A Conscious Failure to Pass: Dressing across Sexual and Racial Borders in Neo-Victorian Fiction

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Abstract:
This article seeks to illustrate how cross-dressing functions to highlight not only a crisis of gender identity, as Marjorie Garber describes in *Vested Interests* (1992), but operates more broadly to indicate multiple and overlapping crises of sexual and racial identity. Using examples from three postcolonial neo-Victorian novels, Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999), Elaine di Rollo's *A Proper Education for Girls* (2008) and Kate Pullinger's *The Mistress of Nothing* (2009), the article analyses the representation of characters who consciously fail to pass as 'other' when dressing across lines of race and gender. Using a postfeminist framework, the article challenges the assumption that seemingly independent female characters in neo-Victorian fiction automatically contest Victorian stereotypes of accepted female behaviour. Looking at the novels' representations of otherness, the article argues for the existence of a double Orientalism in postcolonial neo-Victorianism: a revived Victorian Orientalism within the texts as well as a renewed twenty-first-century Orientalism constructed between the present-day reader and the modern text itself.

Keywords: biofiction, cross-dressing, gaze, neo-Victorian, Orientalism, passing, postcolonialism, postfeminism, race, sexuality.

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Early in Kate Pullinger's *The Mistress of Nothing* (2009), the narrator, Sally Naldrett, tells of her once-a-month visit to the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery in the British Museum: "The first time I saw his shapely long face I thought he was a woman. But no, he's a man, a colossal Pharaoh" (Pullinger 2009: 11). With this introduction, Egypt is immediately set up as a country of gender indeterminacy and the narrator, who claims that "he's the man of my dreams" (Pullinger 2009: 11), as a peculiar woman. Like Sally,[1] the two female protagonists of *A Proper Education for Girls* (2008),[2] twin sisters Alice and Lilian Talbot, are portrayed as unconventional women. The spinster-sister Alice is forced to become her father's amanuensis and even

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part of his collection of curiosa, while the prettier Lilian is made to marry a missionary after engaging in a premarital affair with an unsuitable man. Although *A Proper Education for Girls* could be more critical in places, it can still be read in a way that highlights its concern with "the metahistoric and metacultural ramifications of […] historical engagement" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 6).[3] In Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999), finally, two late-twentieth-century women, one from America and one from Egypt, discover and reconstruct their shared ancestral history. Their story tells of Lady Anna Winterbourne's travels to Egypt after the death of her husband in 1899. Anna's diary describes how she dresses as an English gentleman, hoping to see more than she would be able to see in feminine dress. On one of these trips, however, Anna is captured by a small faction of Egyptian nationalists, which leads to her meeting Sharif Pasha al-Baroudi and his sister Layla, two people who show her different aspects of Egypt.

An important way in which the three novels discussed exemplify their preoccupation with other cultures is through the characters' adoption of foreign dress. In the introduction to *Vested Interests* (1992), her seminal work on cross-dressing, Marjorie Garber writes that "one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what I call 'category crisis'", described as "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave" (Garber 2011: 16) – and numerous others. Cross-dressing or transvestism serves to question the boundary between male and female, but clearly this is not its only purpose. Instead, Garber argues, cross-dressing functions as "an index [...] of many different kinds of 'category crisis'" (Garber 2011: 16). When a cross-dressing character is present in a text "that does not seem, thematically, to be primarily concerned with gender difference or blurred gender", this can indicate "a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin" (Garber 2011: 17, original emphasis). Garber's notion of displacement is highly significant in this article. Looking at three neo-Victorian novels, I consider how cross-dressing, not only across borders of gender but also those of race and culture, displaces the insecurity that is a consequence of such border-crossing onto a figure that is not, or not only,

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sexually 'other' but also represents racial and cultural otherness.[4] The voyeuristic aspects involved link to this issue's theme of sexploitation, as characters are *viewed* as other. Moreover, the use of cross-dressing to include a racial dimension raises questions about the (s)exploitation of others and otherness by present-day authors of neo-Victorian fiction and their readers.

Neo-Victorianism's almost obsessive interest in everything sexual has been extensively theorised. In a 2002 article on 'The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel', Anne Humpherys states that "one could almost say cynically that the purpose of these novels in terms of the Victorian novel is simply 'to put the sex in'" (Humpherys 2002: 446), a subject which the Victorians supposedly left out. Marie-Luise Kohlke, too, argues that neo-Victorian fiction "panders to a seemingly insatiable desire for imagined perversity" (Kohlke 2008: 55). Kohlke's statement that "the neo-Victorian novel exoticises and seeks to penetrate the tantalising hidden recesses of the nineteenth century by staging a retrospective imperialism" is especially significant in novels that explicitly engage with Britain's colonial past and the different parts of its empire (Kohlke 2008: 62). In the same article, Kohlke claims that the genre of neo-Victorianism has become the "new Orientalism" (Kohlke 2008: 67). The Orient, she states, "is no longer somewhere else out there", so that writers instead "turn to their own culture to discover or, more accurately, *(re)construct* a substitute Other" (Kohlke 2008: 69, original emphasis). As a result, "our imagined Victorian Others supplant the Orient to become what Said called 'a sort of surrogate and even underground self'" (Kohlke 2008: 69).

While Kohlke's argument is a valuable one in relation to those neo-Victorian novels which, as she writes, replace "the seraglio with nineteenth-century backstreets, brothels, and bedrooms", it excludes those – admittedly fewer – novels which *do* reconstruct the "literal Oriental settings or individuals" that according to Kohlke "are rarely given prominence" (Kohlke 2008: 69).[5] The novels I discuss in this article are examples of texts that not only insert – or rather make explicit – an obsession with the sexuality of the 'other' but do so in a reconstructed Oriental setting. What occurs in these cases is a kind of double Orientalism, in which our present-day obsession with the Victorians also resurrects the Victorian obsession with the Orient.

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When Edward Said defined Orientalism in his 1978 seminal work of that title, he described it as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience", with the Orient being the place of Western Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 2003: 1). Orientalism, Said argued, involves a series of flexible and changing relationships between Occident and Orient but, for its continued existence, it requires a disparate power relationship between East and West, in which the West always has the upper hand (Said 2003: 7). This relationship, too, is duplicated in the double Orientalism I describe: not only do many of the Western characters in the novel reference, either explicitly or implicitly, their sense of superiority towards the colonial other, but they also invite the reader to identify with their standpoint. Although the texts are partly or wholly set in the nineteenth century, as neo-Victorian novels they also relate to twenty-first-century social and cultural politics. A focus on racial or cultural cross-dressing may thus call to mind present-day debates about 'Oriental' cultural (or often religious) dress, such as the controversy around the wearing of hijabs and burqas.

