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Crafting Women's Narratives

The Material Impact of Twenty-First Century Romance Fiction on Contemporary Steampunk Dress

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ABSTRACT

Science fiction author K.W. Jeter coined the term 'steampunk' in his 1987 letter to the editor of *Locus* magazine, using it to encompass the burgeoning literary trend of madcap 'gonzo'-historical Victorian adventure novels. Since this watershed moment, steampunk has outgrown its original context to become a multimedia field of production including art, fashion, Do-It-Yourself projects, role-playing games, film, case-modified technology, convention culture, and cosplay alongside science fiction. And as steampunk creativity diversifies, the link between its material cultures and fiction becomes more nuanced; where the subculture began as an extension of the text in the 1990s, now it is the culture that redefines the fiction. As this shift occurs, women's narratives have grown in prominence and the treatment of female characters has become more three-dimensional than those of Jeter's initial cohort.

This new wave of authors like Gail Carriger, Cherie Priest, Ekaterina Sedia, and Adrienne Kress write a generation of bold female leads that appeal to millennial readers; this body of fiction is balanced by the efforts of steampunk bloggers and academics like Suna Dasi, Diana M. Pho, and Jaymee Goh who challenge steampunk's canon for representation, diversity and appropriate treatment of race, gender, and sexuality. As more authors, makers, cosplayers, and academics work towards intersectional creativity and balanced narratives, steampunk becomes more focused on personal storytelling and less anchored to a literary canon. In this thesis, I investigate in what ways – and with what tools – women craft their own narratives and cultivate representation inside the steampunk cultural space, thereby transforming it. I explore the symbiotic nature of women's storytelling and women's dress in steampunk culture, tracing the link between character descriptions and development in fiction with the material qualities of women's convention looks, fashion designs, cosplay, 'steampunk light' (casual street-style looks), styled photoshoots, and social media content and interactions.

In my study of women's narratives, I place particular focus on the impact of steampunk romance and romantic fiction – and the expectation of women to write romance – as the cypher linking inspiration to creative practices. My investigation is an intertextual probe into the osmotic nature of fiction and fashion, analysing Anglo-American steampunk writing and dress practices' interplay. This analysis hinges on two theoretical points: narratives of *becoming* and *being* gender performance (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993; Halberstam 1998; McRobbie 1980, 2004) and *inverse ekphrasis* (Heffernan 1991 and Domínguez et al. 2015), a condition where the literary inspires life. At the thesis's close, it will have provided the first detailed academic analysis of steampunk women's fashion and gender performance as they are both written and informed by the contexts – and connotations – of romance fiction.

LAY SUMMARY

This thesis explores the interlocking system of influences between steampunk romance fiction and steampunk women's dress in the last two decades. In it, I analyse how first and second wave steampunk authors describe female and queer characters, investigating their different treatments of women, female bodies, sexuality, gender performance, and women's fashion. The second wave works, particularly romance novels, present criticisms of the prevalent gender stereotyping employed in the 1980s and 1990s canon steampunk fiction (and its predominantly male perspective), and exchange the outdated practices with more nuanced approaches to the relationships between women's personal perceptions of femininity and their gender performances through dress.

My thesis reads clothing as a form of text and presents passages of fiction alongside object biographies as a method to unpack these relationships. I analyse the impact of Gail Carriger's New York Times Bestseller *Soulless* (2009), Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* (2009), and Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone* (2008) near-simultaneous publications – alongside the outcomes of the online science community's 'RaceFail'09' – as a turning point for representations of women in steampunk fiction, and unpack how steampunk's dress practices have developed alongside these new, more inclusive narratives. My investigation resolves a gap in steampunk's current field; it explores and analyses the intrinsic links between the steampunk romance fiction, the impact of gender on women's authorship, and the material qualities of steampunk fashion.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Art is entirely my own work, written and researched for the purpose of this degree, and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Shannon Marie Rollins

September 29, 2019

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Marco De Cuyper, for always being my designated hand-holder, coffee-maker, wine-bringer, and all-around fantastic partner.

GAIL CARRIGER POSING IN HER 'ALEXIA' DRESS

Replica of gown worn & designed by Donna Ricci on the *Changeless* cover (posted on *Instagram*, March 21, 2017)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract i
Lay Summary iii
Declaration iv
Acknowledgements v
Dedication vii
Gail Carriger Posing in her 'Alexia' Dress viii

Introduction 1

Steampunk: The Field of Study 4
Steampunk Fiction: Origins 8
The Steampunk Fiction Boom: 2009 11
Representation and Feminism 15
How Romance Aids Representation 20
Modes of Dress and The Steamsona 24
Cosplay, Steamsonas, and *A Cyborg Manifesto* 25
Technical Training: Mode Museum, Antwerp Belgium 28
Thesis Structure and Chapter Breakdown 30

I. Transforming Fiction With Fashion 33

Methods and Primary Sources 34
Participant Observation 36
Zines: *Steampunk Magazine* and *Exhibition Hall* 40
Social Media 43
What Is 'Authentic' Communication In The Instagram Age? 53
Secondary Sources, Through A Feminist Lens 56
Subculture Studies and Fashion 60
Judith & Jack: Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, Gender and Identity 63
Reading Romance: Sex, The Body, Escapism, and Feminism 68
Case Study: the Corset, Fiction, Neo-Victorian Tropes, and Romance in Steampunk Academia 80

II. Finding Representation in the Formula 87

Steampunk, Representation, and Romance 87
Steampunk, Privilege, and the Publishing Patriarchy 89
Case study: Bustlepunk 93
Writing Neo-Victorian Women: The New & Fallen Woman 102
Jeter, Crossdressing, and the New/Fallen Hybrid 107
Di Filippo's 'Victoria', Women, and Sexuality 110
Impact: Steampunk Romance and Fall-Proof Women 122
Sedia: Fashion, Identity, Tech, and Romantic Narrative 123
Carriger: *The Parasol Protectorate*, Gender, and Romance 130
Priest's *Boneshaker*: Diverging from Romance Expectations 147
Kress: Inverted Formulas and Crafted Bodies in Romance 153

III. Crafted Narratives, Crafted Bodies **159**

Case Study: *Becoming*, *Being*, and *Inverse Ekphrasis* 160
Fashion Origin Stories: Discovering Steampunk Dress 163
DIY, Bricolage, Intertext and the 'Rule Book' 167
Steampunk Fashion: Are There Rules? 172
Iconic Steampunk Women, Bricolage, and *Ekphrasis* 185
Bricolage, the Pillar of Steampunk Styling 191
Steampunk Costume or Clothing: Can It Be Both? 201
Getting Dressed: The Romance of Steampunk Fashion 204
Chemise and Undershirts 205
Corsets 213
Crinolines, Bustles, and Skirted Silhouettes 238
Gender, Sex, Skirts, and Suits: Menswear-Inspired Looks 248
Narratives: The Impact of Accessories 253

Conclusion **257**

Appendix: Screen Captures **267**

David Bennett Instagram Story 'Ask Me Anything' (AMA): December 20, 2018 267

Bibliography **269**

Non-Fiction 269
Fiction 290
Film, Television, and Audio Media 295
Web Articles 295
Blogs, E-Commerce, and Maker Websites 300

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my teenage years and into my adult life, I have held a love for fashion and an interest in both Victorian Britain and the Industrial Revolution. I worked with the latter theme during my undergraduate degree, analysing how J.M.W. Turner's maritime works celebrate the spoils of Industrialisation while still recognising nature's sublime power over society.[1] When a chance encounter in 2012 introduced me to steampunk design, I experienced a vibrant subculture that merged my academic interests in Romanticism, Industrialisation, and Victorian history with my personal interest in contemporary and nineteenth-century fashions.[2] Here was culture I had not previously known, but which I had been unconsciously engaging with for years through my love of historical romance novels, delight in Vivienne Westwood's *Anglomania* collections, and an enduring personal style that regularly features ruffled, high-necked blouses, tweed waistcoats, designer frock coats, and rockabilly hairstyles.

While setting the scope of my thesis project, I determined that my chief interest lay in the very phenomenon I had myself experienced: holding an affinity with steampunk material cultures without prior knowledge or overt exposure to the subculture's origins. This personal narrative of enjoying or experiencing steampunk's aesthetic draw before finding it nominally, as I would later determine, is a common experience and one that ties the community together

[1] Due to this sympathy with the steam age, Turner held unique status among the Romantic painters but never outright demonised the steam engine. His allegorical *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838) depicts a squat tugboat hauling the crippled yet elegant *Fighting Temeraire* into harbour, conveying the retirement of the established, 'dignified' status quo in favour of something more efficient – despite the aesthetic shift. Turner's manner of romanticising the machine captivates me now, just as it did in 2011.

[2] I will cover this subject in greater depth in the next chapter, Transforming Fiction With Fashion, where I will expand on contemporary scholarship of subcultures, and how steampunk may be read as such.

through their diverse experiences of discovery.[3] In her interview for *The Steampunk Bible* Gail Carriger stated, 'I didn't know there was steampunk to *read*, I only thought there was steampunk to *wear*' (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 64). Similarly, clothing designer Brit Frady-Williams explaining that when she started her career, 'I was just designing what I liked, which tended to fall either into the Victorian or retro-futuristic categories', and the link with steampunk came from customers and colleagues commenting that her work fits within the culture's framework (Gleason 2013: 24). These two statements are representative of many first-hand accounts I have encountered. They highlight that women's engagement with steampunk typically begins with their personal style, mixing a passion for history and period dress.[4]

From this anecdotal evidence, when women first encounter wider steampunk culture – and with it, steampunk fiction – it is through the lens of personal style. Their initial engagement with steampunk is intrinsically linked with fashion, gender, gender performance, and identity. And yet, early steampunk culture (late 1990s-mid 2000s) developed out of speculative storytelling anchored by white male protagonists. Female characters, where they appeared, were secondary foils to the hero with bodies, genders, and narratives driven by the male lead's motivation and performance of masculinity.[5] Given the limited

[3] Contemporary research into subcultures, like the post-subcultural studies work of Muggleton 2000 and Piano 2003, posits that unlike Hebdige's contemporaneous reporting of 1970s punk subculture, subcultures of the 1990s and 2000s are better characterised by the diversity of their performances towards a central goal rather than adherence to a semiotic check-list (Piano 2003: 263, referencing Muggleton's 2000 Hebdige-revising monograph *Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*). In this way, both material diversity and introspection are given preference in subcultural experience, deviating from the semiotic adherence-based models of the CCCS. In the first chapter – Transforming Fiction With Fashion – I will further unpack the lay of subcultural studies via feminist scholarship.

[4] Refer to p. 164 for analysis of this primary source evidence. This phenomenon does not relate uniquely to women – Jake von Slatt also describes a similar realisation (von Slatt 2010) – however as my focus is on women's narratives, I have elected to omit men's narratives from this prefacing material.

[5] This subject will be analysed in depth in the second chapter, Finding Representation in the Formula: p. 85

representations of women – not to mention people of colour – in early steampunk fiction, women used fashion as a principle access point for steampunk culture, as well as a vehicle for adapting a cultural space that was not originally designed for their inclusion (Pho 2009).

Thus, my thesis inquires: in what ways – and with what tools – do women craft their own narratives and cultivate representation inside the steampunk cultural space, thereby transforming it? As no prior body of work has analysed the gendered nuances that inform the symbiosis of steampunk's DIY craft ethos and storytelling, my thesis provides the first critical investigation into the impact of women's authorship and storytelling – both written fiction and personal narrative – on Anglo-American steampunk material cultures via dress. It achieves this while also addressing the web of influence that the designers, makers, authors, and community members employ to craft their looks.[6] In my search for spaces of positive storytelling and diverse gender representation, I place particular emphasis on the impact of steampunk romance fiction, gender characterisation and performance, and community members' personal storytelling. To achieve this, my thesis also undertakes a detailed analysis of steampunk fiction (from 1979 through 2018) to isolate the themes and treatment of women's bodies, genders, identities, and sexualities in both first and second-wave steampunk fiction – and unpack the backlash towards women who do not write romance or female-gendered content.

To begin, I dedicate the initial pages of my introduction to identifying the key elements of Anglo-American steampunk fiction and subculture, as well as the fields of popular and academic discourses in which they are studied. In consideration of steampunk as an international culture whose sculptures, paintings, garments, light fixtures, hats, jewellery, accessories, and case modified

[6] I use craft in two distinct manners. The first refers to practices of DIY and *bricolage* in steampunk dress, where the second refers to the virtual construction practice of writing representation into the steampunk fiction canon.

technologies[7] are created across the globe, I have elected to streamline my thesis with a narrow focus on the fashions (garments and accessories) and fictions created inside Britain and the United States.[8] From this precise vantage point, I move outwards first introducing issues surrounding women's representation and the treatment of gender, sexuality, identity, and race in steampunk literary fiction before covering the necessary terminology for my discussions on fashion and dress, before finally presenting the chapter breakdown.

STEAMPUNK: THE FIELD OF STUDY

Steampunk – in its dual contexts of literary genre and subculture – is a segment of popular culture that centres on a romantic, speculative view of nineteenth century history that uses near-nostalgia as a creative catalyst. Steampunk is also a global community, full of multicultural reactions to the nineteenth-century material cultures (American, set in mid nineteenth-century London, loosely based on extant literature or historical record, dependent on innovations wrought of the Industrial Revolution). With community members spread across Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa, Australia, and Asia, each new

[7] Case modified technologies, or 'case mods' as they are colloquially known, are a form of superficial bricolage where a piece of technology – such as a PC desktop computer, iPod, laptop computer, keyboard, and Wacom tablet (graphic design and illustration tool) – is given a new aesthetic and new after-life through the application of superficial details. Notable examples include Richard Nagy's *Steampunk Laptop* (2007), Dr Grymm's *Eyepod* (2009), and Jake von Slatt's *Victorian All-in-One PC* (c. 2009).

[8] I do not include jewellery in my thesis with the exception of pieces whose inclusion is necessary to the wearer's total look. For more information and analysis on this specific subset of steampunk creativity, I recommend Jeanette Atkinson's many studies of these materials in her research on steampunk collecting and fashion (Atkinson 2012, 2014, 2016).

This restriction includes multicultural case studies created inside the physical boundaries of North America and Britain. I have chosen to work inside the boundaries of Anglo-American steampunk as this fits my own language capabilities; there are strong steampunk communities in Brazil, France, Germany, Belgium, and Japan (for example), however as I do not speak their languages it would be a monumental task to engage with their literature – one better suited to a native speaker. On this same theme, my personal experience with American culture (specifically the American South, Midwest, and East Coast), studies of the Victorian era, and familiarity with Britain after spending six years of my adult life in Edinburgh have made Anglo-American steampunk the most accessible format to study, as well as creating a concise field of production.

reading of steampunk – and its creative manifestations – marries the creator's own culture with their own interpretation of steampunk's aesthetic. Steampunk is inward-gazing, growing in the juncture between fiction and reality, personal and cultural history, and its outcomes are these internal thoughts made manifest. This approach – viewing steampunk as the outcome of an internalised love of history and storytelling – embraces the pluralities of steampunk as a subject; steampunk materials grow from writers, makers, consumers, Do-It-Yourself creatives and *bricoleurs*, whose tastes and interpretations have led to the heterogeneous culture. Thus, steampunk materials depend on the creator's authentic voice – and how their voice becomes material.

Steampunk, as a field of study, has been claimed by a variety of disciplines spanning Comparative Literature, Gothic studies, and Neo-Victorian studies, to name a sample. This academic dissection presents an issue; steampunk creativity is spread across a diverse offering of media and, as such, singular disciplinary readings risk incorporating only *aspects* of the subject rather than the spectrum. Thus, interdisciplinary practices, like Neo-Victorian studies, reduce the risk of disrupting steampunk's more hybrid qualities; recent scholarship that situates steampunk as Neo-Victorian places stress on interpretation of the Victorian rather than repetition, thus reducing the political pressure of faithful nineteenth-century history, i.e., colonialism (Pho 2013: 186-187). Regarding the lay of steampunk inside the Neo-Victorian field, Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall's special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies,* which collected research on steampunk fiction and culture as a field of Victorian-influenced production, was among the first academic studies into the subject that approached both steampunk fiction and material culture (2010). This special issue was predated by Rebecca Onion's earlier essay for the same journal, whose title announced Onion's aim to provide 'An Introductory Look At Steampunk In Everyday Practice' (Onion 2008).

Edited volumes such as Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller's *Steaming Into a Victorian Future* (2013) and Barry Brummett's *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk* (2014) have presented research from a variety

of academics working with steampunk's fiction, material cultures, DIY, and maker industry. Both anthologies hold a strong focus on steampunk with Victorian aesthetic, and both devote more pages to literary criticism than design.[9] Articles and book chapters on steampunk are a regular fixture in Neo-Victorian imprints, with the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* garnering at least two, one from Claire Nally (Nally 2018) and one from myself (Rollins 2018). Nally's forthcoming monograph *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture and the Neo-Victorian* (2019) promises to provide the most rigorous academic research into steampunk subculture to date, and is among the first single-author academic titles to explore steampunk from a narrow lens, with Mike Perschon's recent release of *Steampunk FAQ* (2018)[10] targeting popular readership. Though there are many academics actively working on steampunk's fiction, subculture, and the links in between, none of the many texts currently in print investigate steampunk romance fiction, female characters and gender representation, and the link between this traditionally-feminine subgenre's performative elements and steampunk women's dress.

Doctoral research into steampunk has likewise investigated steampunk in relation to a theme or discipline, such as Perschon's comparative literature study that focuses on reading steampunk via Neo-Victorian and retrofuturistic technology (2012) and Goh's examination of steampunk, whiteness and race in North America (2017). Popular media, by contrast, widely focuses on how to create objects inside the steampunk aesthetic. This has led to the publication of catalogues containing the work of figures like Richard Nagy (aka Datamancer), Thomas Willeford of Brute Force Studios (aka Lord Archibald 'Feathers' Featherstone), Jake von Slatt of Steampunk Workshop, Art Donovan, James Ng,

[9] Jeanette Atkinson's *Steampunk Legacy: Collecting and Exhibiting the Future of Yesterday* is unique among the two volumes in its focus on tangible rather than virtual materials (Atkinson 2013).

[10] *Steampunk FAQ* is based on Perschon's 2012 thesis research, condensing his arguments into an accessible text that presents both a survey of materials and his own insights.

Joey Marsocci (aka Dr Grymm), Jeanette Ng (of Costume Mercenary) and Donna Ricci of Clockwork Couture. The purpose of these catalogues is to both display steampunk materials and inspire the reader. To this latter end, these texts also tend to include DIY instructions for small accessories like spats, plated boxes, cravats, and fascinators (Donovan 2011, Dr Grymm 2011, Taylor 2012, Gleason 2013). Science fiction author Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chambers's *The Steampunk Bible* (2011) and VanderMeer and Desirina Boskovich's *The Steampunk User's Manual* (2015) combine the same artists as the catalogues with a survey of steampunk fiction, fashion, culture, and creativity from across the globe, again interspersed with small DIY projects and short editorials from community fixtures like von Slatt, Libby Bulloff, G.D. Falksen, and Diana M. Pho. Many academics rely on these popular texts as self-reporting primary sources as they collect feedback from authors and makers alongside journalist articles to give steampunk's general flavour. However, these texts are general surveys that report rather than analyse. Academic works must synthesise these popular texts, fiction, material output, and analysis alongside the authors'/makers' social media to create a rounded, holistic investigation.

Therefore, situating steampunk in Comparative Literature or Neo-Victorian studies leads to evaluating steampunk in terms of an external checklist, which negates the unique – and messy – qualities that first created the subject: a celebration of personal tastes and cultural responses. I have thus concluded that the best method to discuss steampunk is through intertext; I read steampunk as textually driven, focused on an optional intertextuality that depends on a nuanced engagement with both history and contemporary popular culture alongside the DIY material aspect.

In his doctoral thesis, McEwan University lecturer and steampunk literature expert Dr Mike Perschon states that to engage with steampunk as both a field and a fiction genre one must also engage with connoisseurship, and the negativity that this can entail:

> To understand steampunk as a genre is to invite the tyranny of personal taste. Look at online forum discussions on steampunk literature to see what I mean: someone joins the discussion to say they're reading Gail Carriger's *Soulless*, only to be told that is [*sic*] not *real* steampunk, but paranormal romance in the Victorian era. (Perschon 2012: 241, original emphasis)

This idea that there is a single authentic steampunk and that self-proclaimed connoisseurs act with impunity as gatekeepers closing the culture is, in truth, the primary obstacle for any writer attempting to work beyond thematic analysis. To combat these issues of gatekeeping, Perschon proposes instead an aesthetic approach and the guiding question '"how steampunk is it?" as opposed to "is it steampunk or not?"' (2012: 12). From my perspective, Perschon is right to frame his work with open-ended questions rather than enclosing brackets; fields of production and their creative autonomy require that diversity and shifts be read as generative rather than contradictory as each spectator and reader changes the field itself (Bourdieu 1993: 31). I believe that this climate of exclusion erupted in early 2009 and that, in the near-decade since then, steampunk material cultures that diverge from the pre-2009 status quo continue to argue their relevance. Before delving into this, however, I will first convey the basic history of steampunk from its 1987 coining to its material shift c. 2005 and ideological schism in 2011 (Nevins 2011: 513).[11]

STEAMPUNK FICTION: ORIGINS

Steampunk as a term was first coined by K.W. Jeter in a 1987 letter to the editor of *Locus* magazine. In it, Jeter suggested that the 'gonzo-historical' fiction that he

[11] Nevins's comprehensive review of three major steampunk texts released in 2010 (*Neo-Victorian Studies* Special Issue, VanderMeer and VanderMeer's *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded* anthology, and Mike Ashley's *Steampunk Prime*) explains that, as recently as 2005, science fiction anthologies applied near-identical definitions of steampunk which exactly matched the first-wave's output (Nevins 2011: 513). He goes on to state that, as of his writing the review in 2011, a sudden boom had overtaken the subject as the culture took hold and its dress aesthetic moved into advertisement, television, and film (something he suggests as a short-lived trend that will dissipate – although seven years later this prediction has yet to come true).

and his cohort (namely Tim Powers and James Blaylock) had been making were leading an incoming science fiction trend: 'I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term … like "Steampunk"' (Jeter 1987). From this catalyst, English-language steampunk fiction is characterised by two separate waves of production: the first, c. 1979-early 2000s, a brief pause in quality publications, followed by the second, 2008-present. Where some academics separate fiction from the 1980s and 1990s into two distinct generations, thus making work from 2000-onwards a third generation (Pagliassotti 2013), I believe that this overcomplicates the field and does not account for bookending circumstances (like the development of subculture and online fan cultures). Thus, I read the genre's divides based on their treatment of steampunk: the first-wave as a specific formula of Victorian techno-fantasy and the second as an aesthetic toolkit (Nevins 2011, Perschon 2012).

The first-wave is predominantly male-authored and follows the convention of traditional science fiction, with the majority of storylines crossing over into speculative territory as they revise Victorian Britain (K.W. Jeter's *Morlock Night* 1979, Powers's *The Anubis Gates* 1983, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* 1990, Blaylock's *Lord Kelvin's Machine* 1992, Paul Di Filippo's *Victoria* 1995) and rely on advanced technology to move society – and the plot – forward. These initial novels most often feature a male protagonist and female characters in a supporting or love-interest capacity.

By contrast, several of the second-wave's most commercially popular authors were female, writing narratives that further develop the first-wave's conventions of history-play outside of Britain, with less focus on the details of technology, giving greater emphasis to the impact of the said technology on culture. There is also surge of strong-willed, flawed female leads whose narratives span relationships with other women, and as well both romantic and platonic/familial interactions with men (Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone* 2008, Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series 2009-2012, Cherie Priest's

Clockwork Century series 2009-2013, and M.K Hobson's *Native Star* 2010). Likewise, novels from second-wave male authors contain a greater depth of character development and explore a wider variety of emotional themes from inside the traditional science fiction male lens than their predecessors, with subversive and emotional revision of the solitary academic-turned-adventurer model (Scott Westerfield's *Leviathan* 2009, Mark Hodder's *The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack* 2010). Westerfield defines his view of steampunk's potential as a post-colonial and feminist space for enfranchising narratives:

> In many steampunk works, history is rewritten in a very positive way, with women – and other people who suffered under imperialism – given roles and powers beyond their historical station. It's a way of reclaiming history, and rewriting the roots of our modern world. (Westerfield 2011)

The revision of history can thus be a way to empower extant historical narratives with equalising plots and rounded, diverse characters. Authors like Westerfield, Carriger, Priest, Sedia, G.D. Falksen (*The Ourboros Cycle* 2013-2017), M.K. Hobson (*The Native Star* 2010), Dru Pagliassotti (*Code of Blood* 2011) and Suna Dasi ('The Tinku Diaries' 2014) side-step the conventions of first-wave steampunk, expanding its scope into an intersectional fiction and fandom.[12] Alongside this new generation of steampunk fiction authors came steampunk's bricolage-led fashion (c. 2000, VanderMeer and Chambers 2012), zine culture (most widely-referenced: *SteamPunk Magazine,* founded 2007), blogs (most *Steampunk Chronicle*[13] Reader's Choice awards: *Steampunk Workshop* 2006-present, *Beyond Victoriana* 2009-present, *Airship Ambassador* 2010-present). With this material

[12] While Hobson's *Native Star* (2010) does include interactions with the Miwok tribe and prominently – and positively – features an Indigenous character (Komé, the group's spiritual leader), Hobson's employ of racist terminology to foreground the text precludes her from a listing with intersectional steampunk authors; where others – like Carriger and Priest – make some missteps, Hobson's outright use of 'savages', 'Indian', 'redskin', and 'Wop' (when referring to an Italian character) move beyond this scope of miscalculation and into the very practice RaceFail'09 centred upon. For more on RaceFail'09, see section titled 'The Steampunk Fiction Boom: 2009.

[13] *Steampunk Chronicle* (now defunct) was a news website dedicated to chronicling films, television, books, fashion, events, objects, and blogs that are related to steampunk culture.

explosion, steampunk transitioned from a science fiction genre into a subculture. As the material practices of steampunk grew, the original context of steampunk – *Victorian fantasy* (Jeter 1987) – became less prominent, causing confusion among community members and engendering the 'is/is not' connoisseurship that everyone working in the steampunk context encounters.

In his article on the subject of steampunk's aesthetic evolution, Jess Nevins asserts that the split between the first-wave and the second-wave is the split between that which is authentic to the first-wave and that which is divergent (Nevins 2011). Prescriptive steampunk believes following Jeter et al.'s footsteps to be the unique entry point for the genre, with the descriptive camp – including Perschon and Priest – choosing an approach that focuses on steampunk as an 'aesthetic toolbox', of which Neo-Victorian themes or steam power are a few of many potential tools rather than thematic requisites (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2010: 11). Priest and Perschon's descriptive conceptions of the genre, a spectrum of 'more' or 'less' steampunk rather than is/is not binary, open the field of production for diversity while still acknowledging that steampunk's soul is in its 'gonzo' attitude towards history and technology (Nevins 2011: 517).

By regarding steampunk as a spectrum, it can be both Neo-Victorian and multicultural depending on the writer, reader, spectator and/or maker. Likewise, steampunk fiction's ability to serve as a space for contemporary cultural critique (evidenced in works including *The Difference Engine* and *Burton and Swinburne Chronicles*) can thus comfortably engage with nineteenth-century Britain (as explored by Llewellyn in 2008) while also moving beyond it (*Boneshaker*, *Leviathan*, *Perdido Street Station*, 'The Mechanical Aviary of Emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar'). This is especially important as, in early 2009, steampunk's publishing and online communities clashed over representation and changed the subculture's landscape.

THE STEAMPUNK FICTION BOOM: 2009

In the USA in 2009, four events transpired that reshaped steampunk's environment as a fiction genre, subculture, and a field of study:

- January 12th: science fiction author Elizabeth Bear shares a LiveJournal[14] post titled 'whatever you're doing, you're probably wrong', instigating the 'flame war'[15] that would come to be known as RaceFail'09
- June: Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* released
- October 1st: Gail Carriger's New York Times Bestseller *Soulless* released
- October 23rd through 25th: The inaugural Steamcon takes place in Seattle, Washington (coincidently the setting of *Boneshaker*) and rapidly becomes the largest steampunk-specific convention in the USA until its cancellation prior to Steamcon VI in 2014.

In her post, Bear gave advice on how to write 'the Other' as a white author without succumbing to stereotyping, recommending that authors research the people they want to write first and seeking advice/review from the groups they want to write about (Bear 2009, Reagle 2015). Avalon Willow, a blogger and person of colour, was quick to rebut Bear via her Blogger-hosted blog 'Seeking Avalon' asserting that she (Bear) had failed to take her own advice when writing a central black male character in her novel *Blood and Iron*, and that internalised racism in fantasy and science fiction is an epidemic of white authors who fail to fully comprehend what it means to write well-developed people of colour (Avalon Willow 2009). Avalon Willow concludes:

> And you, Elizabeth Bear in particular have written that someone just '*happens to have that cultural background*'. I do not happen to be black or gay or have a Caribbean culture background. I'm not a

[14] LiveJournal is a social media blogging site, most popular in the 'noughties' (1999 through late 2000s) that has generally been replaced by microblogging site Tumblr. LiveJournal's semi-customisable pages were a space for longer-form writing and direct commenting that would have been out of place on MySpace (the other most popular social media site of the noughties), as well as sharing visual content.

[15] 'Flame war' is the widely accepted term for the extended and sustained exchange of angry messages and insults – flaming – on online forums, most common across blog posts, the comments sections, and in microblogging ecosystems like Tumblr and Reddit.

> straight white woman who just happens to have on these "accessories". Who I am, the facets that make up *me* cannot be picked up somewhere for $3.95, no matter how well you think you shop in exotic locations for true bits of said exotic culture. (Avalon Willow 2009)

Avalon Willow's emphatic, sometimes inflammatory, response to Bear's 'shopping' for diversity incited a cross-fandom 'flame war', with members of the online science fiction/fantasy community arguing over representation in their beloved genre, and the whitewashing of the well-written people of colour who did exist in television and film (see Reigle 2015 and Somerville 2009 for detailed accounts of RaceFail'09).[16] In the course of this online fall-out, many people of colour explained how the science fiction and fantasy community had systemically othered their cultures and failed to recognise imperialism and colonialism when engaging with Victorian-inspired fiction (Pho 2009).

If nothing else, RaceFail'09 highlighted the failures of the science fiction publishing establishment to acknowledge cultural appropriation and the problematic romanticising of the British Empire during the nineteenth century. In the context of steampunk's subculture, Diana M. Pho's blog (*Beyond Victoriana*) is among the most important outcomes of this debate. Pho – now an icon in the steampunk community due to her writing, editing, and activism efforts – began her blog as a method to look inwards, analysing her own feelings about steampunk's Victorian premise, and how to situate her own cultural identity in a fictional space that had – up to that point – given preference to white experience (Goh 2017), searching for a way to engage with steampunk that is both multicultural and post-colonial. With Pho's cultural identity-oriented work rapidly growing in popularity, the scope for other new voices grew.

