on to accuse the British of bullying the inferior Africans.⁴² Kingsley also “opposed some of the education done by missionaries, the creation of jobs for Africans by the colonial administration, coinage, and the building of railroads.”⁴³ As Kingsley critiqued the administration in the colonies, she also affirmed her support of imperial ideology and believed Africans to be naturally inferior to whites. Despite her views on policy, Kingsley’s account of her travels and exploration of West Africa provided an ethnographic account of West Africans and their culture, and through her individual experiences she

⁴¹ McEwan, 112.

⁴² Mary Kingsley, “The Clash of Cultures,” in *West African Studies (1899)*, in *Archives of Empire Volume II*, ed. Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 441.

⁴³ Strobel, 38.

shaped domestic perspectives of readers in the metropole.

Mary Gaunt

Similar to Kingsley, Mary Gaunt felt like Africa was calling to her, and so she answered and began her adventure in the early 20th Century. Gaunt was born in Victoria, Australia in 1861. From a young age she had a strong sense of adventure and dreamt of visiting the places she had only heard of in stories. After her husband died, Gaunt moved to London in hope of earning an income as a writer. Once presented the opportunity, Gaunt left the metropole and headed to Africa.⁴⁴ Gaunt wrote that, “the regular, conventional life did not appeal to me; I could only write adventure stories, and the scene of adventure stories was best laid in savage lands. West Africa was not at all a bad place in which to set them. Its savagery called me.”⁴⁵ It was there that she would write her first travel book, *Alone in West Africa*, in 1912. This account was written as more of a story as Gaunt described her interactions with natives, feelings about Africa, and the sites. She was less an explorer than Kingsley, and more a tourist. Gaunt traveled very comfortably by steamer, had an African servant for the duration of her trip, and stayed in hotels, when available, or in the homes of colonial officials, which was as much an advantage of her race as her gender.

Gaunt recognized the peculiarity of her position as a woman traveling alone in Africa, and it becomes apparent in her writing that she knew that she was

⁴⁴ Birkett, 282.

⁴⁵ Mary Gaunt, *Alone in West Africa* (London: 1912), 32.

going against Victorian gender expectations. She comments on how she was perceived by the men that she encountered, most of them European, in West Africa. After staying with a governor and his wife for a number of days, Gaunt recalls that the Acting Governor, "had no sympathy with my mission, and I think, though he was too polite to say so, [he] was inclined to regard a travelling woman as a pernicious nuisance."⁴⁶ She also received discrimination for being a white woman traveling alone from the District Commissioner of M'Carthy Island after asking him if he thought of bringing his wife to Africa:

He looked at me a moment, seeking words to show his opinion of a woman who insisted upon going where he thought no white woman was needed...My wife," he said, with emphasis that marked his surprise; " my wife ? Why, my wife has such a delicate complexion that she has to wash her face always in distilled water.⁴⁷

Despite the judgment that she faced for being a woman traveling alone, Gaunt continued to feed her adventurous spirit by traveling through out West Africa.

Traveling, no matter the reason, provided British women freedom from some Victorian gender roles. Gaunt broke from Victorian notions of domesticity as she traveled throughout West Africa, explored villages, markets, and interacted with natives. In one instance, Gaunt writes about wanting to go ashore to explore a village in Ashanti, in spite of the captain's wishes:

⁴⁶ Gaunt, 340.

⁴⁷ Gaunt, 77-78.

