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Identity in Flux: The Duster and Dust in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*

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<1>Elaine Freedgood in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* draws attention to the overwhelming number of seemingly meaningless things that fill the Victorian novel. She reads these novels' domestic objects first in terms of their literal meaning within a historical and material context and secondly as metaphors or allegories. Like other scholars,(1) Freedgood specifically applies thing theory to objects of Empire found within Britain. She challenges us to find the fugitive meaning of the thing: "What knowledge has remained unexplored and unexamined, safe in the words that have seemed to designate the most inconsequential and uninterpretable of things?" (Freedgood 1) Olive Schreiner's 1883 *The Story of an African Farm* is full of things—tobacco, harnesses, wine, brandy, hats, rope, mirrors, shoes, and aprons. One of the "most inconsequential and uninterpretable" British things in the novel's colonial setting is the duster.(2) In this essay, I focus on the problematic "thingness" of the duster and, by extension, of dust and dirt, which are made of material particles but are also amorphous and ubiquitous. The duster provides a literal and metaphoric bridge to analyze the ways in which dust mutates conventional roles and notions of identity in colonial spaces.

<2>The *OED* defines "duster" as "a cloth for removing dust from a surface; a dust-brush; feather-duster." Though feather dusters were in the market in the 1880s, the dusters in Schreiner's novel seem to be made of fabric, for example, the "large calico duster" Gregory Rose takes with him to clean the farm's loft (Schreiner 245). What is the significance of this small British domestic tool and its implications for Schreiner's characters in their colonial setting? In other words, what idea exists in the thing of the duster?(3) I argue that the duster and references to dust both solidify and call into question characters' identities in terms of nationality, class, and

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gender.(4) As colonial subjects, many of the characters, such as Gregory, seek to export and recreate their idea of domestic Englishness within the South African home, yet this recreation is simultaneously transferring an imagined England and is refashioning it for a new geographical space. Domestic manuals from the mid-nineteenth century and Florence Nightingale's 1860 nursing manual *Notes on Nursing: What It Is, and What It Is Not* establish the ideology of the proper English domestic. This focus on cleanliness, representative of genteel English propriety, is exported to Britain's colonies. Thus, the calico duster is imbued with ideological meaning within the colonial context of the novel. Additionally, the modification of the feather duster to be made of "calico" invokes the history of Britain's cotton trade. The duster also alludes to notions of class in connection to dirt and filth as transferred and refashioned in imperial outposts. Finally, the duster, with its domestic associations, acts as a means of refashioning characters' gender identities in a foreign space where the New Woman and the New Man could emerge. Reading the duster and dust materially and as metaphor demonstrates the fluidity of identity within a colonial context.(5) Thus, I treat dust as both something that needs dusting—a combination of particles, sand, household debris—and as an elemental part of the human body. I argue that the duster and references to dust in the novel serve as means both of creating an identity and of constantly displacing the self.

Domestic Manuals: The Duster and Dusting in England

<3>Domestic manuals capture the significance of dusters and dusting to the home by describing and reflecting ideal domestic British subjects. In the act of using a duster to tidy and clean the house, women—in varying social classes—embody particular domestic virtues. In four manuals written in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, dust is envisioned as an often ambiguous yet pervasive and even dangerous entity that requires constant vigilance to eradicate. *The Domestic Economy: Adapted to the Code of 1880*, designed as part of Chambers's Educational Course for girls, contains plain instructions for how to dust a room:

> Use a soft dry duster. Begin at one part of the room, and go over everything in order till you come round to the point where you began. Wipe firmly over every part of the furniture and the ledges of doors, windows, shutters, and skirting. Remember that the object of dusting is to take the dust entirely away, and not merely to move it from one part of the room to another. Therefore never flap your duster over anything. Shake the duster repeatedly in the open air while dusting even a small room. (44-5)

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These instructions suggest dusting is a precise task requiring thoroughness—and nothing so haphazard as "flapping" a duster. Dusting demands a work ethic characterized by an almost moral thoroughness and conscientiousness devoted to order ("go over everything in order till you come round to the point where you began"). Though *The Domestic Manual* reminds the pupil that the objective is "to take the dust entirely away," other manuals are more pessimistic, suggesting dust can never be removed completely. In fact, Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*(6) describes dust as permanent: "For from the time a room begins to be a room up to the time when it ceases to be one, no one atom of dust ever actually leaves its precincts" (125). Cleaning such inescapable dust requires a devotion to an unattainable cleanliness. Mrs. Isabella Mary Beeton's *The Book of Household Management,* published originally in 24 parts starting in 1859 and as a bound edition in 1861, also attests to the ability of dust to pervade every inch of a home. Mrs. Beeton instructs housemaids when dusting to leave "no corner unvisited" and to thoroughly wipe a bookcase "so that not a speck of dust can be found in the room" (990). The dust of the English home is pervasive and ubiquitous and requires a strict, well-ordered commitment to proper technique to fight.