[16] The flame war itself rapidly descended into a racist and problematic space, with white commentators defending their colleagues with racists and transphobic comments. For example, an editor at Tor (a well-respected science fiction publisher and website) suggested that Avalon Willow was out of line with a statement that 'some people are smarter than others'. (Somerville)

Priest and Carriger's novels, both featuring a strong-willed female lead, diverged significantly from the extant steampunk formula as penned by the predominantly male first-wave authors. Priest's text – *Boneshaker* – followed the conventions of the male-led adventure narrative, without a single hint of romance (something that Perschon reports as irksome to some of her readership[17]). By contrast, Carriger's novel matches the definition of a romance novel down to the last detail[18], something which Perschon repeatedly cites as the reason for her exclusion from authentic steampunk (Perschon 2011, Perschon 2012: 91 and 241). And yet, science fiction itself shares common DNA with romance, with both tending towards adventure-based formula fiction and serving as an avenue of escape; Carriger's adaptation of the formula to include adventure alongside romance (rather than in the opposite ratio) should not therefore relegate her to the 'inauthentic', just as Priest's choice to write a female rather than male protagonist should not make her adventure plot 'soft' (Perschon 2011). These two female authors penned two very different women and, in so doing, shifted the course of women's representation in steampunk and demonstrated the creative potential of steampunk outside its prescriptive roots.

Likewise, Steamcon provided the first large-scale physical space for the North American steampunk community to meet and interact outside their online forums. Here, as at other similar conventions that have since occurred, community members could share their introspective viewpoints on steampunk fiction and dress, marginalising their cultural identities with steampunk's retrofuturistic aesthetic toolbox. With panel talks, vendors, seminars, evening events, meet and greets, live performances and musicians, in its five-year duration Steamcon featured events with Perschon, Carriger, Priest, von Slatt,

[17] 'None of Priest's steampunk to date features any romance. This omission of romance has angered some readers, some going so far as to perceive Priest's heroines as lesbians, simply because they don't find every man they meet (while escaping near death adventure) attractive.' (Perschon 2011)

[18] See Regis 2003:19 for the eight requisite elements of a romance novel.

Kevin Steil (*Airship Ambassador*), Abney Park (among the first consciously-steampunk bands) and The League of S.T.E.A.M. (performance artists). SteamCon's popularity, and the profusion of similar conventions across North America that followed, demonstrated the diversity of interactions and responses that people performed in their interpretations of steampunk. Steamcon, and events like it, provide physical touchpoints for a community that can (as RaceFail'09 revealed) interact in a continuous, daily manner online.[19]

As I submersed myself in the fiction, engaged with the American and British online communities and attended events in Glasgow, I came to the realisation that the first-wave of fiction simply could not – and did not – represent the spirit of the women whom I had met and followed on social media. The first-wave authors handled gender, sexuality, and identity in a manner that can – at times – be best characterised as clumsy (Jeter's cross-dressing Tafe in *Morlock Night* and Di Filippo's lesbian Otto and sexually liberated Queen Victoria in *Victoria*) or unrewarding (Gibson and Sterling's pawn-like treatment of revolutionary Sybil Gerard and mathematical genius Ada Lovelace).[20] By contrast, the female characters in second-wave steampunk fiction have rich backstories and motivations beyond supporting a heroic male protagonist – something strongly instilled in the Anglo-American literary canon (Prose 1988, Ricker-Wilson 1999). I thus concluded that my study of steampunk would require a survey of steampunk's climate of representation through a feminist lens before refocusing on the relationship between women's authorship and women's dress.

REPRESENTATION AND FEMINISM

[19] See the next chapter, Transforming Fiction With Fashion, for more information on how I access and read online community exchanges.

[20] The second-wave of authors also make mistakes in representation; some of Carriger's gay characters do, at times, tread the line of effete stereotype.

In 2012, at the start of my research, the relatively small number of female authors included in steampunk anthologies struck me as both odd and misleading. This was despite VanderMeer and Chambers's prominent featuring of romance novelist Carriger, graphic novelist Kaja Foglio, and *Clockwork Century* author Priest in their *Steampunk Bible* (2011). I also noted that, while women makers enjoyed relatively equal visibility to their male counterparts in books and blogs dedicated to steampunk art, design, and dress, there is a clear gender divide in the kinds of objects linked to women. In Art Donovan's *The Art of Steampunk* – the 2010 exhibition *Steampunk* at the University of Oxford's Science Museum catalogue and one of the first mainstream publications of steampunk makery – the women artists were, near exclusively, jewellery and trinket makers with the exception of Molly Friedrich; it must be noted, however, that while fashion was not a focus for Donovan's catalogue, images of women's dress are featured in the catalogue's introductory material to showcase the turnout for the exhibition's launch event. This is compared to the men's contributions, which spanned costume (generally metal, resin, and leatherwork), case modifications, fantasy-based contraptions, and fiction-inspired sculptures.

I again noted this trend in Dr Grymm's *1000 Steampunk Creations* (2011) where women's contributions were limited to jewellery and textile-based fashion. In terms of who is published and how, the anthologies dedicated to gadgetry and devices are male-authored, with the fashion-led texts coming from women. I initially questioned whether this division was due to a lack of women makers, or rather, if Donovan et al.'s cataloguing was representative and that the bulk of women makers are indeed focused on fashion and accessory design. Genuine interest would account for this discrepancy, yet such a gendered viewpoint feels that it must be somehow constructed.

Likewise, fiction written by women was also regularly relegated to secondary sub-genres in a manner that I can best describe as exclusionary (Nevins 2011, Perschon 2011, VanderMeer and Chambers 2011, Hobson 2009 and Hobson 2011). The focus on interactions between women, as well as the

choice to use societal intrigue or employ romantic tension for plot – demonstrably by a woman author – appeared to be enough to warrant re-assignment from steampunk into a feminine subgenre. I returned again to the question: is steampunk encoded as male – despite the popularity and existence of female authorship – or does it suffer from gender segmentation?

This gender tension echoes the work of Linda Nochlin and the Guerilla Girls: representation is not always representative. Creative establishments are not always trustworthy, and are currently combatting historic marginalisation of narratives from women and people of colour. And even with the strides made in twenty-first century culture to be 'woke', to 'check privilege' and celebrate diverse voices, the groups that carry power are still better poised to be heard. And from this condition comes a segregation of art and creativity, what Nochlin's seminal essay 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1971) sought to first critique and then combat: the societal suggestion that art made by women is women's art, and thus art designed for women's consumption. With this in mind, I returned to these maker-focused books and, countering the print resources' suggestion that jewellery and trinkets are women's domain in steampunk, my participant observation and online visual research via Facebook and Instagram pointed to this as another situation of representation failing to be representative. As my research progressed, I concluded that this was more than an uncanny resemblance: steampunk's retrospection had situated itself in a space before Nochlin.

Nochlin's essay debuted in January 1971 in *ARTnews* magazine, critiquing the institutional suppression of women artists.[21] Her premise ran contrary to earlier suppositions that there *were* no great women artists, proposing instead

[21] The version of Nochlin's essay I use in my thesis is from the later publication: Nochlin, Linda, 1973. 'Why have there been no great women artists? *Art and Sexual Politics: Women's Liberation, women artists, and art history.* eds. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker. (Macmillan, USA), pgs 1-43.

that there were many – and that they had been victims of a historic trend in academic practices of partial membership. Nochlin's thesis struck at the idea that these artists' biological sex and gender had kept them as outsiders in art history's canon, despite the calibre of their work – or that their art had been considered women's art rather than art made by a woman. Citing Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun, Angelica Kauffmann, Artemisa Gentileschi, Emily Brontë, George Sand, and Rosa Bonheur as examples, Nochlin's essay presses that women artists and writers are not held together stylistically through some intrinsic femininity, but rather hold more in common with their historic peers, regardless of sex or gender.

Nochlin argues against an idea of gendered, 'women's art' as the default production for women artists (Nochlin 1973: 4). For example, Vigee-Lebrun's paintings generally fall inside the tradition of acceptably feminine women-and-children portraiture, with her most famous works centring on these portraiture mainstays. Her contemporaries celebrated her expert brushwork, execution, and talent and her notoriety extended her patronage into Europe's ruling classes, most famously the ill-fated Marie Antoinette. Her portraiture is a strong case for why great art cannot be arbitrarily gendered, demonstrating that *feminine* themes like a mother/child composition can wield as much social impact and be as masterfully delivered as *masculine* history painting. Vigee-Lebrun was a *great* artist, regardless of her gender. Her great art, though feminine in subject matter, is not great art *for* women – it is simply great art. It is not so much a case of women's literature written for women as it is literature that addresses what it is to be a woman – and how this woman can escape herself. With such a context, the romance novel can suddenly serve as a critical space for female-led authorship: a space to advance ideas surrounding women's identity, gender, and cultural significance through a gendered and dismissed mode.

In the same vein, the original incarnation of the Guerrilla Girls' now-iconic 1989 advertising campaign with its gorilla mask superimposed over Ingres's reclining nude (*Grande Odalisque* 1814) and its anarchic visual quotation (use of the yellow/pink/black scheme popularised in the Sex Pistols's *Nevermind the*

Bollocks album art) echo the issues of representation in art. The Guerrilla Girls are still active in 2018, and their message remains largely the same: at what point will there be equal representation for equal work? And when will the female body cease to be an object of the male gaze in popular culture? And yet mugs, stickers, posters and a host of gift shop paraphernalia covered with the Guerrilla Girls' 'warning shot' to the Met are available on both the Guerrilla Girls' website and art museum shops[22]: if the fight for equal representation is commercial, does it increase the likelihood of change? The ways in which feminism, punk, art history and popular culture intertwine are a direct assault on the institutional causes of women, queer people and people of colour's partial membership – and partial voice – in popular culture. In smaller, interest led communities like steampunk, this same dynamic is at play on a smaller scale.

In the 1990s, riot grrrl subculture in the US applied this subversive punk-feminist fusion to their music, art and activism, using punk's DIY ethic to create zines, fashion, lyrics, and conventions aimed towards empowering women and combatting sexism, abuse, and racism (McCool and Shive 1996, Rosenberg and Garofolo 1998, Piano 2003, Bardsley 2006). In its time, riot grrrl gave a space and a platform for women to explore their trauma and use it to empower themselves and other women: riot grrrl sought actively to situate itself outside the male sphere and used DIY to expose their membership in the punk scene (Piano 2003). It was not the duty of riot grrrls to educate men, and the extent to which men's thoughts or opinions impacted riot grrrl varied from person to person (McCool and Shive 1996). And while riot grrrl's level of success in combatting social injustice is difficult to quantify given its predominantly white and middle-class community, the self-formed culture was a space for these women to explore radical forms of feminism and creative identity, giving its members the

[22] In August 2018, I visited the Tate Modern and was both surprised and unsurprised to see the aforementioned souvenirs.

opportunity for personal revolution if not a mass-cultural one (Rosenberg and Garofolo 1998).

As Doreen Piano evidences, riot grrrl showcased the impact of DIY and cottage-industry making to disseminate both rhetoric and emotion, practices which continue to be used today (Piano 2003: 254). I find the same punk-feminist impulses expressed in Nochlin's writing, Guerrilla Girls' activism, and riot grrrls' culture in women's steampunk creativity. I feel the influence of riot grrrl in the reclaiming of garments like the corset in women's steampunk fashion and fiction and the boldness of Guerrilla Girls in women like Pho, Goh, and Suna Dasi of *Steampunk India* who all champion the voices of queer people and people of colour in steampunk.

And yet, during my research my internal monologue continued to echo with Nochlin's rhetoric. With so many women in steampunk actively pursuing – and occasionally fighting – for representation from platforms at conventions, blogs, social media, and their own creative works, how is it that their representation continues to be so unequal in anthologies? I also questioned how the spaces where these gendered inequities tend to dominate – such as romance fiction and fashion – continue to be plagued with questions of authenticity? As I read more of the first-wave fiction that predates the culture, I questioned: how can the first-wave's fiction with its internalised misogyny (the treatment of queer women, Queen Victoria, and Ada Lovelace are particularly troubling) and its uneven treatment of women continue to be held as a canon in the 'woke'-aspiring twenty-first century when so many iconic steampunk figures and creatives actively create work counter to its institutions?

HOW ROMANCE AIDS REPRESENTATION

Second-wave and third-wave feminist touchstones like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's 1972 installation *Womanhouse* (Raven 1994) and riot grrrl culture critique the pervasive cultural knotting of femininity, womanhood, and nurturing in America. Their efforts have

impacted popular thought on gender, though their dissemination has not equated to an end of gender-segmented work nor social equality. Friedan's study gave 'the problem with no name' – the disillusionment surrounding lack of fulfilment in a nurture-focused life – the attention it required, underlining the endemic and systemic anxiety that American women had endured following the success[23] of first-wave feminism. As she mapped the appearance of anxieties about being feminine, being a proper wife and mother while meeting social expectations, she remarked on how these cultural demands coincided with the contemporary re-popularisation of Freud's psychoanalytic claims on the mental differences between the sexes, as well as the derision of women who chose to pursue paths outside – sometimes even alongside – their 'natural' household role.

Riot grrrl zine culture has evolved with social media into fourth-wave feminism that combats inequality and socially-toxic concepts in real time. Across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit social media users implement hashtags like #riotgrrrl, #blacklivesmatter, #metoo and #believesurvivors to signpost their commentary on sexual violence, social inequality, and gender discrimination faced by women, people of colour, and the LGBTQIA+ community in the USA. Alongside its first role as a tool for socialising, social media has been activated by communities to share in joy and fight in unity. Each wave of feminism countered anxiety surrounding 'other' status by seeking legal and social policy changes. As Friedan's work exposes, anxiety and escape are entangled, with literature linked directly to social expectations serving as both escape and support (1963: 34-39).

The heroines in the short stories Friedan reports finding in popular magazines are middle class women – like the readers themselves – whose storylines end in engagement/marriage or feature narratives that encourage affection for their safety of home. Romance novels, with their more-distant

[23] Success here equating to women's suffrage.

heroines (Radway 1983), are familiar enough – that is, feel like a fantasy representation of womanhood – to provide a risk-free escape from their 'problem with no name' anxiety (Lee 2008). For the duration of the reading experience, romance readers are removed from their lived context into the cipher of familiar fantasy. How this cipher is written or decoded depends upon the publisher, author and romance genre.[24]

Harlequin and Silhouette are the most popular romance imprints, boasting hundreds of titles released every year that each follow a similar formula from the hero/heroine meeting to the culmination of courtship (Regis 2003: 19-24). Beyond the general formula outlined by the editor's 'tip sheet'[25], romance as a genre is seldom explicitly defined by the publisher, leaving the genre in the hands of its authors. This level of autonomy alongside the popularity of themes like Regency-era setting and paranormal experiences provides romance writers with a wealth of space to write about – and represent – women. Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* (1813) is widely regarded as the best romance novel ever written (see Regis 2003: 75 for full account), and its portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet as a strong-minded and rounded character has long made her a feminist character in the fiction canon.

So poignant is Elizabeth's representation as an independent female character that her story has been adapted and retold in countless films, television series and novels including Helen Fielding's contentiously feminist/post-

[24] See Regis 2003 for a detailed account of romance's most popular themes, such as regency, western and paranormal.

[25] Tip sheet for the Silhouette Truly Yours line (romances featuring written communication):

> SILHOUETTE YOURS TRULY. 50,000 words . . . Category romance, very contemporary, fast-paced fun, flirtatious, entertaining, upbeat and sexy. Real-life hero and heroine meet directly or indirectly through a form of written communication. Let romantic conflict build to a satisfying happy ending. Marriage not required. (Regis 2003: 24)

feminist[26] chick-lit franchise *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). Romance heroines are themselves the vehicle of escaping anxiety and, in the context of their reading, ciphers of femininity. The author's coding and reader/spectator's interpretation can, thus, take on the performed context of representation when read through a feminist lens. The proliferation of online fandom communities (Baym 1998, Hodkinson 2003, Reagle 2015) armed with the social tools championed in fourth-wave feminism brings discussions of representation – and with it the impact of romance fiction – into the realms of performed intertext.

[26] See McRobbie 2004 and Butler and Desai 2008 for more on feminism/post-feminism tensions in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and chick-lit's relationship with post-feminist consumer practices as prefaced in *Diary* respectively.

MODES OF DRESS AND THE STEAMSONA

I readily comprehend that the nuances separating steampunk fashion and steampunk costume can appear to overlap, and at times, the difference is near imperceptible due to extravagant fabric or design choices. Dress encapsulates the stuff with which people adorn and protect their bodies: clothing, accessories, and their attachment methods. Dress also refers to the material characteristics and physical attributes of the garments in a broad sense, as well as any modifications made to the body. However, while these are all crucial elements that define dress, they are not exclusive to it as they are also the building blocks of fashion.

Fashion is used to designate clothing that creates and critiques trends in contemporary culture via construction, material, emotion, and/or overall appearance of garments (Wilson 1992, Breward 2003, Entwistle 2015). Fashion is expressed and analysed not only in terms of its materiality, but also in its intertextual relationship with the zeitgeist: politics, sustainability, questions of access, body positivity, culture, history, parody, and finance. Fashion is among the most ubiquitous cultural productions – and the most challenged. As luxury brands and high-end fashion become more accessible than ever before[27] , style – the manner of dressing[28] – becomes increasingly more important in terms of identity performance. Likewise, performances of style are increasingly shared on social media, particularly visual-oriented Instagram, a platform that brings the professional presence of fashion (brands, designers, critics, stylists, influencers, etc.) together with the culture who consumes, eschews, subverts, and restyles

[27] This is due to the comprehensive shift in luxury marketing and e-commerce towards the millennial market. In the past two years, I have become an avid reader of *Business of Fashion* (www.businessoffashion.com) due to my job in fashion marketing, an online resource for fashion professional that covers these exact topics on a near-weekly basis.

[28] Style can break social rules or conform to them, while signalling information about the stylist in terms of culture, taste, personality, and zeitgeist. (Hebdige 1979, McRobbie 1991 and 1998, Breward 2003)

their work. This is because, differently from the generality of dress, fashion holds intent: and the intent, translated by style, is dependent upon the wearer.

Different still from fashion, costume is a form of dress that allows the wearer to adopt the persona or character of another entity. Costumes can be worn playfully or as a form of critique. A derivative of costume, cosplay (shortening of 'costume play', originally from Japanese anime culture) is a verb that describes the act of creating a costume based on a specific character (fiction or non-fiction) to be worn at an event such as a convention or meet-up (Winge 2006). Some cosplayers add an extra layer of immersion as they choose to roleplay in-character. Many websites for meet-ups and conventions, including international cosplay hub Comic Con and Weekend at the Asylum Steampunk Festival, provide an FAQ for the public to help them understand how they can engage with cosplay thoughtfully – and suggested cosplayer etiquette when playing in public spaces.[29]

COSPLAY, STEAMSONAS, AND *A CYBORG MANIFESTO*

Steampunk dress straddles fashion and cosplay on a personal level, with the extent of 'costume' depending on the wearer; reading steampunk dress from the perspective of a 'steamsonas' (personal fiction, similar to character creation in LARP or RPGs)[30], steamsona-users' steampunk dress may be read as a performative identity rather than an immersive cosplay. Seeking to situate this phenomenon, Diana M. Pho frames the steamsona via Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg*

[29] 'Costume Parade'. *The Asylum Steampunk Festival:* <http://www.asylumsteampunk.co.uk/the-costume-parade/>

[30] These two acronyms refer to role-playing games: Live Action Role-Playing (LARP) is conducted offline and with a group of fellow players in a joint-fantasy world with each person embodying a character and physically enacting the fantasy quest, whereas Role Playing Games (RPGs) can be online – like World of Warcraft or MIST – or offline, like Dungeons and Dragons, with both relying on avatar-based gameplay.

Manifesto (1985), hybridising the real and the fictional into a personal performance:

> The 'steamsona' is a widely recognized subculture phenomenon, though not all steampunk participants have one. On one hand, the steamsona is recognized as a role-playing identity; a steamsona may use false prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs, and monogoggles as extensions of a cyborg self. Furthermore, the cyborg identity extends not only to physical applications but virtual ones as well, with steamsonas emerging on Facebook, Tumblr, and Second Life. (Pho 2013: 188)

From this perspective, the steamsona is a complex integration of a person's varied interests, performed from the vantage of steampunk's subculture (Pho 2013: 190). VanderMeer and Chambers's *The Steampunk Bible* (2009) also references the steamsona, reporting the steamsona as an opportunity to craft elaborate backstories and heritage that gives purpose and reason to their fashion or prosthetic choices, and thus explaining motivations and actions while circulating through physical and virtual spaces.

Backstories such as these can be based on personal history, as is the case with Suna Dasi's exploration of nineteenth-century India and Pho's Vietnamese steamsona who strives to question colonialist narratives in her performances as Ay-leen the Peacemaker. Steamsonas can also function from a collective perspective, like the League of S.T.E.A.M (performance group), Steam Powered Giraffe (musicians), and crew of the *H.M.S Chronabelle* (a quartet of friends). In these collective forms, each participant's individual backstory develops through the interrelationship with the other group members, and extends into fashion practices. VanderMeer and Chambers asked the *H.M.S. Chronabelle* members why the group gravitated to steampunk and Lady Amira (Tessa Siegel) obliged:

> There was something for each of us in the subculture – literature, art, technology, fashion. When it got to the point that it was part of our daily lives, we decided we needed to form an airship crew. (VanderMeer and Chambers: 171)

The crew members work together to improve their DIY, with their fashions generating a feedback loop that corroborates their group narrative (ibid).

Cultivating a steamsona – whether as an individual or as part of a group – is a creative process that requires curating a selection of key influences and ideas. To craft a steamsona is to engage in personal authorship. It is to pen a new character and perform it. These characters are more than a fantasy escape; they are the participants' access point to a personally-relevant – and thus authentic – identity performance that engages with gender, politics, society, and culture. These secondary personalities have the freedom to critique contemporary culture without the baggage of contemporary time, and with the added benefit of introspection.

Others, however, choose not to work from the steamsona's personal-fiction vantage point. Pho and author Gail Carriger both explain that character creation is not a requisite to creating steampunk fashions, accessories, or props (Pho 2013: 188, Carriger January 2010). From my participant observation, I know that not every steampunk has a steamsona, nor do they always enter steampunk spaces (conventions, meetups, forums, blogs/online forums, events, etc.) while performing their steamsona. For some community members, there may be no substantial personality and character shift; those like Carriger, entering a steampunk space requires only a wardrobe change. Therefore, referring to all forms of steampunk dress as cosplay would be inaccurate. I thus only use the term cosplay in my thesis when referring to immersive, non-personal character play as directed by the cosplayers themselves; I rely on Instagram for many of my images, and many users self-disclose on the subject of cosplay as will be apparent in the coming chapters. As such, I use the term dress broadly, cosplay for true cosplay, and fashion for clothing that reacts to the zeitgeist (whether contemporary or 'gonzo' historical).

The steampunk zeitgeist's basis in 'gonzo' revisions of history provides a fertile field of inspiration for authors, makers and designers looking to create steampunk fashion. Looking again to *Soulless*, Carriger's background as an anthropologist trained her how to mine history for details and her creativity as an author translated these elements into a new context. Carriger regularly shares

nineteenth-century photos, fashion plates and fashion museum mannequinage on her blog *Retro Rack* as visual signpost for her readers, important points of influence as well as framing structures.[31] The posts share not only trends, but also objects that she can imagine her nineteenth-century characters choosing for themselves. These garments translate into the details of her novels, with care taken to explain the personal style and taste of each of her characters. The careful research and enriched storytelling of steampunk authors – like Carriger – are a key escapist element of their narratives that, combined with romance plots and female-led storylines – inspire steampunk women in how their fashion takes form. This intertextual intersection is where I will locate my materials in the course of my thesis's analysis.

TECHNICAL TRAINING: MODE MUSEUM, ANTWERP BELGIUM

Prior to the thesis I had no technical or theoretical background in fashion history or design, so I undertook an internship with the Mode Museum in Antwerp, Belgium (MoMu) in 2017 to improve my knowledge and academic rigour.[32] The aim of my time with the curation and conservation team was to grow my knowledge of both dress history and construction in a hands-on manner. During my time working directly with collections, I compiled incoming condition reports for pieces on loan from the Maison Martin Margiela archive. For the first time, when I picked up a garment I was divorced from thought about the body inside it, or the way it would move and interact with the wearer's motion. Instead I turned full focus to the seams, patterns and individual elements, looking for

[31] See Carriger August 2012, Carriger November 2015, Carriger July 2018, and Carriger August 2018 for examples.

[32] Between January and June 2017, I split my time between the conservation and curation departments, where I wrote condition reports on archival pieces from Maison Martin Margiela and private collections for the exhibition 'Margiela: The Hermès Years', as well as creating digital exhibitions on the contemporary and historical collections for the Google Arts & Culture programme. The entire staff of MoMu have my profound thanks for the opportunity, the education, and the friendship that I enjoyed in those 6 months.

stains, holes, slipped stitches, and material loss. I was holding garments that had influenced and impacted thousands of people from their runway debuts in the 1990s – and was privileged enough to see more details beyond the finished silhouette that contextualise the design. At MoMu I re-learned how to *touch* and to *see* fashion. The precise, meticulous way the registrar processed garments was a John Berger-esque revelation (Berger 1972); this was a way of seeing for which my art history background never prepared me.

Figure 1 'Disco Blazer' look. 2009. Martin Margiela for Maison Martin Margiela. Shot by Stany Dederen for MoMu (2016).

Dressing the mannequins for exhibition proved a reverential experience.[33] While working on my assigned silhouette (Figure 1), I came to understand fashion's emotional power beyond the context of the runway, personal taste, and textbook. This on-site training in 'the White Room' at MoMu taught me how to look at clothing more thoughtfully, to review the cut and construction as deeply as the influences and overall impact. My time at MoMu served as an accelerated course

[33] Each white mannequin had to be dressed in a custom body stocking – made from nylon stockings and no-show underwear – to protect the garments from the mannequins; I learned that under the consistent displahy lighting the mannequins' paint could flake, causing damage to the silhouette. This body stocking was carefully pieced-together onto the mannequin, with stitches that needed to be invisible to any inquisitive eyes.

in terminology, technique, and analysis. I now understood that even the simplest object – like a nude bodysuit – holds a hidden structure and meaning.[34]

THESIS STRUCTURE AND CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

My thesis is the first of its kind, providing a distinct contribution to the field of steampunk research. It commits to an in-depth analysis of women's dress as it relates to representations of female bodies, sexualities, and genders in steampunk romance fiction. In its initial chapter, Transforming Fiction With Fashion, I unpack my research methods and approach to material selection, use of social media for visual research and collation, as well as authenticity analysis and ascertainment of potential biases. All the materials included in my thesis have been produced in North America and Britain, a stricture that I have imposed for the dual purpose of maintaining a focused narrative scope and evidentiary rigour.

Upon completing this methodology, I undertake the literature review where I investigate my digital primary sources (conversations and experiences from participant observation, zines and social media). Following this foundation, the chapter transitions into an analysis of relevant secondary sources via a feminist lens, culminating in an in-depth investigation into prominent studies of romance fiction from prominent academics like Pamela Regis (literature) and Janice Radway (sociology and literature). These exegeses are crucial to my later chapters as, to date, there is no recognised 'ideal' approach to steampunk's literary-led material cultures, as the doctoral theses of both Perschon (2012) and Goh (2017) attest. Thus, this primary investigation into the contexts surrounding romance reading (Regis 2003; Radway 1983, 1984), gender (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993; Halberstam 1991, 1998; Showalter 1991), performance and performativity (Butler 1990, Halberstam 1991; Barad 2003; Salih 2006), formula fiction

[34] See Miller and Woodward 2012 for more on the cultural impact of simple fashion objects.

character development (Regis 2003, Lee 2008), and feminist subculture studies (McRobbie 1978, 1980, 2004; Klein 2003) creates the theoretical cradle that supports both my own later arguments on steampunk fashion's inspirations, construction practices, and performances, as well as – potentially – the work of other academics in the field. As a capstone to this chapter, I undertake a case study in the treatment of the corset in academic analyses of steampunk romance fiction, an exercise which segues directly into the next chapter's romance-fiction focus.

In the second chapter, Finding Inspiration in the Formula, I undertake an in-depth analysis of steampunk romance fiction as it engages with gender, identity, performance, perception, and fashioned bodies. The chapter begins with a thorough examination of steampunk fiction's relationship with publishing hierarchies, readership, reception, and community-led online discussions of steampunk's categorisation; this includes an in-depth case study into the controversial coining of 'bustlepunk' by *Native Star* (2010) author M.K. Hobson (*Bustlepunk Manifesto* 2009), including the contemporary backlash and feminist ramifications of retrospective genre-building outside the scope of steampunk. The latter portion of the chapter is a series of close-readings on the themes of gender and women's representations in canonical and second-wave steampunk fiction, specifically as they related to the Victorian New Woman and Fallen Woman. I use these two literary motifs as an access point, reviewing the manners in which authors employ or diverge from them when writing about women. As I move through each work of fiction, I explore how the characters' descriptions – dress, body, gender – motivate, change, grow, or shift their gender performance, and the role romance plays in the characters' arc. By the conclusion of this chapter, I have evaluated the impact of romance on portrayals of women and their diverse gender performances, exposing romance's importance as a theme in unveiling relatable, three-dimensional female characters.

In the third and final chapter, Crafted Narrative, Crafted Bodies, I open with a brief evidentiary case study of the important interrelationship between

steampunk fashion and identity performance before moving into an exploration of origin stories: I investigate how steampunk authors, designers, and makers first found the genre – or subculture – and their introspective creative works in the wake of this new cultural consciousness. From this frame, I move to contextualise steampunk dress inside contemporary fashion, with particular reference to the importance of punk style with regards to bricolage, historical influence, and gender performance. From this foundation, I present an robust investigation of steampunk fashion since its inception in the 1990s before redirecting to an analysis contemporary women's dress. From this basis, I focus on two key components: the role of *inverse ekphrasis* [35] in the creation of steampunk women's dress and the transmission of *being/becoming* gender performance narratives through women's looks. In aid of this discussion I move layer-by-layer, analysing the occurrences and appearances of the chemise/undershirt, corset, skirted looks, menswear-inspired looks, and accessories. For the sake of balance and cohesion, I again meditate on the corset – and its socio-gendered contexts – for an extended period, using the garment as a focal case study for my analysis of gender *becomings*, steamsona/character work, and *ekphrastic* contexts in steampunk women's dress.

Finally, in the conclusion, I synthesise and restate the thesis's content and purpose. Following this, I again define how my thesis makes an original contribution to research on both steampunk and contemporary subcultural dress. Rounding out this segment on the implications of my study, I unpack how the thesis stands alongside the work of other scholars working with steampunk material and digital cultures. Finally, I address my research outlook, identifying which directions I intend to follow in future projects and publications.

[35] The condition where art imitates literature. For a more detailed account of *ekphrasis* and *inverse ekphrasis*, see Chapter Three.

