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Shades of Sepia:
Examining Eurocentrism and Whiteness in Relation to Multiculturalism
in Steampunk Iconography, Fandom, and Culture Industry

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Sook Yi Goh

December 2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Shades of Sepia:
Examining Eurocentrism and Whiteness in Relation to Multiculturalism
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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
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Dr. Mariam Lam, Chairperson

Steampunk is an aesthetic that combines accelerated technology, retrofuturism, and alternate history. "Multicultural steampunk" is used to describe steampunk separate from the common understanding of steampunk that hinges on neo-Victorianism and imaginings of the British Empire. It often refers to cultural production in which the steampunk aesthetic is applied to or combined with some region, space, or item that is designated non-white in current perceptions of race. Since steampunk's rise as a trend in 2008, communities and industries have coalesced about the aesthetic, often reproduced through a Eurocentric lens, raising anxieties about whiteness. In this dissertation, Eurocentrism is defined as a mode of thought which enshrines Europe as a site and source of linear progress for the rest of the world to follow, while whiteness is defined as a location of structural advantage and racial privilege as well as a standpoint from which white people look at themselves and the world. These are mutually-reinforcing

mechanisms, expressed in popular discourse and media. I argue that whiteness informs the Eurocentric narratives associated with the popular iconography of steampunk. Moreover, discourse in steampunk fandom spaces contributed to an approach to multicultural steampunk that centers whiteness, rendering multiculturalism as a commercial aesthetic mode separate from historical context. Thus, despite attempts to diversify the aesthetic through multicultural steampunk, steampunk cultural productions, particularly literature and costuming, maintain a perspective to multiculturalism and steampunk that nonetheless centers mainstream Eurocentric sensibilities, instead of offering more challenging radical alternate histories. Steampunk informed by a more radical multiculturalist purpose, in which the perspectives and production of the historically marginalized are prioritized, have the potential to create alternate histories that center the experiences of the historically-colonized in ways that resist the mainstream narratives of history.

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Introduction

In early 2009, in the wilds of the social network MySpace, I came across an essay by a performer who styled herself "Ay-Leen the Peacemaker" titled "Thoughts about Orientalism, Imperialism & Steampunking Asia."[1] Part memoir, part argument, part plea, she wrote about the possibilities of doing Asian steampunk. Hitherto, my encounters with steampunk had been few: it was some sort of dress-up thing, like goth, except brown, with a lot more whirlygigs attached to look like robots. It was a pretty aesthetic, like Lolita's Victorian-esque lacey dresses with poufy skirts, except men also did it, with old-fashioned 19th century garb with funny moustasches, top hats, and ostentatious pocket watches. Steampunk was nice to look at, but an expensive hobby, like fishing, or theatre.

Ay-Leen's essay was about looking for a steampunk that did not revolve around the Victorian aesthetic, a steampunk that was about alternate-history Asia without Orientalizing it. It was also about the doubts of being Asian and participating in a subculture that was "rooted in fantasy-escapism and based on a cross between Victorian pulp fiction and a wave of New Romanticism." The lack of historical accuracy in steampunk was a double-edged sword because on the one hand, it meant a certain freedom in historical representation, and on the other, it meant potential offensive racist imagery in cultural representation of the Other, of spaces, peoples, cultures in places outside of Europe. She proposed a new kind of steampunk that explored alternate

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[1] Pho, Diana, as Ay-Leen the Peacemaker. "Thoughts about Orientalism, Imperialism & Steampunking Asia." Previously published to MySpace, now available on Dreamwidth. June 25, 2009. <http://dmp.dreamwidth.org/848.html>

histories of places beyond Europe, like the British Raj, or Chinese imperialism across Asia, or the Aztec Empire.

"Huh," I thought to myself, as I began crafting a lengthy email to Ay-Leen (whose real name I would not know for months after), "that sounds like fun," because Malaysian history had been my favourite subject when schoolmates were excited about international (i.e., European) history. Then, as one does, I Googled "steampunk."

Steampunk

Steampunk is an aesthetic that combines imaginings of Victorianism, historically-accurate or not, and fantastical technology into a shared imagination of what modern technology might have looked like if designed and decorated by the Victorians. Steampunk uses many science fiction tropes and archetypes as inspiration for costumes, props, and narratives, often set in a 19th century milieu featuring accelerated steam technology and rudimentary electric technology. Much of steampunk cultural production takes place in Western Europe, particularly Victorian England, to the point that for many people, neo-Victorianism is a core component for steampunk. Descriptions of steampunk in mainstream discourse remain vague; depending on who is answering the question, it is a science fiction genre, a fashion style, a community, a subculture, a counterculture, an art movement.[2] Descriptions of steampunk might run as follows:

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[2] More recently, the term "superculture" was coined by entertainer Veronique Chevalier, although its usage is rather dubious and more dependent on enthusiasm than observation. It attempts to replace "subculture," as for many steampunks, the latter term implies an exclusive in-group, whereas steampunks wish to put forward the impression that they are open and welcoming to all new participants.

- an imagined Victorian steam-powered era extended into the 20th and 21st centuries;

- Victorian science fiction;

- the future as imagined, or might have been imagined, by the Victorian era;

- "the combination of technology and romance";[3]

- "when goths discover the color brown."[4]

In his doctoral dissertation "Steampunk as Aesthetic," steampunk scholar Mike Perschon pinpoints steampunk as an aesthetic combining three major elements: neo-Victorianism; technofantasy; and retrofuturism.[5] His description has the advantage of describing the general look and feel of steampunk without limiting it to a single medium, allowing for a trans-media approach in describing steampunk. "The easiest way to spot steampunk," writes cultural historian James Carrott and futurist Brian Johnson in *Vintage Tomorrows*, "is by… the way it looks … gears and goggles, mad scientist gadgets, airships and bustle skirts."[6] Ethnographers Suzanne Barber and Matt Hale adds to this iteration by pointing to how steampunk performers link "divergent timelines, both actual and virtual," as well as "technologies, fashion, and ideologies of vastly different sociotemporal contexts ... for an aesthetic effect."[7] They call this position within which

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[3] Jake von Slatt, quoted in NY Times article "Steampunk Moves Between 2 Worlds" by Ruth La Ferla <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/08/fashion/08PUNK.html?_r=0>
[4] Common steampunk lore, coined by librarian Jess Nevins, popularized by author Cherie Priest.
[5] This section of his dissertation was written into a blogpost, "Steampunk as Aesthetic" <http://steampunkscholar.blogspot.com/p/aesthetic-101.html>
[6] Carrott, James & Brian David Johnson. *Vintage Tomorrows: A Historian and a Futurist Journey Through Steampunk Into the Future of Technology*. California: O'Reilly Media Inc., 2013.
[7] Barber, Suzanne & Matt Hale. "Enacting the Never-Was: Upcycling the Past, Present and Future in Steampunk." *Steaming Into A Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Eds. Julie Anne Taddeo & Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013. 179.

steampunks decontextualize, recontextualize and resignify history the "never-was."[8] There are two methods by which this decontextualizing and resignifying occurs: pastiche and bricolage. Pastiche is the imitation of a style, taken out of its original context but recognizable in its new context. Steampunk is thus a pastiche of Victorian aesthetics attached to 21st century items. In bricolage, artists use an item or artefact for a purpose different from what it was originally created for, and in steampunk, this can be the cannibalizing of old clothing bought from a thriftstore for parts to make a new costume, or taking apart a watch for parts in either a different watch or decoration on a prop.

Steampunk comes together from three different directions: popular contemporary novels beginnings in the 1980's; fashion; and the Do-It-Yourself movement. All three directions are inspired by the popular imagination of the Victorian era, manifest in media such as Disney's 1954 film *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Cory Gross, of the blog *Voyages Extraordinaire*, has pointed out how much of the visual inspiration for steampunk came from the Victorian Science Fiction movies of the 1960's; as the people growing up during that time gained the financial capital to create a "Maker" subculture, so-called because they "make" things themselves, rather than buy them, they made work inspired by the aesthetics of those movies. The Makers form the backbone of the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) movement that recycles used materials into props that *look* old. Many of the fashion-driven participants come from the goth subculture, as members of the subculture drifted away from it to partake in a more light-hearted, less somber style. Another large segment of the fashion set comes from the Society of Creative

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[8] Ibid. 166.

Anachronism, a large historical reenactment group that re-creates "the arts and skills of pre-17th century Europe."[9]

Describing steampunk creates anxieties over how steampunk is presented to someone unfamiliar with the aesthetic. If one says that steampunk is "Victorian science fiction," one already conjures up a particular space and time and excludes works that take place either in the present or the future, or treats the world beyond as unimportant. It restricts the creativity of artists who may not wish to work within a solely Victorian milieu. Furthermore, there was the possibility of appearing to condone the crimes of the British Empire by constantly dressing up like a citizen of the time, a criticism that came from both outside and within steampunk. Between fellow fans of steampunk, this conversation felt needful and could become productive;[10] coming from non-fans,[11] this criticism prompted a defensiveness that steampunk does not have to condone Empire or, implicitly, white supremacy, but should critique it. As steampunk's popularity grew, this anxiety came with a new complaint: boredom with the seeming unoriginality of steampunks to do anything beyond sticking gears onto every clothing item imaginable. This complaint masks the larger problem of the predominant whiteness of steampunk spaces, not just of its participants, but also the use of the aesthetic. Whiteness, in the steampunk context, refers to a category of narratives and aesthetic forms that find cultural capital within a white supremacist status quo, comfortable to participants who are

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[9] From the description on the home website. <http://www.sca.org/>

[10] See Pho & Goh, "Steampunk: Stylish Subversion or Colonial Chic?" *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style*. Eds. Shira Tarrant & Marjorie Jolles. SUNY Press: Albany, 2012. 191 – 208.

[11] An oft-cited example of outsider criticism of steampunk is Charlie Stross' blogpost "The Hard Edge of Empire": < http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2010/10/the-hard-edge-of-empire.html>

unaware of it, and alienating to participants, particularly racialized ones, who cannot ignore it.

To give a brief history, the term "steampunk" itself was coined by K.W. Jeter, a science fiction writer, as a tongue-in-cheek riff off "cyberpunk," a subgenre popular in the 1980s when Jeter and fellow novelists James Blaylock and Tim Powers wrote several novels set in the 19ᵗʰ century.[12] Steampunk first gained momentum in two major ways: the unveiling of the Steampunk Treehouse at Burning Man 2005, and the publication of several novels with a similar aesthetic right after, such as Jay Lake's 2005 novel *Mainspring*, and Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* in 2008.[13] *The New York Times* article "Steampunk Moves Between Two Worlds" by Ruth La Ferla coincided with the release of *Steampunk*, an anthology of short fiction by Jeff and Ann Vandermeer, and "an interesting cross-pollination occurred."[14] It is a movement that has relied almost exclusively on the Internet for the formation of communities, who then physically gather for a myriad of activities, chief among them roleplaying and crafting. Like the Society of Creative Anachronism, but with fewer rules, steampunk provided entertainment and a creative outlet for people who did not want to be limited to the oeuvre of Renaissance fairs. Groups create elaborate props and costumes, with accompanying personas ("steamsonas"), and play out a plot loosely laid out that unfolds in a number of activities; these stories often unfold in large-scale Live Action Roleplaying (LARP) or

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[12] Locus Magazine, April 1985

[13] Vandermeer, Jeff and S.J. Chambers. *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide To The World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature*. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. Pg. 63.

[14] Vandermeer and Chambers. Ibid. Pg 14

independently filmed webseries. The Madison-based convention, TeslaCon, is a site for

such LARP activities: the convention aims to provide a "full immersion con experience"

in which the hotel décor match the theme and the plot of the weekend's activities, and the

hotel staff play along.[15]

The Internet brought individuals together, coalescing into a subculture that feeds

into theatrical, live-action roleplaying (LARP) tendencies such as those that keep the

Society of Creative Anachronism and Renaissance Fairs alive. Renaissance Fair goers

often come to steampunk citing "stitch-counters," or members overly concerned with the

accuracy of period costumes, as a reason they feel driven away.[16] Participants used, and

continue to use, a myriad of social media, also collectively known as Web 2.0, to connect

with each other, showcase work, and organize offline events. These different venues have

different focuses. *Brass Goggles* uses a PHP forum,[17] and caters predominantly to

Makers with an emphasis on working with props. *Steamfashion* grew large on

LiveJournal[18], for pop culture and fashion aficionados.[19] *The Gatehouse Gazette*, run by

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[15] From the description on the home website: < http://teslacon.com/>
[16] "Stitch-counters" is a hyperbolic insult on the Renaissance Faire circuit for roleplayers invested in the historical accuracy of a costume, to the point of "counting stitches" on a seam. Steampunk, being less concerned with historical accuracy than with historical trivia, is more playful in comparison, allowing for a wider variety of roles that potentially challenge the status quo, instead of going along with it.
[17] A PHP forum is an online discussion board using hyptertext software. It is a relatively simple format for administrators with varying levels of coding skills, easily customizable for owners who had backgrounds in computer science, and yet robust enough to support thousands of users in the same community. *Brass Goggles*. Online. < http://brassgoggles.co.uk/forum/index.php >
[18] Livejournal is a blogging platform, popular for its many privacy levels. It houses personal blogs with filters for different kinds of friends, so a user could choose which friends could see which posts. These users could also start communities, which resembled a personal blog but multiple users could post into. Many fandoms coalesced around these communities, and users find friends with whom they established long-term friendships, much like penpals, except more instantaneous. LiveJournal is no longer used as much by North American fandoms, who have moved to other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.
[19] Steamfashion Livejournal. N.d. < http://steamfashion.livejournal.com/ >

Netherlands-based Nick Ottens, had a zine and accompanying webforum.[20] Similarly, *Steampunk Magazine*, founded by Magpie Killjoy and then briefly taken over by Allegra Hawksmoor, published a digital magazine and maintained its own forum, called the Gaslamp Bazaar.[21] Both *The Gatehouse Gazette* and *Steampunk Magazine*'s Gaslamp Bazaar were spaces to discuss magazine content. *Steam-Scholars*, a Yahoo mailing list, is comprised of members from various academic institutions worldwide, and is used as a discussion group and mailing list for events and announcements related to the study of steampunk and neo-Victorianism in academia.

From these different venues come a variety of ideological positions on steampunk. The moderators of *Steamfashion* insists that the "–punk" suffix carries no political meaning, while others hang onto the suffix as the important thing that makes steampunk stand out among other subcultures. *Brass Goggles* bans all discussion of partisan politics, such as the federal elections of any country, and heavily discourages ideological arguments. Nick Ottens of *The Gatehouse Gazette* also considered the term to be a gesture of the temporal landscape of the imagination, a way to romanticize history literarily.[22] This claim to an apolitical position ostensibly served to maintain civility and provide steampunk with a veneer of respectability that the term itself seemed to lack, however contradictory the concept may be. By relying on the Anglophile stereotype of

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[20] *The Gatehouse Gazette* zine ended publication in November 2011; its editor, Nick Ottens, moved to the blog format. < http://www.ottens.co.uk/gatehouse/gazette/ >

[21] The Gaslamp Bazaar closed in 2010, due to maintenance issues. Discussion still continues in the comments section of the magazine's blog. < http://www.steampunkmagazine.com/2010/10/the-gaslamp-bazaar-is-no-more/ >

[22] First mentioned in the comments of Steampunk Magazine. "SPM's Professor Calamity Arrested." <http://www.steampunkmagazine.com/2009/10/spms-professor-calamity-arrested/#comment-321> This would later be a running theme in further discussions.

British Victorians as being more mannered than 20th century Americans, one should perform politesse and thus more fully enjoy participating in the community of fellow steampunks. These venues could de-historicize the milieu they drew inspiration from by ignoring that the apolitical position was itself an ideological stance. *Steampunk Magazine*, founded and run by anarchists, defined steampunk as a way of approaching technology in ways that apprehend history in mortal terms of concrete technology, rather than attempt to transcend history.[23] These ideological positions affect what is considered canonical steampunk literature for these groups, and since everyone agrees that steampunk is in some form a literary subgenre, steampunk groups collate lists of books that fit, retroactively claiming Victorian texts as steampunk, to give newcomers a sense of what "counts."[24]

These ideological positions also affect the Maker subset: politically-minded Makers focus on recycling materials and recuperating knowledge that has become obsolete with today's technology, while apolitical Makers are less picky about where to buy their raw materials and investing in commercial ventures. The lack of a firm position allows steampunks to advocate expansion, rather than limitations, giving the impression that steampunk is welcoming to all types. This in turn drives steampunk Makers to appeal to a mainstream consumer audience in order to make ends meet in an increasingly-

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[23] The Catastrophe Orchestra and Arts Collective. "What Then, Is Steampunk? Colonising the Past so We Can Dream the Future." *Steampunk Magazine: The First Years Issues #1-7*. Print. 10-11.
[24] Examples of such lists can be found on review websites such as *GoodReads*; curated by *GoodReads* members themselves, currently the "Steampunk" list has 377 books and the "Best Steampunk Books" list has 905 books. When curated by a single person, these lists are subject to personal taste. When curated by a community, these lists are subject to popularity, and the occasional administrative drama, such as the time when a Steampunk Books list was culled by Evelyn Kriete, creating an uproar:
<https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/951214-what-on-earth-has-happened-to-the-steampunk-list>

competitive market, and encourages middle-man merchants to source materials mass-produced globally as cheaply as possible. The result is that instead of the happy anarchy in exploring the possibilities of steampunk expression, allowing the aesthetic to mutate, the aesthetic instead becomes locked into a recognizable form that can be easily-marketed.

These contradictory ideological stances make it difficult to assign a label that describes the cohesion of steampunk—it is not a subculture because it has no shared meanings to be read against a mainstream culture; it cannot be called a counterculture because while it appears to be a pushback against minimalist design, like those of Apple products with smooth white plastic lines "defined … through a philosophy of simplicity,"[25] the underlying conflict is one of consumer-driven aesthetics. It is inspired by science fiction, but it is not limited to literature or other narrative media. Steampunk is acted out in various ways as well: some participants are "casual" steampunks who wear incorporate the aesthetic into their daily wear, subtly or overtly. Others create more elaborate "steamsonas" (steampunk personas) based on archetypes of Scientific Romances, with elaborate backstories and character profiles that are reflected on the costumes and props they carry. Common archetypes are members of nobility (usually British), dashing airship pirates, and mad scientists bent on world domination. There are varying levels of commitment to these roleplaying personas—some participants inhabit their personas thoroughly, creating a form of brand recognition with them such as Diana

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[25] Bix, Amy Sue. "Steve Jobs versus the Victorians: Steampunk, Design, and the History of Technology in Society." *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Eds. Julie Ann Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2013. 245.

Pho, who uses the stage persona of Ay-Leen the Peacemaker, a Tonkinese assassin, at conventions to speak on multiculturalism and anti-racism; others use personas to discuss their work, be it props, outfit, or art pieces, such as Jake von Slatt, a steampunk Maker who gave workshops on DIY projects.

The difficulty of assigning descriptive labels to steampunk does not mean there is nothing cohesive about it. Steampunk has consistently relied on a rootedness in the historical and speculative, in tandem. Identitarian issues such as race, gender, sexuality, class, etc., have been taken up in various ways in more recent texts. There are two major speculative exercises intertwining with each other that allow for the exploration of marginal identities in steampunk. One is the alternate history exercise, in which participants extrapolate differences in certain historical events. Cherie Priest's *Clockwork Century* series explores the "what-ifs" of the American Civil War, drawing on old documents of war machines that were planned but never carried out; over the course of six books, she examines the effects of a war that would have occurred had these war machines been built, in tandem with the unearthing of a gas that turns people into zombies.[26] The other speculative exercise is the recuperation of lesser-known histories, such as the importance of women in popular uprisings and queer personalities that have been erased from historical narratives, bought to center in performance. For example, Miriam Rocek from New York City roleplays Steampunk Emma Goldman, giving the historical figure a twist in the form of time-travel abilities so she can come to present-

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[26] The American Civil War is extended several years as a result of this technological change, because the reason why these blueprints never came to fruition was that the war ended too soon.

time events like political rallies and conventions; in this way, she educates people on historical events advocating workers' rights.[27]

Steampunk works that seem to rely on superficial visual understandings of steampunk require a basic knowledge of what historical artifacts *might* look like in order to tell their speculative stories, even if it is informed by popular imagination rather than historical accuracy. Today, this is a far cry from the early steampunk novels by Jeter, Blaylock and Powers, who had to coast by on the limited amount of information available to them in the pre-Internet 80's. This is most visible in the wearable fashions and props that steampunk is most famously known for, with a history as fast-paced as the alternate history it explores. At the outset, these fashions were thrifted, recuperated from old wardrobes, or commissioned from fellow tailors or seamstresses. The props were, and still are, handmade, even the more complicated works, which give their wielder a chance to demonstrate their skill and artistry. Steampunk grew to become a niche market of its own, and commercial ventures, from corporate companies to small businesses, began to take advantage of the growing demand. The small businesses ranged from people making their own jewelry for sale, to middlemen sourcing mass-produced items that fit the aesthetic.[28] The rise of corporate involvement did not diminish the thrifting impulse, but complemented it with a new range of things to buy and use in personal outfits. The proliferation of steampunk images on the Internet informed newcomers to the fashion of the common looks and styles associated with steampunk.

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[27]Rafey, Kate. "JWA's Greatest Hits: Meet Steampunk Emma Goldman." *Jewish Women's Archive*. Web. Oct 3, 2011. Last accessed Jul 31, 2017. <https://jwa.org/blog/meet-steampunk-emma-goldman>

[28] This has given rise to shady business practices of buying products in bulk and marketing them as "handmade," giving the impression that the seller themselves made them.

The steampunk marketplace is thus a space of commodities that signal different ideologies, but nonetheless participate in a capitalist marketplace. Anti-capitalist steampunk attempts to push back against the notion of the marketplace. However, steampunk is so oriented by visual aesthetics and material items that participants inevitably end up buying and selling stuff, either through their own websites, or in person at conventions, as middle-men merchants, or as artists selling their own products. This means that no matter what ideological position an individual participants takes, steampunk cultural production is locked into 21st century marketplace logic, which is driven by neoliberalism, a theory of practices both economic and political. In neoliberal logic, individual and societal well-being is maintained and advanced by ensuring every individual has the freedom to participate in the marketplace within a framework by which private property, free markets, and free trade is paramount. This ties human dignity to individual freedom, which characterizes participation in steampunk: if steampunk is what one makes of it, then one is free to do and be steampunk regardless of how, in method or ideology. This logic is not immediately obvious in steampunk because participants attempt to divorce the aesthetic from ideology, but the material manifestations of steampunk production often belie this link. Moreover, ideology and economics have formed the marketplace of stuff from which participants source materials for play.

Alongside steampunk commercialism came the academic analyses of the steampunk phenomenon. Academic research on steampunk has leaned heavily towards the literary productions that have contributed to what seems to the common ideal of

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steampunk, as a cursory glance over Mike Perschon's list of secondary sources shows.[29]

Research on performance-based steampunk spaces is relatively limited, beginning with

Rebecca Onion's piece on steampunk as a form of "everyday practice"[30] and most

usefully by anthropologists Suzanna Barber and Matt Hale in an analysis of steampunk

performance at a convention.[31] Picking up on this, Christian Ferguson demonstrated the

general heterogeneity of ideologies operating in various steampunk media and groups,

giving close attention to the visual style.[32] *Steaming Into a Victorian Future*, a collection

of academic essays on steampunk, contains an evenly-spread ratio of analyses of

performative steampunk versus literary steampunk in recent volumes, inspired by the

Steampunk special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*. More recently, *Clockwork Rhetorics*

attempts to pin down the ideological messaging of the aesthetic in various media, and

Like Clockwork continues conversations within steampunk academia on the ever-

changing definition of genre.

Almost from the outset of its mid-2000's popularity, there was an awareness of

how steampunk centered on Victorian Britain, with the exception of Wild West re-

imaginings. In an early essay, Diana Pho, as Ay-Leen the Peacemaker, recounted her

introduction to steampunk:

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[29] Some of the arguments of literary scholars have been confusing to this steampunk scholar, claiming that steampunk origins can be found in obscure texts that are never cited in any steampunk circles.

[30] Onion, Rebecca. "Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice." *Neo-Victorian Studies.* Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2008). 138-163.

[31] Barber, Suzanna & Matt Hale. "Upcycling the Past, Present, and Future in Steampunk." Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology. Eds. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2013. This article analyzes a series of steampunk skits at DragonCon, a large general fandom convention with an alternate history track.

[32] Ferguson, Christine. "Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture & The Ideology of Style." *Neo-Victorian Studies.* Vol. 4, Issue 2 (2011). 66 – 90.

Diana: "So… I was wondering about steampunk, where does colonialism fit in?"

Friend: "Colonialism? Like in the Colonies?"

Diana: "Like being from the colonies."

Friend: "Oh, you can do that. There're different types of subgenres in steampunk, and it can take place in America."[33]

This feedback she received centered an alternate-history America that remained under British rule, tying it back to the British Empire, completely ignoring the possibility of exploring colonies beyond America, and also the fact that America itself was a colonial project built on the genocide of indigenous populations and a slave trade. Thus, although steampunks can conceive of "an alternate imagined past that never was," their anachronistic vision does not necessarily see a radical break from "the historic past as it is recounted within historical records," [34] and though there is a demonstrated love for minute historical detail,[35] there is a discrepancy in which details are worth dredging up for historical (mis)representation. At the same time, steampunk rose in popularity internationally, exporting itself to countries like Brazil and Mexico. British steampunks, particularly English ones, did not waste time jumping on the new fashion trend to popularize educational initiatives focused on Victorian history. Japan already had a

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[33] Pho, Diana. "'From the Wilds of America': Analyzing the Idea of 'British Colonial America' in Steampunk." BeyondVictoriana.com. June 26, 2009. Last accessed July 20, 2017. <http://beyondvictoriana.com/2009/06/26/%E2%80%9Cfrom-the-wilds-of-america%E2%80%9D-%E2%80%93-analyzing-the-idea-of-%E2%80%9Cbritish-colonial-america%E2%80%9D-in-steampunk/>

[34] Barber, Suzanna & Matt Hale. "Upcycling the Past, Present, and Future in Steampunk." *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Eds. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2013. 167.

[35] Rose, Margaret. "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. Vol. 20 Issue 3 (Nov 2009). 324.

fascination with the look and feel of early industrial Britain, expressed in "Lolita" fashion that draws heavily on Victorian fashion to emphasize the femininity of its wearers, and translated easily into adopting steampunk as a street style.[36]

Starting in 2009, steampunk participants, mostly in the United States and to a lesser degree Canada, began to discuss ways of diversifying how steampunk can be imagined, divorcing it from its focus on Victorian Britain fashions and aesthetics by imagining steampunk in other geographic and temporal spaces. This followed on the heels of RaceFail, a long-running conversation about the issue of race and racism in science fiction and fantasy publishing and fandom in which non-white fans finally spoke out in multitudes about their experiences of alienation and racism within the genre.[37] The three major blogs that attempted to direct this shift were: *Beyond Victoriana*, a multicultural steampunk blog that showcases members within and beyond the steampunk community covering a wide range of media, accepting articles on historical moments, personal essays, interviews and convention reports; *Silver Goggles*, a postcolonial steampunk blog reviewing a range of steampunk media from a critical race theory perspective; and *The Steamer's Trunk*, or *Multiculturalism for Steampunk*, a multicultural steampunk blog that provided summaries of non-British, and often non-white, cultural artefacts from the 19th century that could be "steampunked". Of these, Ay-Leen the

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[36] Lolita has its own set of problematiques with a great deal of criticism. I do not address them in this dissertation because even though the Lolita subculture is a source of inspiration for some in the steampunk subculture, the problems of Lolita in Japan are not the problems of steampunk in North America.
[37] The "Fail" part of this term comes from how several white commentators behaved during this time, in which they failed to empathize with the non-white fans and at times actively antagonized them.

Peacemaker of *Beyond Victoriana* has been the most visible and successful, presenting at many conventions across the East Coast of the United States.

"Multicultural steampunk," then, is used to describe steampunk separate from the common understanding of steampunk that hinges on neo-Victorianism and imaginings of the British Empire. It often refers to cultural production in which the steampunk aesthetic is applied to or combined with some region, space, or item that is designated non-white in current perceptions of race. For example, gears and sprockets, common motifs associated with steampunk, would be applied to an "ethnic" costume. Depictions of other, non-European countries in alternate 19th century re-imaginings might also be considered multicultural steampunk.[38] These are thought experiments to demonstrate that steampunk can be done anywhere by anyone, and thus is an egalitarian aesthetic free from the oppressive 19th century history from which it draws inspiration.

The Race Question

Since our initial conversation, Diana Pho and I have seen and advocated for multicultural steampunk on our respective blogs, in interviews, and at steampunk fan conventions as presenters. We would go on to present separately, give interviews, and enter graduate school to further study steampunk. We started our own steampunk-themed blogs in late 2009: hers on multiculturalism, taken up as the representation of multiple identitarian groups often considered minority; mine on postcolonialism, a field of critique

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[38] There are steampunk anthologies from Brazil and Romania, and *El Investigador* is a retrofuturist magazine based in Mexico City. They tend to fall under the radar for "multicultural steampunk" because they are not in English.

which interrogates the histories of colonialism, and its economic and psychological consequences after decolonization. I had started studying postcolonial theory on my own, and the prospect of meshing postcolonial critique, my favourite historical subjects, and science fiction was an exciting new direction for my creative writing of fiction and non-fiction.

I turned to postcolonial theory and critical race theory because as interdisciplinary fields, they offer a robust set of questions with which to complicate the steampunk project beyond counterfactual histories, firmly challenging steampunk with the current world consequences of colonialism that steampunk cultural producers would have to interrogate to be creatively and politically productive. Postcolonial theory is the field of inquiry into the effects of colonialism and imperialism on countries that have been formerly colonized, and while formally decolonized, still experience the economical and psychological after-effects of colonialism. My point of reference for postcolonial theory is Syed Hussein Alatas' work on the "myth of the lazy Native," which is an analysis of how British colonizers of the 19th century disseminated stereotypes of Malay natives in what is now Malaysia.[39] These stereotypes were used to justify taking control of the bureaucracies of the local sultanates, and were so pervasive that even locals came to believe these stereotypes themselves. Alatas' work would go on to influence Edward Said's theory on Orientalism, the construction of "the East" in relation to "the West" in which "the East" became a construction by European scholars, many of whom had never

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[39] Alatas, Syed Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its function in the ideology of Colonial Capitalism.* New York: Routledge, 2010.

visited the regions they studied.[40] These works are useful in discussion on steampunk, because they focus on the centuries that inspire steampunk, and offer a framework for understanding the kinds of racist stereotypes and ways of discussing the Other that crop up in the present day.

Critical race theory addresses the present-day problems of racism faced by people of color. The term "person of color" is derived from "women of color," an umbrella term created by Black American women activists in 1977 to include women from other racial minority groups[41]; although it is used interchangeably with terms as "racial minority," I use the term "person of color" as an acknowledgement of this political solidarity. "Race," then, refers to a socially constructed form of categorizing people by perceived ethnicity, or facial phenotype. Racial categories may also include cultural or national aspects, often in relation to a dominant racial group. Though socially constructed, these categories create fluid but significant differences for individuals in the different groups when experiencing the world. Racism is the oppression of racial minorities or people of color, through structural mechanisms of popular and political representation, and in institutions of public and private life. Racism has material and epistemological dimensions, affecting every interaction between groups and individuals, and every negotiation of power. Its consequences range from continued social fatigue from dismissal or invalidation, to social and/or physical death. The study of racism is thus interdisciplinary, ranging from sociology, law, psychology, and media studies. In my inquiry, I am interested in the ways

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[40] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
[41] "The Origin of the phrase 'Women of Color'." Youtube, uploaded by Western States Center, Feb 15, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82vl34mi4Iw

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that steampunk participants re-create or re-imagine race relations or racial stereotypes in their invented histories, or how they do not address them at all. Steampunk fans tend towards two ends of a spectrum in their approach to historical racism: on one end, they take on what Joyce E. King calls a "dysconscious" racism, in which they accept racism as a given, and see no purpose in addressing it.[42] On the other end, they may try to not be as racist as their historical inspirations, or try to imagine alternate histories which may either confront historical oppression, or in which historical oppression does not exist. However, racism evolves in multiple ways as part of daily experience; the racism of a 21st century steampunk aficionado is expressed differently from the racism of a 19th century every(white)man. It is thus worth asking questions about how people of color, and other minorities, are represented in steampunk media, because the ways these alternate histories include or exclude historical oppression have different implications for the alternate presents that we wish to occupy.

With the cultural zeitgeist around RaceFail, these questions seemed especially important. RaceFail was not the first time that issues of race and representations of racialized minorities collided in science fiction and fantasy. In the early days of science fiction and fantasy fandom, the fictional figure of Carl Brandon, maintained by two fanzine managers, would be revealed as a Black man in the back-and-forth chatter of fanzine correspondence, during which a conservative member of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association asked what might happen if a Black person applied for membership.

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[42] Joyce E. King. "Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity and the Miseducation of Teachers." *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Spring, 1991), pp. 133-146

There are various examples of science fiction media tackling issues of race, such as an episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* featured a Black science fiction writer from the Civil Rights Era of America struggling against the erasure of his racial identity in his work and profile, as a cautionary tale against the return to the racism, xenophobia, and oppression of the past from *Star Trek*'s utopic vision.[43] Samuel R. Delaney wrote on his experiences with racism in science fiction, as a young author receiving awards, or as a veteran author who nonetheless is always seated with other black science fiction writers despite having little in common with them at conventions.[44] Responding to the whiteness of Tolkien derivatives, called "sword and sorcery," Charles Saunders writes African-inspired epic fantasy, called "sword and soul." In 2008, a year before RaceFail, John Rieder would publish a formal academic study of science fiction's connection to the emergence of colonialism, in which he theorized that science fiction as a pulp fiction genre grew because writers ran out of places on Earth for "the radical exoticism of unexplored territory," and thus turned to invent other territory, such as the moon, or caves of lizard people.[45]

However, RaceFail was a unique event, because it took place on the burgeoning social media in 2009; because of social media, dissenting voices against the status quo of science fiction publishing were much more numerous.[46] Over the course of several

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[43] "Far Beyond the Stars." *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, Season Six, written by Marc Scott Zicree, directed by Avery Brooks, Paramount, 1998.

[44] Delany, Samuel R. "Racism and Science Fiction." New York Review of Science Fiction, Issue 120. August 1998. < http://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html>

[45] Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

[46] LiveJournal user rydra_wong maintained a list of links to posts and essays addressing RaceFail, which hit the limit of LiveJournal character limits three times. A later post on the LiveJournal community

months, fans of science fiction and fantasy across multiple blogging platforms, organized as communities of fans of different texts, wrote personal essays on the emotional effects of not seeing themselves reflected in the texts they consumed. They addressed not only representation within the texts themselves, but representation within the processes by which these texts are created and processed through the industries that produced them for mass consumption, most notably the publishing or film industries. Due to how these conversations permeated the maturing social media platforms of the time, RaceFail had demanded an engagement with creative media that forced questions about race, representation, and the consequences of not reflecting the reality of people of color on a level that had rarely been reached before when fans and creators were limited to fanzines, fan columns in magazines, fan conventions, and mailing lists.

The critical conversations arising from these personal standpoints had a few key effects. Through RaceFail, fans learned a language with which to express their alienation within their own fandoms. It opened a conversation on racial biases and ways that tacit racism in fandom and industry discourages minority engagement, such as the lack of first readers in most major publishing venues who are non-white. In this way, fans and even casual consumers of popular media gained a way to theorize their experiences on race and racism and respond to white supremacy. RaceFail prompted the creation of more networks of cooperation between minorities, such as the Con or Bust fund, which sends fans of color to science fiction conventions, in order to represent their communities,

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deadbrowalking, called the "Wild Unicorn Herd Check-In" requested people of color to post identifying themselves as science fiction and fantasy fans, and garnered over 1,000 comments: http://deadbrowalking.livejournal.com/357066.html

participate on panels, and make potential connections with industry professionals. It was within this context that I came to steampunk.

Using *Unthinking Eurocentrism* by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam as a model for media analysis, I began writing essays on steampunk, and made social media forays into steampunk-centered online communities. I was either dismissed with the categorical claim that steampunk can only be recognized with the 19th century Victoriana, as Evelyn Kriete insists in *the Steampunk Bible*,[47] or received with open arms, taken on as a new challenge to alleviate the boredom that saturation with brass brings. Participants did their utmost to put their best foot forward in representing steampunk's positives, and resist criticism from outside the fandom, such as Charles Stross' essay "The hard edge of empire," in which he wrote:

> We know about the real world of the era steampunk is riffing off. And the picture
>
> is not good. ... It was a vile, oppressive, poverty-stricken and debased world and
>
> we should shed no tears for its passing ... Nevertheless, an affection for the
>
> ancient regime is an unconsidered aspect of the background of most steampunk
>
> fiction.[48]

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[47] Kriete asserts, "The Victorian or Edwardian […] are the core of its identity, the aesthetic of the age. One of the things that allows steampunk to be so diverse and so harmonious is that it has a clear core aesthetic to build on[…]. Thus, there's always a common ground that its fans can fall back on to resolve their disagreements of interpretations." Quoted in Vandermeer, Jeff and S.J. Chambers. *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide To The World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature*. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. Pg. 150. Kriete is, of course, wrong, because her assertion that the core aesthetic is Victorian or Edwardian cannot apply to many interpretations of steampunk, such as the post-apocalyptic or space operatic ones.
[47] Vandermeer and Chambers. Ibid. Pg 14
[48] Stross, Charles. "The hard edge of empire." *Charlie's Diary*. October 2010.
<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2010/10/the-hard-edge-of-empire.html>

The resistance to Stross' statement was immediate and rooted in current literature. Scott Westerfeld, author of the young adult series *Leviathan*, jumped to the defense of steampunk, gesturing to Cherie Priest's novel *Boneshaker*: "the current emblematic book of steampunk is *totally Dickensian*, but no one pays attention to that because it's got zombies and airships."[49] (Stross' criticism of Priest's novel was that the gas-induced zombies were emblematic of the faulty science in steampunk generally. The zombies were a small part of Priest's novel, which was about a working-class single mother looking for her missing son in the zombie-infested city of Seattle.) Westerfeld cited six articles asking questions on the political climate of steampunk as a sampling of "the online world of steampunk," to prove that steampunk was far more critical of imperialism and empire than Stross claimed.

However, Stross was not entirely wrong in his criticism of steampunk—he was wrong that affection for empire was an *unconsidered* aspect of steampunk, but he was right that the history of British imperialism was embedded into steampunk, saturating it. It was easy for fans to get defensive at the time. Like Mwenda Ntarangwi in his defense of anthropology,[50] I, too, wanted steampunk to get away from the caricaturing criticisms. Because of that, I ignored the reasons why I began asking questions about representations of race in the first place, ignored why RaceFail even occurred in the first place, and left undocumented the many instances of unease I experienced, because I wanted steampunk to do better, and become the multicultural site it could be.

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[49] Westerfeld, Scott. "Genre Cooties." *Scott Westerfeld blog*. November 2010.
<https://scottwesterfeld.com/blog/2010/11/genre-cooties/>
[50] Ntarangwi, Mwenda. *Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010. 57.

Alienation and Appeal

Diana and I began our participation within the steampunk subculture in earnest from a place of alienation, with a determination to shape steampunk so that it stopped alienating us. For all our efforts, with the rise of "multicultural steampunk" as a term and a mainstreamed approach, steampunk remains an alienating aesthetic for an outsider looking in. We participate not because we are comfortable, but because we want to make it comfortable for others like ourselves. We want to represent these alternate histories, and we are invested in these alternate histories, because we are invested in steampunk being able to reframe history so that we have a more equitable world. We want to provide the relief of being able to recognize oneself in historical narratives.

As multicultural steampunk became more of a trend, there arose a feeling that even though it was ostensibly *about* non-white people, it was not really *for* non-white people. The trend to represent non-white people in steampunk became a source of alienation as well. This discomfort brings to mind the deployment of affect theory by Sara Ahmed. Sara Ahmed connects public outcries of emotionality to projects of national identity, for example the project of Reconciliation in Australia which she argues aims to transform a source of national shame into national pride through a performance of apology to the aboriginal peoples.[51] In the more recent *Promise of Happiness*, she argues that national identity is connected to "happy objects," and the happiness of an individual depends on whether or not they can properly derive happiness from the socially-

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[51] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 103.

designated happy object.[52] Failure to be happy in the proper ways renders one an "affect alien," one who is alienated by the affects that one is expected to feel and perform.[53] As multicultural steampunk grew as a trend, I and others too have failed to be happy, have become affect aliens even though ostensibly, this trend is something we *should* want. It forces the question—what is it about multicultural steampunk, and indeed all of steampunk, that is alienating? On the opposite side of the question, what draws people to the aesthetic, despite criticisms of imperialist nostalgia? If the aesthetic was truly an empty signifier, that steampunks "make what we want of it," then what meaning was being imbued or read onto the aesthetic that made it attractive?

This was the starting point for my inquiry into steampunk's popularity. Enmeshed in the steampunk community, online and off, the average participant I spoke to were very interested in talking about how they made their costume, and the details of their steampunk persona's background, but generally fell back onto affective responses to explain why they would go to all that trouble of costuming and attending: "cool" and "interesting" were common adjectives. In a blog interview I conducted with a participant from the Native American Seaconke Wampanoag tribal nation, I asked why, despite the settler colonial narratives that abound, she was still attracted to steampunk; her response was an animated picture of a woman with laser rays shooting out her eyes, and the word "Shiny" blinking in bright red across different parts of the image.[54] Many were not even

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[52] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. London: Duke University Press, 2010. 145.

[53] Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)." *The Scholar and Feminist Online*. Issue 8.3 (Summer 2010). Para. 8.

[54] Poirier, Monique. Steampunks of Color: Monique Poirier. *Silver Goggles*. Blog post, January 2012. <http://silver-goggles.blogspot.com/2012/01/steampunk-poc-monique-poirer-seaconke.html>

aware of the original novels and were drawn to the costumes, the accoutrements, or the activities of steampunk (which were varied and not necessarily historically-based—building workshops, history lectures, absinthe-tasting sessions, tea times, and assorted performances).