<4>Yet what comprises dust is unclear. In *Domestic Economy*, it is included in a list of "house-refuse" and later with ashes or "fire dust" (38, 90). Mrs. Beeton suggests dust accumulates "from the smoke of the coal, oil, gas, &c" (23). *Notes on Nursing* vaguely defines dust as "organic matter" when detailing the necessity of keeping the sick room clean: "The inside air can only be kept clean by excessive care in the ways mentioned above—to rid the walls, carpets, furniture, ledges, &c., of the organic matter and dust—dust consisting greatly of this organic matter—with which they become saturated, and which is what really makes the room musty" (Nightingale 131). She has trouble defining dust—it is separate from organic matter (as "organic matter and dust"), but it is also principally composed of this organic matter ("consisting greatly of"). Though dust is everywhere, its origins—whether in refuse, smoke, or organic matter—are unclear. Terence McLaughlin, though he focuses on dirt, argues dirt is relative: "because dirt can be almost anything that we choose to call dirt, it has often been defined as 'matter out of place'" (1). The inability of these domestic manuals to clearly define dust suggests dust too is "matter out of place." Thus, the origins of dust are not as important as the act of reclaiming and maintaining order from disorder.(7)

<5>Though not clearly defined in the English home, dust is consistently viewed as pernicious. In *Domestic Economy*, the dust negatively affects the air: "Much dust clings to the walls and ceilings. This dust makes the air impure and our houses unhealthy" (49). Not only can dust negatively affect air quality, but it can also eat

into clothing and destroy it and make good water impure (*Domestic Economy* 15, 36-7). Mrs. Henry Reeve's 1882 *Cookery and Housekeeping* attaches dust to "taint." In her chapter on the kitchen, she attests to the importance of keeping foods free from dust: "But always to keep every nook and corner and cranny free from dust, germs, or taint; which, as dust, germs, and taint are being produced every day, requires unceasing vigilance" (Reeve 22). By linking dust to dangerous elements like "germs" and "taint," Mrs. Reeve suggests a kind of battle must be fought and won against dust. Nowhere is the fight against dust more pressing than in the sick room. Nightingale argues dust is dangerous: "You see your dust is anything but harmless; yet you will let such dust lie about your ledges for months, your rooms for ever" (130). Instead, dust must be removed: "The only way I know to *remove* dust, the plague of all lovers of fresh air, is to wipe everything with a damp cloth" (Nightingale 125). A clean sickroom and a clean home free from dust are the hallmarks of a well-kept, well-run, healthy British domestic space.

<6>Nineteenth-century manuals also demonstrate *who* is expected to dust domestic spaces. Nightingale envisions every woman as a nurse: "Every woman, or at least almost every woman, in England has, at one time or another of her life, charge of the personal health of somebody, whether child or invalid,—in other words, every woman is a nurse" (v). Thus, every woman is expected to dust to preserve cleanliness. Though the three other manuals also envision female subjects, Mrs. Beeton's distinguishes who should be dusting among the ranks of housemaids, lady's maids, nurses, and the mistress herself. The nurse must dust the sickroom every day and the lady's maid dust her mistress' clothing (Beeton 1020, 979). In larger establishments, Mrs. Beeton recommends the upper housemaid do the dusting: "the upper housemaid will probably reserve for herself the task of dusting the ornaments and cleaning the furniture of the principal apartments, but it is her duty to see that every department is properly attended to" (987). On the other hand, Mrs. Beeton suggests dusting is often a "little matter" that the mistress often sees to herself:

> The lady of the house, where there is but one servant kept, frequently takes charge of the drawing-room herself, that is to say, dusting it; the servant sweeping, cleaning windows, looking-glasses, grates, and rough work of that sort. If there are many ornaments and knick-knacks about the room, it is certainly better for the mistress to dust these herself, as a maid-of-all-work's hands are not always in a condition to handle delicate ornaments. (1002-3)

Mrs. Beeton distinguishes between "rough work" and, presumably, rough hands and delicate work that requires the fine hands of the "lady of the house." Dusting requires a level of care, especially when handling the sentimental items of a living space. Mrs. Beeton's manual thus establishes the social hierarchy of the domestic sphere. Dusting, though principally the duty of the servants, often falls to that of the mistress. While dusting is overwhelmingly envisioned as a female enterprise, it is not necessarily confined to the lower classes.

National Identity: Preserving the Illusion of Order

<7>The ideology of the ideal domestic subject captured and reflected in these manuals is exported to the British colonies. In the next sections, I apply conceptions of dust and dusting to Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, first published in 1883 in England. Though I treat dust as a reflection of characters' national, class, and gender identities separately, these distinctions—with dust's help—naturally blur and inform one another.