I. TRANSFORMING FICTION WITH FASHION

Methods & Literature Review

Gail Carriger and Cherie Priest, both iconic second-wave steampunk authors, have noted in respective interviews for VanderMeer and Chambers' *Steampunk Bible* (2011) that steampunk's aesthetic, fashion and cosplay are integrals elements of their origin story and authorship inspiration. For Carriger, this refers to her pre-existing interest in Victorian-inspired fabrics and fashions, and subsequent participation in steampunk subculture at events such as SteamCon. Priest, conversely, began her relationship with steampunk by observing cosplay and discussing the fiction with established authors prior to concluding that she wanted to participate (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011). Their approaches to dress, much like their approaches to narrative and character development, have vastly different styles.

Figure 2 Gail Carriger and Cherie Priest at Nova Albion in 2011

As with her novels, Carriger's sense of style gravitates towards the romantic, with elaborate gowns, corsetry, gloves, novelty handbags (ex. faux leather teapots and fabric champagne bottles), as well as parasols and octopi making frequent appearances in her convention-circuit wardrobe. By contrast, Priest's convention wardrobe tends towards more casual garments including trousers, waistcoats, and blouses offset by whimsical jewellery, hats/headbands, and accessories (as

demonstrated in Figure 2)[1]. Carriger's debutante heroine Alexia prides herself in her ascription to mid-nineteenth-century fashion, where Priest's debut heroine – Briar Wilkes – is far more utilitarian in her outlook on clothing. These two women's personal taste in clothing is – at least in the context of convention performance – directly linked to their fictions; Carriger writes society romance where Priest deals in post-apocalyptic fantasy.

Both authors deal with femininity and conventions of feminine dress in their own way (before the apocalyptic events of *Boneshaker*, Briar was a young society woman and dressed accordingly before work at the water treatment facility required a shift in priorities and personality). In both their fiction and their personal style, Carriger and Priest use dress as a vehicle to position themselves and their characters inside steampunk culture. Investigating the character of this link between women, fiction, and fashion has demanded a varied, interdisciplinary approach. In this chapter, I present my methods and conduct my literature review. I begin with an in-depth investigation into my primary sources, first with offline participant observation and then moving into my use of social media as online observation and visual resourcing. Upon the conclusion of this analysis, I mirror this approach with the secondary literature, exploring the relevant texts on feminism, gender and performativity, subculture studies, fashion and dress, and romance fiction.

METHODS AND PRIMARY SOURCES

With my background in art history, and specifically painting, I was more accustomed to static primary sources with which I could interact as an unrelated other, a distanced viewer. This approach, of course, became increasingly difficult as I determined the importance of meet-ups, events, and conventions as well as

[1] 'Gail Carriger and Cherie Priest at Nova Albion Steampunk Exhibition 2011', photo captured and copyright Lois Buhalis. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/12852675@N08/5569597015/in/photostream/>

digital spaces like Facebook, Instagram and blogs with regards to steampunk's continued cultural growth. As I delved into feminist ethnographies of Internet fandom communities in search of a foothold (Baym 1998, Bury 2003), I encountered the participant anxiety I had struggled to define put into words by other women: the need to be present in my research without 'lurking' (Bury 2003: 273). To lurk is to be complicit in the continuation of female 'silence', the very antithesis of feminist scholarship (ibid, McRobbie and Garber 1978). Thus, I determined to be present in social media and blogging communities.[2] This led me to Nancy K. Baym's research into online soap opera newsgroups, which is one of the first academic analyses of digital fandoms, with her project beginning in 1990 (Baym 1998, 2000). As the Internet has evolved and grown in sophistication, newsgroups hosted by Usenet and its ilk have become outdated, replaced with Facebook pages and groups, blogging threads, and WhatsApp group chats.

Baym's thesis began when her interest in soap operas converged with research, with watching soap operas a post-coursework ritual that ended with logging into the Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s.) for follow-up discussion. In studying Baym I found myself in familiar territory: she too engaged her research community – soap opera fans – via participant observation from inside an established online forum. And the subject matter was grounded in the offline world. Baym found that the ways r.a.t.s. members communicated with each other were based in emotional responses to the events, with criticism as the main conversational aid. For soaps, criticism meant heated debates on realism, authenticity, construction, consistency, character arcs and above all emotional motivation. With fandoms being so tightly linked to the aforementioned emotions, criticisms may stem not just from intellectual disagreement with a concept but also from a sense of betrayal. These emotions are crucial to members' overall enjoyment and engagement with the fandom: critique is a cornerstone of

[2] Though, as Bury's study of female-only *X-Files* Usenet fandom notes, lack of communication from a community member does not equate with lack of engagement (Bury 2003: 275).

fandom's pleasurable consumption. And in this fandom forum, a member can perform their critical competence and prove their commitment/interest in the subject. How someone views their fandom can be personal and grow organically in a space that's defined by emotional response.

With Bury, Baym, and McRobbie's experience and sympathetic methods as a springboard, I could now review my own participant observation and social listening[3] in a new light: a light that focuses on emotional response. With steampunk, I have found emotional responses are most often triggered by questions surrounding an object or narrative's authenticity – its performance as 'real' steampunk – as demonstrated by Nevins's critique. For this reason, I have elected to evaluate my primary sources based on their abilities to perform 'authentic' steampunk from the perspective of both creator and beholder.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In the early phases of my PhD research, while still mapping my direction, I attended a variety of steampunk events. These events included meet-ups, parties and parades. Among the most formative of these events were those organised by the Glasgow Ubiquitous E. Steampunk Society (GUESS). GUESS began as a university club, with the 'GU' originally signifying 'Glasgow University'. As the club's founding membership began to graduate, the group shifted away from the student union and extended membership to any Glaswegians interested in steampunk. This catchment quickly expanded to include anyone in Scotland interested in steampunk and willing to make the trip to Glasgow. At each event, I encountered attendees who had travelled from Fife, Perth, Edinburgh, and St. Andrews to spend the day – or night – immersed in steampunk culture. I joined

[3] 'Social listening' is a marketing term for watching interactions on social media to understand end consumers' thoughts and desires. Social listening depends on choosing trustworthy, authentic profiles to balance any commentary that may be on-trend but off balance. In the course of my thesis, this practice has helped me in grounding the relevance of my sources.

the group events at the invitation of then-president Dave Morrison (via Academia.edu).

My first event with GUESS, 'Glasgow by Gaslight' (October 13, 2012), is best described as a meet-up as it featured a diverse programme of activities geared towards community engagement, conversation and fun. Held at the world's oldest surviving music hall, the period-appropriate Glasgow Britannia Panopticon (1857), the day's entertainment included a diverse line-up of acts that spanned storytelling, music, belly dancing, and gymnastics. The perimeter of the music hall was populated by stalls selling a variety of steampunk objects: vintage clothing selected for its upcycling potential, handcrafted leather goods (harnesses, holsters, belts and bags), fascinators and hats. Nestled alongside these community vendors was a teashop, whose profits funnelled directly into restoring the Britannia Panopticon. Meanwhile, on stage, the storytellers recited original works of steampunk fiction set in their vision of an alternative nineteenth century. I was most compelled by the gymnastic group who, as they performed, explained their origin story as an airship crew who used tumbling as on-board calisthenics. And in the centre of it all, perched on rows of seats politely chatting and exchanging stories, were dozens of Scottish steampunks. Nearly everyone in attendance was dressed for the occasion: a profusion of toppers, corsets, spats, bustles, cogs and bows in earthy browns, deep reds, blacks, greys, navys, and the occasion shock of pink.

Choosing what to wear to my first steampunk event had been difficult. I didn't want to stand out in denim, but I also didn't want to appear over enthusiastic and run this risk of causing offence with unwitting cultural appropriation. As the former president of GUESS had invited me to the event to take a closer look at the culture I wanted to make a positive, respectful first impression as their guest. Ultimately, I chose to wear black shorts with a white blouse and tweed waistcoat, topped with a veiled and feathered lilac velvet cap: all things I had in my wardrobe already and – at that time – was the kind of outfit I felt the most myself in. I didn't feel like I was wearing a costume; I felt like me,

but with a few added accessories. Some women had, like me, opted against skirts. Leather trousers, bloomers and tweed breeches were the most popular among this set; some in a blouse and waistcoat combination like myself, others in a corset. However, most women who chose to be corseted had also elected to wear skirts.

I noted a clear visual divide among the skirted women: those who aimed for more historically accurate dress and those who, like myself, preferred to cherry pick elements of Victorian garb in a style all their own. In this first group, there were wide hoop skirts, flexible crinolines, and bustles with overskirts in lace-trimmed cotton, satin or taffeta. Over their corsets they wore Victorian-style blouses with ladder details and lace, or elegant, high-collared shirts matching their skirts' material. These women had an eye for detail that held a singular, focused vision. Their garments could be classified as middle class or aristocratic in their styling, and nearly all were accompanied by an accessory or gadget that marked them as different from a historical re-enactor: goggles, a ray gun, or clockwork-inspired jewellery. In the second group, there was a piecemeal element to their Victorian aesthetic that I find both twee and charming. Items like striped stockings and a brown skirt were paired with a dark corset worn over a blouse. Like the more historically-minded women, this group also tied together their outfit with accessories that circle back to the romantic, retrofuturistic detailing of brass cogs, burnished metal goggles, and weathered leather. While execution fluctuated, the aesthetic and vibe remained unified.

Intriguingly, there was also a sense that some women had chosen items from their 'formal' steampunk wardrobes rather than their more 'casual' closet. This division became clearer to me at the second GUESS event I attended that autumn: The Gaslight Soirée. Held at one of the Glasgow University student unions on November 17th, 2012, the Gaslight Soirée was billed as a black-tie event with tickets costing £30. Where at the previous event I had attended alone, this time I took two of my close male friends who were enthusiastic about the

idea of an immersive evening – and put effort into sourcing their steampunk black-tie looks from Armstrong's, the Edinburgh vintage shopping staple.

I had spent the weeks between the two events modifying a bridal-white satin corset I'd found in good condition at a thrift store, as well as sewing a red velvet overskirt. A novice seamstress, laying new lace and fabric over the corset was a slow labour of love. On the night, I paired my craftsmanship with the then-ubiquitous Jeffrey Campbell 'Lita' ankle boots, a black bolero, brown gloves, a brass effect pocket watch, and a small tri-corner hat that I'd purchased from one of the GUESS member's stall at Glasgow by Gaslight. My friends had military-inspired black wool jackets and top hats, with cog-and-gear buttonholes. We arrived at the event excited to see what others had chosen to wear and were not disappointed by their creativity or their grandeur. At this event, most of the women I met had elected to wear clothing more aligned with recognisable Victorian fashions spanning different decades. At times, the attendees mixed styles based on their personal aesthetic: I saw 1860s silhouettes with wide-skirts alongside 1870s bustles with corsets as outerwear. I saw a riot of lace, taffeta, satin, velvet, cotton, and man-made silk. And, as with the previous event, accessories and attitude tied together each person's unique interpretation of steampunk aesthetic.

Like most subcultures of the last seventy years, there is a performative element to steampunk. Most people I encountered altered their behaviour to match the formal, festive occasion and the character of their steamsona; there were far fewer weapons included as props than at 'Glasgow by Gaslight', with many electing to trade these in for walking sticks, fans, and gadgets that reference gentility such as a leather teacup holster. And yet, this was not the element that I found the most beguiling. It was the easy mix of time, texture, and talent that each person's clothing conveyed that drew me in. Some clothing – like that of my friends – was clearly from a vintage store and had been altered for the occasion with accessories and tailoring. Others, like me, had cobbled together looks from homemade and upcycled garments. And then there were those with expert

sewing skills who mixed contemporary costume patterns from major brands like McCall's and Butterick to create their bespoke silhouettes.

My participation in these two GUESS events highlighted a dual importance for such meetings: to [re]connect with community members and to exhibit fandom via the variety, details, and diversity of steampunk dress cultures. I've noticed that the observations I've made are echoed across social media and digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, blogs, forums, etc.: in the descriptions of science fiction/fantasy conventions, meet-ups and established festivals (Whitby Gothic Weekend and The Asylum Steampunk Festival) fashion shows, costume parades, formal attire events, and makers' markets receive high billing.[4]

ZINES: *STEAMPUNK MAGAZINE* AND *EXHIBITION HALL*

SteamPunk Magazine released its first volume in Autumn 2006, titled 'Putting the Punk Back Into SteamPunk' (Killjoy 2006). A publication created by and for community members, this zine[5] includes short and serial fiction, interviews, DIY projects, and essays. Many of the contributors are recognised public figures: G.D. Falksen, Bruce Sterling, Cory Gross, Libby Bulloff, The Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective, Jaymee Goh, Diana M. Pho (credited as Ay-leen the Peacemaker), and Jake von Slatt. According to the preface of their inaugural issue, the contributors to *SteamPunk Magazine* have several goals:

> One of the goals of this magazine is to bring the SteamPunk culture offline, a step we consider crucial to its vitalization. We want SteamPunk to be more than a blog, more than a website. Hell, we want SteamPunk to be more than a magazine; we imagine it as a way of life. […] But it is the physical nature of SteamPunk that

[4] Whitby Gothic Weekend <http://www.whitbygothweekend.co.uk>: The Asylum Steampunk Festival <http://www.asylumsteampunk.co.uk>

[5] A zine is a self-published (or grassroots-organised), low-budget subjective 'life' narrative that is developed out of DIY and shared interest (Poletti 2008). Zines have a strong history with third-wave feminism, specifically riot grrrl culture (McCool and Shive: 1996).

> attracted us to it in the first place, however we first heard of it. We love machines that we can see, feel, and fear. We are amazed by artifacts but are unimpressed by "high technology". For the most part, we look at the modern world around us, bored to tears, and say, "no, thank you. I'd rather have trees, birds, and monstrous mechanical contraptions than an endless sprawl that is devoid of diversity." (Killjoy 2006: 2)

In their introduction, chief editor Magpie Killjoy expresses the impetus that brought together the editors and contributors of *SteamPunk Magazine*: a desire to bring steampunk discussion outside the Internet, and into a tangible form as the contributors all believe that steampunk ought to be lived as well as discussed. Killjoy asserts that *SteamPunk Magazine*, and its analogue format (available for download online, intended to be printed), could be a remedy for those disenfranchised by contemporary technology. This echoes von Slatt's *A Steampunk Manifesto*, furthering the notion that steampunk's key draw is its focus on DIY: 'But it is the physical nature of SteamPunk that attracted us to it in the first place, however we first heard of it.' (ibid)

This statement exposes the importance of aesthetic in drawing community members to the concept. *SteamPunk Magazine*, similar to the impulse of riot grrrl zines, overtly asserts equality of authorship. The editor Killjoy is openly genderqueer, and uses their personal blog and writing as a platform to celebrate diverse mind-sets in community thought, thereby improving the visibility of the marginalised steampunk community members. In the premiere issue's first essay – *What then, is Steampunk? Colonizing the Past so we can Dream the Future* – The Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts collective aims to identify and evaluate steampunk in terms of its thematic roots:

> Steampunk is a re-envisioning of the past with hypertechnological perceptions of the present. Unfortunately, most so-called "steampunk" is simply dressed-up, reactionary nostalgia: the stifling tea-rooms of Victorian imperialists and faded maps of colonial hubris. This kind of sepia-toned yesteryear is more appropriate for Disney and the suburban grandparents than it is for a vibrant and viable philosophy or culture. (The Catastrophone Orchestra 2006: 4)

This opening presents a Baudrillardian reading of contemporary steampunk, suggesting that a majority of the cultures current creations are 'Disney' and 'suburban' simulations that both parody and obscure the authentic. In their second sentence, despite using 'colonizing' in the title, the Catastrophone Orchestra and Arts Collective decries imperialism and 'colonial hubris', despite aforementioned titling marking this same hubris (The Catastrophone Orchestra 2006: 4). This paradox, damning the nature of colonialism while also invoking it, echoes a problem felt by both readers and researchers alike: how to engage with Victorian elements without the Empire's problematic treatment of its dominions regarding race, culture, and politics (see Pho 2009, Goh 2010 and 2017). Each of *SteamPunk Magazine*'s nine volumes hosts a diverse group of contributors sharing their knowledge and research regarding: steampunk's relationship with race and gender, interviews with public figures, short fiction and fiction reviews, cultural developments, manifestos, fashion, and DIY project guides.

Exhibition Hall is an online steampunk fanzine that began publication in 2009, dedicating itself to sharing interviews with figures, information about US event reviews and announcements, fiction and music reporting, art, creative writing, fashion content, and interest-led articles. Unlike *SteamPunk Magazine*, *Exhibition Hall* is an on-going project, with 28 issues as of March 2018. Where *SteamPunk Magazine* aimed to educate on context and critique the aesthetic, *Exhibition Hall*'s prose is more conversational and friendly; *Exhibition Hall* is focused on the shared fandom experience of conventions and media, with a large focus given to fashion and style (Garcia et al. 2009). As zines, *SteamPunk Magazine* and *Exhibition Hall* succeed in sharing varied viewpoints on steampunk materials and culture from *inside* the online/offline cross-cultural space. As such, its grassroots contributor content proves invaluable when unpacking context and intent for the materials that I analyse.

SOCIAL MEDIA[6]

In 2007 danah boyd and Nicole Ellison's *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship* explored the online shift from what we used to call social networking (friend-to-friend communication) into social media platforms that champion sharing and sociability (boyd and Ellison 2007, Miller et al. 2016: 10-11). In their recent anthropological study, Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes et al. shift their definition of social media away from boyd and Ellison's connection-based perspective to include content-sharing practices:

> We have defined social media as the colonisation of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy that we have termed scalable sociality. (Miller et al. 2016: 9)

Situating social media as liminal allows Miller et al. to explore its online/offline cross-cultural paradoxes as both public and personal communication without the risk of contradiction. As the lines between online and offline blur – with social media's 'scalable sociality' as the vehicle – cultural researchers must keep pace with platforms like Facebook and Instagram's increased importance.

My research into steampunk has revealed that, similar to Paul Hodkinson's work with online goth subculture in the early 2000s, relationships formed offline at events and conventions are developed and strengthened with regular online contact – and vice versa (Hodkinson 2003: 285-293). Regarding gender, Miller et al. report that across their international fieldwork, cultural norms and stereotypes were upheld in online gender performances; in his

[6] One major shift between earlier incarnation of my thesis and this final version is my understanding of social media, particularly its power to engage, hype, and sell. I spent a year as digital copywriter and social media coordinator for a Belgian eyewear brand, and the cornerstone of current social media marketing strategies is influencer content on Instagram. This meant that, before I write a single line of copy, I first check Instagram for how these fashion 'influencers' talk about their favourite products and how their community responds. Social media hinges on communication, with influence and authenticity the premium concerns. I've translated this knowledge on engagement, content creation, sponsored content, trolling, authenticity, and influence into my research methods as I chose which profiles to include, and whose voice to raise.

English sample, Miller noted that the alcohol-preference stereotypes of men/beer and women/wine were consistent in Facebook posting behaviours (Miller et al. 2016: 119-120). However, while there was a universal adherence to gender norms, each field's disruptions to normative behaviour were linked to subverting or questioning offline cultural narratives, where social media became a space for women to carve their own narratives and operate more openly in communication spaces like the comments section of Facebook posts (Miller et al. 2016: 121). Outside the heteronormative gender performance sphere, social media creates a space for openness and conversation, particularly in cultures where being 'out' is taboo (Miller et al. 2016: 125). Miller et al. conclude that social media is not an inherently transformative space for gender performance, but that it may be used to express identity towards a community of like-feeling/like-minded 'friends' and followers (Miller et al. 2016: 126).

When selecting which social media profiles to work with, and how to read their gender performances and authenticity, I take the findings of Miller et al. to mean authenticity and performance are case-by-case, with dominant cultural narratives crossing-over from the offline parent cultures. As such, if something is perhaps subversive in the online sphere it may then subvert an offline norm. Ultimately, social media – and its scalable sociality – is a subjective, communication-oriented field. Analysing social media content, likewise, is an exercise in subjectivity that hinges on an awareness of local pop culture narratives and those of relevant subcultures – like steampunk.

BLOGS

Blogs – whether called weblogs, diaries or personal websites – have been a fixture of the Internet and online communication since the Internet became available to anyone with a computer and a phone line. Blogs are dedicated spaces for the author to talk about whatever subject matter they choose. In my thesis, I reference blogs devoted to culture, costume design/construction, making, corsetry, reading, writing, fashion, and fiction. Kim Ryser (also known as Baroness Violet von Mickelsburg) is the owner, operator, designer, and

seamstress at *Steam Ingenious*, a *Steampunk Chronicle*[7] Reader's Choice winning corset and craft blog. Ryser is a self-taught designer, whose posts span reviews of popular pattern manufacturers, *cosplay* pattern ranges, construction notes on her own projects and commissions, and reflections on the culture surrounding steampunk makers. This side of her blog includes notes on books, events, and friendships. All this combines to create an authentic-feeling and comprehensive site. By contrast, *Soulless* author Gail Carriger's blog *Retro Rack* covers fashion from the nineteenth-century through today (one of her most regularly discussed fashion eras is the 1960s), writing, convention appearances, her breast reduction surgery (hence the pun 'Retro Rack'), steampunk, and DIY. Outside the scope of DIY and making, blogs like Diana M. Pho's *Beyond Victoriana,* Jaymee Goh's *Silver Goggles*, and Balogun Ojetade's *Chronicles of Harriet* analyse fiction, provide convention and conference reviews, and explore diversity in steampunk fiction and culture.

This new generation of steampunk writers and makers – populated by those at the convergence of Generation X and Millennial – have carved a space for their introspections using digital and social medias to create and engage with a community that reflected themselves and their values. *Beyond Victoriana*, *Silver Goggles*, and *Steampunk India* direct their readers towards writers, creators, makers, designers, and conventions where intersectional interpretations of steampunk are conveyed and/or celebrated. *Steampunk Hands Around the World*,

[7] *Steampunk Chronicle* (now defunct) was a digital periodical and digest of global Steampunk events and creativity. Their annual awards celebrate the best in Steampunk culture, with other recipients including Diana M. Pho's *Beyond Victoriana* political and feminist activism (2013) and fiction (2015), Sarah Hunter (Lady Clankington) as Steampunk Fashion Icon (2014), Thomas Willeford's maker book *The Steampunk Adventurer's Guide* and Brute Force Studios (both 2014), The Asylum in Lincoln as Best International/Non-US Convention (2012 and 2014). Their mission statement: 'Steampunk Chronicle aims to bring you the latest happenings on fashion, media modding and events relating to the steampunk genre. Our reporters scour the world far and wide to bring you up to the minute information. Bringing you the latest news from the grease stained workshops of the makers and modders to the elegant ballrooms of the world of high fashion.'

'About'. *Steampunk Chronicle*. Accessed June 7, 2016
<http://www.steampunkchronicle.com/About/tabid/322/Default.aspx>

launched by Kevin Steil (*Airship Ambassador*), is an annual online event that connects steampunk creators from around the globe, providing a platform for individuals across the world to share their thoughts, expressions, and creations with an international audience (Steil 2018). In past years Pho, Goh, Dasi, Sedia, Carriger, and Perschon have all participated in the celebration, and these collaborative-minded and purpose-written popular texts grow the community's identity while also creating primary sources to evidence the new generation's purposes.

These primary sources provide direct insight into women's creative processes, research, interests and personalities. While these may not be as scientifically structured as an interview, they have the benefit of reflection, interest and visuals, as well as authenticity. Carriger, Ryser, Pho, and most other bloggers created their blog as they had an interest, object, or feeling that they felt compelled to share. When analysing a work for authenticity, bias is of course possible. However, in the case of a community-produced blog, the stakes are relatively low as each of these is a known destination; readers are aware of whose opinions they will be seeing and move directly to the site with the intention of reading on. But this phenomenon of purposeful traffic is unique to blogs. Social media platforms, by comparison, rely on passive scrolling, algorithms, and eye-catching visuals that capture attention. And these elements impact the authenticity of a post – and the posting user.

At times these blogs failed to provide a complete story, and left me with more questions. For example, when reading Carriger's blog posts on constructing her 'Spoons' corset, I was left with question on its relationship with her writing and her connection to the steampunk community. In this in instance, as well as in similar situations, I directly email the blogger and ask if they're willing to elaborate. I've reached out to Facebook friends I've made at steampunk meetups, as well as public figures with active blogs like Carriger and Perschon. Everyone I've had contact with has been gracious enough to answer my questions in detail, whether about their writing, fashion design, or creative practice. I call these

interviews informal as they lack the structure of a formal sociological interview. These conversations are based on mutual interest and seek further clarification on a public post. They are leading questions and I recognise that this marks my work as subjective.

FACEBOOK

I've come to view Facebook as the 'brand building' platform after my time spent working in fashion marketing. Pages and groups are created around a theme, and all posts, conversations and content link back to this unifier, and these pages are most often used to promote a personality, a brand or a theme while cultivating a community of engaged followers. Even in terms of personal relationships, Facebook is holistic; people's full histories with the platform and nuances of their lives are available for their (privacy-set) community to view openly. Miller et al. explain that cultural mores can carry over to online behaviour to a greater extent than in offline life, particularly in their Turkish fieldwork with religious expectation upheld online if not offline (Miller et al. 2016: 104). On Facebook, I follow several steampunk pages and groups:

- *Steampunk* (144k followers) whose content includes memes, events, and film and television news. Posts concerning steampunk's qualities host passionate exchanges on what is/is not [canon] steampunk – always a favourite topic for debate in any fandom.

- *Steampunk Fashion* (80k) posts about global fashion trends, styles, Victorian dress history, and artwork that finds influence in steampunk or can be used as an influence.

- *Steampunk Tendencies* (2.5m) focuses on art and design. Unlike *Steampunk*, the community engagement on this page is largely positive with very few trolls.

- *Steampunk Couture* (285k) is a page dedicated to famous steampunk model and fashion designer Kate 'Kato' Lambert, her photography, fashion designs, and appearances.

- *Beyond Victoriana* (5k) is a relatively small community that links directly to Diana M. Pho's blog of the same name. *Beyond Victoriana*'s content

focuses on multicultural steampunk, historical figures of colour, feminism, and attention to diversity in steampunk.

- *British Steampunk Community* (10.4k) is a space for steampunk in the UK to share group photos, clothing, costumes, and content as well as engage in discussion. The group has a documented etiquette to ensure all members feel they are treated with respect and dignity at all times.

- *Welcome to the Asylum* (5k) is the dedicated group for Weekend at the Asylum, an annual event in Lincoln that enjoys the notoriety of being the longest running steampunk festival in the world.

Regarding groups and pages it is important to note that their visibility is impacted by Facebook's algorithm, which is designed to show the user content and posts that it considers of interest – and is less likely to show content that it deems 'irrelevant' (regardless of chronology). For my research purposes, I have kept a mental note of what Faceboook views as 'relevant' to me based on my following and click-through on the visible posts.[8] Of the content that appears on my feed organically, memes are the most common and provide a broad insight into Facebook communication dynamics. On April 6, 2018, the viral *American Chopper* meme[9] appeared in a post from the administrators of the *Steampunk* page with divisive results (Figure 3).

[8] I visit these pages regularly, which increases the likelihood of the content appearing relevant. As someone with a high level of interest in the subject who follows most of the major pages, I'm curious how much of this interest-based content appears to an average user as compared to content from popular media sources like Buzzfeed or i-D/Vice. I have not been meticulous in my data mapping, so have no scientific answers on how this content appears organically to other people registering at my same interest level. However, what I can communicate is that Facebook recognises that I am more interested in fashion-related content and memes. My taste for fashion makes this algorithmic action obvious, and my preference for memes stems from their unique ability to capture the pulse of popular culture through their references. These two post types are what I find the most relevant to my thesis.

[9] For more on this specific meme and its contexts see Yglesias 2018.

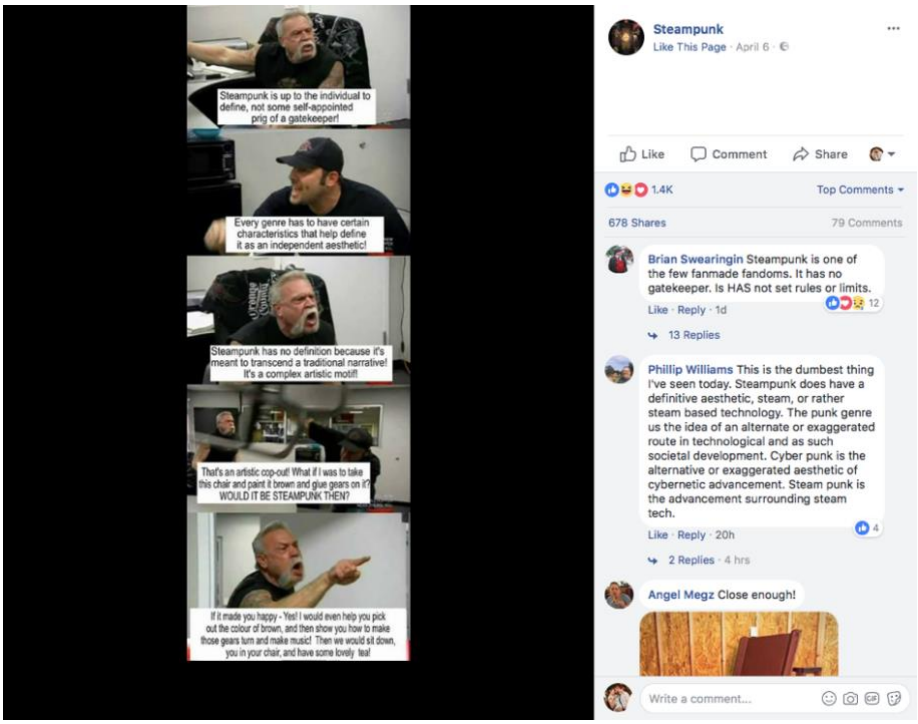


Figure 3 Undated original, meme post on the *Steampunk* Facebook page satirising the schism between aesthetic-led steampunk and canon-led steampunk

Taken from the *TLC* television programme *American Chopper*, the original context is a father (Paul Teutal Sr.) and son (Paul Teutal Jr.) arguing over their custom motorcycle business, with the younger man losing his temper and exiting both the programme and the business (Yglesias 2018). The aggression of this exchange, the visible age difference, as well as possible classist and cultural stereotyped readings of the visuals make the argument prime meme fodder. This meme has become popular as it uses the back and forth dialogue like a formula to explain both sides of an argument.

In *Steampunk*'s post, Paul Teutal Senior and Junior are set on opposite ends of the schism between aesthetic-driven steampunk (Senior) and canon-based creativity (Junior). Their argument echoes the community-popular Youtube video 'Just Glue Some Gears On It (And Call It Steampunk)', where Reginald Pikedevant bemoans the trend to create steampunk with surface level-decoration (and use it for commercial gain) rather than engineering or crafting with gusto (Pikedevant 2011). Returning to the meme, Paul Senior's core argument is that Steampunk is a space for artistic expression, meaning that it can

only be 'correct' in so far as it makes the creator happy. Paul Junior, on the other hand, argues that there must be rules – and that they must be followed in order for something to be considered real steampunk.