The texts here examined discuss the crossing of racial, ethnic and cultural borders and, through their *neo*-Victorianism, also that of temporal ones. Because neo-Victorianism is at least as concerned with the present as it is with the Victorian era, the category crises depicted in the novels are connected to the present as much as the Victorian period. In *Imperial Fictions*, Rana Kabbani highlights two main themes that arise from the Western construction of the Orient: "The first is the insistent claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality, and the second that it was a realm characterised by inherent violence" (Kabbani 2008: 24). The return to a re-imagined nineteenth century – throughout the narrative in *The Mistress of Nothing* and *A Proper Education for Girls* and in selected parts of *The Map of Love* – becomes a means of tracing the genealogy of sexual phenomena that received attention in the Victorian period and of connecting them to the present. Through these narratives, the twenty-first century repercussions of Victorian exploitative conceptualisations of sexual and racial otherness can be explored.

1. Empowerment, Postfeminism and (Elective) Sexploitation

Within the novels, the characters' assumption of the clothes and characteristics of other genders or cultures recreate the Victorian Orientalist

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obsession with the other and the space of that other as a place of unfettered sexuality. In the reality of the reader, however, neo-Victorianism not only connects these Victorian Orientalist stereotypes of race, sex and desire with the nineteenth century but also replicates them in the present. Orientalism has clearly not disappeared in the twenty-first century, even if it uses the excuse of a Victorian setting. While the novels discussed focus on the aspect of sexuality – highlighting either an imagined Victorian prudishness or a supposed Eastern lasciviousness – the connection created between fiction and the reader's lived experience through a doubled Orientalism also evokes media narratives of violence in the Orient (often automatically linked to Islam). It must be noted that *The Map of Love* is in a somewhat different position from the other two texts, as Soueif is Egyptian and her writing engages with both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egyptian politics. As a consequence, Soueif's depiction of sexuality digresses from Orientalist stereotypes. For the same reason, however, her novel more clearly resonates with the aspect of violence that Kabbani also mentions. The fact that Soueif writes in English, and therefore for an international audience and market, also complicates the case.

All three novels centre on female characters and their unconventional or non-normative positions in society. While such a focus might indicate that these novels are examples of the way in which neo-Victorianism can explore (or perhaps exploit) narratives of female empowerment that remained unspoken in the Victorian period, this assumption proves problematic. Both in *The Mistress of Nothing* and in *A Proper Education for Girls*, the women are initially presented as making themselves less dependent upon the men in their lives as they head towards a more adventurous life. However, as the stories progress, these narrative strands are not developed further and instead, most main characters return to and consolidate stereotypically feminine behaviour. Letting go of what seemed a growing self-awareness, they retreat behind a front of normative femininity, discouraging or even rejecting those characters who do not adhere to conventional norms. In a recent article, Karen Sturgeon-Dodsworth identifies this as a broader trend:

> through and in their New Woman many contemporary neo-Victorian fictions fashion an entirely illusory radicalism, with a number of mainstream twenty-first century films and

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> novels using the form and its expected representation of strong femininities to pay lip service to progressive gender ideals while never fully upholding them. (Sturgeon-Dodsworth 2015: 165)

As a result, many female characters in neo-Victorian fictions "enact choices that superficially signify agency and yet on closer inspection betoken a return to the strictures of traditional binaries" (Sturgeon-Dodsworth 2015: 173). Citing Angela McRobbie's notion of "*faux*-feminism" (McRobbie 2009: 1, original emphasis), Sturgeon-Dodsworth argues that such ideological transvestism connects these neo-Victorian fictions to theories of postfeminism (Sturgeon-Dodsworth 2015: 173-174). In postfeminism, according to McRobbie, the advances made by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s are "actively and relentlessly undermined" (McRobbie 2009: 11). Popular culture plays a large role in this, as it uses a variety of strategies to contribute to the undoing of earlier feminist gains, "while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (McRobbie 2009: 11). Postfeminist popular culture offers a nod to feminism, as it references women's choice and sexual freedom, but at the same time proclaims that feminism, as a social and political movement, is no longer necessary as equality has been achieved or, even more worryingly, that feminism has enabled the achievement of as much equality as is possible and that striving for more might be counterproductive (see Kavka 2002: 32).

Sturgeon-Dodsworth uses Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes films to exemplify her argument on postfeminist neo-Victorianism.[6] It is perhaps not surprising that its most explicit examples can be seen in popular cinema. In her famous article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalytical theory to examine the power relations involved in the structures of looking and being looked at that films offer. Mulvey states that "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 1975: 11). Rosalind Gill, however, challenges this binary division:

> Where once sexualized representations of women in media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today sexualization works somewhat differently in

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> many domains. Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so. (Gill 2007: 151)

Because of this, Gill continues, the power of surveillance shifts "from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze" (Gill 2007: 151). The objectifying gaze becomes internalised and thereby part of one's self-constructed sense of identity.

Gill's argument echoes Michel Foucault's analysis of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). According to Foucault, the goal of the Panopticon is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power", which is "permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault 1991: 201). As a consequence of this automatisation and disindividualisation of power, the inmates of the Panopticon become "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 1991: 201-202). Self-monitoring, as Foucault, Gill and McRobbie all argue, becomes foundational to the construction of an individual identity, and this monitoring is never independent from what the subject thinks is expected of her (or him) in and by society. The assumption that one can choose what life to lead is strongly bound up with the commodification of a supposed female (sexual) empowerment (Budgeon 2011: 287; McRobbie 2009: 19). What is monitored most explicitly, once again calling up the tension in postfeminism between passive objectification and 'choosing' to be looked at, is the female body (see Gill 2007: 149-50), especially the (self-)sexualisation of that body, which risks becoming another form of (albeit elective) sexploitation

2. Observing and Judging the Cross-Dressing Body

The fixation that neo-Victorianism displays towards Victorian sexuality can be extended to include an interest in the nineteenth-century body. The analysis of cross-dressing, as a means to cross borders of sex and possibly race in neo-Victorianism, is one way in which to study the preoccupation with Victorian sexualised bodies and their physical and aesthetic exploitation – in the past, as it is recreated in the diegetic settings, but also

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in the extradiegetic present through the neo-Victorian genre itself. The interest in the body, especially in bodies that are in some way 'other', links cross-dressing to a Victorian medical discourse in which the body formed an indicator of (non)normativity that could be categorised, measured, and ordered.[7] All three texts place the body under medical scrutiny: Anna's husband dies of depression as a result of what we would now most likely describe as PTSD after returning from the Sudan Campaign; Lady Duff Gordon journeys to Egypt to relieve her respiratory difficulties; and, most explicitly, the 'ugly' twin Alice is rescued from a planned clitoridectomy, which is supposed to restore "[h]er gentle nature, her sweetness of countenance and docility", even though she never possessed these characteristics in the first place (Di Rollo 2009: 311). The focus on the body and its dress forms part of a set of overlapping discourses of a medical, sexual, racial, social and cultural nature.