<8>The rhetoric of the British manuals is not only domestic, but also colonial and imperial. "Cleaning up" the colonies requires a commitment to order and a thoroughness that could wipe away the native culture in favor of an imperial one devoted to advancing its economic interests. In Schreiner's novel, Gregory Rose's associations with the duster exemplify his attempts to export his national identity—his commitment to English cleanliness—to a colonial setting. Gregory envisions his new "daub-and-wattle building" in the "karoo" as an English domestic space that requires the kind of constant vigilance the domestic manuals prescribe (174). He has internalized the proper English home's commitment to spotlessness: "All was scrupulously neat and clean, for Gregory kept a little duster folded in the corner of his table-drawer, just as he had seen his mother do, and every morning before he went out he said his prayers, and made his bed, and dusted the table and the legs of the chairs, and even the pictures on the wall and the gun-rack" (174). Gregory's regimen of dusting his room is closely tied to his moral commitments ("said his prayers") as well as his sense of order and routine, essential characteristics of an English domestic.

<9>Gregory's devotion to his dusting routine is reflective of his colonial identity. Sara Mills explains the colonial domestic space is one in which "colonial sensibility" is always on display: "Private life was lived as if always in public, as if colonial superiority had to be on constant display…in terms of more mundane acts such as cooking, eating and relaxing"—and we can easily add, dusting (55). Mary Poovey argues Nightingale's domestic rhetoric is an imperialist one: "The crusade that

Nightingale originated in this autonomous, middle-class, female home was explicitly colonial" (191). Thus, the native must be colonized/civilized by mother England (Poovey 196). Gregory's dusting routine is an attempt to impose order in a place over which he has little control—it affirms his commitment to "civilize" the South African colony. Mary Douglas, though analyzing dirt, reinforces Gregory's desire: "In chasing dirt, in tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (2). Gregory clings to this idea of British cleanliness in South Africa in an attempt to cling to and export his national identity, which is already being refashioned. Dianne Lawrence in *Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1910* argues that colonists' "[a]ttempts to create and maintain controlled genteel spaces were often rendered problematic by aspects of the local environment" (127). For example, outside of his small room, Gregory is often annoyed with the ever-present dust of the South African plain. He complains of the "confounded dust" the horses kick up and "dusty roads" (208, 264). The dust—these particles of earth and sand—consistently and persistently seep into his space and cover his home, suggesting Gregory's colonial ideology is impermanent and constantly in a state of flux. John Plotz, in his analysis of the movement of objects in Victorian novels, might explain that the duster embodies English culture and has an "exceptional power" overseas that embodies "a restrictive, distinctive sort of Englishness" in "a world that stayed distinctively non-English" (20). Gregory's dusting signals his commitment to his English identity and his duty to preserve such an identity from the "taint" of the colony, though—like the manuals dictate—constant vigilance is needed to manufacture the illusion that such a pure English identity even exists. The pervasive dust of the colony reveals an ever-shifting national identity.

<10>Gregory's national identity as an English colonial subject is also signaled by the designation of the duster as "calico." Such an invocation carries the British Empire's history of cotton trade and manufacturing. Freedgood argues, "[C]alico contains within its very name the history of the deindustrialization of the Indian textile manufacture, and the rise to dominance of British cotton production" (57). By mid-century, cotton was Britain's primary export (Freedgood 63). Though Gregory seems to have personally brought his own "little duster" from England, the "large calico duster" (245) Em hands Gregory to clean the loft was likely exported to South Africa. Such an export emphasizes Gregory and the other characters' placement within a mercantile empire. I have emphasized the cotton cloth of the dusters, yet feather dusters existed in England since the mid 1870s. In fact, ostrich feathers,(8) though primarily of decorative use, were a key export of Cape Colony in the 1870s (Marks 406), and the novel is full of references to ostriches on the farm. The omission of feather dusters seems to draw greater attention to the cotton duster

and its associations with an oppressive empire, one that is willing to extract natural resources from, for example, India and then flood the same foreign market with its manufactured goods.(9) The duster's descriptor "calico" thus invokes this national rhetoric of economically motivated colonial expansion.