To address the ecosystem of publishing, material art, performance, I turned to cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field that examines the ways and effects of "culture" through and on individuals and systems of power. My frame of reference for this project is Stuart Hall's theory on representation and symbols, and in particular his suggestion that culture can be defined as a system of "shared meanings or shared conceptual maps."[55] If steampunk comprises of multiple disparate elements that form a cohesive whole, then its elements can be examined, if not as individual concepts unto themselves, then as parts of a system of representation in which concepts and their relationships to each other are communicated through multiple kinds of media. Cultural studies pairs this analysis of representation and symbol to larger questions of the historical context and political dynamics of contemporary culture. Although steampunk is inspired by the 19th century, it remains a product of the late 20th and early 21st century—it is not science fiction written by Victorians but by contemporary 21st century inhabitants. These inhabitants are informed by what they know of the 19th century and how they think about it. Being able to trace what the historical narratives are in these 21st century imaginings enables an understanding of how steampunk appeals and alienates.

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[55] Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications, 2003. 18.

Steampunk appeal is a combination of two seemingly unrelated things: nostalgia for familiar, rudimentary technology, and desire for novelty. The choice of the 19th century aesthetic common in steampunk is mutable—it could move back to any earlier period, or forward to the early 20th century. Steampunks have also placed their aesthetic choices in the apocalypse, and outer space. This might not account for steampunk works that take place in fictional worlds. However, these fictional worlds, unlike the alien planets of science fiction, are designed to resemble our world as much as possible in look and feel, to make it familiar, albeit with a twist. The common thread is that the technology of their chosen time *looks* more rudimentary, less "advanced," and thus more easily repaired compared to technologies of the 21st century. It is made novel by its resemblance to actual 21st century technology, or 21st century expectations of technology, such as advanced robotics, or telecommunication. The guise of this technology can be faked by choosing an assortment of appropriate things to upcycle or repurpose. It harkens to a time when the craftsman could fix their own tools and machines, and thus participants try to recover the skills so that they could do the same, taking control of some aspect of their lives, to be less alienated by present-day conditions. Unfortunately, that same time also happens to be popularly associated with the 19th century, the most recent height of colonialism by the British Empire, a source and site of alienation.

Multiculturalism, Eurocentrism, and Whiteness

The strong associations between steampunk and the 19th century British Empire, also referred to as Victoriana, led to a dialog in steampunk communities to de-couple

steampunk from popular re-imaginings of 19th century England. This gave rise to the

trend of multicultural steampunk, using the term "multicultural" to refer to anything

outside the default of Victoriana. The trend to represent non-white people is not limited

to steampunk; it is also reflected in the large genre publishing industry. This trend within

steampunk is of particular interest because it is not just a response to institutional

publishing industries, but also the habits of its participants to default to a certain look and

template.

The term "multicultural," in theory and by implication, should signify the

presence of multiple narratives, agents, and cultural or ethnic groups in a text. However,

this definition is undermined when it means that anything that is not Victorian, or even

European, is considered "multicultural." Therefore, the work of James Ng, whose

Imperial Steamworks series focuses on a representation of an industrializing Qing

Dynasty China, is called "multicultural," despite the series being focused specifically on

characters in relation to the imperial family, and not really about any possible syncretism

between Han Chinese, its Manchurian rulers, and other minorities. "Multiculturalism,"

asserted Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "has become an empty signifier on to which

diverse groups project their hopes and fears."[56] When watered down, it devolves into a

pluralism in which ethnic differences are managed for commercial or ideological

purposes. The prerogative of this kind of multiculturalism, which Karin Aguilar-San Juan

called marketplace multiculturalism, is "to profit off cultural diversity."[57] As a result,

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[56] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Pg. 47.
[57] Aguilar-San Juan, Karin. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Pg. 92.

"multicultural" becomes a short-hand to signify anything non-white in steampunk, but it is sometimes also used to signify something non-European; steampunk set in the American Wild West is occasionally used as an example of multicultural steampunk. As long as it has cultural capital for being novel and/or exotic, seen as a deviating from the default of Victoriana, it can be multicultural.

Multicultural steampunk is the response to criticisms of steampunk being Eurocentric. Eurocentrism is a form of discourse that centers Europe, or "the West," as the site of linear historical progress.[58] As a mode of thought, Shohat and Stam explained, Eurocentrism situates the West as the source of democracy, while ignoring how the democracy of the West has been built on subverting non-European democratic traditions. In Eurocentric discourse, racism, colonialism, imperialism, and slavery are "contingent, accidental, exceptional," not "fundamental catalysts of the West's disproportionate power." In narrative media, particularly film, Eurocentrism is expressed through racist stereotypes and tropes that justify the colonialism of Western empires, as well as through the exclusion of minority narratives. It is then reinforced by a film distribution industry in which media exports from the West, specifically America and Europe, have a wider global reach than media exports from anywhere else.

The criticism of steampunk as being Eurocentric stems from the observation that steampunk draws on popular imaginaries of Victorian England, implicitly glorifying it as a site of adventure, scientific discovery, and aesthetic pleasure. Furthermore, in the early

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[58] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Pg. 2.

days of steampunk popularity, role-players in steampunk using "steamsonas" tended to use long titles mimicking English nobility, and it was rarely clear whether the use of the long title was meant to be a parody or sincere. This was compounded by role-players affecting British accents. Steampunk literature, especially from small presses, similarly drew from popular imaginaries of Victoriana. Discussions of the ills of Victoriana did not loom large in the popular consciousness, although they were occasionally discussed. Imperialism can be waved away by calling the steampunk universe an alternate history, hence colonialism, slavery, and all attendant problems do not *have* to exist.

Multicultural steampunk began as a counter-discourse to discuss the role that colonialism and imperialism plays in the formation of the 19th century milieu. It is taken up as a challenge for costuming, whereby the costumer or designer takes up the aesthetics of a foreign culture and combines it with the steampunk aesthetic, or in literature as a way to show that the writer is being inclusive and diverse. Multiculturalism is seen as a good thing to do, to show liberal awareness and progressiveness, to show that one is not a white supremacist because one has done their research on a different culture and is cognizant of the violence of imperialism.

Steampunk participants simply do not always think about the implicit histories connected to their costumes or the common pulp narratives they draw upon. This thoughtlessness, or lack of self-consciousness, is not callous or malicious; it is simply just not a consideration when swept up in the excitement of the whole business of doing steampunk. The desire for novelty may prompt the adoption of a steamsona that belongs to a lower class, for example a ship's cook, instead of the captain. However, occasionally,

a participant does consider the racism of the time period and tries to address it in some fashion, in their costume and steamsona. A steampunk of color might take it as an opportunity to explore their own heritage, as Ay-leen the Peacemaker does in her exploration of an alternate-history Vietnam. Steampunks might also take an opportunity to experiment with the cultural artefacts or outfits of another culture that they may or may not be part of.

In a different dissertation there would be an ethnography of these various explorations, and an examination of the occasional white savior steamsona. In this dissertation, the white savior still exists, not in the form of the roleplayer, but as the writer who wants to contribute to the multicultural steampunk trend, who may be white, but not always. There are writers who are cognizant that they need to "write diversely," and that representations of non-white characters bring novelty and fill a need in the market. They may not, however, feel invested in the need for representation and cultural competence. There are also writers who are deeply invested in representing racial minorities, using their privilege and access to do so, but then inhabit the uncomfortable space where they become experts on minority experience in writing, instead of giving space to minorities themselves to talk or write about their own experiences. Organizers of steampunk conventions may also recognize the need to acknowledge the rest of the 19th century world beyond Victorian England, and create an event or thematize the entire convention around the idea of multiculturalism. They then fail to people their programming with actual people of color, instead falling back on white participants to speak. Therefore, a project can seem multicultural on the surface, having all the

furnishings of the non-white, the Other, but still ultimately be written or produced from the standpoint of whiteness.

Whiteness is defined by Ruth Frankenburg as "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege," by which white people benefit, both on an institutional level and on an everyday level, receive better treatment, in visible and invisible ways.[59] It is also a "standpoint," from which "white people look at [themselves], at others, and at society," and which informs the way that white people speak about themselves and others. Whiteness can also refer to "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed," largely because they are considered default behaviours, so normal it is not worth remarking upon. To offer a spatial metaphor on the relationship between commodified multiculturalism and whiteness, multiculturalism comprises of spaces of managed ethnic differences, and whiteness the space in between them. To offer a steampunk metaphor on the relationship between commodified multiculturalism and whiteness, multiculturalism comprises spaces and stuff of ethnic difference, and whiteness the default imagery of steampunk applied to or in combination with the spaces and stuff, to create some fusion that is recognizably Other and still recognizably steampunk.

Eurocentrism and whiteness are mutually reinforcing mechanisms: where Eurocentrism is a larger discourse in which the superiority of Europe and its descendants is enshrined and justified, whiteness is the mechanism through which this enshrining and

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[59] Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Pg. 1.

justification occur. To speak about whiteness in steampunk is to speak about the institutional ways that white steampunks benefit from their participation and are shielded from the implications of their play. Where whiteness is the standard default position by which to orient the aesthetic priorities of steampunk, Eurocentrism is the discourse that provides the historical background for this orientation.

Pulling Stuff Together

Steampunk began as a site to explore alternate histories with the 19th century as its starting point. Fan critics such as myself and Diana Pho have tried to intervene by articulating problems of imperialism and Eurocentrism in the subculture, and by introducing concepts of multiculturalism into steampunk play. Steampunk cultural production, either from top-down industries such as publishing, or bottom-up organizations such fan conventions, still maintains a Eurocentric narrative as the default perspective. When writers and event organizers attempt to integrate multiculturalism into their projects, their perspectives are still lodged in a standpoint of whiteness. This dissertation argues that steampunk, far from embracing the project of multiculturalism in a radical, equalizing fashion, remains a site of alienation within which participants from marginalized backgrounds must push back. Most imaginings of alternate histories fail to re-write the narratives in any challenging fashion, and reinforces the same ways of looking at history and the Other, instead of offering productive alternatives.

In Chapter 1, I argue that steampunk participants, whether as artists or writers, rely on a set of popular symbols that signal the steampunk aesthetic, found in visual

media such as book cover designs and sculpted artwork, narratival media such as books and film, and performative spaces such as convention spaces. These symbols are associated with narratives that are often Eurocentric, and come together to create spectacles which build on each other to provide an escapist atmosphere to steampunk. This creates a feedback loop whereby the Eurocentric narratives feed into the spectacular use of the symbols, and steampunks, drawn to the spectacles of these narratives, recycle and reinscribe Eurocentric narratives onto these symbols through consistent reliance on them to signal the steampunkiness of a given object, whether in literature, costuming, or visual art. Steampunk participants return to these particular symbols repeatedly because the narratives associated with these symbols pacify common anxieties—meanings and feelings that are both familiar enough to function as a shorthand, and novel enough to signal a departure from the quotidian. This would account not just for the white participants in the subculture, but also for the non-white participants, who find affective value in the same iconography for similar reasons. Caught up in these spectacles, both in the consumption and the creation of them, participants fail to critically interrogate the elements and historical contexts of the narratives they draw upon to meaningfully engage with them, or subvert them.

Alongside wide circulation of these symbols is the rise of liberal discourse in steampunk. Chapter 2 argues that if commercially-viable steampunk was focused on Eurocentric forms, from the ranks of the politically-minded steampunk participants came the aforementioned anxieties of condoning empire, and from the ranks of creative-minded steampunk participants looking for new ways to take advantage of the trend came the

aforementioned complaints of boredom with Victoriana-centric forms. Steampunks

discussed the issue of introducing multiculturalism into the sphere across various

ideological positions, such as in G.D. Falksen's Tor.com article "The World Is Not

Enough, But Such A Perfect Place To Start" in 2009. This liberal discourse often

contributes to a *neo*liberal approach to multicultural steampunk—now code for

steampunk that has a non-Eurocentric form—as having just as much cultural cache and

profitability in circulation as Victoriana-centric steampunk: multicultural steampunk is

for everybody, to produce and consume, creating an environment that is reminiscent of

diversity initiatives calling for active inclusion, while contributing to expansive

capitalism. Steampunk multiculturalism, informed by whiteness, thus has three modes:

multiculturalism as an irrelevant ideological additive; multiculturalism as a site of

conquest; multiculturalism as a site of commodities.

In chapter 3, I argue that steampunk literature uses the language of multicultural

progressivism to market books that ostensibly represent perspectives and narratives that

are usually marginalized in mainstream literature. However, closer inspection of

marketing materials and the texts themselves surface Eurocentric narratives and

Orientalist stereotypes which undermine the multicultural projects of these books. I chose

three texts—two books and a convention—for their high-profile marketing that frame

themselves as products fulfilling the current trend for multicultural, that is to say, non-

white narratives in steampunk. I use *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar* by Susan and Clay

Griffith and Jay Kristoff's *Stormdancer* as texts of steampunk literary production, and the

marketing discourse deploying the promise of multicultural steampunk. This predilection

is further present in other forms of cultural production, such as convention spaces. Nova Albion, a convention in Santa Clara, CA, was themed "Wild Wild East" in 2011; convention reports and emails provide a range of reactions to the organization of the convention and its attendees that use the concept of multiculturalism as a source of novelty and difference. These attempts at non-Eurocentric steampunk are ultimately rooted in a white standpoint, made manifest in the deployment of racist tropes and white assumptions; their portrayals of racial difference thus undermine their claim to positions of multiculturalism.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I argue that steampunk that is radically multicultural would center the perspectives and narratives of people of color in a way that challenges conventional historical narratives that often overstate the importance of historical—or fictional—actors of European, or more specifically Victorian English, descent. Multicultural steampunk engages with imperialism, and the experience of having been colonized, in a way that generates an uncomfortable novelty, because it can be misread as not steampunk, or have its roots ignored in favour of its novelty, or turn an interrogative gaze onto narratives of European hegemony and refuse an easy redemption for any of its actors. Pushing beyond commercial multiculturalism that treats culture as aesthetic, steampunk that engages with a different cultural, and thus epistemological, context may also utilize a different set of physical materials from the ones usually upcycled by steampunk participants. These approaches may in fact lead to steampunk that is not multicultural at all, but so rooted in a specific cultural context that it is practically monocultural, and can only be called "multicultural" because it is, for all intents and

purposes, associated with the non-white. The result may not even be recognizable as steampunk, due to the refusal of the usual frames of reference common to mainstream steampunk. This, however, allows the aesthetic to evolve into more fruitful directions that engage with history, and the present in more interesting and politically-viable ways.

In this manner, I hope to demonstrate the material relationship between narrative and aesthetic through an analysis of these seemingly disparate aspects of steampunk: the iconography, the fan discourse, and the industry. Across these aspects, the popular manifestations of steampunk seem wedded to and reproduce particular ideas that are tied to whiteness and Eurocentrism, and undermine any radical potential steampunk has to offer its participants. While I firmly believe, as steampunk producer, participant, consumer and fan, that steampunk has been extremely productive and serves many interventionist functions in education and re-considerations of history, it is important to avoid being the insider who is invested in tailoring an ethnography of the community so that it makes a favourable impression which often happens in most interviews on steampunk's popularity, as anthropologists have noted of their informants.[60] It is important not merely to consider steampunk's potential for the creation of utopic spaces, but also what it is at present (re)producing, not just to consider what *could* be, but also what *is*.

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[60] Mwenda Ntarangwi. *Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010. 43.

Chapter 1: Spectacular Vernacular

In this chapter, I argue that steampunk participants, whether as artists, writers, creators, or consumers, rely on a set of popular symbols that signal the steampunk aesthetic. These symbols are associated with narratives that are often Eurocentric, and these narratives are circulated through spectacles created by participants and driven by consumption. The symbols thus form a language for the spectacles of steampunk works, creating stories through the ideas associated with them. These spectacles are attractive for the kinds of escapist values they promise in the landscape of popular imagination communicated through the iconography, and steampunks, drawn to the affective attractions of these spectacles, recycle and reinscribe the Eurocentric narratives onto these symbols through consistent reliance on them to signal the steampunkiness of a given object, whether in literature, costuming, or visual art. They are compelling because they contain narratives that pacify common anxieties such as displacement and lack of control. These narratives are rarely encapsulated in specific, singular texts, so I cite a variety of them—the Martin Scorcese film *Hugo*, the song "Just Glue A Gear On It," Dr. Grodbort's *Infallible Aether Oscillators*, craftbooks. I also remark on the physicality of certain items that lend to the consumer-generated spectacle. By themselves, these spectacles could be generated by other aesthetics and narratives, as evidenced by other science fiction and fantasy genres alongside which steampunk exists. The commercial aspect of steampunk requires an easily accessible combination of historical narratives that already exist in popular imagination in order for the aesthetic to be viable in a

consumerist system. The spectacular is diminished when the consumer is forced to re-think the narratives offered, and by negating the critical perspective, the frame of whiteness is entrenched.

The definition of steampunk is a contested space of contradictions. In the early 2010s, the *LiveJournal* community Steamfashion often fielded questions about what made an outfit steampunk, whether an outfit was steampunk enough, and if it was possible for something to be too steampunk. Since most people were migrating to steampunk from other subcultures because they felt restricted, it did not make sense to create and enforce a new set of rules on becoming identifiably steampunk. Nonetheless, steampunks do, however unconsciously, have a measure of steampunk: re-imaginings of the 19th century have produced a set of popular symbols that have become the standard for signaling the steampunkiness of any given item, project, or image. In no particular order, these symbols are: the gear, the raygun, the airship, goggles, corsets, prosthetics, trains, and the color brass. They are used in steampunk merchandise, advertisements, and other forms of graphic design that circulate across a variety of media.

These measurements of steampunkiness are specific for marketing purposes. Because steampunk is considered a niche market, being able to discern what would appeal to consumers of this niche enables cultural producers at any level to craft and target their products appropriately. It also enables a cohesion for gathering, despite the disparate elements at play. Diana Vicks, chair of SteamCon in Seattle, required applications from prospective vendors and advertisers, and regularly rejected any she

considered "not steampunk enough."[61] Her concerns of adhering to the theme was one of marketing (which she folded into concerns of consumer experience), and she argued that in order to differentiate from other conventions, and make it a specifically steampunk convention, she had to have firm standards. Pushing these boundaries would mean she could not justify rejecting other people's applications, diminishing the point of a themed convention. These concerns of hers clashed with some other definitions of steampunks who wanted to open the aesthetic to more experimental forms.

By themselves, most of these things identified as symbols of steampunk are without function; a gear glued onto a hat does not, as a gear glued on a hat, have a purpose. It is not the form of the gear or that it is glued onto the hat that is the main point; it serves a symbolic function, which as Daniel Miller points out, is not to be confused for being the function unto itself.[62] This iconography serves to signal the attendant assumptions and presence of an aesthetic that is a re-imagining of the 19th century as it never was: with technology accelerated to the point of the fantastic, taking on larger-than-life functions and ever more decadent decoration.

Steampunk as an aesthetic is a way to manifest fannishness, a set of behaviours that express enthusiasm, usually for a media product. Fannishness can take a variety of forms: the desire to spend time analysing said media product, or curate further information about it, or produce creative work based on it. It is often heightened through the sharing of these activities with other fans—the body of work and fans for a single

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[61] Informal conversation, recorded in Goh, Jaymee. "SteamCon III." *Silver Goggles*. Blogspot. Oct 23, 2011. <http://silver-goggles.blogspot.com/2011/10/steamcon-iii-starts-with-mugging-ends.html>
[62] Miller, Daniel. *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. 50

media product is called a fandom. "Fandoms presupport consumption," Matt Hills writes, "and are expressed through consumption,"[63] either of the media product itself, or of the fandom's own creative work.

Similarly, steampunk as a product of the 21st century reaction to mass-market production is nonetheless part of the selfsame mass-market it is trying to criticize. The Do-It-Yourself culture of steampunk gestures to a resistance against mass manufacturing, but it cannot really function without those systems in place. In steampunk however, there is no singular media product that it is tied to, merely a set of storytelling tropes, a particular look, and set of activities. It is therefore tied to the larger culture—in my analysis the white supremacist North American culture—that produces it, and its fandom accepts the unspoken messaging tied to its popular iconography in order to continue existing, as a fandom cohering around an aesthetic.

Because it is an aesthetic and not a specialized media product, steampunk has been taken up as a trend with which to produce commercial mass-market items, particularly in craft stores. These items are then used as part of individual steampunk production, for its fans to incorporate into their own fannish activities, so that they can become part of the re-imagining of the 19th century. They are used to create spectacular products, ranging from clothing and props to large-scale sculptures, through either the process of pastiche or bricolage. Pastiche involves the imitation of a style, for example the imitation of Victorian aesthetics, often to decorate a more recent piece of technology, such as a laptop or a phone case. Bricolage is a method by which artists appropriate an

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[63] Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 159.

item or artefact from its original purpose, such as the use of pipes to build a raygun, or the use of brass cups to create a car headlight. As a trend, steampunk graphic design relies on a set of images that invoke the 19th century in popular imagination: as Jules David Prown said of material culture, "when style is shared by clusters of objects in a time and place, it is akin to a cultural daydream expressing unspoken beliefs."[64] Analysing the iconography of steampunk allows us to see how, taken together, the elements come together to create a particular cultural imaginary and tells the audience, however unconsciously, what kinds of imaginaries they should picture in response.

Steampunk iconography takes place within what Stuart Hall calls a "system of representation."[65] Representation is the way we describe, or symbolize a concept or item. These concepts or items can be material or abstract, things we can feel or see, or even just imagine. Systems of representation are a way of "organizing, clustering, arranging, or classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them."[66] Each common symbol used to signal the steampunk aesthetic can, on their own, signify a concept, or several concepts that call to mind a set of narratives that we have to associate with steampunk. These symbols, however, take place in a shared understanding of what they mean, however vague the encoded meaning.

Steampunk iconography is laden with social and narratival cues that provide a Eurocentric frame in commerce-friendly novelties. These narratival cues frame fantasies

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[64] Prown, Jules David. "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*. Ed. Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000. 14.
[65] Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications, 2003. Pg. 16.
[66] Ibid. 17.

that involve a certain perspective of history, particular activities or performances, and non-quotidian atmospheres. The aesthetic choices that steampunks make in the creation of their works, whether driven by visuals or narratives, are influenced by individual knowledge of and perspective on history, whether dependent on a sense of historical accuracy and authenticity, or a desire to appropriate the seeming of the historical without context. These choices are then circulated in steampunk activities of creation and consumption—in convention spaces, roleplaying games, themed events, or literary production. The circulation of these aesthetic choice lead to a shared imaginary space that enable individuals to participate in an atmosphere that is different from daily lived reality in some fashion. As a result, steampunks create spectacles that are full of novelty, but are nonetheless familiar enough to be comfortable.

I use the term "spectacle" to refer to the cultural productions in steampunk that contain any number of narratives, temporal cues, and stimuli. I derive this concept from Guy Debord's theory on the society of the spectacle in which he argues that "the spectacle is both the outcome and goal of the dominant mode of production."[67] The spectacle, writes Debord, manifests as "news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of the entertainment" and upholds the status quo of the dominant ideological system. Steampunks are not just passive consumers of the entertainments in the subculture; they are also active participants in these spectacles. What is passive about their consumption is not in what they do physically or even in terms of creative control,

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[67] Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 13.

but in how they fail to interrogate the historical narratives behind the tropes that they recycle and reuse in an attempt to transform and make novel. Therefore, steampunks cannot be said to be primarily passive consumers of the society of the spectacle, but instead active reproducers of the society of the spectacle.

These spectacles can be organized into three different themes: the Adventure, Mad Science, and the Promenade. Each theme has its own set of narratives associated that are nonetheless intertwined with the other themes in terms of narrative logic and fannish activity. These underlying narratives can be teased apart by analyzing the iconography that crops up often in steampunk.

Adventure

According to sociologist Georg Simmel, an adventure is an event that "occurs outside the continuity of life."[68] In most subcultural or fan communities, various activities that members participate in take on the two conditions that define an adventure: that the activity has a beginning and an end outside the continuity of quotidian life, and that despite being outside this continuity, it nevertheless connects to "character and identity of the bearer of that life."[69] In steampunk, participants go on adventures by wearing clothing or costumes and participating in events outside of quotidian life that are meaningful to how they conceive of themselves—as creatives, as characters, or as players. As a larger theme, the Adventure is a spectacle that is filled with the novelty of the different, yet

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[68] Simmel, George. "Adventure, 1911." *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Ed. Donald Levine. The Heritage of Sociology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971. 188.
[69] Ibid. 190.

recognizable. Therefore, 19th century aesthetics and 21st century technologies are combined in a pastiche that challenge and tease the viewer into identifying the sources of the elements, inviting admiration for the cohesiveness of the disparate elements into a whole.

The Adventure is a product of the culture industry that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer describes in relation to mass media. Just as they place the culture industry in relation to the dominating project of the Age of Enlightenment, Adventure is a byproduct of "the civilizing inheritance of the entrepreneurial and frontier democracy,"[70] manifested through narratives of exploration and discovery through its cultural production. Within the last few years leading to the current steampunk trend, Adventure as expressed in steampunk materialism is both a coping mechanism against the learned helplessness of capitalist consumerism and a new mutation of the Enlightenment project.

This Enlightenment project I refer to is the system of logic that "provided the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world."[71] "The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy."[72] By reducing everything into calculable quantities, "Man" can know, thus categorize, and finally manage, his environment. When he has disenchanted and rendered the world manageable, Man will achieve sovereignty, and he will be free from fear. If he comes across something dissimilar or unknown, he merely has to rely on the universal principles that have been

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[70] Adorno, Theodor & Max Horkheimer. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972. 150.
[71] Ibid., pg 7.
[72] Ibid., pg 3.

established, and thus he reduces it to something manageable, or proves it an illusion and thus not worth fearing. The Enlightenment project seeks to know everything, since "the mere outsideness is the very source of fear."[73] The end result is a self-referential system of thought that demands conformity to the established universal principles which informs capitalism, imperialism and industrialization. The demand for conformity occupies its subjects in such a way that it becomes itself a source of the fear it meant to stamp out, and lies at the heart of oppression.

This desire to stamp out the unknown is a long-established part of science fiction. In tracing the 19th century roots of steampunk, Jess Nevins remarks that "the image of the lone inventor as a heroic protagonist [...] gained a surprisingly large amount of its power, within science fiction and without, from the Edisonade," a genre of boys' adventures which "portrays white boys using advanced technology to kill non-white men and loot their treasure."[74] Despite, or perhaps because of, outsideness as a source of fear, "the closing of the American frontier" meant that adventures had to turn to lesser-known spaces: "the hidden cities of Lost Races [...] and more overtly of environments such as fictional lands and other planets."[75] This continues into the 1900's, characterized by an anxiety of dealing with difference too closely, and yet also "haunted by the fear that there might soon be no uncharted territories left."[76] Not consciously driven by the fear of the unknown, "the heyday of science fiction—the mid-20th century—was fueled by near-

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[73] Adorno, Theodor & Max Horkheimer. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972. 16.
[74] Nevins, Jess. "The 19th Century Roots of Steampunk." *Steampunk*. Eds. Jeff & Ann Vandermeer. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008. 9.
[75] Ibid., pg 6.
[76] Carrott, James H. & Brian David Johnson. *Vintage Tomorrows*. California: O'Reilly Media Inc, 2010. 9.

universal excitement about the promise of science."[77] This excitement about the promise of science is the manifestation of the Enlightenment project to apprehend the unknown. This promise, recreated in 20th century science fiction, manifests in the spectacle of the Adventure.

In steampunk, however, the object of excitement, the Adventure, is decidedly not about the unknown frontiers, but about the imagined unknown: the history that never was. "Having no place on Earth for the radical exoticism of unexplored territory, the writers invent places elsewhere," John Rieder observes of science fiction as a literary genre.[78] Steampunk re-invents explored territory through the use of alternate history for the sense of the exotic or the novel, and in doing creates a space in which writers and artists hone new skills and create new avenues of expression. The world has been disenchanted and known, so now knowledge is bent towards the creation of fancy, turning the Adorno and Horkheimer schema around—the substitute of fancy for knowledge, since things are so knowable (and all the knowable things are depressing or overwhelming to know). Yet the underlying drive for Adventure, to seek and stamp the unknown, still informs this fancy. On an Adventure, one can go on expeditions, travel, and remove oneself from that which is already known. Exploration is expansionist by nature: if not of territory, than of a body of knowledge. Discovery is linked to exploration, but can refer to a more stationary pursuit, an uncovering of something previously unknown. This eventually leads to conquest, the move to control that which

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[77] Segal, Stephen. "Five Thoughts on the Popularity of Steampunk." Fantasy Magazine. Sept 2008.
[78] Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 4.

has been uncovered, and apprehend it. In steampunk, the world becomes one "of endless potential, where anyone could invent a flying machine, discover a country, or overthrow an empire," declared a manifesto on corsets, because "adventure knows no gender, and possibility knows no bounds."[79] The invention of the flying machine, the discovery of a country, the overthrowing of an empire evoke physical sensations: the shudder of a thrill in the invention or discovery, wind against ears in flight, the fist clenched in righteousness. These are not quotidian sensations, but escapist ones, the insertion of the self into the history that never was, spectacular distractions from the everyday.

This project of Enlightenment, however mutated, is necessarily tied to an understanding of the world as categorizable and manageable, and to manage something, one must know it, or at least of it. The desire to know the unknown dispels anxieties that are created by the unknown, or at least, that which cannot be apprehended and controlled. By participating in an adventure, the steampunk indulges in an affect in which anxieties are conquered through imagined exploration and discovery. The helplessness is replaced by a sense of the potential, that there is something bigger and better and one can be part of it—be part of the adventure beyond. Moreover, since it stems from fancy, it has the promise of apprehension.

The culture industry that Adorno and Horkheimer observed runs on technology owned by the powerful[80] and is designed to push out products that require "quickness, powers of observation, and experience" to apprehend, "yet sustained thought is out of the

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[79] Casey, Katherine. "A Corset Manifesto." Steampunk Magazine, The First Years #1-7, 2013. 33
[80] Adorno, Theodor & Max Horkheimer. *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Herder & Herder, 1972. 121.

question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts."[81] The industry of

cultural production requires similar quickness of observation. For example, a costume

might require a quick eye to note all the details on a costume, and enough experience to

appreciate where the materials making the costume might come from—bits and bobs like

nuts and bolts might be sewn on alongside large beads; props may be made out of

fiberglass or old pipes, spraypainted to resemble, perhaps, a giant harpoon. However,

once the observer has managed to pin down the basics of the participant's persona, and

perhaps some information on the making of the costume, there is usually little further

questioning on the context of the persona, or the reasoning behind the costume[82]; there

are just so many costumes to see at once, that there is often no time to have a sustained

conversation about any singular costume. Steampunk as a result becomes a subculture

based on the consumption of spectacle, relying on knowledge of common tropes churned

out in as many permutations as possible.

This takes on a new intensity in the 21st century, in which institutional

entertainment industries continue to push out new entertainments while user-generated

social media generates its own sets of discourses. Tracking down specific information is

murky and difficult. Portraits and candid pictures from conventions are distributed widely

across various websites, often without credit or context. Certain images may get wider

distribution, but there is often no information on the cosplayer portrayed, or even the

costume, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions as to the provenance and make

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[81] Adorno & Horkheimer, 127
[82] The reasoning is usually not much more than "I thought it was cool and interesting." "Hilarious," if we're lucky.

of the image. Information is thus dispersed in short bursts, with little communication between the various pockets of steampunk groups. Each website is set up as its own site of expertise, recycling information. The only common thread between them is the excitement about the aesthetic. The emphasis in social media discourse is on consumption and production instead of ideology.[83]

Gears and sprockets are ubiquitous as a mainstay of the steampunk aesthetic, applied as superficial decoration. The gear, as a circle with teeth on the outside, appears on book covers, jewelry, accessories, and clothing. As an accessory, it is usually glued into the closest approximation of what it might look like in a clock, layers of gears arranged artistically with feathers and wires like a flower arrangement. As inner parts of watches and clocks, they are "tokens of time travel"—what Susan Barber and Matt Hale call "temporal play" in steampunk—and importantly for steampunk's culture industry, "the more meaty bits of the watch works, with their built-in holes, are useful as links or in other applications."[84] They are relatively easy to access or make, with the teeth offering an interesting technical challenge. The time travel signaled is also the source of escapism, the start of an Adventure into the history that never was.

The prevalence of gears being glued on anything as the bare minimum to signify that a particular item has been "steampunk'd" has given rise to jokes about how to make anything steampunk, and the indignation that one can't "just glue a gear on it and call it steampunk," as the song goes. In "Just Glue A Gear On It," the vocalist, Sir Regiland

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[83] *Steampunk Magazine*, with its focus on anti-establishment views, is the exception rather than the rule
[84] Campbell, Jean. *Steampunk Style Jewelry*. Minneapolis: Creative Publishing International, Inc., 2009. 13

Pikedevant, Esq., sings, "Gears are appropriate to introduce / If they look like they have a legitimate use." Makers are wont to sneer on newcomers to the scene who believe that gluing gears on into an arrangement that is otherwise non-functional is a legitimate way of doing steampunk. When I pitched a panel on steampunk and social critique to a convention programmer, he said, "yes, please do, because I already have"—and here he sighed dramatically—"three people offering me workshops on how to hotglue gears onto a hat." However, despite criticisms, the gear is a multi-valenced symbol that speaks to the atomization of the individual, and apprehension of time. These are the driving forces of the spectacle of Adventure.

In the film *Hugo*, the orphan protagonist Hugo Cabret has been recruited by his uncle into winding the clocks of the train station. The uncle disappears, so Hugo keeps his existence secret from the train station inspector, who will haul him off to the orphanage if he is discovered. He spends his free time working on a project his father left behind, the repair of an automaton recovered from a museum. He steals things from all over the train station until he is caught by the owner of a toy store, who later on turns out to be the film special effects innovator Georges Méliès.

In a scene with Isabelle, the goddaughter of Méliès, Hugo explains why he loves clocks and machines like it: "I'd imagine the whole world was one big machine. Machines never come with any extra parts, you know. They always come with the exact amount they need. So I figured, if the entire world was one big machine, I couldn't be an extra part. I had to be here for some reason. And that means you have to be here for some reason, too." The gear here is an expression of the atomization of the individual separate

from community, and society. In comforting Isabelle for not knowing her purpose in life, Hugo comforts himself, the orphan who has lost a father and must live on the edges of society in order to continue his father's work.

When Hugo is caught, the station inspector tells him, "You'll learn a thing or two [in the orphanage]. I certainly did. How to follow orders, how to keep to yourself. How to survive without a family, because you don't need one! You don't need a family!" Hugo resists this statement's implications, and not as an exemplar of rebellious youth culture; his world philosophy, on which he survives psychologically, rests on the idea that he needs a larger mechanism where he belongs. A clockwork piece without a clock is meaningless. Similarly, the steampunk gear, as a spare part, is given purpose when hot-glued onto an accessory. Even if it is technically non-functional, the gear already has a function: that of aesthetic decoration. It is now part of a larger project, and has thus fulfilled a purpose, even if it is not the purpose one might expect of a gear. As an extended metaphor for life purposes, this offers a sense of comfort that perhaps one's life is serving a purpose, just one that strays from expectation and original purpose. The repair of the automaton, and the scavenger hunt for pieces to fit it, give Hugo a reason to remain out of the inspector's clutches so he can fulfill his father's legacy. Like a gear looking for a project to be a part of, Hugo evades the trash heap, and finds a place, transplanted into Georges Méliès' family at the story's denouement when the filmmaker finally accepts his legacy and place in history.

At the background of this story, and others like it, hums a narrative of displacement, and the management of individuals into larger systems of displacement.

Displacement is universalized in Hugo Cabret, a white boy: made an orphan, placed under threat of being processed into an undesirable institution, and given a mystery which he uncovers with his natural talent and hard work—Hugo's narrative arc is one of the threat of oppression without the identitarian complications of race or gender. Rendered persona non grata by ill fate, Hugo only has to bide his time before he is restored to a middle-class family life, much like the gear awaiting its purpose. A similar sentiment is found in steampunk, expressed by Miriam Bailin on neo-Victorians: "In our disposable culture, the ability to transform the discarded objects of another century into the 'found' treasures of our own may offer some reassurance that here, at least, in the perdurable world of things, all is not lost."[85]

If the gear expresses the atomization of the individual, then the mechanism within which most people associate with the gear—clockwork—is a process of this atomization. Historian Michael Freeman observed that the rise of the train as a major mode of transport also increased the importance of punctuality, made manifest in the "widespread diffusion of the pocket watch, especially among urban dwellers."[86] The pocket watch is always a fashionable steampunk accessory (if not always useful for its continual need to be wound), less for its timekeeping and more for its evocation of the 19th century's industrial age. To hold and check a pocket watch is the equivalent of checking one's phone, creating the air of having somewhere to go, and being important enough to be needed somewhere else. Because the average person in the 21st century does not use a

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[85] Bailin, Miriam. "The New Victorians." *Functions of Victorian Culture at the Present Time*. Ed. Christine L. Krueger. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. 46.
[86] Freeman, Michael. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 83

pocket watch, the physical presence of the pocket watch is unfamiliar enough to feel a little outside of quotidian action. The pocket watch also has historical narratives attached to it, among them train-catching, travel, or the suspense of being on time. When an observer sees it as part of a costume, they immediately recall, or call up, those narratives and thus understand the significance of the pocket watch and how it fits into the story the costume is trying to tell.

The pocket watch is also a symptom of the project of Enlightenment, signaling the breaking down of time into smaller intervals, hours and minutes assigned and categorized into timetables. The calculability of time was just as important as punctuality,[87] a new dimension in the conquest and management of the world. It is thus especially tied to Victoriana, to Europe and North America, for this reason. Few timekeeping mechanisms in previous industrial revolutions have led to such wide-scale awareness of time and time management as a sign of progress and efficiency. This selfsame progress would go on to be imposed on the rest of the world through the processes of colonialist exploration and expansionist capitalism. These processes are abetted by two major modes of transportation that are also popular in steampunk imaginaries: the airship and the train. The romanticization of airships and trains expresses the enchantment with discovery and exploration in steampunk, sparking the mutation of the Enlightenment project.

The train in particular encapsulates much of what steampunk attempts to invoke; it runs on steam, emblematic of the 19th century in Britain, and is a powerful technology

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[87] Freeman, Michael. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 84

that transformed the experience of space and time for an entire generation. As a convenient shorthand for the 19th century, the train as a narrative device offers a convenient setting for all sorts of dangerous action, a McGuffin to explain the passage of time, and a liminal space so one doesn't have to go mucking about with buildings and roads. Its evocation comes with its own set of ambient sounds and images that are outside the everyday experience of the 21st century—even though the train still exists as a mode of transportation, the 21st century train in a metropolitan city does not make the same sounds as a 19th century steam-driven train, nor carry the same danger that comes with the exposed technology of the steam train.

The train also represents a generational shift in experiencing the world, and expectations of how much ground one might cover in a lifetime: "Whereas the older generations had often never stirred from their native villages in a lifetime, the new became rapidly accustomed to a vast extension of their spatial horizons."[88] The 21st century, too, sees an expansion of horizons brought about by the ever increasing pace of technological change. Trains created a new sense of space and time that is driven by Victorian capitalism, and this effect is mirrored in the 21st century inhabitant whose sense of space and time is now shaped by global capitalism. There are now more possibilities for movement, and ever more avenues to consume and produce knowledge. However, this particular valence is better expressed through the other popular mode of transport, the airship.

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[88] Freeman, Michael. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 36

Airships are common as a mode of transportation or even backdrop item to set the narrative in the 19th century. Visually, they are easily adaptable; for its Steampunk Months, Tor.com's logo, nicknamed Stubby the Rocket, becomes an airship.[89] The airship's popularity capitalizes on the sense of marvel it evokes, because of its ability to fly. Unlike the airplane of today, the airship of the 19th century is romantic for "their seemingly effortless progress among the cloud, and their stately arrivals and departures, matched the gentility of the environment they provided for those on board,"[90] while 21st century airplane travel is a chore; 19th century airship travel is an Adventure by comparison, if only because of the relative freedom, comfort, and excitement of the airship.

Figure 1 Stubby the Rocket, Tor.com Logo
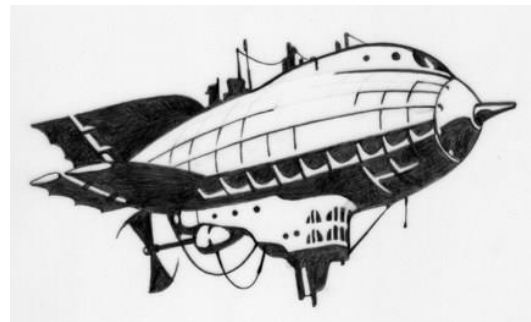
Figure 2 HMS Stubbington, Steampunk Tor.com Logo

Airships are perhaps better expressions of breaking boundaries and exploration that airplanes do not capture. Airplanes need orchestrations of airports and runways;

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[89] Gallo, Irene. "How Stubby, the Tor.com rocket, became the H.M.S. Stubbington." *Tor.com*. Oct 2009. Last accessed July 2015. <http://www.tor.com/2009/10/01/how-stubby-the-torcom-rocket-became-the-hms-stubbington/>

[90] Miller, Cynthia J. "Airships East, Zeppelins West: Steampunk's Fantastic Frontiers." *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Eds. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013. 155

airships, on the other hand, would only require "an airship terminal [comprising of] grass, maintained by flocks of sheep."[91] Current airplane travel is associated with the stresses of security checks, cramped seating, and bad food; the airship predates all those flaws of air travel, with depictions of its happy passengers wandering its decks much like one might a luxury cruiseship. The anxiety of security theater, not present in romantic narratives of the airship, are a reminder of the global politics within which it takes place—these are absent in mentions of airship travel. There are no stories of counter-terrorist security measures in airship stories, favouring a different set of flight-related problems that are exciting in a universalist way while masking the complications of 21st century globalization that affect only specific groups.

The airship crew as re-imagined by steampunk is more than its pilots and several servers with a ground crew. If the airplane was associated with individualism and adventuring in its early days, championed by Charles Lindburgh and other American investors,[92] then the internal, human workings of the airship is the rejoinder: it is several people with various roles. Some of these roles are specialized; other roles are not, so that when one person is off-shift, another may take their place. This is the other side of the clockwork universe metaphor: where Hugo Cabret sees himself as a small gear whose role in the larger workings of the world are not yet apprehended, the individuals of the airship crew recognize each other's roles and work in tandem, while understanding that

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[91] Dougherty, Carolyn. "On Progress: On Airships." *Steampunk Magazine, The First Years #1-7*, 2013. 253.
[92] Ibid.

these roles are fluid and can be learned or taken on by another crew member at any time, given inclination.