'I must get away before dark.' He spoke as if that settled it, and he was right, but not the way he expected. I felt I simply could not go without seeing this place, and I decided. 'Then I'll go ashore.' 'You can't possibly,' [replied the captain]. 'Oh yes, I can. They won't eat me.' I don't know though that I was quite comfortable as I was dropped over the side in a mammy chair into a surf boat that was half-full of water.⁴⁸

Once ashore, she was invited by a white soldier to stay in the home of the Consulate in Ashanti, obviously the proper place for a white woman to lodge. This was an invitation extended by her racial equal, which speaks to the advantage of being white in the colonies, but Gaunt also seemed to be afforded this luxury because of gender. Her request of the ship captain can be seen as outside of what a "normal" woman would want to do, but it is interesting that when making the trek to the Consulate she complained about the road conditions, which would have been expected from a "nagging" woman. She writes, "such a walk as it was. Never have I met such a road. It was steep, and it was rough, and it was stony as a mountain torrent; now after the rain it was wet and slippery and the branches of the overhanging trees showered us with water as we passed."⁴⁹ Many European men that she encountered on her travels felt the need to fulfill their gentlemanly duty of accommodating her, while also reminding her that Africa was not place for a lady: "every man felt it

⁴⁸ Gaunt, 131-132.

⁴⁹ Gaunt, 134.

his duty to impress upon me the unhealthiness of the Coast, and every man did his duty manfully, forgetting that I have a very excellent pair of eyes and an inquiring mind.”⁵⁰ At the same time that Gaunt wanted the freedom to make her way around West Africa without male control, she was also grateful for the hospitality she received and took comfort in her encounters with other Europeans. This is important because the reader is able to grasp a sense of her independence, but also how social norms of her “home” are still at play when she was “away.”

Just as Gaunt entered the colonies with an idea about gender expectations, she also came with preconceived notions about race. In *Alone in West Africa* it is apparent that Gaunt was aware of her white prestige, which influenced how she wrote about racial difference. She pointed out the differences between whites and blacks, stating it as more of a fact than a social inequality. Gaunt gives a justification for racial difference and states that:

It is no good trying to hide the fact; between the white man and the black lies not only the culture and the knowledge of the west—that gulf might, and sometimes is bridged—but that other great bar, the barrier of sex. Tall, stalwart, handsome as is many a negro, no white woman may take a black man for her husband and be respected by her own people; no white man may take a black girl, though her dark eyes be soft and tender, though her skin be as satin and her

⁵⁰ Gaunt, 166.

figure like that of the Venus of Milo, and hope to introduce her among his friends as his wife.⁵¹

Gaunt sexualized African men, calling them “tall, stalwart, and handsome,” and African women with their “soft and tender” dark eyes, “satin skin,” and figure of a Venus. This hyper sexual representation of Africans furthered imperial anxieties about race and sexuality as African men were portrayed as sexually threatening and African women as sexually tempting. Her opinion on racial mixing and racial barriers of civilization and sex promote white dominance. Instances where Gaunt self proclaimed her racial dominance are found throughout the book, and as she spent more time in the colonies it seems as though she became more aware of the power in using her race. Exercising white prestige was advantageous to British women travelers, because their authority when traveling was often granted to them a result of their race.

As not to paint an image of Gaunt too negatively, it is important to recognize that these ideas about racial superiority were similar among most Europeans in the colonies and in the metropole.⁵² Gaunt was also aware that she had preconceived notions about race that were influenced by stories and writings of empire: “to me, before I went to Africa, a negro was a negro, and I imagined them all of one race. My mind was speedily disabused of that error. The negro has quite as many nationalities, is quite as distinct as the European.”⁵³ During her travels, Gaunt interacted with natives but

⁵¹ Gaunt, 47.

⁵² Strobel, 39.

⁵³ Gaunt, 53-54.

writes less about them and more about her reactions to them and the physical places she goes, leading her assertions about racial difference to come off as assumptions. For example, Gaunt writes: “ so the white man has always ruled the black; so, I think, he must always rule. It will be a bad day for the white when the black man rules. That there should be any mingling of the races is unthinkable; so I hope that the white man will always rule Africa with a strong hand.”⁵⁴ This is evidence of how her writing furthered notions of white dominance and promoted the British imperial agenda. In contrast, it appears as though Kingsley made a point to base her assertions about Africans and their character more on the basis of cultural understanding, though imperial language is still present, lending to the ethnographic nature of her work. However, in one example Gaunt appears to be surprised at her own race perceptions that have developed in the colonies, as she wants to use physical force on one of her African cart-boys. Within this example there are also numerous racial assumptions made:

What they wanted of course was a master who would beat them, and as they did not get it, they took advantage of me. It is surprising how one's opinions are molded by circumstances. Once I would have said that the man who hit an unoffending black man was a brute, and I suppose in my calmer moments I would say so still, but I distinctly remember seeing one of my cart-boys who had been on an errand to get himself a drink, or satisfy some of his manifold

⁵⁴ Gaunt, 48.

wants, strolling towards me in that leisurely fashion which invariably set me longing for the slave-driver's whip to hasten his steps. In his path was a white man who for some reason bore a grudge against the negro, and, without saying a word, caught him by the shoulder and kicked him on one side, twisted him round, and kicked him on the other side, and I, somewhat to my own horror, found myself applauding in my heart. Here was one of my cart-boys getting his deserts at last. The majority of white men were much of my way of thinking, but of course I came across the other sort.⁵⁵

Gaunt assumed that her cart-boys wanted a master who would beat them into working hard, and because she could not do this, they took advantage of her because she is a woman. As a female traveler, Gaunt benefitted from power attributed to her whiteness. But she still felt as though her authority was limited, especially when it needed to be exercised through physical force.⁵⁶ The outcome of this interaction and Gaunt's satisfaction with it shows just how deep her ideas about native racial inferiority ran. In her writing about the people and places she encountered, it is clear that Gaunt came to Africa with notions about racial difference. But her racial views developed and became solidified in the colonies as she wrote with a tone of white superiority.

In final comments on race Gaunt again asserted white dominance, but concludes that some Africans

⁵⁵ Gaunt, 366-67.

⁵⁶ Birkett, 135.

are not completely impermeable to the goals of the imperial civilizing mission. “Between black and white there is that great, unbridgeable gulf fixed, and no man may cross it. The black men who attain to the higher plane are as yet so few and scattered that each must lead a life of utter intolerable loneliness, men centuries before their time.”⁵⁷ Gaunt fulfilled her goal of writing a travel book that was exciting to the reader with imagery of savage lands, danger, experiences of a woman traveling, and promoted the imperial agenda all at the same time. So as Gaunt blurred gender lines with her position as a female traveler in West Africa, she also helped to define race lines in her writing.

Mary Hall

Similar to Kingsley and Gaunt, Mary Hall came to Africa with ideas about race and gender that influenced her account of her travels. Hall was born in 1857 and was raised in a lower-class district of London. She never married and in her late forties began her travels in Africa. On her reasons for travel, Hall writes that she had “always been interested in seeing fresh countries and peoples, and [had] ever considered travelling the most delightful method of studying geography.”⁵⁸ Motivated by this desire for new experiences, Hall traveled from Cape to Cairo and wrote *A Woman’s Trek from the Cape to Cairo* in 1907. This book reads like a diary, somewhat similar to Gaunt’s, as Hall recounts her experiences traveling and provides pictures of the natives and the places that she

⁵⁷ Gaunt, 756.

⁵⁸ Mary Hall, *A Woman’s Trek From The Cape to Cairo* (London: 1907), 2.

visited. However, we learn little about the Cape or Cairo as Hall focused on the “less known part of central Africa.”⁵⁹ In the preface of the book Hall writes:

As I am the first woman of any nationality to have accomplished the entire journey from the Cape to Cairo, I think perhaps a simple account of how I managed to do it quite alone may be of some interest to many who, for various reasons, real or imaginary are unable to go so far afield. I hope that a book, written from a woman’s point of view, minus big game romances, and the usual exaggerations incidental to all things African, may be acceptable.⁶⁰

As Hall acknowledged her accomplishment, she simultaneously downplayed her experience by referring to her writing as a “simple account” and hoping that it is “acceptable.” The preface provides a glimpse into the gender dynamics that are at play throughout the novel. According to Blake, the argument of Hall’s narrative is that ordinary travelers, women in particular, can travel in Africa.⁶¹ Women travelers did not have to be considered explorers or ethnographers like Kingsley, or even be paid authors like Gaunt, they can just be ordinary travelers that participated in the colonial experience.