In all three novels, clothing is one of the ways to show the characters' refusal to continue to adhere to British habits once they leave their country, actively confusing the interconnected class and gender constructions made visible through one's choice of outfit. The neo-Victorian novels I describe all feature female characters dressing in men's clothes. On those occasions where a man is described in a cross-dressing context, it is usually across racial borders, often explicitly or implicitly referencing the historical figure of Sir Richard Francis Burton. This implies an inherent power question to the kind of cross-dressing depicted in these texts: characters not only dress up, but they often dress *up*, aiming for a role with more social power and status.[8] Racial cross-dressing might not appear to fit this argument entirely, yet the fact that characters engaging in this practice continue to be read and coded as white maintains their power position or even strengthens it, as they flaunt their knowledge and abilities to deceive the 'natives' to the reader.

The power dynamics involved in dressing across borders of sex, race and culture again illustrate Garber's claim that cross-dressing in a text that is not primarily concerned with the instability of gender binaries indicates "a *category crisis elsewhere*" (Garber 2011: 17, original emphasis). In relation to this argument, I analyse scenes in the narratives where characters not only cross established gender binaries but also shift along the lines of race. Adopting the clothing of another sex, race or culture in these novels does not always engage with the concept of a non-normative sexual or gender

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identity, but even when it does not, it remains implicated in challenging nineteenth-century normative femininity. Moreover, in many instances, dressing across boundaries of sexuality as well as race shows the instability of such borders within and between multiple categories, signifying points of tension and potential crisis.

In Pullinger's *The Mistress of Nothing*, Lady Duff Gordon is the first to lose her corsets, stays and heavy skirts, as she finds her European clothing too hot and confining and not conducive to her delicate health – her reason for moving to Egypt in the first place. The narrator, Lady Duff Gordon's maidservant Sally Naldrett, describes how one morning she entered her lady's room only to find her already dressed:

> She was wearing the most extraordinary outfit I had ever seen. She had on a pair of Egyptian trousers – men's trousers, brown cotton, loose flowing, tied at the ankles – and a long white cotton tunic on top – a man's tunic, plain – and sandals on her bare feet. That was it. (Pullinger 2009: 51)

Choosing comfort over propriety, from then on Lady Duff Gordon dresses, in Sally's description, "like an Egyptian man, a peasant, mind you, a *fellahin*, with a dash of Bedouin tribesman thrown in when she felt inspired" (Pullinger 2009: 52). With her dress, Lady Duff Gordon has crossed several borders. Sally explicitly mentions her lady dressing as a peasant male, but when asked for her opinion by Lady Duff Gordon, Sally says to her – and to the reader – that she looks "like a learned Egyptian sheikh" (Pullinger 2009: 51). Thus, rather than directly referencing the fact that the lady is wearing male dress, even if it is implied in the word 'sheikh', Sally instead refers to the bridging of a class gap from peasant to scholar, a gap that she, as a servant, cannot cross.

The fact that Lady Duff Gordon dresses in male clothing lifts her status over the limits imposed on her because of her sex, as the novel also shows through her changing relation with the local community. Although she adopts an Egyptian outfit, she does not completely change from English to Egyptian and from female to male. Rather, she maintains her authority as a white, European lady but also assumes the authority a masculine position would grant her. As a woman of some standing, Lady Duff Gordon has a dubious position in local people's eyes. Her adoption of men's clothes,

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coinciding with her "growing stature as the host of regular salons with her important male friends and village *hakima*" (Pullinger 2009: 85, original emphasis), somewhat alleviates local people's confusion. In fact, Sally writes, the lady "was well on her way to becoming an honorary man" (Pullinger 2009: 85). The change in clothes thus not only connects to Lady Duff Gordon's own comfort and wishes but also functions as a visible symbol of her status within the community. However, the fact that she only partly crosses boundaries of sex and race, as indicated by her outfit, opens the way to a crisis of identity.

Pullinger's Lady Duff Gordon is not simply a fictional creation. Rather, she is based on Lucie Duff Gordon, née Austin (1821-1869), who was herself an author of two travelogue-like collections of letters under the name Lucie Gordon: *Letters from Egypt, 1863-1865* (1865) and *Last Letters from Egypt* (1875). The character Sally Naldrett in *The Mistress of Nothing* also existed and indeed accompanied Lady Duff Gordon to Egypt. By taking Sally as focaliser, Pullinger engages in what Kohlke describes as biofiction of a marginalised subject (Kohlke 2013: 4). When it comes to writing about such lesser-known subjects, Kohlke states, it is not "their personal glamour or prestige" that provides an author with opportunities but rather "their comparative indistinctness as private individuals – apart from their relations to famous figures or the myths and 'hype' that have been woven round them" (Kohlke 2013: 9). In the author's note that ends the book, Pullinger explicitly states that while Lady Duff Gordon is still relatively well known through her *Letters from Egypt*, little to nothing is known about her Egyptian dragoman and her maidservant and that she "ha[s] played fast and loose" with those facts that are known (Pullinger 2009: 249-250). A risk of writing about marginalised subjects is that they may inadvertently "again be relegated to supporting roles – the very status biofiction was supposed to rescue them from – even in their own life-stories" (Kohlke 2013: 11). In *The Mistress of Nothing*, however, Pullinger has been successful in breathing life into a historical character who has left few historical traces.