On the performance side of steampunk, airship crews are often local, regional groups, a way for steampunks to arrange their meetings and get-togethers and other events. They range from performance groups who lend their expertise and skill as a group to conventions and events, to organizations that provide venues and events for locals to participate. Airship Isabella in Texas sends members to represent and perform as emcees at Austin and surrounding area events. Airship Archon of Columbus hold "Build Days" as a way for the locals to get together, bring their projects, and crowd-source the skills and knowledge of other people to finish the work together. While these airship crews do not necessarily have a hierarchy like on a real airship, it provides enough of one for duties and responsibilities to be parceled out. As an added bonus, in an airship crew, one already has people to meet and go to conventions together, without the awkwardness of meeting strangers to connect with, harking back to Hugo Cabret's comment about not being a spare part. The airship crew is a site where atomized individuals come together to feel part of a whole, contributing and developing their own skills in tandem with others. It offers the promise of acceptance on the basis of skill, and a high ideal of meritocracy over prejudice. Because the airship crew is also usually a hobby, not paid work, it is labor volunteered for the satisfaction in working communally to build a spectacle.

Airship crews are often assembled through pre-existing friendship networks, and expanded through an online presence. They attract like-minded people who are keen to work in a cooperative space, whether from a desire to share their skill or to develop it.

The airship crew becomes a platform from which to create one's profile, either as a public figure or a steamsona, and possibly launch off into careers of event management, or even just to network and build a set of contacts that may be professionally useful. Attachment to an airship crew is more memorable than presentations as an individual who has not yet built a reputation. The imagined space of the airship provides a site of negotiation and networking separate from the usual institutions of work and education. It is similar to the fan convention, which is similarly leisure-based, but operates on a much smaller, manageable scale, while still being an activity which is outside quotidian spaces.

This would lead to the replication of Adventure's narratives, because the airship crew shares the same vision in order for the performance to work. Unless the group performing together shares a mandate for a particular narrative that pushes back against popular imagination, the accepted Eurocentric narratives that inform steampunk remain in place. The activities of steampunk airship crews encourage individuals to create and participate in a spectacle which they have created for themselves and an audience. These activities are incited by the desire for Adventure, to push back against helpless capitalist consumerism, and seek a more positive affect. This is expressed through the activities spurred on by the spectacle of Mad Science.

Mad Science

The mad scientist, and mad science generally, is the mutation of the Enlightenment project that re-visits the wonder and civilizing project of the world. Mad Science, thus, is the spectacle expressing accomplishment, overcoming challenges in the

mastery of a skill, or a scientific puzzle, especially in applied science. It is someone who shouts "science!" with their fists raised high, having finally figured out how to solve a particularly tricky problem to. If in the 21st century the worker is alienated from the final product of their labor, steampunk brings the satisfaction of skilled manual labor back to the maker, and endorses the open expression of this satisfaction.

The Mad Scientist, in popular culture, is the villain who has been driven mad with power. His control over the scientific method is not matched by any moral compass, making him dangerous to the status quo. He (and the Mad Scientist is often a he) often has a lair in which he stores large equipment that are often incomprehensibly complicated. He concocts plans for world domination which the hero(es) must thwart. He may or may not have loyal minions who do his bidding (and presumably the smaller chores of cooking and cleaning that he cannot do for himself), a superweapon or two to unleash on an unsuspecting world, and a tragic backstory that explains his intentions. He is often depicted with wild hair (from being electrocuted several times) and a grotesque grin or cackle. Whatever the provenance of the mad scientist, he is a figure of authority and power outside of institutional avenues, with seemingly unlimited resources to carry out his plans.

The Mad Scientist is a spectacle of a sense of power without needing to make ethical consideration, feelings of being able to take over the world, and a fearlessness of the complex technology he is surrounded by, because he has the capability to control it all. Through his scientific prowess, he conquers and controls his surroundings, his minions, and his world, or at least he attempts to. The spectacles of Mad Science are a

sequel to the spectacles of Adventure: where the Adventure expresses the desire to escape

the quotidian, to participate in a larger venture, Mad Science manifests the illusion that

one has the capacity to do so, to change the environs surrounding one, for good or for ill.

Beyond that, the spectacle of Mad Science proposes that one *should* do so, because one

can. This can apply to any kind of venture, or project, so long as the steampunk has

developed the appropriate skills.

To begin examining the figure of the mad scientist, in the Western tradition, we

can look to the Renaissance period, specifically the Baconian ideals of new philosophy

that broke away from the natural philosophy of the Greeks. There, the beginnings of the

psychological paradox forecasts the mad scientist: "On one hand, the seekers must be

cold, impersonal, testing each theory mercilessly. On the other, they must be filled with

ardor, on fire to imagine radically new insights into the depths. [...] This paradox

threatens to unravel the seekers' selves and to paralyze their desires."[93] Later on, in the

long eighteenth century, the sciences would be established among the ranks of conjurers

and physicians, as well as amateur scientists called the virtuoso class. Barbara Benedict

argues that in the wake of the Restoration, this virtuoso class of scientists failed to

establish themselves as good for the society, as the ideals of objectivity clashed with the

desire to claim superiority of knowledge. Continuing with the ideals of Bacon to maintain

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[93] Pesic, Peter. "The bell and the buzzer: on the meaning of science." Daedalus, Vol. 132, No. 4 (Fall 2003). 37.

an impersonal approach, "the virtuosi's posture of disinterestedness seem deluded, [and] also suggested that they were indifferent to the plight of their fellow men."[94]

The mad scientist figure in pulp fiction goes back to more recent American history. Glen Scott Allen identifies two figures, tied to two different kinds of sciences: the Evil Wizard, associated with theoretical sciences which could not be made immediately relevant to the general public, and the Master Mechanic, whose applied sciences could be used by independent amateurs to develop inventions that were easily monetized.[95] Thus, intellectual, abstract work is looked down upon as it does not contribute to a larger community, or rather, larger capitalist ventures, and encourages self-imposed alienation. The Evil Wizard in the title refers to the aristocratic archetype whose work cannot be commercialized; the Master Mechanic is the innovative inventor, a rugged individual whose work is practical and enables others to conquer nature, harking back to Adventure.

Back to the present, one sees, at steampunk conventions, multiple workshops run by presenters affecting scientist-sounding names, without actually being scientists. Sometimes these steamsonas are for play only, and sometimes, they are artist brands, such as Professor Jake von Slatt (whose name is not Jake von Slatt, nor is he a professor). If, as Barbara Benedict says, that one reason for the depiction of scientists as being prone to insanity is "the illegibility, construed as secrecy surrounding science,"[96] then, the

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[94] Benedict, Barbara M. "The Mad Scientist: The Creation of a Literary Stereotype." Imagining the Sciences: Expressions of New Knowledge in the "Long" Eighteenth Century. Eds. Robert C. Leitz III & Kevin L. Cope. New York: AMS Press, 2004. pg. 71.
[95] Allen, Glen Scott. "Master Mechanics & Evil Wizards: Science and the American Imagination from Frankenstein to Sputnik." The Massachusetts Review, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter 1992). Pg. 532.
[96] Benedict, 104.

performance of the mad scientist figure recuperates science for the layperson, through roleplay and the Do-It-Yourself Maker movement and plays out in the steampunk marketplace of ideas and consumable goods. The steampunk mad scientist in this field attempts to share scientific knowledge with the masses, even if the knowledge is not immediately relevant, and artistic objects that don't serve any function abound. They try to bring back the image of the amateur scientist in their own workshops. They romanticize the conquering of the illegibility of science while creating avenues of accomplishment through the application of hands-on skills that may well serve to inspire further searches for understanding.

This romanticization harks back to the 'march of intellect' that the Victorians espoused, which is connected to a sense of achievement, capacity, and power.[97] That sense of achievement is also a hallmark of the Victorians, with the main goal of the Enlightenment project that seeks to manage the world. It is a driving force behind colonialism, which "provides the impetus behind cognitive revolutions in the biological and human sciences that reshaped European notions of its own history and society."[98] These notions of history and society center the superiority of the colonizer group, because it is the group that is actively seeking to conquer the world through its sciences, and succeeding in its goal. They then provide justification for the continued conquest of the world—the colonizing project *should* go on, because it *can*, and demonstrates the

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[97] Freeman, Michael. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 66.

[98] Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 4.

superiority of the colonizer, whose burden is then to share this capacity with the rest of the world, in the sense of Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden."

Mad Science and Adventure are brought together in two prevailing kinds of props: goggles and rayguns. Goggles, or other elaborate kinds of eyewear, express the scientific curiousity that is the heritage of the Enlightenment project. They come in different forms, although the round-lensed welding ones are the most common. Some steampunks buy aviator goggles, and others buy, in place of goggles but serving the same decorative function, jewelers' glasses. Jewelers' glasses are sometimes mini-spectacles unto themselves, complicated contraptions which have not merely the main lenses, but several other additional ones, attached to the main frame, often of different magnifying orders.

Goggles give the air of someone who examines things extremely closely and thus requires different grades of magnification. It is thus associated with crafters, although they can also signal some investigative narrative. Goggles abound in steampunk media: the titular character of the webcomic *Girl Genius* is often depicted wearing goggles, a leading character in Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series is introduced as wearing "glassicals," an adaptation of spectacles with jewelers' lenses, and most steampunk accessories involve goggles of some sort. Some people attach jewelers' lenses or other additive markings like a telescoping or targeting grid onto their goggles, depending on an imagined function. Goggles are also used by airship crews in performance, as a useful shorthand to signal that one is in an environment which requires eye protection, whether from an exploding engine, the wind, or strong sunshine. They are also a form of

consumption: whether materially as steampunks buy the eyewear themselves or buy materials to make them, or visually as they become a part of a costume, hinting at the narrative the costume is trying to communicate.

The spectacle of Adventure is compounded with the goggles, as the sensibility of discovery is spurred on by a desire for knowledge and the surety that this knowledge can be had. This indoor adventurer, the Mad Scientist who is making something, will need goggles, either for magnification or for eye-protection from highly-explosive chemicals or engines. If the acquired goggles can be used in and out of doors, so much the better. And one requires goggles to safely deal with the ramifications of the other Mad Scientist's prop, the raygun.

Rayguns are a popular prop to display the ingenuity of steampunk prop-builders. The raygun is often a non-functional prop carried around because it is ornate and impressive. Also, it is one of the easier props to carry around, because it can be slung over a shoulder or kept in a holster without much fear of damage. Rayguns are made in various ways. A popular, and fairly cheap, method is to get a common Nerf gun and spraypaint it the appropriate colors of brass and copper, with a coating of black paint, wiped off, to give it the look of having been used. Sometimes they are made of various different things, like pipes and cups, welded together to look like a gun. They are occasionally large things, perhaps three or four feet long, in order to give the viewer a sense of awe.

A steampunk marketplace can thrive on rayguns. Rayguns can be made by individuals as part of an overall outfit, or they are made by artists who then sell them in

order to make a living. It can be cheaper to simply buy a modified piece, because then the customer does not have to buy all the necessary tools to build the thing. The cost of spraypaint, soldering machine, and other additional tools can build up, which is not what someone might want to invest in when they might only want just a single raygun, and not build a collection of them. They can accrue obnoxious names to play up the pulp action trope, the most famous example being Greg Broadmore's fantasy weapons, a collection called *Doctor Grordbort's Infallible Aether Oscillators,* popular for the visual spectacle they create.

Rayguns have unpleasant connotations despite the self-reflexive play involved. Raygun play involves over-the-top dramatization of conflict, whether military or otherwise. This conflict presupposes an enemy that must be defeated or subjugated—a literalization of the Enlightenment project that seeks to eliminate fear through mastery of the world. The narrative cues embedded in the raygun necessarily involves an Other that must be conquered, and the power which the raygun presumably deploys would result in a show of force that is meant to intimidate, a shock-and-terror strategy. Even a satirical take on the raygun would gesture to the self-reflexivity of the prop itself, but not necessarily challenge the status quo of who finds it necessary to wield it in the first place, or why.

The Infallible Aether Oscillators by Greg Broadmore and the WETA Workshop are an example of satire that forefronts this history of projectile weapons. The 4th Law is an example of the spectacularity of the raygun: its stock appears to be a combination of the stocks of both a rifle and a shotgun, and its barrel has several canisters and spark

cartridges. The marketing copy for The 4th Law, a "Matter Mangler and Disentangler Beam," runs as follows:

> *"Do you live in constant fear of alien probing from the rearwardly vector? Does the thought of imminent robotic usurpation and replacement plague your every waking thought? Do cultures and ways of life other than your own fill you with insular dread and insecurity?*
>
> *If you've answered 'yes' or even 'no' to any of these questions, then Dr. Grordbort has the answer to your problems: The 4th Law.*
>
> *By simply pointing The 4th Law in the direction of your inescapable paranoia and depressing the trigger, the source conveniently vanishes in a pleasingly violent fireball."*

Tongue-in-cheek, the marketing copy indexes several anxieties of its hypermasculine customer: fear of homosexual penetration ("probing from the rearwardly vector"); fear of irrelevance ("robot usurpation"); fear of the Other. It highlights the "insular dread and insecurity" and its solution is violence towards the source of the "inescapable paranoia." It makes fun of the symptoms of the insecurity, without pinpointing the source of the paranoia. By refusing to pinpoint the source, the 4th Law copy can elide the various bigotries encapsulated in the advertisement, and offer a product that is aesthetically pleasing and useful for steampunk play. It can ruefully gesture to the self-awareness surrounding the need for a toy gun, without confronting it at all.
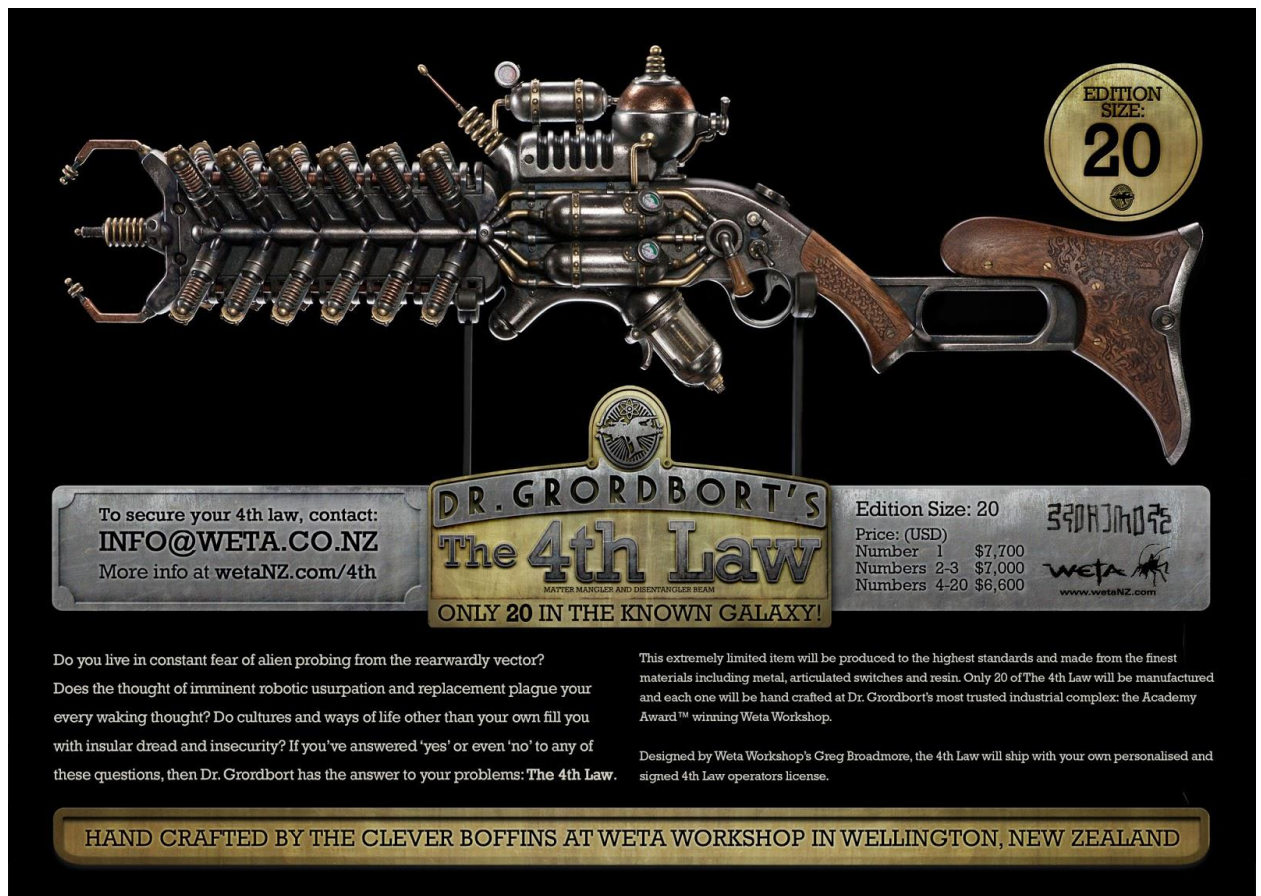
Figure 3 Doctor Grordbort's 4th Law by Greg Broadmore from WETA Workshop

The commercial success of the raygun thus relies on this obligatory embarrassment at these anxieties; once performed, one can say that one has done the duty of acknowledging how problematic it is. This is what Sara Ahmed calls a 'politics of emotion,' that the performance of an emotion, the declaration of a bad feeling, demonstrates the good intentions of the individual who is performing it.[99] Having done so, the individual may carry on doing whatever they have been doing, comforted in the

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[99] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

perception that they are recognized as good people, wielding and admiring a very large gun while at it.

This performance is designed to overcome the all the bad connotations associated with the raygun—that even as the reflexive play is about conquest, mastery, and intimidation, this performance should not be taken seriously, because the performer has declared that it is not serious. As the speech act of this declaration has been made, the spectacle of the raygun should not create anxiety in the audience, especially when taken into the spaces designed to show them off, and indeed show off the fruits of Adventure and Mad Science, through the spectacle of the Promenade.

Promenade

The word "promenade" describes both a place and an act, where one walks or rides in public, for the purpose of being in public. It is unlike the nature hike, in which one walks to appreciate nature or for physical exercise. It is unlike a jog or an errand in which one navigates a public space for a specific purpose. To promenade is to be in the public space to *see* and *be seen*. In the steampunk space, one promenades to participate. One wants to observe the spectacle: *that costume is cool; this costume is very historically accurate; such-and-such costume seems very technically difficult to make; I never knew one could do that with mailing tubes and a nailgun*. One's costume is one's contribution to the spectacle: *I have taken effort to blend in; I have made an interesting thing; I have learned how to work leather; these rivets were bought cheap from this supplier whose contact information I shall be happy to share...* The space of the Promenade indulges the

desire for self-display, the happiness of sharing the results of one's work, the wonder of seeing others, and the pride of being seen.

I use the term "Promenade" to refer to the physical spaces of steampunk costume play: the single-night events such as the Edwardian Ball, steampunk conventions, and other steampunk-themed events where attendees are given license to dress up as outlandishly as they please. These are sites where artists display, demonstrate, and advertise their works, and those selfsame works may take up large amounts of physical space, whether as a giant robot sculpture, or wandering Dalek drones. It is arguably the most alluring spectacle of steampunk, because it allows one to be self-centered and vain, but rightly so for participating in the public space in such a spectacular fashion, and this vanity is compounded by generosity of sharing knowledge and enjoyment in *other* people's vanity. It is also one of the end points of the culmination of the culture industry, and ostensibly the most involved part of the steampunk spectacle.

Promenade is made manifest through costuming and roleplaying that that may take on aspects of Adventure and/or Mad Science. Upon viewing a costume, an observer has to guess at the narrative it is trying to tell through the deployment of its core elements and smaller details, assuming there is time in the midst of the entire spectacle. In the steampunk convention space, visually stimulating costumes are walking conversation pieces that are designed for display, and provide opportunities to exchange discourse. They provoke encounters, and the convention space is designed for such encounters. While not specific to steampunk conventions—indeed, any media convention that has cultivated a cosplay culture has a similar dynamic, designed to give fans of a particular

media a chance to identify each other, display their skills, and develop acquaintanceship based on such—the affect in which one purposes displays oneself is at most obvious work when there is no canon to refer back to except mechanical virtuosity. "Due to the large population of well-dressed people at steampunk events," steampunk fan writer G.D. Falksen observed, "it is common to have fashion or costume contests where attendees model their outfits. Winners are generally afforded some sort of prize in addition to the much-coveted bragging rights."[100] Because one is judged based on the technical skill needed to make the costume, or the creativity in creating the most novel use of materials, these shows give an impression of meritocracy, eliding questions of access and leisure. These bragging rights are the psychological rewards of Promenade, borne from the efforts that Adventure and Mad Science spur on.

One does not need to participate in a fashion show to reap the benefits of Promenade, however. When one is wandering on one's lonesome, taking in the sights and sounds of a convention, one is also placing oneself on display, becoming part of the selfsame sights and sounds, to see and be seen. One is, in effect, promenading as an active participant of the spectacle, rather than as a distant observer who consumes the spectacle. One is there to be part of the crowd, but also to create chances that one might be the person chosen for a chance conversation. One is there wearing clothing that enables one to blend in, but also wearing items and outfits that signal the individuality of oneself, because chances are, no one else is wearing the exact same combination of

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[100] quoted in Vandermeer, Jeff, and Selena Chambers. *The Steampunk Bible*. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. 169

clothing, with the exact same combination of accessories. (And when one sees someone else wearing something similar, that is an opportunity for conversation, even if only to crow about great minds thinking alike.) Compliments abound, exchanged with enthusiasm in the immediate space (while negativity is saved for the remoteness of the Internet). All one has to do to participate in this way is to take a walk.

Talking a walk is a longstanding leisure activity: one must have time, a place to do so, and no urges to hide away. It is encouraged by the space available: hallways down which one might encounter friends; eateries with comfortable seating; wide pavilions with lots of natural light; interesting other things with which to pose. The space of the promenade must fulfill the individual desire for attention while remaining part of the scenery. It is enabled by steampunk costumes where someone is bound to be dressed in something strangely outlandish—a giant robot, a mechanical arm—that makes for a great photograph. The spaces of Promenade are escapist spaces made physical. Promenading is especially indulged at this peak of the Internet era, where it is easy to take pictures for posterity and share them with wide audiences on services such as Instagram and Facebook. Not only is one on display in the convention space, now one has also been selected, or has self-selected, for display to a wider audience to showcase their participation in an environment that is made for display.

The impulse to promenade is not limited to the convention space or special occasions, especially for the "steampunk casual" faction. With a critical eye towards sustainable fashion, *Steampunk Magazine* co-founder Libby Bulloff argues that "if [steampunk] has become a fashion trend, it hasn't yet entirely metamorphosed into a

functional, sustainable style."[101] This conspicuous consumerism is a source of criticism whereby steampunk will not be ruined by the mainstream, but by its own participants who treat steampunk fashion as costume, to be taken off and worn only during special occasions, and as something to conform to: "It's the folks within the subculture who misguidedly view only heavily embellished outfits with their goggles, functionless gears, and sepia and brown as the one true look of steampunk."[102] Bulloff criticizes the seeming indulgence in class division through the creation of costumes used only for specific events instead of everyday wear, as well as nostalgia for performed elitism manifest in the affected British accents and uncritical delight in imitating a colonial upper-class. Her argument is for a steampunk style that is versatile and everyday—part of the daily functioning of life, not only part of the convention space or the steampunk ball. However, the convention space remains the primary space for wearing steampunk clothing out in public, because the steampunk costume is the site upon which escapist affects are imbued.

During the Promenade, the body is disciplined for the fantasy: having already been placed into its frame (its costume), the body is then placed out to physically move itself and negotiate and perhaps even compete for space and attention within the spectacle. Promenading, then, also opens a site of vulnerability—to physical accidents, to criticism, and other such negative encounters. The person wearing the complicated costume opens themselves to risk of damaging their costume, their work destroyed. The

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[101] Bulloff, Libby. "The Future of Steampunk Fashion in Two Parts." *Steampunk Magazine, The First Years #1-7*, n.d. 388.
[102] Ibid.

person walking with large props is at risk of harming another. The promenade demands of its participants to be aware of their surroundings so that they can share the space, if not equally, then with equanimity. And promenading invites recognition, as well as mis-recognition. However, these conditions are what make the Promenade special, and mark it as outside quotidian experience. Because these conditions are also heavily marketed with Victorian imagery, they reinforce the Eurocentric narratives, further associating the Promenade with the Victorian.

The space of Promenade creates a tension whereby fashion and self-expression is ostensibly democratized, through the individual tastes expressed in customized costumes, while at the same time building a pressure to blend into the surrounding aesthetic. We might ask, who feels entitled to promenade? Who feels more entitled to the taking up of space—through costume or otherwise—during the promenade? Clues are provided in the narratives associated with the steampunk iconography arranged in any given costume, any given space of Promenade. Aside from the symbols already explored in this chapter, two things that are common in the space of Promenade, both in performance and in narrative, are the corset and the prosthetic.

Given the popularity of the corset, it is almost quintessential steampunk wear. Despite women wearing corsets under clothing during the 19th century, corsets today are somehow associated with the 19th century despite being worn on the outside. Corsets in steampunk do not, in fact, come from direct inspiration that draws on the 19th century; the steampunk corset can be traced back more recently to Vivienne Westwood's popularization of the corset in the 1980s, associated with dominance in fetish

pornography.[103] That the association with the 19th century is so strong speaks to the dominant narrative of steampunk inspiration being necessarily Victorian.

The corset communicates a sense of displaying of the body, especially when it is multicolored among a sea of other similarly colorful corsets. It accentuates the body with its shape on top of other clothes. Wearing the corset in an environment outside the steampunk environment is inviting judgement on one's sense of the appropriate, since it is so sexualized outside of steampunk. Yet, in steampunk, because so many other people are wearing it, it loses its sexual power, becoming instead a decorative piece, its aesthetic function pushed to the forefront. A corset does not necessarily have to be uncomfortable, but it often feels different from quotidian clothing. One cannot slouch while wearing a corset, and the snugness of the corset makes one more aware of the body encased in it. This loss of its quotidian association within the steampunk space signals the departure into the escapist Adventure or Mad Scientist experiment: in a madcap fantasy one can wear a corset to the skies or in the lab, no matter how ill-advised it is according to laws of reality and practicality, simply because it *looks* good, and therefore *feels* good.

The corset, of course, is not limited to women—men can also wear the corset, although this is less common. The "male" version is the vest. Like the corset, the vest serves to streamline the body into an aesthetically pleasing form. The vest, usually pulled taut around the chest and waist, just like a corset would, signals self-assurance, and self-containment (just like the corset does for the woman), compared to the sloppy jeans and t-shirt of the (presumably) non-steampunk environment. Paired with a jacket, overcoat, or

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[103] Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 166.

other outer wear that usually hangs off the shoulder, the vest offers an alternative image of masculinity that indulges proudly in Promenade. The steampunk gentleman often appears in the spaces of Promenade with a perfectly-cut jacket, closely-fitting vest, matching trousers, and often intricately-primped facial hair. He has put in the effort, and the satisfaction of the Promenade is his reward. This is especially so when accompanied by any other props he has built himself that signal a narrative, like a prosthetic.

Because of this focus on the female gaze, the steampunk corset is associated with liberation and the purposeful re-writing of the historical limitations on women. "We shall lace our corsets only as tightly as we want to," declares "A Corset Manifesto.[104] Even in the 19th century, "the garment's ubiquity might indicate that it provided women with a culturally sanctioned eroticism in an era of competing sexual discourses that denote female sexuality as either negligible or demonic."[105] Corset historian Valerie Steele agrees: "as sexual attitudes and behaviour have become dramatically freer, the visible corset has become a socially acceptable form of erotic display."[106] Wearing the corset is a safe kind of sexuality in steampunk, especially when it is worn with voluminous skirts and high-collared blouses that are associated with the modesty of the Victorians.

What champions of the corset, and Victorian garb, often fail to take into account are the identitarian associations of the costume. The history of the corset involves its presence in the colonies, a reminder of its wearer's origins in a foreign environment—so, too, does the corset signal a particular history, in time and geographic space. Here, the

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[104] Casey, Katherine. "A Corset Manifesto." *Steampunk Magazine, The First Years #1-7*, 2013. 133.
[105] Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. New York: Berg, 2001. 6.
[106] Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 170.

Eurocentrism of the Enlightenment project comes to the fore: "Tightly laced corsetry [...] disciplined and contained the 'Western' body and acted as a symbol of civilization and order, as opposed to the chaos and disorder of the 'primitive' naked or semi-naked bodies of the 'unconverted.'"[107] The corset, ostensibly worn by anybody, of any social class, is such a mainstay of the spectacle of the Promenade—it looks good, thus it feels good—that the cultural hegemony of its historical roots and association is side-stepped.

The rigidity of the corset (and the vest) surrounding the body can be likened to the frame of a machine, made of inorganic material that is moulded to specifications, containing the inner workings in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Occasionally corsets are made with fabrics featuring prints of gears, which hearken back to the idea of the gear, making the inner workings of a machine visible—the fabric with gear prints attaches this metaphor to the body, which is not so far from how we think of the body in the first place: as a machine, that can be adapted (according to DIY principles) or repaired into a properly working order. This metaphor is connected to the prosthetic.

The steampunk prosthetic is, aside from the gear, the most visible of all motifs in steampunk cosplay. Upon entering a convention area, the most common prop after a weapon of some kind is the prosthetic, or a form of mechanical limb. Prosthetics take many forms: legs and arms encased in faux-brass trappings, rivets at the joints, single-eye goggles that are over-built (and possibly non-functional). Canes are common accouterments used by people who may not actually need them, and are thus carried for aesthetic value.

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[107] Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. New York: Berg, 2001. 19.

This motif leads to "crip drag" in steampunk: non-disabled people wearing prosthetics as a performance of having some sort of disability. Steampunk participants will incorporate some sort of excuse for having a cyborg arm into their persona, but often the prosthetic arm is worn because it *looks* cool. No one pretends to be actually disabled and wheelchair users are a common sight at steampunk events, kit out with modifications. Disability can be considered normalized within steampunk, as the idea of the body as machine that can be repaired and fixed is taken for granted, but this kind of visibility does not necessarily take into account lived experiences.

In popular culture, the prosthetic tends to be featured as an enhancement that augments the power of its wearer. Kathryn Crowther notes that in films like *Wild Wild West* and *Steamboy*, the prosthetic is a "dangerous superpower," in which the prosthetic lends greater power to its wearer, and thus has greater possibility for evil use. In literature, the prosthetic provokes questions regarding "the relationship between the body and technological replacement,"[108] treating the body as a machine in which body parts can be replaced at will. As crip drag draws more on popular visual culture than on literary inspiration, the narratives often involve the human body being enhanced by prosthetics so that it can go beyond the limits of expectations. When I wrote the first essay on steampunk and disability, I titled it "With this steampunk prosthetic arm I could be as strong as... a normal person,"[109] because it often does not occur to most non-disabled

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[108] Crowther, Kathryn. "From Steam Arms to Brass Goggles." *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, & Futures*. Eds. Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 78.

[109] Goh, Jaymee. "With this Steam-Powered Prosthetic Arm, I Could Be As Strong as… A Normal Person." *Tor.com: Steampunk Month*. Oct 28, 2009. Last accessed June 20, 2017.

people that a prosthetic does not have to grant superhuman strength, but simply enable a person to do what they might not have been able to do to keep up with the 'average' body. Steampunk inclinations towards the theatrical often translates into an inclination towards the extreme, in order to get the more dramatic reactions. The prosthetic thus can even be kit out with weaponry of its own, pushing the imagined capabilities of the body, evoking Mad Science. The steampunk prosthetic, therefore, is not about the lived experience of disability, but about the skill of its wearer, meant for display. It provides an illusion of power and ability suited to the persona being played.

Makers are often very proud of their creations, and prosthetics often are an excuse to stop a person and start a conversation. Makers share their knowledge on how it works, how they built it, what materials they used, and how they achieve specific effects. Prosthetics as conversation pieces are a chance to share knowledge. The materials range from cardboard, wood, acrylic, molded plastic, and aluminum (or other lighter metals), often given coatings of spraypaint. They are also often infused with electronics of some sort, LEDs lighting up for further visual interest. The disabled person (or as the case may be, the able-bodied person wearing the prosthetic) is not only visible, but also most likely to be the among the most visually interesting people of the room (which can be a hard feat, in an environment saturated with visual interest, in which case the disabled person has assimilated into the room and is no longer the focus of gawkers). The dialogue about the display is not likely to be about disability, which makes invisible the lived

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<http://www.tor.com/2009/10/28/with-this-steam-powered-prosthetic-arm-i-could-be-as-strong-as-a-normal-person/>

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experiences of the participant who is actually disabled. Instead, the dialogue becomes a universalized promise of ability and achievement, that the person who puts their mind to making the prosthetic can do it as long as they try hard enough. This promise transcends all questions of limitations as Makers discuss the various ways they achieve the effects they want as cheaply as possible. It undermines the potential of normalizing disability, and the potential to ask questions of how the world can be made more accessible.

Such visible prosthetics are a class marker in that they are more likely to be made when one has the financial capital available to invest in the required materials and tools for building them. The more sophisticated the prosthetic's mechanisms, the more likely that the maker has accumulated a lot of material, because one would require materials to practice on, and rare is the artist who is able to build something functionally impressive upon the first go. This builds social capital among the Makers, especially when the building process is documented publicly on social media. The process of creating the prosthetic and the sharing of the process becomes a source of a sense of productivity. Ignored from the equation are the accumulated price of materials, and the source of aesthetic inspiration. The prosthetic becomes a source of good feeling, and the spectacle of it, whether as a worn item or as stand-alone art piece, is a source of novelty, and being able to wear it out gives the wearer a sense of belonging to the space.

The prosthetic, like other steampunk props, is a bricolage, a cohesive piece made of a variety of things that happened to be available for use at the moment. Makers use materials gleaned from places they can access, like craft stores, or hardware shops. For a more authentically old-looking piece, they may sift through thrift stores and antique

stores for items to be converted into something else, something new that looks old, being made of old items. The design of the prosthetic is already determined by what is available in these stores, and is already circumscribed by the artifacts found in such stores to be (re-)used. As historian Amy Sue Bix points out, the aesthetic of Victorian design was "quite chaotic, borrowing and mixing elements" from a variety of time periods, and steampunk today is limited by "generalizations of shadowy colors, dark woods, and metallic tones,"[110] because this is what steampunk participants have come to expect of the Victorian. Transforming an item from its original shape or function into its place within the prosthetic, the Maker [insists] on the changeability of identity and purpose, a reflection on the recuperation of the body, the self, wresting it from a predetermined fate.

The human body as machine in turn takes on a fluidity of meaning: the machine is metaphor for the body, and it can be built, repaired, taken apart and made anew—the body is metaphor for the machine, and it is organically grown, it suits the user, it enables the user to move through the world. Combining all this steampunk iconography together, steampunk costuming functions as a method of disciplining the body according to what we perceive to be conventional, standard, or perhaps more acceptable, ways of being. Visually, it signals a similarly conventional, standard, and more acceptable, sense of history which centers particular narratives of liberation. This then feeds into the shared imaginary space that steampunks share, which ultimately becomes a Eurocentric space that purports to be universal due to the combined narratives that the iconography signals.

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[110] Bix, Amy Sue. "Steve Jobs versus the Victorians: Steampunk, Design, and the History of Technology in Society." In *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013. 240.

Because of the reliance on consumption of this iconography, and the tendency towards being impressed by spectacle in steampunk spaces, there is very little discourse that either highlights or challenges these affects. Rather than argue that there is no space for a critical discourse, it is more accurate to say that there is little provocation for such within the performance spaces of the subculture. A lack of provocation does not mean an absence of it, which the next chapter will discuss.

Chapter 2: Talking the Talk—Or Not—of Steampunk

Multiculturalism

Alongside the rise of steampunk as a new aesthetic trend between 2009 and 2012, came critics who wrote about steampunk in order to steer its direction. Steampunk critics, who often identified as liberal, and occupied a range of positions on multiculturalism in steampunk. For some, multiculturalism in steampunk is an additive that can either dilute recognition of the steampunk aesthetic, or is ultimately unnecessary. For others, multiculturalism in steampunk is a necessary discussion and evolution for the steampunk subculture. This chapter argues that liberal discourse in steampunk fandom spaces contributed to a neoliberal approach to multicultural steampunk—now code for steampunk that has a non-Eurocentric form—as having just as much cultural cache and profitability in circulation as Victoriana-centric steampunk: multicultural steampunk is for everybody, to produce and consume, creating an environment that is reminiscent of some diversity initiatives calling for active inclusion, while contributing to expansive capitalism.

Steampunk is described as an aesthetic that can be applied across different media. Common elements cited are: neo-Victorianism, or the modern reclamation of Victorian aesthetics; retrofuturism, a form of futurism imagined through older lenses[111]; and fantastic technology, which may take the form of exaggerated machinery or the appearance of the scientific method on improbable subjects. Participants take up the

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[111] More specifically, what people now think people in history would have thought of the future, which might be the now but might also be further into the future.

aesthetics of the past, particularly the Victorian, to decorate technology of the now

through costuming and the modification of objects. In doing so, they ideally provoke

questions of how history might have unfolded had a technological analogue been

developed in the past, which often gets taken up in literature. Often, the result is an

entertaining spending spree in thrift stores, antique shops, and home hardware

departments to make costumes that approximate Victorian fashion using a color palette of

sepia tones into a modern look, and props, with a similar color palette, of dubious

technological natures with equally dubious names to signal an imagined function.

Commercially, fashion lines produce clothing that vaguely take on the Victorian aesthetic

and may include ornate patterns, also in sepia tones, to signal that a given item is

"steampunk." There is huge entertainment value in speculating the effects of injecting

modern sensibilities and present-day knowledge systems into the past to consider how

history might have unfolded otherwise. There is similarly great entertainment value in

pulling together clothing items and modifying random daily objects such as pipes and

cups into props that approximate an adventurer's outfit from pulp fiction with a brass

patina. For those with no skill in making or modifying their own, there is always the

spectacle of watching others, in Youtube tutorials, or reality shows like *Steampunk'd*

which pitted contestants against each other to be named best steampunk designer.

In their analysis of steampunk skits at a convention, anthropologists Suzanne

Barber and Matt Hale argue that steampunks thread multiple temporalities into one stage.

Their analysis of skits applies to many other kinds of steampunk cultural production,

whether performative, literary, visual, or a combination of all three. These productions,

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regardless of medium, require the audience to understand multiple ways of reading the

historical and fictional. "Steampunks," wrote Barber and Hale, "reshape and refine

elements of prior temporalities into refurbished forms" through "upcycling," the practice

of using old materials that might otherwise have been thrown away.[112] Barber and Hale

assert that steampunks "revise and selectively re-create the past [to] confront the complex

issues that were part and parcel of the historical time frame from which they construct

their alternate worlds."[113] This temporal play, however, relies on shared and collective

understanding of history, which is oftentimes shallow and Eurocentric, just enough for

everyone to get the joke, but not necessarily to interrogate the larger context. In an

example they provide, steampunk perform a skit in which Vikings successfully colonize

the Americas in the 1000s and celebrate Thanksgiving in 1900 by historicizing their first

contact with "a beautiful Native American princess," who they immediately kill and steal

food from ("being brutally awesome Vikings").[114] The threads that this example pulls

together are twists on popularly-known narratives of history, designed to entertain as a

joke for the moment: stereotypes of violent Vikings; Native Americans, in particular a

"beautiful Native princess" welcoming the settlers with gifts of food; the genocide of

indigenous peoples and theft of their resources and land. The context within which the

skit is performed is not conducive to provoking further questions on the specific context

of how or why it would be amusing, nor on the implications of the amusement.

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[112] Barber, Suzanne, and Matt Hale. "Enabing the Never-Was: Upcycling the Past, Present, and Future in Steampunk." In *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013. 167.
[113] Ibid. 177.
[114] Ibid. 171.

Steampunk iconography, because all that is associated with it, is not the only manifestation of Eurocentrism within the subculture or cultural production of steampunk. While outsiders to the communities may cite the overwhelming Eurocentrism of steampunk events as a point of criticism, the points where whiteness is most prevalent position is in the discourse itself. It is discourse between members of the community that reveals the narratival standpoint of the steampunk participant's cultural production; it is this discourse, these conversations had between participants, that reveals the structural inequities and racist priorities of steampunk. It is also in discourse where whiteness and Eurocentrism remain unremarked upon, except as a point of embarrassment and self-castigation, if remarked upon at all.

Steampunk defaults white, a position of race privilege in which one's racial identity is never called into question as being an aberrant to the social landscape, and fits neatly into popular historical narratives that tend to center the West, particularly Europeans of a particular skin color and their descendants in a Eurocentric mode of thought—its whiteness is noticeable from a distance with its callbacks to the British Empire, the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, and an America during or after the Civil War, all expressed in its iconography. It is easy to make the argument that non-white people would find nothing attractive in steampunk due to the constant reference to racist imperial histories, and thus would have no reason to participate in steampunk. This discounts the idea that people of color might actually want to also dress up, and build things, and participate in events, despite its overwhelming whiteness, because whiteness is as default and as unremarkable for many people of color as it is for white people.

The popularity of the term "multicultural steampunk" can be traced back to the earlier work by Diana Pho, Jeni Hellum, and myself. In an early essay I wrote, "The Intersection of Race and Steampunk," I argued that steampunk, being a nascent genre/subculture at the time, had the opportunity to not repeat the mistakes of other fashion subcultures in adhering only to whitewashed visions of the aesthetic, but instead push forward to re-imagine racial parity among the participants. I exhorted an awareness of the colonialism put forward by uncritical idealization of history, and encouraged people of color take the reins of steampunk and insert themselves into the alternate histories being created.[115] A multicultural steampunk, Pho and I asserted, would do what is done to Victorian history in steampunk: take up the aesthetics of a past point in time, think through the implications and importance of events in history, re-tell history in a different way that accelerates the technology of the time and play out what might have been had a more recent understanding of technology been had in that previous point in time.[116] In practice, however, multiculturalism is treated like an aesthetic, added on or off to signify the exotic and the foreign.

Multiculturalism is, according to Ruth Frankenberg, "ostensibly a product of race cognizance."[117] It is supposed to be an acknowledgement of cultural difference; this difference is not necessarily racial, but has become synonymous as such.[118] Because it is

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[115] Goh, Jaymee. "The Intersection of Race and Steampunk: Colonialism's After-Effects and Other Stories from a Steampunk of Color's Perspective." *Racialicious.com*. June 2009.

[116] Pho, Diana & Jaymee Goh. "Steam Around the World: Steampunk Beyond Victoriana." Powerpoint slide presentation. 2010 – 2012.

[117] Frankenberg, Ruth. White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 15.