<11>Freedgood argues the calico curtains in *Mary Barton*, a Victorian novel set in Britain, not only invoke colonial history, but also signal domestic order (57).(10) Similarly, Gregory's calico duster signifies a commitment to domestic order amid turmoil in colonial South Africa. Though Gregory uses the calico duster to put the farm's loft in order, the colonies of South Africa in the 1880s were far from orderly. The mining of diamonds and gold in South Africa upset the already-tenuous equilibrium among the African kingdoms, Afrikaner republics, and British colonies (Marks 359-60). Civil wars among the African chiefs, redivisions of power among colonial authorities, and an eagerness for raw materials and labor made the South African colony one of unrest and disorder. Though outright conflict does not occur in the novel, the tensions between different national identities are ever present. For example, the landlady at a little hotel references "the great finds at the Diamond Fields" in the same breath as "the shameful conduct of the Dutch parson in that town to the English inhabitants" (Schreiner 268). Gregory's devotion to the domestic order the duster represents is just one way the novel characterizes Gregory's preference for the English colonial venture over that of the Dutch, German, and Irish nationalities, to say nothing of the different African peoples present in the text. Gregory's commitment to his duster is thus a stubborn attempt to preserve the illusion of domestic order in a colonial context that is constantly changing as literal dust pervades the home and as the imperial countries clash with each other and with the African kingdoms.

Class Identity: Dust Versus Dirt

<12>Just as Gregory seeks to impose an English identity on the South African farm, characters cling to their social classes. The duster—with its commitment to order and cleanliness—both upholds the social hierarchy and calls into question the lines between the classes. Dust itself blurs the divisions between social classes and demonstrates that the characters on the farm enjoy more social fluidity than those in the urban centers of the colony. Schreiner also distinguishes between dust—an entity that pervades all classes—and dirt—the designation of the lower classes.

<13>Though characters on the farm come from different classes, dusting calls the clear boundaries into question. Many of the characters on the farm dust their homes.

Despite the presence of the nearby "Kaffir" maids, Em invites Gregory to dust the loft because he is listless after Lyndall's rejection:

> Em saw she must do something for him, and found him a large calico duster. He had sometimes talked of putting the loft neat, and today she could find nothing else for him to do. So she had the ladder put to the trap-door that he need not go out in the wet, and Gregory with the broom and duster mounted to the loft. Once at work he worked hard. He dusted down the very rafters, and cleaned the broken candle-moulds and bent forks that had stuck in the thatch for twenty years. (245)

This dusting of the loft seems to be what Mrs. Beeton might term "rough work," yet Gregory, the half owner of the farm, throws himself into the tidying with a singularity worthy of *The Domestic Economy*'s instructions. In fact, like the daily dusting of his little room, Gregory seems to talk often of cleanliness: "He had sometimes talked of putting the loft neat." Though dusting in England is usually reserved for a servant, Em's invitation to Gregory, despite his position of power, is quickly taken up. The overseer, Otto the German, also dusts. Before he relinquishes his top-boots to Bonaparte Blenkins, Otto "dusted them carefully" (66). When Otto expects to depart his room forever, he tidies his space by dusting: '"I will leave it neat. They shall not say I did not leave it neat,' he said. Even the little bags of seeds on the mantlepiece he put in rows and dusted" (95). In the face of his expulsion from the farm, he falls back on a domestic task he can control. On the South African plain, where these men—the part-owner and overseer—desire order, neatness, and control, English social class expectations in terms of dusting are easily ignored. In other words, traditional notions of class are upended and dusting is done to preserve an appearance of control and normalcy when change occurs.

<14>In other colonized spaces, more traditional figures from the lower classes do the dusting. On other farms in the novel, the maids are responsible for the dusting. Tant' Sannie becomes envious of her lover's dead wife who would "break a churn-stick over a maid's head for only letting dust come on a milk-cloth" (203). The maid takes both the responsibility and the punishment for dusting. In an urban area, Gregory stumbles into a "little hotel" in a "little town" on his quest for Lyndall, and "the clean little woman" who acts as landlady talks while dusting the front parlor (267-8). Maids, landladies, and nurses are the traditional dusters. Though I address gender identity in the next section, here Gregory transgresses class boundaries when he dresses as a nurse to care for Lyndall. Though Nightingale envisioned a classless nurse, nurses at mid-century had to fight against the stereotype of the lower class, drunken, slovenly nurse.(11) Nursing—and necessarily dusting—facilitates

Gregory’s movement between classes. The South African colony allows characters to simultaneously hold onto class expectations and refashion them as they see fit.

<15>Class distinctions are signaled, however, outside of the farm in contrasting descriptions of “dust” and “dirty.” The domestic fight against dust and dirt was an ideological fight against the impoverished lower classes. Part of Nightingale’s nursing campaign centered on the figure of the middle-class mother cleaning up the dirty lower classes (Poovey 185, 188). “Dust,” however, is more neutrally charged than “dirt.” Sabine Schülting in *Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture*asserts dust “lacks all negative association. Dust may be worthless and without cohesion...but it is hardly ever disgusting” (5). By contrast, dirt signals a moral disorder: “Dirt in nineteenth-century texts is thus almost always a marker of class, and frequently also of race, suggesting not only physical labour but also dark skin colour, uncivilized habits, immorality, and the neglect of homes and personal belongings” (Schülting 6). Dirt could easily spread and infect the middle classes with the diseases of the poor.(12) Importantly, nineteenth-century filth “first and foremost signifies urban squalor and disease” (Cohen xix).