When Sally also adopts local dress, the issue of class is further highlighted. Hesitantly, she asks the dragoman Omar Abu Halaweh, who guides and supports the household during their stay in Egypt, about getting different clothes. Shyly, Sally explains:

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> ‘I would like to buy –’ I stopped, and looked across the dusty passageway to where a woman was emerging from a doorway. She was dressed in typical Upper Egyptian style, in a simple garment draped so that it covered her body, fastened at her shoulders, secured at her waist […] ‘You want to buy a maidservant?’ ‘No!’ I laughed […] ‘I would like to dress as she is dressed. My clothes, Mr Abu Halaweh, I am always too hot in my English dress.’ (Pullinger 2009: 55)

At first, Omar Abu Halaweh does not entirely understand, asking whether Sally wants to be dressed like a fellah, a peasant woman. Sally has to explain that she does not know what kind of local dress would be suitable for a woman of her status – something much more relevant to her than it is to Lady Duff Gordon. Omar helps her by arranging for a village seamstress and her assistants to come visit her at the house. This occasion, too, emphasises Sally’s class position, especially in relation to that of her lady. With Omar out of sight but in hearing distance to translate where necessary and Lady Duff Gordon arranged on a divan as if for a private theatrical, Sally is “measured and prodded and draped” (Pullinger 2009: 56). The village women strip her to her underwear and upon seeing the garments, Lady Duff Gordon exclaims: “Those are the most heavily repaired and restitched knickers I have ever seen, Sally” (Pullinger 2009: 56). Omar translates and all women laugh, though Sally “hadn’t the heart to remind my Lady that what I wore under my clothes was what she had deemed no longer fit for her to wear under her own” (Pullinger 2009: 56). Although it is Sally who initially requested the clothing, the set of Egyptian lady’s clothes that she is measured for is ordered for her by Lady Duff Gordon. That the clothing is bought for her emphasises Sally’s subordinate position: she does not have the money nor the power to buy her own clothes without such help.

Sally’s change of clothing, facilitated and supervised by Lady Duff Gordon, has the potential to put her in a different socio-cultural position, as the male peasant’s clothes do for her lady. Not only is she encouraged to get a “*tarhah*”, a scarf to cover her hair, and a veil, but she is also measured for a long and covering overgown that local women sometimes wear outside the house. Although initially she balks at this, Lady Duff Gordon overrules her protests: “You never know when we might need you to be able to move freely through the city without being seen to be European, Sally, to *pass* as

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Egyptian" (Pullinger 2009: 57, added emphasis). The use of the word 'pass' here creates a connection to the sexual and racial cross-dressing that Lady Duff Gordon and Sally engage in. Although Lady Duff Gordon dresses in an outfit usually worn by lower-class Egyptian men, it is obviously not her intention to actually pass for a male Egyptian peasant. Sally, however, should be able to pass, dressing in a way suitable to both her sex and class, if not her national and cultural background. While both Sally and Lady Duff Gordon are thus depicted as dressing across borders, the ones that Sally crosses are portrayed as simultaneously less significant – as she retains her gendered and class identification – and more so, as she is able to immerse herself in a foreign country and culture in a way that Lady Duff Gordon cannot.

Sally and Lady Duff Gordon's change of dress initially follows from their changed surroundings, especially the Egyptian climate. In Di Rollo's *A Proper Education for Girls*, however, clothing is first specifically mentioned as a symbol of (lack of) femininity in connection to both Talbot sisters. When it comes to cross-dressing, however, the focus lies on Lilian. Soon after being forced to marry a missionary, who is generously recompensed for taking on 'soiled goods' by her father, Lilian travels with him to India. Initially, Lilian only makes "some useful and, to her mind, necessary modifications to her way of life" (Di Rollo 2009: 45). These include wearing a pith helmet to keep the sun off her skin instead of constantly carrying a parasol, learning a foreign language to enable her to speak to the bearers, and practicing how to shoot. She also adopts the habit of "wearing a pair of her husband's trousers" beneath her skirts as she explores the countryside, "which enabled her to climb over fallen trees and scramble up rocks with ease and no loss of dignity" – at least, not of her dignity (Di Rollo 2009: 45). Her husband Selwyn, however, sees her unfeminine adventurousness as detracting from her – and by implication his – status.

Although Selwyn knowingly took on a 'tainted' bride, he expects her to be shamed and cowed rather than to display what he considers an unfeminine forwardness and confidence. He explicitly reminds her of her degradation, angrily declaring:

> Where's your gratitude? Where do you think you would be without me? I mean, if it were not for my noble work at the

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> Magdalene asylum with Dr Cattermole your father might never have found a husband as suitable as me, nor as understanding of *who* and *what* you are. (Di Rollo 2009: 47, original emphasis)

By explicitly identifying her with the archetype of the fallen woman, Selwyn marks Lilian as a quasi-prostitute, emphasising the stereotype of the Madonna/whore binary. Simultaneously, he blatantly references the way in which Victorian charitable institutions could be engaged in policing social boundaries of morality.

Not long after their arrival at Kushpur, Lilian's ineffectual husband dies from lockjaw, his death and burial described in hardly more than a page, after which Lilian is simply "glad that her new status as a widow granted her conversational licence" among the European set in India (Di Rollo 2009: 148). Not long after Selwyn's death, several British men start competing for Lilian's hand. Because of this, former friends become rivals for her affection, even though "there were a number of subjects, had they but known it, upon which they were in accord", among them Lilian's "increasing affection for all things Indian. Indeed, it was soon widespread intelligence that in the privacy of her own home the widow Fraser wore native clothing" (Di Rollo 2009: 151). When Mrs Birchwoode, Mrs Toomey and Mrs Ravelston pay an unannounced visit, they are scandalised to find Lilian in truth dressed "in the loose flowing fabrics of the bazaar, her feet bare, her hair undone" (Di Rollo 2009: 151). Lilian's dressing across racial lines is portrayed as shocking to the British women in the local community, but Di Rollo clearly writes for a modern audience, placing Lilian's changed dress in connection to a discussion of women's rights and that movement's development in Britain relayed just a few pages earlier. By placing Lilian's racial cross-dressing within a women's rights context, the significance of the racial and cultural lines that she crosses is mitigated – after all, she is still in women's clothes.

The marginal transgressiveness of Lilian's choice is confirmed by the description of an outing of the white British community shortly after. As Lilian turns up, dressed in a sari, most of the company is shocked: "Mrs Fraser," one of the more timid men says, seconded by the matrons, "how can you possibly think this form of dress is appropriate?" (Di Rollo 2009: 207-208). Some of the other men, however, view things differently: "Mrs

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Fraser looks quite delightful", one of them states, while several others are happy to gaze at the pretty young woman (Di Rollo 2009: 208-209). One of the men describes her outfit as a "nautch-girl costume" (Di Rollo 2009: 208), another reference that emphasises the crossing of social boundaries as much as those of race. Although nautch girls were traditionally girls trained from a young age for dance performances and were sometimes recognised and respected as artists by British people in the colonies, the word later became more or less synonymous with 'loose' women offering sexual gratification.[9] Through this reference, Di Rollo makes clear that while Lilian may not be selling sex, her adopted style of dress is erotically attractive to her male companions. The novel here exploits the overt sexuality – and neo-Orientalism – that features regularly in neo-Victorianism.