[118] The new buzzword corollary is "diversity" which also encompasses queerness and disability, but steampunk remains as old-fashioned in its nomenclature as it does its clothing

only a matter of recognition, it is open to different interpretations and values of recognition, with varying effects.[119] When coopted into established institutions, multiculturalism becomes a managed form of difference that is exploited for its novelty. Multiculturalism thus becomes a form of segregating groups into "neatly fenced-off areas of expertise,"[120] separate from the mainstream default spaces. These default spaces are often Eurocentric, for all that they are unnoticed and unremarked upon. Anything that deviates is thus considered multicultural, as opposed to the more radical form of multiculturalism proposed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in which multiculturalism offers "a profound restructuring and reconceptualizing of the power relations between cultural communities"[121] by recognizing "the existential realities of pain, anger, and resentment" between groups that "have not historically coexisted in relations of equality and mutual respect."[122]

This form of commodified multiculturalism is driven by neoliberalism, a theory of political and economic practices that rely on the idea that individual freedoms are best guaranteed through "strong property rights, free markets, and free trade."[123] While often spoken of in terms of macro-scale politics that affect whole communities, it is modified from liberalism, a philosophy emphasizing individual rights and freedom. In neoliberalism, this philosophy is amplified through state institutions working in tandem with capitalist frameworks. In his history of neoliberalism, David Harvey writes that

[119] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 47.
[120] Ibid. 6.
[121] Ibid. 47
[122] Ibid. 358.
[123] Harvey, David. A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 2.

neoliberal ideas have circulated through "corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society," disengaging the accumulation of capital from the constraints of a regulatory state.[124] This free market logic thus permeates discourse between individuals who may or may not be expressing their own desires for liberty and equality. As Chandra Mohanty observes, "political agency itself is redefined as an act of consumption."[125] In the case of steampunk, acts of consumption are ascribed political agency, as giving and contributing to a larger collective radical politics. This in turn renders theories addressing inequality, such as multiculturalism, into "an inert theory of identity that emphasizes difference over commonality, coalition, and contestation."[126] Watered down further in social media discourse, the radical potential of multicultural steampunk is subject to commodification and risks being folded into marketplace logic, which, favoring capital, favors the dominant racial group.

Steampunk, like other fandoms, generates a lot of informal discourse, which takes place across multiple platforms of social media. On these platforms, participants and wannabe participants ask questions and discuss definitions of steampunk, potential activities that could be part of steampunk events, projects through which they adapt the aesthetic for their own use, and much more. From short questions with long response threads to long-form essays, this discourse is often ephemeral and quickly subsumed with the sheer amount of new content generated—a phenomenon not specific to steampunk, but characteristic of user-generated content on the Internet. Because of this, the most

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[124] Harvey, David. A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 40.
[125] Mohanty, Chanda Talpade. "Transnational Feminist Rossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 38, no. 4 (Summer 2013). 972.
[126] Ibid. 974.

long-lasting of steampunk's discourse takes the form of essays; once archived, they are usually more easily searchable and accessed. They are also often more collectively memorable.

Online, essays are common points of conversation with which to begin conversation and debate. They are often written by someone who has an established platform with a ready audience, but are occasionally written on platforms as free content to attract audiences. Bloggers in general build reputations through the publications of such essays on their own platforms; their ready audience spreads the essay's presence through their own networks, and through this, the blogger's presence is built. Done enough times, the blogger's reputation becomes entrenched as a familiar name in popular discourse in the blogger's self-identified community, built from the audience's participation. In theory these essays enable the cohesion of a community around an issue. In practice, perhaps, these essays enable the establishment of groups around a particular ideological position on a certain issue, which may or may not lead to a fracturing of the community.

The essays taken up in this chapter were first published in the 2009-2012 period, the tail end after a surge of popularity in steampunk cultural activity. Cultural historian James Carrott identified a spike of activity in a cultural heat map he and futurist Brian Johnson charted between 1987, when the term 'steampunk' was coined, and 2011, the last year of their data.[127] Steampunk being a disparate community, political positions

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[127] Carrott, James, and Brian David Johnson. *Vintage Tomorrows: A Historian and a Futurist Journey Through Steampunk into the Future of Technology*. Farnham: O'Reilly, 2013. 9.

were and still are as varied as the larger culture from which steampunks come: two of the largest online communities, *Steamfashion* and *Brass Goggles*, disallowed discussions of politics; the *Gatehouse Gazette* zine's founder famously declared an apolitical position in an essay titled "Get Your Punk Out Of My Steampunk"; *Steampunk Magazine* was founded by anarchists. Essayists are often participants of steampunk who provide the subculture with a critical eye from within. In theory, they provide a site of critical intervention and spark conversations to be taken up in other parts of the subculture. In practice, they demonstrate the complexity of practicing one's politics in steampunk.

Since then, several essays have taken up the discussion of what racialized steampunk would look like, to varying degrees. I look at six in particular: "Victorientalism" by Nick Ottens of the *Gatehouse Gazette* makes an argument for the romanticization and exoticization of a mythical Orient in steampunk, to re-create the escapism of the Orient for the European explorer. "Why Steampunk (Still) Matters," originally published on James Schafer and Kate Franklin's website *Parliament and Wake*, argues for the relevance of steampunk as a politicized form of escapism to re-think history and technology. From *Tor.com*, a science fiction and fantasy website associated with publishing company MacMillan, I selected two essays that discuss reasons for integrating multiculturalism into steampunk. Finally, the blog *Multiculturalism for Steampunk* by Jeni Hellum and the presentation "Steam Around the World" that I and my colleague Diana Pho gave (and still give) at steampunk conventions across North America offer methods for integrating multiculturalism into steampunk. *Multiculturalism for Steampunk* was started in September 2010, and took its cue from G.D. Falksen's

Tor.com essay and his following posts to the Steamfashion LiveJournal community. "Steam Around the World" follows the heels of the conversation called RaceFail, which raised questions of race, racism, and representation of minorities in the science fiction genre. Lacking a language to discuss culture and social justice in meaningfully inclusive ways, we often fell into the habit of discussing culture in relation to cultural artefacts, even as we tried to educate our audience on racism and cultural appropriation.

In these essays, multiculturalism is either an ideological red herring to whatever aims they think steampunk moves towards; or, the Other is a site of conquest for the essayist and audience to inject a new novelty into the aesthetic; or, "culture" comprises of commodity items that can be taken on and off at will. This well-meaning discourse, informed by neoliberal ideas of absolute freedom expressed through market logic, subsumes multiculturalism into a mode of expansive capitalism, continuing the practices of white creators profiting off non-white cultures.

Multiculturalism as Additive

In this section, I link two essays that have seemingly disparate political aspirations and demonstrate how they resemble each other. The *Gatehouse Gazette* essay, "Victorientalism," is buffeted by its romanticism, while the *Parliament and Wake* essay, "Why Steampunk (Still) Matters," seeks an escapist solution, to get away. This desire, to looking beyond, to seek something more exciting and distracting, is in line with Adorno and Horkheimer's argument of the Enlightenment project that manages expectations through the culture industry. Both essays look to some horizon, atomized from reality.

Because it is not informed by the reality of race relations, neither position truly offers anything radically different from what has already been offered: the fan of Victorientalism, or the Victorientalist, can only re-constitute the same racist fantasies it draws inspiration from; the wannabe radical is heedless of what the marginalized can bring to a conversation on possible solutions to present-day troubles in its search for change.

Ignorance, willful and unintentional, is common in fan discourse on the subject of racism and racial representation in popular media. An example lies within the comments awaiting moderation in the back end of my blog by an anonymous commentator on a post I made about racist imagery in a steampunk role-playing game: "I don't understand why is this even important? Why is this important? Why do we care about political correctness?" Several more comments of a similar vein pepper the moderation queue. Together, they make clear that many steampunk participants and fans do not think issues of race and racism matter—this is not limited to steampunk. They are also among the more obvious expressions of willful whiteness.

Less obvious is the discourse in which issues of race and racism are distractions and dismissed as identity politics not intrinsic to steampunk's core. Even in essays which are socio-political critiques, race and racism are barely discussed, because they are not a priority. In her essay "Feminist Killjoys," Sara Ahmed discusses the act of killing joy at the dinner table by creating tension in the act of pointing out something problematic.[128]

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[128] Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Killjoy (and Other Willful Subjects)." *The S&F Online. Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert* Special Issue. 8, no. 3 (n.d.). Last accessed Jul 10, 2017. < http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm>

This is the source of alienation. However, the steampunk anti-racist is usually not even at the same table. We are at the same convention hotel, taking up different rooms. We discuss things amongst ourselves in these rooms; our audience discusses what we say in the hallways, in the courtyard, in the bar. This is also how we hear of what other people have said. And some people's words are repeated more often than others'. It is hard to trace who said what, when, and where for most part.

The Gatehouse Gazette was one such venue which generated and circulated ideas and knowledge. It had a modest readership, and was one of the earliest steampunk webzines, publishing articles about the 19th century, steampunk, and dieselpunk. The editor-in-chief, Nick Ottens, was based in the Netherlands and besides running the zine, also ran an accompanying forum; both are now defunct, and the *Gatehouse* now runs as a themed single-author blog. It was also one of the earliest venues to articulate a steampunk set outside British Victoriana, an aesthetic called "Victorientalism"[129] that sought to "recreate the Orient as it was described and depicted by nineteenth century authors and artists who might never have actually seen it. In steampunk all the myths and miracles of the East that enchanted the Victorians can come true."[130] What Ottens proposed, in other words, was that the racist imaginations of the "mysterious Orient," of Asia, could be re-created in the steampunk imagination, free from the realities that further exploration and the globalization of knowledge brought.

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[129] It is unclear whether Ottens lifted this term from Erin O'Connor's "Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Studies" in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Winter 2003); this neologism could have sprung up on its own separate from this issue.
[130] Ottens' article came out in February 2009, predating my Racialicious essay, "The Intersection of Race and Steampunk," by four months.

In an early essay, Ottens describes the romanticism of the Orient to the 19th century Westerner, which "must indeed have seemed a paradise from the paintings and novels that reached him" and "never quite lost its charm entirely." Orientalism, in Ottens' frame, expressed the disappointment of the French at losing the colonial race: "Between West Africa and Indochina, France possessed no colonies. Rather the Near East reminded the Frenchman of defeat and humiliation with Napoleon's disastrous adventure in Egypt still fresh in memory." It is in the Orientalist imagination, more interested in "fantasies and fables than the Orient itself," that steampunk would find inspiration, separate from the "presumed bias and even racism" of the historical Orientalist tradition.

This position is one of anti-conquest, which Mary Louise Pratt describes is a strategy in colonial travel writing to represent oneself as innocent and neutral.[131] In the anti-conquest work, the travel writer presents himself as merely passing through, observing the sights and sounds of the foreign space and recording his experiences for posterity. By focusing on his individual experience, he elides the power dynamics of the contact zone between visitor and native, colonizer and colonized. Anti-conquest is about the individual intention of the writer, his own interactions and interiority in the face of the Other. It is a useful strategy to avoid talking about the hegemony that enables the European travel writer to traverse the charming East. In the larger political context, the position of anti-conquest is still conquest, ostensibly de-fanged, expressed as a form of admiration.

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[131] Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 7.

This essay is not a piece of travel writing, but an example of how anti-conquest has evolved and continues to be present in the imagination. By suggesting that the Orient can be "safely recreated," Ottens attempts to detach the material consequences of empire from the Orientalist imagination that is presented as more preoccupied with the business of art than it is in the business of colonization. This assumption that art is separate from reality informs much of genre publishing, which has led to the current zeitgeist of RaceFail in which white writers faced a backlash for asserting their colonial heritage to depict non-white cultures from fans of color who had had enough of such. One does not need steampunk to "safely recreate" the Orient, but steampunk encourages such through its form of temporal play.

The fantasy of the Orient is an important historical condition for proponents of Victorientalism. In his historical summary, Ottens asserted that since the French lost "the colonial race" to the British, they turned to "fantasies and fables" of the Orient, rather than "the Orient itself." Moreover, "those who were able to actually travel eastward were sometimes disappointed to find it not quite the fantastic realm they had imagined it." The beginning of this conversation, happening in its own corner, is striking for being all about the interiority of disappointed Europeans[132] during the same time that a conversation raged on in other quarters of the Internet about racial representation. The centering of the European in the face of the reality of the Other is a characteristic of Eurocentrism, minimizing the oppressive role of the West and highlighting ostensibly benign attitudes

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[132] Also for its semantic calisthenics that turns a historical fact into a historical inaccuracy: "France possessed no colonies, between West Africa and Indochina"—by moving a key subordinate clause, France goes from having colonies to the *appearance* of having none.

towards the Other. The choice of subgenre is not so surprising: "Isn't this, after all, steampunk's very premise?" the editorial introduction to the *Gatehouse Gazette #11* asked rhetorically, introducing the theme of the issue, Victorientalism, "To delve into a past that never real was." Interested in only a form, but not a reality, the *Gatehouse Gazette* staked out the aims of Victorientalism: to infuse steampunk with the aesthetic appeal of the East without reckoning with the imperialism that acting on the appeal has wrought. When criticized, Ottens pointed out that the perspective of the *Gatehouse Gazette #11* was "to redeem, if only for a moment, if only in the space between our computer screens and our imagination, the inaccurate, the imperfect and the improper but the oh-so-romantic and beguiling fantasy that was Asia before we actually knew it." The redemption of the fantasy assumes that the Other can be decontextualized from its context and reality to serve the purposes of the center. The insistence on the unknowable Other prioritizes a specific perspective: that of the European explorer, seeking an adventure in the mysterious Orient, rather than the perspectives of the Other (who might even seek an adventure in Europe).

This perspective sits comfortably in the axis of a few different issues. Firstly, the pattern of Eurocentrism to "separate forms from their performers, convert those forms into influences, bring those influences into the center, leave the living sources on the margin, and pat itself on the back for being so cosmopolitan"[133] runs strong in the romanticization of the East as it never was. This is a form of disassociation between

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[133] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quoted in Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 2.

fiction and reality that is enabled by the privilege of never having suffered the consequences of the racism reinforced by the stereotypes promulgated through mis-representation. This is a perspective unsullied by the alienation of racism, shored up by a long tradition of decontextualizing Asian aesthetics from their producers. Secondly, this perspective actively devalues the Asia that is the reality, in favour of the fantasy of Asia—better for being unspoiled by the humanity of its inhabitants that do not exist to be someone else's entertainment. The fantasy of Asia does not disappoint, because it has no agency of its own to act differently from expected. The fantasy of Asia is a long unbroken tradition that not even the decolonization process can break, because the decolonization process jolts the colonizer into holding on ever more firmly to the fantasy of control. Thirdly, the idea that Victorientalism "redeems" any space between individual imagination and the shared space of the Internet implies that racist fantasies are at all redeemable. The racist imagination is forgivable because it is individualized, ignoring a larger pattern of racist imaginations that actively informs actions in reality. The individualist position of the steampunk Victorientalist is justified by the idea that "the concept is not steeped in bigotry, nor was its purpose ever to facilitate the colonial subjugation of non-Western peoples."[134] The intent trumps any effect this racist imagination may have. In this reasoning, the subjects of imagination do not exist; the subjects become objects, stripped of agency to say anything that might ruin the fantasy.

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[134] Ottens, Nick. "Victorientalism." *The Gatehouse*, 2009. Last accessed Jul 31, 2017. <www.ottens.co.uk/gatehouse/2009/02/victorientalism/>

Ahistorical, and apolitical, this position prioritizes the objectification and exoticization of the Other for the aesthetic value that the Other can add to steampunk. The idea that "steampunk is fiction, not research" is a contradiction created by this position: steampunk is fiction, made from the weft and weave leftover from actual historical events; steampunk is fiction, decontextualized from the rest of the world. Steampunk is thus otherworldly, a distraction from the troubles of the world. Non-white peoples do not take center stage in this individual imagination, because we have nothing to add to the fantasy beyond our forms. The work of steampunk, for the apolitical, is sheer entertainment within the culture industry, because all participants have the freedom to dream whatever they want.

Yet, to shift gears, it is not merely the apolitical side of the steampunk spectrum that is prone to this kind of de-historicizing and de-contextualizing. Whiteness in liberal progressive steampunk also leads to the failure to take into account the gaps in the critical discourse, defanging the multiculturalist potential of representation and equity in the subculture at large. Such is the case of the essay "Why Steampunk Still Matters," written by James Schafer and Kate Franklin. First published on their site *Parliament and Wake*, it made the rounds among North American steampunks as a politically-affirmative piece that saw the positive potential for steampunk to make a difference in the world.

Instead of the apolitical position that actions within steampunk do not matter, this essay took the position that "steampunk still matters because it allows us to imagine change, and that is the most important step in ultimately making such change a reality," amidst disappointment that steampunk failed to create "a community of Steampunks who

seriously adhere to a revolutionary, or even a particularly progressive, philosophy." As a whole, the essay reads as a re-calibration of expectations of the steampunk community: "We've been in the camp that sneered at the people who dressed up in Steampunk costumes and assumed artificial personas in the style of a role-playing game. ... We got this wrong; and are increasingly convinced that some measure of apparently escapist fantastical role-playing is actually protective against the malign influences of mass commercialism." It ends by asserting that steampunk is a visionary movement, with its highest stakes taking place in "the landscape of imagination" which determines the power of the aesthetic to enact social change. Just as interesting but unsaid is that the landscape of imagination, so powerful as to motivate individuals to political movement, has no identitarian priorities. A change in the world order is all that is called for; any narratives of the Other are superfluous.

By refusing engagement with the Other, Schafer and Franklin deradicalize the potential they claim to advocate because they are so focused on the individual imagination. As Harvey has argued, political movements that emphasize the individual's freedom "is vulnerable to incorporation into the neoliberal fold."[135] In his essay "Counter Culture and Cultural Hegemony: Some thoughts on the Youth Rebellion of the 60s," A. Norman Klein observes that the youth protest of the 1960s was "an integral part of the culture they were protesting against."[136] The youth counter-culture movement failed to achieve any radical change because it "only partially recognized the absorptive,

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[135] Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 41.
[136] Klein, A. Norman. "Counter Culture and Cultural Hegemony: Some Notes on the Youth Rebellion of the 1960s." *Reinventing Anthropology*. Ed. Dell Hymes. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 316.

integrative character of the hegemonic culture it attacked" and was thus assimilated into the dominant culture. Schafer and Franklin's essay identifies some particular links through which steampunk remains connected to larger culture: they note that "steampunks can be sold all sorts of little bits of crap, all kinds of movies and music, and they'll click 'like' on pictures of kittens in goggles with reckless abandon," "are happy to play genre-specific RPGs like Unhallowed Metropolis and Space:1889," and "consistently favor game-spaces created within convention hotels and populated with characters over messy social geographies populated by people." They lament the resistance of steampunks towards consideration of steampunk as "a vehicle for social reform," in favour of "a less contentious community structure" wherein "the most intense argument (carried out ad nauseum but apparently without ever boring many steampunks) is over whether a particular object/song/movie/book/commercial/etc. meets an entirely arbitrary definition of Steampunk." Unlike Klein's youth, Franklin and Schafer recognize how steampunks are absorbed into hegemonic culture; like Klein's youth, they fail to recognize how steampunk is part of the social fabric they propose steampunk should protest against, a fabric that emphasizes commercial profit and capital accumulation through individual self-expression.

To recuperate steampunk, they argue that a key aspect of steampunk participants "inhabit their own unique world or a world created with just a few other members," such as with an airship crew, with no corporate sponsors of these invented worlds. Thus, rather than give up the escapist as not performing the ideal, they assume a cooptation of escapist activity:

If an escapist wishes to shout down Steampunk as apolitical but is willing to participate in a fantasy space in which European explorers interact on equal terms with women and indigenous peoples and in which pirates are ethically justified in robbing from exploitative industrialists—well, he can continue to believe that he isn't endorsing a political movement, but for all the reasons we've discussed above, he's still helping.

What the essay argues for is a focus of steampunk on secondary worlds: worlds that are not recognizable as being set in the same world where the reader lives. The secondary world is a wholly constructed world, with some parallels, for example, the world of Middle-Earth in J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*. The term "secondary world" often only applies to fantastical spaces, with its systems of logic that are often alien from the daily physics of reality. Schafer and Franklin are so concerned with recuperating an idealized vision of steampunk that they fail to take into account the larger culture within which steampunk is situated. More importantly, they assume that their hypothetical steampunk imaginary will carry over despite the objections of their apolitical participants. This has precedent, identified by Jodi Melamed in the development of liberal multiculturalism: that cultural production is powerful and transformative, a "materializing social process, productive of relatively permanent forms of value, economy, meaning, and distributions of good and resources."[137] Yet Schafer and Franklin are content to leave this process in imagination, without organizing to bring it

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[137] Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 94.

into materiality. For all the political ideals espoused, they do not examine the ways that steampunk performs hegemonic culture, preferring instead to hope that such performances are in their atomized ways doing some counter-cultural work.

The creation of utopic spaces in the realm of the imagination is not a new exercise within speculative fiction. However, this exercise is also accompanied with the assertion that any connection to the real world leads to a bind in which the imagination cannot really break free of the systems of oppression if engaging directly with them. In the essay, Schafer and Franklin argue that the steampunk alternative history exercise that injects modern sensibilities into historical contexts, such as "the cantankerously-emancipated woman," "leads to narratives that may critique our history and present using a contemporary morality, but which also struggle to avoid reinforcing current constructions of society and self." As a result, the novels they cite as being the best examples of politically-effective steampunk are predominantly novels in which the present world, or the primary world and its histories, are hardly recognizable, such as China Mieville's Perdido *Bas-Lag* trilogy which takes place in a city populated by non-human creatures, and the "peripheries produced by the Vicky consumer empire" in Neal Stephenson's *Diamond Age*, in which the social order is threatened by a subset of Makers and producers. This is a variant of the argument of escapism: that to talk about oppression is to assert the oppression itself, and that to liberate oneself, one simply tries to imagine living without said oppression, rather than name its existence directly. Everyone is thus free to create their own utopia outside the real world. Freedom is perfected and exercised in the landscape of the imagination, which purportedly is separate from the political logic

of the lived world. This line of reasoning refuses to acknowledge the ways that systemic oppression is taught and ingrained in thought processes and biases, which are no less present in the landscape of imagination.

A utopic formation of society is meaningless without reckoning with how real-world systems have historically operated to silence the histories of marginalized populations. When Schafer and Franklin claim that "it was once certain that women/non-whites would never be able to hold political office/practice medicine/be soldiers," they refer only to a very certain sliver of history that is shaped by white supremacy, falling back into a Eurocentric mode of linear progress. After all, there have been many places, temporally and geographically, where women and non-white people have held office/practiced medicine/were soldiers. By refusing to root an argument in histories beyond what is conjured in the popular imagination of steampunk, the essay undermines its own argument of steampunk's political relevance. In doing so, it makes a claim to a political project through escapism without calling for an engagement with a critical lens. In effect, it says, to the participants who indulge in play but fail to carry that into their everyday lives, *what you do is enough. No one can buy your imagination*. This is a form of resistance to commercialization of the imagination which subjects even interiority to capitalist market forces. However, it fails to recognize the material ways that this imagination is expressed, which are subjected to the selfsame capitalist market forces it seeks to resist, because it is caught in its neoliberal rhetoric of individual freedom.

Like the protest culture Klein writes of, this form of justifying steampunk "did not begin as alternative institutions, social forms, or political economics. Instead, it addressed

itself first to the hearts and minds of young people."[138] It is a superficial move that offers

no departures from science fiction generally, or even the larger American culture within

which North American Anglophone steampunk takes place. A desire to change the world

does not necessarily lead to the actions needed to do so, especially when the desire is

expressed within the comfort of white privilege. David Roediger, in his critique of the

idea that progress is linear, pointed out that "even among radical artisans, the

revolutionary heritage did not lead to unambiguously antislavery conclusions."[139] This is

especially so for a solution that seeks to apply the steampunk aesthetic to "Brave New

Worlds [as] a better way to visualize and thus achieve alternate futures," or the use of

secondary worlds to imagine alternatives to the real world. To Schafer and Franklin, "the

application of the Steampunk aesthetic to history," or steampunk set in alternate histories

rooted in real world events, is "an inspiring means to understand and critique our

present," but still fell short of offering a truly different other world. In effect, they

prioritized one approach over another, as if the community did not have space enough for

both. At the same time, they implied that historically-based steampunk was too caught up

in identitarian issues, too rooted in real world problems, to be truly different, reinforcing

the very issues addressed by allowing them to exist in the alternate world. This is the

same logic that argues that talking about racism makes one racist, or makes the racism

worse. The approach to steampunk advanced by this essay thus remains a refusal to

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[138] Klein, A. Norman. "Counter Culture and Cultural Hegemony: Some Notes on the Youth Rebellion of the 1960s." In Reinventing Anthropology, edited by Dell Hymes. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 322.
[139] Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1991. 31.

engage with the world in favour of the creation of utopic spaces within which to muck about and perform social experiments without considering the allohistorical consequences. It is not so different, ultimately, from the apolitical Victorientalist.

Multiculturalism, in either essay, is not even a viable concept, because multiculturalism requires a dialog that neither end of this spectrum is willing to have, a dialog which would prioritize the voices of the marginalized over the freedom of the individual to imagine whatever they want. The steampunk aesthetic remains a re-constitution of an unchallenged popular imagination that might have some difference from reality, by way of novelty and escapism. This is a message that has ramifications for participants who turn to steampunk for escapism from the hegemonic culture that Schafer and Franklin claim steampunk works against. Rather than create truly alternative worlds, the imaginaries are exported to other countries, further reinforcing the hegemony of Eurocentrism. In a 2013 Facebook post, Steampunk Philippines claimed, "This page is not for popularity or some kind of issues that may cause troubles for others. We just want to bring the American culture and passion to make 19th century machines in our country." Because of how steampunk is thought of in popular culture, especially North American popular culture, steampunk is associated specifically with the 19th century, and with machine-making. There is no mention of history, of larger questions of technology within society, or even the story-telling aspects of steampunk.

The popular iconography of steampunk that composes its aesthetic, with its gears, steam technology, airships, and pulp fiction adventure, is associated with British Victorian history to such a degree that a popular imaginary of the British Victorian

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aesthetic becomes a stand-in for steampunk itself. Even more recently, during an interview with Spanish steampunk site *Mundo Steampunk*, Josue Ramos confessed, "when I talk about it with other steampunks (Internet, social networks, conventions, panels…), they often say this is not steampunk. Sometimes, talking about Spanish steampunk make people laugh. 'It is impossible. Steampunk outside the British Empire… It cannot be steampunk.'"[140] The Other is not part of this conversation at all, because it is not relevant and not recognizable as steampunk. Steampunk outside the British Empire cannot be steampunk because steam-powered technological fantasy apparently cannot be found outside the British Empire. Years after the initial burst of steampunk, these connotations remain embedded in a widely-shared escapist fantasy aesthetic, affecting cultural production of steampunk across the world. Steampunk, in this formulation, can only be British Victorian, and any other form is unacceptable, or at least unrecognizable because it does not fit the popular narrative that is exported and shared globally.

This formulation only holds because in these discussions of steampunk, anything outside Victoriana, the Other that is not Victoriana, is not important. Questions of history are not central, set aside in favour of questions of imagination. These essays do not discuss multiculturalism because their writers do not prioritize questions of dialog between groups. Multiculturalism for them is optional, not a reality to be engaged. The Other is interesting insofar as it is "imperfect and improper" as admitted by the *Gatehouse Gazette*. Speaking of the Other in relation to steampunk and history is

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[140] Ramos, Josue. "Interview with Joyce Chng and Jaymee Goh." *MundoSteampunk.net: From Spain to the Steampunk World*. Oct 1, 2015. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017.
http://www.mundosteampunk.net/2015/10/interview-with-joyce-chng-jaymee-goh.html

otherwise called "identitarian," by *Parliament and Wake*, not of general interest but to be segmented off unless otherwise called for in the quest for political liberation.

When steampunk became an aesthetic trend, the way steampunk fans wrote about it on social media and its adoption in art and film exported the aesthetic across the world in its popular form, which is Victorian. The Victorian is then divorced from its source material and claimed as a general popular culture. This entrenches an assumption of whiteness in steampunk media abroad, because the Victorian aesthetic is accessible to all and its primacy is never questioned. Imaginaries of the 19th century remain limited to Victorian Britain or some analogue of it. Any other form of steampunk, any potential of multicultural dialog using the steampunk aesthetic, became irrelevant in deference to the kind of steampunk that North America popularized. The ideological position of critical fan discourse does not dislodge this assumption, whether coming from a position of Orientalist affection for the non-European, or from liberal self-touted radicals who claim to want to think beyond identitarian restrictions. Instead, the desire to introduce other cultural influences end up supporting the consumption of these influences as commodities in steampunk, so long as it is done in acceptable ways that render steampunk still recognizable as inspired by Victorian aesthetics.

Multiculturalism as Site of Conquest

While steampunk fans around the world rallied around the North American sensibility which was, and still is, decidedly Anglocentric, North American steampunk had begun conversations about non-European, and non-British forms of steampunk. It

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seemed, inevitably, that as a collective, we got bored of the same sepia-toned costumes,

and were looking to inject a bit more color, whether literally or culturally.

Multiculturalism, as a practice of adapting non-Victorian, or non-European aesthetics,

became of interest for a variety of reasons. On a superficial level, the practice had a

novelty value that was not yet explored, just as steampunk, as an aesthetic, adds a certain

novelty to the familiar.

To use a spatial metaphor, multiculturalism was conceptualized as a territory, to

be unearthed or uncovered. In this formulation, multiculturalism is spoken of as a "next

step" for the expansion of steampunk. It echoes Edward Said's words on how the study of

the Orient renders the Orient accessible: "From being distant, it becomes available; from

being unsustainable on its own, it becomes pedagogically useful; from being lost, it is

found, even if its missing parts have been made to drop away from it in the process."[141]

Any geographical territory that is not actively covered in neo-Victorian steampunk

becomes fair game for being made available to consumption. This is further justified by

an approach to history in which steampunks are reminded that history occurred in the rest

of the world alongside the Victorians, without necessarily admitting to the role of the

Victorian English in those histories.

Meanwhile, the appeal of steampunk is semantically contained in the simplified

description of the term "Victorian science fiction." The science fictional part of this

phrase is dubious, and refers more to popular aesthetics—the look and feel of science

fiction—than it does to genre definitions that science fiction critics have wrestled with

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[141] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. 129.

over the years. The "Victorian" side of it ostensibly refers to "a period of time rather than a specific culture." This is the interpretation offered by G.D. Falksen, an essayist and popular steampunk blogger, to open up a discussion taking "the existing complexity and diversity of the 19th century world and bring non-European discourse into an even greater form." This reading pushes back against the notion that "Victorian" refers to the time of Queen Victoria, then the Queen of England, and ruler of the British Empire, which encapsulates a geographic designation. At the same time, this use of the term itself roots the aesthetic within a Eurocentric shorthand, making Victoriana the center from which the aesthetic begins from. It shortchanges the more organic grassroots origins of the aesthetic, as it coalesced into a shared pop culture imaginary. The result is that its attempt at non-Anglocentric steampunk becomes a challenge.

In an essay entitled "The world is not enough, but it is such a perfect place to start," as part of *Tor.com*'s 2009 Steampunk Month extravaganza, Falksen suggests that the happenings in other parts of the world during the 19th century should be considered as part of the purview of steampunk. This essay was among the first that wrote on steampunk beyond the re-imaginings of Britain widely-circulated to a generalized audience.[142] The essay is designed as a survey over what steampunk had left unturned, framed as an exciting new challenge for steampunk to take on. It does two things: offer extremely simplistic historical overviews of various regions during the 19th century, and suggest directions for steampunk alternate histories.

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[142] The first essay on the matter was Ottens' "Victorientalism," to which Diana Pho responded as Ay-Leen the Peacemaker, in "An off-shoot thought from RaceFail '09: Steampunking Asia," in March 2009. The latter was written as a personal piece on *MySpace*, and then circulated on the *Asian Women Blog Carnival*—its reach, therefore was nowhere the expanse of *Tor.com*'s.

Falksen begins with the Americas, since he presumably writes for a North American audience. The Americas "represented new nations with unique cultures drawn from both native and European traditions." Furthermore, "Haiti deserves a special mention as an independent republic ruled not by the descendants of Europeans but by the descendants of African slaves who had fought a revolution for both freedom and independence." Funnelling into the colonization of North America specifically, "the 19th century saw numerous conflicts as the new American nations sought to expand further into native territory. Even after absorption the dialogue continued, as native peoples adapted to their situation." This mention of Native Americans and Haitians celebrates the continued existence of the oppressed groups, while refusing to engage with the source of oppression and why an alternate history exploring avenues for their liberation would be empowering. The colonization of indigenous territory is a "dialogue," erasing the genocide the Native Americans suffered in order to push forward a cheerful picture of their superior adaptation of European technology. This trend of historical erasure continues: in discussing Africa, as an entire continent, Falksen writes,

> Africa is often overlooked when considering steampunk, which is a shame given that it was not colonized in force by Europeans until the end of the 19th century. For much of this period Africa was ruled by Africans, not only by local tribes but also by large and highly organized kingdoms and empires. Historically, the empires of Africa were cosmopolitan and possessed complex governmental systems, pre-industrial manufacturing and militaries that used metalwork,

cavalry and firearms. Introduce pre-colonial industrialization and one has the perfect starting point for indigenous African steampunk.

Falksen must emphasize that Africa was ruled by Africans—the audience might take for granted otherwise. The audience must be reminded that Africa, generic continent Africa, had empires—which are never named—and these empires had their own complex governments, manufacturing and militaries. Implied in this statement is that Africans are just like Europeans, with the same level of social complexity and technological advancement. That is what qualifies Africa as a place for steampunk narratives: for all its difference, it remains familiar, or could be made familiar, just as how Victoriana-centric steampunk harnesses the iconography of the familiar.

This frame of industrialization as a mode of modernization is also applied to Asia, in which Japan provides "one of the finest examples of non-European 'real world' steampunk" because it "modernized and industrialized with such effectiveness that it was able to supplant China as the dominant power in East Asia [...], and finally become an international power in its own right." Here, industrialization becomes the synecdoche for modernity. Industrialization, modernization, and political power become yardsticks for steampunk—the ability to conquer and the potential for a region to participate in the civilizing project of the world qualifies it to be sufficiently steampunk and thus of interest. This is why, in the case of China, Falksen offers an imperative: "Remove [the Dowager Empress Cixi] as a stumbling block to industrialization, and Chinese steampunk is free to blossom," because the monarch is, in this deployment of alternate history, the factor that prevents Chinese 19th century industrialization. Similarly, the Indian

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subcontinent is "especially viable for explorations into steampunk […] because of its cosmopolitan nature and […] its position as a key portion of the British Empire." Indian steampunk, however, could go both ways: "it must be remembered that India has a long history of absorbing and blending diverse ideas, belief systems and sciences, and there is no reason to think that it would not give a unique look and feel to its steampunk even while subjected to colonial rule." Industrialization and modernization under colonial rule could be made "unique"; an indigenous blending could make colonial aesthetics more interesting, thus make the familiar exciting again. Steampunk would make the colonized spaces worth looking into, worth researching. Industrialization is also the frame of reference for steampunk, imposing a particular vision of modernity that ignores the historical consequences of said modernity—colonialism, genocide, economic collapse.

Multiculturalism in steampunk, thus, is framed by an assumption of how steampunk should look like assuming a change in the history of the local—the removal of Empress Cixi—rather than a change in the history of the colonizer—the removal of, for example, British interests in Hong Kong. Victorian-based steampunk may dwell at length on the social ills caused by the industrial revolution, but rarely does anyone suggest removing Queen Victoria, the aristocracy, or the British East India Company, because industrialization in England as a concept collapses without their imperialism, rendering this vision of steampunk unrecognizable. If a region industrializes, it should resemble the English industrial revolution, ruled by a burgeoning market, and the same capitalist interests of the British, sidelining any critique of imperial and colonial interests.

The imperative and prescriptive language of the essay addresses a generalized

audience, assuming universality of experience and power. Offered with no nuance and no

word of caution to seek the nuances in historical trajectories, the essay is symptomatic of

a newly-evolved Orientalism, not so different from the Victorientalism of the *Gatehouse*

Gazette essay, and perhaps all the more dangerous because it does not admit its

romanticization or purposeful errors. It is instead a thought experiment using the

trappings and histories of the Other, of subordinate regions, re-creating the colonialist

aspirations of the past in a contemporaneous setting. It offers a mutation of John Rieder's

observation on the colonial-expansionist ideology informing the emergence of science

fiction: "Often the travel gains its interest by defying political boundaries and threatening

to render them meaningless."[143] Addressing a generalized, unmarked audience, Falksen

invites a deterritorializing of history—to look at histories beyond Victoriana not to

understand the world better as it might have been, but as an escapist tool to enjoy history

better through novelty and difference. Unlike the deterritorialization that Deleuze and

Guattari imagine in which the minority wrenches a tool from the hegemony, this

deterritorializing can be done by anyone, especially the colonizer who, bored with what

has been, can now imagine what might have been, so that history becomes much more

interesting than presumably a string of guilt-inducing oppressive events or a series of

conquests already done and over with. Genocide and colonialism can be re-framed to be

interesting, or an error that the colonizer can undo. British imperialism does not have to

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[143] Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 32.

be inevitable, promises this multicultural steampunk dream. In this way, the theoretical approaches of the oppressed for liberation can be appropriated for the entertainment of the oppressor.

A scant year later, the author duo Clay and Susan Griffith would write for *Tor.com*'s Steampunk Fortnight a brief essay on African steampunk. They are slightly more politicized, beginning with the remark that "there are also many loud voices inside the genre community who speak for cultural and geographical diversity, and that includes African influence. We hope to add to that clamor." Setting up a political project, the Griffiths propose an alternative to the inevitability of European imperialism in Africa, and like Falksen, offer a prescription: "In a steampunk world, we can imagine the vast wealth and resources of Africa staying home in the 19th century to transform the continent's societies, which are based on agriculture or trade, into great industrial nations." The statement begins with a wide horizon of possibility when imagining an alternate history for the African nations without the colonialism, yet falls back into the Eurocentric assumption that a region will necessarily industrialize. The inevitability of imperialism is swapped out for the inevitability of industrialization, as the right and proper culmination of unimpeded progress, as opposed to other visions in which technology serves people on smaller, more community-specific scales, adapting and changing as it moves between regions.

The imposition of these expectations demonstrate how a well-intentioned project that seeks to de-center focus on one empire nonetheless compromises itself by an understanding of multiculturalism that does not address different ways of understanding

modernity and civilization. Romanticizing the march of the intellect, the Griffiths suggest

that "a history of powerful, centralized states with the administrative hierarchy capable of

leading an industrialization movement" in the African continent was compromised by the

particular challenges of "low population and typically scattered settlement patterns."

Somali-American fantasy author Sofia Samatar points out that these disadvantages are

not necessarily disadvantageous at all,[144] but in the Eurocentric frame, any possible

benefits are negligible, because they do not add anything to the common steampunk

perspective that industrialization is the most exciting part of the civilizing project. Indeed,

the Griffiths write, "in order for Africa to play a central role in a steampunk story, the

continent has to absorb and develop the technology that defines the genre." At no point

do they state what this technology is—the reader must assume they refer to steam-

powered technology. The essayists' claim to clamor for diversity is undermined by their

limitations of what that diversity would look like: "throwing Africa under a neo-Victorian

steampunk lens [for] possibilities [...] endlessly strange and wonderful." It is not enough

that Africa has already been thrown under the Victorian lens, historically; for diversity's

sake, the essay encourages throwing Africa under the neo-Victorian lens.

Under the guise of diversity and creativity, this proposition operates on two

levels: it divorces the historical material consequences of subjecting Africa to the colonial

gaze, and reinforces the entitlement to subjecting the region to further re-imagination.

This kind of liberal multiculturalism, Jodi Melamed writes, creates "a fatal detachment"

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[144] Samatar, Sofia. "Dreadful Objectivity: Steampunk in Africa." Personal blog. February 24, 2014. No longer publicly available. <http://sofiasamatar.blogspot.com/2014/02/dreadful-objectivity-steampunk-in-africa.html>

by "produc[ing] the possibility for multiple disassociations: of cultural production from people of color, of representation from context, and of antiracist intentions and desire for interracial exchange from activism for racial equality."[145] In steampunk, this is a promise that if one studies enough history and reads enough books about the culture one wants to write about, in this case Africa, one can produce "African steampunk," or "multicultural steampunk." Anyone can know enough about Africa to produce "African steampunk," because this knowledge is available on a marketplace of ideas.

This detachment is demonstrated in what the essay does not do: it fails to highlight possible examples of approaches to steampunk by non-white artists, such as the textile art of Yinka Shonibare, a British-Nigerian artist. Shonibare uses "African fabric" to make Victorian costumes as a commentary on the movement of cultural forms, challenging the idea that culture is static and fixed to a certain geography.

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[145] Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 92.

Figure 4 Gay Victorians, by Yinka Shonibare[146]

The choice of fabric in Shonibare's work, also called Dutch wax prints, is significant:

Dutch colonizers adopted the method of dyeing it from their Indonesian colonies, and

developed designs they felt would appeal to their African colonies, thus creating a

successful marketplace commodity. Shonibare creates these sculptures using this

geographically-specific cultural artefact to demonstrate the global movement of artforms

as a result of colonialism and challenge notions of cultural authenticity. While not

recognizably steampunk as such, this approach develops an aesthetic that puts into

conversation the past and the present that would create a steampunk from an African

gaze, instead of overlaying Western conventions of civilizational and technological

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[146] Shonibare, Yinka. "Gay Victorians." 1999. Life-size fibreglass mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, mixed media. *Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)*.
<http://www.yinkashonibarembe.com/artwork/sculpture/?image_id=12>

progress onto the region. Instead, the Griffiths offer as an example the (now defunct) webcomic *Virtuoso*, in which a black inventor forced to invent guns for her government is in danger for inventing a printing press.[147] This failure to seek inspiration from or engage with artists of the very region written about defangs any antiracist potential such a project might have, a potential that might have offered a "materializing social process, productive of relatively permanent forms of value, economy, meaning, and distributions of good and resources."[148] The material consequences of colonialism and imperialism are given a headnod of acknowledgement—this headnod asserts the good, liberal-progressive intentions of the writer without needing to engage specifically in the ongoing consequences of white supremacy, especially within literary production. In the absence of noting this disparity, and in the addressing of a general audience, which may be assumed to be white, the implicit assumption is that anyone, generally, can embark on this venture, and indeed should. "Such a position purports to be apolitical but manages only to be ahistorical and blind to relations of power,"[149] and made worse still when this position purports to be a positive contribution to the larger discourse of its field, only to cleave representations of the marginalized into the larger frame of their oppressor.