Responses to this meme were immediately mixed, as demonstrated in the screen capture in Figure 2. One community member notes that as steampunk's aesthetic and culture has been developed by fans, and thus there is no gatekeeper, and therefore no set of prescribed rules (Paul Senior's 'argument'). The previous commenter has a viscerally negative response, calling the meme 'the dumbest thing [he'd] seen today' and stating:

> …Steampunk does have a definitive aesthetic, steam, or rather steam based technology. The punk genre us [*sic*] the idea of an alternate or exaggerated route in technological and as such societal development. Cyber punk is the alternative or exaggerated aesthetic of cybernetic advancement. Steam punk is the advancement surrounding steam tech. (*Steampunk*: April 6, 2018)

What I find the most intriguing about this exchange is the lack of admin copy contextualizing the post. I conclude that this means that the page acknowledges the schism between canonical and aesthetic steampunk, and elects to maintain neutrality. Upon review, this is true for all content posted on the *Steampunk* page in 2018. Based on this neutrality, the conversations I see are 'authentic' in that they are unprovoked by the admins. They are community spaces for debate where members performed their fandom (Baym 1998, 2000).

This negative comment disappeared from the post within the week. I am uncertain as to who chose to delete it or why based on the visible comments at the time I took the screen capture (April 7) [10]. As the language is non-inflammatory, I doubt that this removal can be attributed to the admins. Impassioned posts, of any stance, are a barometer for reading the schism in

[10] I returned to check across several days. This capture remained representative of the passion, contact and communication on this post.

steampunk cultural history, whereas the fashion/design posts tend to only hit this schism if they appear to have 'glue[d] some gears on it' to borrow from Pikedevant. Generally, comments on Facebook are focused on sharing viewpoint and sharing interests. By contrast, Instagram features similar visuals, with an entirely different kind of engagement.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram, as a platform, is visually led. Copy tends to be looser and less grammatically correct than on Facebook with more abbreviations and emoji. Instagram's layout and feed lends itself to fast scrolling. Imagery has to immediately capture the user's attention in order to be seen. And the population on Instagram is small, smaller than on Facebook. *Steampunk Tendencies*, which has 2.5 million followers on Facebook, only has 104,000 on Instagram (@steampunktendencies). Likewise, Kato's profile on Instagram (@katopunk) has 331,000 followers while her Facebook public figure page boasts a following of 362,000 unique users. Despite this, Facebook is the top social network with significantly more global users than Instagram's 800 million monthly active users (Mathison: 2018). However, Instagram is more personally focused.

Instagram is the platform of choice for relationship building, and its indexing system – hashtags, co-opted from Twitter – allows users to both follow and target their favourite types of content (Veszelszki 2016: 139). Hashtags are also employed to actively direct people towards content, with brands, makers, casual users and influencers alike using this catalogue system to increase visibility.[11] In the past two years, Instagram has become the home of 'influencers': bloggers who cultivate a large following and use it to push their preferred brands and sponsorship partners. For brands, influence is equivalent to sales, and is a relatively passive form of marketing in terms of team energy expenditure.

[11] For an in-depth analysis of hashtag usage and connection with visuals on Instagram, see Veszelszki 2016.

Trading on influence expands exposure outside the brand's own reach potential – or targets a specifically desired consumer group that they may have struggled to attract otherwise. This digital sphere of influence, however, expands beyond commercial branding and into the sphere of personal brands.

For example, Kato's @katopunk Instagram profile with its 331,000 followers is a public figure account as well as a space to showcase her goth and steampunk fashion designs and erotic photography – at least a third of her posts are cross-posts from her @steamgirloffical page[12] while others reference her designs and music career. For Kato, Instagram is the ideal platform to promote and monetise her projects, while communicating directly and authentically with her many fans. She harnesses her influence to push her brand strategy and is, by far, the most popular steampunk profile. Pho, whose blog *Beyond Victoriana* is a regular fixture in 'best steampunk website' lists, has an Instagram following of 627 – a number which clearly does not reflect her importance to steampunk as an online culture (as her work is largely written, Instagram's visual format does not engage her strengths, so this low number is understandable). Steam Powered Giraffe's Bennett twins (Bunny and David)[13] are the most followed after Kato, boasting followings of 19,600 and 17,900 respectively with the band's account having a slightly lower following of 16,600.[14] This suggests two potential

[12] @steamgirlofficial is a steampunk stylized softcore erotica company that pushes users to Kato's paid site (steamgirl.com) for uncensored and stronger images,

[13] Whether Steam Powered Giraffe qualifies as a steampunk band is debated, as David Bennett has previously commented on his own lack of interest in steampunk; he ascribes their success – and regular event appearances – with the Anglo-American steampunk communities as incidental, likely owing to their band's name and his sister's inclusion of goggles in her stage costume (Bennett December 20, 2018, see Appendix for screen capture references). Due to this, and my wider exclusion of musical talent, I will not comment on the influence of Steam Powered Giraffe for the duration of my thesis. However, it would be accurate to characterise the band's costumes, makeup, and performance mannerisms as greatly inspirational with many community members sharing their cosplays and Steam Powered Giraffe-inspired characters on Instagram with #steampoweredgiraffe.

[14] Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred following Instagram's conventions and were collected in October 17, 2018: Bunny Bennett (@bunnybennett), David Bennett (@spineraptor), and Steam Powered Giraffe (@thesteampoweredgiraffe).

realities: either the steampunk community is not a heavy user of Instagram, or that the steampunk Instagram community does not view following influencer content as a key element of app engagement. Instead, it suggests that steampunk users are more likely to follow their friends and accounts they find inspirational such as @steampunktendencies (119,000 followers, credited content, good engagement) and #steampunk which amasses all uses of the #steampunk hashtag across posts and ephemeral Stories format (24 hours only).

This data is impactful, as it presents not only the steampunk material cultures that are consumed on Instagram – it also shows what is most popular with this smaller population. I conclude that Instagram is the primary social medium for sharing images and finding inspiration whereas Facebook is the preferred location for discussion. The crux of a popular Instagram account, regardless of its content wheel, is an authentic communication style. Authenticity is overwhelmingly manufactured by brands and influencers alike through exhaustive amounts of market research, performance analysis and 'tone of voice' copywriting. In this era of augmented authenticity, how can we as researchers define authentic communication on social media? And once we do: what can it reveal to us as academics?

WHAT IS 'AUTHENTIC' COMMUNICATION IN THE INSTAGRAM AGE?

Brands, influencers, and artists are increasingly dependent on social media platforms like Instagram for 'authentic' engagement with their ever-growing audience. It is therefore unsurprising that questions surrounding authentic communication in a digital age are rife. Authenticity is itself a contested term: how do you define 'authentic', and what causes something to be 'inauthentic'? Is the concept externally and structurally quantifiable – i.e. is it objective? Or is it subjective, organised via circumspection or emotion? With emotion being key to fandom, is all authentic communication in and of itself subjective? The questions surrounding authenticity make it difficult not only for the social media

researcher, but also for the personalities constructing a tone of voice that will *feel* authentic. And in the fast-paced digital world – is authentic *feeling* different from authenticity?

In *How the World Changed Social Media*, Miller et al. investigate how communicating in a digital, written format may impact the authenticity of interpersonal communication (Miller et al. 2016: 101-103). Ultimately, their fieldwork determined that each person, in each of their studied fields, considered authenticity on a case-by-case basis that linked intrinsically to their level of interest in the concerned party. The status of the offline relationship was directly linked to their online status, with online communication serving as an avenue to grow connection (Miller et al. 2016: 103). Suggestions of social media as wholly inauthentic is linked to social status, with Miller et al. suggesting that only those in 'elite' positions denigrate social media as way to disenfranchise the less privileged masses and their communications (Miller et al. 2016: 112).

My research – as well as my experience in fashion marketing – have taught me that authenticity is a *subjective* concept, more related to the feeling of communication rather than its validity. This is likely due to my generational bias as a fringe 'digital native'; having grown up in the 1990s with my own computer and internet access, I was primed for the transition to mobile and social technologies (Miller et al. 2016: 100). From this perspective, authenticity is read reactively, emotionally. Its quality depends on an audience reaction. For a social community, authenticity is applied to visuals and written language. It is defined by the strongest voices in the community – and ultimately, it is questioned by all. A post's authenticity precludes its success (likes, positive engagement and share-ability). American steampunk model (fashion and erotic) Amy Wilder's Instagram account @amywilderness presents an ideal case study of the slippery notion of authenticity in public figure profiles as her gallery images run the gamut of retouched professional photoshoots, design projects, pets, behind-the-scenes and personal content, as well as the photo projects from which she takes the greatest pleasure (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Wilder and Thomas Willeford. Undated romance novel cover art, shot by Chad Geist. (posted September 24, 2018)

The intermixing of highly styled erotica and less-filtered personal or behind-the-scenes 'exclusive' imagery provides her followers with the illusion of interpersonal authenticity while also furthering Wilder's need for greater professional exposure. Thus, her Instagram profile boosts her visibility as a model, while also giving her fans a sense of her personality and – most importantly – something that feels authentic to engage with. Wilder's copy is light-hearted, friendly, and speaks directly to her audience. She shares her experience both literally and figuratively: her audience feels included and seen. It is this casual language and sense of inclusion that defines authentic verbal communication on Instagram. Regarding visuals, the perception of authenticity is linked to the tone of its accompanying copy – and is thus wholly subjective. From this vantage point, social media is both human and manufactured. So, the question of which digital primary sources to believe is raised.

The subjectivity of blog posts, Facebook, and Instagram is what creates interpersonal authenticity. For the medium, this is more desirable than objectivity. The author's subjective experience is the motivation for content

creation. Prior to my marketing experience I didn't (or perhaps couldn't) comprehend the impact and importance of opinion. And it is this juncture of authenticity and transparency that dictates how I weigh my primary sources. Many of my primary sources are digital, self-published and part of the sharing/liking culture cultivated by Facebook and other social networks.[15] Their subjectivity and biases are what form and engender their authenticity. When referencing one of my primary sources in the coming chapters, I will acknowledge the source's context and account for the extent of its use. For secondary sources, I operate with a revised viewpoint, granting allowances for subjectivity on a case-by-case basis.

SECONDARY SOURCES, THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

Gender is a social and interpersonal construct that informs identity and culture; and none of its many iterations, styles, or performances are intrinsically better than others. The vast majority of feminist scholars, authors, and activists would agree with this general concept. It is in the nuance where we all differ. And yet all would agree that the fundamental building block of feminism is understanding the problematic concept that is femininity. When Betty Friedan began researching 'the problem that has no name' – the feeling of dissatisfaction, loneliness and *yearning* endured by countless American women in the 1950s and 60s – she uncovered a distressing truth. Popular culture, media, and education were instilling the importance of motherhood and spousal support (read as femininity) over self-reliance and independence (Friedan 1963: 13). What Friedan had unearthed was the systematic redefinition of what it is to be feminine

[15] I have chosen to work with the current commercial social networks (Facebook, Instagram) rather than the more niche spaces like Reddit, 4chan or the recently re-vamped MySpace. Reddit has its own vocabulary and scope, worthy of a thesis all its own. Likewise, 4chan and MySpace have very particular communities. I've chose to focus on Facebook and Instagram as they are visually-focused and have the most diverse set of age-groups and cultural currency respectively. In a future research project, I would like to analyse the differences in representation, language, content and imagery between Facebook and Reddit.

and womanly. Western culture is still recovering from the damage that this caused to cultural understandings of sex, gender, and community. And above all, Friedan revealed the insidious belief that women should aspire to and be fulfilled by their femininity, and that this femininity is intrinsically linked to biology: 'the mystique' (Friedan 1963: 16). This mystique haunts and informs all feminist literature to date, and is a critical starting point for unpacking femininity.

Friedan's analysis begins with popular media and fiction, as these both propose and report contemporary attitudes towards femininity. Fiction is a location for imagination, expression, and introspection. It has the unique power to share the temperature and tone of culture via representation and satire alike. Today content in the entertainment sector – whether lifestyle blogs or a Netflix series – tap into these same impulses. In Friedan's time, the women's magazines published fiction alongside fashion, housekeeping advice and advertisements. Prior to America joining World War II, short stories featured the New Woman as the lead, a heroine who was:

> …less fluffily feminine, so independent and determined to find a new life of her own, [she] was the heroine of a different kind of love story. She was less aggressive in pursuit of a man. Her passionate involvement with the world, her own sense of herself as an individual, her self-reliance, gave a different flavour to her relationship with the man (Friedan 1963: 34).

These twentieth century women's magazines featured romance and love stories, and a romantic male lead who cherished (or at least acknowledged) the leading lady's passions. And yet, by 1959, Friedan scours the most popular women's magazines and fails to find, 'a single heroine who had a career, a commitment to any work, art, profession, or mission in the world, other than "occupation: housewife"'(Friedan 1963: 39):

> Like Peter Pan, they must remain young, while their children grow up with the world. They must keep on having babies, because the feminine mystique says there is no other way for a woman to be a heroine (39).

These new heroines were eternally young, happy housewives with children. In the cult of femininity that confronts Friedan, suburban middle-class ideals overtake women's own sense of self-worth. Freud's psychoanalytic approach to gender and sex reinforced the idea that [cisgender] women recognise their biological differences from [cisgender] men as a lack; women who fail to acknowledge their natural space reach and show 'masculine' traits (having goals and desires beyond husband/family) are only redeemed, only feminised by having children (Friedan 1963: 103). While many of Freud's theories about biology, sex, and behaviour have been debunked and overhauled, contemporary American society still suffers a hangover from his ideology. And the extended ideology of natural femininity, the idea that housewifery equals happiness and fulfilment, defined mid-century femininity.

An entire market developed out of the typical housewife's boredom and need to fill time between the school-run and cooking dinner. With fresh product design and savvy advertising, companies could sell the housewife a temporary – not to mention therapeutic – identity as a tasteful, modern homemaker stimulated by her purchase (Friedan 1963: 182). Her diversity of products makes her an expert and by extension buys her a heightened level of purpose. All this for the sake of achieving biological completion: properly performed femininity. Consumption as escapism hit its stride, replacing the intellectually healthier escape of fiction. In stark contrast to expectations, contemporary culture had not in fact reached a modern, post-feminist space. Instead, these women were confronted with the reality that taking the feminist approach could mean loneliness and isolation while choosing the path of wife and mother would guarantee a sense of protection and love. The pre-war feminists and career women transformed into cold and unnatural misandrists, a foil for the gentle softness and sophisticated gentility of contemporary femininity.

Close re-reading of *The Feminine Mystique* has brought me a realisation: each generation (in my Anglo-American focus) has its own 'post' feminist moment. A moment where the previous generation's struggle with social

constructions of femininity feels resolved, thereby negating the need for feminism. A status quo for gender roles and cultural awareness, colloquially, 'wokeness', sets a new normal of femininity. In the 1970s, feminists pushed for gender equality as a reaction to the previous generation's domesticity. By the early 1990s, 1970s feminism was decried for its white, heterosexual, middle-class focus; equality among those with white privilege is not the same as equality. With each decade, more 'post' feminisms took hold: -colonial, -modern, -structuralist. However, there is a second post-feminism that I find problematic: passé feminism.

And I am not alone in that impulse, with Angela McRobbie's *Post-Feminism and Popular Culture* (2004) weighing in on post-feminism's destructive nature; this post-feminism suggests contemporary society has reached the point where feminism has achieved its goals – a time where feminism has outlived its purpose and has become obsolete; more than being obsolete, feminism becomes passé. The suggestion that feminism is unfashionable has far reaching consequences, that McRobbie deftly underlines. They still resonate today: until her friendship with writer Lena Dunham, teen role model and cultural juggernaut Taylor Swift openly stated in interviews that she was *not a feminist* (Griffiths 2017). Once Dunham explained that feminism is actually about equality, not women-before-men thinking, Swift publicly reversed her stance and has made being a female-power icon part of her identity (Dunham herself makes errors concerning feminism in her work with dominantly white, privileged narratives).

Swift's initial thoughts on feminism reflect the long shadow of post-feminism, something that continues with network broadcasts of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), Dunham's debut series *Girls* (2012-2017), and reruns of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Questioning the white, cisgender, and heterosexual privileges rampant in *Sex and the City* has been increasingly popular as the show reached its twentieth anniversary. From articles on *Vice*, *Dazed*, and *Bustle* decrying the tokenisation of gay characters Stanford Blatch and Anthony Marentino and

renewed scrutiny of the show's at-times racist, transphobic, and egocentric values.

Figure 5 '#WokeCharlotte'. Original date unknown. Dazed magazine's @dazedfashion account. (posted December 19, 2017)

The recent meme of 'Woke Charlotte' – *Sex and the City*'s Charlotte responding to problematic exchanges with 'woke' replies (Figure 5) – demonstrates that despite an abiding love for a show dedicated to empowering women, viewers now enjoy the drama with a grain of salt. In 2018, repeated watching of the programme's narrative exposed feminism's work as far from completed in the 'postfeminist' 1990s and 2000s.

SUBCULTURE STUDIES AND FASHION

When opening a discussion on subculture, Dick Hebdige's ground-breaking *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) is a common access point. Hebdige's reporting of subcultures' styles and influences spans the rocker counterculture (1950s) through the mods, teds, skinheads, teenyboppers, and punks of the 1970s. Hebdige's semiotic-led theories, and his study on the meaning of punk style located its cultural paradigm in the politics of diaspora and working-class othering (though Roger Sabin argues that Hebdige overstates the camaraderie

between London's punk and black communities[16]: Sabin 1999). Fortunately for Sabin and contemporary subculture researchers, Hebdige explains the context of subcultures as:

> [...] subject to historical change. Each subcultural 'instance' represents a 'solution' to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems and contradictions. For example, the mod and teddy boy 'solutions' were produced in response to different conjunctures which [*sic*] positioned them differently in relation to existing cultural formation (immigrant cultures, the parent culture, other subcultures, the dominant culture). (Hebdige 1979: 81)

Hebdige's strategy – alongside that of his Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS, University of Birmingham) cohort – depended upon semiotic readings of culture. For Hebdige's central case study (1970s punk), he defined the culture's aesthetic as reactionary and in doing so created a 'check list' of social behaviours, recreational drug habits, dress idiosyncrasies, and response triggers that match punk identities. Most notably, he and his cohort linked subculture directly to contemporary music scenes, extrapolating links between mod culture and modern jazz, and punk culture and punk rock among others. In recent years, and as early as 1980, the shortcomings of Hebdige have been addressed from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl's work also addresses the issues of Hebdige's continued application, and that of the CCCS, to contemporary subcultures:

> A main criticism of the CCCS approach is its assumption of a 'media-free space', thus 'positioning subcultures as transparent niches in an opaque world as if subcultural life spoke an unmediated truth.' This positioning not only veils the role that the media play in the subculture's own internal construction but it posits the media along with the forces of capital and commerce as instrumental in

[16] 'The punks' open identification with black British and West Indian culture served to antagonize the teddy boy revivalists, and the ted/punk battles played out every Saturday afternoon along the King's Road in the summer of 1977 provided spectacular evidence of the fundamental tension between the two subculture.' (Hebdige 1979: 67)

> the eventual 'defusion and diffusion' of the subculture. (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 8)

Muggleton and Weinzierl here assert a hybrid re-theorizing of subcultural studies. Their ethos moves contrary to the CCCS conception of media-as-enemy (i.e., parents' and popular cultures as enemy) to subcultures, engagement with the media can strengthen the bonds between subculture community members as a textual flash point. Where the CCCS model suggests that media interest (and subsequent popular culture appropriation) in a subculture leads to a destruction of authenticity, the post-subcultures approach accepts the symbiotic influences of Internet connectivity and social media as a means of positive (i.e. constructive) diffusion across a global community rather than an inauthentic dilution. In their edited volume *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, Muggleton and Weinzierl et al foreground with the work of Bourdieu (chiefly habitus and practice) or Butler (performativity) as they analyse contemporary subcultures (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 6-7).

Predating Muggleton and Weinzierl (and referenced in their discussion of gender: 18), Angela McRobbie's feminist studies of subculture – of women and girls' 'bedroom' subcultures from the 1950s through the 1970s (McRobbie and Garber 1978) as well as 'silences' regarding the gendered divisions of men and women in popular subcultures like the teds, mods, and rockers (McRobbie 1980: 20) – run counter to or confront Hebdige's majority-male sample:

> But although his [Hebdige's] method draws on the work of feminists like Kristeva and is one widely used by feminists working in media studies, Hebdige by and large reproduces yet another 'silence'. (McRobbie 1980: 24)

McRobbie's chief grievance – and central goal – is addressing three themes that arise from a feminist reading of subculture: how *bricoleurs* (those who create via bricolage) engage with patriarchal meaning, sexual ambiguity in youth cultures, and questions surrounding gender and 'moral panic' (McRobbie 1980: 25). Her most compelling critique of Hebdige is directed at his approach to gender and style:

> Dick Hebdige claims that style breaks rules and that its refusals are complex amalgams taken from a range of existing signs and meanings. […] More tangentially, punks appropriate the 'illicit iconography of pornography, the male-defined discourse *par excellence*. Of course, it would be ludicrous to expect anything different. The point I am stressing is how highly differentiated according to gender, style (mainstream or subcultural) is – it is punk girls who wear the suspenders, after all. (25-26)

Contrasting with Hebdige, McRobbie's analyses of twentieth-century youth cultures acknowledge paradoxes rather than masking them with semiotics. Her combination of Hall-inspired semiotics alongside her feminist lens adds depth to her analysis that Hebdige's prior work lacks. Like Hebdige, she works with style as a cultural practice; unlike Hebdige, her work addresses style's production.

McRobbie's sizable oeuvre also addresses fashion through an intersectional feminist lens, with her strongest analysis focusing on industry and culture (*British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry* 1998*)*. Her work explores how feminist scholars approach fashion, critiquing the expansive interest on image, bodies, and processes of consumption to the exclusion of studying the labour that goes into fashion's creation. McRobbie also emphasises Vivienne Westwood's role in revolutionising women's fashion, a subject that my analysis of steampunk dress draws upon. Westwood's attitude, construction and viewpoint of the past were fashion game changers that shifted the course and creativity of British fashion; Westwood's innovative spirit created the foundation for future bricolage and DIY-led fashion. How – and for whom – women wear garments is central to feminist readings of fashion and is a concept that my thesis covers extensively in its third chapter.

JUDITH & JACK: JUDITH BUTLER, JACK HALBERSTAM, GENDER AND IDENTITY

Femininity, as my thesis reckons with it, belongs equally and reciprocally to both gender and identity studies. How someone experiences their gender informs their identity; how society anticipates and reads gender informs their reception. Judith Butler's readings of gender and identity (informed by Gilles Deleuze and

Felix Guattari's Platonic revisions of *becoming* and *being*)[17] evidence how one person can perform gender differently from moment to moment in a way that builds identity. Butler not only understands, but also experiences, the link between personal identity narrative and external perceptions of gender performance. The body is the location of performance, and the performer as evolving their identity and behaviour based on the experience's reception.

In her seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler's analysis of drag, gender's link with both the body and sexual politics, and gender performance highlights the issues surrounding deviations from the 'frame of reproductive heterosexuality' (Butler 1990: 185). Butler's salient point is that understandings of 'true' or 'real' gender are based on fabrications that stem from the actor's own identity. And, as such, any identity performance is the product of an individual's discourse with their self and their social understanding. However, the use of the word performance suggests mimicry between a 'true' and 'false', which Butler argues as more complex than binary discussions allow, particularly when the actor (using the example of drag) consciously mixes sex, identity, and gender:

> But the relation between the 'imitation' and the 'original' is, I think, more complicated than that critique [feminist theory] generally allows. […] The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (187).

For Butler's hypothetical drag actor, there is the anatomical sex, the gender identity, and the gender performance. Butler's analysis of the trifurcated drag identity reveals information on *any* actor, drag or otherwise, as there are latent

[17] Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between becoming narratives and being states for women – and their comparative 'not' nature – is best explained in their own words: 'It is perhaps the special situation of women in relation to the man-standard that accounts for the fact that becomings, being minoritarian, always pass through a becoming-woman. […] A woman has to become-woman, but in a becoming-woman of all man. [i.e. all that is not man].' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 291)

distinctions between sex, gender identity, and gender performance.[18] Where cisgender men and women may potentially have lesser variance between their gender identities and performances, this is highly personal and subject to individual contemplation; their continued performances provide overt statements of differential expression (Butler 1993: 108).

Jack Halberstam's[19] *Female Masculinity* (1998) queries the female performance and experience of masculinity, and culture's larger understanding of what constitutes masculinity,[20] From Halberstam's perspective, the importance of gender performance to women, drag actors, and the trans community is due to the presumed stability of white, cisgender[21] male identity – to the extent that performing masculinity outside of a ritually masculine arena (for example the locker room) is redundant or unnecessary:

> Indeed, current representations of masculinity in white men unfailingly depend on a relatively stable notion of the realness and

[18] In her essay 'Critically Queer', Butler notes that at the time of *Gender Trouble*'s publication, there was a measure of confusion as to her meaning (confusion outlined in Kosofsky 1993); 'citing drag as an example of performativity, a move that was taken then, by some, to be *exemplary* of performativity.' (pg 109) The original intent of Butler's text aimed to express that gender is a performative concept, something created by the actor, rather than reading 'gender-as-drag'; gender as something that may be removed. So, while gender identity and gender performance ought to be differentiated, this performance should *not* be considered akin to a costume removed at will, which the example of drag led some readers to believe (Butler 1993: 108-117).

[19] In researching which pronouns to use in reference to Halberstam, I came across contradictory reporting. In a 2012 blogpost, the author chose not to share pronoun preference as Halberstam – at that moment – continued to feel in-flux regarding transition towards a more male figure. In the author 2016 bio for a seminar at Swarthmore College on trans bodies, the text uses he/his pronouns. As these bios tend to be penned by the author themselves, this use of he/his is unlikely to be a misgendering. I will thus be sparing with pronouns, and aim to use the author's name wherever possible. What I am certain of, however, is that Halberstam no longer uses the name Judith outside of a small, intimate circle. Because of this, I refer to Jack Halberstam rather than Judith, despite the bibliography and publication citing Judith as author (Halberstam 2012, Swarthmore College 2016).

[20] In 'Crafted Narratives, Crafted Bodies' I return to Halberstam for theoretical assistance in analysing queer identity performance in steampunk.

[21] Halberstam's analysis notes that masculinities of colour and gay masculinities stand outside this safety, both read as performative outside of the static white masculinity inside the scope of American gender comprehension. (Halberstam 1998: 235)

> naturalness of both the male body and its signifying effects. Advertisements for Dockers pants and Jockey underwear, for example, appeal constantly to the no-nonsense aspect of masculinity, to the idea that masculinity 'just is', whereas femininity reeks of the artificial. (Halberstam 1998: 234)

If white male masculinity is held as the authentic, and white female femininity as the binary-opposed inauthentic (and a performance that marks the female as un-male), then Halberstam is correct in her characterisation that any other form of masculinity (female masculinity, gay masculinity, the masculinity of people of colour) is by default a performed masculinity. This assumption situates the power structure of gender as white male masculinity and divergences therefrom:

> […] white men derive enormous power from assuming and confirming the nonperformative nature of masculinity. For one thing, if masculinity adheres 'naturally' and inevitably to men, then masculinity cannot be impersonated. For another, if the nonperformance is part of what defines white male masculinity, then all performed masculinities stand out as suspect and open to interrogation. (Halberstam 1998: 235)

This analysis of masculine performance serves not to validate the supposition of white male masculinity as the lone 'authentic' type, but rather to explain the cultural conditions that necessitate conversations surrounding gender performance and its link with both gender and sexual identity. In the introduction to *Female Masculinity* Halberstam discusses 'the bathroom problem', the ambiguous risks of performing masculine gender while inhabiting a female body (Halberstam 1998: 20-29). Anecdotally, Halberstam has experience with gender performance being met with suspicion and fear (having security called in the women's bathroom, despite Halberstam's right to use this public space safely). The 'bathroom problem', much like Friedan's 'problem with no name' centres on social understandings of what it means to *be* female – and the baggage that is

parcel with *becoming* such. In terms of 'passing'[22], the consistency of performing as *being* feminine-female translates into a *becoming*. And, despite the validity of female masculinity as a gender performance, the dominant social narratives will struggle to see this as an avenue for *becoming* female.

For my study of this *being*/*becoming*, one of the most useful essays is Butler's contribution to Diana Fuss's 1991 gender and sexuality anthology *Inside/Out*. In the introduction, Fuss explains the title, noting that the (self/Other) / (inside/outside) binary cultural hierarchies are unhelpful and irresponsible in discussions of sexuality and sexual identity as they situate heterosexual as natural compulsion, homosexual as contamination, and relegate bisexuality, pansexuality, and trans identity as outside the scope. (Fuss 1991:1-2) In her chapter, Butler discusses the internalised arguments that surround what it means to be a lesbian in 1990s America: what it means to sexually identify as a homosexual woman; what it means to *be* a lesbian; and how this *being* may be a performance that does not reflect internalised sense of self. (Butler 1991: 18) This *being*, and its repetition, invokes Deleuze and Guattari.[23] Butler questions whether regularly performing the *being* will ultimately transform her *being* state into her lived identity (*becoming*). Would her *being* performance shift into her *becoming* after enough repetitions? Is it possible to have an identity outside – or without – gender performance?:

> And if the 'I' is the effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence, then there is no 'I' that precedes the gender that it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of the that 'I'. (Butler 1991: 18)

[22] 'Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully; at various moments, the successful pass may cohere into something akin to identity.' (Halberstam 1998: 21)

[23] Deleuze, Gilles. 2014. *Difference and Repetition*. trans Paul Patton for Bloomsbury Revelations edition. (Bloomsbury Academic, London UK)

In *being* lesbian on command and performing an expected gender identity, Butler argues that she risks losing herself in the repeated performance; something echoed in Halberstam. The repetition of these acts of *being* constitute the effect of coherency, the precursor to identity:

> …sexuality always exceeds any given performance, presentation, or narrative which [*sic*] is why it is not possible to derive or read off a sexuality from any given gender presentation (Butler 1991: 25).

Moments of *being*, then, are effects of the longer *becoming.* And this line of inquiry feeds into one of my top interests in steampunk dress: can it be discussed in terms of *being* and *becoming*? And if so, is it like Butler's personal example wherein enough repetitions of *being* steampunk result in a *becoming*? Does it come from influence or practice? Throughout my analysis of inspiration and action, I will loop back to this viewpoint on identity structure to unpack how, why, where, when, and for what women create and wear steampunk fashion.