<16>The novel blurs class designations of characters covered in “dust.” In addition to Gregory and Otto dusting, Lyndall, Waldo, and others are associated with dust at different times. Lyndall, an Englishman’s daughter, shakes the “dust daintily from her skirts” (198). Waldo, though “an uncouth creature with small learning” whom Gregory calls a “low German,” is often covered in dust (299, 206). For example, as the overseer’s son, Waldo is full of ‘“mealie dust’” (198). Gregory and Em, Tant’ Sannie’s stepdaughter, at different times both kick up the dust with their horses’ hooves (197, 208). Worker, owner, and gentleman’s daughter alike are covered in dust. Additionally, dust unselectively attaches itself to lower and upper classes on the veld. Waldo’s stranger from the higher echelons of society is covered in dust. The “French-looking,” “well-dressed gentleman” shakes “the dust from his sleeve” before departing (156, 172). Dust, as the particles of earth and sand from the plains, lacks the negative class associations of moral deterioration and disease. The dust of the farm is indiscriminate in its associations with people. Dust clings to the owner’s and the workers’ things and bodies alike, blurring the seemingly rigid lines of a British hierarchy the characters try to enact on the South African farm.

<17>By contrast, class distinctions are preserved and enforced outside of the farm and especially within city limits by labeling characters of lower class as “dirty.” Vijay Prashad in his analysis of “native dirt” and cholera in India explains how colonial space was visualized as “two bifurcated sections—one for the colonizers and one for the colonized” (244). Colonial regimes thus produced distinct social

spaces to banish the natives to in order to “protect” the colonizers from dirt, taint, and disease (Prashad 256-7). While Schreiner’s novel reinforces this distinction between the colonizer and colonized by attaching “dirt” to the colonized, it also designates working-class colonizers as “dirty” within the city center, suggesting that they too are of a lower social and moral class than those outside of it. After dismissing one of the “Kaffir” workers on whom Bonaparte blamed the theft of the herd, Otto sees the man’s wife sitting by the road: she has her “baby tied on her back by a dirty strip of red blanket” (87). Here, “dirty” signals the distinction of a lower class—and race(13)—between Otto and the worker’s wife. Within the urban setting, “dirty” characters are of lower classes. When Waldo has a room in the city, a man who collects pew rents comes to him for a subscription: “he always wore very dirty black clothes” (254). During Gregory’s search for Lyndall, he encounters the daughter of a “surly creature” who “was dirty and lazy” (266). Later he is laughed at by “a dirty barman” and he becomes despondent at a “dirty little hotel where he had dropped the thread” (267). Each of these city folk or locations are relegated to a lower social class by the signifier “dirty.” Note, too, that these modifiers are “dirty” instead of “dirt,” suggesting an inherent uncleanliness and a need for the nurse, the domestic, mother England to enter the morally impoverished space and clean up the lower class. The attempt to preserve class distinctions in this colonial space are more easily enforced and identified in city centers that seek to mimic their imperial roots and are less pervasive in the dust-filled context of the colonial farm.

Reimagining Gender in the Colony: “[A] cloud of fine dust”

<18>Dusting and dust not only blur the boundaries of characters’ social class identities, but earth-dust and household dust also reflect characters’ ability to perform their genders. Although the distinction between dust and dirt upholds a class difference, dust and dusting facilitate experimentation with gender in the colonial context. Consciously or unconsciously, Lyndall and Gregory attempt to refashion themselves as the New Woman or New Man, yet their failures to do so emphasize the burden of traditional heteronormative values.

<19>The colonial space is one where traditional gender roles can be refashioned; dust helps blur the line between the masculine and feminine. At Tant’ Sannie’s wedding, where the meek widower is joined to the brash, unrefined Boer woman, Gregory, though betrothed to Em, attempts to court Lyndall. He tries to use the tools of typical romantic courtship at this celebration of matrimony, yet Lyndall is not the typical would-be wife. The dust at the wedding reminds Gregory that this space is one of redefinition. The dancing creates a cloud of dust: “Now, too, the busy feet have broken the solid coating of the floor, and a cloud of fine dust arises, that makes

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a yellow halo round the candles..., and grows denser, till to recognize any one on the opposite side of the room becomes impossible, and a partner's face is seen through a yellow mist" (212). This "cloud" and "yellow mist" causes people's physical appearances to be unrecognizable, making even one's partner a blurry other. The dust at the wedding literally and metaphorically distorts the visions of men and women. Gregory, however, fails to revel in this "yellow cloud" through which Lyndall sees people (212). Lyndall, an independent woman who highlights the social inequalities between men and women, enjoys seeing people through this dusty haze. Though the New Woman took various forms in late Victorian novels, Schreiner fashions Lyndall as an educated, striving young woman seeking fulfillment outside the confines of a traditional marriage. By contrast, Gregory clings to "the baggage of Victorian expectations of masculinity" (MacDonald 143). He complains and pouts that the room '"is so dusty'" (213). In his fixation on Lyndall, Gregory refuses to embrace the blurred lines of gender that the dust signifies.