This cleaving is deemed necessary, however, in order to make the marginalized recognizable. Multicultural steampunk is deemed exciting, as an adventure, as a mad

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[147] "Steampunk expands, becomes 'diverse,' but what sort of diversity is this?" Samatar asks: "Guns and writing," two measures of Eurocentric progress.

[148] Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 94.

[149] Coombe, Rosemary. "The Properties of Culture and the Possession of Identity: Postcolonial Struggle and the Legal Imagination." In Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation, edited by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 78.

science project, because steampunk is considered to have a core of the Victorian. The Victorian—in its temporal and geographic sense—roots steampunk: "One of the things that allows steampunk to be so diverse and harmonious is that it has a clear core aesthetic to build on, and then a great deal of freedom to explore using that core aesthetic as a base. Thus, there's always a common ground that its fans can fall back on to resolve their disagreements of interpretation."[150] If steampunk does require the starting point of the Victorian as Kriete argues, then its expansion into the non-Victorian takes a disquieting valence given the language used to describe the rest of the world: the rest of the world is "the perfect place to start"—for the expansion of steampunk as a consumable aesthetic. The countries that the Victorians colonized are valuable for their "wealth and resources" and this wealth is interesting when deployed not for indigenous forms of civilization, but for a narrative of industrialization that maps easily onto modern assumptions of modernity and progress, made visible in fan and critical discourse.

The Falksen and Griffiths essays take seemingly different perspectives on the non-Victorian: in one, the reference point of Victoriana as the starting point is obvious in the imperative language to look beyond the bounds of England. In the other, the reference point of Victoriana is less obvious, ostensibly using a different country or region as the starting point. However, the end point—industrialization and modernity—requires a Eurocentric frame of reference, rather than considering an indigenous mode of modernity that may look completely different from how history has played out. Because neither

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[150] Evelyn Kriete quoted in Vandermeer, Jeff, and Selena Chambers. *The Steampunk Bible*. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. 150.

essay actively interrogate the assumptions of modernity in the frameworks they operate within, their writing on their subject matter—steampunk of the Other, the non-Victorian, the non-white—treats the Other as a subject to be conquered, rather than as an interlocutor with which to question ideals of modernity, reified further by ways of participating in steampunk that is not based in narrative, but in visuals, specifically costuming.

Multiculturalism as Commodity

As steampunk is a heavily-visual fandom, based on creating a canon out of a shared imaginary that is displayed, the discourse of multicultural steampunk moved quickly into the realm of costuming. In the effort to popularize the concept of multicultural steampunk, steampunk participants offered methods of integrating non-European, and non-white ethnicities into the aesthetic through the use of material goods. This could take several forms. An individual might wear a historical costume from beyond Europe within the appropriate timeframe (the 19th century, or early 20th century) and possibly incorporate something to signal steampunk, such as a corset, or gears, or the use of an inordinate amount of brass. An individual might also wear a "typical" steampunk outfit, probably one that implies a traveling persona, and incorporate something that signals "ethnic" or otherwise foreign to Victorian Britain, such as a hakama or a straw cone hat. A 2015 entry on *Steampunk Canada*'s blog, "Multicultural Steampunk - a Cosplay Approach," exemplifies this:

After you have found your inspirational culture or cultures, put your mind to how

such garments could be steampunked – either by adding steampunk elements

(such as corsets worn outside the undergarment, utility belts, monocles, hostlers,

googles, fans, pocket belts, hats, pocket watches, parasols, etc.) or mashing up

elements of different cultures (e.g. a houndstooth printed sari, or a pirate/poet

shirt worn with hakama).[151]

In these methods, "culture" is comprised of commodity items that can be taken on and off

according to taste and visual cues in the effort to expand the possibilities of steampunk,

much like in other subcultures, from goth, to punk, and Star Trek fandom.[152] Much like

goth, steampunk subcultural commercial consumption is often "focused around an

internal network of relatively specialist subcultural institutions,"[153] such as vendors at

steampunk fan conventions, niche brick-and-mortar stores like Clockwork Couture store

in Burbank, California,[154] or Wells & Verne in Portland, Oregon, or online made-to-order

merchants on platforms such as Etsy. Like in other subcultures in which the subcultural

identity is marked by difference, steampunk participants dress in ways that mark them as

part of the group, but also emphasize difference and uniqueness in costuming.

     This is then adopted into ways of thinking about cultures, generally speaking, and

more specifically cultures that are considered minority, or Other, which may be of one's

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[151] Chernik, S.L. "Multicultural Steampunk—A Cosplay Approach." *Steampunk Canada*. Jan 20, 2015. Web. < http://www.steampunkcanada.ca/apps/blog/show/43015153-multicultural-steampunk-a-cosplay-approach>

[152] Kozinets, Robert V. "Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of Star Trek's Culture of Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research 28* (June 2001): 67–88.

[153] Hodkinson, Paul. *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture*. New York: Berg, 2002. 109.

[154] Sadly now defunct.

own culture, or outside one's own culture. Culture, Grant McCracken writes, "constitutes the phenomenal world," as the lens through which an individual views the world, or as a blueprint of human activity that determines social action.[155] Consumer goods are a form of expressing culture in a material form. If steampunk subcultural play is expressed through its fashion, costuming, and other forms of merchandise, minority cultures are similarly fair game, to be rendered into consumer goods that can be appropriated and assimilated into steampunk fashion. The process is reinforced by the logic of liberal multiculturalism, in which "books (and other cultural commodities) … stand in for people" as a source of representative knowledge, giving an individual enough familiarity with the Other, or any minority culture they happen to have read about, to speak about the Other and claim an anti-racist stance through this display of knowledge.[156]

This knowledge is then conflated with parameters of "respect" in steampunk fan discourse. In order to respect a minority culture when using an artifact, an item that represents that culture in costuming, props, or fashion, one should know the provenance of said artifact or item. The individual has an implied obligation to learn about the culture insofar as how the item is historically significant to the minority group, and to be able to speak about it when queried. Failure to do so is a sign of racist behavior in the form of cultural appropriation, because the individual does not have the respect enough to do their research on the item they are using. Cultural appropriation, in this framework, is the use of an artifact or item without caring about its point of origin or cultural significance, as

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[155] McCracken, Grant. "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods." *Journal of Consumer Research*. Vol. 3 (June 1986). 72.
[156] Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 37.

opposed to the use of an item from a minority culture divorced from its original context and re-contextualized by a hegemonic power. Therefore, as long as respect has been appropriately paid, an item that signals the ethnicity of a minority culture in use within the overall steampunk aesthetic is not a sign of cultural appropriation, but instead appreciation. This appreciation is expressed through the wearer's knowledge of the item and ability to speak to its significance.

Fan discourse surrounding multicultural steampunk costuming became sources and hubs for information about multicultural steampunk. By itself, this practice is benign. However, it takes place in a larger system of representation in which the Victorian is privileged and considered the center. The fan discourse was well-intentioned, and, importantly, advanced by fans of color. We were not necessarily equipped to have discussions describing experiences with systems of representation. In our eagerness to see more difference, we did not take into account how difference is exploited and marketed. Within the discourses of multiculturalism we had grown up in, no matter what our ideological stance (though we tended towards liberalism), we instantly became representatives for multiculturalism, gaining a lot of cultural capital. Instead of conversations and dialog across communities, as encouraged by Shohat and Stam, we encouraged representations of the Other, because the Other was ourselves, and we desired representations within familiar frameworks.

Liberal discourse permeating the discourse of steampunk compromises projects that avail themselves to a universalized audience despite the best of intentions. As "multiculturalism as it actually exists today in the United States is more of a strategy for

selling culture,"[157] projects designed to de-center Victoriana from steampunk either find themselves participating in a marketplace of ideas that ultimately cleave to white comfort, and any discomfiting elements are disregarded. Because liberal multiculturalism is about the universal audience, it prioritizes the detachment of cultures from communities, or of artifacts from context. In steampunk, this detachment was made manifest in the cultural capital accumulated around the ability to pull together items from a variety of sources into a cohesive form that generated the greatest effect combining novelty and familiarity.

The blog *Multiculturalism for Steampunk* is "a celebration of culture as a sourcebook for steampunks- a collection of costumery, tutorials, history, whimsy, and recipes to put a little global flair into your steampunk."[158] Started in September 2010, it takes its cue from G.D. Falksen's *Tor.com* essay and his following posts in the *Steamfashion* LiveJournal in which he wrote brief articles simplifying historical events in spaces outside Victorian England. In the introductory post of *Multiculturalism for Steampunk*, Hellum lays out her reasons for starting the blog: a desire to "offer content on multi-cultural steampunk in a visual, informative manner," and a belief that "sharing cultures and making something wonderful [...] is how we overcome distrust, fear, or hatred."[159] Further, she argues that "if the proper honor and scholarship has been shown, people should not be afraid to wear the clothing of another people." The blog posts are

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[157] Aguilar-San Juan, Karin. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 119.
[158] Hellum, Jeni (Miss Kagashi). *Multiculturalism for Steampunk* header description.
[159] Hellum, Jeni (Miss Kagashi). "The Beginning of an Exciting Voyage." *Multiculturalism for Steampunk*. Blogger. September 30, 2010.

tagged with categories relating to regions, history, book recommendations, clothing, food, tutorials, and art challenges. To make the content friendlier, images are used for clarification and provide the reader with visual inspiration. This format condensed the concept of multiculturalism into something "doable," accessible, and simple to enact. This act of writing and reading about other cultures is purportedly enough to "overcome" prejudice and promote racial equality.

Hellum's cultural cache as expert on multicultural steampunk was more credible as a self-identified Potawatomie. In response to criticisms of her Native American steampunk cosplay, she took the stance that "it is important to know about the injustices of the past, but if we dwell on them then all that grows is bitterness."[160] Moreover, to talk about Native American steampunk is not to "[give] carte-blanche to people" the right to use stereotypes of Native Americans in costuming: "I'm not telling people to run out and make Native American steamsonas or bedeck themselves in warbonnets, wear feathers in their hair or run out declaring themselves 'Awesomefox' or 'Jim Stands With a Possum' (that would be a double-whammy of silly AND offensive)." There is nothing wrong, in Hellum's estimation, in being inspired by the culture of the Other, that it is an honor, so long as one does research to ensure one's outfit is done correctly. The research and statement of intention to honor the Other is enough to deflect or invalidate criticism, especially coming from a representative identifying with the Other, in this case a racial minority group.

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[160] Hellum, Jeni (Miss Kagashi). "A Reflection from the Crow-Lady." *Multiculturalism for Steampunk*. Blogger. November 12, 2010.

Hellum's response is an expression of liberal multiculturalism: that reading about the Other gives one enough familiarity in order to assert knowledge, in steampunk expressed through artistic expression. The theory is that in the course of researching one's outfit inspired by a culture different from one's own, one will eventually come to know the other culture, creating a mutual respect. In her articulation of the legal aspects of cultural appropriation, Rosemary Coombe writes about the rhetorical position of Romanticism, in which "the Romantic author claims the expressive power to represent cultural others in the name of a universalized cultural heritage."[161] Inspiration becomes the rallying cry under which to learn to understand the Other, regardless of the imbalance of power. Any understanding or research of the Other is demonstrated in the accurate deployment of the visual cues signifying the Other in tandem with steampunk iconography. However, in practice, in the spaces where the costumes are worn, only that which is worn is seen; there are no secret messages to decode, and not all audience members are informed enough to recognize the difference between accuracy and invention.

Attempts at a more critical perspective also failed to generate any radical shift from this form of multiculturalism, because of the assumed universalized audience. A presentation given by myself and Diana Pho at various conventions between 2010 and 2013 attempted to offer an alternative focus for steampunk, and change the visual canon from the Victorian science fiction mien to one that drew from international influences.

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[161] Coombe, Rosemary. "The Properties of Culture and the Possession of Identity: Postcolonial Struggle and the Legal Imagination." In *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, edited by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, 75–96. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 91.

Our presentation was split into three parts: 1) Reasons Why Multicultural Steampunk

Works; 2) Examples of Non-Eurocentric Steampunk; 3) The Tough Stuff i.e. addressing

issues of racism and cultural appropriation. Like *Multiculturalism for Steampunk*, "Steam

Around The World" was designed for a generalized audience to demonstrate the

possibilities of the steampunk aesthetic beyond the default Victorian iconography. We

used artists such as Yinka Shonibare (mentioned earlier), South African junk artist Willie

Bester, and Moroccan feminist artist and photographer Lalla Essaydi. They were not

"steampunk," but we felt their approaches would be useful examples for directions to

take steampunk, as their work exemplified what we felt to be a key element of steampunk

being a conversation of the current times with history. Our selling point was a discussion

on the potential for offense and perpetuating of stereotypes, which we addressed with

attempts to define racism and appropriation in a user-friendly manner. We were not

aware enough at the time to recognize the liberal multiculturalist rhetoric and stance we

were taking at the time. Like Hellum, Pho and I placed an emphasis on researching the

cultures from which an outfit might be inspired by. Unlike Hellum, our advice was more

useful for literary production than material costuming; in a list of "Do's," we offered a

few goals such as "multiple perspectives from around the world," "communicating across

cultures," and "sharing ideas and inspiration versus taking them."[162] These goals assumed

a lateral playing field in which dialog across groups of disparate power could speak.

Taking our cue from the idea that "bringing a transformed world into concrete being by

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[162] Pho & Goh. Steam Around the World PowerPoint Slide Presentation. 2010 – 2012.

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performatively (re)constituting communal life,"[163] a dialog brought about by the performance of multiculturalism in steampunk that would perforce require an examination of historical injustices that ultimately would achieve what we believed steampunk could do: question modernity, subvert common ideas of history, and present interesting alternative histories.[164] Our presentations were often received warmly, although moments of discomfort among audience members were commonplace.[165] However, because of the assumed demographics of our audience, we were often speaking with whiteness informing our position: we needed to begin our work by justifying the presence of multiculturalism in steampunk. Our presentation was also directed more at the white audience members than the racialized minorities of the room. Our contribution to the discourse on multiculturalism, while not directly contributing to the commodification of culture, could not confront or discomfort whiteness enough from re-asserting its hegemony.

The hegemony of whiteness curtails the discomfort by transforming the discourse of multiculturalism into a language that comfortably commodifies culture for the consumption of the universalized audience. This is evident in more recent posts after the initial boom of steampunk. Austin Sirkin's 2013 post on *WonderHowTo*, "Adding a Multicultural Touch to Steampunk Without Being an Insensitive Clod," attempts to offer a reminder to readers that the Victorians were not a self-contained culture by giving an anti-conquest reading: "Advances in travel during the Victorian era made the world much

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[163] Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 94.
[164] Pho & Goh. Steam Around the World PowerPoint Slide Presentation. 2010 – 2012.
[165] In hindsight, this was a feature, not a bug.

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smaller and ignited the passion of the British for other cultures."[166] Sirkin is careful to use

women of color as examples in his how-to, but his audience remains undefined, thus his

prescriptions—"decide what culture you'd like to incorporate," "thoroughly research the

culture you're going to imitate," and apologize if the result is offensive—do not touch on

the power dynamics that such incorporate and research has historically perpetuated. In

commenting on a "Turkish steampunk" outfit, he comments, "Everything certainly looks

authentic to my untrained eye, but no amount of research excuses someone from having

to say 'I'm sorry' if their outfit is offensive to someone else." Authenticity can be re-

constructed by doing one's research, because in Eurocentric thought, "historical periods

and geographical regions [can be segregated] into neatly fenced-off areas of expertise."[167]

Moreover, authenticity can be assumed of a participant without given context, based on

an uninformed visual judgement. An act of appropriation—the participation in on-going

ontological violence—can be smoothed over with the speech act of an apology. Sirkin

further attempts to explain offensiveness using examples that center white Americans as

potential foci of racism: "To many white people, it can be very intimidating to sail the

waters of multiculturalism when the fear of accidentally offending someone is always

present." From the perspective of whiteness, empathy with the oppression of racial

minorities is difficult without an equivalence to the hypothetical white experience.

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[166] Sirkin, Austin. "Adding a Multicultural Touch to Steampunk Without Being an Insensitive Clod."
Wonder Howto. Jan 19, 2013. Last accessed July 20, 2017. <https://steampunk.wonderhowto.com/how-to/adding-multicultural-touch-steampunk-without-being-insensitive-clod-0141367/>
[167] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 6.

In conclusion, fan critics in steampunk across many different ideological positions created a multiply-pronged approach to multiculturalism that would ultimately undermine any radical interventions that might have been made. *Parliament and Wake* disagreed with the *Gatehouse Gazette* regarding the place of politicized goals for steampunk: the *Gatehouse Gazette* was adamantly pro-escapism and resistant to suggestion that steampunk might have liberating potential, and *Parliament and Wake* believed that the escapism in steampunk was the liberating potential. Both parties nonetheless dismissed the idea that dialog across and representations of racialized groups would contribute to the subculture in any form, citing that any such inclusion would be identitarian by nature and thus unimportant. However, the desire to include a multiculturalist aspect to the subculture has also been fraught with the language of colonialism. The *Tor.com* essays of G.D. Falksen and Susan and Clay Griffith treated the concept of multiculturalism as a site of conquest in which spaces outside of Victorian England are transformed through an imposition of a particular modernity determined by the presence of colonial industrialization. Finally, multicultural steampunk discourse advanced by self-identified non-white fans attempted to encourage approaches to multiculturalism that were based on seeking knowledge about the Other. These approaches had to work within a system of representation which prioritized visual and material aspects of culture, limiting the potential for education and dialog across communities.

In a scant few years after the beginnings of a multiculturalist discourse that envisioned dialog and understanding, the commodification of multiculturalism crept in to become the mainstream understanding of what multicultural steampunk could be. This

commodification bears out in the materiality of steampunk cultural production which will

be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Steampunking Industries and Multiculturalism

As part of the effort to diversify steampunk beyond the usual neo-Victorian aesthetic, steampunk producers and fans take up multiculturalism as part of their steampunk project, whether in literature, costuming, and conventions. Steampunk literature is part of the top-down industry process of genre publishing. Steampunk conventions, at which costumes and props are on display, are organized by fans, who are considered the end point of the consumer process. However, no matter which direction the cultural production comes from, these multicultural projects are framed by the standpoint of whiteness, made evident in the racist tropes and narratives they take for granted and deploy in their work. The multiculturalism of these projects are thus superficial, rather than a way of re-framing history and modes of thinking about the Other. Moreover, they add novelty value to the steampunk projects through the pacifying deployment of Eurocentric stereotypes of the Other.

The result is that these creators and organizers reinforce ways of thinking about multiculturalism and racial minorities that involve consumption. This has the added consequence of reasserting Orientalism, what Edward Said identified as a way of thinking about, or a system of knowing, the Orient in relation to the Western European experience of colonizing. However, instead of the historical Orientalism which studies the Other in order to colonize it effectively, this form of Orientalism invents the Other in order to address some ideal of representational disparity in popular media and bring novelty to the marketplace of cultural production. The Orient is no longer a static space

of pre-modernity and tradition, but a space in flux that changes the way the industrial West had in the 19th century, while maintaining much of the same status quo. It is infused with the same kind of technology that enabled European colonization, and enacts the same processes of colonization.

This chapter argues that two dominant forms of industrial cultural production perpetuate Eurocentric frames of narrative in steampunk: literary production, marketed as steampunk, borne of a top-down process, and performative production, manifest in costume choices, which is a more grassroots endeavour informed by popular culture media landscapes and enabled by the event management choices of performance spaces in the steampunk convention. In these industries, steampunk and multiculturalism are capitalized upon as marketing materials. While fan discourse on steampunk and multiculturalism provides the frame with which to approach either, whether together or as a singular whole, the discourse of steampunk multiculturalism is both a source and a symptom of larger institutional industries undergirding the expression of steampunk. These industries reflect and reinforce popular forms of steampunk through the legitimacy of their institutions.

In its most radical form, multiculturalism opens the possibility for dialogue between communities. However, multiculturalism is often spoken of as cultural differences between groups; this may be called other buzzwords such as "diversity" and "minority literature" in fields like literary publishing, which expands the definition of cultural difference beyond racial lines to include narratives about sexuality, gender, class, or disability. Any narrative that can be considered as being outside the cultural norm can

be called "multicultural" or "diverse," and marketed as such to take advantage of the novelty value. In convention spaces, the term "multicultural" signals a costume that is outside the norm of the British Victorian aesthetic common to steampunk, or incorporates visual or aesthetic elements associated with the "non-white," or racial minorities. "Multicultural steampunk" is popularized by fans themselves, who use their interpretations of these minority aesthetics to modify their costumes through the use of various items that signal a culture outside British Victoriana.

Steampunk is often strongly associated with the Scientific Romances of the 19th century, written by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. It is, however, a late-20th century invention, a label retroactively applied to Verne and Wells for aesthetic inspiration. As an aesthetic, it re-imagines technologies as they might have looked like if they had been invented earlier, or casts current technologies with the visual design of different historical periods. Fans of the aesthetic, called steampunks, participate and create costumes, props, art pieces, or literature that either re-imagines a previous historical period, a future period, or a different world entirely, combining the aesthetics of that period with accelerated technology. These settings often feature either an incipient industrial revolution, or one in full swing. The historical period of choice, and geographic region, is often Victorian England, due to the literary origins of the term and general familiarity with the Victorian Industrial Revolution.

Literary production of steampunk is often tied to the marketing thereof of steampunk. K.W. Jeter, James Blaylock, and Tim Powers were writing the novels which would go on to form a steampunk canon in the 1980s, when Jeter cheekily coined the

original term. However, steampunk as a marketing term would not be used until 2008. James Carrott has observed in a cultural heat map that steampunk as a search term in Google would not spike until 2005 to 2008.[168] A lot of books are thus retroactively labeled "steampunk," notably the Victorian Scientific Romances by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, simply because they fit the community aesthetic that was beginning to coalesce.

With these texts in mind, cultural production had a basic set guidelines to follow and to build on, up to their most imaginative heights. These heights rest on the foundations of steampunk iconography and certain types of narratives associated with steampunk, as well as the prevailing institutional problems embedded in the demographics of cultural producers and their gatekeepers. This leads to literary production that purports to be multicultural, but manifests Eurocentric narratives as a result, and disproportionately privileges white authors, simply because of the predominance of whiteness in the larger publishing industry.

In 2015, Lee and Low Books, a publisher of multicultural children's books, performed a survey of diversity in the back end of the U.S. American publishing industry.[169] They received "responses from 8 review journals and 34 publishers of all sizes from across North America" in the categories of: 1) Board Members and Executive Positions, 2) Editorial, 3) Marketing, 4) Sales, 5) Reviewers. They were done through anonymous surveys, requesting identification on the basis of race, gender, orientation,

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[168] Carrott, James & Brian Johnson. *Vintage Tomorrows: A Historian and a Futurist Journey Through Steampunk Into the Future of Technology*. California: O'Reilly Media Inc., 2013. 38.
[169] Low, Jason. "Where Is The Diversity in Publishing: The 2015 Diversity Baseline Results." Lee and Low Books Blog. Jan 26, 2016. <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/>

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and disability. The study is flawed, being unable to account for the finer nuances of self-identification, but it provides a good baseline from which to start looking at the industry and consider the implications for the cultural products that they generate. Upon the axis of race alone, the numbers of industry workers who identify as White/Caucasian are as follows: in the industry overall, 79% of survey takers identified as white/Caucasian; at the Executive level, 86%; in Editorial departments, 82%; in Sales departments, 83%; in marketing and publicity departments, 77%; and among book reviewers, 89%.

These numbers are both symptomatic and explanatory: publishing is a culture industry, and culture industries both shape the mediascapes and values of their consumers, as well as profit from these mediascapes and values. I use Arjun Appadurai's definition of "mediascape," to refer to the distribution, production and dissemination of information shaped by mode (whether of documentation or entertainment), hardware, audience, and interests of the owners. Thus, mediascapes disseminate scripts for potential imaginaries.[170] Like any other culture industry, publishing survives by producing consumable products to as wide an audience as possible—more accurately, they produce product which their staff assume will be consumed by as wide an audience as possible. The echelons of their staff are dominated by a particular identitarian group, and this group affects the type of product that is pushed out, and the kind of content that the consumer will be allowed to choose from on the market. Without active questioning of the tendencies that will inevitably result, the processes of producing genre literature will

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[170] Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 34.

acquire what Helen Young calls "the shape of the white bodies that have habitually occupied [genre literature] for decades."[171] This shape extends even to works that claim to move away from the white, Eurocentric norm.

The white bodies that Young writes of are not white only through scientific discourse, but by "culture through the construct of ethnicity."[172] They are white by their position in their respective societies, whereby material experiences and unnamed cultural practices cultivate a standpoint from which these white bodies view themselves as unmarked and normal.[173] This position is further reinforced by a Eurocentric mode of thought, in which a particular historical trajectory that focuses on the West at the expense of other historical narratives is privileged. This creates a frame of viewing the Other, a white gaze, that is pervasive and taken for granted. Not satisfied with colonial knowledge, writers invent spaces in Asia and Africa anew, from the perspective of the white gaze, under the auspices of liberal multiculturalism which seeks to address representational disparity.

In the push for "diversity" and "multiculturalism," works that use the aesthetics of the Other are processed through this white gaze, recycling and transmuting racist stereotypes. Works in this vein are often celebrated for the use of a different cultural setting; the racist stereotypes in use are unnoticed, and the use of these stereotypes are what makes these works comfortable and accessible to their audience as they cleave to

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[171] Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Fiction: Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge, 2016. 11.

[172] Ibid. 10.

[173] Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 1.

the norm of how the Other is viewed. In literature, the reader can recognize the whiteness of the gaze through the racial imagery deployed. The writers, writing from the white gaze, depict Other'd characters in ways that are re-iterations of how these selfsame Other'd characters, ostensibly the viewpoint characters, are depicted in media within which they are the Other. The characters are not necessarily outwardly named as racialized: for example, in the novel *Stormdancer*, all the speaking characters are coded Japanese, in a setting coded as Japanese; therefore, their race is unremarked upon. It is in the aesthetic and discursive codes through which they are described and depicted that the process of racialization occurs. In convention spaces, the white gaze is manifest in the costuming choices of steampunk attendees, who walk through the convention wearing accouterments to signify the Other on their unmarked bodies. The whiteness of the convention space is also determined by organizational choices: what subjects are discussed, who are assigned to which panels, and other thematic issues. The ultimate consequence of this whiteness, regardless of which aspect of the culture industry in which it is found, is that people of color find themselves alienated by the racist representations that is supposed to help reflect and include them into the steampunk mediascape, and white cultural producers are rewarded for participating in this institutional racism.

This chapter will examine two novels which were marketed as non-Eurocentric steampunk in the last five years: *Vampire Empire* by Clay and Susan Griffith, and *Stormdancer* by Jay Kristoff. *Vampire Empire: the Greyfriar* is an example of how whiteness ultimately centers Eurocentric ideals and norms despite claiming to provide alternate narratives. The shift in geography does not negate the centrality and importance

of Europe in this story: Europe has become the site of the Other, as Africa has become

the seat of the British Empire, but no matter how acculturated the European nobility has

become to Alexandria, the two largest empires of the world conspire to reclaim Europe

from the titular Vampire Empire. *Stormdancer* is marketed as a "Japanese steampunk"

novel, replete with a setting that, through the power of Wikipedia-based research,

attempts to be "distinctly Japanese."[174] It is demonstrative of how a work that uses the

face of the Other does not necessarily center that Other, but instead uses white

supremacist stereotypes to tell a story that is comforting to the sensibilities of the status

quo while having the novelty of a non-white aesthetic. These two books are also

noteworthy for the fact that their authors received multiple-book deals, implying

publisher confidence in the commercial viability of the books, despite (or because of)

their deployment of racist representation. Finally, this chapter also recounts how

whiteness plays out in convention spaces, looking at Nova Albion 2011. This convention

was themed "Wild Wild East," and demonstrates how multiculturalism as an idea is

compromised by organizers and attendees who are unaware of how they re-create white

supremacy within their management and performance of the Other.

White Bodies Reconquering Europe from the Comforts of Africa

In Clay and Susan Griffith's *Tor.com* essay "Do Goggles Block the Sun?

Steampunk in Africa," they propose an alternate history in which African resources

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[174] Kristoff, Jay. "Japanese Steampunk by Jay Kristoff." *STEAMED!* Guest blogpost. July 28, 2011. Last accessed July 28, 2017. <https://ageofsteam.wordpress.com/2011/07/28/japanese-steampunk-by-jay-kristoff/>

remain within the continent to transform it into a thriving industrial space, the same as how the Industrial Revolution in Europe would have transformed European nations into the colonizing forces they became. This essay also served as promotional material for their then-upcoming novel series, *Vampire Empire*, the first book called *The Greyfriar*, which is an alternate history novel that deploys tropes from the fantasy epic alongside its steampunk iconography. The availability of the essay on a popular platform as *Tor.com* is a marketing move that draws a reader in with the proposal for something entirely different, in this case "African steampunk."

The essay uses the promise of multiculturalism—the use of something coded as non-white—in order to sell what is ultimately a Eurocentric narrative. The Griffiths assert, "In a steampunk world, we can imagine the vast wealth and resources of Africa staying home in the 19th century to transform the continent's societies, which are based on agriculture or trade, into great industrial nations."[175] With such a statement, one might agree: it is progressive to re-imagine the resources of Africa as having never been stolen through colonization and imperialism, remaining instead within the continent for the use of local nations, rather than for industrialization abroad. Such marketing copy—which is what it is, at the end of the day, despite having been written as an opinion editorial— promises a setting, Africa, that is often ignored in genre fiction unless it serves as a generic space for white bodies to navigate. The back copy of the book gives us the setting:

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[175] Griffith, Clay & Susan. "Do Goggles Block the Sun? Steampunk in Africa." *Tor.com: Steampunk Fortnight*. October 28, 2010. <http://www.tor.com/2010/10/28/do-goggles-block-the-sun-steampunk-in-africa/>

In the year 1870, a horrible plague, vampires, swept over the northern regions of the world. Millions of humans were killed outright. Millions more died of disease and famine due to the havoc that followed. Within two years, once-great cities were shrouded by the gray empire of the vampire clans. Human refugees fled south to the tropics because vampires could not tolerate the constant heat there. They brought technology and a feverish drive to reestablish their shattered societies of steam and iron amid the mosques of Alexandria, the torrid quietude of Panama, or the green temples of Malaya.[176]

Optimistically, this description seems promising because of the implication that since these European societies have now been established somewhere else outside of Europe, much of the narrative will take place somewhere that is not in Europe. While Eurocentric in how it focuses on the travails of the exiled Europeans, such a setting opens a possible conversation on the negotiations that could take place between colonizer and colonized, a relationship that would have been in place around this time. This relationship would be characterized by racism, "the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized,"[177] but an upending of power relations due to the abrupt genocide and exile of Europeans might have changed the dynamics. Instead of the colonizer wielding power remotely over a region distant from its shores, the colonized might have demanded control over the re-settlement and escape from the colonizer's hostile homeland.

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[176] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. Back cover copy.
[177] Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967. 70.

Greyfriar attempts to demonstrate the cultural mixing of the changed setting in a few ways. This vastly changed 20th century is peopled by multilingual characters, such as the greedy merchant who "could speak the most beautiful classical French," as well as "the harsh mercantile Mediterranean patois that had grown up since the vampire revolution had forcibly mixed European, Levantine, and North African."[178] Secularism is the religious view of the day, being the proper trajectory for an industrialized empire: "Churches and mosques and temples still existed, and services were still held, but those who attended were viewed as quaint at best and deranged at worst."[179] (This statement is also necessary because the protagonist has "a penchant for the occult and miraculous," encouraged by her mentor and tutor Mamoru, "a very spiritual man" from the Far East,[180] signaling her uniqueness and cosmopolitan nature.) Moreover, this alternate present is littered with the quintessential steampunk airship across its skies, their names reflecting their North African origins: the *H.M.S. Ptolemy*, Princess Adele's ship for her European tour,[181] is accompanied by the *H.M.S. Cape Town*, *Mandalay*, *Khartoum*, and *Giza*.[182] Other named vessels are the *Persepolis* and the *Canterbury*.[183]

The cast of the novel is as colorful as the setting. Within the first few pages we are introduced to the heroine of the novel, Princess Adele of the Equatorian Empire and her younger brother Prince Simon, who are poster children of cultural mixing: Simon has a "red-cheeked visage that he got from their father, the Emperor Constantine II" and

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[178] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. 48.
[179] Ibid. 16.
[180] Ibidi. 16.
[181] Ibid. 7.
[182] Ibid. 9.
[183] Ibid. 103.

Adele has "olive skin and the distinctive nose of the late Empress."[184] This description of Adele codes her as being not completely white, with a hint of Semitism in her appearance, while still maintaining enough proximity to whiteness for the purposes of the story. The royal siblings are accompanied by Colonel Mehmet Anhalt, a "short but powerfully built Gurkha officer."[185] Their court includes the Equatorian Prime Minister, Lord Kelvin and Admiral Kilwas, "author of the air campaign that broke the rebels of Zanzibar."[186] Apart from the court is a shadow organization with a global reach, with agents such as: Nzingu Mamenna, a "sorceress from Zululand" who "wore a fashionable dress with graceful embroidery and beadwork" made of "polished bits of bone"[187]; and Sanah the Persian, who wears a black veil, leaving visible only her hands that are "covered with intricate henna tattooing and festooned with large silver jewelry." Sanah also has "knowledge and practice from her Persian homeland as well as Afghanistan and India," and collects "arcane religious rituals like butterflies." These two characters are described using their accouterments, to signal their exotic origins. In comparison, Sir Godfrey, a character presumably of British descent, is described as an "old gentleman... with a beet red face" who has "piercing and hard eyes" above a "bushy moustache," with no such accompanying items to signal his exotic Britishness. These characters, alongside the very spiritual Mamoru, appear in a single scene, to demonstrate how wide the scale of the novel's geography is. Such scenes are common and convenient for seeding the larger

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[184] Ibid. 8.
[185] Ibid. 7.
[186] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. 67.
[187] Ibid. 92.

arc that will carry over into sequel novels, and for gesturing to how multiethnic the cast is.

The multiethnic cast in a fantasy epic like this novel adds either an exotic appeal to the setting, or a cosmopolitan one. A novel thus can point to this background cast as evidence of having performed the legwork necessary to populate the world with a diversity of peoples. It deploys epithets such as "the Japanese man" and "the Zulu sorceress" to remind the reader of the presence of these racialized characters; within a page of introduction, the text impresses "Nzingu the Zulu" and "Sanah the Persian" onto the reader again, lest one has forgotten. Sir Godfrey, however, is Equatorian and living in Giza where this scene takes place; his name is also familiar enough to the white gaze as to not require qualifications for its origin. This form of multiculturalism uses the non-white bodies within the text as a façade for the default of whiteness, and uses unmarked bodies to signal the perspective of the white default.

This whiteness manifests within the construction of the Equatorian Empire. In the *Vampire Empire* world, Equatoria is an evolution of the British Empire, and "stretched from India to South Africa, with its great capital set amid the dusky mosques of Alexandria."[188] When Princess Adele asserts the supremacy of her empire—"My grandfather conquered India and my father conquered Africa"[189]—she underscores the power dynamic of the revised region. Africa's resources have indeed remained within the region as promised in the Griffith's essay, but instead of remaining in the power of

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[188] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. 12.
[189] Ibid. 55.

indigenous peoples, it instead is now bent to the needs of an established imperialist

power, Britain. Indeed, indigenous African nations are a threat to this British-led empire:

"the major African kingdoms of Bornu and Katanga had shown signs of expansionism in

the last two decades. [...] the Zulu in the Empire's mineral-rich but fractious Cape

Province could easily rebuild an independent military machine and swallow up a

weakened Equatoria."[190] Thus, when Princess Adele claims that Equatoria's goal is "for

all humans to join together and kill the vampires,"[191] her frame of reference for "all

humans" really only includes Equatoria, ruled by white bodies, and its incipient ally, the

American Republic. It harkens to Frankenberg's definition of whiteness as a standpoint

from which is unmarked, unnamed, and thus assumed to be universal.[192]

The concept of the Equatorian Empire creates a site of confusion as to how and

from where the royal family trace their lineage. The seat of power is in Alexandria of

Egypt, where Emperor Constantine II sits in state wearing robes "adapted from the

British pattern with the addition of a tiger skin shoulder throw as a nod to India." His

crown is made from "Egyptian gold" and jewels from India, his scepter topped with "a

fist-sized diamond from the Cape," and the carvings on his throne includes "Indian

elephants and lions of Africa" as well as "two golden Egyptian sphinxes."[193] Highlighting

the origins of these trappings underscores the imperial power and cosmopolitanism of the

emperor. To assert the Africanness of the family, Adele recognizes a monument in the

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[190] Ibid. 47.
[191] Ibid. 55.
[192] Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 1.
[193] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. 123.

British Museum while held captive in the vampire stronghold of London: "An ancient pharaoh of her homeland, wasted here in London. [...] It should be standing in the Victoria Palace in Alexandria. After all, her father was the heir to the pharaohs. As was she."[194] Here, the Griffiths attempt to make Adele a 'multicultural' character by having her identify with the pharaohs of Egypt, rather than the British Empire from which Equatoria is descended. This tactic tries to disrupt the whiteness of her lineage, in that despite her proximity to a white center of power, she identifies with what is not considered white. It does so by ignoring the historical basis upon which this heritage is built: the appropriation of Egyptian, generic African, and Indian symbology as a result of conquest. This disruption itself is a symptom of whiteness: the default European culture embedded in the Equatorian Empire is unmarked, papered over by the facade of the Other.

Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek note that one rhetorical strategy of whiteness is to tie itself to power "in a rather crude, naked manner": "In this space, the majority ('white') position is not universal, rather it is particular to whites, and the power embedded in this particular position is hidden from analysis."[195] In *Vampire Empire*, the majority position is indeed particular to white characters (or rather, the "northern-featured"), but it masquerades as an Other through Princess Adele's vaguely exotic features and its multiethnic supporting cast as being universal. The white gaze deployed in the text is purportedly displaced because viewpoint characters like Princess Adele,

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[194] Ibid. 134.
[195] Nakayama, Thomas K., and Robert L. Krizek. "Whiteness as a Strategic Rhetoric." *In Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*. Eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith K. Martin, 87–106. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. 96.

Colonel Mehmet Anhalt, and Mamoru are non-white. This tactic makes it easy to deflect criticism of white supremacy by pointing to Adele's distance from the white Equatorian courtiers—she is not completely white, therefore the text is not colonialist nor white supremacist—and the presence of the multiracial shadow organization—this text cannot be white supremacist, because these non-white characters have such obvious power.

However, the shadow organization is functionally helpless—it can only operate underground, and hangs its hopes on Adele to change the world—and Adele's exotic skin color and ethnic nose does not detract from the fact that she is heir to an empire that is built off the British Empire's conquest of India and Africa. Princess Adele is heir of pharaohs inasmuch as the idea gives her character something to feel introspective about, to make her seem more interesting to a reader. Her loyalties remain with an empire built upon the white conquest of black bodies; Adele refers to her homeland as "her own Equatorian Empire"[196] and the Equatorian army as "my army."[197] When the titular Greyfriar rescues her, she offers him a dukedom—"Would you like to be viceroy of Somaliland?"[198]—underscoring the imperial conquest of the continent with the blithe parceling out of its territory. Ultimately, too, the thrust of political tension within the novel is the reclamation of Europe from the vampires. Princess Adele is betrothed to a Senator of the American Republic, to "unite the two greatest human states into an allied war machine" against the vampires in North America and Europe.[199] The Equatorian

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[196] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. 12.
[197] Ibid. 55.
[198] Ibid. 57.
[199] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010.13.

court is dominated by "northern-featured courtiers,"[200] who "remained galled by the vampire clans' continuing domination" of Europe and "always talked of returning 'home'" in a War of Reconquest after a hundred and fifty years.[201] For a book selling itself as steampunk in Africa, its characters spend a lot of time talking about taking back Europe, and, in Europe itself, specifically London. This marks its priorities, and shows who maintains power in the supposedly changed world.

Europe and Eurocentrism remain the dominant frame of reference despite setting the story in Africa. The humans fleeing the newly-vampiric north "set about trying to recreate new versions of their beloved societies based on steam and iron in the wilting tropical heat,"[202] bringing their cultures, technologies, and colonial mindsets with them to re-establish their empires in climates that they are clearly unsuited to. In an encounter with a female vampire, Adele is "shocked to hear a vampire speak English ... this vile parasite, so much like a beautiful woman,"[203] implying that English has remained the official language of this Alexandrian-based empire. The vampire, who looks "beautiful" to Adele, is described as being "tall and statuesque, but pale and blue-eyed" implying that the standard of physical beauty still remains the pale and blue-eyed ideal; and these remain standard despite the obvious disgust that the northern-descended (white) Equatorians bear for the vampires. Time does not diminish these Eurocentric ideals, the same way that time has diminished the value of dark-skinned women in subjugated groups or the value of indigenous knowledge through cultural genocide. The vampires

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[200] Ibid. 8.
[201] Ibid. 12.
[202] Ibid. 11.
[203] Ibid. 27.

still look beautiful despite several generations of disgust for them. Given how history has played out in the changes of ideals regarding beauty and intellect, the authors' choice to maintain English as the language of empire, Europeans features as beautiful, and European technologies in unsuitable climates diminishes their argument that steampunk in Africa would be in any way a truly new idea that they are bringing to the table—they ultimately bring European steampunk into Africa, and re-establish non-European countries as sites of conquest.

This historical trajectory privileges Europe despite being an alternate history taking place somewhere outside of Europe. European history has not been diminished; it has simply halted, waiting for re-conquest to put it back on track. Long after the British have moved, through India, then through Africa, their old legends retain power, spurred on by the figure of the titular Greyfriar, whose legendary exploits are "borne of more than a century of subjugation and frustration, a re-surfacing of the legends like Rostam, King Arthur, or Robin Hood."[204] Even after the center of the British Empire has been moved from London, London still remains a romanticized bastion of ancestral pride, "the land of her father's ancestors, a realm of legends and heroes held in highest esteem by her family." It is "a mythic landscape" which "had grown much wilder since those grand days of gentlemanly squires showing their prize heifers, but the lines of fields and pastures were still visible from the air."[205] 19th century London is described as "the center of art and science and technology, the center of the world"[206] despite its "smoke

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[204] Griffith, Clay & Susan. *Vampire Empire: The Greyfriar*. Amherst: Pyr Books, 2010. 37.
[205] Ibid. 77.
[206] Ibid. 78.

and chemicals and compressed humanity," even though Adele now smells "blood and decomposition." Steampunk in Africa cannot apparently exist without continual references to Europe, despite the authors' insistence that Africa itself has its own examples of civilization and technological industrialization. Hence, the whiteness that informs the creation of the book undermines any purported multiculturalism it attempts to portrait, through its inability to conceive of a mode of being outside of whiteness, European colonization, and Eurocentric imperialism.