READING ROMANCE: SEX, THE BODY, ESCAPISM, AND FEMINISM

Romance fiction and gender have a fraught relationship, with much ink having been spilled over romance's thematic focus running counter to twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist agendas (see Radway 1991, Ricker-Wilson 1999, Regis 2003, Butler and Desai 2008). This is due to romance's intrinsic elevation of relationships, most often written as heterosexual and cisgender (Romance Writers of America 2018: *About the Romance Genre*). However, this specificity of sexuality and gender is not directly written into the genre's standards. The Romance Writers of America define a romance novel as containing two specific elements: 'a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending' (ibid). Pamela Regis's academic definition suggests the romance novel as 'a work of prose fiction that tells the story of a courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines' (Regis 2003: 19), following an eight-step narrative formula:

> All romance novels contain eight narrative elements: a *definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the *meeting* between the heroine and the hero; and account of their *attraction* for each other; the *barrier* between them; the *point of ritual death*; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*. (Regis 2003: 14, original emphasis)

Romance novels published by Harlequin (1964-present) and Silhouette (1980-present), the ubiquitous North American publishing houses with sub-genre imprints, near-uniformly follow this arc, as do the works of iconic romance novelists like Nora Roberts (with both Silhouette and mainstream publishers like Bantam and Penguin) and Danielle Steel. Roberts' novels in particular consistently achieving the ritual death and recognition in the penultimate chapter so that the final pages include a declaration of love and urgency of marriage.[24] This requisite of 'betrothal', i.e. a promise of marriage, is perhaps the narrative element that enforces the criticism of romance novels as dominantly heterosexual and cisgender, as homosexual, genderqueer, transgender, and gender-fluid characters have only begun to appear in mass-audience publications since the late twentieth century.

This is not to say that gay and lesbian romance narratives have uniquely been written since the 1970s: Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* critiques and rejects the euphemistic 'romantic friendship' historians such as Blanche Wiesen Cook and Lillian Faderman that erase the diversity of nineteenth-century femininity and lesbian sexual identity (Halberstam 1998: 55), as well as recounting the contemporaneous lived realities of lesbian relationships via the 'female husband' frame of Anne Lister's diary entries. Susan Koppelman's anthology *Two Friends: And Other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories By American Women Writers* (1995) comprises a range of women-authored short

[24] *The MacKades Collection* (1995-1996) and *The Stars of Mithra Trilogy* (1997), for example, all follow a twelve-chapter structure with the ritual death occurring in chapter eleven and the betrothal scene ending the twelfth and final chapter (some of these, like the final *MacKades* novel, include an epilogue that includes pregnancy or some other end-tying element).

stories written in the nineteenth century that focus on female-female romantic narratives. Likewise, the gothic novella *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1872) is traditionally read as a lesbian romance and is among the first works of fiction to equate vampires with human sexuality, predating Bram Stoker by nearly thirty years.

However, the twentieth-century dominance of heterosexual/cisgender narrative and focus on such a romantic coupling has led to the romance genre suffering from regular castigation as a tool of a patriarchal status quo, with its focus on romantic love and escapism transforming it into a vehicle for asserting patriarchal gender roles. Such commentary regularly precluded it from second- and third-wave feminist reading as the celebration of partnership eclipses career narrative and asserts the importance of relationships. As most romance writers are themselves women with careers, this form of feminist reading presents a paradox:

> Feminists talk about sisterhood; I do not know how deeply they feel it. The undercurrent throughout feminist criticism of romances is that these scholars and critics know what is right for other women – and oh my, do they feel the 'us/them' distinction acutely. (Romance writer Kathleen Gilles Seidel, quoted in Lyon Clark et al. 1996: 362)

Likewise, the formulaic elements of its storytelling have rescued romance from discourses on 'real' fiction, and accounts of the social shame surrounding romance readership abound (Prose 1988, Lyon Clark et al. 1996, Ricker-Wilson 1999, Regis 2003). In late twentieth-century romances, many novels relied on the male gaze as a lens to describe the physicality of the female lead, a tactic that allows for both a shifting first-person narration between the two leads while also allowing each character to have relatable emotions surrounding body image and self-esteem – if the characters themselves are not, in fact, relatable (Lyon Clark et al. 1996). The potential to conflate the male gaze as a narrative device with feminist critiques of the male gaze as insidious has caused generations of romance readers to feel shame around their reading and the need to explain their enjoyment of sophisticated literature with romance themes like *Pride & Prejudice*

or *Jane Eyre* (Lyon Clark et al. 1996: 360). At the close of their interjectionally-structured group analysis of the emotions surrounding women reading romance in 1990s, Karen Gennari (of Lyon Clark et al.) remarks:

> Maybe we feminists *should* write romances (many of us have said we could easily follow the formula) and address the issues of class, sexuality, and rape-like scenes. We can change the power balance in subtle ways. We can make the romance a satisfying experience – and a true utopia for women. (Lyon Clark et al. 1996: 381)

This call to action is not, however, the first to come from an academic study of reading romance fiction. Since the early 1980s, Janice Radway has conducted research that explores the American female experience through the lens of reading; her work largely relies on the context of reading, with subjects spanning the relationships between romance fiction, identity, zines, riot grrrl culture, and patriarchy.[25] Early in her career with romance Radway broke with convention, choosing to access female social experiences and gender from the perspective of romance readers rather than the lens of publishing critics, marking the first time that romance fiction's readership would be the analytic focus rather than the literature's content.[26] Her 1983 contextualisation of romance is a pioneering sociological investigations into the relationship between female readers and this female fiction, explaining for the first time that while romance novels do hinge on romantic love and gratification, critics of the genre miss a key point concerning their readership:

> Consequently, they [romance's critics] also fail to understand that some contemporary romances actually attempt to reconcile

[25] Gleaned from Radway's Northwestern University faculty research profile (Radway 2018),

[26] Radway's 1983 study, though seminal, is also short-sighted as she takes her Smithton sample as representative of romance readership at large despite their preference for only one subgenre of romance; as such, her points regarding the importance of readers' context is weakened (Regis 2003: 5). I am aware of the shortcomings of Radway's study, despite my strong agreement with her conclusions regarding reading, and as such balance her work with Regis's historiographic work and the focused writings of scholars such as Clawson, Ricker-Wilson, Prose and Lee.

> changing attitudes about gender behavior with more traditional sexual arrangements. (Radway 1983: 54)

This argument that romance reading can serve as an ideological space for the romance audience places greater agency in the readers and writers, as it acknowledges the possibility that authors encode information on contemporary gender structures via 'patriarchal institutions' such as heterosexual love, the male gaze, and passion.[27] It is this concept – the context of reading provides as much data as the text itself – that keeps Radway relevant more than thirty years after her first study's publication. And, though Radway ultimately concludes that romance is a tool for the patriarchy, contemporary research would suggest the opposite. It is a tool for the female experience, and has the ability to subvert the patriarchy as it speaks to its audience in a familiar context with emotional reach.

The very act of *reading* a romance novel expresses information on the reader in terms of gender and identity, and this performative intertext reveals the novels' cultural significance (Radway 1983: 56). This thought should not be revolutionary, as it is the crux of literary criticism. However, it is Radway's assertion that romance is worthy of the said critique that is a revolt. As her study opens the context of romance novels as an avenue for feminist ideology, the genre's ability to bypass and subvert the lens of institutionalised patriarchy as it communicates the power of female choice and identity directly to a receptive audience: it combats the same institution that Nochlin's seminal text on female-authored art also sought to subvert. The coincidence that the transmission of feminist prose comes through a conduit for female escape should not be taken for granted, however, as Radway's readers 'readily admit in fact that the characters and events discovered in the pages of the typical romance do not resemble the people and occurrences they must deal with in their daily lives […] one can

[27] This is similar to ideas presented in Stuart Hall's essay 'Encoding, Decoding'. Hall argues that cultural objects and concepts are 'encoded' with meaning that the consumer/user/reader/ cultural actor must 'decode' and unpack in order fully understand said object or concept (Hall 2007 [1980]: 90-103).

conclude that it is precisely the unreal, fantastic shape of the story that makes their literal escape even more complete and gratifying.' (Radway 1983: 59) The fantasy, the escape, is about the reader's own journey and their ability to connect with the heroine – not her situation. The issue of representation is down to the heroine and the context of her relationships rather than their detail; where the details provide the avenue of escape, the scripted familiarity of the heroine and her story arc (Regis 2003: 23-25) protect the reader from unnecessary stress or trauma that may be linked to the unique plots (Lee 2008: 55). The eight-step formula uncovered through Regis's exhaustive research may define the romance narrative's flow, but it does not define romance's contextual impacts.

The wives and mothers in Radway's 1983 suburban sample cite the pressure and tension of being constantly available (physically and emotionally) to nurture their family as one of the key reasons that they enjoy romance fiction to the voracious extent that they do (40% of the women in Radway's study disclosed reading twenty or more romances a month, Radway 1983: 58). And though contemporary Anglo-American culture has ceased to normalise – or more accurately, celebrate as natural and desirably wholesome – the male breadwinner/female homemaker gendered household structure, many of the emotions, anxieties and impulses described via Radway's community contact and charted in Regis's literary study exist in popular culture outside the romance genre. Looking to popular Anglo-American television as an example of this, contemporary female-led ensembles rely on how characters like Alicia Florrick in CBS's *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) and Rebecca Bunch in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-present) action or critique these same status quo gender roles, with the female leads of period dramas/fantasies like Sara Howard in *The Alienist* (2018) and Vanessa Ives of *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) hinging on these same protagonist types that abound in romance fiction. Each of these four characters conform to a feminine cliché (the good wife, the crazy ex, the career woman or

'new woman', and the social deviant or 'fallen woman' respectively) [28] while also subverting conceptions that surround contemporary cisgender femininity and common female anxieties surrounding heterosexual love and relationships. All four of these protagonist types engage with Regis's eight elements in some way, though they may not reach each of the markers that she suggests are required for the designation of romance.

The popularity [29] of these complex female protagonists and their narratives marks that romance, and its related formula, have the cultural currency to maintain the interest of network television's viewership, and by extension a market share of consumer attention akin to the 34% share of the 2015 U.S fiction market in 2015 reported by the RWA (Romance Writers of America 2018: 'Statistics'). [30] The approach of these programmes to mental health, identity, gender, and sexuality – though uniquely focused on a white, cisgender, heterosexual female experience – are multivalent, and are regularly self-aware in their feminist message (particularly Rebecca Bunch and Sara Howard), again demonstrating that a romance narrative can be encoded to

[28] Alicia embodies a contemporary version of the 'stand by your man' conceit, while also subverting it as she regains personal and financial agency from her husband and begins to explore her identity as a professional woman outside her role as wife/mother. Rebecca, like Alicia, portrays a successful lawyer whose personal life and identity are complicated by not only her relationship with her ex-boyfriend and other men, but also her own journey through mental health misdiagnoses and the complexities of female friendship. Sara is a self-identifying spinster whose ambitions to pioneer space for women in nineteenth-century New York City's police force is grounded by her willingness to rethink the role of romance in her life when confronted with intellectual equals, as well as her determination to not sacrifice femininity on her pursuit of justice. Last of the sample, Vanessa is tortured by her own sexuality and paranormal powers while also traversing Victorian London as a fallen woman of status.

[29] According to popular television and film review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, each show boasts a positive to outstanding score with *The Good Wife* (CBS) at 96%, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW) 97%, *The Alienist* (TNT) 64%, and *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime) 91% as of September 2018. Accessed November 2018.

[30] This figure does not include the host of fiction that relies on love as a central theme, that borrows the essence of romance, without trading on its name.

transmit nuanced information while subverting the potentially patriarchal elements of romantic love.

And yet, despite the increasing visibility of feminist romantic heroines and improved scholarly appreciation for romance narratives (Lee 2008, Butler and Desai 2008, Wendell and Tan 2009), romance fiction continues to face criticism from popular reviewers and academics alike (see Modleski 1982, Mussel 1984, Pearce 2007, and Fletcher 2008). This issue is two-fold as Regis's historiography explains:

> Critics mistake the romance novel's effects because they do not know, precisely, what a romance novel is. […] They generalize hastily from a small group of texts to the genre as a whole. […] But the critics make a second mistake: they attack the romance novel for its happy ending in marriage. (Regis 2003: 6-7)

Electing to evidence claims from a small sample of texts, and generalising a genre from that stance, is a reasonable point of dissent regardless of the said genre. Regis's study notes which scholars have worked from this method, then moves forward to the crux of romance criticism; that a happy – read: 'successful' – ending relies on betrothal or marriage is the critic's sticking point. These critics understand this romantic ending as an elevation of marriage to a woman's ultimate goal, rather than reading a successful relationship as a part of her larger narrative. The author's ability to create rounded characters, likewise, impacts the context of finding love in the written heroine's identity.

The diversity of authors' character development ability and their approach to romance's eight-step formula is the critical point where romance's critics can argue the genre as un-feminist through its lack of complexity. Fletcher's focus on 'I love you' as a performative utterance across all romance novels (Fletcher 2008) coupled with Pearce's proposal that romance's mass-market success comes at the price of the male heroes' interchangeability (Pearce 2007) suggests that the lack of complexity equates to romance being understood as a cheap form of entertainment via its mass-consumption appeal (Regis 2011). Romance as simple, however, presses the wrong question and ignores the

authors who work to create challenging story arcs (ibid). This supposition also ignores romance's transition in the wake of third-wave feminist critiques like those of Lyon Clark et al., Modleski and Mussel, leading to the post-feminist female leads in the 1990s.

Romance's boom of popularity developed in tandem with feminism in the 1970s, with academics reading 1990s novels in conversation with contemporary feminist context (Lee 2008: 54). Romance fiction itself grew outwards from the Harlequin/Silhouette model, with 'chick lit' bridging a readership gap between the romance formula (Salinas-Moniz 2011) and 1990s consumer culture (McRobbie 2004, Butler and Desai 2008).[31] Cultural critic Angela McRobbie cites Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) as chick lit's archetype, casting Bridget Jones literally as a new generation's Elizabeth Bennet, herself the archetypal romance heroine (Regis 2003). Bridget's simultaneous independence, conspicuous consumption of popular culture, and social and romantic anxieties map the psyches of her readership while also providing 'successful' romance endings across the franchise. Fielding's narrative is wholly dependent upon the conceits of romance fiction, as it is a conscious retelling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, itself a diversion from gothic romance and prototype for the contemporary romantic novel (Regis 2003: 75-84).

McRobbie's stance on chick lit, through the vector of the *Bridget Jones's Diary* novel and film adaptation, views the genre as undermining 1990s feminist reflexivity, simultaneously trading on feminism's efforts while suggesting its redundancy (McRobbie 2004: 257). Her chief concern is that chick lit's light-hearted nature and mass-appeal create a new 'gender regime' that 'normalise[s] post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women' (McRobbie

[31] For an in-depth look at chick lit's history as predominantly focusing on white, middle-class, heterosexual cisgender space, as well as analysis of post-feminism, neoliberalism, and representation through the lens of South Asian American narratives, see Butler and Desai's 2008 critique.

2004: 262). In this statement, McRobbie localises popular literature as an encoded space for women to experience, unpack, and regulate their gender performances, making feminist forms of popular fiction ever more important. Thus, both romances and chick lit convey a wealth of information on women's relationships with love, sex, gender, and identity alongside their provision of escape. Likewise, these texts tend to be written *by* women *for* a predominantly female audience – and this reality comes with a responsibility to all generations of readers, as McRobbie's distinction of 'young women' notes.[32] However, research into the importance of romance to young girls suggest that the genre is integral to the young adult readers' finding emotional attachment to reading as an action, and connecting with relatable characters via romantic narratives.

Romance novels have received attention for their role in adolescent female identity development. Secondary English instructor and academic Carol Ricker-Wilson explains that for many young American women their school's literary curriculum excludes women's perspectives, leaving extracurricular romance novels as the most viable route to personal resonance with both a formative protagonist and relatable narrative:

> Fundamentally, I would argue, romance readers *really like to read*, they like to read about women, and they don't want to read about their unmitigated despoliation and dispatch. But once readers venture out of the formulaic romance genre, fiction is a wild card and identification with female protagonists and emotional risk. It's very likely most women first learn this in language arts classrooms. As recently as 1977, the literary canon was almost singularly male-authored, and research by the Sadkers and others suggest that in North American reading curricula, male protagonists and perspectives still predominate all the way through school. (Ricker-Wilson 1999: 58-59)

Ricker-Wilson's fundamental assumption is that romance readers – i.e. women – are interested in reading, however during adolescence their school curricula

[32] These demographics are changing, but still hold true generally (RWA 2018).

alienate them. These curricula are based on a literary canon dominated by male authorship and male protagonists, leaving the young readers feeling excluded. In search of a protagonist more similar to themselves, these young readers seek identification outside the canonical scope and find it in romance novels. These novels package womanhood, platonic and sexual relationships, and varied gender identities into worlds that are safe to explore (Lee 2008). While works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a crucial twentieth-century critique on society and gender roles (Ricker-Wilson 1999: 59), its importance is most viscerally comprehended once the reader understands what adult female identity feels like – and without this education, such works can feel 'depressing' (ibid).

In Ricker-Wilson's initial classroom sample, five white working-class female students (Ricker-Wilson 1999: 57) chose to read Danielle Steel novels for their independent study rather than works from the pre-approved list; Ricker-Wilson explains her interest in *how* they read rather than *what* they read as reason for allowing this deviation (Ricker-Wilson 1999: 58). All five students cited their initial interest in Steel's novels as escapism, thus matching with Radway's earlier assertions; where Ricker-Wilson's sociological analysis deviates is that romance can be not only an escape from the mundanity daily life, but also an escape from male-dominated literature and fiction that fails to protect female characters (Ricker-Wilson 1999: 58-59). The acceptance of romance reading in the classroom setting served as a validation for these students, giving them a sense of agency in their own education and allowing them to analyse complex themes like gender, social status, sexuality, value, and representation in a form of fiction that they could comfortably interpret. Ricker-Wilson's study impresses lifecycle thinking regarding romance reading; the appeal of romance fiction may develop through adolescence as a safe escape from literary curricula that preference male experience and in adulthood this transitions into a form of entertainment that is free of risk and focuses on female experience. Romance fiction is a powerful tool for young women looking to find an access point to literature, and a genre whose formula lends itself to varied revisions like regency, historical, and paranormal subgenres – which includes steampunk romance.

Linda Lee's essay 'Guilty Pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales' evaluates the relationship between romance fiction and European fairy tales, another formulaic and relatively feminine genre. Her work explains that romance fiction is often interpreted as a reflection of how women navigate their fantasies inside a patriarchal society (Lee 2008: 54). Lee goes on to explain that the exception to this exclusion of violent fantasy is paranormal romance, which tends to take on elements of the beauty and the beast fairy tale with the male lead a rotating cast of vampires, ghosts, werewolves, and creatures. Lee identifies these creatures alongside magic, fairies, and more 'fantastical' themes (Lee 2008: 53) as part of the paranormal subgenre. Her argument centres on authors' unconscious translation of recognisable narratives – fairy tales – into romance as a way to give the female character power in meeting her desires, and thus a low risk space for female readers to explore their own (Lee 2008: 55).

From this perspective, the journey towards romance is balanced with a quest for knowledge and transformation, with the heroine's understanding of the hero as a realisation of empowerment. Lee's emphasis on feminist fantasy, fairy tales, and transforming bodies is particularly poignant for steampunk's paranormal romances: Carriger's *Soulless* is, with reference to Lee's arguments, a Neo-Victorian reconstitution of beauty and the beast where Alexia goes on a self-discovery journey while finding love; Dru Pagliassotti's novella *The Code of Blood* parallels Sleeping Beauty's rescue at the hands of true love as she, in turn, finds her own self-worth through ritual civic sacrifice; Ann Aguirre's short story *Wild Magic* shares markers with the twelve dancing princesses as the heroine leaves behind painful familial expectations to carve her own path. Lee states the versatility of romance for its readers as an avenue for feminist context thus:

> Readership studies, such as Janice Radway's, make it clear that women see these novels as escapist fantasies. If we reposition the conflict in romance novels from the quest of love conquers all to a struggle for power through knowledge of the other, it becomes possible to read these novels also as fantasies of female empowerment. (Lee 2008: 62)

Lee and Regis's compound argument for reading romance as an avenue for empowerment, when held alongside Baym's methodology for analysing r.a.t.s., McRobbie's approach to cultural theory and the intersection of Butler and Halberstam provides a critical, compound tactic for analysing steampunk romance novels, novellas, and short stories.

CASE STUDY: THE CORSET, FICTION, NEO-VICTORIAN TROPES, AND ROMANCE IN STEAMPUNK ACADEMIA

Julie Anne Taddeo's essay 'Corsets of Steel: Steampunk's Reimagining of Victorian Femininity' (2013) begins with a brief history of the corset in nineteenth-century Britain, relying on sources that paint the object as anti-feminist, restrictive, and dangerous; she relies heavily on Leigh Summers's *Bound to Please*, a text that established corset historian Jill Fields reviewed as problematic in: its conflating 'feminist' with 'dress reformer'; failure to situate her analysis of shaping women's bodies and sexual pressure alongside a literature review of the history of sexuality; anecdotal evidence that undermine her clarity; and her seeming ignorance of the changes to corsetry between 1850 and 1900 (Fields 2003: 1084). Fields concludes that, though flawed, 'the book remains a useful, detailed account of Victorian corsets' (1085). Perhaps most tellingly, Fields discloses that despite similarities in their work – and Fields's many extant publications on the subject – Summers excludes her work from the bibliography (ibid). Taddeo's own bibliography includes three academic analyses on corsets: Summers, Fields's *Fighting the Corsetless Evil* (1999), and Wendy Dasler Johnson's *Cultural Rhetorics of Women's Corsets* (2001); I would have expected to see Valerie Steele among this list, alongside the many cultural historians that Taddeo employs to round her arguments on corsets, gender, health, and feminism.

In light of this foreshortened list, and its uneven linchpin (Summers), Taddeo sets herself up for a sensational, subversive revelation when she argues, 'the corset-clad steampunk heroine may look "dashing" and "fascinating", but more importantly, she facilitates the interrogation of gender issues that connect

the past and present' (Taddeo 2013: 44).[33] She suggests that romance novels present women writers with an opportunity to channel their power, autonomy, and cultural capital into an object – the corset – using their fictional characters to craft reclaiming gender narratives that subvert nineteenth-century conceptions of gender and femininity:

> As a genre, steampunk reflects not only the continued historical relevance and accessibility of the Victorian period but also its 'dangerous edginess' and possibilities for 'subversion'. (Taddeo 2013: 44)

She here suggests that steampunk aesthetic is the avenue that 'its inhabitants, particularly women, safely and triumphantly play with and transgress its boundaries' (Taddeo 2013: 45). Taddeo's arguments move to analyse how steampunk corsetry diverges from problematic social reshaping into a celebration of choice in romance and erotica, suggesting that for this audience the corset is more than a sex object, and is instead an object that 'showcases female empowerment above all else' (Taddeo 2013: 45). As she moves through the material elements of her argument – chiefly that the corset is a gateway object in steampunk culture which leads to adventure and blurs the lines between the Madonna/Magdalene binary – converges with misconceptions of tightlacing – i.e., that it was a widespread epidemic (Taddeo 2013: 46) – with the historical record of the practice as a niche trend and sexual fetish (Steele 2001, Entwistle 2015).

The idea of a Victorian woman's body contorted in pain to achieve the shape considered socially desirable resonates with the propaganda of dress reform and second-wave feminism; casting the corset as a dark sexual thing informed by a patriarchal gaze further eroticises an object that, when correctly constructed and laced appropriately provides both back and bust support, is a

[33] Various quotes respectively to Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn, eds. 2010. *Neo-Victorians: The Victorians in the Twenty First Century, 1999-2009* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke UK and New York NY USA), pg 4 and 'The heroine's description' on the dust jacket of' Gray, Natalie. 2010. *Full Steam Ahead.* (Red Sage Presents, Seminole FL USA), Kindle edition n.p.

mundane foundation garment. It is a continuation of Bloomsbury revisions of the Victorians, and illustrates the necessity of Neo-Victorian studies:

> Our perception of the corset as barbaric, unnatural, restrictive, anti-feminist, and so on, is precisely a product of our need to confirm our own liberation, and enormously simplifies the complex discourses circulating around the theme of tightlacing in the Victorian period. (Spooner 2004: 16)

In this analysis, noted Gothic academic Catherine Spooner aligns the contemporary impulse of vitriol towards corsetry with the compulsion to be more evolved than the past; if the current viewpoint of the corset as a painful anti-feminist antique or erotic object is correct, then its past history must be 'barbaric'. Contrasting with Spooner's holistic focus, Taddeo's analytic pivot concerns the male gaze and its impact on historic corsetry: a focus on the erotic-sexual rather than the social-sexual implications of reading the nineteenth-century corset as transgressive.

I agree with Taddeo's introspective evaluation that female characters achieve empowerment via the corset in steampunk fiction, as she argues the object as a vehicle to reclaim undermined agency through *choice*. In steampunk fiction and community fashion practices, wearing a corset is an aesthetic *choice*, not a societal expectation. This choice proposes that agency is cast entirely on to the corset wearer, rather than an external gaze or agenda. In publicly demonstrating her *choice* to wear a corset, either in the traditional mode as an undergarment or the popular trend of outerwear, women in steampunk fiction reject the Victorian myths and stigmas as tightlacing, repression, angelic overtures in separate spheres, and the generalised gender imbalance bemoaned by dress reformers. In each case study, she suggests that the adventure heroines knowingly use the corset as an erotic object to titillate the male gaze (Taddeo 2013: 52), and subvert it by using it as armour (Taddeo 2013: 45) or weapon concealment (Taddeo 2013: 52). Unfortunately, on the whole, Taddeo is sensational where she could be critical, thus destabilising her arguments. By her

concluding statement, Taddeo has literally and figuratively fetishised the corset into a uniquely sexual context:

> On steampunk commercial websites and in romance stories and erotica, the corset promises its wearer just such a life of social and sexual transgression. (Taddeo 2013: 57-58)

Taddeo argues for the corset as an object capable of both containing a woman's body and channelling her empowerment through its use as both armour and an erotic garment. Though I disagree with the calibre of her resources regarding the corset itself, and thus to an extent the rigour of her arguments, her conclusion proposes that women in steampunk are free to use and read the corset in steampunk romances and culture as a vehicle for both pleasure and power.

Mary Anne Taylor's *Liberation and a Corset: Examining False Feminism in Steampunk* (2014) gives an opposing assessment of the corset. Her essay purports to be a decisive exposé of the corset as a hindrance to feminist gender performances in steampunk subculture (Taylor 2014: 38). Taylor situates steampunk as both utopian and Neo-Victorian, reading the use of Victorian aesthetic as appropriative (ibid) rather than the more culturally-open interpretive sense championed by Pho (Pho 2013). More specifically, Taylor questions whether the Victorian aesthetic has the ability to be feminist, and in so questioning invokes Taddeo:

> In investigating gender empowerment through steampunk and exploring feminist possibilities through the aesthetic, it is necessary to ask if a Victorian aesthetic can indeed be feminist. Julie Anne Taddeo argues that Victorian style and the steampunk corset go beyond feminist critiques of 'straightjacket style' because steampunk focuses on what the corset can do 'for' women, instead of 'to' women, thereby expanding the traditional notions of femininity. (Taylor 2014: 39)

Taylor's argument against Taddeo centres on her disagreement over the role of choice and agency in wearing corsets, and she aggressively asserts that it is 'problematic' to suggest that choosing to wear a corset could possibly be a feminist action (Taylor 2014: 39). However, Taylor relies heavily on Taddeo for research on the corset, and as Taddeo's work is informed by romance and erotica,

Taylor creates the bias she needs to flex her argument of the corset as sex object. Her vehemence that Victorian women's fashions like the corset and petticoat 'historically represent oppression' (Taylor 2014: 44) is entirely unsubstantiated, as she neglects to include a single analytic resource on nineteenth century fashion or dress history and appears to rely purely on opinion: both her own and that of Ellen Rosenman who argues that Victorian literature objectifies and sexualises the female body (Taylor 2014: 45). Taylor's analysis of the corset as an object is, thus, uniquely reactive, reading as a series of impassioned outbursts. Her lack of academic rigour for the dress portion of her arguments weakens her discussions of gender performance, a subject on unstable footing. Taylor suggests gender bending as the only form of steampunk dress that could read as empowering due to its absence of gender rules, citing the example of Jake von Slatt and Libby Bulloff's presentation on the subject at SteamCon II (Bulloff and von Slatt 2010). However, in the next breath she states that the said gender-bending relies on gender binaries, therefore casting it as insufficient due to normativity (Taylor 2014: 48) – despite this being at the very heart of gender-bending performances as explored in Halberstam's analysis of drag kings (1998).

My chief concern with Taylor's arguments is rigour: she conflates erotica with exploitation, citing Kato's SteamGirl domain as exploiting both women and steampunk without situating Kato's role in designing some of steampunk's most visible garments – her high-low ruffled 'Vex' skirt is an iconic garment that appears widely across social media, and is regularly mimicked in DIY looks (Dracula Clothing: 2018). Ultimately, Taylor's demonising of the corset and by extension all Victorian-inspired steampunk dress reads as biased from the outset, taking Taddeo's own uneven readings of the corset as gospel. Her analysis is at times offensive as she outright suggests gender equality may be impossible in steampunk culture as she sets the highly controversial comic book *Steampunk Palin* as representative of the prevailing mindset on women's bodies, gender, and

the gaze in steampunk.[34] The extant analyses of steampunk women's dress – worn by both living and fictional women – overlook the impact of representation on the material record, and thus the tandem growth of feminist fiction and feminist dress. Taylor concludes, 'steampunk is not feminist, yet' (Taylor 2014: 55). This sweeping and generalising statement undermines writers and activist like Pho, Goh, Bulloff, and Killjoy, as well as academics like Perschon and Nally, all of whom consciously work to highlight feminist, postcolonial, and LGBTQIA steampunk narratives while giving robust attention to identity, culture, and gender. I condemn Taylor's statement, and recommend the following revision: steampunk is becoming more feminist, and more culturally complex, through the creativity of its authors and makers.

[34] *Steampunk Palin*, a quasi-satirical work that capitalised on the concurrent popularity of steampunk and fetishing of Sarah Palin in American media is, in truth, deeply problematic and disturbing in its treatment of Palin's body, politics, and public opinion. For a rigorous and academically-driven study of the comic see Pho 2013.

II. FINDING REPRESENTATION IN THE FORMULA

The Impact of Gender and Identity in Steampunk Romances

During my research, I have read thirty-three steampunk romance novels and short stories, in addition to dozens of other works of fiction spanning a variety of steampunk subgenres (paranormal, alternative history, fantasy, young adult, etc.). As steampunk culture is so linked to storytelling and fiction, I knew that I needed to understand how these works represented women, how/whether these women were representative, and how the authors conveyed gender, sexuality, and identity before I could move into an analysis of fashion. In this chapter, I compare and explore the characterisations of female protagonists in a selection of steampunk fiction.

As my primary interest is romance fiction/romantic narratives, I begin with an investigation into steampunk fiction's relationship with publishing hierarchies, readership, reception, and community-led online discussions of steampunk fiction's categorisation. In the second half, I commit a series of close-readings into gender and women's representations in canonical and second-wave steampunk fiction as they related to the Victorian New Woman and Fallen Woman; I analyse how these literary motifs are employed as an access point for gender, and how the authors respond to/diverge from them. As I move through each case study, I explore how the characters' descriptions – dress, body, gender – motivate, change, grow, or shift their gender performance, and the role romance plays in the characters' arc. At the conclusion of this chapter, I will have demonstrated the impact of romance fiction on portrayals of women and their diverse gender performances, exposing the importance of romance as a theme in unveiling relatable, three-dimensional female characters.