Di Rollo continues to describe the objectification of Lilian as she simultaneously ridicules the men who cannot hide their (sexual) interest. One of the men, although knowing "he should try to avert his eyes from Lilian in her delicious native costume", is unable to look away, so that "[i]n the end he abandoned all pretence and allowed his gaze to remain fixed covetously on her" (Di Rollo 2009: 209). The alluring young woman, cross-dressing as a native woman but still recognisably white and 'civilised', undermines the men's self-control. The scene fits into a larger discourse of Orientalism, with Lilian representing the exotic other and the pure white woman at one and the same time. Di Rollo's choice of vocabulary in this fragment – words like "looks", "stare" and even "gaze" – makes clear that she knowingly references theories of the male gaze and the objectification of the woman being looked at (Di Rollo 2009: 208-209). The scene also fits into a postfeminist discourse, as Lilian knowingly presents herself in a way that will evoke comments, reactions and looks from her companions (see Gill 2007:151). Her choice of clothing seems to represent female empowerment, as she breaks normative boundaries of dress. Nonetheless, the fact that even the *sircar*, the male head of the house servants, is described as expressing approval of her dress, "bowing deeply and murmuring something that sounded like 'bloody beautiful, memsahib'" (Di Rollo 2009: 207), makes it clear that Lilian's choice of dress is not for comfort alone.

The female protagonists of Pullinger's and Di Rollo's novels, while performing a kind of cultural and racial cross-dressing, in most cases do not actually try to *pass* for a person of another sex, race or class. Passing, in

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Sara Ahmed's words, "has been theorised [...] as a form of transgression. Such approaches assume that 'passing' destabilises and traverses the system of knowledge and vision upon which subjectivity and identity precariously rest" (Ahmed 2000: 125). In 'Rites of Passing' (2001), Linda Schlossberg argues that passing can have different consequences, causing either comfort or anxiety. Referring to vision, Schlossberg stresses the connection between seeing and knowing: "Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation" (Schlossberg 2001: 1). The significance of visibility is exemplified in Di Rollo's description of the responses to Lilian's Indian dress: she "looks the part", "looks quite delightful", and the men stare at her or even "gaze [...] covetously" (Di Rollo 2009: 208-209). Nevertheless, it is clear that Lilian is consciously *failing* to pass; her intent is not to be seen as an Indian woman but simply to be more comfortably – and attractively – dressed. Reina Lewis, referencing Gail Low, writes how "the pleasures of cross-cultural dressing […] are often underpinned by a closely held sense of racialized differentiation", so that "for the westerner […] the pleasure of wearing an exotic and splendid 'native' costume is enhanced by the knowledge of the white skin underneath the disguise" (Lewis 1999: 509). The 'splendidness' of Lilian's costume also points to the attraction of the Orient as a site for pleasurable consumption, for both past and present audiences.

That the women in both *A Proper Education for Girls* and *The Mistress of Nothing* do not intend to pass for someone of a different class, sex or race makes their cross-dressing both more and less transgressive than it could be: more so, because the way they look visibly does not match their status, but less so because they have not completely 'gone native'. Passing, as Schlossberg writes, not only

> wreaks havoc with accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility, it also blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender, and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct, and deconstruct one another. (Schlossberg 2001: 2)

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The fluidity of borders of race, class and gender that the characters represent indicates the difficulty of making distinctive divisions between Britain and its colonies. The characters in these texts remain recognisably white and therefore 'not-other', implying an awareness of the social risks of being able to pass successfully as 'other'. Only Sally becomes able to pass as an Egyptian woman and initially she has no choice in this. Sally, while part of the colonising nation, remains dependent upon Lady Duff Gordon's goodwill for her position in the household and in Egypt. In *Passing Into the Present* (2010), Sinead Moynihan writes:

> to pass into a different class is more likely to be an invisible form of passing, predicated on the possibility of changing aspects of one's identity related to, but existing at one step's remove from, the body – dress, accent and so forth. (Moynihan 2010: 8)

Nevertheless, it is this form of passing that is seen to present as much of a danger to British society as does racial passing. Both forms of passing emphasise an inequality of power with persons having the chance to pass for a higher-status individual, a position to which they have 'no right' in the existing social structure.

3. The Limits of Transgressive Passing

One of the difficulties of cross-dressing, be it sexual, racial or social, is that it reaffirms the same borders it challenges. Referencing the experience of transgenders, Judith Lorber argues that trans people "who pass as normal [sic] women or men achieve a successful transformation, but their achievement (and the gender resistance it entailed) must remain a secret" (Lorber 1999: 361). This connects to Schlossberg's broader reference to passing, when she states that a "convincing performance" requires skill: "the seams must not show" (Schlossberg 2001: 6). For people to pass successfully, then, others have to fail to recognise that someone is trying to be seen as belonging to a category with which they would not normally be identified. In this, Elaine K. Ginsberg claims, they differ from people temporarily assuming the position of an other, for example in transvestism. Referencing Madeline Kahn, Ginsberg argues that, generally, "the male transvestite's interest is in the success of the illusion, which is not complete

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until it is revealed as an illusion" (Ginsberg 1996: 14). Making one's attempt at passing overtly visible implies a different strategy, used to a different purpose.

Both Moynihan and Robert S. Chang highlight the implicit risk in racial (and other forms of) passing. Chang writes that "racial cross-dressing already contains the notion that there is such a thing as racial dressing, that racial identity already contains within it aspects of performativity or agency" (Chang 1997: 431; see also Ginsberg 1996: 4). This can be linked to Jack/Judith Halberstam's reservations about the claim that, in a discourse of passing, "there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self" (Halberstam 1998: 21). Such an assumption would imply that there is a steady identity at each end of the binary that the passer moves between – from male to female, black to white, etc. Several years earlier, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler also raised this issue, claiming that "[t]he notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (Butler 2006: 187). The idea that there is a stable, perhaps even binary, notion of gender to a certain extent negates the purpose of attempts to pass. A similar point is made by Moynihan, who emphasises the implied contradiction inherent in racial passing also:

> by 'crossing the color line', the passer *simultaneously* subverts and reinforces the racial binary. S/he subverts it by exposing its constructedness, its permeability, its instability. But in the very act of passing, s/he also reinforces it by granting authority and credibility to the mythical 'color line' as a real and true boundary to be transgressed. (Moynihan 2010: 9, original emphasis)

In the examples discussed here, characters' intentions are usually to assume their new categories imperfectly, so that the categories against which they are generally identified and identify themselves remain clearly visible. While their passing obscures the mythical colour line, the emphasis on their continued 'superior' whiteness somewhat negates the critical potential that such confusion offers.