<20>Yet Gregory's gender identity is in a state of flux throughout the novel. Though he clings to masculine expectations in terms of marriage for a time, he embraces the domestic role of the housewife as soon as he sets foot on the farm. The reader's first introduction to him signals this gender ambiguity with his neatly folded "little duster" (174). Gregory's devotion to dusting represents a tactile union with his domestic space—the act of dusting literally brings him closer to the elements of home. His gender ambiguity is also seen in the walls of his room, "profusely covered with prints cut from the *Illustrated London News*, and in which there was a noticeable preponderance of female faces and figures" (174). The motive for the "preponderance of female faces and figures" is unclear—are the prints functioning like pinups, as objects of Gregory's sexual desires, or are they models of the feminine with which he identifies? Based on his admiration of Lyndall and eventual cross-dressing, Gregory seems to hold a fascination for the female form. The fluidity of Gregory's gender identity continues to be played out in his room: each day, he dusts these pictures *and* his "gun-rack" (174). This combination of dusting the "female faces and figures" alongside the masculine gun-rack blends the traditional feminine and masculine strains within Gregory, putting them under the umbrella of domestic routine. Dusting, a traditionally feminine enterprise, points to Gregory's gender fluidity.

<21>Only later, in Lyndall's absence, does Gregory consciously experiment with his gender identity and embrace tenets of the New Man. When Em calls on Gregory to clean the loft, his association with the duster foreshadows his adoption of "womanhood." After dusting the loft, he finds Em's mother's clothing and tries on the "kappje" and brown dress (246). Gregory's experimental cross-dressing hints at

his future adoption of his identity as a female nurse to serve Lyndall. He caresses the fabrics, puts on the female attire, and admires himself in the mirror: "Gregory's mind was very full of thought" (246). Already, he pictures himself as a kind of "sister-of-mercy" or nurse (246). As a domestic figure already devoted to cleanliness, Gregory sees himself as almost a mythic Florence Nightingale: "the image of the English Sister of Charity, the self-denying caretaker—a mother, a saint, or even a female Christ" (Poovey 168). Once Gregory descends from the loft, he announces his intention of searching for Lyndall. His devotion to a New Woman effeminizes him—he must give up some of his traditional masculine traits if he is to be her New Man. Tara MacDonald helps define the New Man, who "is best understood as the political ally to the New Woman, supporting and aiding her attempts at social and political liberation; yet he is also, in the fiction of the period, the New Woman's romantic partner" (1). In Gregory's quest to be Lyndall's romantic partner, he agrees to serve her without receiving sexual fulfillment. Before Lyndall runs away with her stranger, Gregory agrees to serve her—to '"*give everything, and expect nothing*"' (232). Later, after Gregory finds Lyndall, he has this opportunity to serve her as a female caretaker. Gregory must become a woman because, as an inversion of Nightingale's statement, every nurse is a woman.(14) In order to bring about his transformation, he retreats outside of the town into the dry veld of South Africa. The red earth and "dusty ants" witness his change—in fact, the ants carry away Gregory's "soft brown beard" "to line their nests" (270). Though MacDonald argues the sickroom is a liminal space for Gregory "that offers (temporary) freedom from social norms and restrictions" (132), I argue more broadly that the colonial space, a place naturally destabilized and in flux, allows Gregory to transgress the bounds of heteronormativity. Thus, becoming a woman is possible for Gregory in this South African plain where only the dusty ants preside. He enters town wearing "one of the old-fashioned gowns and a great pinked-out collar" as an "experienced nurse" (270, 273). He "seems to abandon his former identity" because "[t]o become the New Man, he must become a woman" (MacDonald 132, 146). In fulfilling his "chosen life's work" (Schreiner 273), Gregory embodies Nightingale's ideology of the nurse who views nursing as a calling, a labor of love, outside the realm of monetary compensation.(15)Though Gregory must take on this "lady" identity to serve Lyndall, Poovey speaks to the complicated asexuality of Nightingale's rhetoric: "nursing...both intimated and specifically sacrificed sexuality" (Poovey 177). Thus, Gregory must renounce his own passion for Lyndall just as he comes physically close to her in her dying days. In adopting the feminine enterprise of dusting and caregiving, Gregory becomes a woman in outward performance, while simultaneously revealing the slippery nature of defining "man" and "woman."

