Mary Kingsley, as author and as person, has always defied categorisation. The very circumstances of her birth – her father married his housekeeper – placed her on the margins of English society, and it may be that this fact conditioned her apparent reluctance to allow herself to be wholly appropriated by any social group or stereotype, be that Victorian spinster and Imperialist, or proto-feminist and ‘nigger-lover’. Consequently, she has aroused very ambivalent reactions, in her own time as more recently.

Unsurprisingly, this reaction has been particularly acute when the critical perspective is one of ideological conviction, such as recent attempts by feminists and post-colonialists to recruit her to their cause. Her discourse, which sometimes seems so charmingly to anticipate more modern attitudes, at other times wallows about in the patriarchal and imperialist prejudices of the Victorian establishment; and her ‘rescuers’ are left high-and-dry, bemusedly muttering about incoherence and ‘resistance to the lexicon of self-discovery’.

If peripheral status left Mary Kingsley with an ill-defined sense of identity, it also endowed her with a fluidity of perspective that is

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1 The importance of this transgression in Victorian society cannot be underestimated. Dawes (1989, pp47-50) recounts the story of a respectable Victorian gentleman, Arthur J. Munby, barrister, poet and civil servant, who fell in love with and married his servant, maintaining the liaison a secret throughout his life, so afraid was he of the consequences should he be found out. ‘Society would not allow them to break down the barriers that divided class from class. Hannah refused, like the heroine of Pygmalion, to become a lady, and Munby knew that if he made his marriage known to his family and the world at large he would be completely cast out.’

2 Cf. Lawrence (1994: p129): ‘The interest of Kingsley’s ambiguous status in relation to the dominant culture’s imperial ethos increases when one looks at the way her writings were appropriated by political and intellectual figures of radically divergent views, such as J.A. Hobson and Michael Davitt on the one hand, and Rudyard Kipling, on the other.’

3 Lawrence (1994:p128)
undoubtedly a valuable asset for anyone with literary, scientific or political ambitions. To all effects, it would seem that Mary Kingsley had all three; for following her return from West Africa, she became extremely active in all kinds of areas, writing and lecturing on subjects of general and specialist interest, and campaigning about a variety of different issues such as the liquor traffic debate and the ‘hut tax’ controversy. Whether her motivation was a deeprooted belief in the rightness of her ‘causes’, desire for fame, or simply a way for an unmarried, otherwise ‘useless’ woman to make use of her considerable energies, is unclear. Whatever the reason, she was amply aided by her ability to think herself into other worldviews, a skill which she frequently made use of to both break down the barriers dividing people from each other, and to subvert some of the more stubborn establishment perspectives.

In this paper, I will be especially concerned to examine the ways in which Mary Kingsley relates to themes of gender and empire in her book *Travels in West Africa*. I do not approach this as an exploration of her personal identity, as some critics have done (since it is naïve to assume that opinions expressed by a narrative voice are necessarily in line with those of the author as person); rather I am concerned with looking at the ways in which Kingsley uses conventional discourse to create an effect in her intended readers. But first, we need to examine what in fact ‘discourse’ is.

**Discourse**

The term ‘discourse’ has become common currency in many different disciplines in recent years, and unfortunately, it is often left undefined. Sara Mills, in her book *Discourse*, has attempted to make sense of this terminological confusion, by laying out some of the main developments of the word. She begins by examining the various dictionary definitions available (the etymological root is Latin *discurrere*, meaning a running to and fro) and moves on to specialist usages, concentrating upon the meanings attributed to it in Cultural/Critical/Literary Theory, Mainstream Linguistics, Social Psychology and Critical Linguistics, and, of course, Discourse Theory.

I will be concerned here with Discourse in the sense that it is defined in Critical Language Study, as social practice determined by social structures. As Norman Fairclough describes in *Language and Power* (pp.17-42), the term was adopted to replace the traditional Saussurean distinction between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’, as these were felt to inadequately account for the historical specificity of language use and