A connection can be drawn between the characters' purposeful failure to pass and that of the novels themselves. No matter how thorough

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authors are in their attempt at verisimilitude, neo-Victorian literature is not and never can be the same as Victorian literature. Most authors obviously recognise this, instead creating the kind of playful awareness of dual temporalities that novels like John Fowles *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) display. Although neo-Victorian novels may dress up in Victorian clothes, the seams of their performative act of dressing across temporal borders are not simply shown, but *on show*.

In *A Proper Education for Girls*, there is only one occasion where Lilian directly crosses boundaries of gender as well as race and succeeds in passing as other. Notably, this is also the situation where she expresses the most prejudice towards India and its inhabitants. Dressed as a native young man, Lilian leaves behind several suitors for her hand in the drawing room of her home, as they are waiting for her to finish "getting changed" (Di Rollo 2009: 220), a phrase that acquires multiple connotations in this context. Lilian puts on the outfit of an Indian young man to be able to travel more safely, dressing in "pyjama trousers and dhoti, with a turban wrapped about her head. On her feet she wore a pair of soft leather boots she had bought in the bazaar and over the whole costume a goatskin jerkin secured by a belt" (Di Rollo 2009: 261). With her pale hair tucked away and her skin darkened from riding around in the sun, "it was only Lilian's blue eyes that seemed out of place" (Di Rollo 2009: 261). Her departure coincides with an outbreak of violence related to the 1857 Mutiny or First Indian War of Independence, an event that, as Kohlke also states in her review of the novel, serves solely as a background filler and does not introduce a critical postcolonial engagement with the history of the British Empire (Kohlke 2008/2009: 171). Upon witnessing the indigenous violence, Lilian immediately wishes to return to the cantonment:

> Possibly Mr Hunter was still there, perhaps at that very moment devising a plan that would outwit the bloodthirsty Indians and lead everyone to safety. After all, he had always understood the natives better than anyone else (he had told her so himself on many occasions). Besides, who but her fellow Europeans would offer her sanctuary from the slaughter? (Di Rollo 2009: 270)

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Lilian's act of crossing sexual and racial borders and her enjoyment in being "free from the encumbrance of so many layers of complicated female clothing" and "freed from the expectations and restrictions of womanhood" may initially seem transgressive (Di Rollo 2009: 263). However, her immediate retreat to stereotypical European femininity negates her seeming subversiveness.

In *The Mistress of Nothing*, too, Lady Duff Gordon's tolerance towards Egyptian people turns out to be no more than a front. Even though she encourages a growing informality between herself, her maid Sally and their dragoman Omar, this appearance of friendship proves deceptive. After her role as head of the household is recognised, several of the local people come to ask Lady Duff Gordon for Sally's hand, from donkey boys to respectable young men. Even one of the lady's male friends, Mustafa Agha, expresses an interest on behalf of his oldest son, a proposal that must be treated with caution and respect, if they are not to lose the support of the wealthy and influential man. Nevertheless, in private, Lady Duff Gordon is less than complimentary:

> 'The very idea,' my Lady said […]. She paused for a moment and looked at me. 'Would you like to marry him?' she asked abruptly. 'This is, quite possibly, the best offer you'll ever receive.' I gasped. 'No! Of course not!' 'Of course not,' my Lady agreed. 'What was I thinking? How ridiculous […]. For an Englishwoman to marry an Egyptian man. Unthinkable'. (Pullinger 2009: 88)

Lady Duff Gordon's prejudices are clearly selective. Similarly, when she finds out Sally has an affair with Omar and is pregnant with his child, she immediately retreats to a cold distance and expresses her disapproval of the connection based on stereotypes of race. However, she blames Sally for leading Omar on, banishing her from her presence and service, while retaining Omar. Omar is compelled to refuse taking Sally and their son into his household, along with his first wife and daughter, so as not to lose his job with Lady Duff Gordon and the financial security necessary to support his family.

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4. Alternative Orientalism: Assuming a Different Look

A very different viewpoint from both Lilian's and Lady Duff Gordon's is presented in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*. In the nineteenth-century narrative that the two modern women piece together, Anna is looking for the kind of Orientalism she saw in John Frederick Lewis' (1805-1876) paintings in the South Kensington museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum. In a review of a 2008 exhibition titled 'Visions of the Harem' in the Tate Britain, Ahdaf Soueif herself claims how, "[o]f all the 'oriental' paintings I had come across, only those of Lewis beckoned me in […]. Lewis's truth, expressed in colour and brushstrokes, was a truth about the spirit of the place" (Soueif 2008: n.p.). Soueif's protagonist Anna comes to Egypt looking for the country she imagined John Frederick Lewis saw and depicted for the audience back home.

Although Anna is presented as a tolerant and free-thinking woman, her view of the East is nevertheless a construction based on Western knowledge and limited or censored views. Anna "would read the accounts of travellers; the letters of Lady Duff Gordon lay by my bed for several months" (Soueif 2000: 101). Anna writes in her diary how "there is something at the heart of it all which eludes me – something – an intimation of which I felt in the paintings, the conversations in England, and which, now that I am here, seems far, far from my grasp" (Soueif 2000: 102). Clearly, Anna has constructed her own Orient before even leaving Britain and is looking for experiences that confirm her construction. That eventually she does find an Egypt that confirms to her expectations, with her vision matching the 'true spirit' of the country, seems somewhat unlikely. Open-minded as Anna is made out to be, her Orient is nevertheless based on Western representations, or at least, on representations mediated through Western eyes. As soon as Anna penetrates the British layer to see the 'true' Egyptian Orient beneath, the familiar depictions are confirmed for her. We can wonder whether this means that some British people *can* have a 'true' vision of the Orient, or whether Anna's Orient remains a fictional construction rather than a historical actuality.