<22>Gregory's movement from dusting the farm's loft to caring for Lyndall (and necessarily dusting the sickroom) represents his attempt to be the masculine counterpart of a New Woman. Yet Lyndall dies, and Gregory intends to marry Em to permanently inhabit the traditional domestic mirage—to be married, to manage the farm, and to act out heteronormativity. MacDonald argues that Gregory's crossgender performance, though temporary, helps map "the transformative possibilities of the New Man" and represents "the social ills Schreiner witnessed around her" (148, 149). Schreiner envisions Gregory's failure as a necessary evolutionary step in the struggle for equality (MacDonald 4). In the end, though Gregory dons the clothes of a man and consents to marry Em, I argue he retains the gender fluidity he has had throughout the novel. His face is still clean shaven, bearing the memory of his time as a woman. The novel leaves him in the shade of the house, attaching him to a domesticity he has consistently enacted (294). Lyndall speaks to Gregory's ambiguity as "man-woman" best: '"There...goes a true woman—one born for the sphere that some women have to fill without being born for it. How happy he would be sewing frills into his little girls' frocks, and how pretty he would look sitting in a parlour, with a rough man making love to him!'" (197) The South African farm is a space where Gregory can simultaneously be intended for the domesticity of sewing and sitting and can be in a position of power as master of the farm. He can be both duster and husband. Though the New Woman and Man cannot yet shake off the expectations of the imperial country and thrive in the colonial space, both take steps to reimagine their gender roles. Perhaps Schreiner was anticipating a time when both men and women could use and refuse dusters without scrutiny.

Corporeal Dust

<23>I have attempted to show how the duster and dust transports, reflects, and calls into question various characters' national, class, and gender identities in colonial South Africa. Perhaps the best way to think of identity is in terms of a kind of corporeal dust—an embodied dust. Dust calls into question the very notion of a cohesive identity. As an often-indefinable vagueness consisting of small particles, dust functions as a metaphor for the self, which is continually in a state of flux in the constantly shaping and reshaping colonial context. Dust, like identity, cannot be clearly divided into its component parts or be combined in a cohesive entity. If dust is an apt representation of one's identity, it is also a metaphor for the body—we are dust and will return to dust.(16) Both Lyndall and Waldo's deaths represent this corporeal dust. Here, dust is literally the earth of the South African plain, but symbolically the idea that colonial subjects are in many ways inextricably bound to their colonial contexts.

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<24>In returning to the earth for her death, Lyndall flees from herself as a middle-class English woman and is concerned with returning to the natural landscape. When Lyndall shares her thoughts on love with Gregory, she explains, '"There are as many kinds of loves as there are flowers; everlastings that never wither; speedwells that wait for the wind to fan them out of life; blood-red mountain-lilies that pour their voluptuous sweetness out for one day, and lie in the dust at night. There is no flower has the charm of all'" (229). In a way, Lyndall is the mountain-lily who gives over her sweetness to the stranger and is left "in the dust at night." After Lyndall gives birth and quickly weakens, she despairs of living and seeks to return to dust. She directs Gregory to drive the "waggon" into the countryside to the foot of the "blue mountain," where her "unclouded" soul looks forth and closes its eyes for the last time (282, 284). To renounce her earthly life, Lyndall leaves a traditional domestic space. Her choice to leave the town, where notions of nationality, class, and gender have a tighter grip, and retreat into the dust of the mountainside demonstrate her rejection of traditional monikers of identity and her embrace of dust's indefinability. In returning to the dust of the mountainside, she demonstrates that colonial subjects are a part of the colony—they become the very dust of the plain.

<25>Waldo's return to dust in his death similarly echoes dust's mutability. Waldo is a character covered with dust throughout the novel, suggesting his unconventionality in terms of nationality, class, and gender.(17) The first description of Waldo is him covered in dust, "powdered all over from head to foot with red sand" (39). Waldo is often found sitting, reclining, lying, or muttering in the dust. After his father's death, he emerges with "the appearance of an ill-conditioned young buffalo," one whose head made "the appearance of having been deeply rolled in sand" (103). In consistently covering Waldo from "head to foot" with dust, the text signals Waldo's ties to this colonial farm, itself ill-defined and constantly changing ownership. The bodily covering of the dust also foreshadows Waldo's return to dust in his death. When it is time for Nature to "enfold" Waldo, he sits on the ground "with his arms folded on his knees, admiring the sibling affection of the little chicks (298, 299). He pulls his hat lower and dies in the old yard (300). In the South African colony, both Lyndall and Waldo retreat into the veld to become dust. Indeed, the other characters on the farm seem to have no intention of returning to their sites of empire. The "colonial" dust of their bodies will pervade the crannies of the farm and spread out over the veld. The colonial subject remains a part of the colony indefinitely.