Although Hall was the first woman to make that journey, men and women had been traveling in Africa well before her and these travelers influenced her

⁵⁹ Hall, 2.

⁶⁰ Hall, v.

⁶¹ Blake, 27.

image of the British Empire and her writing. Birkett speculates that women who wrote after the turn of the century, like Hall and Gaunt, relied on the printed word to construct their own imagery of the colonies. The writings of those before them influenced their perceptions of Africa and the natives who belonged to it, and “while many did not begin their journey until the turn of the century, their cultural baggage looked back to an earlier age in which they had been reared.”⁶² As Hall was influenced by existing information on the colonies prior to her journey, she was also contributing new information about the less known parts of central Africa that informed readers in the metropole. The “cultural baggage” that Hall brings along with her is seen in her perceptions of racial difference and promotion of Victorian gender norms.

Traveling rather comfortably, Hall passed through European settlements and missions, stayed in hotels, and took trains and luxurious boats. She was accompanied by porters, native soldiers, and was often carried by her native “boys” in a machila (a carrying device). Although traveling comfortably would have been expected of a lady, she also went outside of the bounds of Victorian femininity on her journey. When traveling through central Africa Hall notes that she was in command of a caravan of forty, and remembers that “the porters by this time were really no trouble; like children they were quick to see that I meant what I said and I was very careful never to give an order unless I intended it should be obeyed, so that I had them quite under control.”⁶³ By taking command of

⁶² Birkett, 22.

⁶³ Hall, 238.

the natives in her caravan, Hall went against traditional gender roles where a woman would normally follow and not lead. However, she also acknowledges that she was somewhat limited by her gender. Hall alludes to it being improper for her to use extreme physical force on the natives, but also that “merely telling them to do a thing, when they know the order is not likely to be backed up by a good thrashing if not obeyed, has very little effect sometimes.” So in order to maintain her power, she goes on to write “however, I felt I must maintain my authority somehow, so I kicked over their fire, and they had to go supperless to bed. I taught them a lesson.”⁶⁴ As a woman traveling by herself, for the most part, Hall needed the men in her caravan to set up camp, carry the equipment, carry her so that she would not have to walk the whole way, and to trek alongside her, so it was imperative that she exerted power over them and that they followed her command. Hall was able to ignore some Victorian gender conventions and to gain authority as she traveled, which was in large part due to her race.

Whiteness granted Hall a certain amount of automatic superiority, however as seen in the examples above, when dealing with African men she had to make an extra effort to ensure that her racial superiority was respected. One key example in *A Woman's Trek* where Hall is vulnerable because of her gender but also powerful because of her race, appears when she described her caravan being pursued by an irate chief and his tribe. After African soldiers from her caravan took captive a man from another village to be their guide, Hall realized that they are being followed by

⁶⁴ Hall, 367.

“hordes of natives” that were running toward them “brandishing their spears above their heads.” When they approach her caravan, Hall engaged in a negotiation with the chief who she thereafter referred to as “the Sultan.” She described him as angry yet calm as he stated his case against her soldiers. Then, Hall writes:

I expressed my regret, and told him that it was not with my sanction that this had been done... I said that I should be very glad if he would allow some one to come with me as far as the next river, and he answered to the effect that nothing would give him greater pleasure... I felt that I had taken a new lease of life when we came to this amicable understanding. There was a visible stir among the men in the background, who began to feel that ‘the White Queen’ and their own Sultan were evidently coming to terms, and that bloodshed would be unnecessary. I think my own porters had remained so calm because they never doubted the omnipotence of the white skin to overcome every difficulty.⁶⁵

The Sultan then posed for a picture, they exchange gifts, and made a friendly parting. Referring to herself as the “White Queen” and recognizing the “omnipotence of the white skin” shows that Hall relied on her race to take control of the potentially dangerous situation. But she also used her gender and ladylike demeanor to sway the conversation in her favor, showing what “a little courtesy even among so-called