For all that the novel begins with a multicultural premise, whiteness asserts itself as the default frame of reference—having conquered brown and black spaces, it sets out to reconquer a white space. The inconsistency between the concept of steampunk in Africa and its execution can be excused as a result of careless editing, but to dismiss it as such is to ignore the structural fact that this was firstly written (with no apparent irony), then underwent several editorial passes and proofs, and finally became part of the marketplace of books for consumers to purchase. One apparently can have a multicultural book whilst centering whiteness. The use of the Others to surround the white center diverts attention from the white center, as it is invisible and unmarked. Ultimately, steampunk in Africa is commercially-viable so long as whiteness remains the standpoint from which it is viewed.

Non-White Masks: Literary Colorface Atop White Supremacy

This strategy of diversion also holds when the white center is painted over with the guise of the Other, specifically in novels that attempt to place themselves as being

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outside the Victorian milieu, or divorced from it. In 2011, buzz for *Stormdancer* by Jay Kristoff began. Marketing buzz for books is generated by a number of strategies asserting the presence of the author and the entry of the new book on the scene. These strategies involve targeted word-of-mouth news through advanced reading copies distributed on book review sites such as *GoodReads* and *NetGalley* as well as interviews and guest posts on book blogs. Such interviews and guest posts are seen as mutually beneficial exchanges: the book author gets the audience of the blog to sell their product, and the blog owner gets free content. In the case of *Stormdancer*, the buzz involved asserting the novel as "Japanese steampunk," which is also the title of a guest post on the blog *STEAMED!*[207]

This guest post is an example of multiculturalism as a commodity item within steampunk, using the principle of marketplace multiculturalism "to make a profit off cultural diversity."[208] Arguably, nobody gets rich selling books unless one has caught a cultural zeitgeist. *Stormdancer* is an interesting example of how the diversity discourse can be co-opted to trump up the appeal of a book written by a white author. In a brief essay, Kristoff discusses the history unfolding in Japan in the 19th century: the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and the opening of Japan to further trade and industrialization. He remarks on how the examples of Japanese animation movies that could be called steampunk are not set in places "remotely Japanese, despite being penned by Japanese creators." He wants something that is "distinctly Japanese," and not "so-called

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[207] Kristoff, Jay. "Japanese Steampunk, by Jay Kristoff." *Age of Steam*. July 28, 2011. Blogpost. < https://ageofsteam.wordpress.com/2011/07/28/japanese-steampunk-by-jay-kristoff/>
[208] Aguilar-San Juan, Karin. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 92.

'Victorientalism' or the Japanese annexation of Victorian fashion." He demonstrates his

knowledge of the discourse by linking to an essay critiquing Nick Otten's concept of

Victorientalism.[209] However, he does not discuss the investments of avoiding

Victorientalism, a 21st century re-imagining the Orient that draws not on the reality of the

place, but on the historical imaginations of it by Europeans. The "Vic-" prefix implies its

affiliation to steampunk, which is wedded by iconography and popular discourse to the

aesthetics of Neo-Victorianism. Without identifying the investments of avoiding

Victorientalism, it is hard to discern what alternatives this will present; as a result, this is

a performance of anti-racism, as Sara Ahmed points out, in which "saying as if saying

was doing can actually extend rather than challenge racism."[210] An examination on the

investments of challenging Victorientalism, especially from a white author, would have

been an ideal moment of what Chen Kuan-Hsing terms *deimperialization*: "to examine

the conduct, motives, desires, and consequences of the imperialist history that has formed

its own subjectivity."[211] Without this self-conscious examination, however, the

performance appeases a crowd that fancies itself progressive without having to do the

actual work of confronting issues of racism or privilege.

In his essay, Kristoff presents a series of questions on how feudal Japan would

have evolved "in a tech-heavy environment," with attendant changes in religion,

philosophy, and caste systems, as well as the "toll it would wreak on environment." This

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[209] Goh, Jaymee. "Countering Victorientalism." *Steampunk Magazine Blog*. March 8, 2010. Blogpost. < http://www.steampunkmagazine.com/2010/03/countering-victorientalism/>
[210] Ahmed, Sara. "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism." *Borderlands* 3, no. 2 (2004). Para 52.
[211] Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 4.

is a form of framing that assumes a certain trajectory of history: the way the Industrial

Revolution in Britain unfolded did lead to air pollution and the waste from

mechanization. Thus, every other Industrial Revolution must go the same way, because

we have no other roadmaps for technology with which to use. It is not hard to imagine the

answers to these questions, when one reads the local history: Japan was already involved

in its colonization of Manchuria, and fought with China regularly. Trade with other

countries was underway. Moreover, British Victoriana was not feudal, but a

constitutional monarchy abetted by colonial capitalism, which contributed to the changes

of the era. While feudal steampunk does exist, it is an application of the aesthetic to a

setting that could not possibly support it, such as faux-medieval Europe. Kristoff does not

reckon with any of this in his essay, implying that any historical aspects are of neutral

value and unimportant. Despite the proposition of presenting something "distinctly

Japanese," the frame of whiteness used in the writing of the novel dismisses the history of

actual Japan and wastes the opportunity to examine the history of the proposed era. In

such a project that attempts to offer novelty to the genre, the white gaze sabotages any

radical potential of revising ways of viewing the Other, falling back instead of the

selfsame Orientalism that the author himself criticized.

To compound the lack of rigor in epistemology, Kristoff decides that works by

artists like Greg Broadmore, mentioned in Chapter 1 for a series of rayguns, and James

Ng, whose series of Chinese steampunk considers the aesthetics of an industrialized Qing

Dynasty, "sum up the aesthetic of [his] novel exactly." That the art of Chinese steampunk

helps sum up the aesthetic of a Japanese steampunk novel indicate a problem in which

two Asian aesthetics are conflated as if they were interchangeable. James Ng's project is a different one from Kristoff's: Ng is exploring an alternate history of industrialization and the aesthetics not set in a secondary world. Moreover, Ng is rooted in the history of the aesthetic he is exploring; he is informed by it and by the cultural mores of the history with which he is experimenting. Kristoff, on the other hand, demonstrates a blithe dismissal of his source setting: in another interview, he cites Wikipedia as his research.[212] Adding to the list of absent acknowledgements is the transnational aspect of Japanese media that has in turn influenced steampunk through the fashion industry. Failing to consider the perspective of actual Japanese people (except for a bit of translation), the marketing of *Stormdancer* as a "Japanese steampunk novel" is tied to a perspective of Japanese-ness that does not originate from people of Japanese descent: *Stormdancer* received *GoodReads* accolades and book blurbs, with bestselling authors such as Patrick Rothfuss and Scott Westerfeld expressing excitement for "a Japanese steampunk novel." Although a novel marketing itself as such should not be tied to notions of purity that are wrapped up in the discourse of authenticity, this marketing does demonstrate a form of multiculturalism that "pats itself on the back for being so cosmopolitan," as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes with regards to cultural appropriation.[213]

Stormdancer, as such, is an example of what I will call "literary colorface." Literary colorface is the production of media that, on its surface, represents people of

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[212] Dashcooray. "An Interview with Jay Kristoff – Stormdancer." *Books and Swashbuckling*. July 30, 2012. Blogpost. <https://booksandswashbuckling.wordpress.com/2012/07/30/an-interview-with-jay-kristoff-stormdancer/>

[213] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 2.

color. It is also marketed as such, as in this case, a book called "Japanese steampunk."

The main characters are presented as non-white; the setting is neither North American,

European, nor any analogue. It is thus celebrated as an example of multicultural

representation, and given space on social media as such. This celebration ignores the

white supremacist processes that led to its production, and the (usually white) actors

behind these processes. The narratives underlying the perceived representation are

subsumed as being "universal," thus relatable to a wide audience from whom the

producers reaps profit.

The novel presents a story of Yukiko, a daughter of a hunter who has been

charged by the Shogun of this faux-Shogunate Japan to hunt down a mythological

creature, the griffin. The "distinctly Japanese" setting is marked through a series of

images and codes that are "naturalised, fixed and essentialised representations which

establish 'difference' by repeating and transmitting particular forms and ideas, creating

imperial, often racialised, 'knowledges,'"[214] in this case the language—encoded in names

and dialogue—and symbology associated with Asian-ness. The islands are divided into

territories overseen by four clans: Tiger, Fox, Dragon, and Phoenix. The Shogun is of the

Tiger clan, a despotic tyrant who kills subjects with impunity and has megalomaniac

ambitions of becoming the titular stormdancer, achieved when one rides the griffin, in

order to subjugate "the round-eye gaijin hordes,"[215] who are coded as white Westerners,

having blue eyes and pale skin. He rules over a landscape that has been wrecked with

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[214] De Groot, Joanne. "Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connection: Reflections on Consumption and Empire." *At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. Eds. Catherine Hall & Sonya Rose Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 187.
[215] Kristoff, Jay. *Stormdancer: The Lotus War Book One*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012. 8.

pollution through a combination of industrialization and drug addiction—both stemming from a plot device called the "blood lotus." The Shogun's imperialist desire at the center of the novel, without any other global power that his country interacts with to place it within any larger context, harks to the historical Yellow Peril, the Asian horde that seeks to conquer the West and corrupt it.

The blood lotus, in the novel, is a root of the nation's ills: "A third of the country is hooked on bud smoke, and the rest drink lotus leaf tea."[216] The entire plant has a use: "anesthetics from its sap, toxins from its roots, rope and canvas from its rind." The seeds provide a substance called "chi," used as "fuel for sky-ships, o-yoroi, motor-rickshaw, chainkatana and memory machines," enabling the industrialization that has made the Shima Imperium the leading colonizing force in this secondary world. This industrialization, reliant on blood lotus, causes pollution, noted by a character who remarks that the weather has been warming, and the sky used to be "brilliant blue, like a gaijin's eyes. And now? [...] Red as [blood] lotus. Red as blood." The implicit Eurocentrism is buried amid the description of the setting: the gaijin's eyes, the white Westerner's eyes, signal the former purity of the sky, now ruined by the blood lotus industry. The blood lotus also destroys local agriculture, as "the lotus roots gave off a toxic discharge that rendered the soil around it barren in just a few short years."[217] Industrialization has led to environmental degradation, the populace is driven into cities as a result, and starvation is widespread. This imagery relies on the cultural imagination

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[216] Ibid. 47.
[217] Kristoff, Jay. *Stormdancer: The Lotus War Book One*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012. 48.

of the Industrial Revolution, which in turn is rooted in a Eurocentric historical narrative. In this narrative, industrialization and mechanization led to the rise of a middle-class, a burgeoning working class, social ills such as poverty and corruption, and environmental degradation. This is a narrative that has been exported to other countries, creating the assumption that this necessarily plays out the same way for all forms of industrialization.

Kristoff masks this narrative using the plot device of the blood lotus. The lotus is a convenient shorthand for an Asian-esque setting. The lotus was, and still is, a metaphor of enlightenment in Buddhist religious imagery: the lotus flower symbolically rises above the mud of its origins to bloom. In white supremacist North America, it is divorced from its religious significance to serve as a code for the submissiveness of the East Asian woman, because of the delicacy of the lotus bloom. The blood lotus of *Stormdancer* can be read as a feminized symbol of corruption, poisoning the populace slowly through bodily ingestion and environmental pollution. It is a subversion of the lotus' symbolism in many living religions, re-signified into an analogue of yet another white supremacist narrative of Asian weakness: opium. The image of the opium addict is an anti-Chinese stereotype perpetuated in the 19th century against Chinese migrant workers.[218] Chinese and Japanese, however, have become synecdoches for Asia; what is associated with Chinese-ness clearly can carry over, in the white imagination, over to Japanese-ness, because they are both Other in similar enough ways, aesthetically.

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[218] Jiobu, Robert M. *Ethnicity and Assimilation: Blacks, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Mexicans, Vietnamese, and Whites*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. 40.

To further heighten the cultural differences of this setting from other novels of the same genre, Kristoff uses, or mis-uses, the syntax and vocabulary of the Japanese language. The use of Japanese words is intentional to mark the text from its Eurocentric peers; the mis-use is probably unintentional. Compounding the disregard for living religious traditions, English-language constructions are applied to religious references: "Izanagi's balls," swear several characters in the novel,[219] while one prays by "promising to perform several implausibly acrobatic feats on the Lady Luck's nether regions if she delivered."[220] These constructions plaster a Japanese cast over a certain style of oath-making and swearing usually associated with European fantasy milieus, in order to make the foreign deities more accessible to the universalized audience. Furthermore, the dialog of the entire novel is peppered with the use of Japanese words that have been divorced from their actual syntactical function, giving the sense of being Japanese-inflected. In breaking up a fight, Yukiko approaches her father's aggressor, saying, "Sama, please. Enough for one day, hai?"[221] The suffix "-sama," which in Japanese is appended as a term of respect or awe, is used liberally as a form of the English "mister" or "sir." Similarly, "hai" becomes a Japanese-sounding replacement for English-language multiple-use words like "okay" and "all right." (Negative *GoodReads* reviewers are especially fond of targeting Kristoff's use of "hai," a positive response part-of-speech, rather than a multiple-use word.) Usage of either of these terms does not fit Japanese linguistic cadences, because this text, far from being "Japanese steampunk," simply

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[219] Kristoff, Jay. *Stormdancer: The Lotus War Book One*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012. 17.
[220] Ibid. 12.
[221] Ibid. 15.

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wants the appearance of Japanese-ness, a "distinctly Japanese" setting that cleaves to popular culture's impressions of such without actually requiring the empathy and understanding of Japanese culture. The disregard for the actual linguistics of the language despite having ample resources for reference—Japanese media imperialism being such that it is very easy to find Japanese speakers who can explain the cultural contexts and usage of the specific phrases dotted throughout this text—demonstrates an entitlement to audience attention that would never be given to a Japanese writer seeking an international audience without running the risk of being inauthentic.

The novelty of Japanese-ness in *Stormdancer*, sold to a market that wants cultural difference without critical engagement with it, masks other white supremacist narratives, in this case, a narrative of poisoning marginalized communities as a long-term capitalist strategy. *Stormdancer*'s Asian-esque ruler poisons his own people with an opium analogue, and is himself a consumer of it. The entire economy of the country is arranged towards the production and continued consumption of the opium-analogue. It calls to mind the anti-Chinese stereotype of the opium addict, and draws on ignorance of the Opium Wars. The Opium Wars were initiated by the British's escalation of opium production to capture a Chinese market. In Western media, "the image of the opium den [...] represents Chinese immigrants who are incapable of resisting imperialism and coercive labor systems"[222]; in this novel, the opium analogue, found everywhere, represents the local populace's helplessness in rebelling against the tyranny of their ruler.

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[222] Marez, Curtis. *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 41.

Stormdancer also brings to mind the American War on Drugs in which government agents vilify African-American communities and raise the incarceration rates of young Black men.[223] By masking it as a government poisoning its own people, and having them all raced the same, *Stormdancer* proposes that "they could do it too"—projecting the white narrative of poisoning minority groups onto other groups who do not have any history of doing the same. This absolves readers from examining the material processes through which white supremacist systems purposefully oppress others, often towards physical death.

When divorced from the marketing and the author, *Stormdancer* stands out among several other novels that seem to repeat more of the same because of its choice to combine the oft-Victorian steampunk aesthetic with Japan, rather than using the Victorian aesthetic alone. However, the novel, which fits into the same niche as epic fantasy, actually provides more of the same: the adventure that seeks to overcome adversity and overthrow the corrupt regime is a popular narrative for the affects it produces—possibility, potential, individual power and agency, rebelliousness (without the work of actually rebelling, safely placed into the hands of a single individual). The setting, with its faux-Japanese neologisms to refer to industrial inventions, pique the readers's attention through the novelty of familiar technology now found in a foreign cast. What makes these conventions so difficult to recognize as such is that there are so few English-language novels using this multicultural face that the novelty of one "Japanese

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[223] LoBianco, Tom. "Report: Aide says Nixon's war on drugs targeted blacks, hippies." *CNN Politics*. March 24, 2016. Web. Last accessed June 20, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/23/politics/john-ehrlichman-richard-nixon-drug-war-blacks-hippie/index.html>

steampunk" novel alone fills a gap. However, this is a Japanese-ness that is filtered through not just a white gaze, but a gaze that refuses to provide the rigor required to truly root its steampunk into its chosen historical-geographical milieu, choosing instead a form that has been separated from its original. What this does is offer the presumption that anyone with a passing understanding of the culture it claims to represent can—and indeed, should—attempt to provide this representation as entertainment. It reproduces what Edward Said observes of the Orient from the perspective of the Orientalist: "the Oriental was always *like* some aspect of the West,"[224] always a space to map upon Eurocentric values and epistemologies. It uses the promise of multiculturalism as a strategy for selling culture, commodifying the face of the Other. It is not driven by the desire to cultivate empathy with the Other.

This is necessary to remember because literary production is often seen to be the forefront of exploring alternative narratives. For people uninterested the performance or visual side of steampunk, the literature is often the gateway into the aesthetic, and the marketplace of ideas associated with it. However, when a book markets itself as one that centers non-white bodies in a non-white setting, it does not necessarily follow that it is written from the non-white gaze, nor even for a non-white audience. It is disingenuous to claim that the writing will necessarily always transcend the author, that the narrative will always transcend race. More honestly, it transcends race by comforting the maintainers of the racial status quo.

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[224] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. 67.

White Bodies, White Spaces

The idea that narratives transcend race does not merely inform top-down cultural production like the publishing industry. It also informs community-based endeavours like the science fiction fan convention. Fan conventions are organized by local communities who intend to provide a space for attendees to indulge in a common interest. Without a clear mission stating a commitment to racial diversity, fan conventions tend towards the white gaze, simply because of the make-up of fannish spaces over time. Convention culture has been cultivated for decades, and newcomers to conventions are often introduced through a friend already familiar with it. Due to the basic racial makeup of such introductions, as well as the cost of attendance and other factors, conventions tend towards draw more white fans than racialized ones. This has prompted organizations like Con or Bust, designed to raise funds specifically to enable fans of color to attend fan conventions.[225]

These dynamics are replicated in convention organizing committees. As a result, whiteness permeates convention spaces in two forms: the programming decisions by the convention committee, and by the costuming choices of attendees. Although there is no baseline survey for fan conventions like the Lee and Low survey of the publishing industry, fans have commented on the lack of diversity on convention programming and the demographics of panelists. For example, fans and attendees of the 2016 World Fantasy Convention took umbrage with the program for panel items that demeaned

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[225] "Con or Bust's History." *Con or Bust*. N.d. Last accessed June 12, 2017. <http://con-or-bust.org/about/history/>

people of color and people with disabilities, as well as erased the work of female authors in recent years.[226] Even more recently, former chair of the 2017 World Science Fiction Convention, Crystal Huff, observed that "people who work for WorldCon frequently have defaults about who the 'go-to' person is for various jobs at conventions," limiting the pool of organizers involved in favour of the status quo of how to run the annual event.[227] This lack of diversity among program participants and organizers creates a fannish environment that flattens the discourse of diversity into lip service, or ignores it altogether. Accompanied by a desire to represent minority culture, organizers and attendees can unthinkingly reinforce Orientalist tropes and racist practices that further alienate fans of color. These practices can also be maintained in order to pacify the status quo that often skews towards a particular demographic, such as in the case of the World Fantasy Convention panel items.

Nova Albion was a steampunk convention formerly held irregularly in the Bay Area of California. It began as the Steampunk Exhibition in 2008, then returned in 2010 as Nova Albion. In 2011, Nova Albion announced their theme would be "Wild Wild East." Steampunk performer Diana Pho was invited as Ay-Leen the Peacemaker to present, given the theme of the convention and the burgeoning popularity of her blog *Beyond Victoriana*. Pho noted in her convention report, "Nova Albion's theme could've

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[226] Meadows, Foz. "WFC 2016: Programming Thoughts." *Shattersnipe: Malcontents & Rainbows*. Aug 2, 2016. Blogpost. Last accessed June 12, 2017.
<https://fozmeadows.wordpress.com/2016/08/02/wfc-2016-programming-thoughts/>
[227] Huff, Crystal. "Where is the WORLD in WorldCon?" *The WisCon Chronicles Vol. 11: Trials by Whiteness*. Ed. Jaymee Goh. Aqueduct Press, 2017. 103.

been a game-changer for steampunk."[228] The radical multiculturalist potential of the convention could have opened opportunities to reach minority communities in the area to discuss local histories, create sites of cultural exchange, and begun conversations between groups that might address inequalities. By re-visiting under-represented histories, Nova Albion might have offered a profound vision of possibility in understanding difference and the Other. A multicultural policy that truly respected the multitudes of peoples from varying cultures in attendance would have emphasized the need for these people, who are already acknowledged to be marginalized in the subculture, to be centered and affirmed. Given the location alone, attendee Astra Kim, a Korean-American member of the St. Clair's Aeronauts, pointed out that "there was such a wealth of topics that could have been broached in the panels and workshops like the Chinese Exclusion Act, the role of Chinese in building the American West in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, the Opium Wars, accessibility of various Asian mythologies and incorporating them into alternate universes in the way that Steampunk literature tends toward."[229] The convention policies went in a different direction, one in which attendees could "imagine an outside to the exhaustion and disasters of European culture,"[230] an escapism common in much of Eurocentric steampunk.

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[228] Pho, Diana. "The Good, The Bad, and the Weird: Nova Albion Con Report by Ay-leen the Peacemaker." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. May 13, 2011. Blogpost. Last accessed June 8, 2016. <https://beyondvictoriana.com/index/the-good-the-bad-the-weird-nova-albion-con-report-by-ay-leen-the-peacemaker/>

[229] Astra Kim, email message to author, December 12, 2012.

[230] Root, Deborah. *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*. Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1996. 21.

The opportunities to open dialogue and educate audiences on Asia-specific histories by tapping into local talent were not opportunities taken by the convention. The convention space instead became a site of commercial multiculturalism, in which the aesthetics of minority cultures are deployed superficially for novelty, and a site of alienation for its minority attendees. Unease began with the responses to the advertising of the convention several months prior:

> My unease with the 2011 Nova Albion Steampunk Exhibition actually began at Maker Fair the previous year. One of my fellow Aeronauts came back to our tent where the St. Clair Aeronauts were teaching creative writing with a flyer for the convention the next year with the remark of, 'I guess I better brush up on my insults in Chinese.' For the record, this fellow Aeronaut is a white fellow. I gave him a pretty hardcore side eye, and he handed me the flyer that has WILD WILD EAST emblazoned upon it with James Ng's airship painting.[231]

Without a firm policy in place to deal with issues of harassment and microaggressions, convention spaces often become free-for-all spaces in which victims of harassment must depend on the goodwill of whoever is in charge at the time. It is the same with regards to race and racism; without a clear statement and guidelines to adhere to in setting the tone for how differences will be approached, the comfort of the racial minority must depend on the sensitivity of fellow attendees. This sensitivity cannot always be depended on, as Kim's fellow volunteer demonstrated with his casual remark. Therefore, anti-racist policies, or lack thereof, often set the tone for attendee behaviour. "We are enthusiastic

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[231] Astra Kim, email message to author, December 12, 2012.

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more than we are culturally sensitive," someone remarked to Kim, furthering her

alienation at the convention, because comfort is a precarious luxury for the racial

minority at conventions, however low the bar is set.

There was also a sense that the few program panelists of color—Diana Pho, local

artists Jade Falcon and Roget Ratchford, and myself—were tokens in a sea of whiteness,

multicultural additives to steampunk: Pho wondered whether this would be "an

opportunity for *Beyond Victoriana*'s blog outreach or an appeal for the Stamp of

Approval,"[232] the token minority who approves of a potentially racist action and serves to

stand in for their entire minority group. Blogger Latoya Peterson has written on the

burden of representation that "to refuse to participate may mean that voice is never

represented, that the voices are the underrepresented are once again unvoiced, unheard,

and perhaps unknown."[233] Our presence at Nova Albion thrilled several people who

expressed to us that we were the main reason that they attended the convention, because

we were there to represent an anti-racist viewpoint. However, it was disappointing that

our attendance was tantamount to "positive reinforcement of a convention that hadn't

lived up to our own expectations about the theme."[234] The few Asians on the

programming of an ostensibly Asian-themed convention gave credit to an event that

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[232] Pho, Diana. "The Good, The Bad, and the Weird: Nova Albion Con Report by Ay-leen the Peacemaker." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. May 13, 2011. Blogpost. Last accessed June 8, 2016. <https://beyondvictoriana.com/index/the-good-the-bad-the-weird-nova-albion-con-report-by-ay-leen-the-peacemaker/>
[233] Peterson, Latoya. "On Being Feminism's 'Ms. Nigga.'" *Racialicious.com*. March 8, 2011. Facebook post. Last accessed June 8, 2016. < https://www.facebook.com/notes/racialicious-race-identity-and-pop-culture-in-a-colorstruck-world/on-being-feminisms-ms-nigga/10150117774152287/>
[234] Pho, Diana. "The Good, The Bad, and the Weird: Nova Albion Con Report by Ay-leen the Peacemaker."

could have seen more racial parity. A few Asians being encouragement for attendees who might have otherwise been lukewarm about the event speaks to the sense of relief that racial representation offers to minorities who are often alienated by events dominated by Eurocentric programming and white organizers.

The sense of tokenism was further exacerbated by the fact that Nova Albion was using art widely recognized as the *Imperial Steamworks* series, by Hong Kong artist James Ng. Though Ng himself was not well-recognized as the hand behind the creations at the time, the *Imperial Steamworks* series had still garnered a great deal of attention as inspirational "Asian steampunk." Yet James Ng himself was not the Artist Guest of Honor; that honor went to Paul Guinan and Anina Bennett, creators of the retro-futuristic robot *Boilerplate*, who, in Forrest Gump style, was part of an imagined history in which it participated in a wide range of historical events. The robot Boilerplate made an appearance in the program book, but not in the advertising for the convention itself. Ng himself was not be brought in as a Featured Artist until a few weeks before the convention. Kim criticized the last-minute nature of adding James Ng to the convention guest list, given the theme of the convention.[235] It sent a signal that James Ng's art was good enough to use as advertising, but Ng himself was not relevant to the theme of the convention unless the budget allowed for such secondary priorities.

Picking an artist across the Pacific and Asian American steampunks on the opposite American coast also added another layer to the tokenism. The list of programming panels only listed two names that could be visibly counted as Asian. There

[235] Astra Kim, email message to author, December 12, 2012.

was no evidence that there was any visible engagement with Asian communities in the immediate Bay area. The lack of effort was more obvious to locals, as Kim wrote: "We are a hop, skip, and jump away from San Francisco's very famous and very historic Chinatown […] there is a wealth of young Sinologists at the local universities, there are plenty of Asian-American folks within the Steampunk community who are history and culture academics who would have been able to contribute to the theme in a meaningful and critical way."[236] In the case of Nova Albion, the lack of engagement with the local communities whose heritage is supposedly showcased in the aesthetic theme of the convention demonstrated an unwillingness to reckon with the various histories that may have interacted with the time period that steampunk revisits. This lack of engagement reinforces the Eurocentric priorities of the theme, despite it being ostensibly about an Other, and makes stark the white gaze used to frame the event.

The white gaze of the organizers not only informed choices in guests of honor and panelists, but also programming titles, descriptions and assignments. Despite the event director's initial search for "discourse and depictions that show various Asian themes through a Steampunk lens," the panel topics were harked more towards European history—and even then, a thin sliver of Europe—than Asian history. A panel on gender, for example, was topically called "Sexual Politics and Suffragettes." The term "suffragette" is not one found in much of Asia, even in translation, and immediately calls up women's history outside of Asia. Another panel was titled "Class Politics in England,

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[236] Astra Kim, email message to author, December 12, 2012.

America, and The Far East," with no indication of what the "Far East" entailed.[237] Lumping Asian countries into a vague singular term while naming specific Western countries, the programming organizers sidelined the region that is supposedly the theme of the convention. During the panel organizing process, panelists were requested to provide a list of topics they are interested in speaking on or have some expertise about. Thus, when Pho listed "Asian history" in her research interests, used by programming directors to assign panelists to appropriate topics, she was assigned to give a lecture on 19th Century China, despite her Southeast Asian background. From the perspective of the program organizer who is not paying attention to the racial dynamics of the situation, the specifics do not really matter; the East is the East, even as India, Arabia and Africa are excised from the picture.

Careless programming choices using an Orientalist East-West binary also placed an awkward burden of representation on the panelists of color. A panel entitled "History of Technology in the East and West: How did the less-developed West overtake the sophisticated East?" was described as follows:

> For a thousand years, China and Japan were light years ahead of Europe in technological development: Paper, movable type, fine ceramics, finely-tuned bureaucracies and government institutions, etc. Then, in the course of a very few centuries, the empires of Europe rocketed from primitive feudal agricultural civilizations to advanced industrial powerhouses, in some cases conquering the countries they once idolized. Why did this happen? And what changed again to

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[237] Upon further querying, the "Wild Wild East," it seemed, consisted only of China and Japan.

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make Japan the world leader in robotics, electronics, and infrastructure? These

questions have perplexed and divided scholars for over a century—and we're sure

our panelists will have something to say about each of them!

The description begins with a list of technologies commonly credited to "the East," which

consists of China and Japan, reflecting a 21st century sensibility of what constitutes

"East" or, the Orient. Immediately with a broad stroke, the history of Europe is re-

asserted, implying that to talk about "the East" one must also necessarily talk about it in

relation to "the West," because in the Orientalist framework, the East can never stand as

its own entity separate from the West (even at an event themed "Wild Wild East"). The

questions, designed to frame the panel, gestures less to the creation of a conversation and

more to the education of the audience by assuming the expertise of the panelists, who

may not be experts on this history at all. Furthermore, the idea that "these questions have

perplexed and divided scholars for over a century" is a form of what Mary Louise Pratt

calls "anti-conquest," the colonizer's self-representation as innocent and neutral, puzzled

over violent historical processes.[238] By not naming the history and the violence of

European colonialism, the panel description positions an observer whose subject position

is not interrogated.[239] While panelists at conventions are expected to have some expertise

on the panel topic, the panel description assumes a conversation with speculation—

"something to say" on "perplexing" and "divisive" questions—on a topic that has been

researched without the false binary of expertise implied by the panel description and

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[238] Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 7.
[239] The panelists did not actually have much to say about those questions at all beyond how inappropriate they were: "Within the first five minutes," Pho reported, they were "re-directed away from the 'East vs. West' psuedo-cultural-war-binary."

choice of panelists. The panelists, Pho, who presumably was meant to represent the East, and Roget Ratchford, a Black American mechanical engineer who presumably was meant to represent the West, were moderated by fanzine editor Chris Garcia. Given that this was also the most racially-diverse panel during the entire convention, it placed a burden of responsibility to educate the audience on what might have been an extremely heavy topic covering large swaths of time periods and geography.

The whiteness informing the programming was stark in the changes made to a panel that Pho and I had pitched to Nova Albion which was drastically changed: its title, "Steam Around the World" was changed to "Steampunk Beyond Victorian England." The new title implied that despite the theme that looked like it should center Asians, Victorian England remained the starting point from which we would 'go beyond.' Besides maintaining the supremacy of Victoriana discourse even in an Asian-themed convention, the re-naming of our presentation signaled an invalidation of the panelists' power to name the presentation. Although the original panel title was restored, the program description was also changed. The following paragraph was the original description:

> Beyond Victoriana, what steampunk possibilities exist? Come join us as we take
> you on a trip around the world to see how steampunk manifests in the minds of
> those who don't think within a Eurocentric context, whether they blend Western
> influences, or use recognizably steampunk elements within a distinct flavor
> outside of Europe. We will also approach the ethical challenges that come up

when engaging in multicultural steampunk and discuss matters of race, privilege, and cultural appropriation.

The modified description ran as follows:

A whirlwind tour of non-English steampunk conventions, customs, film, comics, and literature.[240]

The new program description did not represent our presentation in the slightest, as our presentation consisted of considerably more than just a catalog of media. Any language that promises pushback against the status quo with difficult conversations about race and privilege was removed. That the title and description was so ignored in favour of concocting a new one that was misrepresentative of the presentation was an example of microaggressive racism: one which made us doubt whether our voices were heard and valid, and yet an instance in which we could not be sure whether this had or had not been done to other program items. The idea that our program description was too long could not be the case, as many other program descriptions were as long, evidenced in the description of the "History of Technology" panel. Thus does it surface what it means to "show various Asian themes through a steampunk lens": the lens remains Eurocentric, and the Asian-ness is the subject of study. The terms of study are set by the ones who control the lens, and the ones who control the lens at an event such as Nova Albion are white, invested in a status quo that does not question race and privilege.

Beyond the structural organization of Nova Albion, the Orientalism of the convention came in the form of the many costumes worn by the majority-white attendees.

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[240] "I wonder what steampunk customs are," Diana mused to me later. We never figured it out.

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The costuming ran across a spectrum between costumes which were extraordinarily accurate to the period, made from close study of portraits from the time, and costumes that were extraordinarily inaccurate, a mish-mash of anything that vaguely signified "Eastern." "I saw many women dressed as sexy Geishas in yukatas that were hiked up to their knees and bustled at the back in the Victorian fashion with a corset over it in place of an obi," Astra Kim reported.[241] Pho recalls "the awkward use of geisha makeup."[242] The "Sexy Geisha" is an example of how the West treats many cultural imports: stripping them of their original context, infusing it with hypersexualized fantasies borne from a colonialist mindset, then mass-producing this image for commercial profit to consumers looking for mere entertainment. As Asian American women, both Kim and Pho keyed into the stereotypes immediately, being constantly at risk of racism from the narratives perpetuated by these stereotypes. This, combined with other programming choices, has echoes of what Deborah Root refers to as "an aestheticized taste for societies far removed from where we actually are" whereby "the Westerner remains in charge, and the outside remains inside, the aesthetic property of the avant-garde."[243] The theme of the convention gave its tacit permission to the attendees to treat the societies of the "Wild Wild East" as aesthetic property, expressed in consumer items that perpetuate racist stereotypes, and rely on these stereotypes for commercial purposes.

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[241] Astra Kim, email message to author, December 12, 2012.
[242] Pho, Diana. "The Good, The Bad, and the Weird: Nova Albion Con Report by Ay-leen the Peacemaker." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. May 13, 2011. Blogpost. Last accessed June 8, 2016. <https://beyondvictoriana.com/index/the-good-the-bad-the-weird-nova-albion-con-report-by-ay-leen-the-peacemaker/>
[243] Root, Deborah. *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*. Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1996. 21.

Religion, too, was commodified into costume inspirations: "I saw a white vendor who was dressed as a Bhikkuni (a female Buddhist monk) along with wearing a portion of a metal prayer wheel on her head as a hat," Kim wrote to me, expressing offense as a practicing Buddhist, "There is clothing that denotes a layperson who is a serious student of Dharma, but that was not it." Whatever this woman's intentions were, she participated in the use of "an image that never engages with actual people or communities and indeed has no real interest in doing so"[244]; as the convention programming did not involve panels on which conversations on the representation of religious imagery might have been had. Groups are not a monolith, with a diversity of opinions on what constitutes offensive versus acceptable, tied to political currents and investments of self-representation. Devoid of the space to have the dialogue, religiously-themed costumes are divorced from the context and community of the religion that inspires them. Like in Jay Kristoff's *Stormdancer*, Buddhism becomes part of an Orientalist project that sees Asian cultures and their religions as "inherently timeless and apolitical,"[245] rather than a living religion that is caught up in the politics of capitalist commodification and minority representation. The convention space, which might have been the space to connect history and aesthetics, instead becomes the space that privileges the white gaze's entitlement to Orientalist aesthetics at the expense of the minority attendees.

The other mode of costuming was expressed in costumes that were re-created as close to period portraits as possible. There were a group of men in Lawrence of Arabia

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[244] Root, Deborah. *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*. Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1996. 93.
[245] Ibid. 93.

robes, and a couple in Middle-Eastern uniforms who proudly showed the portrait they referenced. There were also the usual British "explorers" with their pith helmets and khaki uniforms. Made with the attention to detail that steampunks are fond of, they were impressive, in terms of how much time and effort had gone into the project. On the surface, this seemed an improvement: if they were willing to spend that much time researching the clothing, then some time must have been taken to study the contexts of the clothing. This was counterweighted by the racial disparity in demographics of convention attendees and hotel staff: Pho would note "the discomforting parallel when watching white people dressed like sahibs being waited on by South Asian waiters," recreating the dynamics in which class and race intersect.[246] Whether consciously or not, attendees of Nova Albion re-created the Orientalism and racism of the Victorian era, and occasions like it were like what Deborah Root called "a version of the desire to display trophies of war, here narrativized images rather than enemy rifles, body parts, or actual artifacts."[247]

This aestheticization of the East did not humanize actual Asians beyond the individual level to one of community engagement. This does not manifest in outwardly oppressive actions or openly racist attitudes, but in declarations of appreciation and confusion on how to express such without engaging with the communities of the appreciated cultures. After a panel, a young white woman approached me, and asked,

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[246] Pho, Diana. "The Good, The Bad, and the Weird: Nova Albion Con Report by Ay-leen the Peacemaker." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. May 13, 2011. Blogpost. Last accessed June 8, 2016. <https://beyondvictoriana.com/index/the-good-the-bad-the-weird-nova-albion-con-report-by-ay-leen-the-peacemaker/>
[247] Root, Deborah. *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference*. Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1996. 164.

"how do I show that I really love these cultures without disrespecting them?" This question expresses an anxiety on "the line between appreciation and appropriation" and a desire for firm and universal guidelines applicable across cultures. It comes from a place of good intentions that nonetheless wants the ease of flattened power dynamics and the perfect equality between social groups that does not exist. Falling back on imagining the Other in a liberal multiculturalist framework, wherein representation alone can provide knowledge of the Other, steampunk participants do not recognize the need to go beyond "research" towards community engagement. The observation that Margaret Rose makes of how steampunk attention to detail "within flamboyantly wrong imagined pasts" is supposed to "explore the ways in which the conventional historical sensibility sometimes gets it wrong"[248] takes on an uncomfortable, alienating valence when it is performed by steampunks of a hegemonic racial group who are ignorant of how historical sensibility gets non-Eurocentric histories wrong. "Do your research" is common advice to people wanting to do multicultural steampunk, but it is advice that fails to consider a response that might have pushed back against the framework of liberal multiculturalism. "Research" implies a collection of knowledge about the Other, taking advantage of an access to a body of knowledge, often collated through colonial mechanisms. It does not necessarily lead to empathy and fruitful relationships with the Other in which the power dynamics of privilege might be up-ended.

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[248] Rose, Margaret. "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 20:3 (2009): 319-333.

Caught up in the desire to research the Other, with the novelty of knowing the Other through representations of the Other, the industries of steampunk reinforce the standpoint of whiteness. Top-down industries, such as publishing, legitimize representations of the Other through their institutional support, promoting works as non-white steampunk from regions outside the Victorian milieu despite these works using racist stereotypes. The white authors are celebrated as contributing to the multicultural diversity of the steampunk subgenre, further legitimized with multi-book deals. Bottom-up industries, such as the convention, that fail to assert an anti-oppression stance in their organizing principles create spaces in which white steampunk fans rely on their own limited knowledge of the Other to represent the Other, creating fraught and alienating spaces for racial minorities. Multiculturalism becomes a commodity that adds novelty to the industry, rather than a mode with which to provoke conversation between communities and dialogue with history.

Chapter 4: Radical Multiculturalism and Steampunk

In this chapter, I argue that steampunk that is radically multicultural would center the perspectives and narratives of people of color in a way that challenges conventional historical narratives that often overstate the importance of historical—or fictional—actors of European, or more specifically Victorian English descent. Multicultural steampunk can engage with imperialism, and the experience of having been colonized, in a way that generates an uncomfortable novelty, because it can be misread as not steampunk, or have its roots ignored in favor of its novelty, or turn an interrogative gaze onto narratives of European hegemony and refuse an easy redemption for any of its actors. Pushing beyond commercial multiculturalism that treats culture as aesthetic, steampunk that engages with a different cultural, and thus epistemological, context may also utilize a different set of physical materials from the ones usually upcycled by steampunk participants. These approaches may in fact lead to steampunk that is not multicultural at all, but so rooted in a specific cultural context that it is practically monocultural, and can only be called "multicultural" because it is, for all intents and purposes, associated with the non-white. The result also may not be recognizable as steampunk, due to the refusal of the usual frames of cultural reference common to mainstream steampunk. This, however, allows the aesthetic to evolve into more fruitful directions that engage with history and the present in more interesting and politically active ways.

As an aesthetic, steampunk re-imagines historical technology with the knowledge of more recent scientific advancements and the expanded possibilities thereof. These

imagined technologies, such as giant clockwork robots, powerful rayguns, convoluted

chemical processes, or hulking airships, may be exaggerated beyond commonsensical

logic, to the point of being magical.[249] Steampunk stories and art are often set in an

alternate history Victorian England based on popular imagination of the time and place.

Historian Cory Gross attributes the popularity of romanticizing the 19th century, and turn

of the 20th century, to Walt Disney: "[Disney] recognized that the Victorian Era was

changing from the backwards past of our fathers to the gilded fairyland of our

ancestors."[250] The 1954 movie *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* would lead to several

features of Disneyland, which in turn would inspire the generations that would eventually

coalesce around steampunk as a label. With the cultural hegemony of the West, and the

lingering dominance of the British Empire through language, cultural mores, and

epistemology, Victorian England tends to become the default setting for steampunk art

and literature.

    This hegemony is maintained by cultural producers and fans who conceive of

steampunk specifically as a re-imagining of Victorian England. Long-time community

member Evelyn Kriete asserted that "the Victorian or Edwardian […] are the core of

[steampunk's] identity, the aesthetic of the age. One of the things that allows steampunk

to be so diverse and so harmonious is that it has a clear core aesthetic to build on."[251]

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[249] Tidhar, Lavie. "Sub-genre spotlight: Steampunk." *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*. Feb 2005. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10114/Steampunk>

[250] Gross, Cory. "A History of Steampunk." Guest post on *Steampunk Scholar*. Aug 27, 2010. Last accessed Jul 7, 2017. <http://steampunkscholar.blogspot.com/2010/08/history-of-steampunk-by-cory-gross.html>

[251] Quoted in Vandermeer, Jeff and S.J. Chambers. *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide To The World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature*. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. Pg. 150.