Conclusion

<26>Of course, all of these identities—nationality, class, and gender(18)—are necessarily linked together and affect one another sometimes indistinguishably. I have treated them separately in order to demonstrate the ways in which characters cling to some, like nationality, more tightly than others, such as gender. I have also joined the duster and dust in similar and contradictory ways, at times juxtaposing them, at times treating them synonymously, and at times using one as the extension of the other. The duster and dust are, in reality, separate "things." One is the tool meant to do the cleaning; the other is the object of the cleaning. Yet in Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, they function metonymically and metaphorically in similar ways to show how things are "used to think about the self" (Brown 18). The idea in the duster is contradictory—it is emblematic of the traditional English domestic and the transgressive man-woman who crosses both class and gender lines. It is both sexual and asexual, differentiating and equalizing. The idea of the duster changes based on its location and user. Dust's meaning, too, varies in different settings: it is more easily defined in South Africa than in England. Instead of being residue from refuse, smoke, or organic matter, dust is overwhelmingly sand, the earth of the plain in the colony. It is unabashedly everywhere—pervading the home and the human. It is an equalizing, neutralizing thing on its own. Thus, both the duster and dust, though sometimes different in ideological and material ways, signal a destabilization of the self. The dust of the South African plain reminds us, despite some of the duster's attachments—British, servant, and woman—that dust is the ultimate equalizer. After all, our fates are inextricably the same, and all our earthly forms turn to dust.

Notes

(1)John Plotz looks at how things gain sentimental value through their peregrinations. Suzanne Daly analyzes Indian objects found within Britain's domestic sphere. See Jennifer Sattaur for an overview of thing theory.(^)

(2)Though some scholars such as Daly argue things begin to function more like commodities in fin de siècle novels, I argue the duster contains rich sentimental and ideological value in this 1883 novel.(^)

(3)Bill Brown in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* asks, what is the idea in the thing? (6)(^)

(4)Of course, another obvious aspect of identity is race, but a discussion of the complexities of race in the novel is beyond the scope of this essay.(^)

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(5)Freedgood argues things can be read both metonymically and metaphorically in and outside of their temporal spaces to represent the different kinds of knowledge that are attached to them.(^)

(6)Mary Poovey in “A Housewifely Woman: The Social Construction of Florence Nightingale” explains Nightingale’s book was “written for a general audience and sold fifteen thousand copies in just one month” (179).(^)

(7)Though Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* focuses on dirt, her argument applies here: “dirt is essentially disorder….Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment” (2).(^)

(8)See Aomar Boum and Michael Bonine, “The Elegant Plume: Ostrich Feathers, African Commercial Networks, and European Capitalism” for the history of the British trade in ostrich feathers, its destruction of the wild African ostrich population, and its negative effects on local African livelihoods.(^)

(9)Freedgood explains the disastrous effects the cotton industry had on colonial India: “The history of cotton production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is largely a history of increasingly successful British imitations of Indian cottons, the destruction of the indigenous industry in India, and the subsequent need—an ironic and horrifically consequential one—for India to import cloth from Britain, leading to poverty and famine” (66).(^)

(10)Daly also argues calicoes signaled “stability, continuity, and order” (37).(^)

(11)Poovey explains Nightingale struggled to establish a classless view of nurses in contrast to the “class-laden assumptions about the unreliability of the women who had previously done this work” (175).(^)

(12)Lee Jackson in *Dirty Old London* echoes this sentiment when he explains, “Nineteenth-century Londoners also grew increasingly apprehensive about the health risks associated with dirt” (3).(^)

(13)Prashad speaks to the inextricable nature of class and race. In colonial India, for example, the colony justified dividing the colonists into White Town and natives to Black Town because they regarded Black Town’s “dirt as something inherent in itself” (253). Thus, the colonists justified separate and unequal sanitation practices and conditions for colonizers and colonized because, they argued, dirt was inherent in India (255).(^)

(14)See previously on page 5: "[E]very woman is a nurse" (Nightingale v).(^)

(15)Poovey points to the conundrum of embracing nursing as a labor of love: "If invoking the asexual, apparently classless image of woman by which her own exploits were publicly represented enabled Nightingale to solve rhetorically most of the problems introduced by her original conceptualization of nursing, it added one new difficulty. If 'every woman is a nurse,' then why should nurses earn money for what ought to be a labor of love?" (185)(^)

(16)Christopher Hamlin in "Good and Intimate Filth" speaks to English writers' obsession with the destruction and construction of the body (13). He points out, "Even during life the body was continually in flux, replacing its substance, its atoms coming and going" (Hamlin 22).(^)

(17)In fact, even in MacDonald's argument centering on the New Man, she posits Waldo does not fit into typical gender roles. He is "a New Boy," "a child for much of the narrative," he "resists adulthood" and is no match for "the capitalist labour market" (MacDonald 132).(^)

(18)Again, thinking of dust and colonial cleanliness in terms of race would be a valuable addition to this discussion of identity.(^)

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