⁶⁵ Hall, 206-210.

savages” was worth.⁶⁶ Gender conventions, as well as race relations, played a role in how Hall negotiated with the Sultan. By handling the situation with the courtesy of a Victorian lady, Hall showed a level of submission to the Sultan’s power but was also assertive. Hall had to relate to the Sultan “subject to subject,” one colonized by race and the other by gender, and she responded graciously by recognizing the Sultans power but also exercised her own power as a European.⁶⁷

Hall occupied the unique position of an ordinary traveling British lady and a lone woman on a trek, which was influenced by both her gender and her whiteness. Even when traveling between European settlements with her native porters, Hall was influenced by her “cultural baggage” and always observed racial boundaries.

She furthered imperial notions of emasculated African men when writing about the three main “boys” in her travel staff, calling them “practically my parlor maid, housemaid, and lady’s-maid.”⁶⁸ In several instances she also refers to native men as childlike:

the more I saw of the natives, the more they impressed me with their childish temperament. Once or twice, after I had been angry with them, they seemed quite downcast, and then just as I was thinking, ‘Poor fellows! Perhaps I have been too hard on them,’ the air would suddenly be rent by peals of laughter, and all my regrets

⁶⁶ Hall, 210.

⁶⁷ Blake, 29.

⁶⁸ Hall, 90.

vanished when I saw how little my severity affected them.⁶⁹

It is clear that Hall believed she was justified in her treatment of the natives because of their poor character and lazy habits: “they are drunk and normally lazy, and in general just not that smart.”⁷⁰ Throughout her book Hall was not very sympathetic to the natives and clearly thinks that African colonization is justified.

A Woman’s Trek ends in Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan. Hall rationalized not ending her account in Cairo because, “as I have said before, it is only my experiences in the more unknown parts of Africa that I wish to give in full detail... and as Khartoum has now been brought by the railway within the reach of the ordinary tourists, there is no need to describe my experiences between it to Cairo.”⁷¹ By simultaneously traveling Africa like a European tourist and trekking through unknown parts of central Africa, Hall made her journey accessible to European readers and brought knowledge about the road less traveled by in Africa. However Hall was not just an ordinary tourist, as she navigated how to slip between the roles of traveler and lady.⁷²

Flora Shaw

Flora Shaw was also no ordinary tourist in the colonies. She used travel writing to gain a political identity and also to promote the British imperial

⁶⁹ Hall, 242-243.

⁷⁰ Hall, 234.

⁷¹ Hall, 418.

⁷² Blake, 31-32.

agenda. Shaw was born in 1852 to an upper-middle class family with a military and parliamentary legacy.⁷³ Like Kingsley, she took care of her mother until her death and then was required to run the household. However, Shaw would not always be bound to the domestic sphere or strictly conform to gender roles. With encouragement from a male mentor, she began writing for different London magazines and ended up writing for *The Times* of London. From 1890 to 1900 Shaw wrote for *The Times* on the politics on imperialism, and later became the paper's first Colonial Editor. She traveled around British colonies, like Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa to gain firsthand knowledge of the British Empire. In her writing it is clear that Shaw supported British expansion and imperial ideology.⁷⁴ After retiring from *The Times*, Shaw married Sir Fredrick Lugard, Governor of Northern Nigeria, in 1902 and they traveled to Nigeria.⁷⁵ Shaw's early travels to the colonies were influenced by her career, which points to her independence. Her later position as a wife brought her to Nigeria, making her experience quite different from those of Kingsley, Gaunt, and Hall. While in Nigeria, Birkett describes Shaw as feeling rather isolated in the colonies and being bored with her life there, she had "[given] up her stern professional old-fashioned black dresses for white

⁷³ Helen Callaway and Dorothy O. Helly, "Crusader for Empire: Flora Shaw/ Lady Lugard," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 1992), 79 and 81.