Kriete's assertion only considers the visual aesthetic of the dominant image of steampunk, and not the methods by which steampunk art is produced—the pastiche and bricolage to imagine a retrofuturist technology. Pastiche involves an imitation of a style, while bricolage is a method by which artists appropriate an item or artefact from its original purpose. In steampunk, pastiche involves the imitation of Victorian aesthetics, often to decorate a more recent piece of technology, such as a laptop. This process may include bricolage: the use of pipes to build a raygun, or the use of brass cups to create a car headlight. These methods are not tied culturally or temporally to any specific context.

Therefore, although fans such as steampunk scholar Mike Perschon often cite neo-Victorianism as an element of steampunk,[252] it is possible to imagine a steampunk with a radically different point of reference away from the Victorian. Steampunk as an aesthetic mode proposes modern, or postmodern, imaginings of what the future technologies could have looked like, from the perspective of what we think our ancestors might have thought. These imaginings are allohistoric by nature: alternate histories with the premise of accelerated technology and how that technological acceleration affects the course of historical events as recorded. The supremacy of the British Empire is often assumed or taken for granted. While critiques of empire are possible, the colonized are often subsumed into the narrative, playing the exact same role that they would in conventional history: as victims, or as resistors, and rarely as generating their own agency and gaining self-determination through these accelerated technologies.

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[252] Perschon, Mike. "Defining Steampunk as Aesthetic." *Steampunk Scholar*. Blogspot. May 17, 2010. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017. <http://steampunkscholar.blogspot.com/2010/05/defining-steampunk-as-aesthetic.html>

Because steampunk does not have to be tied to the Victorian, it is open to re-imagining history in ways that do not necessitate or assume the supremacy of the British Empire, or indeed any empire. "Multicultural steampunk" began as a way to address this desire to see alternate histories in steampunk that were not set in Victorian England, but in other geographic spaces, often spaces of the colonized. Therefore, "multicultural steampunk" often refers to cultural production in which the steampunk aesthetic is applied to or combined with some region, space, or item that is designated non-white, often non-European, in current perceptions of race. For example, gears and sprockets, common motifs associated with steampunk, would be applied to an "ethnic" costume, such as an Indian sari. Depictions of Asian or African countries in alternate 19th century re-imaginings are also considered multicultural steampunk. These are attempts to demonstrate that steampunk can be done anywhere by anyone, and thus is an egalitarian aesthetic. They presume biases free (or at least different) from the ones in the oppressive 19th century history that inspires steampunk. Thus, multicultural steampunk runs the risk of being superficial by nature, concerned only with novelty and visual difference. Without anti-racist awareness backing it, it lacks any radical potential to connect with the communities it is supposed to represent and thus fails provoke the audience to re-think history as it is conventionally told.

I thus propose that steampunk can be significantly deterritorialized from the geography of Victorian England, and demand attention to regions underrepresented in science fiction and fantasy cultural production as a whole, if steampunk participants are willing to take a more radical approach to multiculturalism. The concept of radical

multiculturalism, as proposed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their project of "unthinking" Eurocentrism, generates more powerful and politically-cogent narratives out of a subgenre that thrives on re-iterations of historical events and re-conceptualizations of technology, as well as visual aesthetics that are associated with the past. Shohat and Stam propose that radical multiculturalism "has to do less with artifacts, canons, and representations than with the communities 'behind' the artifacts [and] calls for a profound restructuring and reconceptualizing of the power relations between cultural communities."[253] A multicultural steampunk that moves beyond novelty and superficial difference demands a difference in how people are thought of, historically and conventionally. It also begins to move away from the hegemony of Eurocentrism in steampunk and recognizes in full the whiteness permeating steampunk cultural production.

Whiteness, argued sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, is an accumulation of material and discursive dimensions that shape the lives of white people, who are not considered "raced" and therefore are considered default and unmarked in the system of dominance within which they are advantaged.[254] This advantage manifests through institutional privileges which are so pervasive they are unremarkable and considered part of the status quo. Whiteness is also a standpoint, "from which white people look at [themselves], at others, and at society." This standpoint is internalized and expressed in everyday interactions with the Other.

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[253] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 47.
[254] Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Pg. 1.

Whiteness in steampunk is evident in the Eurocentric histories and perspectives that are privileged in cultural production such as literature and costuming. The association of Victoriana with steampunk is a consistent aspect in how the aesthetic is taken up by its fans. This has led to anxiety over and criticism of the pervasive representations of the British Empire and seeming valorization of it through the fashions and aesthetics inspired by it. In a post about the presence of Empire in steampunk, author Charles Stross ranted about steampunk fans playing "wealthy aristocrats sipping tea in sophisticated London parlours [and] airship smugglers in the weird wild west" in a category filling up with "trashy, derivative junk and also with good authors who damn well ought to know better than to jump on a bandwagon."[255] This trend held "an affection for the *ancien regime*" in the background of steampunk fiction glutting the market in 2010. Stross' point about the derivative nature of steampunk received pushback against the post that gestured to existing work by steampunk critics.[256] Ironically, this pushback seemed to confirm the hegemony of the Victorian in the steampunk cultural imagination: if steampunk were really the unproblematic, intrinsically antiracist subgenre that its fans made it out to be, then its literature and art could stand on its own without needing defense.

Part of this hegemony continues to exist because of the reliance on specific images to signify the steampunk aesthetic. In an essay challenging the Eurocentrism of steampunk, Amal El-Mohtar observes that steampunk fans are "happy to let the

[255] Stross, Charles. "The hard edge of empire." *Charlie's Diary*. October 2010.
<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2010/10/the-hard-edge-of-empire.html>
[256] Westerfeld, Scott. "Genre Cooties." *Scott Westerfeld blog*. November 2010.
<https://scottwesterfeld.com/blog/2010/11/genre-cooties/>

clockwork, the brass, the steam stand in for them synecdochally, but have gotten to a point where we've forgotten that they are symbols, not ends in themselves."[257] The iconography is imbued with meaning beyond the text, brought into the text to signal as a shorthand that specific types of stories are being told. Often, the appeal of these types of stories rest on colonialism and imperialism, since they are told within a Eurocentric frame of reference. Casting a net wider beyond the typical iconography could still create similar narratives, but they would have different valences, and would require more work in understanding as the frame of reference shifts from the familiar. Revising the position of whiteness in steampunk and dislodging Victoriana in steampunk challenges white hegemony as a default that maintains its relevance and novelty through the narratives it perpetuates in the use of popular iconography.

Multicultural steampunk as a trend was intended to push back against this hegemony. However, the concept of multiculturalism in application to steampunk also has inflections of priorities identified by Jodi Melamed in her articulation of liberal multiculturalism.[258] She criticized the pluralism that informs knowledge production of culture and the Other as having "restricted antiracism to forms that assented to U.S. nationalism" and "reduced culture to aesthetics and then overvalorized aesthetic culture by ascribing agencies to aesthetic culture all by itself, apart from social and material forces." Ways of knowing and interacting with the Other are managed so that minority communities become harmless to larger institutions, such as the state. Knowledge of

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[257] El-Mohtar, Amal. "Towards a Steampunk Without Steam." *Tor.com: Steampunk Fortnight*. Oct 2010. Last accessed Jul 29, 2017. <http://www.tor.com/2010/10/29/towards-a-steampunk-without-steam/>
[258] Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 94.

racialized and/or minority groups are deployed as aesthetics in literature or art, separate from communities of racialized groups themselves. Multicultural steampunk made in this mode therefore has less to do with the engagement with living communities than with how these histories can add novelty and entertainment value through consumption.

At a glance, then, steampunk participants seem heavily invested in an imaginary of Victoriana that excludes or exploits people of color. This is an effect of a Eurocentric view of the 19th century, in which "Europe, alone and unaided, is seen as the 'motor' for progressive historical change."[259] Oppressive practices of colonialism and imperialism are minimized, or not directly addressed, placing emphasis on the prosperity and power of the empire. People of color may be invisiblized and unacknowledged, when in fact they are present at events or within the literature. This is further exacerbated by a lack of desire to acknowledge race as a factor in order to appear "color-blind" and thus progressive.

People of color have a presence in steampunk, as far as dressing up and participating in gatherings go. The presence of people in color cosplaying steampunk has a soothing effect. It provides optimism to other people of color that they could also participate despite steampunk looking like it is not "for" them. It also soothes white guilt for participating in a form of play that centers a time of Empire. People of color in the steampunk communities become the equivalent of "the [non-white] friend" to whom members can gesture to in order to say that steampunk is not racist.

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[259] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 2.

The presence of people of color in steampunk does not necessitate any progressiveness. Diana Pho's recent chapter on racial and political ideologies in steampunk performance analyzes the works of British chap-hop artists who draw from Black American hip-hop tradition and the performances of non-white steampunk cosplayers such as Vietnamese-French Maurice Grunbaum, who deploys Iron Cross imagery, and Savan Gupta's steampunk persona A Count Named Slick Brass, a South Asian using the politicized *Boondocks* figure as a reference point for misogynist performance.[260] She argues that although these works either draw heavily on non-white cultural histories or purport to critique white supremacist ones, their effects miss the mark of providing true critique, as their performances reflect a standpoint of whiteness. A position that suggests that the mere presence of people of color in the production of steampunk diminishes the presence of white supremacy also absolves the role of the uncritical creator and consumer in the overall industry surrounding it, and erases the work of white creators who actively attempt to include non-white histories into what might otherwise be another erasive counter-history, such as Cherie Priest and Kate Elliott.

Often, the racial minority's presence is deferred as an anomaly, sidelined from the mainstream. The final chapter of *The Steampunk Bible*, "The Future of Steampunk," offers two possibilities for the aesthetic to develop: environmentalism ("green steampunk") and cultural diversity ("multicultural steampunk").[261] Multiculturalism, that

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[260] Pho, Diana. "Punking the Other: On the Performance of Racial and National Identities in Steampunk." *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, & Futures*. Eds. Bowser, Rachel A., and Brian Croxall. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 141.

[261] Vandermeer, Jeff and S.J. Chambers. *The Steampunk Bible: An Illustrated Guide To The World of Imaginary Airships, Corsets and Goggles, Mad Scientists, and Strange Literature*. New York: Abrams Image, 2011. 203.

is, the interaction between multiple cultural groups and their values, aesthetics, and social priorities, is projected into the future as a possible evolution for steampunk. Multicultural steampunk is part of the future—and as the book has been on the market for several years now, without editorial changes, multicultural steampunk is always part of the future within this text—despite existing as part of the present, because to reckon with the difficulties of multicultural steampunk is to reckon with the unhappy results of racism. Therefore, the discourse of diversity is given a futurity that ignores the diverse, if difficult, present.

To take up the project of a multicultural steampunk that has radical potential is to push back against the notion that it is just like "regular" steampunk—brass and steam and clockwork, just in a different ethnic context. A multicultural steampunk may take up the work of re-imagining the past and the ways that technology may have been taken up by our ancestors. It does not only take into consideration plausible workings of technology, but also different ways of thinking about the world. Radical multiculturalism in steampunk will result in vastly different kinds of steampunk which may not share anything in common at all, aesthetically or epistemologically, beyond methodology.

Geographic Materialism

Radical multiculturalism is a response to Eurocentrism, a refusal to accept commonly-held perspectives on history, and thus non-Eurocentric. A successful non-Eurocentric steampunk project would first see Victorian steampunk as, essentially, a regional project, made popular by the supremacy of Eurocentric history. Therefore, a

non-Eurocentric steampunk moves away from the Victorian as the frame of reference, historically, geographically, and culturally. It takes up the question of geographical materialism in Chen Kuan-Hsing's *Asia as Method*:

> To spatialize historical materialism is not only to remove Eurocentrism, but also to launch another round of spatializing (after historicizing) epistemology. ... within the imminent historical-geographical formation, how does a geographical space historically generate its own mode of production?[262]

> In science fiction and fantasy parlance, this is what writers call "worldbuilding," the process by which creators—as writers, artists, or other cultural producers—create a believable world that may or may not resemble our own. In steampunk, this is the alternate history that has an element of accelerated technology, or futuristic technology as imagined (and decorated) by people in the imagined past. This alternate history should offer what Darko Suvin calls "cognitive estrangement,"[263] referring to how science fiction re-casts the world we know into something a little different, something that challenges how we understand our world and the possibilities available to us. For science fiction that takes up a different geographical and cultural context, this dissonance should be two-fold: as it does not take place in a geography familiar to most readers of steampunk, it should ensure a similar dissonance for the foreign reader through a refusal of the exoticism associated with the region. It should say something about the region that the reader cannot take for granted based on superficial, tourist-oriented knowledge.

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[262] Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 106.

[263] Suvin, Darko. "Estrangement and Cognition." *Strange Horizons*. Nov 2014. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/estrangement-and-cognition/>

Chen's argument of geographic materialism is a pushback, or an addition, to historical materialism. Historical materialism in practice has been fruitful and useful in decolonial movements, but also "inherited the evolutionary view of history from the Enlightenment tradition," becoming reliant on a set of propositions that are purportedly universal.[264] Thus, geographical materialism does not take for granted the premises of historical materialism. The history of England unfolds different from the history of China, because England, as a relatively small island, interacts with the other European countries in a different way than how China, as a relatively sprawling landmass, interacts with its own neighbours. Industrializing England, with its relatively fewer resources, was a product of trade and colonialism, the latter of which required a Eurocentric mode of thought. China's technological trajectories ebb and flow with the rise and fall of dynasties, and the Qing Dynasty's priorities and challenges affect the attitude towards influences that drive its science and technology. An alternate history of China would thus not look like an alternate history of England.

Due to the commercialism of steampunk and the visual focus of steampunk, artists rely on shorthands that draw on popular narratives of how history has played out. Even in narrative form, historical trajectories tend to remain the same despite the presence of accelerated technology. In Cherie Priest's *Clockwork Century* series, the American Civil War is prolonged fifteen years in order to accommodate the invention of military machines, and ends with the capitulation of the South (forced by an invasion of

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[264] Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 70.

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zombies). *Boilerplate* by Paul Guinan and Anina Bennett focuses on a false history of a robot invented to convince governments that mechanical men could substitute real soldiers on the field to minimize casualties. The robot fails to impress the relevant people, and goes on to participate in various events and conflicts across the world in various other capacities. Scott Westerfeld's *Leviathan* series features accelerated bioengineering in Britain and super-powered mechanical technology in the rest of Europe, deployed in its version of World War I, which ends sooner than later; in an afterword, Westerfeld implies that with "less devastated" empires, the elements that led to World War II would not arise.[265] Although these novels do feature colonized peoples and liberation efforts, they rarely lead to an alternate history with vastly different consequences. Anti-colonial efforts, like the Philippine War witnessed by Boilerplate, or the Mexican Revolution that Westerfeld's protagonists encounter, are mentioned in relation to the colonizers. While viewed with sympathy from the eyes of those from the colonizer group, their inevitability is not challenged. The benefit of these works is that they take the opportunity to write about regions and conflicts not usually part of popular consciousness. These works served as early interventions into Victorian hegemony but are not marketed as "multicultural" because their protagonists are often classified as "white." (Boilerplate, being made by a white man, is written of in relation to the whiteness of its creator.) Performing these interventions is easier done in literature than in visual art and in costuming.

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[265] Westerfeld, Scott. *Goliath*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2011. 542.

Visual art's challenge, therefore, is to present an alternate history that imagines

accelerated technology through the historical priorities and cultural aesthetics beyond the

common maxim of "gluing a gear on it." James Ng's *Imperial Steam and Light* is a series

of digital paintings of machines and people that exist in an alternate-history Qing

Dynasty China. The Dowager Empress Cixi, rather than Queen Victoria, permeates the

series that explores Chinese hegemony; in a portrait, she towers over the viewer, a robotic

figure "permanently attached to her floating golden throne" with pipes affixed.[266]

Highlights from this series include the Imperial Airship (Fig 1), a floating airship city that

harks to the Forbidden City. Its figurehead at its bow is an imperial dragon, holding a

banner that reads "Qing" in its front claws. Large and small propellers jut out from its

sides, and pipes belch smoke from all the roofs. Its lower half resembles the hull of the

Chinese junk, and under this hull and at the rudder are large fins that combine the

function of the airplane and the shape of the junk's sails. To amplify the sense of

largeness of the ship, its top half resembles the layout of a palace, with multiple buildings

ranging from two to three storeys, marked by roofs and eaves, and its bridge has a palatial

facade. The deck looks like a courtyard covered in flagstones, and the bridge itself has a

quarterdeck that resembles another flagstoned courtyard, with two sets of steps, leading

to the bridge. The description of this painting reads: "Generating mass air pollution in its

path, the Empress's airship is big enough to block out the sun as it approaches a village,

demonstrating the overwhelming power of the Imperial family."[267] Accelerated

[266] Ng, James. "Immortal Empress." *Imperial Steam and Light* series. James Ng Art. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/immortalempress.html>

[267] Ng, James. "The Imperial Airship." *Imperial Steam and Light* series. James Ng Art. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/imperialairship.html>

technology in this alternate Qing Dynasty is deployed to make stark the power of the

Imperial family, who are invading Manchurians in both history and allohistory. The

description of the image is a tacit criticism of the power on display, implying corruption

in the metaphor of pollution.

WWW.JAMESNGART.COM

Figure 5. Imperial Airship by James Ng

Figure 6 Raccoon Express by James Ng

Figure 7 Chimaera by James Ng

Figure 8 Harvester by James Ng

The hegemony of the Qing Dynasty, with its accompanying industrialism, is rooted in a thought experiment on the visual aesthetics of industrialization, much like Victorian-based steampunk. It responds to the English Industrial Revolution and the idea of westernization as a pre-requisite of modernization; in a 2009 interview, Ng wondered, "what if China was the first to industrialize during the turn of the last century, creating an alternate standard of modernization? Maybe skyscrapers would look like Chinese temples? Cars would look like carriages? Perhaps China will still be in Imperial rule?"[268] Not averse to everything West of China, Ng draws on Greek myth to create the Chimera (Fig. 3),[269] a snow-plow to "clear Imperial City streets": "the lion's head," a golden face with the spiral eyes and broad nose of the Chinese lion on the front of the machine, "devours the fallen snow, as the snake's head," a dragon face that is often used for spouts, "expels it to the side of the road." A more direct response to the West is the more recent *Raccoon Express* (Fig. 2), a train of food carts manned by robots, accompanied by trained organic and robotic raccoons to clean up after customers. The Raccoon Express "pokes [fun] at the American fast food chain, except this is actually an express."[270] A black chassis with red frames, the train has "chimney bots" with a golden bell and flute to signal its arrival. Small flourishes mark the Sinocentrism: the Chinese signs, the tiled roofs of the carts with red counters and pillars, the embossing on the robots' chests, the cash in robot hands with the holes in the center.

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[268] Ng, James. Interview by Jaymee Goh. Tor.com Steampunk Month. Oct 2009. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://www.tor.com/2009/10/13/an-interview-with-james-ng/>
[269] Ng, James. "Chimaera." Imperial Steam and Light series. James Ng Art. Last access Jul 19, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/chimera.html>
[270] Ng, James. Personal correspondence, Dec 4, 2013.

This thought experiment examines the historical priorities of the time, and how iconography is deployed to reflect these priorities. The ornamentation on the machines depicted by Ng are thus not for novelty alone, but to express their significance, historically and in this imaginative space: "If I am an engineer living in this world designing an airship, the ornamentation is functional in that it indicates that the ship belongs to the Imperial family."[271] The Empress being the focus point of technology in Ng's series, several images are in some way connected to her. Several other image descriptions thus reference the Empress: the Imperial Inventor "focuses all his time creating new machines for the Imperial family,"[272] and the Crystal Herbalist offers her concoctions to "prolong [the Empress's] youth and reign."[273] A mechanical musician band replaces court musicians "to ensure the safety of the Empress."[274] However, the Harvester (Fig. 4) is a gray-brown single-rider machine that combines the functions of the tractor, a water sprinkler, hoe-loader, with a little bamboo umbrella over the rider's seat.[275] This differs from the Victorian aesthetic, developed as a result of increased exports from the colonies and a rising middle class, and the Victorian ornamentation of its new technologies, designed to inspire confidence and acceptance in the average

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[271] Ng, James. Interview by Henry Lien. "Artist Showcase: James Ng." Lightspeed Magazine #67. Dec 2015. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/artist-showcase-james-ng/>

[272] Ng, James. "Imperial Inventor." Imperial Steam and Light series. James Ng. Art. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/imperialinventor.html>

[273] Ng, James. "Crystal Herbalist." Imperial Steam and Light series. James Ng Art. Last accessed Jul 19, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/crystalherbalist.html>

[274] Ng, James. "Court Band." Imperial Steam and Light series. James Ng Art. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/courtband.html>

[275] Ng, James. "Harvester." Imperial Steam and Light series. James Ng Art. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017. <http://jamesngart.com/harvester.html>

citizen.[276] These differences are addressed visually, creating an aesthetic language that relies on a different set of cultural and historical knowledge.

Steampunk taking up geographical materialism also considers indigeneity in the development of technology: what does a locale need, and what technologies come out of that? This may result in thinking as a technology something that may not be considered technology. Steampunk that centers indigenous peoples and asserts a retro-futurist aesthetic does not hark to industrial technologies of the Victorian era, but instead focuses on the technologies of indigenous peoples. This would be a steampunk that uses narratives that empowers indigenous people, asserts and ensures their sovereignty, and averts settler colonialism by using the frame of alternate history. Rather than assume that indigenous peoples lacked technology, indigene-centric steampunk asserts a narratival point of view that reclaims indigenous knowledge and ways of interacting with the environment as valid forms of technology.

Like much of mainstream steampunk, indigenous steampunk utilizes bricolage as a way of creating. However, while mainstream steampunk attempts to recycle, or upcycle, old material and create new uses for old things, indigenous steampunk also uses natural materials. Anishinaabe Elizabeth LaPensée's "The Path Without End" is a short film made with stop-motion animation. LaPensée She uses "copper, rawhide, leather, bone, beads, rocks, shells, birch bark" throughout the piece to tell the Anishinaabe interstellar and intergenerational story of the Moon People.[277] Figures made of beads and

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[276] Bix, Amy Sue. "Steve Job versus the Victorians." *Steampunk into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Eds. Julie-Ann Taddeo & Cynthia Miller. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013. 238.
[277] Goh, Jaymee. "The Path Without End by Elizabeth Lameman." *Silver Goggles*. Dec 2011. <http://silver-goggles.blogspot.com/2011/12/path-without-end-by-elizabeth-lameman.html>

silhouette travel across interstellar space in canoes and starships made of beads, past moons and planets made of copper disks. Anishinabek and Moon People travel between these planets, and in between, Wetiko, a malevolent spirit depicted as a snake, chases them. In the deployment of the bricolage method in re-telling Anishinabek stories, LaPensée pushes back against the notion that steampunk must be tied to the Victorian as a point of reference.

Figure 9 Still from "The Path Without End" by Elizabeth LaPensée

This approach to creating art emphasizes sustainability through the impermanence of its materials. Among the more "punk" side of steampunk participants, there is an acknowledgement that nothing lasts forever; every prop and costume is a project that requires constant improvement and repair. Artists keep having to take things apart and fix them, so it is useful to develop the skills to do so. As the Catastrophone Orchestra and

Arts Collective wrote, in *Steampunk Magazine #1*: "The technology of steampunk is natural; it moves, lives, ages and even dies."[278] It is presumably the finished product, like the giant steam robot, that lives, dies and needs taking apart, not the materials that make it. Steampunk recycling invites a cannibalism of the technological carcass, but the impermanence of indigenous steampunk materials forecloses that, forcing the process of re-consumption to stop. This allows other processes of regeneration to occur, which is also sustainable and in cooperation with environmental concerns.

However, the focus on sustainability has had a different consequence for indigenous communities. As LaPensée points out, "we do and did have technology, but since we use(d) biodegradable materials, and thus 'evidence' has faded with nature, we are told by the dominant culture that we were savage with no technology."[279] Using natural materials at her disposal, LaPensee reclaims and recites a historical record that is not recognized as such in Eurocentric settler colonial history. She also pushes back against assumptions of what materials make possible different kinds of technologies. This calls into question the reliance on specific materials to signal retrofuturistic technology in steampunk: if steampunk is an aesthetic that imagines advanced technology in the past, it does not follow that this technology must have been invented, industrialized, and

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[278] Castastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective. "What, Then, Is Steampunk?" *Steampunk Magazine #1* (2007). 4 – 5. Web. Last Accessed Mar 11, 2014. <http://www.combustionbooks.org/downloads/SPM1-web.pdf>

[279] LaPensée, Elizabeth. "The Path Without End: An Anishinaabe Steampunk Film." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. Dec 11, 2011. Web. Last Accessed Mar 11, 2014. < http://beyondvictoriana.com/2011/12/11/97-the-path-without-end-an-anishinaabe-steampunk-film-guest-blog-by-elizabeth-lameman/>

developed the exact same way as the 19th century industrial revolution would have unfolded.

Finally, LaPensee combines a visual aesthetic and narrative that is wholly dependent on the audience being familiar with Anishinaabe mythology to understand the film as a whole. It forces an audience who is not a part of the community to either seek familiarity through a dialogue with members of the community, or to accept the refusal of access to understanding the narratives of the film. This refusal of access brings into focus the assumption that the audience is entitled to an understanding of the text. In turn, the configuration of power between the indigenous artist and the audience at large is called into question.

Steampunk as Minor Literature

One could even consider the presence of people of color in steampunk as a form of either assimilation or minor literature. Minor literature, in Guattari and Deleuze's definition of the term, is literature written by a minority in the language of the hegemonic power, and thus creates a language-literature that transforms the hegemonic power's language in service of expressing the minority's concerns.[280] If one considers costumes and props, or even the common iconography of steampunk, as a form of text, then people of color, such as Native Americans, dressing up as middle-class Victorians are expressing

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[280] Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 16.

a form of minor literature that refuses a narrative of poverty and savagery often imposed

on them by settler colonialism. A Southern Pomo woman I interviewed once said,

> It's not about buckskin and beads. If I tried to incorporate my Native heritage into
>
> Steampunk in a historical way, I would be dead or a slave. This is not fun. I
>
> choose to use Steampunk as a way to look back at history and make it be better
>
> than it was. With Steampunk, I get to be a free, educated, independent, middle-
>
> class Native woman in the Victorian Era. How cool is that? My ancestors sure
>
> didn't have that option![281]

The refusal of the abject history in favour of a socially-mobile, and more optimistic,

alternate history is an assertion of agency and empowerment. Steampunk thus becomes a

tool to explore alternate histories which push back against the inevitability of

colonization.

Costume maker and role player Monique Poirier (Seaconke Wampanoag) has

written on the challenges of navigating stereotypes and community expectations.[282] She

engages in world-building with a sense of responsibility towards the importance of

stories. She was drawn to "the chance to create alternate histories in which Native

Americans maintain sociological primacy and control over the North and South

American landmass" and began with a persona who was "an Air Marshall in a timeline in

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[281] Quoted in Goh, Jaymee. "<Steampunk POC: Mrs. Mary Lou Sullivan (Southern Pomo)." *Silver Goggles*. Aug 3, 2012. Last accessed Jul 31, 2017. http://silver-goggles.blogspot.com/2012/08/steampunk-poc-mrs-mary-lou-sullivan.html>

[282] Poirier, Monique. "Overcoming the Noble Savage and the Sexy Squaw: Native Steampunk -- Guest Blog by Monique Poirier." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. Nov 21, 2010. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017. <https://beyondvictoriana.com/2010/11/21/beyond-victoriana-50-overcoming-the-noble-savage-and-the-sexy-squaw-native-steampunk-monique-poirier/>

which Tecumseh's Rebellion was successful and resulted in the creation of a Native American confederacy of nations that holds most of North America, as well as parts of Mexico and several island nations in the Pacific (most notably the Kingdom of Hawaii)." The Air Marshall outfit is an example of "casual" steampunk, using everyday clothing that looks like it could vaguely pass as something worn in the past, in this case a blouse, jeans, and waist cincher. The outfit is marked by a raygun, with a holster pouch on which a hand-made beaded pattern hangs. The raygun is a common steampunk prop, signaling a narrative that involves some form of combat or military, which suits the persona of the Air Marshall.

The problems of the minor literature follow this kind of effort to imagine alternate histories. Deleuze and Guattari argue that a characteristic of the minor literature is that it takes on a collective value; because there are so few authors, "what each author says already constitutes a common action."[283] However, where Deleuze and Guattari feel this has revolutionary potential, as any literature is thus politicized because it is articulated as something "other than a literature of masters," this places responsibility on the minority author to represent their entire community to a larger audience. This raises the stakes of representation. Thus, ultimately, Poirier felt that the Air Marshall persona and costume only fed stereotypes of Native Americans as Noble Warriors, because there would be no way for spectators to know otherwise unless they asked for her persona's backstory.[284] The prop that signaled this particular stereotype the most was the raygun. Rayguns are

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[283] Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 17.
[284] Poirier, Monique. "Untitled Tumblr post." *Moniquilliloquies*. Aug 3, 2011. Last accessed Jul 22, 2017. <http://moniquill.tumblr.com/post/8443815867/jhameia-tampasteampunk-steampunk>

often an advanced technology in the retrofuturist world, powerful portable weapons beyond the artillery of guns with bullets. Rayguns are popular in steampunk as participants presuppose conflict as a necessary part of an alternate 19th century. The Native American wielding a raygun then must perforce be playing either the savage or the warrior, valiantly fighting against colonizers. In the convention space, the cosplayer often blends into the overall spectacle of a costumed crowd, and there is very little context provided to the audience. The audience relies on their own knowledge and assumptions to fill in the context for themselves, assumptions that are based on what is commonly but inaccurately taught about Native Americans. The chances of reinforcing stereotypes are higher with certain costumes than others, as in the case of the Native American Air Marshall—without speaking to Poirier, there is no way to know the story the costume is meant to signal.

Poirier's Native American Mad Scientist is a response to the idea that even in an alternate history, colonialism of the Americas will unfold the same way, albeit with bigger technology. Rather than focus on martial efforts to ward off the colonizers, Poirier instead questioned the assumption that "despite alternate histories that allow for magitek and phlebotinum and aether-powered airships and steam-powered, clockwork everything from cell phones to teleporters to ray guns … European contact can only have occurred in the 15th century and it can only have resulted in colonialism, slavery, resource theft, land theft, and genocide."[285] If steampunk places modern scientific knowledge further back,

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[285] Poirier, Monique. "Musings about Native Steampunk." *Moniquilliloquies*. Dec 17, 2011. Web. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017. <http://moniquill.tumblr.com/post/14393053317/musing-about-native-steampunk>

allowing for accelerated technology, it makes no sense that this only works for colonizer groups, and not for others. "What if," she asked, "[Native] folks had, say, knowledge of vaccination?" And extending this further to other forms of technology, from domestication of animals and cross-country communications, what alternate histories could have been possible? These are the questions that lead to divergences from the grand narrative of history, rather than simply accelerating its technological trajectory.

They are also questions that lend to other productive questions about what sovereignty means from the Native American perspective, what kinds of relationships between groups could exist that are not driven by capitalist expansionism, and how to reclaim and center indigenous scientific frameworks. In being "sick and tired of the myth that prior to European contact [Native Americans] were a stagnant neolithic monoculture," Poirier rejects the single story of Native Americans perpetuated by the current settler colonial imaginary. Tracing the trajectory of the relationships that would have resulted from this alternate timeline is a speculative exercise that eventually leads to questioning the current temporal context. Keeping in mind the various factors that contribute to the various histories unfolding the way they have, or unfolding the way we know it, speculating on how it could have been otherwise leads us to be more mindful of how we want history to keep unfolding. Being mindful of how to keep history unfolding also means being mindful of how one performs a role in the (re-)production of narratives and materials used to do so.

Like LaPensée, Poirier uses materials that are quotidian to her identity. Her "Native Mad Scientist" outfits are adapted from pow wow regalia, and the leather dresses

are home-sewn. Consistent across her outfits as props are a raccoon tail and silver fox tail, trade items in her Native steampunk alternate history. A weasel pelt bag, traditionally a medicine bag carrying sacred items, serves to hold various medicines such as acetaminophen, aspirin, anti-histamines, and her personal prescriptions in the performance space of steampunk conventions. This transforms the historical narrative expressed by the costume, and offers a challenge to the stereotypes that an audience may choose to read.

Far less quotidian items are a bird skeleton on her shoulder and a belt of old test tubes filled with variously colored liquids and sand (with an appropriately wild description for each tube's content; their functions are variously defensive, offensive or benign). "Native Science understands that nature is technology," she writes, and thus the Native Mad Scientist, treating nature holistically, does not see Western labs that isolate test subjects as useful, and her equipment is portable as a result. Most of the items in this outfit are biodegradable, and items that are painted to look biodegradable are biodegradable in the alternate-history persona space. Finally, since in her alternative timeline contact with Europeans still does occur—with different outcomes for indigenous peoples—her outfit is topped off with a tophat and goggles, even though Poirier uses very little brass bits common to steampunk. Goggles strapped onto tophats (or any other kind of hat) are a common sight in steampunk circles because they either give off an air of adventure, as pilot's goggles, or science, as lab goggles. Top hats were also popular among Native Americans trading with Europeans in the Age of Steam, although they probably did not have a ventilating fan installed, too. In this way, she combines the visual

language found in conventional Victorian-based steampunk and materials commonly

used by her community.

Figure 10 Native American Air Marshall

Figure 11 Native American Mad Scientist prototype 2011

Figure 12 Native American Mad Scientist variation 2013

Figure 13 Native American Mad Scientist variation 2013

Native American Mad Scientist costume development over the years

The difficulty of the minor literature is that of recognition: the transformation of the hegemonic power's language is often dismissed or seen as a quirk, rather than having revolutionary potential. One speaks to an aether where one might find oneself to be all alone. Or one finds an audience who, having internalized the codes and commands of the hegemonic power, fails to recognize the history that one is attempting to convey. The steampunk that refuses to center Victoriana or common imaginaries of industrialisation is thus considered "not steampunk" or is simply ignored: at Steampunk World's Fair 2011, a Black woman played a steampunk Dahomey warrior on the first day, but told me later

that the television camera crew roaming around interviewing people that weekend had completely ignored her until the next day, when she was back into a more "properly" Victorian costume. The effort to transform the language was thus lost, because the audience viewing it failed to recognize the way it was taken up in a productive way that would allow a conversation about it. The dismissal, or refusal, of a legitimizing power—in this case the camera crew documenting the convention—further diminishes the opportunity for this moment to be reflected on, if not immediately, then in the future.

This problem of recognition is rooted in popular parameters of what constitutes steampunk. Evelyn Kriete's assertion that steampunk requires a core of the Victorian and Edwardian is shared and taken for granted in many steampunk communities: Josue Ramos, administrator of Spanish steampunk site *Mundo Steampunk*, confessed, "Sometimes, talking about Spanish steampunk [with Spanish steampunk fans] makes people laugh. 'It is impossible. Steampunk outside the British Empire… It cannot be steampunk.'"[286] The reliance on the visual language of the Victorian or Edwardian to communicate steampunk leads to a narrow vision in re-imagining the 19th century, or any kind of retrofuturism. It reinforces the Eurocentrism of steampunk: that the Victorian or Edwardian is necessary for recognition and for its own popularity. The implication is that without this core, steampunk becomes unrecognizable and loses its zeigeist. Steampunk outside the Victorian is a novelty and an aberration, to be managed so that it is more recognizable, and thus, consumable.

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[286] Ramos, Josue. "Interview with Joyce Chng and Jaymee Goh." *MundoSteampunk.net: From Spain to the Steampunk World*. Oct 1, 2015. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017.
<http://www.mundosteampunk.net/2015/10/interview-with-joyce-chng-jaymee-goh.html>

Steampunk that refuses to cleave to these standards invites well-intentioned but alienating advice to better fit in. This dynamic of an audience demanding access and legibility of an artist is made starkly manifest in spaces where the artist and the audience interact: Monique Poirier's Native American steampunk outfits have attracted the comments that to be more recognizable, she should "use more feathers."[287] The refusal of the Victorian prompts the demand that the non-Victorian be relatable in some form, recognizable according to racist stereotypes and assumptions of what the Other should look like. The minority literature of steampunk resists this relatability and rejects recognition, insisting on the integrity of the proposed alternate history to stand apart on its own terms, within its own cultural context.

This separate cultural context creates a lack of accessibility to the colonizing gaze and the white standpoint, and proposes a disruption in the deployment of technology. In "Vulcanization," author Nisi Shawl subverts the technology that is designed to help the colonizer by means of an inaccessible epistemology of the supernatural. The short story focuses on the historical King Leopold II of Belgium. He is haunted by apparitions of Black Africans who have died under his rule: when riding his steam barouche, he pets the rubber seat cover, a product of the atrocities his colonization has visited on the Congo Free State, and it is "water repellent, elastically resilient, warm to the touch as—" The interruption of his thoughts are a reminder of the physicality of the ghosts who haunt him. His physician has commissioned a machine, the Variable Pressure Ethereo-Vibrative

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[287] Poirier, Monique. "Overcoming the Noble Savage and the Sexy Squaw: Native Steampunk -- Guest Blog by Monique Poirier." *BeyondVictoriana.com*. Nov 21, 2010. Last accessed Jul 20, 2017. <https://beyondvictoriana.com/2010/11/21/beyond-victoriana-50-overcoming-the-noble-savage-and-the-sexy-squaw-native-steampunk-monique-poirier/>

Condenser, to expel the visions the king suffers. The machine's inventor demonstrates the function of the machine on a Black woman, named Fifine because "her African name is far too outlandish."

Fifine provides Leopold (and thus, the reader) with an opposing epistemology of the supernatural. She has been chosen specifically for this experiment, as she has several spirits accompanying her in her imprisonment. Her relationship to these spirits is not like Leopold's; Leopold's visions "plagued him night and day. Sometimes they held up their bleeding, handless arms, shaking them accusingly." In contrast, Fifine resents the Condenser, telling its inventor, "The harm you have caused me with your Condenser has no cure. […] you persist in destroying all that remains to me of those I love." When the Condenser renders her spirits physical, she greets them with "a compound of regret and delight," and "whispered murmurs and cooed nonsense, " a reaction Leopold finds incomprehensible. In a vision he experiences while in the Condenser, he meets a white English girl, Lily Albin, who has died in a battle against the Belgians. Lily laughs at Leopold for assuming that the Condenser will cure him of his apparitions, explaining, "Though with so much blood you'll be creating many more _____, of greater power." Already resistant to empathy, he cannot grasp the indigenous word Lily uses to name his ghosts. Though he interprets her words as the blood he is shedding in the dream, she refers to the atrocities he perpetuates in the Congo. When she tells him "no one will be able to do anything to your _____, to even touch them. Except for you," he cannot grasp her meaning, having seen the demonstration on Fifine, whereupon Lily clarifies, "have you the sort of close and respectful relationship with your dead that she does? [...] No.

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You do not." Fifine's spirits can be made manifest because of her ontological or spiritual

closeness to them, because she is fond of them. Leopold and the ghosts haunting him are

alienated through his crimes against them, and therefore unless he can somehow repair or

create a relationship with them that is not oppositional, he cannot have them removed.

Thus does the technology fail to serve the colonizer, even as it presumably works on the

colonized.

Shawl's "Vulcanization" does not merely turn the colonizer's technology onto the

colonizer within the text; it directly responds to the hegemony of Eurocentrism in

steampunk, using steampunk genre conventions to turn the reader's gaze onto the

colonizer. If the overarching trajectory of the alternate history within a steampunk world

remains similar to that of recorded or popular history, in which Europe and white

colonizers assert hegemony over their colonies, then Shawl's focus on the hegemonic

forces examines these choices and actions within the trajectory. Thus does

"Vulcanization" take on what Deleuze and Guattari cite as another characteristic of minor

literature: that it is political, or politicized, by way of its minority status.[288] However,

where identitarian issues of the minor literature may focus on the axes of oppression of

the minority, in Shawl's project, whiteness is the identity under scrutiny, examined from

the perspective of the oppressed minority. In the world of "Vulcanization," and by

extension the world of *Everfair*, the novel that the short story is companion to, the

various European countries still retain control over their African holdings. In the short

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[288] Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 17.

story, King Leopold II as an enactor of this hegemony is called to account for his choices in ruling the Congo Free State. Through his perspective, the reader learns not just of the atrocities he has ordered but is also forced to understand his attitude and the ways he justifies his actions. When Leopold's wife offers to bring her confessor to him, he side-steps the offer: "Leopold had done nothing wrong. The casualties in the Congo were necessary to the extraction of its wealth." The bland statement of fact underscores his instrumentalization of the Congo and his perspective that the Congo is a source of wealth, that he has done nothing unjust. The visions of ghosts are a malady to be fixed through scientific intervention, not through questions of morality and conscience. Leopold's choices, in his mind, are rational—it is the ghosts who are irrationally haunting him, not recognizing his right to their lives. The reader is forced to recognize that Leopold is not requesting sympathy, but demanding order to the supernatural chaos that currently plagues him. The ghosts are demanding accountability from Leopold, but the text makes it clear that he is refusing that accountability, which ends the story on a note of growing horrors.

This call to accountability is a challenge to the supremacy of Eurocentrism and to the unmarked position of whiteness. This challenge is often tempered in fiction through a narrative that paints the white protagonist as a sympathetic character, or a character worth redeeming. The wrongness of white supremacy and racism is punctuated with acts of overt physical violence and sadism, senseless and irrational when contrasted against a sympathetic character's perspective. The insertion of a sympathetic character is a rhetorical move to assuage the guilt of the reader by giving them someone to identify

with who objects to the obvious wrong. However, Shawl denies the reader this easy

identification—Leopold's dehumanization of Black Africans is marked by an easy

dismissal of Fifine's pain and distaste for the visions that haunt him, and he is startled

when Fifine demonstrates that she can speak French, thereby forcing him to acknowledge

her by being able to understand her words. Leopold expresses a casual superiority of self:

Fifine is "quasi-animal," and he considers himself to have the "more sensitive and highly

evolved nervous system." He is formal and polite to the other speaking characters in full

confidence of his status. No one in the story is there to directly accuse him of his crimes

in the Congo and force him to reflect on why his ghosts haunt him, therefore there are no

sympathetic characters that the reader could project themselves into. All the European

speaking characters are unconcerned with the problem of Black humanity: Travert, the

Condenser's inventor, expresses superficial concern for Fifine's welfare, asking, "You

are prepared for a demonstration?"—and then denying harm to her—"I haven't touched a

hair upon your head!" Even Lily Albin, the dead white character who is clearly an anti-

colonial rebel, offers no comfort to the reader, as her rhetorical function is to explain to

King Leopold the consequences of his colonialism; she is depicted in vaguely monstrous

terms, with a leg that is "a pulpy mess of gore and bone" and a "chilling laugh." She does

not, and cannot, play the role of the white savior, nor does she offer any redemption: "No,

you do not [have the relationship with the dead that would allow the machine to work],"

she declares, without offering a solution. The focus of the story on its white characters

offers nothing comfortable to relate to, no redemption, and no salvation. In this way, the

story demands that whiteness and its sense of superiority be examined, and called to account.