Soon after Anna arrives in Egypt she decides to dress up as a young man, thinking it would be safer and attract less attention. After all, she writes in her diary, "dressing as a man to go on an expedition did not seem so outlandish" (Soueif 2000: 107). Of course, Soueif's nineteenth-century narrative is set several decades after both Pullinger's and Di Rollo's novels,

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which may indicate a more open approach to women in men's clothing. Unfortunately, Anna has barely left the city centre of Cairo before she is dragged off her horse and, together with her local guide Sabir, is abducted – in retaliation for the arrest of an Egyptian man, as the reader later finds out. When Sabir informs the abductors they have captured a lady, however, the young men are "thrown into horrified confusion" by this news (Soueif 2000: 109). In her decision to have Sabir inform the men about her sex, Anna trusts in the men's chivalry, as she has "never heard of any harm befalling a lady travelling alone" (Soueif 2000: 107). In their apparent consideration for young women like Anna, the Egyptian men are presented as adhering to similar values as Victorian British society ascribes to its own gentlemen.

Anna ends up in the house of Sharif Pasha al-Baroudi, meeting his sister Layla. Although they argue with her to return or to stay with them, Anna is set on travelling into the desert, so that Sharif feels obliged to accompany her to ensure her safety. Layla helps Anna dress, covering her head with a *kufiyya*, a headdress for men, and arranges it for her. Afterwards, Anna "gazes into the mirror and a fair, surprised-looking young Arab gazes back at her" (Soueif 2000: 192). Like Di Rollo, Soueif knowingly uses a vocabulary of looking and gazing to invoke uncertainty about the stability of Anna's identity. Although Anna sees herself and looks at herself, she is also seen and looked at by the other that she has become. That the other is part of Anna, however, again references her openness in relation to the different society in which she finds herself.

The multi-ethnic, multicultural exchange of looks constructed through Anna's cross-dressing complicates both Mulvey's analysis of an active/male versus passive/female gaze and postfeminism's assumption of the internalisation of the gaze. In this case, a more productive approach might be that of Ann E. Kaplan, who distinguishes between the gaze and the look. According to Kaplan's conceptualisation, "the subject bearing the gaze is not interested in the object per se, but consumed with his (*sic*) own anxieties, which are inevitably intermixed with desire" (Kaplan 1997: xviii). The gaze is thus concerned with a process of crisis within the person gazing upon someone (or something) else instead of an interaction between the gazing subject and the object of that gaze. The look, however, can be placed in a shifting process, in what Kaplan, following Jane Gaines, calls "the looking relation" (Kaplan 1997: xviii; also see Gaines 1988). Rather than the gaze, which traditionally, and even in later feminist psychoanalysis, is

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placed in a context of white and masculine power, looking comes to stand for the possibility of 'others' doing the looking.

When Anna sets out on her desert trip, wearing an Egyptian overdress that makes her unrecognisable – likely similar to the one ordered for Sally – Anna's internal sense of otherness again comes up. As they hurry to catch a train, "suddenly there was a great bustle and we and many other people were pushed aside as porters hurried by" (Soueif 2000: 194), making room for a group of upper-class British travellers whom Anna had met numerous times before. Anna is initially afraid that she will be recognised but then realises that her position and dress make her as anonymous as the other Egyptian people on the platform to the British set walking past. In her diary, Anna records the incident:

> It was a most curious sensation […]. I felt at once the fear of being discovered and the strangeness of their sweeping by me without acknowledgement – but the oddest thing of all was that I suddenly saw them as bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them […]. I was invisible. (Soueif 2000: 194-195)

Despite the strangeness, however, Anna feels that "it is a most liberating thing, this veil. While I was wearing it, I could look wherever I wanted and nobody could look back at me" (Soueif 2000: 195). The repeated reference to looking here indicates a freedom not only for Anna but also for all other women wearing a veil, as she writes: "I was one of many black-clad harem in the station and on the train and could have traded places with several of them and no one been the wiser" (Soueif 2000: 195). The fact that the veiled women are interchangeable negates their subjectivity to some extent. Nevertheless, their ability to look without being looked at betokens a shifting power balance: the fact that Anna and other women can gaze without others being able to look back puts them in an ambiguous position of power. The power structure here described recalls Jacques Derrida's 'visor effect', briefly referenced in *Spectres of Marx* (1993). In the case of the visor effect, "we do not see the one who sees us", and even when the visor is raised, "its possibility continues to signify that someone, beneath the armor, can safely see without being seen or without being identified" (Derrida 2006: 7, 8). While in Derrida's example, however, the visor is

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connected to a figure already in a position of authority, in Soueif's text the power gained by the ability to look without being looked at is not a power that can be directly acted upon.

Anna mentions the advantages of her outfit, but at the same time her racial and cultural cross-dressing also confuses her. After spending two weeks in the desert in the clothing of a young man, Anna "changed back into [her] usual costume", an outfit that now seems strange to her "with all the lacing and fastening and fuss" (Soueif 2000: 235). The ways she has lived all her life are becoming strange; she is becoming different, becoming other herself. This sense of strangeness and otherness is represented even more strongly by Pullinger in *The Mistress of Nothing*. Although Lady Duff Gordon has adopted Egyptian dress as well as some local manners, neither turns out to be very easy to let go of. After she travels from Upper Egypt back to Cairo to meet her visiting husband, she stands in front of the hallway mirror of their Cairo house, dressed in her European clothes to receive her husband. Surprised, she exclaims: "I don't recognise myself! I'm neither English, nor Arab; I've become a kind of creature in between. I look a kind of man/woman, don't I?" (Pullinger 2009: 115). Lady Duff Gordon tried to place herself in both worlds, while simultaneously remaining separate from them, but her own confusion shows that she has not succeeded.

5. Conclusion: Neo-Victorian Exploitations

The exploitative use of female sexuality and racial otherness plays an especially significant role in *The Mistress of Nothing* and *A Proper Education for Girls*. Nevertheless, all three novels end by stressing the significance of relations between women in mediating foreign cultures. In *A Proper Education for Girls*, these are the bonds of sisterhood between Lilian and Alice.[10] In *The Mistress of Nothing* and *The Map of Love*, however, the bonds between women enable them to reach out across cultures. Resisting pressure from Lady Duff Gordon to return to Europe after her son is born, Sally instead manages to find a job in Cairo so that she can still see him. The boy, Abdullah, lives with Omar's first wife Mabrouka and Sally strikes up a friendship with her that crosses racial and cultural boundaries. In *The Map of Love*, finally, Anna discovers that while she thought to see more of Egypt by cross-dressing, instead her acquisition of knowledge is enabled by her friendship with Layla: "since knowing Layla –

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I have so many more opportunities to learn about Egypt than wandering round dressed as a man could ever have afforded me" (Soueif 2000: 240). Characters like Anna and Sally are described as successful in incorporating different cultures into their own selves. For the other characters, the crossing of sexual, cultural, class and racial borders seems to be a temporary shift, an attempt at 'playing native' rather than 'going native', which is rejected as soon as it no longer fulfils expectations and desires. In this rejection, however, the characters become involved in Garber's category crises: although they have ended dressing across sexual and racial borders, they still have to cope with crises of identity, no longer able to represent their identity through external appearance.