STEAMPUNK, REPRESENTATION, AND ROMANCE

Much like romance, science fiction has combatted characterisations as formula fiction (Le Guin 1993), an evaluation that can lead to its exclusion from literary designations – and has thus led to authors like Margaret Atwood expressing

hesitance on their works' inclusion in the genre (Zigo and Moore 2004). However, while some science fiction follows formulaic patterns originally outlined for 'space opera' (ibid: 86), novels like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) diverge from a space-linked formula in favour of dystopian arcs, and are considered literary classics in their own right. The formula at the roots of both genres provides a stable starting point for more complex narratives, while also giving an immediate sense of comfortable understanding to readers: they understand the risks associated with the novel they've selected. Steampunk fiction, in its first-wave incarnation headed by Jeter, worked from the conventions of science fiction's formula adding in Victorian aesthetic and fantasy technology.

This first-wave maintained a narrow set of conventions and character types such that fans of the genre may fail to find representation – much like the students of Ricker-Wilson's study. The second-wave's diverse authorship knowingly combatted this gap in representation as Suna Dasi explains on her website:

> As a Steampunk aficionado, I found myself wishing for more roles occupied by Victorian women in the Steampunk fiction I was reading: women who were less hampered by the framework of society damsel. Being of Indian heritage sparked the desire to see Indian women break out of their mother of pearl cages and into Steampunk adventures […] Transferring this and many other aspects of Victorian society to an alternate, Post-Mutiny India, incorporating native characters unhampered by traditional gender roles, seems an opportunity for fiction that is too good to let lie. (Dasi 2014)

Dasi's fiction and photography projects harness the Victorian inspiration of first-wave steampunk source material and revises it to challenge imperialism and give representation and empowerment to Indian characters who push gender boundaries. Dasi largely publishes her work online (on her own website *Steampunk India*) or with small-scale independent publishers like Alliteration Ink

(*Steampunk Universe*, 2017)[1]. Dasi's stories focus on strong female characters and tend to include a romance in their plot. Writing diversity in steampunk – women, people of colour, non-traditional gendering LGBTQIA+ people, non-white postcolonialism – is a growing effort that has yet to receive wide credit. This condition is compounded and heralded by the patriarchal norms of the steampunk (and science fiction generally) publishing community.

STEAMPUNK, PRIVILEGE, AND THE PUBLISHING PATRIARCHY

In her recently released doctoral thesis on the subject of whiteness and the representation of people of colour in steampunk material and fan culture, postcolonial scholar Sook Yi 'Jaymee' Goh compiles the prevailing definitions of steampunk in a succinct, sound bite format:

- 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" (La Ferla 2008)
- "when goths discover the color brown." [attributed to Cherie Priest via Jess Nevins] (Goh 2017: 3)

As *Shades of Sepia* goes on to unpack, these points are insufficient to capture the full nuance of the genre; they do not encompass multicultural nor individual approaches – gender, culture, and personal interest are left out entirely. As Goh's thesis enforces in its conclusion, voices in steampunk culture need to do better and make greater strides towards questioning dominant narratives in order to

[1] *Steampunk Universe* reached its Kickstarter funding goal – which I contributed to – though I have yet to receive my promised e-book as of October 2018 due to unforeseen circumstances with the publishing team.

fully represent the community that creates its materials. Certainly, there have been hiccoughs in America steampunk culture in terms of representation, with RaceFail'09 immediately coming to mind, an event that drew Goh and Pho together in their mission to carve space for themselves and other people of colour in steampunk. In the fall-out of RaceFail'09, the community rebounded with steampunk makers and readers enjoying the kinship that their DIY practice engenders; many makers enjoy sharing their process in a blog post. However, at the same time that the maker, fashion, and convention cultures were evolving, the publishing community – which was largely responsible for the abrasive and racist behaviour displayed in RaceFail'09 – showed something more akin to *brotherhood*; it appeared as though the problems that led to RaceFail'09 had not, in fact, been addressed in the publishing community. In addition to issues of racism, the steampunk publishing community's literary canon hosted deep-seated internalised sexism. Evidencing this is English literature lecturer Mike Perschon, who explains this exclusionary behaviour as both dismissive and short-sighted:

> When Gail Carriger's *Soulless* was first released, detractors stated it was not 'steampunk enough'. Justification was often on the technical end: the book was set in Victorian London, but where was the anachronistic technology, the retrofuturistic mechanical innovations? […] I suspect a number of factors contributed to these dismissals: the series was marketed as a romance, and 'real steampunk' could not be romance (this by the 'serious' Steampunk aficionados', who wish to exclude any silly girls from their tree fort) […] (Perschon 2012: 85-86)

These 'serious aficionados' in their 'tree fort' excluding women whom Perschon refers to are the patriarchal publishing/criticism structure who three years prior made such grave errors in understanding the importance of sophisticated dialogue on diverse representation in science fiction – and who thus undermine Dasi's self-disclosure on p. 86. More problematic still, this passage also implies that the lack of female authors in the steampunk canon is not related to a lack of women writers, but rather an elitist sentiment that women-centric narratives are

neither technologically complex nor 'serious' enough to warrant the steampunk designation – just as with RaceFail'09.

This situation echoes Nochlin's core argument in 'Why have there been no great women artists?'; there are several highly successful female steampunk writers whose works, like Carriger's New York Times Bestseller *Soulless*, draw new attention to the genre. It becomes increasingly apparent that, with his almost blasé 'tree fort' comment, Perschon establishes that the portrayals of women in 'serious' steampunk and in steampunk 'romance' fiction are at odds; in the different approaches to authorship and character development. The language used to describe steampunk romance fiction diminished its qualities, with new terms having been added to the mix over the years. Terms such as mannerspunk, gaslight romance, and bustlepunk have been proposed to house this romance fiction outside the steampunk umbrella. In moving romance writing – or any writing that is not an exact match to the original Neo-Victorian canon – to a tangential subgenre, steampunk voices are muffled in a manner strongly reminiscent to the conditions Nochlin fought in fine art nearly fifty years ago.

The Steampunk Bible, which I would characterise as a relatively egalitarian resource in terms of gender representation, elects to unpack steampunk fiction's diversity by their secondary themes, e.g. romance, social class, alternative (to steam) energy, etc. In this list, VanderMeer and Chambers define these branches of steampunk with a focus on disqualifying them as authentic, canon-friendly steampunk. The language used to describe what I would characterise as the 'feminine' subgenres read as 'frivolous', like how they quantify mannerspunk:

> Fiction that may or may not be deemed Steampunk, in which elaborate social hierarchies provide the friction, conflict, and action of the narrative, usually in the context of endless formal dances. At parties. In mansions. (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 55)

This description is clearly angled at regency-style romances whose plots revolve around high-society intrigues. VanderMeer and Chambers's palpable derision for these novels is clear, even without the opening salvo of 'may or may not be

deemed Steampunk'. This cutting remark, alongside the staccato closing of '[…] endless formal dances. At parties. In mansions.' translates as a dismissal of those who enjoy these regency narratives and reads as a direct undermining of Carriger's *Soulless* (2009) which opens at a party. In a mansion. This is at odds with their treatment of Carriger later in the text where they devote several paragraphs to her journey with steampunk as a community and a fiction genre. VanderMeer and Chambers address the second form of steampunk romance fiction with less derision, though this is paired with a lower level of clarity:

> A mainly British term for alternative histories that romanticize the Victorian era. Some Brits would argue that all American Steampunk is actually gaslight romance. (ibid: 55)

Given steampunk's decidedly American roots (the term's creator K.W. Jeter is an American who hadn't visited London prior to setting his 1979 novel *Morlock Night* in the city), VanderMeer and Chamber's definition of gaslight romance reads as belittling, even bitter towards the UK community. Or, *The Steampunk Bible*'s authors failed to clarify that said 'Brits' would argue that all steampunk <u>set</u> in America is actually gaslight romance. This use of 'romance' is less focused on romantic love than it is on romanticising the Victorian era. However, all forms of Neo-Victorian steampunk fetishise Britain to some extent – regardless of the author's nationality. And, to reiterate, the term steampunk was coined by an American with no personal experience with Britain. In both situations, the 'romance' element is what removes the texts from the mainstream steampunk tradition. The dismissive language specifically used to explain mannerspunk contends that romance fictions are out of place in steampunk given their frivolous plotlines and 'dull' content (with 'dull' considered a synonym for 'endless' formal balls).

This is echoed in steampunk romance author and academic Dru Pagliassotti's essay *Love and the Machine: Technology and Human Relationships in Steampunk Romance and Erotica*, which evidences the fetishising of women in early steampunk fiction alongside the suggestion that more diverse narratives dilute the genre:

> Jess Nevins's later [2009] analysis of the genre condemned most second-generation steampunk as 'steam sci-fi' or 'gaslight romance': 'This abandonment of ideology is an evolution (or, less charitably, an emasculation) that is inevitable once a subgenre becomes established.' The use of 'emasculation' is provocative, given the sexist nature of those earliest works of steampunk. Although *Infernal Devices* (1987) by K.W. Jeter is primarily populated by male characters, the most prominent female character, Miss McThane, is sexually brazen but ultimately subordinate to her male partner […] (Pagliassotti 2013: 66)

Pagliassotti contends that the tendency – exhibited by Nevins – to canonise the first-wave of steampunk fiction as the only 'real' works excludes content created in the past decade, and ignores that steampunk itself is already a subgenre of speculative science fiction. Crucially, Pagliassotti isolates Nevins's description of steampunk romance as 'emasculating' as unfounded and sexist nonsense. In his essay Nevins suggests that any deviation from canonical steampunk constitutes a misguided dismissal of ideology; simply, Nevins regards steampunk romance fiction as frivolous at best, and therefore unworthy of the genre's title. He implies that romance is a uniquely feminine theme, and that by his binary logic steampunk is masculine. Again, an interest in romance fiction becomes a gendered concept, aligned with frivolous femininity. This dualistic viewpoint is discriminatory to the many women who write, read, and feature in steampunk fiction, and demonstrates a broader issue in contemporary culture: women in steampunk must carve their own space and in so doing craft their own narratives.

CASE STUDY: BUSTLEPUNK

This excision of romance/romanticising plotlines from the steampunk canon by a secondary source – and one as relatively balanced as *The Steampunk Bible* – sets an uncomfortable precedent of exclusion by reason of sub-genre. In a 2009 blog post, author M.K. Hobson coined the term 'bustlepunk' (titled after the mid/late nineteenth-century silhouette) to encapsulate the work of herself as well as that of other female authors in the steampunk romance writing community. Her list of similar authors included Carriger (*Soulless*: 2009), Sherwood Smith (*Crown*

Duel and *Court Duel*: 1997/omnibus 2002) and [erroneously] Cherie Priest (*Boneshaker*: 2009). Her 'Bustlepunk Manifesto' describes this new sub-genre as:

> Paranormal romantic historical fantasy tinged with the Victorian. There may still be ratchets and gears and clouds of steam, but they are a more colorful background to the social dramas played out through fashion, manners, and etiquette. There's still high adventure, skulduggery, and intrigue…but it's just as likely to occur over a tea-table as on a zeppelin. (Hobson 2009)

With this new term, Hobson intended to carve a space for female writers outside the arguments surrounding steampunk authenticity. Her term 'bustlepunk' engages with the same portmanteau as steampunk – and predates VanderMeer and Chamber's blurb on 'mannerspunk' by two years – while injecting action into the narrative. The conception of bustlepunk separates Hobson and the more-established authors she equates herself with from canonical authenticity debates, crafting a refuge for herself and other romance authors who may otherwise be excluded for their 'frivolous' focus on manners and social intrigue. However, her term serves as a further form of exclusion, reinforcing the idea that these romances <u>should</u> exist outside of steampunk's sphere: an idea readily picked up by those looking to regroup the work of women authors. If Hobson's sub-genre is, as Perschon astutely claims in his 2011 blog post on the subject, a marketing device, then Hobson's motive is at once understandable and unstable (Perschon May 2011). Writing on the conflation of Carriger and Priest with Hobson's new genre (in both the 'Manifesto' as well as a May 10, 2011 article by Alyx Dellamonica on science-fiction outlet *Tor.com*), Perschon expands:

> Bustlepunk has a nice ring to it, and for an author looking to carve out a niche in the larger pool of SFF, serves the purpose of creating a buzz. Nevertheless, words take on a life of their own, beyond authorial intent. My concern with Dellamonica's article is that it lumped Carriger and Priest into a 'soft' category, a space reserved for women in Science Fiction and Fantasy for decades, most famously with Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness.* This isn't 'real' science fiction, it's 'soft' science fiction. (ibid)

Perschon and I share in concern over the paradigm such sweeping groupings of female authors may cause – and have already caused. As Perschon's blog goes on

to explain, Carriger's work has received and continues to receive criticism for not being 'real' steampunk, and this in spite of her being one of the key voices in the second wave of steampunk fiction – alongside Cherie Priest. This lack of respect is echoed in Carriger's own post on the controversy of bustlepunk, where her message is essentially a 'take me as I am, I am silly and so too is my writing; if that makes you consider me as less than steampunk then so be it' ultimatum (Carriger May 2011). Carriger's viewpoint on steampunk syncs with that of Perschon, Goh, Pho, and myself: that the first-wave canon is not the ideal, and that the culture's future is in an aesthetic approach to steampunk material. Carriger explains her influence in her own words:

> I suspect I am one of the first New Wave Steampunk authors to have come from the aesthetic movement. That is to say, I loved Victorian literature and Gothic attire, then discovered the steampunk aesthetic, and only *much* later did I realize that there was literature to go with it. My writing is informed by the *movement* not necessarily by the First Wave Steampunk literature. (ibid)

That Carriger is outspoken in her support of the aesthetic camp – the 'descriptivist' binary half that Nevins dismisses in his November 2011 article for *Science Fiction Studies* – is compounded by her self-awareness regarding her work's broad reception. She acknowledges that her *Parasol Protectorate* novels struggle to be taken as 'real' or 'serious' steampunk novels in their own right as they are 'silly ~ unabashedly frivolous and fun. There is romance. There are caricatures. There is parody and farce' (ibid). She concludes that for these reasons, those who would want steampunk taken seriously would wilfully exclude her work so as not to taint a reputation by association. She summarises all this into a single word: whimsy. She views the 'real' steampunk as lacking it, where her work and that of the many makers creating inside the steampunk community embraces it.

Unlike Carriger, Priest's *Boneshaker* (2009) is a dark, solemn novel with a tough female lead who shows no interest in romance throughout the course of the novel. As Perschon's defence of Carriger and Priest notes, Priest has received

disgruntled reviews from those who expected romance from a female author and instead received, 'hard-edged alternate history adventures with drug-crazed revenants who will chew your face off' (Perschon May 2011). The existence of a term like bustlepunk is not insidious because of its isolated character: it is problematic as it provides cause to separate the women from the men. And with Hobson herself misrepresenting the scope of women's authorship (as it is she who first references Priest, not Dellamonica for *Tor.com*).

Within two weeks of Dellamonica's article, Hobson penned a follow-up to her *Manifesto* titled *Bustlepunk Revisited*, where she provided further context. Hobson explains that her intent with the new sub-genre had been to create a generative space that used 'aspects of 19th century life' and its 'feminine experience' as a subversive analytic lens to discuss contemporary struggles with traditionally held gender binaries (Hobson 2011). This revision of her earlier post comes in response to dismay over her term's reception, and led to a minor 'flame war' between Hobson and Perschon. As the two engaged in a heated argument on Twitter as well as the comments section for Perschon's blog *Steampunk Scholar* over the term's utility and impact on dialogues of gender, Perschon took a major gamble with his online reputation; his interference could have read as Perschon failing to check his privilege in the male-dominated steampunk publishing space, 'mansplaining' and alienating those who looked to his research to unpack steampunk literature. If he had not positioned himself as an ally to female authorship – and had he not had the support of Carriger in both his comments and her linked blogpost (Carriger May 2011), then more people might have misread his intentions. Hobson is chief among those who took umbrage at Perschon's argument, as demonstrated in her screen capture of the heated debate on Twitter (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Twitter thread from May 2011, Hobson's screen capture of the exchange, now informally referred to as a 'receipt' in Anglo-American online cultures

With Perschon no longer a Twitter user, this exchange exists now in Hobson's 'receipt' of the transaction – and it is not a flattering one for Hobson as she decries Perschon's concerns as unwarranted without addressing his chief frustration: that bustlepunk may lead to a further gulf in the imbalance of steampunk authorship equality.[2] This reticence to engage with questions on the feminist impact of wilful gendering is also clear in Hobson's blog post, where she refers to Perschon as:

> Poor man, he sticks his neck out for us poor little girls – including treacherous, ungrateful me – and look at the treatment he gets! He might as well just be a sexist asshole! Oh…wait… (Hobson 2011).

Briefly setting aside any semblance of objectivity that my own feminist reading of steampunk might have taken, the name-calling is uncalled for. Having been in

[2] On my most recent attempt to access it January 2, 2019, I discovered that Hobson's website *Demimonde* has been suspended by her hosting service due to either bandwidth overload or unpaid invoices. Though her website may yet return to active status, archive sites such as Wayback Machine may, in the future, be the only point of retrieval for this content.

intermittent online contact with Perschon since 2014, I have not experienced his writing nor his approach as sexist.[3] However, experience is subjective and that Hobson felt his interjection abrasive is worthy of note as it is the catalyst for her entire post; *Bustlepunk Revisited* is a highly reactionary piece of personal writing that encapsulates how Hobson feels as a female science fiction author – and that her target audience (also female) are gravitating towards a particular type of narrative. Bustlepunk is, in Hobson's revision, defined as 'examining aspects of 19th century life through the lens of feminine experience' (Hobson 2011). This is the point where Hobson loses both myself, and I suspect, readers like Perschon and Cory Gross (established steampunk critic in his own right, published in *SteamPunk Magazine*'s inaugural 2006 volume).

In its first incarnation, Hobson's *Bustlepunk Manifesto* included Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker*, and in her revision, removes her from the category with the excuse that she cannot remember why she had originally included Priest in the socially-focused sub-genre. She goes on to explain in the comments section that class struggles must be engaged in order for a work to be bustlepunk, and that her 'recollection is that I did not find any such friction in *Boneshaker*, and that while it had an exceptionally strong female heroine, it was not her challenges within the social and political structures of the time that drove any percentage of the plot' (Hobson 2011). And yet, as the commenter to whom Hobson responds (New York-based steampunk Daniel B. Holzman-Tweed) points out, a critical element of Priest's novel is her heroine Briar Wilke's fall from grace as a member of Seattle society in the aftermath of her husband's disastrous experiments and father's indiscretions. Her existence in Priest's near-apocalyptic industrial hellscape is punctuated by both class and gender. She is not, however, an overtly

[3] In my personal experience, Mike Perschon is a self-aware and conscientious university educator aware of his own limitations and expertise; in the past he has asked the extended online network via Facebook to help crowdsource critical academic materials for seminar discussions on gender (this tends to happen in the summer months, during syllabus planning season, and appears to be a fairly common practice among my Facebook friends teaching in the UK, USA, and Canada).

feminine woman; she is utilitarian, dressing and behaving for survival. This circles back to the most damning element of Hobson's bustlepunk characterisation: 'the lens of feminine experience', and is perhaps why Hobson elected to ignore Holzman-Tweed's comment on *Boneshaker*'s plot, choosing instead to argue with more aggressive commenters like Cory Gross, who both she and Dellamonica view as a troll inciting a gender-binary flame war (Dellamonica May 27 2011).

I perceive from these actions that Hobson intends to isolate bustlepunk to narratives that centre on feminine gender performances, with the more fluid or female-masculine narratives excised. This is not a feminist stance, and is – I believe – at the core of the issue concerning the paradigm of steampunk sub-genres. If there is a genre that uniquely focuses on feminine-female narratives and moves to incorporate the work of major authors as a means to authenticate the gender-based fence, then the 'feminine' literature becomes an 'other'. And as with the othering in RaceFail'09, the flame war that ensues simply serves to highlight the separation between the privileged and marginalised. Stigmatising gender as a plot point, and narrowing female authorship based on gender performance, can only serve to further damage the possibility of representation. And despite the damaging potential of 'bustlepunk', Hobson goes on to argue to the contrary:

> The deep social issues that result in a female writer being dismissed or trivialized because she 'just' writes romance do not disappear, and cannot be made to disappear, by simply calling her a 'fiction' writer (or a 'steampunk' writer for that matter.) It is a comfortable, abhorrent fiction that simply pretending a marginalized group is a happy part of one harmonious whole will make them not be marginalized. Equality does not emerge magically as the result of calling everyone the same thing. (Hobson 2011)

Hobson's impassioned statement exposes frustration over the marginalisation of not only women authors, but also women authors who engage with – and enjoy writing – romance fiction. It becomes clear in this conclusion that the impetus of coining bustlepunk is as a panacea, and a safe space for female voices. And yet,

she denies feminist critique. When female commenter 'Joie' politely argues against separating the feminine from the masculine as this too is a marginalising action, another commenter ('Victoria Lockyear', who held Hobson's favour earlier in the thread) interjects 'Do you consider it positive or negative to refer to a piece of writing as 'Feminist?' and Hobson herself skips over the crux of Joie's question to ask (seemingly sarcastically) if refraining from using 'romance' to describe the work of Carriger would be an appropriate way to be inclusive and – if so – where to draw the line regarding readership's comfort with terminology.

This is the point, this exchange between Hobson, Joie, and Lockyear – another woman – is more indicative of the tension than any other element of the body copy or the comments. Joie makes no overt reference to feminism in her comment and keeps a level tone. Lockyear's accusation of feminism is very of the moment in 2011 and on to today; feminism is still misunderstood, with American celebrities like Taylor Swift clamouring to explain why they are or are not feminist to the world stage – with many of those in the 'not' camp misunderstanding or misinterpreting the egalitarian aims of third-wave feminism.[4] Joie does not rise to Lockyear's bait, as – I believe – she is less concerned with the extent to which the text is itself feminist than the space it comes from welcoming diverse readership. Feminist fiction with a focus on representation has the power to pull down marginalising barriers, but this only achieves its full potential when paired with a genre that encourages and bolsters this power. Hobson suggests in her response to Joie, albeit in a confrontational manner, that romance as a genre has the power to represent women as a marginalised group, but only to those who are unashamed of romance – and that this cannot be reconciled with the masculine steampunk space; Hobson seems to neither desire nor need male readers. Hobson's defence of bustlepunk could

[4] See page 57 for a discussion of Taylor Swift's shift from non-feminist to feminist; also noteable is the 'We Should All Be Feminists' t-shirt trend in 2017 which borrows its slogan from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2014 book of the same name.

thereby be read as post-feminist, and yet I find that her vitriol toward male critics – deserved or otherwise – as well as her re-enforcement of women's marginalisation in science fiction precludes her from a comprehensive post-feminist space. Bustlepunk isn't an equalising force, as she suggests, but rather a division. A division that the women she bands together as her sisters are uninterested in (Carriger May 2011).

As the work of established feminist critics of culture like Nochlin show, demanding space inside a wider system is the most effective way to instigate change; not policing a separation of space. The application of terms like gaslight romance, mannerspunk, and even bustlepunk (for all its earnest intention) removes romances from the broader steampunk context, enforcing labels that at once segregate women's narratives and maintain a patriarchal purity for the first-wave's canonical style. Additionally, mannerspunk and bustlepunk are different from Pho's bamboopunk and Ojetade's steamfunk as these are culturally-based revisions of steampunk's aesthetic that still exist inside steampunk's auspices. Neither Pho nor Ojetade suggest that their work or that of like-minded authors and makers are <u>not</u> steampunk; doing so would undermine their dedication to increasing the representation of people of colour inside the steampunk space.

It is the exclusionary usages of the '___-punk' portmanteaus that are problematic, not their intrinsic existence. And, as Hobson rightly points out, romance fiction is already under substantial scrutiny for its stereotyped feminine-focus and its strained relationship with feminism regarding the male gaze and patriarchal gender narratives. Her bustlepunk is meant to combat this, despite it providing further fuel to the metaphorical fire. Likewise, I believe that Hobson's creation of bustlepunk is meant to address a phenomenon of science fiction reading flagged by Regis:

> For example, many [women] have read science fiction with romance novel conventions in mind, attending hard to the romantic subplot and skimming the adventure or journey that provides the primary structure of the book.' (Regis 2003: 13)

The women Regis refers to gravitate towards the passages that they best recognise – and which are most likely to feature the female lead. In this way, the science fiction escape is transformed into a romance escape. By zoning the hypothetical bustlepunk authors at the intersection of romance and science fiction, Hobson funnels both romance and sci-fi-as-romance audiences towards her novels. Regardless of her success in this genre-creating venture, Hobson's efforts exemplify efforts to create space for more diverse narratives in the steampunk aesthetic space. As Dasi, Pho and Goh all cite, the initial Victorian steampunk materials have been the springboard from which they launch their multicultural works; Dasi's fiction imagines an India where the 1857 rebellion[5] against the British Raj was successful, giving voice to the native culture while also allowing Dasi to engage with Victorian technology and conventions. In the following section, I use the momentum of this genre-led discussion to explore how Victorian tropes regarding women have translated in Anglo-American steampunk fiction, and how these Neo-Victorian women have developed and evolved from the nineteenth-century cautionary Madonna/Magdalene into complex, 'fall proof' women .

WRITING NEO-VICTORIAN WOMEN: THE NEW & FALLEN WOMAN

Two female character motifs dominated British fiction in the long nineteenth century, reflecting prevailing anxieties around women's liberation and first-wave feminism: the New Woman and the Fallen Woman. In their 1894 exchange in *The North American Reviewer*, Sarah Grand and Maria Louise Ramé (signed under her pseudonym Ouida) debate the contemporary state of women's liberty and independence, and bring a female voice to the popular discourse. In March of that

[5] During my undergraduate career, I undertook a course on nineteenth century European history in which this rebellion was referred to as both the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Sepoy Mutiny. In Dasi's quote, she refers to this military engagement simply as 'Mutiny'. As the phrase 'mutiny' has a derogatory context, and suggests underhanded actions against a rightful leader, I have elected to refer to this engagement as a 'rebellion', to enforce that these battles were taken as an effort to remove foreign imperialist control.

year, Grand published her diatribe on the poor condition of women's rights, and thus women's social standing, as culturally enforced naivety. Grand prefaces her arguments with a denouncement of the Madonna/Magdalene complex, and the suggestion that all women fall inside this binary (Grand 1894: 271). She argues that newer, intellectually and emotionally complex women who seek education and identities beyond these subgroupings are beyond contemporary social comprehension (laying the onus on men's inability to uplift women in their turn).

Ouida suggests that the 'New Woman' (Ouida is credited with this neologism) whom Grand describes is blind to the plight of her fellow woman to such an extent that she internalises the 'remedy' to this binary. Describing Grand's arguments on man's mismanagement of social norms as 'deliciously comical', she suggests that the New Woman is humourless and has, after silent contemplation, elected to feel suppressed rather than actively embrace her own potential (Ouida 1894: 611). Ouida further views Grand's argument as paradoxical, explaining that the New Woman commands respect and education, while still insisting on chivalry, something that Ouida views as a confession of submission to the self-same man from whom she demands equality.

Fundamentally, Ouida disagrees with the petulance of the New Woman, suggesting that the key issue is a woman's *choice*, and not society's refusal to reform. She provides examples of women, including George Sand, who proactively sought further education (614) [6]; she suggests that intelligent, talented women have always carved their own paths without the leave of men or

[6] Ouida's invocation of George Sand is echoed in Nochlin's twentieth-century citation of the author as a historic benchmark for women's impact on society through their intellect. However, where Ouida suggests that Sand's existence signals that women tacitly hold agency over their own education, Nochlin critiques that those women who *have* raised themselves up have not been granted the same attention as their equally talented male counterparts. Nochlin's discussion of Sand implies her contemporary success as a relative anomaly, whose experience was tempered by her gender and required extraordinary effort (adopting trousers, for example) to achieve a sense of social equilibrium and devotion to her craft. Nochlin argues that, without the pressures of gender and gender-performance conformity, Sand could have been greater still, and that other talented women – with fewer opportunities – could have found greater success.

society. She explains that, if women fail to rise up it is the fault of their own nature, not that of men. For Ouida, the New Woman is a vain construct. And yet, both Ouida and Grand advocate for the same subject: autonomous womanhood. For Grand, men and their women-enablers withhold agency from the New Woman. Ouida's New Woman demonstrates her vanity by projecting their lack of autonomy on to others, and that this trait is more detrimental to society than gendered social spheres. In his article on the subject, *Daughters of decadence*, Greg Buzwell expands:

> The New Woman was a real, as well as a cultural phenomenon. In society she was a feminist and a social reformer; a poet or a playwright who addressed female suffrage. In literature, however, as a character in a play or a novel, she frequently took a different form – that of someone whose thoughts and desires highlighted not only her own aspirations, but also served as a mirror in which to reflect the attitudes of society. (Buzwell)

It was the New Woman of fiction, not history, who prompted Grand and Ouida's arguments. Women who have not chosen to carve their own space, as Ouida demands, but have been designed 'New' to reflect the social anxiety surrounding cultural changes (from Industrialisation's changing city, imperialism's diaspora, and shifts in class hierarchy) that allowed these previously 'obscure' women to engage with desire: both intellectual and sexual (Ouida 1894: 614). However, the New Woman, as Ouida insists, can go awry, leading to the Fallen Woman.

Unlike the New Woman's lived realities (Showalter 1991), the Fallen Woman is largely a myth wrought in fiction. Feminist literary critic Nina Auerbach explains the transparent sexism in this mythologising of women's virtue, arguing:

> Contemporary feminists share the discomfort of Victorian social reformers at the irreversible sin and doom Egg's trilogy represents [conversion from wife to prostitute, absolved in death]; in conjunction, though by different routes, they deny the fallen woman existed at all. […] Nineteenth century liberals were as drawn as we are to this glimpse of flexible, open, nonretributive [*sic*] world; but in imaginative literature, the myth persisted. […] No doubt the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman so

> pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife cast beyond human community, because of her uneasy implications for wives who stayed home. (Auerbach 1980: 32-33)

The Fallen Woman, if she was not a lived type, was a cautionary metaphor for the unsteady social condition of women who partook [too] strongly in their desires, losing their position through public exposure of these desires. This 'falling' could be from promiscuity or from behaviour that deviates from acceptable feminine convention of wife and mother (Friedan 1964 and Showalter 1991). The threat of falling was not uniquely linked to sexuality; the shifted interests and pursuits of New Women were likewise slandered on a physical ground:

> Doctors maintained that the New Woman was dangerous to society because her obsession with developing her brain starved the uterus; even if she should wish to marry, she would be unable to reproduce. (Showalter 1991: 40)

In this pseudo-medical interpretation, the New Woman is a sterile and neurotic creature, as her intellectual pursuits exhaust her beyond the point of matrimony, and therefore, reproduction. This sanctioning of the New Woman on medical grounds suggests more social than therapeutic concerns, suggesting that interests outside the home, society or church functions would divorce her from what Friedan calls *the mystique*. This policing of women's minds on the basis of concern for their bodies moved from the medical to the social by way othering. For example, the 'bluestocking': in its original context (c. 1780) the term referred to a scholastically active woman and was a laudable moniker that referred to tasteful intellectual pursuits of aristocratic women. However, it declined in the nineteenth century to a derogatory term describing a distasteful bookish tendency; these women had engaged with the cerebrally precocious facet of the New Woman to excess, rendering themselves unwomanly – unsexed, to quote Grand – and in doing so, *fell*. Further complicating the motif, this form of self-aware 'fall' may not be a uniquely destructive action: there is power in the *fall* should it result from women's *choice,* a conscious act counter to social convention (Auerbach 1980: 37). And yet, these fictional 'falls' require death or external

intervention to return respectability, regardless of this idea of wilful *choice* (40-45). The Fallen Woman's power is transitory, with cultural pressure surpassing individual will.