The focus on white characters, and on King Leopold II in particular, can be read in two ways that are opposite of each other, but do not cancel each other out. In one, the story is about an oppressor's unceasing haunting by the oppressed, who are abject. Shawl creates a twofold sense of unease: the ghosts are repulsive, because they are unwanted and harass the point-of-view character. Leopold is disturbed by how they do not inhabit his space: "He refused to turn around. Once he had done so, and had seen then no sign of the savage who'd just the moment before brushed past him—through him—with a fixed and insolent stare." They disrupt his public appearances: "He looked out at an audience abruptly filled with hundreds of weeping black faces." He feels their presence, however illusory, physically: "Leopold's scalp crept as he felt the soft resilience of their nonexistent flesh." Yet Leopold himself, and the characters around him, are repulsive in their thoughts and actions towards the Black characters: Leopold constantly refers to them as "nigger," a racist slur weaponized against Black Africans and their descendants; he justifies the casualties of the Congo with the outcome of wealth for himself. Travert's false concern towards Fifine, calling her his "favorite" subject because of the results the violence towards her generates for his research, recalls the gendered, sexual violence of gynecological research by J. Marion Sims on black slaves.[289] This two-fold revulsion drives in the ways that racism is enacted by the powerful through their dehumanization of

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[289] Ojanuga, Durrenda. "The medical ethics of the 'Father of Gynecology', Dr J Marion Sims." *Journal of medical ethics*. Vol. 19, 1993. 31.

Black subjects. This is not a problem that can be easily universalized and stripped of its identitarian implications: Leopold's whiteness is a driving force of his haunting.

"Vulcanization," however, offers an alternate history in which the oppressed are able to take revenge on a distant oppressor. Where in recorded history King Leopold II continued to extract wealth from the Congo Free State, later annexing it into the Belgian Congo, never punished, the cosmology of Shawl's alternate history permits the ghosts to directly confront the king, impressing onto him the wounds that colonial violence has inflicted on them. The technology that should have saved him fails because its (presumably Eurocentric) science does not reckon with this cosmology. By the end of the story, Leopold has lost his sense of pride and confidence: "All his life, Leopold had known himself to be as brave and strong as he was good and handsome. All his life till now." In this denouement, Shawl impresses onto the reader the idea that multiculturalism must demand difficult questions about what brings parity between oppressor and oppressed, and that reparations for such power imbalance will have an ontological cost for the oppressor, just as the power imbalance inflicts an ontological cost on the oppressed.

Resistant Allohistories

The tipping of the scales of power in alternate histories is a consequence that is not often examined closely. In stories or world where a historically-colonized group is not overcome, what is often imagined instead is that the historically-colonized become the colonizer instead, a revenge of the oppressed in becoming the oppressor. This often

happens when the concept of multiculturalism is commercialized: instead of examining the specific context of power imbalance, the culture in question is transformed into an aesthetic that can be papered over a story, often that of a colonizer. The novel *Stormdancer* by Jay Kristoff is an example of a novel marketed as "multicultural steampunk," or "Japanese steampunk," set in a different world where the equivalent of Meiji-era Japan has risen to become a global colonizing power. This is marked by the presence of blue-eyed gaijin as slaves, as a parallel to the Atlantic slave trade of the real world in which Africans were bought and sold by (presumably blue-eyed) Europeans. This narratives of turned tables relies on the telling of history from the perspective of whiteness: if white Europeans achieved supremacy through imperialism and exploitation, then the alternative must play out similarly, simply with different imperialists and exploited white bodies instead. This is a comforting racist narrative as it uses the actions of a select few to represent the psyche of the whole of humanity: given the chance, anyone would have done the same thing, the colonized would have also colonized and exploited the colonizer.

When written from the perspective of the colonized, this alternate history that overthrows the colonizer takes a different valence, especially when considering a global perspective to the costs and spoils of colonialism. In a poem, Ngāpuhi Maori poet Robert Sullivan chronicles an alternate 1870 in which Maori warriors invade England by hiding their canoes in a steamer called *Troy*, referencing the Greek myth.[290] Taking over the

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[290] Sullivan, Robert. "London Waka." Reproduced from *Voice Carried My Family*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005. *Poetry Archive*. 2011. Web. Last Accessed Mar 11, 2014. <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=16254>

capital city, they then empty the museums of colonial booty, returning the artifacts to their original owners.[291] As they have also destroyed the main colonizing power of the time, they have freed and "forged alliances with a quarter of the planet,"[292] and the newly-colonized England sends "lamb to New Zealand and potatoes to Ireland, instead of troops."[293] In a twist that completes the alternate history, Sullivan announces that the new colony "will benefit from self-government in the long term"[294] and, in a mirror of more recent sentiments towards indigenous peoples, "a restoration project is underway to ensure the survival of their language."[295]

While not explicitly steampunk, Sullivan's poem is representative of the kind of imaginative play that steampunk participants indulge in to create alternate histories. 19th century technology is appropriated and almost magical in the feats that they can perform—in this case, a fleet of canoes overrun an industrial city—and in turn creates a different timeline of events. "London Waka" requires knowledge of the factual past and issues of current times relating to indigenous peoples in order for the reader to understand what produced this counter-history, especially of anthropological projects to recover what colonialism has destroyed. Recited from the position of an alternate present, it also offers a "speculative future" through this re-imagining of global politics.

Upon the first read, "London Waka" strikes the reader as a tongue-in-cheek revenge fantasy of the colonized upon the colonizer: The attacking Maori "killed / on the

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[291] Sullivan, Robert. "London Waka." Reproduced from *Voice Carried My Family*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005. Lines 12 – 14.
[292] Ibid. Line 18.
[293] Ibid. Line 22.
[294] Ibid. Line 23.
[295] Ibid. Line 24.

first night"[296] as they "lobbed a bomb" onto what was an unsuspecting corner pub. As more canoes join the first canoe, they start "marauding / Southend."[297] They attack London, the seat of the British Empire, in a prolonged siege: "They fired heavy artillery every day / for months,"[298] using weapons on the ships they commandeered. Sullivan affects indignation that the colonial subjects attack the affluent part of the Empire's city center: "The blighters even had the cheek to fire at the West End!"[299] The Maori attackers succeed in this alternate history by destroying landmarks such as Big Ben and Westminster, and they capture "a marquess and a baronet" to be "paraded at the Waitangi Marae" as "spoils of war."[300] The resources of Britain, lamb meat and potatoes, are exported, a wry observation that perhaps there is little the former colonizer has to offer the rest of the world, so much so that the colony must be condescended to with maintenance of their government and language preservation, the same way settler colonials have treated indigenous peoples with reservation lands and anthropological projects to preserve the culture of the natives.

The multicultural potential of the poem does not lie in the revenge fantasy, but in the imagined dialogue with other colonies after the colonizer has been conquered. Sullivan's narrator in "is happy to report,"[301] as if they were a distant observer, the actions of the Maori following the overthrow of England: they "returned the Elgin

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[296] Sullivan, Robert. "London Waka." Reproduced from *Voice Carried My Family*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005. Line 3 – 4.
[297] Ibid. Lines 6 – 7.
[298] Ibid. Lines 8 – 9.
[299] Ibid. Line 9.
[300] Ibid. Lines 12 – 13.
[301] Ibid. Line 14.

Marbles" and empty the various museums that contain spoils of colonization.[302] In a

climax, the narrator exclaims a list of countries, emphasizing their liberated status:

"Palestine free! Rhodesia free! South Africa free! Kenya free! / India free! Canada free!

Ireland free! Australia free! West Indies free! Aotearoa free!"[303] The repeated word,

"free," is a celebration of the liberation taken by force not through guerilla freedom

fighting within the colony, but by the destruction of the colonizer's country. The alternate

world that Sullivan proposes is not one in which one colonizer replaces another, but one

in which countries build alliances based on goodwill and recognition of each other's

culture, represented by the national treasures now restored to them. The liberation is

global in breadth, acknowledging the similar scale of colonialism.

Being only twenty-four lines, Sullivan's poem simplifies the complicated

conversations that multiculturalism necessarily sparks. Focused on a single group, it does

not quite fit the parameters of "multiple" cultures in interaction, although it offers an

interesting alternate history that refuses the Eurocentrism common to steampunk. Ella

Shohat and Robert Stam warn that "any substantive multiculturalism has to recognize the

existential realities of pain, anger, and resentment, since the multiple cultures invoked by

the term ... have not historically coexisted in relations of equality and mutual respect."[304]

Even oppressed minorities do not co-exist peacefully simply because they are oppressed,

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[302] Sullivan, Robert. "London Waka." Reproduced from *Voice Carried My Family*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005. Lines 14 – 19.

[303] Ibid. Lines 19 – 20.

[304] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 358.

though they may temporarily ally with each other to achieve a specific goal in resisting the oppressor.

In *Everfair*, Nisi Shawl explores a steampunk alternate history centered on a parcel of land in the Congo Free State. The Fabian Socialists of Great Britain purchase land from King Leopold II of Belgium, and with African American settlers and other Europeans attempt to establish a utopia where indigenous Africans can seek refuge from the atrocities of Leopold's rule. The novel is told from several perspectives: though dominated by the French writer and spy Lisette Toutournier and her lover Everfair founder Daisy Albin, characters such as English settlers Jackie Owens and Matty Jamison, African American settlers Thomas Jefferson Wilson and Martha Livia Hunter, African indigenous characters King Mwenda, his wife Josina, and Fwendi, and Chinese coolie Tink Ho Lin Huang, flesh out the alternate history over the course of decades. An ensemble cast demands the reader apprehend the development of Everfair as a contested space in which different ideologies and identities clash but must unite in a nation-building project. It forces the reader to recognize "even bitter, irreconcilable difference."[305]

Everfair has many elements associated with steampunk: it takes place between the years 1888 to 1919, the turn of the 19th century into the 21st. It is an alternate history in which science and technology seem fantastical in their sophistication for the time period. A different series of events is set off because of the technology introduced into the setting

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[305] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 355.

of the Congo Free State under the rule of King Leopold II, which begins a decolonization process much earlier. Technologies often associated with steampunk, such as the train and steamship, are present, romanticized through the perspective of one of the novel's protagonists, Lisette, who sees her first locomotive as "a magician who would whisk them away from this ugliness, who would carry them on his broad, strong back to the land's end, to the very edge of this continent."[306] The ubiquitous airship also invented by Everfair settlers, though it uses nuclear power rather than the conventional steam engine. These elements firmly establish the genre of the novel, even as it makes it radical departures from the usual concerns of the Victorian in other steampunk works.

The obvious starting point from which to consider the technology of Everfair and its possibilities beyond the aesthetic concerns of the genre is the historical—the Congo Free State was colonized by King Leopold II for its rubber. Reverend Lieutenant Wilson, like his real-life analog George Washington Williams, begins the novel with a mission to expose the atrocities in the Congo Free State with an open letter to King Leopold: "he had written five pages and not yet named a third of the atrocities he had been forced to witness. The whippings, the murders …, innocents dismembered…"[307] Beginning first with the testimony before giving the reason for it foregrounds the cost of exploitation, revealed later in a letter to King Mwenda: "The whites have taken away all the women, and all children below the height of eight fingers ... to be killed unless we deliver to their encampments huge quantities of the hardened tears of the vines-that-weep. By way of

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306 Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 34.
307 Ibid. 23.

showing they truly mean to do this evil, they have sent to us, your captains, the severed

heads, hands, and feet of our mothers."[308] Beyond the use of a different vocabulary in

calling the rubber "vines-that-weep," Shawl impresses onto the reader the human cost of

this resource exploitation, centering the local people within the context of colonialism.

Shawl counters this violent exploitation process by imagining different

technologies which create a solution. As a landlocked state, the settlers of Everfair must

establish a regular mode of transport that is not limited to the ground, forcing them to

pass through enemy territory and thus making them vulnerable to attack. Using local

materials, and with the cooperation of the local priesthood, Macau engineer Tink Ho and

Martha Hunter's godsons Chester and Winthrop, bringing their mechanical knowledge to

bear, build a nuclear engine that becomes the core for an airship, which Tink calls the

"Littlest Heater." The uraninite minerals are referred to as "the two earths"[309] and the

knowledge of it is derived from "the deepest principles of Bah-Sangah cosmology."[310]

Fwendi, introduced early in the novel as a child refugee who has lost a hand, spends

much of the novel sporting a series of different mechanical hands. The hands, made of

"glittering brass"—another steampunk affectation, to mimic the aesthetics of the

Victorian period—begin with simple wind-up functions,[311] and later take on more

weaponized functions, such as knives in place of fingers.[312] Later in the novel, King

Mwenda, right hand damaged in his imprisonment by Belgian soldiers, receives a similar

[308] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 41.
[309] Ibid. 113.
[310] Ibid. 101.
[311] Ibid. 109.
[312] Ibid. 171.

gift from Tink. These advanced prosthetics are not distributed equally; many of the other amputated people in the novel receive "simple hooks and knives."[313] Yet despite this disparity, recruitment into King Mwenda's army is made easier when he can demonstrate what joining his freedom fighters can offer to other victims of King Leopold's rule. Technology that serves the need of the oppressed thus take center stage in *Everfair*, creating the alternate history that empowers the colonized.

Despite the fetishization of machines and science, technology and the supernatural are often not separate in steampunk, with stories involving séances, ghosts, and machines that generally break the laws of known physics. Through the interactions between the colonists and indigenous refugees, Shawl introduces the notion that what might be considered religious or superstitious in one continent are quotidian and a science in another. Reverend Wilson attempts to convert the Bah-Sangah refugees to Christianity, but in his attempt to spiritually and militarily guide them, makes an unwitting compromise: in a series of blackouts, visions and events, he finds himself committed to the worship of a local god.[314] Over the course of the novel, he suffers further hallucinations and physical side-effects that can only be alleviated by following the advice of Bah-Sangah spiritual advisers, and assimilates into local customs. On a less spiritual note, Fwendi, the Congolese refugee who rises to become Everfair's top spy, uses her family's ability to "ride" cats. It is a skill that requires practice—"by the time they reached Alexandria she'd graduated to prides of up to eleven"[315]—in order to

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[313] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 150.
[314] Ibid. 96.
[315] Ibid. 267.

cultivate the finesse needed to steal state secrets. The ability is not without risk: an embassy officer, wisely asserting, "Superstition's nothing to laugh at in Africa," shoots at one of her cats,[316] leaving Fwendi unable to move or speak without the aid of a family member.[317] These local spiritual traditions, with their own rules and powers, are deployed to help the little country of Everfair survive with minimal European intervention.

Shawl also asserts the scientific knowledge of the indigenous Africans that may not have been recognized in the time period the novel derives inspiration from, and may still not recognized as such, as the knowledge is framed as ritual and spiritual traditions. As Tink Ho assembles a propeller, he bows to the Bah-Sangah priests in attendance in acknowledgement of their contribution in the invention of the engine.[318] King Mwenda, in feigning surrender to Leopold, states that the surrender will be complete "when the dance of the sun and earth repeats the steps now taken," in full knowledge that "the sun danced with other suns as well as with the earth, in complicated maneuverings never to be exactly repeated," trusting his enemies to underestimate his intelligence "as a stupid child's poor attempt to understand their concept of ah-nay (année)."[319] Queen Josina cures malaria using her knowledge of antibiotics found in animals: "The small animals inside the ants had begun their work after just one application; the ritual called for five."[320] This forces the reader to re-think the notion that indigenous populations are necessarily less scientific and to re-consider what the concept of 'modern progress'

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[316] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 270.
[317] Ibid. 281.
[318] Ibid. 101.
[319] Ibid. 43.
[320] Ibid. 152.

entails. It brings to mind the criticism that Sofia Samatar makes of "African steampunk" that questions whether industrialization that mirrors modern Western industrialization is necessary or desirable in re-imagining the history of the continent.[321] Shawl demonstrates that such wide-scale industrial processes are not necessary to gain knowledge of natural processes.

The settling of Everfair, and the efforts to keep it safe from its surrounding enemies, however, leads to the introduction of vastly different ideologies and factions into the region. Political conflicts arise as a result of this endeavor, particularly along religious and racial lines. The African American missionaries see Everfair as an opportunity to "save themselves [from oppression in America] and simultaneously to uplift their savage kin,"[322] mirroring the same attitudes towards indigenous Africans that white missionaries would. Martha Hunter's religious conflict with atheist Daisy Albin[323] is further complicated by other personal prejudices: Martha does not approve of Daisy's lesbian relationship to Lisette, and Daisy does not approve of Martha's interracial marriage to Daisy's much younger son. Despite his ideals, Jackie Owen does not encourage the white European settlers of Everfair to cohere or socialize with the non-white settlers or indigenous Africans, more mindful of "the Fabians' secret program, the deliberate loss of white lives in a black cause." [324] He justifies the expected sacrifice as necessary to ensure Everfair's survival: "How else to stir up support for the colony except

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[321] Samatar, Sofia. "Dreadful Objectivity: Steampunk in Africa." Personal blog. February 24, 2014. No longer publicly available. <http://sofiasamatar.blogspot.com/2014/02/dreadful-objectivity-steampunk-in-africa.html>
[322] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 45.
[323] Ibid. 185.
[324] Ibid. 106.

through the deaths of innocent Europeans?" Indeed, white antipathy and microaggression create alienating relations between all the factions, both on the political and personal scale: Daisy Albin fails to recognize how her whiteness leads her to express prejudice against miscegenation to her mixed-race lover Lisette, alienating the latter into a years-long estrangement,[325] and to suggest tone-deaf nation-building projects such as the establishment of a founder's holiday in Jackie Owen's name against the wishes of the indigenous members of the government.[326] King Mwenda chafes against the sway that the settlers hold on his ancestral land. He exiles himself to attend Fouad University—Cairo University, in Shawl's alternate history founded much earlier than its historical 1908—in order "master the whites' ways and prove himself their rightful ruler,"[327] but returns alienated and still wants them gone: "will they never leave? Will we never be rid of them?" he demands Queen Josina, to which she sadly realizes, "No, we never will."[328] These conflicts over the course of several years make manifest the "bitter, even irreconcilable difference" that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue must be recognized in multicultural undertakings. Everfair becomes the common element between these factions that they must learn to negotiate in order to sustain.

Nevertheless, the different factions coming together result in a syncretism of culture as the indigenous Congolese learn to adapt to the Western settlers, and the settlers assimilate into their new home. The most striking examples of this syncretism is present in the aesthetics and fashions that Shawl introduces in the novel. Queen Josina adds

[325] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 220.
[326] Ibid. 305.
[327] Ibid. 222.
[328] Ibid. 229.

gardenia juice to the rubber surface of a jumpsheet (parachute) for decorations, fulfilling

social expectations that women will paint designs on surfaces for protective blessings and

combining local cultural mores into new technology.[329] Reverend Thomas Wilson, now a

famous war general, becomes a fashion icon due to his religiously-imposed obligation to

wear skirts: "some emulator of his style was always standing nearby [...] Thomas

returned the salute of one, a white-shirted dandy in a charcoal-colored kilt leaning against

the wall."[330] This marks another departure from colonial history: where La Société des

Ambianceurs et Persons Élégants (or the Society for the Advancement of People of

Elegance in English) began with Congolese houseboys imitating their colonial masters

and drawing inspiration from Paris couture,[331] in *Everfair* their source of inspiration is an

African American immigrant. Other aspects introduced into the region become part of the

cultural landscape: Matty Jamison the playwright introduces theater and enshrines the

founding of the nation in a play called *Wendi-la*, based on Fwendi's life[332]; Daisy Albin's

anthem to help the settlers cohere[333] is later translated into Lingala.[334] This constant

interaction comes to a head when King Mwenda attempts to restore the hegemony of his

rule by expelling the foreigners,[335] leading to a Conciliation document between settlers

and monarchy that gives up English as the official language of Everfair.[336] This

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[329] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 149.
[330] Ibid. 306.
[331] Gondola, Didier. "*La Sape* Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth."
Contemporary African Fashion. Eds. Suzanne Gott & Kristyne Loughran. Bloomington: Indiana University
Press, 2010. 159.
[332] Shawl, Nisi. *Everfair*. New York: Tor Books, 2016. 237.
[333] Ibid. 63.
[334] Ibid. 364.
[335] Ibid. 351.
[336] Ibid. 362.

prevention of a civil war through political compromise emphasizes the importance of Everfair as a nation with its multiple kinds of people at its core, all contributing to its establishment and security.

In full, then, *Everfair* attempts to lay out the complexity of a multicultural utopia, established with high ideals and executed, necessarily, imperfectly. The recognition of the costs of imperialism and migration, complicated with identitarian issues of race, religion, sexuality, and gender, is a difficult task because it recognizes how the multiple cultures in interaction with each other have not historically been equal nor respectful of each other.[337] This inequality, however, must be reckoned with in order to assert a different view of history, or a different vision of history, so that a different present and future can be envisioned that at least attempts equality.

The promise of multicultural steampunk then stretches far beyond its premise of simply combining steampunk with some "ethnic" flavor. Steampunk stories offer a way of re-thinking technology and history in entertaining ways that hopefully catch a zeitgeist and expose histories that may not have been widely known through popular culture. Multicultural steampunk is informed by and strives to address the historical inequalities created by colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism, centering the perspective of the formerly colonized, or those who are continued to be oppressed by these histories. Centering the perspective of minority groups and people of color, steampunk creators open an opportunity for dialogue between past and present in ways that challenge

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[337] Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 358.

common narratives of how history is told. Multicultural steampunk, then, is more than

aesthetics divorced from the historical and geographical contexts that inspire them, and

becomes instead a site of communication and diversity.

Conclusion

When K.W. Jeter coined "steampunk" as a tongue-in-cheek joke about a set of novels written in a 'gonzo-historical' style set in a pseudo-Victorian era, he could not have countenanced that a disparate set of tinkerers and costumers, goths and preps, youth and elders would take up this term to name an aesthetic familiar to all without a name. A shared set of ideas about history and the way things were allowed them to participate in a shared fantasy, and created sociable creative outlets through which they could meet each other. Steampunk thus has been called a subculture, an arts movement, a counterculture, a fandom, a community, and, for a brief unmemorable moment, a superculture. Through social media, steampunk fans found each other and gained the critical mass to create a momentum that would lead to steampunk become popular in mass media.

When I first began participating in steampunk, I among others criticized it as glorying the Victorian era and the British Empire, because most of its fans dress up in approximations of costumes from the time period. Because of this association with the Victorian and with Empire, steampunk is also criticized as being very "white" with little explication on what that "white" meant: the racial demographics of steampunk fans? The fact that so many people wander around wearing pith helmets and safari explorer outfits? The lack of people of color in steampunk spaces and art? (All of it, it turns out.) As a community we knew we had this problem; as individuals we had no language to name it.

To address this problem of whiteness, steampunk fans began discussing other forms of alternate history with the 19th century as its starting point. Critics have tried to intervene by articulating problems of imperialism and Eurocentrism in the subculture,

and by introducing concepts of multiculturalism into steampunk play. However, despite this intervention, steampunk cultural production, either from top-down industries such as publishing, or bottom-up organizations such fan conventions, still maintains a Eurocentric narrative as the default perspective. When writers and event organizers attempt to integrate multiculturalism into their projects, their perspectives are still lodged in a standpoint of whiteness. If I began steampunk hoping for the best, for the potential of steampunk to reveal itself, I began to feel more disillusioned with the social and racial landscape I saw.

This dissertation has argued that whiteness in steampunk remains a problem despite the introduction of multiculturalism, creating instead a multicultural steampunk that alienates people of color. Whiteness, then, has to be explained in relation to steampunk. What is "white" about steampunk is not just that so many white people run around wearing clothes and props associated with the colonial enterprise (although that is the first and most obvious thing), nor is it just that steampunk is attractive to the fringe of white supremacists who seek to normalize their bigoted values by participating in steampunk. Whiteness is a site of structural advantage and race privilege[338]; certain narratives, histories, and identities are more likely to be used or referenced in steampunk cultural production compared to others, simply because they are more accessible, or more known. As steampunk events do not take place in some other dimension, the same rules

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[338] Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Pg. 1.

of racial difference still apply to steampunks of color, despite the escapist atmosphere that steampunk participants try to cultivate in any given physical space.

Whiteness is also a standpoint from which white people look at themselves and at others, a standpoint easily adopted by non-white people because it is so pervasive. In steampunk, the white standpoint can be identified in what kinds of stories are told, about who, and how others are talked about in its periphery. To talk about whiteness in steampunk, even in multicultural steampunk, is to talk about the historical narratives and popular tropes used, to talk about what is appealing about steampunk in its various media forms and fandom spaces. It is to talk about who gets advanced technology in historical settings and whose history gets to change, and who feels entitled to re-tell history for what purpose. It is also to talk about who gets to tell these stories, who populates the legitimizing institutions, and who falls over the radar of popular consciousness.

As an aesthetic, steampunk is marked by a certain color palette, a set of styles and iconography associated with eras past. Steampunk fans connect Eurocentric tropes and narratives to this iconography and invest affective value to them. I have described this affective value as different groups of feelings: feelings of Adventure, manifest through narratives of discovery and exploration; feelings of Mad Science, expressed in the satisfaction of mastery of skill and labour; and feelings in a Promenade, of self-display and participation in a public space of spectacle. These feelings are compelling for the escapist atmosphere they provide from common anxieties of displacement and lack of control, an atmosphere which is ostensibly free of identitarian value and thus universal. However, this creates a feedback loop whereby steampunks rely on iconography to

generate this escapist atmosphere, which reinscribes the Eurocentric narratives and tropes. Thus is Eurocentrism reproduced in steampunk cultural production, whether in literature, roleplaying, or hands-on crafts. Without proper interrogation on how this iconography interacts with the cultural context it is used in, the standpoint of whiteness is maintained, creating an alienating affect for non-white audiences.

This affective value is why, even though we tried to become more inclusive to these non-white audiences, the endeavor failed. Though fans tried to introduce the concept of multiculturalism, in a cheery "color up the world" counterweight against the whiteness of steampunk, we invested into multiculturalism the same affective value that we invested into steampunk iconography. As a result, we treated multiculturalism as if the concept of culture could be divorced from communities, and this approach manifested itself in various ways. For some, multiculturalism in steampunk is an additive that can either dilute recognition of the aesthetic, or is ultimately unnecessary as a consideration. For others, multiculturalism in steampunk is a necessary discussion and evolution for the steampunk subculture. We did not realize that we treated multicultural steampunk as a kind of marketplace of culture and aesthetics. Because this discourse does not actively interrogate the framework of whiteness within which it operates, multicultural steampunk simply becomes code for steampunk that has a non-Eurocentric form. The iconography, narratives, tropes, and assumed identitarian-free affective values of steampunk remained the same. For a time, however, this was enough, and it seemed like multicultural steampunk was making headway into becoming mainstreamed. At some point,

steampunks of color could stop feeling alienated by the overwhelming whiteness we experienced.

We did not, however, consider the ways that Eurocentrism and whiteness re-asserted each other in the media landscape, and underestimated the ways institutions privileged certain voices at the expense of others. The steampunk cultural industry, finding commercial value in this discourse, took up multicultural steampunk as the next big trend. The marketing of steampunk literature uses the language of multicultural progressivism to sell books that ostensibly represent perspectives and narratives that are usually marginalized in mainstream literature. However, closer inspection of marketing materials and the texts themselves surface Eurocentric narratives and Orientalist stereotypes which undermine the multicultural projects of these books. This predilection further is present in other forms of cultural production, such as convention spaces. These attempts at non-Eurocentric steampunk are ultimately rooted in a white standpoint, made manifest in the deployment of racist tropes and assumptions; their portrayals of racial difference thus undermine their claim to positions of multiculturalism. Thus, multiculturalism is not a counterweight against whiteness at all, but yet another mechanism through which whiteness is expressed and reproduced, using the face of the Other as an aesthetic mask.

What was missing from the fan discourse and culture industry of multicultural steampunk was a radical bent in which whiteness as racial privilege and perspective was acknowledged, providing a weightier counter to whiteness. It is not enough to tell a story about the Other; if the way an alternate history unfolds remains the same despite the

changes to technology, a story about the Other remains the same kind of story that is already recorded in Eurocentric history which bypasses liberatory efforts. A focus on the struggles of the colonized may well become a catalogue of suffering, oppression and anti-colonial embattlement that serves to provoke white guilt without offering any alternative. A radically multicultural steampunk deals with histories of imperialism and colonialism in ways that create liberatory alternate histories that re-envision histories beyond Eurocentric ones. This has the political potential of re-envisioning how the present may look like, by centering the experiences of the colonized. This may result in a steampunk that is not easily recognized as such, because it moves away from the usual Victorian frames of reference, and thus demands more of the audience.

There is a lot that this dissertation could not cover, because it is limited to textual analysis of media images and literature, and steampunk is more than its media and literature. Claims that steampunk is a community or subculture, and what it means demographically and thus representationally, could not be more usefully interrogated because that is a project that requires an ethnographic methodology or analysis of data points. There are, for example, questions to be asked about how steampunk fans come to steampunk, through what gateways, and what definitions of steampunk Google can easily provide, versus a less mainstream definition that opens steampunk beyond its focus on the Victorian. Rather than theorize the affects imbued in the iconography, I might have benefitted from being able to ask questions about popular perceptions of the iconography. In an interview, documentarian Martha Swetzoff wondered "why the steampunk subculture seemed to emphasize the military, weapons and warfare," answered in part by

the focus on the military during the 19th century. Yet, she questioned, "in a what-if world of the imagination, why bring weapons?"[339] I have tried to answer it in part with my examination of the raygun, but an engagement with people who make them may provide further, more thorough answers.

Questions of gender and class were another set of inquiries this dissertation has not been able to explore, beyond an analysis of spectacle and clothing. If the corset (or vest) is an item that steampunks invest value in, then how aware of its history are its wearers? Furthermore, does its cost delineate the costume players from each other? Can a steampunk be recognized without them? My conversations with Monique Poirier and other steampunks of color hint that cleaving to racist stereotypes makes a more recognizable steampunk outfit beyond the Victorian, and that anxieties of authenticity are very fraught. In the early days of my involvement in steampunk, aristocratic personas were much more popular, and playing a lower-class character was bucking the trend; as steampunk has become a fashion, or a style, does this roleplaying aspect lose its appeal, or has it transformed?

These are also economical concerns. I have long suspected that Cory Gross is right in his assertion that Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and other Victorian Science Fiction movies served to popularize steampunk as an aesthetic.[340] This might be more usefully explored with an ethnography of Makers who grew up with this media and

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[339] Pho, Diana. "Looking at Steampunk from the Outside: a Roundtable Interview with Don Spiro and Martha Swetzoff." *Tor.com: Steampunk Week*. Oct 7, 2011. Last accessed Jun 10, 2017. <http://www.tor.com/2011/10/07/looking-at-steampunk-from-the-outside-a-roundtable-interview-with-don-spiro-and-martha-swetzoff/>
[340] Gross, Cory. "A History of Steampunk." Guest post on *Steampunk Scholar*. Aug 27, 2010. Last accessed Jul 7, 2017. <http://steampunkscholar.blogspot.com/2010/08/history-of-steampunk-by-cory-gross.html>

upon gaining the financial capital to invest in their tools, could create their own art product reflecting the aesthetic, thereby popularizing it. Since questions of class are also closely interwoven with questions of race and gender, this is an analysis that may address many concerns about the reproduction of Eurocentrism and reinforcement of whiteness in steampunk (as well as other science fictional subcultures). As steampunk relies on consumption for its popularity, whether of materials for making or finished product, questions about money need to be asked.

What might have also been an interesting avenue to investigate were the new steampunk conventions. While their demographics are regional by nature, and steampunk is a general theme to give the attendees an excuse to dress up, there may be trends in the types of events held, topics discussed, and choices in guests of honour that hint in the directions that fans are driving steampunk towards. (Tea dueling was introduced to the convention scene in 2012.[341] The duel involves dipping cookies in tea and consuming them before they crumble but holding out for as long as possible before one's opponent consumes theirs. There is probably something to be said about the blithe disregard of the history of tea and colonialism, as well as combining beverages with a martial aspect, all in good fun. What affects do steampunks seek in tea dueling?) Here again is where an ethnographic methodology would benefit, or at least a wide range of interviews, regarding the participation of people of color at steampunk conventions. Do the criticisms of steampunk as being alienating to people of color still remain? Is multicultural

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[341] Frame, Wilhelmina. "A Brief Introduction to American Tea Duelling." *Steampunk Chronicle*. April 24, 2012. Last accessed July 30, 2017. <http://bestofsteampunk.com/ArticleView/tabid/238/ArticleId/239/A-Brief-Introduction-to-American-Tea-Duelling.aspx>

steampunk still promise for the future? It may be that the default—the neo-Victorian aesthetic—still holds sway, and multicultural steampunk is reserved for special occasions, specially themed. It may also be that the iconography is now associated with other things beyond what has been explored in this dissertation.

Cheerfully, there is more work now that we can use to theorize multicultural steampunk, than there has been when the first multicultural steampunk blogs first began. A 2012 anthology, *Shanghai Steam*, attempted to combine steampunk with wuxia. In the same year, British poet Anna Chen debuted *The Steampunk Opium Wars*, a play that re-tells the history of the Opium Wars in a poetry slam format. (Following the play was the Hackney Tea Ceremony, a playlet meant to be "a fairground mirror held up, showing what it's like when an aspect of your culture gets exoticised to a comical degree."[342]) Editor Balogun Ojetade has produced two anthologies of alternate history—*SteamFunk* (2013) and *Rococoa* (2015)—and Alliteration Ink has published *Steampunk World* (2014) and *Steampunk Universe* (2016), both anthologies specifically focused on non-Victorian steampunk. Recently, *Tor.com* published two steampunk novelettes: *A Dead Djinn in Cairo* by P. Djeli Clark and *Buffalo Soldier* by Maurice Broaddus.

I have also attempted to put the questions I raised into practice. In 2015, I co-edited *The Sea is Ours: Tales of Steampunk Southeast Asia* with Singaporean writer Joyce Chng. A long-time dream project, *The Sea is Ours* allowed us to do several things. First, it opened an opportunity to encourage more steampunk work set in Southeast Asia.

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[342] Chen, Anna. "Afterview of the Steampunk Opium Wars." *Anna Chen* website. N.d. Last accessed Jul 30, 2017. <http://www.annachen.co.uk/theatre/the-steampunk-opium-wars/afterview/>

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Second, it gave us a chance to discover new genre writers from the region. Thirdly, it was a space to interrogate and push back against trends of multiculturalism in steampunk: the idea that a story is "multicultural" if it just happens to be set outside Victoriana with appropriately brown names; the bypassing of colonial histories by using alternate worlds; the use of vague impressions of local culture that allow the story to take place anywhere vaguely Asian. (We also had to push back against the notion that "Asia" constitutes China and Japan.) Moreover, we had to actively work to ensure that Southeast Asian writers felt welcome to submit despite their lack of knowledge of steampunk, because we felt that a table of contents populated by non-Southeast Asians would diminish the mission of the project.

A huge part of these trends stemmed from the lack of knowledge about the countries in the region—access to old manuscripts is limited, anthropological data is plentiful but sourcing it is difficult when a writer doesn't know who to ask, and then doesn't know what to do with the data. Many writers, whether or not they were from the diaspora, worked with impressions of the past, not more direct archives of it, because there few archives of knowledge to be had of the past. In a portion of an all-day Twitter chat I hosted to promote the anthology, the conversation took a turn to discuss this lack of access, and there was an air of being cut off from history as a result of the race to be modern.[343] Anthology contributors discussed questions of writing "authentically," even as these writers were writing stories featuring their own heritage.

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[343] Goh, Jaymee. "#SEAsteampunk All Day Twitter Chat." *Storify.com*. Feb 14 2015. Last accessed Jul 30, 2017. <https://storify.com/jhameia/seasteampunk-all-day-twitter-chat>

The project raised more concerns than it allays: the problem of self-authenticity (and the resultant imposter syndrome); the difficulty of representing an entire region with a sample dozen sotires; the continued reliance on Eurocentric iconography to express the steampunk aesthetic. However, it is a modest success nonetheless, if only because of the reviews that mention the need to consult Wikipedia. (*The Sea is Ours* also received a one-star review from a reader who complained that despite having traveled to Asia multiple times, they found themselves alienated by the anthology, unable to recognize the countries they loved so much in it. "Perhaps the tagline should be 'Uninviting to Colonizers!'" Nisi Shawl quipped to me. So this one-star review marks a success, because if the anthology alienates someone reading from the standpoint of whiteness, then it does work as a site of resistance to the white gaze.) With it, perhaps it is now possible to propose a theory of postcolonial steampunk and potential approaches that touch on language, technology, and other standpoints of seeing the world. What then, of postcolonial, or decolonial epistemologies of technology and science, in interaction with history? What different models of writing (and reading) can we glean from a postcolonial steampunk? What should be our vision of multiculturalism and postcoloniality in steampunk, besides creating "good" steampunk?

Good steampunk projects have an educational value that lies beneath the entertainment they provide. In what Margaret Rose calls the "easter eggs" of steampunk, the fantastic technologies have a researched science, known to inhabitants of the present who take pleasure in identifying them or researching them further, and the alternate

histories are rooted in real-life events.[344] Science fiction and fantasy fans are magpies of knowledge, however trivial, but in an era when knowledge is easily acquired, the challenge of puzzling out the factual from the fictional becomes a powerful education tool. Young adult author Scott Westerfeld has documented the works that middle school students have built in response to his novels and the conversations about rights and wardrobes he has with them on his blog. That uranium is plentiful in the Congo is probably not common knowledge, but one gets the chance to talk about it in relation to Nisi Shawl's *Everfair*. Steampunk gives pleasure because it is pleasurable to learn in an environment where one's knowledge can be put into practice.

Steampunk that explores an alternate history is, as Karen Hellekson argues about alternate history as a genre, interested in the genesis of historical events, in order to impress onto the reader that they could have happened otherwise.[345] This opens questions of how the present could look like otherwise, too, as in the manifesto of the Catastrophe Orchestra, "colonizing the past for a better future."[346] In the current pop culture climate in which alternate histories that envision white supremacist presents as a result of failed liberation efforts in the past are being produced, the need for alternate histories that provide a harder juxtaposition to the present, turning the gaze onto whiteness and its effects, becomes more necessary. This is not to say that steampunk is not different from

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[344] Rose, Margaret. "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. Vol. 20 Issue 3 (Nov 2009). 324.

[345] Hellekson, Karen. *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2001. 2.

[346] Castastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective. "What, Then, Is Steampunk?" *Steampunk Magazine #1* (2007). 4 – 5. Web. Last Accessed Mar 11, 2014. <http://www.combustionbooks.org/downloads/SPM1-web.pdf>

the alternate history genre. Steampunk is interesting because alternate history is one aspect of it, and sometimes even optional. It is interesting because it has caught a zeitgeist of anxiety about technology, control, and what it means to be free, and is expressed in wearable fashion, an individualist, personal form of self-expression. It is difficult to wear an alternate history, because people do not walk around with explanatory captions. The costumes and their wearers blend into the spectacle of the event.

Yet multicultural steampunk should not be an easy spectacle, just as multiculturalism, in reality, is not an easy spectacle. The interaction of difference is not only a source of excitement, but also of anxiety and alienation. Multicultural steampunk that is easily accessible, easily recognizable, is a steampunk that has made itself friendly and comfortable to the standpoint of whiteness. Difference should not be made available for consumption. If multiculturalism is to change steampunk for the better, then it must do for steampunk what is permitted of whiteness: the ability to change history in any number of ways, telling different stories and tweaking history in tiny ways that permit vast seas of change. Helen Young has noted the fantasy genre has formed "habits of whiteness," that is, dispositions, actions, systems of thought and ways of being that seem permanent.[347] Formed in the 19th century, it is only in the 21st century that the habits are being challenged to change.

There is currently no such sea of change on the horizon of steampunk, or science fiction, or even literature generally. If there were, we would not need movements such as

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[347] Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Fiction: Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge, 2016. 11.

the #ownvoices hashtag on Twitter, invented by Amsterdam-based science fiction writer, Corinne Duyvis, to start a conversation on authors, particularly those of marginalized groups, writing narratives inspired by their own experiences, without being autobiographical. We would not need organizations such as We Need Diverse Books to address the structural inequalities in book publishing and distribution, because such inequalities would already start disappearing.

Beyond the performance of guilt, what needs to be done about the problem of whiteness in steampunk? It is not enough to write stories with ostensible characters of color. Whiteness studies names the problem of whiteness and its consequences, but naming a problem does not make it go away. It simply makes it easier to puzzle out a solution. In *Everfair*, the white poetess Daisy Albin has once more alienated her African peers and her mixed-race lover, because while she vaguely realizes that race is a factor, she does not quite understand how the problem came to be. "You are the problem," Queen Josina tells Daisy Albin. "You. Sit with me and we'll figure out how to solve you." Daisy Albin cannot reach the solution on her own, because her own perspective prevents her from seeing herself as the problem, and thus prevents her from arriving at the solution without intervention. Through Queen Josina's (admittedly mystical) meditative inducement of a trance, Daisy sees how her own actions have caused harm to Lisette, how her own standpoint prevented her from empathizing with other mixed-race couples. Similarly, the hegemony of whiteness does not end without a white supremacist society being able to identify how it causes harm to its racialized subjects. The difference,

of course, is that Daisy loves Lisette, and no such love is lost between white supremacists and their victims.

As a long-time blogger about steampunk, I was often questioned on whether I was truly a steampunk fan, because much of my work rests on anti-racist call-outs and very little on praise for steampunk as a genre or aesthetic. I am consistently negative even about ostensibly good steampunk writers, because I firmly believe that steampunks of color deserve more the bare minimum of performative anti-racist goodness. I felt, and still feel, no need to provide validation to the efforts of whiteness to refrain from asserting itself in liberal discourse. As a science fiction writer, steampunk has always provided a unique research challenge, because I find it both pleasurable and relevant to research the histories of my heritage, and it galled me to watch white writers hijack a trend meant to empower racial minorities and profit by it. To love something is not to let criticism of it go unsaid, but to trust it can do better. Steampunk as an aesthetic means nothing without its cultural producers, and Eurocentrism or whiteness in steampunk will not go away until its producers recognize how they reinforce and reproduce them. The dislodging of the hegemony of whiteness requires a willingness to be subjected to scrutiny and an imagination that sees beyond the brass and the gilt of clockwork.

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