Of the three novels discussed, Soueif's *The Map of Love* is the only text that provides some full-fledged non-Western characters, both in its late Victorian narrative and in its twentieth-century sections. In the other texts, the racial other only functions as a foil against which the white characters can play out their crises. As such, these neo-Victorian novels are clearly part of what I called a double Orientalism, where not only Victorian Orientalism is reconstructed within the novels, but the texts themselves also enact a renewed twenty-first-century Orientalism. Cross-dressing, in these novels, functions as an entry into nineteenth-century discussions of Victorian normative sexual and gender identities and the historical exploitation of the body that is sexually and racially other. However, it also shows that the body as a representative object of otherness remains highly significant at present, although the focus has seemingly shifted from the female figure as other to a sense of otherness based on race, ethnicity or supposedly visible markers of cultural identity. Consequently, an internalisation of social surveillance, highlighted by postfeminist critics like McRobbie and Gill, is directed at all those who do not 'fit' into idealised categories of identity.

In 'Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel' (2008), Kohlke argues that neo-Victorianism should be seen as the new Orientalism. However, I want to conclude my analysis by suggesting that Kohlke's argument should be opened up in recognition of the fact that we are not yet free from the kind of Orientalism so prominent in the Victorian period. The engagement of postcolonial neo-Victorianism with the Orient and its peoples in almost all cases takes place from a privileged (often white) viewpoint, in which other cultures are described – and judged – from the position of an outsider. While the novels may be set in the Victorian period, their neo-Victorian

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connection to the present means that characters' reconstructed 'Victorian' views of Oriental others always imply twenty-first-century perspectives on those others, not only as they are placed in the past but also reconfigured in the present. As a consequence, it is highly important to remain aware of the exploitative risks as well as the pleasures of such postcolonial neo-Victorian fictions.

Notes

1. Pullinger refers to Sally by her first name for most of the text (only rarely is she described as Sally Naldrett). Sally addresses herself by her first name and it is used by characters with whom she becomes friendly. As such, I follow this usage. However, it is important to note that the use of Sally's first name by Lady Duff Gordon also makes explicit their different power and status, emphasising their mistress-servant relationship. Early in the novel, in fact, Sally herself points out the difference in using names: "Lady Duff Gordon. Lucie. Although, of course, I don't call her by her Christian name. But it's a sweet name, Lucie, sweet and grand, the very opposite of my own name: Sally. Bald. Plain. Like a dog's name […]. A maid's name" (Pullinger 2009: 12).
2. Di Rollo's novel was first published as *The Peachgrower's Almanac*, the title under which it is reviewed by Kohlke in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2:1 (2008/2009), but was republished as *A Proper Education for Girls*. Whereas the original title is relatively neutral – the novel features a peach tree which is important to the two female protagonists as a legacy of their mother – the newer title has more dubious potential, from the use of the word 'proper', loaded with nineteenth- as well as twenty-first-century significance, to the potentially denigrating use of 'girls' to describe the protagonists, no longer young children at the time that the narrative is set. 'Education', furthermore, implies some kind of a Bildungsroman-like narrative, something that can only be applied in a very limited way.
3. Kohlke also mentions this mix of critical and less critical approaches in her review of the novel (and two others) (see Kohlke 2008/2009: 166-167).
4. Cross-dressing occurs in more neo-Victorian novels, such as Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), Sandi Toksvig's *Valentine Grey* (2012), and Wesley Stace's *Misfortune* (2005), although the latter is set in the 1820s, prior to the Victorian age per se. Here, too, cross-dressing serves to

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question borders, but the texts do not, or not as overtly, engage with the racial and oriental aspects discussed in this article.

5. While Kohlke's article on 'Sexsation and the Neo-Victorian Novel' was published in 2008 and therefore predates two of the three novels discussed in this article, she continues to build on the 'sexsation' theme in more recent essays, for example in '"Abominable Pictures": Neo-Victorianism and the Tyranny of the Sexual Taboo' (2015).
6. The first film, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), was fairly quickly followed by a second one, titled *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011). Discussions about a so far untitled third film have been ongoing ever since, but since 2016, online references suggest that filming is due to start sometime in the near future (see for example Shepherd 2016: n.p.).
7. See, for example, Mak's account of the changing perception of hermaphroditism and other cases of unclear or non-normative sex in *Doubting Sex* (2012), or Davies' analysis of representations of the Victorian freak show in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (2015).
8. In *A Proper Education for Girls*, Sir Richard Francis Burton is referenced through the man Lilian had an affair with, Mr Hunter. Other examples are Iliya Troyanov's biofiction about Burton, *The Collector of Worlds* (2006) and Philip Hensher's *The Mulberry Empire* (2002), which features a Burton-like character named Alexander Burnes. I initially assumed female-to-male cross-dressing would be most prevalent. In practice, however, this is far from the case: while Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Affinity* (1999) display mainly female-to-male cross-dressing, the reverse also occurs regularly, for example in Stace's *Misfortune* and in biofictions about the cross-dressers Thomas Boulton and Earnest Park, such as Neil McKenna's *Fanny and Stella* (2013) and Barbara Ewing's *The Petticoat Men* (2014). Dressing across class-borders is described in Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002). Finally, Patricia Duncker's biofiction and Rachel Holmes' part fictionalised biography about James Miranda Barry highlight the difficult relation between clothing, sex and gender identity; see *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and *Scanty Particulars* (2002) respectively.
9. For more on nautch girls, see, for example, Pran Nevile's *Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009).
10. Although the narrative switches between Alice and Lilian, Di Rollo wrote a third sister into the narrative, Emily, who died in infancy, meaning that the twins were originally a triplet. However, she subsequently never mentions this

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ghostly third sister, making it unclear what her role or function is supposed to be, either in the story or in the portrayal of sisterhood. While Kohlke stresses the portrayal of sisterhood in her review of the book, she also does not reference this (lack of) presence of the third sister.

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