The New Woman and Fallen Woman were vessels for Victorian anxieties surrounding women's intellectual and sexual liberty, however, these anxieties were not unique to late nineteenth-century society, nor have they vanished.[7] Perschon argues that the New Woman is revised in steampunk fiction in a distinct, and freer, manner from Neo-Victorian authors:

> Neo-Victorian writers will be able to write only about *what was*, or in the rare case when their characters seek to break convention, their tales will likely end in tragedy. The steampunk New Woman, however is not the New Woman as she was imagined in the nineteenth century, or even reimagined by neo-Victorian writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: she has far more agency than those women and is given the option to have her proverbial cake and eat it too. […] she can be the Madonna and the Magdalene, the Angel and the Fiend. (Perschon 2013: 36)

I agree with Perschon's categorisation of steampunk female characters as enjoying complexity beyond the New and Fallen motifs due to the agency they are conferred. Steampunk fiction engages with these two character formulas via a Neo-Victorian access point, before moving to hybridise the New and Fallen Woman; this hybrid is better suited to convey women and contemporary issues of anxiety surrounding femininity, gender, sexuality, and social identity. How this

[7] Just one example of this is conservative pundit and political commentator Rush Limbough's outlandish 2012 comments on activist Sarah Fluke's sexual history following a hearing on broadening birth control access. Even in the twenty-first century, a contemporary New Woman may be facetiously converted to Fallen based on politics and fear of female agency:

> At [Nancy] Pelosi's hearing, Fluke said her fellow students at Georgetown, a Jesuit university, pay as much as $1000 a year for birth control because campus health plans do not include coverage of contraceptives for women.
>
> 'What does that make her?' Limbough said on his show Wednesday night. 'It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute.'
>
> 'She wants to be paid to have sex," Limbough continued. "She's having so much sex she can't afford the contraception.' (Fard 2012)

hybrid is written, however, differs greatly between the first- and second-waves of steampunk fiction. Perschon's essay focuses only on the latter without addressing the former; I believe that analysing the New/Fallen Women of the first-wave exposes a nerve, providing a snapshot of the conditions that have led female authors to write women who 'have her proverbial cake and eat it too' (ibid).

JETER, CROSSDRESSING, AND THE NEW/FALLEN HYBRID

Where her nineteenth-century counterparts must toe a precarious line between righteously demonstrating their desires (New) and disastrously giving themselves (or being taken) over (Fallen), female characters in steampunk fiction negotiate their own desires with a conviction that belies newness or falling. In the first-wave of steampunk fiction, lead protagonists are traditionally men, who are supported by women whose identities and gender performances serve as either a balance or a foil to the protagonist's performance of masculinity. This use of femininity as a foil for the hero's masculinity is a clear tactic from the very first steampunk novel. At the onset of Jeter's *Morlock Night* (1979), hero Edwin Hocker is consumed by worries over respectability, dress, social normativity, and his own creature comforts. His genteel behaviour at the beginning of the novel and his visceral discomfort with early confrontations in the text are certainly meant to be read as effeminate, as his character transforms by the novel's end into an overtly masculine martyr.

The novel begins where H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) left off, introducing Hocker to the reader as a dinner party guest incredulous of the traveller's revelations of the future. Hocker is disdainful of having his walk home interrupted by Dr Ambrose, another party guest who assures Hocker that the Morlocks are not only real, but are already infiltrating their timeline as they spoke. Still incredulous, Dr Ambrose (later revealed as Merlin) transports Hocker to the same location a few years into the future, where a firefight is underway in this alternative, apocalyptic London. Hocker is rescued by a rebel fighting the

Morlocks – a woman named Tafe – who shares none of Hocker's gentility. Hocker describes his first impressions of her thus:

> I saw a young woman of slight build with close-cropped dark hair. Her fine-boned features were obscured beneath streaks of black grease on her forehead and cheeks. Dressed in a man's rough trousers and jacket, with a belted leather harness crossing her shoulders and waist, she crouched in front of me, cradling some odd type of rifle across her knees. (Jeter 1979: 34)

In this first description of Tafe, Hocker's attention gravitates towards the characteristics he finds shocking: her delicate cheekbones and feminine nose juxtaposed with rough clothing. The way Jeter words this description suggests that Hocker finds her female body at odds with the patchwork, male garments she wears. The trousers and jacket are more practical for her life spent scuttling through tunnels and trading fire with the Morlock invaders, and the leather harness an object of utility. Tafe's gender performance registers as unimportant compared to the situational peril; seemingly Hocker can forgive the perceived impropriety of this crafted masculine body given the anxiety of their aspect. Though perhaps it is shock that leads him to ignore her non-conforming gender rather than a sense of survival.

Likewise, Tafe is immediately suspicious of Hocker's concern for spoiling his tweed suit, lack of spatial awareness, and shock at the indecorum of grenades detonating in central London; from Tafe's perspective, Hocker is the deviant. In this exchange, Tafe is immediately cast as the lead actor of the pair as she takes control of the situation and guides Hocker to relative safety. This gendered power dynamic – female masculinity of utility – changes drastically once Tafe is transported to Hocker's own timeline. When Hocker encounters Tafe for the first time on home soil, he is again shocked by her clothing – still male – but traded for those of a peer:

> Seated at a heavy oak table were Dr. Ambrose and a young man. Only when I was standing at the side of the table did I recognise the young man to be no man at all, but Tafe outfitted in a men's suit and collar. The elegant cut and the confidence with which she wore it

> all served to disguise her femininity from anyone who was not aware of her true status. (63)

Hocker's characterisation of Tafe demonstrates Hocker's understanding of gender performance as inextricably linked to sex, and that her masculine performance – her elegant and confident appearance in trousers – she disguises her 'true status' as female (ibid). This statement of 'true status' is, in itself, problematic, as it suggests that Tafe is consciously trying to occlude both her sex and its culturally normative gender presentation. At no point in the novel is Tafe given a voice to explain why she feels most comfortable in a suit, and that her feelings of femininity may in no way be impacted by this sartorial decision. Furthering the problematic treatment of gender and sex, Hocker is incredulous that with the threat of death removed Tafe would choose to continue wearing traditionally male clothing when the feminine full skirts and corsetry are no longer a liability. This disconnect mirrors Halberstam's critique of gender performance, 'the bathroom question' and transgender passing (Halberstam 1998); Tafe's gender performance and clothing selection should in no way impact her status as female. And yet Jeter's narrative suggests that this clothing choice makes Tafe unwomanly as Hocker forgets (or ignores) that Tafe is not of *his* culture and that gender performance may have different markers in her parallel London. Based on my own reading, I conclude that her culture is a survivalist egalitarian society whose main objective is combatting the Morlock invasion; Hocker's notions of gender performance – and 'true status' – are inadequate, and inappropriate, to describe Tafe. Thus, she does not disguise her femininity, Hocker doesn't (or perhaps can't) comprehend it.

Hocker and Tafe are situated in distinctly recognisable roles concerning 'self-help' via 'self-presentation' clothing practices (Spooner 2004: 46-85). Hocker's fastidious behaviour at the novel's opening demonstrates his own discomfort with the unknown and his self, while Tafe's clothing (post-timeline transplant) reflects self-awareness and a comfort in identity. Hocker reads this aversion to contemporary female fashion as a signal of insanity. In this first-wave steampunk context, Tafe's stable sense of herself reads as madness as she

'disguises her femininity', foregoing the sanity that her self-presentation had momentarily bestowed.

These reproduced excerpts from Jeter's novel present translations of the New and Fallen Woman; their convergence in one woman, and her transparent confidence, suggests that the motifs have undergone a hybridised evolution that – ultimately – hold with newness as a threat to biology and denoting a 'fall'. Hocker's reading of Tafe's dress as emblematic of resourcefulness in the face of adversity runs parallel to the historic New Woman. In Tafe's apocalyptic London, her actions are informed by intellect as well as instinct, and this practicality visually manifests in her dress. Her perceived unsexing, stemming from a refusal of orthodox, feminine clothing, constitutes an overextension of the New.

Throughout the novel Tafe is Hocker's side kick, in a pseudo-Sherlock Holmes/John Watson dynamic of intellect versus common sense. Indeed, Tafe is written as if she were a man, with few references to her being female made outside the commentary on how she is *not* womanly. And yet, she conforms to the chief convention of the Fallen Woman; she sacrifices herself for the sake of the male protagonist, and in so doing transforms both herself and the hero. Tafe's role appears to have been holding Hocker up as he experienced the necessary character growth to defeat the Morlocks and take on his eternal mantle as a reincarnation of King Arthur. At the novel's conclusion, Hocker has shed his fastidiousness in favour of blatant hyper-masculinity and Tafe has given her life to ensure he reaches the final encounter. In Jeter's novel, the New/Fallen woman hybrid still *falls* due to her newness, and is still redeemed through sacrifice; she is both at once and is only recognisable as different from her nineteenth-century (fictional) sisters due to the circumstances of her cross-dressing and gender performance.

DI FILIPPO'S 'VICTORIA', WOMEN, AND SEXUALITY

Sixteen years after Jeter's novel and less than decade after the genre's coining, first-wave author Paul Di Filippo – who has been referred to as the 'godfather' of

steampunk (Yaszek 2010, Nevins 2011) – published his canon-setting anthology *Steampunk Trilogy* (1995). The novella *Victoria* features two distinctly different New/Fallen hybrids in the form of pre-coronation Queen Victoria and dress reformer and mission-school matron Lady Ottoline 'Otto' Cornwall. Like Jeter (and Blaylock, Powers, and Moorcock who all published steampunk novels in the interim), Di Filippo's protagonist is an academic-type male. This convention of an intellectual male hero is so prominent in the early (canonical) steampunk fiction that Jeff VanderMeer's 'steampunk equation' (Figure 7) cites a 'Mad Scientist Inventor' as the first element for the steampunk formula.

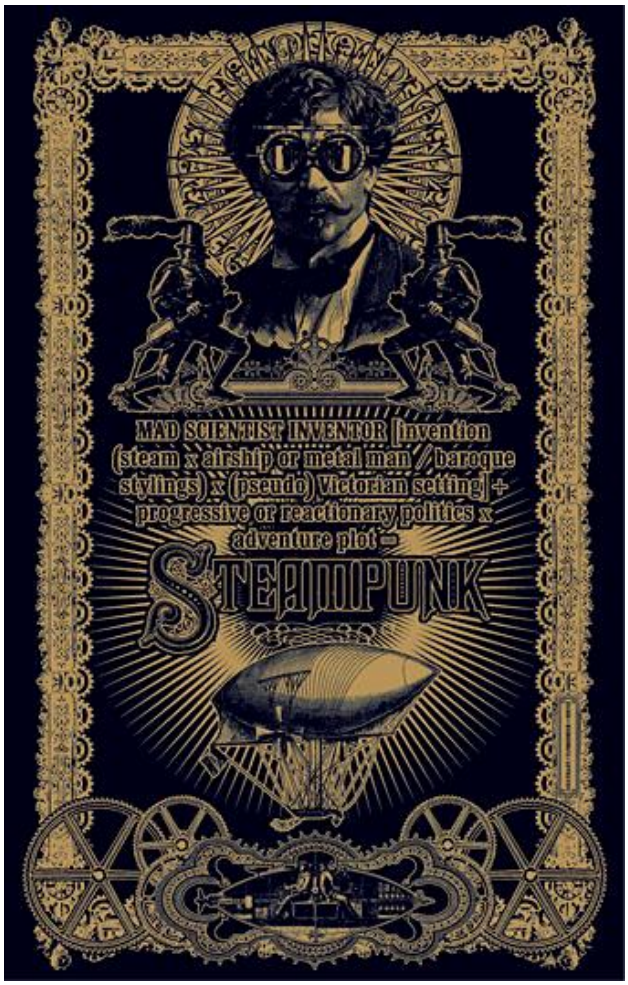


Figure 7 Steampunk formula. 2010. Written by Jeff VanderMeer, illustrated by John Coulthart

While VanderMeer admits that this 'equation' is meant as a tongue-in-cheek response to the perennial 'what is steampunk?' question (VanderMeer and

Chambers 2011: 9), its connection to the Captain Nemos, Victor Frankensteins, and boy geniuses of nineteenth-century popular fiction gives clear evidence for the academic-yet-inept male protagonist's ubiquity in early steampunk fiction.[8] Di Filippo's Cosmo Cowperthwait is another in this line of book-smart heroes, a scientist with low-level connections to the aristocracy and a dedicated friendship and working partnership with a fictionalised version of railway innovator Isambard 'Ikky' Kingdom Brunel. At twenty-five, Cowperthwait is described as thin with sandy hair and a well-dressed finery that 'bespoke a comfortable income' (Di Filippo 1995: 242). As the plot moves forward, the reader is introduced to one of Cowperthwait's experiments – a humanoid salamander named Victoria for her resemblance to the young queen – who has been placed into the guardianship of a *Madame;* Cowperthwait is disappointed that this female hybrid is more salamander than human in her behaviours:

> It seems a shame that my experiments had to end in this manner. I had, of course, no way of knowing that the carnal appetites of the Hellbender would prove so insusceptible to restraint, nor her mind so unamenable to education. I feel a transcendent guilt in having ever brought into this world such a monster of nature. (Di Filippo 1995: 243-244)

This Victoria cannot be trained into a nineteenth-century lady as she is unable to learn sexual impulse control. Cowperthwait's guilt suggests that he feels he has created a salamander succubus, whose base urges mark her as monstrous. The character of her sexuality marks her as a fallen woman, and her enjoyment of her situation in the brothel of little consequence as she is 'unamendable to education' that would inform her of the expected feeling of shame. This Victoria's lack of agency over her body and sexuality is only protracted later in the novella when she is used as a stand-in for a truant Queen Victoria.

[8] Later in this section, I will return to this idea of the 'mad scientist inventor' as it correlates with second-wave, female authorship.

The second female character to appear in the novel is Lady Ottoline Cornwall, a dress reformer and school teacher devoted to raising young girls up from dire circumstances. Otto, as she prefers to be called, shocks Cowperthwait with her appearance when answering his call at the school's door:

> Revealed was an imposing figure of womanhood. Clad in a strange kind of one-piece white cotton garment that ended at the elbows and knees, the woman stood six feet tall with a deep bosom and large hands and feet. Striped lisle stockings and flat athletic shoes completed her outfit. Her hair was sequestered under a plain mob-cap. Her gray eyes radiated a fierce intelligence. Her full unpainted lips were quirked in a smile, as she dangled the pistol by her side. (Di Filippo 1995: 270)

Di Filippo's description, and Otto's resistance of traditional, let alone fashionable, female garments, resonates with Grand's frustrations over the concept of educated women suffering an 'unsexed' state. Otto's outfit is most likely a revision of the 'combination', an undergarment popular through the nineteenth-century worn beneath the corset and petticoat; Cowperthwait's inability to process it as such is revealing, as it suggests his own inexperience with the trappings of femininity. Otto's preference for this more athletically-practical clothing – rather than socially expected feminine garments – instead conveys a masculine energy through its exclusion of skirts. Like Tafe, Otto's female masculinity serves as a foil to a man's academic energy, effectively 'unsexing' the male character. Further, in a later statement describing her girls' home, Otto explains her impetus and philosophy:

> There is much wrong with this world, but I limit my scope to ameliorating the sorry condition of womankind. I have pledged my family fortune to this establishment, which is dedicated to helping unfortunate girls from every stratum of society. […] I extract the abused and maltreated and try to inculcate a sense of their own worth in them. (Di Filippo 1995: 270)

In this initial monologue, Otto appears as a refreshing shift from the flatness of Tafe, the Flemish mussels merchant in Blaylock's *Lord Kelvin's Machine* (1985) referred to simply as 'woman', the *deus ex machina* character of Sybil Gerard, the lacklustre treatment of Ada Lovelace as a pitiful addict first and mathematical

genius second in Gibson and Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990), and the seduction-focused Miss McThane and Mrs Augustina Trabble in Jeter's *Infernal Devices* (1987); female characters in the first-wave existed to develop the male protagonists' character. And at first, Otto reads as a deviation from this distressing trope. Her school finds downtrodden and abused women, and empowers them with education and exercise; Otto is subverting the nineteenth-century cycle, orchestrating a generation of New Women out of their Fall. Her charges are converted through their own autonomy and discovered agency, rather than through a passive act of noble (or sacrificial) death. And yet, for all her apparent Newness, Di Filippo writes Otto and Cosmo as opposites, with Otto holding the traditionally masculine role of strength, forthrightness, and assertion and Cosmo feeling faint at the smell of blood outside a butcher shop. This squeamishness is particularly telling as his having created life from salamander eggs would have required dissection, an equally grisly operation.

And yet for all this power and control, Di Filippo does not write Otto as liberator, but rather as emasculator. In her office, Otto commends Cosmo for his intelligence as it 'raises him above the brutish level of his fellows', where in the previous breath she chastised his 'male imperiousness' (Di Filippo 1995: 272). This emasculation is conferred when, smitten with the reformer, Cowperthwait proposes marriage via post. Declining with no explanation, and little sympathy, Cowperthwait is again disappointed with his interactions with women. First, his salamander progeny is too sexually assertive, and then the dress reformer is uninterested in his advances. When, during his continued search for the missing queen, Cowperthwait discovers Otto unashamedly patronising a brothel he exclaims:

> 'A daughter of Lesbos. No wonder you had no interest in my proposal. I should have guessed, from your mannish ways. How convenient for your perversion, you keeping all those young helpless chicks as your wards -'.(281)

In this moment, Cosmo revises Otto's largeness, intelligence, and unorthodox clothing from aspects of her gender performance into signifiers of deviant

sexuality; signifiers which he reads as a direct affront to his own gender and sexuality (cisgender, heterosexual male). And yet, the reader was given several hints that this plot twist lay on the horizon, such as the pasteboard card for Otto's institute with a quote ascribed to Sappho. With this later, *en flagrante* revelation of Otto's sexuality, and Cosmo's invocation of Lesbos, her similarities to the New Woman become an expression of precariousness and anxiety towards shifts in the sexual status quo. Otto's homosexuality reads as a physical threat to Cowperthwait's own identity and performance of masculinity as it negates the 'truth' of his desires and exposes his ignorance concerning the complexities of gender and sexuality. Looking more closely at Di Filippo's descriptions of Otto's physical presence, he creates the sensation that she is always in motion, both physically and intellectually. She places supreme importance on self-improvement and confidence, for both herself and her charges:

> Eight hours of sleep nightly in our well-ventilated dormitory, plenty of good food and exercise, along with the wearing of sensible clothing – no stays or contorted footwear here – can work wonders in their self-image. (Di Filippo 1995: 271)

Otto's mandate recalls those of nineteenth-century dress reformers, first-wave feminists, who viewed traditional women's clothing (particularly the corset) and inactive lives/minds as unrighteous deviations from women's potential. Otto's *choice* not to wear a corset – nor to allow it with her charges – is a reflection of her desire to be sensible, rather than an exclusionary performance of gender; she is a woman with or without it, and being female does not require gendered clothing. As a counterpoint, when Cosmo finally encounters the young Queen Victoria working in a high-end brothel, she too has undergone a hyper-sexualised transformation at the hands of the author:

> The Queen possessed a commanding gaze which Cowperthwait now found hard to disengage from his own. At last doing so, he took in the rest of Victoria's *dishabille*. She lay with the covers thrown back, wearing the sheerest of peignoirs. Her bust and hips were full, giving some hint of future stockiness, and she looked ripe for bearing many children. (Di Filippo 1995: 290)

This scantily-clad entity is far removed from her historic contexts as puritanical, subverting the Bloomsbury mythologies of Victoria's morals and propriety. Again, Di Filippo's woman is defined first by her body and sexual appeal, and then by her own words. As Victoria describes her months spent as a sex worker, she explains their utility as an opportunity to learn a *different* side of politics:

> 'Why, I've met many of the most important figures in the country, on more intimate terms that I could ever achieve in the sterile corridors of state. Writers, artists, members of Parliament, educators. Men and women both. […] And the talk has been almost as stimulating as the loving. The secrets I've learned, the bonds I've forged, the self-confidence I've cultivated, not to mention the tricks I've learned.' (Di Filippo 1995: 291)

It could be argued that in this passage Di Filippo could be making a statement about equality of desire and demystifying female sexuality. However, any possibility that this was his intention loses lustre as a simpering Victoria throws herself bodily – along with her traditionally feminine (cis)gender performance – at Cowperthwaite rather than calculating interest or consent. His initial response to Victoria's current state supposes that she has become a sex worker to shirk responsibility and experience sexual freedom. Also noteworthy in Victoria's statement is her comment on having entertained female clients; her off-hand attitude alongside her comments on 'learning' reads as a fetishised version of women's bisexuality. These two women, Otto and Queen Victoria, are both hybrids of the cautionary Janus head of nineteenth-century womanhood: the unorthodox New and the pitiable Fallen woman. Their role as a foil to the cisgender heterosexual male protagonist is unfortunate, as Di Filippo's creative talent and clear prose could have been a triumph for the representation of women in steampunk fiction. However, the distillation of each to off-set the academic quietude of Cosmo Cowperthwait translates to *becoming* narratives – narratives of how they find and access their identity as women – with problematic relations to gender performance.

Otto and Victoria approach their *becoming* from different perspectives. For Otto, her identity *becoming* stems from humanitarian efforts to better the

lives, and improve the self-confidence and identities, of abused and destitute women. Meanwhile, her sexuality is a significantly smaller aspect of her identity, despite Di Filippo's brusque equivalency between female masculinity and sexuality; Otto's gender and gender performances are informed by her philanthropic *becoming*, her service to other women, rather than (to paraphrase Butler) her *being* lesbian. By contrast, Di Filippo presents the young Queen with a *becoming* narrative indelibly fused with her sexuality; Victoria explains that she has come to understand herself and the political world through experiencing the sexual desires of others in her role as a sex worker. For Victoria, *being* cisgender and heterosexual is presented as the momentary aspect.

Looking to their clothing, the conflations between identity and gender are brought to a tangible and stark relief. For Otto, whose *becoming* is tied to educating and assisting women, her garments reflect the needs of her repetitive actions: robust physical and mental exercise. In fact, the only point at which Otto wears something approaching traditional feminine clothing is on her excursion to a poor neighbourhood in aid of an unfortunate girl: Otto quickly slips a simple dress over her 'cotton garment' (combination), and lets her hair down out of its cap. This change in dress is a minor acquiescence to social expectation, a *being* socially unobtrusive, and is intended to serve as camouflage rather than fashion. Most notably, she chooses *not* to include a corset in her transitory gender performance, cementing her dress reformer ideology into her *becoming*.

Likewise, the young Queen Victoria's state of dress – the 'sheerest' peignoir – is scripted for its illicit boudoir appeal, and to create a diametric performance to Otto's practicality. In Di Filippo's text Victoria is drawn as a hypersexual reclining nude, a textual mimic of Manet's *Olympia* (1863, Figure 8), whose confrontational gaze and bodily agency belied a socially-shocking self-awareness.

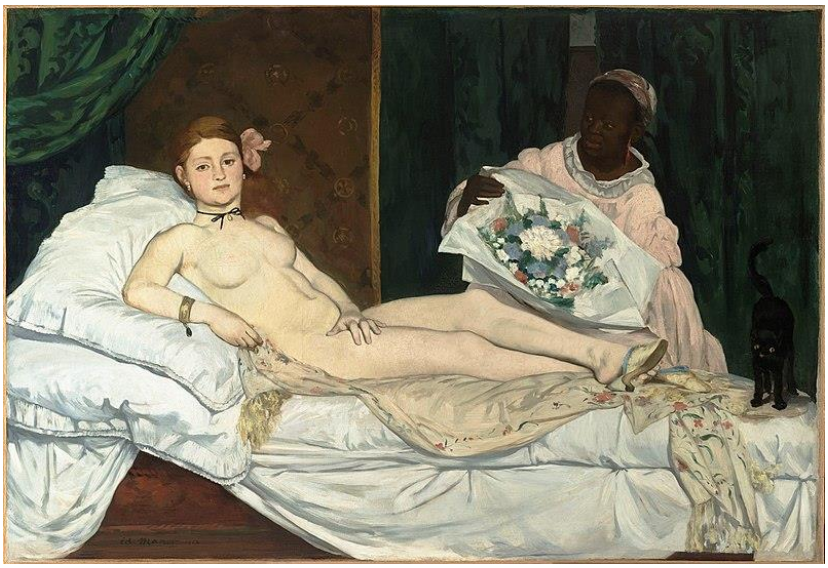


Figure 8 Édouard Manet. 1863. *Olympia*. Oil on canvas

The filmy and insubstantial nature of the peignoir, like Olympia's own discarded garment, serves to highlight Victoria's body and femininity in a manner that nudity alone cannot convey and that moves into the artifice of gender performance. Importantly, Victoria's choice of 'undressed' dress is a symptom of an unwritten repetition; the peignoir is a uniform devised for its appeal to her alluded clients, the presumed reader's desire, and the male protagonist's sexual gaze. This uniform's purpose is entrenched in Di Filippo's conflation between Victoria's identity and sexuality, and the requirements of satisfying her customers with excess femininity. Equally, this choice of garment – and her professed enjoyment of sex work – creates an echo to Cowperthwait's hybrid Victoria, who possesses a voracious sexual appetite.

The *madame*, Madame de Mallet, mentioned earlier in the novel oversees both Victorias, and is described as:

> Tall and buxom, swamped with jewels, perhaps overly made-up for some tastes, in the fashion of an older period, de Mallet was a well-preserved seventy. Rumor had it that she had been a chambermaid to Marie Antoinette (and sometimes bedpartner of Louis), and had barely escaped the Revolution with her life. (Di Filippo 1995: 280)

Again, a female character is described from the vantage of male gaze, as her look is described as too made up to be tasteful. As with Otto, de Mallet is a caricature of femininity. All of these principal female characters in *Victoria* are reduced to their sexuality, with each mode of dress serving a gender performance that matches a female stereotype, all of whom sync with the Magdalene 'fall': the beautiful simpleton (hybrid Victoria), the butch lesbian (Otto), the nymphomaniac (Queen Victoria), the Miss Havisham-esque relic (de Mallet). Di Filippo is clearly capable of developing a compelling storyline and writing a coherent novella, however, his reliance on stereotypes to create female characters is emblematic of the same shortcomings that RaceFail'09 sought to address in science fiction writing as a whole.

This is not to assert that Cosmo Cowperthwait is overwhelmingly more complex as a character; he closely follows the socially-awkward academic formula of steampunk (phrased as 'Mad Scientist Inventor' by VanderMeer) much like his contemporaries; Jeter's Edwin Hocker (1979) and George Dower (1987), Tim Powers' professor Brendan Doyle (1983), and Gibson and Sterling's palaeontologist Edward Mallory (1990) all rely on this formula to create their male protagonists, and their work with the formula informed its continuation into the 2000s with China Mièville's Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin (2000) and Hodder's revision of Richard Burton (2011-2015). However, Cowperthwait is given a complex backstory – the tragic death of his parents in an experiment gone wrong and indebtedness to high-profile friendships – to explain his behaviours, something that his female characters are not granted.

Otto explains to Cowperthwait that she has dedicated her life and family fortune to help working class young women become more self-sufficient and empowered, however, the route to her own empowerment is left blank allowing space for Cowperthwait's later accusation of abuse (and dangerous false equivalency between homosexuality and abusive behaviour). The Queen's sole motivation is the intersection of sexuality and power, with De Mallet's backstory/motivations distilled to gossip surrounding her conquests. This is not

to mention the hybrid Victoria being described as uneducable and sex-obsessed. Each woman in the text is distilled down to her sexuality, ascription to femininity, and her physical desire to such an extent that they are incapable of reading as representative to a female audience; these characters are reduced to their *being* relationship with the protagonist rather than their *becoming* identity narrative.

Both Otto and Queen Victoria are repetitions of steampunk's hybrid New/Fallen Woman (a *becoming* arc), however, each receives her newness passively by way of her fall; Otto's self-sufficiency and intellect is superseded by what the protagonist's male gaze reads as dangerous (and undermining) homosexuality. Likewise, Queen Victoria's intelligence and desire place her alongside the cautionary nineteenth-century characterisations of the New Woman, like Bram Stoker's Lucy Westenra (*Dracula* 1897) or Wilde's eponymous Salomé (*Salomé* 1891) [9]: women who feel empowered by their social status, but each ultimately received a negative outcome (their fall) for acting on their desire. Victoria is only saved from her fall by merit of her *being* Queen, and Di Filippo's text attaches this *being* directly to her identity (*becoming*). Their garments, makeup, and physical descriptions each signpost a *being*-objectified that is at odds with the *becoming* narrative each woman is owed to hold equivalency with the male protagonist and the other male characters; Cowperthwait's assistant – tough as nails American 'Nails' McGroaty – is provided a rich mythology featuring Stephen Austin in Texas and the Chickasaws in Mississippi that outshines any information given of the titular Victorias. Where Di Filippo's female characterisations are an improvement on the work of Jeter, Blaylock, and Gibson and Sterling, their focus on the relational *being* excludes them from representation.

Likewise, that this *being* tends towards fleshing the complexity of male characters casts the female characters in subordinate roles. For example, Cosmo

[9] See Showalter 1991: 144-187.

Cowperthwait and Isambard Kingdom Brunel are only raised 'practically as brothers' due to the strange circumstance under which their fathers met; prior to their wedding Cowperthwait's mother is caught in a 'compromising position' with Brunel's father, a situation that de-escalates from a duel between the two men into a mutual bond over steam engines, and culminates in a friendship and business partnership (Di Filippo 1995: 251). In this single page of parental exposition, Cowperthwait's mother – Constance – is described only as 'engaged', 'lovely', 'compromised', 'desecrated', and 'married' whereas his father is 'engaged', offended', and 'incensed' before the more descriptive passage:

> […] the men began to discourse on their shared vision of a world united by railroads and steamships, a world shrunken and neatly packaged by the magnificent inventions of their age. (ibid)

In Cowperthwait's telling of this saga, his mother is an entirely passive character without interests or traits; she is a fallen fiancée redeemed through her role as wife and mother. Her *becoming* is uninteresting to the plot, with her *being* fiancée/wife/mother supporting the *becoming* of her husband and son – just as Otto's *being* lesbian, de Mallet's *being* a morally-corrupt enabler, Queen Victoria's *being* a sex worker, and hybrid Victoria's *being* both mute and insatiable propel Cowperthwait's *becoming* without properly delving into each woman's respective *becoming* narrative.