⁷⁴ Callaway, 79.

⁷⁵ Strobel, 41.

gowns, and drifted unhappily around the verandah at Zangera with the outward appearance at least of a colonial woman.”⁷⁶ It is apparent that Shaw was not the typical colonial wife that was secluded in the domestic sphere, she was meant for travel and “crusaded for empire” through her writing and political involvement.⁷⁷ After four months in Nigeria, Shaw was ordered to return to London for health reasons. Upon her return, she wrote *A Tropical Dependency: an outline of the ancient history of the Western Sudan* in 1905. Unlike the three other travelers’ writings, this book is less an account about Shaw’s experiences in Nigeria. Instead, it provided an extensive history of the region and chapters on the contemporary political situation of Nigeria.

Shaw had a public and political identity, through her journalism career, and was in direct contact with people in colonial administration before she wrote a book inspired by her time in Nigeria. These class advantages put Shaw in a position of power, making her able to subvert gender roles and enter the male-dominated public sphere of imperial politics. However, her social class and her race also required Shaw to police herself in relation to how far she went outside of Victorian gender norms. Shaw did not try to change accepted gender roles but instead made a space for herself in the politics of empire through a career in journalism.⁷⁸ Shaw had to negotiate gender dynamics as she traveled to Africa and other British colonies, not just for the sake of travel, but instead for her work and

⁷⁶ Birkett, 76.

⁷⁷ Callaway.

⁷⁸ Callaway, 80.

her husband's career. She occupied a space outside of her gendered sphere even before she went to Nigeria and wrote *A Tropical Dependency*. The extensive history of Western Sudan in her book, although biased towards imperial expansion, shows that Shaw was expert enough to write a dense book on this topic. However, Shaw could not be considered as contributing to empire building because of her gender. Despite this gendered limitation, "she achieved the limits of the possible- as a fearless global traveler and a journalist who could sway public opinion and influence the reputation of empire builders."⁷⁹ At the same time that Shaw went against Victorian gender norms as she travelled the globe and swayed public opinion, she negotiated gender tensions between her work and her womanhood.⁸⁰

Although Shaw had a political voice, her political participation was restricted by her gender, and "in her direct political maneuvers, she acted through men." In her early publications in *The Times* Shaw even wrote anonymously. However, it is interesting to consider if Shaw herself felt this gender subordination as limiting. Helen Callaway and Dorothy Helly highlight that Shaw identified with "imperial ideology of masculinity" and "male 'heroes of empire'," which is seen in her promotion of colonial administration and Lugard's views on imperial policies in *A Tropical Dependency*.⁸¹ This respect for a male empire may be on account of Shaw's position as Lady Lugard and her upper-middle class background where gender norms would have been

⁷⁹ Callaway, 85.

⁸⁰ Callaway, 80.

⁸¹ Callaway, 80.

strictly observed, and also because of her strong support of imperialism, which her class would also have influenced.

Believing in the development and expansion of the British Empire, Shaw promoted imperial policies and British presence in Nigeria in *A Tropical Dependency*. The theme of racial superiority is also important to Shaw's history of Western Sudan as she writes that "there were evidently superior and inferior tribes" of Africans.⁸² Shaw's writing has a tone of white European dominance while she also created a hierarchy among Africans, making it seem like domination of one racial group over another is natural. Another key theme of Shaw's contemporary account of Nigeria is the cultivation of tropical lands, which brings up the questions of transport and labor.⁸³ In order to get the material benefits from colonial land the empire still needed native labor. Shaw writes, "we have abolished slavery, and, as a consequence, it has been assumed that the labor which once supplied the great industries of the world has ceased to have any value."⁸⁴ Shaw viewed Africans as laborers, important to serving European economic needs, and in exchange Europeans would bring civilization to this inferior race.⁸⁵ Although slave labor was abolished in British colonies in 1901, Shaw explains that natives in British protectorates could choose to stay with their masters and provide free labor, which she actually promoted in *A*

⁸² Flora Shaw, *A Tropical Dependency: an outline of the ancient history of the Western Sudan* (London: 1905), 39.

⁸³ Shaw, 7.

⁸⁴ Shaw, 9.

⁸⁵ Callaway, 94.

Tropical Dependency. Free labor was beneficial to the British Empire and to the laborer, because “he has, in slavery, the habit of work, the country can only be developed and made prosperous by labor, and it would be retrogression, not progress, if a race now fairly laborious were, by a too sudden alteration of the social system, to be rendered idle and vagrant.”⁸⁶ Through examples of slavery, labor, and harvesting of resources in colonial Nigeria, it is clear that Shaw believed in white racial dominance and promoted the imperial agenda through her writing, which influenced her ideas about Africans and racial difference.

Shaw dealt with questions of race rather than gender in her book, but the career that she made for herself by writing on the colonies often did put her at odds with gendered expectations of her home society. She brought information to Britain about the colonies and contributed to imperial discourse. In her travels in the colonies and her work in Britain, Shaw went against gender roles and participated in the public sphere. Strobel accounts for the impact that Shaw actually had on colonial policy as she states, “few late-nineteenth-century writers had more influence on colonial affairs than journalist Flora Shaw. Her writing fed the environment that fostered imperial expansion.”⁸⁷ In *A Tropical Dependency* it is clear that Shaw truly does believe in imperialism and the superiority of white civilization. Similar ideas about race and empire are seen in the other women travelers’ writings, however Shaw was more political about it and had the opportunity to make her opinions public.

⁸⁶ Shaw, 791-792.

⁸⁷ Strobel, 41.

Conclusion

As seen in the contents of Kingsley, Gaunt, Hall, and Shaw's travel narratives, how they perceived the colonies had as much to do with British colonial ideology as their personal experiences. They became part of the imperial project as they traveled and wrote about the African colonies. The fact that they contributed to colonial discourse at all highlights that women were not absent from empire, despite it being labeled a male space.⁸⁸ British women travelers went against Victorian gender conventions through their presence in the colonies, which shows that travel was a method of mobility where white women could cross race and gender boundaries in the colonies that could not be crossed at home.⁸⁹ As Kingsley, Gaunt, Hall, and Shaw simultaneously challenged and reinforced Victorian gender conventions, they came to occupy a unique yet contradictory space in the colonies. This influenced how they wrote about race, but also how Africans perceived them. At the same time that their gendered position was ignored because of their whiteness, gender was also important to racial boundaries and white respectability. Occupying this unique space allowed these four travelers to have an experience that was different from other British women in the colonies, as most of them were settlers and missionaries.

Kingsley, Gaunt, Hall, and Shaw's writing contributed to information about the colonies, perceptions about African culture, and discourse on racial difference that was absorbed in the metropole. Kingsley contributed knowledge about the diverse populations

⁸⁸ Strobel, 47.

⁸⁹ Blunt, *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism*, 16.

of Africa and an understanding of African culture. While Gaunt made racial assumptions about natives, and her racial views furthered existing notions about race. Hall also brought Victorian notions of race and gender with her to the colonies, which complicated her role as an ordinary traveler. And Shaw's writing contributed to discourse on racial dominance and promoted the colonial agenda. Readers in the metropole could find the race views and ethnocentric perspectives that these four female travelers adopted in their writing relatable, rather than their experiences in the African colonies.⁹⁰ Although these women had varying motivations and intentions for travel, their writing was shaped by their places as women in both home and colonial societies. This influenced how they wrote about racial hierarchy, acted on gender norms, and promoted imperialism in their writing. Although influenced by their home society, in traveling to the African colonies Kingsley, Gaunt, Hall, and Shaw were doing something that was original and also admirable as they contributed to imperial discourse in a unique way.

Sally Ulmer graduated in 2015 with a major in History and a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. She was initiated into Phi Alpha Theta in 2014.

⁹⁰ Mills, 118.