Critically, sex is divorced from love in the aforementioned works by Jeter, Gibson and Sterling, and Di Filippo: it is written as a tool to provoke action from male characters and its employment is a mark of the hybrid New/Fallen Woman. This point of contention – the problematic treatment of sex and women's sexuality – is resolved by second-wave authors who link sex with romantic love, and use their characters' openness to romantic relationships as a vehicle to plumb the depths of character development.

IMPACT: STEAMPUNK ROMANCE AND FALL-PROOF WOMEN

As the preceding analysis argued, the one-dimensional women in first-wave fiction are, by their nature, not relatable for many female readers. This is placed in stark contrast with their male counterparts who enjoy nuanced backstories, identity performances, *becomings*, and communication styles. This gendering of steampunk fiction –steampunk written as male with the protagonist as proxy – refutes the genre as diverse, inclusive, and yes relatable, for female and genderqueer readers. As steampunk novelist and academic Dru Pagliassotti further notes, the implied masculinity of steampunk's canon can be matched with binary rhetoric (as seen with Perschon 2012) to detrimental effect:

> In short, the 'masculine,' oft-analyzed steampunk classics offered readers few, if any, strong, independent, and sympathetic female protagonists. By contrast, the later, 'emasculated' steampunk has discarded gender stereotypes, retrieved marginalized voices, and embraced popular genres. (Pagliassotti 2013: 66)[10]

Steampunk, and science fiction more generally, is an adventure genre where the chief protagonist is challenged and makes decisions as they move towards their life-altering goal. The new generation of steampunk voices write these same adventure narratives, but with a fresh perspective on gender and genre. Chief among the new guard are Ekaterina Sedia, Gail Carriger, and Cherie Priest, whose late 2008/2009 novels reinvigorated steampunk and ended what VanderMeer and Chambers referred to as an 'interregnum' (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 58). For the remainder of the chapter, I explore the work of these three novelists as well as Adrienne Kress's *The Clockwork Corset*, which is widely cited in analyses of steampunk romance. This exercise will evaluate how these second-wave authors write and empower their female protagonists, and how the pleasures and pressures of romance fiction and women's authorship correlate. In

[10] The 'emasculation' comment is in reference to Nevins's 2009 use of the word while characterising new forms of steampunk as 'gaslight romance'.

each study, I investigate the gender performances, *becoming/being* narratives, characterisations of body and dress, and romantic entanglement (or lack thereof) of each principle female character and how these analyses enforce the second-wave New/Fallen hybrid's relatability.

SEDIA: FASHION, IDENTITY, TECH, AND ROMANTIC NARRATIVE

Ekaterina Sedia (Russian-born, New Jersey-based) is a novelist, university lecturer, and avid fashion consumer and critic; her blog *Fish Monkey's Writing Stuff* includes analyses of Rei Kawakubo's influence on Rick Owens's abstract silhouettes and semiotics, short updates on her writing projects, and feminist readings of fashion using her own body as an access point.[11] Sedia's viewpoint on fashion is made clear in her blog posts; her metadata tags including 'feminist', 'criticism', 'activism', and 'review' (Sedia 2016 and 2017) which link directly to the content of her analysis on cut, drape, shape, luxury, and design for female bodies. Sedia also cites Blaylock and Powers as influences, specifically Powers's work with secret societies and alternative history (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 63). This influence mixes with her personal interest in fashion, feminism, bodies, and representation to translate into her debut steampunk novel *The Alchemy of Stone* (2008).

The Alchemy of Stone, from the perspective of both setting and attention to technology, is cut from the same narrative cloth as Jeter, Di Filippo, and Gibson and Sterling; the novel is set in Ayona, an autonomous city-state and fantasy double of Victorian London ruled by the Duke, where humanoid automatons service the wealthy social classes. The structure of Ayona, and its ghettoing of non-natives are reminiscent of the segregated districts in *Perdido Street Station*

[11] See Sedia 2017, Sedia October 2008, and Sedia 2015 respectively; Sedia's blog has been inactive for the past 13 months though she remains an avid twitter user as of November 2018 where she continues to share her thoughts on these and similar themes. (Sedia 2018)

(Miéville 2000), forging another link to works situated in the steampunk canon.[12] Where *The Alchemy of Stone* deviates from the canon is its protagonist, Mattie, and the novel's focus on a female *becoming* narrative.

Mattie is an automaton, whose creator programmed her to learn, openly express her will, feel emotions, and create an identity. The reader meets Mattie through the eyes of the gargoyles, Ayona's ancient protectors whose immortal ancestors raised the ducal Palace in one solid piece of granite from the earth, only to be incorporated into the stonework itself as time moved forward. The still-moving gargoyles, unwilling to join their predecessors, employ Mattie to find an antidote to their future condition; Mattie is an Alchemist, working as an emancipated automaton away from the home of her Mechanic creator Loharri (much like Gibson and Sterling's Tory/Industrial Radicals clash in *The Difference Engine*).

In the course of the novel, the reader discovers that though Loharri granted Mattie permission to pursue alchemy – and thus join the political opposition – he maintains dominance in their relationship by refusing to relinquish control of Mattie's key: the key that winds her clockwork components and gives her life. Throughout the text, Mattie vacillates between fond concern and hatred for Loharri as his refusal to fully grant her autonomy leaves her at his whims. Mattie inhabits a liminal space between the humans and other automata as her superior programming and body give her the ability to feel emotions, desire, and connections outside the confines of her working role. Mattie is physically different from other automata, as she has human hair attached to her scalp and a conscious gender performance.

[12] *Perdido Street Station* is not widely referred to as a canonical steampunk work. However, it is a faithful match to its canonical predecessors, thus cementing its space in first-wave steampunk alongside Jeter, Di Filippo, and Powers whose own works include fantasy characters alongside humans.

Early in the novel a potential client – a courtier named Iolanda – asks Mattie if she is a woman. Startled, Mattie rhetorically asks what else she would be if she were not a woman:

> 'What I meant was, why do you consider yourself a woman? Because you were created as one?
>
> 'Yes,' Mattie replied, although she grew increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation. 'And because of the clothes I wear.'
>
> 'So if you changed your clothes…'
>
> 'But I can't,' Mattie said. 'The shape of them is built into me – I know that you have to wear corsets and hoops and stays to give your clothes a proper shape. But I was created with all of those already in place, they are as much as [*sic*] a part of me as my eyes. So I ask you: what else would you consider me?' (Sedia 2008: 151-160/3373)

This exchange recalls Halberstam's discussion of 'the bathroom question', and places Mattie as feeling the pressure to 'pass' as female, despite herself (Halberstam 1998). Iolanda questions Mattie's female gender status as Iolanda assumes it to be a side-effect of Loharri's creative decisions; this probing into *why* Mattie considers herself as such causes Mattie discomfort. The connotation of gender fraud – that Mattie is passively female, or only female as a default due to her being an automaton – are an insult; unlike the other automata in Ayona, Mattie has free-will, can learn, and can act without the blessing or interference of her creator.

Likewise, Iolanda interrogates Mattie's female body, specifically if it has a sex: Iolanda interprets the automaton's form as a mannequin that, with a change of clothes comes a change of gender, suggesting that the Mattie standing before her is a machine wearing a woman costume. This is a parallel to Halberstam's analysis of the contemporary conflation between FTM transsexual and butch lesbian identities: Mattie's body and gender are read as transsexual – transitioning from a created, unsexed default to female – rather than her intent – a female body performing a feminine gender (Halberstam 1998: 152-154). So, though Mattie considers herself a cisgender woman, the outside world reads her gender performance as manufactured due to her constructed body; that her body

is made female, and that she feels her gender matches her body's femininity, is misunderstood by outside viewers who read her machine form as impossible to quantify in human terms. To her credit, Iolanda realises the offence she's caused by questioning another woman's gender and explains her rude interrogation:

> 'I will not do business nor would I employ a person or an automaton of a gender different from mine, and I simply had to know if your gender was coincidental.'
>
> 'I understand,' Mattie said. 'And I assure you that my femaleness is as ingrained as your own.' (Sedia 2008: 151-160/3373)

Mattie's response – that her 'femaleness' is as valid as Iolanda's own – demonstrates Mattie's acute consciousness that though her femininity and identity are natural to her, the society that she moves through does not fully accept her as female nor trust her. Mattie's body, which must encase her clockwork components, has been designed with a narrow waist with metal and whalebone in-lays and hoops. She questions her gender, viewing it as relational to the other women she encounters:

> […] women like Iolanda who asked Mattie worrying questions. Mattie was a woman because of her corset stays and whalebone, because of the heave of her metal chest, because of the bone hoops fastened to her hips that held her skirt wide – but also because Loharri told her she was one. (899-908/3373)

Mattie feels an internal dilemma, as she measures her femininity against the human women she meets. She is cognitively aware that her body is female-shaped, that she wears female clothing, and that her creator intended for her to be a woman. However, as other women struggle to recognise her femininity, Mattie feels discomfort in her gender performance. She reads the ease with which human women connect as an exclusionary force and that by having a constructed body, she is thus excluded from the world of women:

> That the flesh women had some secret bond that Mattie did not share, that by implication she was excluded from their thoughts like she was excluded from their conversation. She was just a machine, a clunker one only acknowledged when convenient. (Sedia 2008: 1966/3373)

Mattie's confusion over her own femininity is made more complex by her problematic sexual relationship with her creator Loharri; he creates her, tells her she is a woman, then exposes his motivation for making her such – and for making her more self-aware and more sophisticated than any other automaton. Prior to her emancipation, Mattie would accept Loharri's advances as method to 'soothe' his depressive spells – something that she banned upon her release (Sedia 2008: 899/3373). Mattie's sex and gender identities are tied to a semi-non-consensual relationship, which lead her to question how and why she feels female. Her *becoming* woman narrative is so intrinsically linked with her *being* property that she struggles to disentangle the two. The perception of Mattie *being* a 'fraud' also impacts her *becoming*, and the turmoil she experiences manifests in the way she presents her clockwork body to society, and is captured in the novel's original cover art (Figure 9).

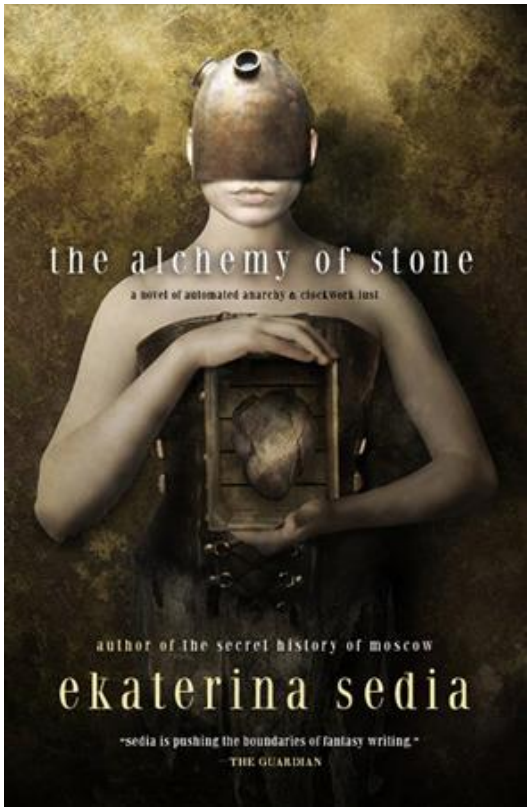


Figure 9 Segal, Stephen H. 2008. Cover design for *The Alchemy of Stone*. (Prime Books, Gaithersburg MD USA)

In terms of dress, Mattie is aware that her wearing clothing is for personal and aesthetic purposes, as garments do little to protect her body from the elements; upon stepping in a puddle and ruining her slippers Mattie mentally notes that she wore the shoes 'for the occasion's sake, even though she had no need of footwear' (Sedia 2008: 387/3373). Indeed, Mattie's relationship with her clothing is both conforming – she does not need the slippers, but she wears them for the sake of convention – and fashionable. At the same event for which Mattie wore the slippers she also selected, 'striped stockings, black and white, and a black dress with open neckline fringed with foamy white lace' (Sedia 2008: 361/3373). Though her clothing does not protect her body, it is however protecting Mattie; when dressing for the event, she tells Loharri to leave the room, thus showing Mattie to be protective of her body's autonomy. This comes into sharper focus still when Mattie suddenly needs winding at the event, and must suffer Loharri's touch for the sake of life:

> The flash grew larger and obscured the room and the dismayed faces of the mechanics, annoyed at such brazen automaton malfunctioning, and Mattie could only feel her creator's hands – loving, repellent – tugging the dress on her chest down, exposing her shame for all to see. (Sedia 2008: 477/3373)

The 'shame' referred to here is two-fold: the shame of losing control of her body in a room of adversaries and the shame of having her keyhole for all to see. The tenderness with which Loharri touches her is moot as the touch itself is non-consensual. The irony that Mattie is a thinking, feeling automaton without autonomy is what makes her a complex and relatable female character. She feels at odds with her body, and with said body's link to the desires of its creator. When later in the novel Mattie experiences a consensual relationship with a human man (a Mechanic named Sebastian), she feels both pleasure and embarrassment, worrying that her partner will feel ashamed of having relations with an automaton-woman rather than a human-woman.

Further complicating this is Sebastian's race; he is a dark-complexioned 'easterner' and, as such, experiences distrust and racial discrimination in Ayona.

Both he and Mattie are outsiders, something that strengthens their bond alongside his interest in her body's complexity and uniqueness. In each interaction following their sexual encounter, Mattie wonders if he feels shame, if he is avoiding her due to the said shame. They are both joined and divided by their otherness in Ayona's culture, and this feeling of alienation from other aliens protracts Mattie's gender struggles. This encounter between Mattie and Sebastian is one of the most poignant moments of the novel as the reader discovers that Mattie's female form does not include the same genitals as a human female as well as the revelation that her sexual organ is also her key-wind hole (2067-2076/3373), again invoking transsexual identity and non-binary bodies. This disclosure shows that a female body is not defined by its organs, but also reveals that Loharri's refusal to give Mattie ownership of her key – now understood as both a source of life and a source of pleasure – and his insistence on winding her clockwork is tantamount to rape. This exposure transform's the reader's understanding of the scene at the mechanics' event and Mattie feelings of shame, exposing that her *becoming* woman, her sense of female identity, is informed by abuse – and that this abuse has shaped the way she views her own body, gender, and sexuality.

The romance storyline between Mattie and Sebastian, when held alongside Mattie's interactions with human women like Iolanda, reveals complexity of character and relatability for the reader. Each major character in the novel is provided with detailed exposition that not only shapes their narratives, but also feeds into Mattie's *becoming*. Returning to the trope of the New/Fallen hybrid, Mattie engages with this characterisation, however not in the same manner as her predecessors Tafe, Ada Lovelace, Sybil Gerrard, Otto, or Queen Victoria. Mattie's 'new'ness is founded on the emancipation she sought so that she might pursue a career in alchemy – the opposing practice to that of her creator. Her 'fall' is consensual and in a social space where sexual encounters do not ruin the female party.

Likewise, this encounter is charged with complex emotions like love, shame, and desire in a way that Jeter, Gibson and Sterling, and Di Filippo's one-dimensional female characters do not explore. With her debut in early autumn 2008, Mattie marked a shift in steampunk fiction away from straw female leads towards more complex, relatable women whose *becoming* narratives and *being* states resonated with the readership in a way that previous steampunk novels had not (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 58, 63). The merger of steampunk as an aesthetic toolkit (Perschon 2012) with more representative characters and accessible narratives led to the second-wave and steampunk's re-emergence in the hands of women.

CARRIGER: *THE PARASOL PROTECTORATE*, GENDER, AND ROMANCE

Gail Carriger, the pen name of Tofa Borregaard, is – like Sedia – a highly educated woman with a blog devoted to her love of fashion (*Retro Rack*). Her debut novel *Soulless* (autumn 2009) is set in an alternative timeline of 1870s London where paranormal creatures are among the upper echelons of society, mixing company with the landed aristocracy in an uneasy coexistence. This setting gives Carriger ample space to explore fashion, costuming, and fabrics, and she does so with gusto, sharing her research process on her blog. *Soulless* quickly garnered *New York Times Bestseller* status, bringing the new wave of steampunk fiction to the attention of popular readership. *Soulless* (and 2010 sequel *Changeless*) have subsequently been adapted into manga-style graphic novels based on Carriger's character descriptions.

Working from the popularity of *Soulless*'s heroine Alexia Tarabotti (Figure 10), Carriger has created a universe of romance novels (spanning young adult and more mature content) that centres on strong female protagonists, whose interpersonal relationships include a diverse field of gender identities and performances, sexualities, supernatural abilities, and social/national backgrounds. And, though Carriger is among the most recognised and widely

read steampunk writers, her fiction is reclassified under VanderMeer and Chambers's mannerspunk, Hobson's bustlepunk, and Nevins's gaslight romance due to its deviation from the canonical, and thus 'real', steampunk genre (Pagliassotti 2013: 66).

Figure 10 Carriger, Gail. 2009. *Soulless*. Cover design by Lauren Panepinto. (Orbit Books, New York NY USA)

This is due to *Soulless* being, at its core, a paranormal romance novel; it matches Regis's eight-phase formula and adheres to the perennially popular historical romance reader (Regis 2003: 107) and Lee's analysis of the paranormal subgenre (Lee 2008: 53). The novel follows the suddenly upturned life of Alexia, a twenty-five-year-old society 'spinster' and New/Fallen hybrid who lacks a soul (hence 'soulless') whom the reader first meets during a surprise encounter with a vampire that leaves her lamenting the limitations that nineteenth-century presumptions of sex and gender place on women. While her *being* soulless saves her from the vampire's desire – in Carriger's universe it is the soul held in blood that supernatural beings covet – she is still mortal and thus susceptible to physical violence. Confronted with her own vulnerability, and her desire to do something worthwhile, Alexia confesses her feelings of wastefulness to Lord

Maccon and Professor Lyall, two members of the Bureau of Unnatural Registry (BUR, the supernatural policing force):

> 'It's simply, gentlemen' – and when she raised her dark eyes they had a slight sheen in them – 'I would so like something useful to do.' (Carriger 2009: 18)

Tellingly, Lord Maccon's response to this outburst is to wonder why Alexia doesn't choose to marry and thus find a use for her time, to which Professor Lyall responds that she may be too 'assertive' and 'Italian' for any potential suitors (ibid). This private exchange about Alexia's person uses 'assertive' as a synonym for masculine energy, something unbecoming for a young lady; as the novel moves forward, it is clear that Alexia's gender performance is strongly feminine, however her commanding tone and physicality place her at odds with her love of fashion in the alternative nineteenth-century context.

Perschon also gravitates to the weight of this passage in his essay 'Useful Troublemakers', as this declaration brings Alexia directly into resonance with the nineteenth-century New Woman motif while also subverting its expectations through her invocation of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Perschon 2013: 26). Crucially, Perschon's analysis notes that Carriger does not write Alexia to self-identify with the New Woman, a motif that would have been familiar in her supernatural version of 1870s London, instead choosing to reference the bluestockings (Carriger 2009: 106). Perschon argues that such a performative utterance would be heavy-handed, even redundant, given the female protagonists that precede Alexia:

> Instead of creating a nineteenth-century suffragette, Carriger has created a character who has been granted the sort of agency necessary for her to appeal to twenty-first-century readers who are used to female protagonists portrayed by […] Sarah Michelle Gellar in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (1997-2000). (Perschon 2013: 27)

This analysis assumes that the portrayals of women in late 1990s and millennial television – with complex, strong, and feminine characters including Buffy Summers, Xena Warrior Princess, and Agent Dana Scully – have moved towards

rectifying the lacuna of two-dimensional women on television. While Buffy, Xena, and Scully are beloved women with both beauty and brains, Alexia is more than a reprisal of these women, or a continuance of their legacy. Carriger's novel – and her leading lady - move beyond this trajectory, instead answering a call for feminist-friendly romances that marry romantic narrative with nuanced and powerful female leads:

> Maybe we feminists *should* write romances (many of us have said we could easily follow the formula) and address the issues of class, sexuality, and rape-like scenes. We can change the power balance in subtle ways. We can make the romance a satisfying experience – and a true utopia for women. (Gennari et al 1996: 381)

Soulless meets each of Regis's eight points of the 'romance formula':

- *Definition of society*: supernatural and human society are at odds, living in an uncomfortable truce
- *Meeting*: Alexia and Lord Maccon meet under dramatic circumstances at a ball
- *Attraction*: both Alexia and Lord Maccon fight their budding attraction to each other in a manner similar to the iconic Elizabeth/Mr Darcy love-hate relationship development
- *Barrier*: Lord Maccon views his age and Alexia's mortality as insurmountable
- *Point of ritual death*: a depressed and distracted Alexia is kidnapped by the Hypocras Club for experimentation
- *Recognition*: Lord Maccon realises the depth of his feelings for Alexia when they are both held prisoner by the Hypocras Club and must work together to escape
- *Declaration*: Lord Maccon accepts that he mistook Alexia's mortality as vulnerability, and that their feelings are more important than a sense of propriety (returning to Elizabeth/Darcy, Lord Maccon has overcome his prejudice)
- *Betrothal*: the novel closes at Alexia and Lord Maccon's wedding.

That Alexia and Lord Maccon save each other, with Alexia thus overcoming her internalised feelings of inadequacy, the novel's skeleton takes a feminist structure. As such, though Alexia's transition from a self-described bluestocking spinster into a political leader occurs by way of romance, this romance narrative is (like *The Alchemy of Stone*) is a route to explore the female protagonist's relationship with not only her partner, but also herself. Romance novels tend to include high levels of character introspection at both the 'barrier' and 'recognition' phases as the they soul-search for reasons and answers to their current situation. So, though *Soulless* follows the eight steps exactly, Alexia's story arc is not uniquely focused on the 'betrothal' phase. Rather, her marriage is a single facet of her identity with the character developments leading up to the wedding taken up in the subsequent four novels; with the marriage complete, the romance between Alexia and Lord Maccon traverses matrimonial 'ritual deaths' and 'declarations' instead. Perschon's analysis misses this nuance, and situates Alexia's strength in gendered autonomy:

> [...] she and her steampunk sisters do not require the rescue of a Prince Charming to deal with these situations. They have inherited the Earth prepared by the likes of Xena and Lara Croft. (Perschon 2013: 29)

While I agree with the basic content of this assertion, it misses the relevance of the romance narrative: Alexia and her steampunk sisters *do* have 'Prince Charmings', men that they choose to engage with and love. They are the product of feminist romances as the familiar, formulaic love story serves as an ideological entry point. So, having forgone an unnecessary celebration that they *don't* need rescuing, as this is tacit from their character descriptions, Alexia and Mattie are written to demonstrate their own identities both inside and out of their romantic entanglements. And for Alexia, this stems from her intelligence, supernatural-cancelling abilities, enjoyment of fashion, and adventurous spirit. Throughout *Soulless*, and the following four *Parasol Protectorate* novels, Carriger describes Alexia's carriage and clothing in great detail, exploring how her dress impacts her sense of identity, gender performance, and social presentation. These descriptions are purposeful cues about the character and social anxiety, and stem

from fiction conventions found in gothic romances such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847):

> Self-presentation became an essential element of social advancement and tied into discourses of self-help. This is reflected in Victorian Gothic fiction, which tends to pay much more specific and detailed attention to dress and other commodities than that of the preceding period. The manipulability of social persona through dress is sensationalised to produce the recurrent theme of the impeccable social façade that enables a discourse of secrecy to come into play. (Spooner 2004: 48)

Descriptions of clothing in fiction can serve to illustrate the quirks and shortcomings of a character, and suggest that the more a character is aligned with social expectation, the more madness (or relevant social oddity) they seek to hide. This matches with a description of Alexia given early in *Soulless* where her taste is described as too on-trend: 'The poor thing could not help it. Her choice of clothing simply lacked soul' (Carriger 2009: 43).

Again, Alexia's *being* soulless impacts her *becoming* narrative as it is the fashion-flawed characters, those whose sense of uniqueness pervades their dress, that read as the most 'sane' and, paradoxically, socially stable. Thus, Alexia's close companion Ivy Hisselpenny, with her penchant for outlandish and 'silly' hats (Carriger 2009: 27), is the more socially stable of the two; where trend-following Alexia considers herself a confirmed spinster and her sisters consider her socially inept, Ivy – who is of a slightly lower class than Alexia – is still hopeful of making a respectable match and thus moving in better social circles (Carriger 2009: 28-29). Across Carriger's debut – and her subsequent novels for the *Parasol Protectorate*, *Finishing School*, and *Custard Protocol* franchises – the female characters' relationships with fashion provide insight into each respective character's *becoming* woman and their social *being* arcs. Looking again to Carriger's first protagonist, Alexia's close attention to trends gives further clues to her sense of identity and feelings about her body:

> The day was quite a fine one, and the two ladies walked arm in arm, their full skirts swishing and the smaller, more manageable bustle, just come into fashion last season, making it comparatively easy to

> move around. Rumor had it that in France, certain ladies had dispensed with the bustle altogether, but that scandalous mod had yet to reach London. (Carriger 2009: 28)

This passage reveals that Alexia's trend-following is not impacted by comfort, but changes that bring relief – like the introduction of slimmer bustles in the later 1870s – are appreciated, though discomfort or restricted movement are not a deterrent. Alexia's attitude towards trend-following means that she seldom renounces fashions for the potential restrictions, only noting the nuisance that skirts and bustles can be when swift movement is needed due to an adventurous plot-point. This is most visible – and easily read – when she mentions her corsets. In her internal monologue, Alexia refers to her corset neutrally, or as a minor inconvenience at worst.

The first mention of Alexia's corset occurs in the third chapter when she internally notes that no matter how she wears or uses her corset, her chest would never be considered 'narrow' (Carriger 2009: 48), and thus will never achieve the socially-desirable shape that her English half-sisters possess. She will never give the feminine gender performance dictated to her by society's fashions and expectations. This bodily reflection is more a comment on Alexia's discomfort with her curvy, 'Italian' femininity when compared with London's beauty standards than a complaint about the corsetry itself. Her utterance is more a lament that her corset can only make her waist smaller, not make her body or physicality. Likewise, it cannot transform her into a socially-traditional beauty; she cannot craft a fashionable body that would render her shape fully on-trend, she can only conceal herself with the trappings of correct dress. This focus on her body's differences, and her use of fashion to mask herself, is the self-presentation-as-mode-of-hiding-anxiety that Spooner's critique indicates. Her attention to trends is a coping mechanism for *becoming* anxieties that translates into a *being* fashionable. This impulse – using trends to conceal the self rather than to self-express – is a point of relatability, woven into the novel's frame as it speaks to many readers' own social anxieties and use of dress as an obscuring mechanism.

After this first mention, Alexia's corset is variously described as 'dratted' (Carriger 2009: 200) [alongside her bustle], 'not conducive to lying, bound, on a hard floor' (Carriger 2009: 207) [incl. bustles, skirts, and 'accoutrements' of 'proper dress'], and 'creaking' (Carriger 2009: 225). However, in each of these situations, Alexia has been forced into a compromising physical position: kidnapped, bound by her attackers, or in violent jeopardy. At no point is her annoyance directed at the corset itself, but rather at the injustice she's been served and the difficulties proper dress have presented outside of their normal, daily contexts. Alexia's corset is at times a physical restriction, yes, however it is more often a shield or a tool for integration. And yet, she is highly aware of the inequity of gendered fashion, something she confirms in the first *Soulless* sequel, *Changeless*, after being pushed off a floating airship's deck:

> And then she was stopped with an abrupt jerk and flipped upside down, her head crashing hard into the side of the ship. The reinforced metal hem of her dress, designed to keep her copious skirts from floating about in the aether breezes, had wrapped fast around a spur stuck out of the side of the ship […] She reflected that this was probably the first and last time in her life she would have cause to value the ridiculous fashions society foisted upon her sex. (Carriger 2010: 139)

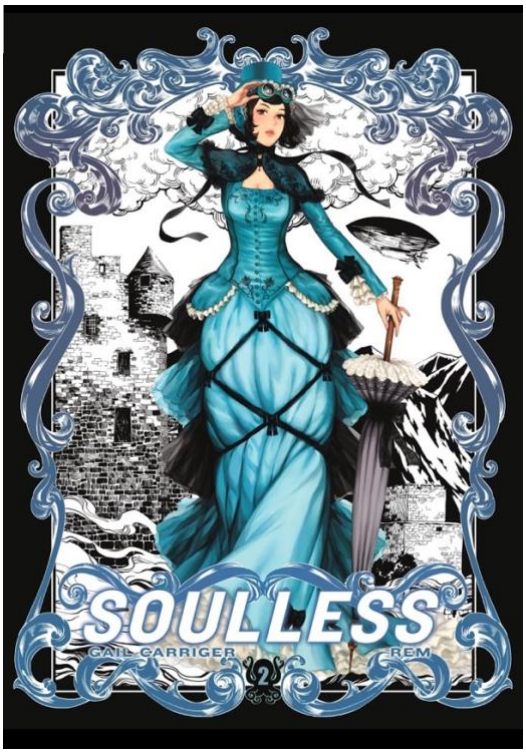


Figure 11 Carriger, Gail and Rem. 2012. *Soulless: The Manga* Vol. 2. (Yen Press LLC, New York NY USA)

Alexia's reinforced teal and black 'floating' dress – designed to maintain both style and dignity when flying hundreds of feet in the air – is the first moment Alexia reveals her annoyance with the realities of gendered fashion that reshapes women's bodies and the lengths required to achieve the correct, feminine silhouette (featured as the cover art for *Soulless: The Manga* Vol. 2, see Figure 11). I suspect that this deviation from her general neutrality towards restrictive fashion in the first novel is linked to her marriage. With her principle anxiety – *being* foreign and therefore unlovable – resolved with her marriage at the conclusion of *Soulless*, the necessity of exact trend-matching is greatly reduced as it is no longer a mask for said *being*. In its place, Alexia is read as *being* a fashion leader rather than a trend follower who expresses her dislike for London society's sense of propriety and taste (Carriger 2010: 117).

And, as Alexia experiences her 'fall' at the conclusion of the *Changeless* (an unprecedented supernatural pregnancy that leads to questions of paternity), she is steely and resolute in the third novel *Blameless* (2010) as she faces the disdain

of her family (Carriger 2010: 1-6), Queen Victoria (Carriger 2010: 13), her husband (Carriger 2010: 19-25), and human society (Carriger 2010: 47). She overcomes this 'fall' – a new 'barrier' – due to self-'recognition', that is, the strength of her *becoming*. *Blameless* is a romance of the self, a novel where Alexia is reminded of her own worth outside her *being* wife and accepts – somewhat grudgingly – that the body she had felt overlarge in the first novel is worthy. This agency and sense of self-worth flourishes despite the expected unsolicited comments she receives about her growing form during her pregnancy in *Heartless* (Carriger 2011), and is a testament to her New/Fallen hybridity (Perschon 2013: 29-30).

FEMALE MASCULINITY IN *THE PARASOL PROTECTORATE*

Though Ivy may be Alexia's foil in the first novel, her character is most challenged by Genevieve Lefoux, a French inventor who first appears in the second *Parasol Protectorate* novel *Changeless* (2010) and is a staple character from thenceforth. A recent émigrée, Madame Lefoux[13] is introduced as the proprietor of London's most exclusive hat shop ('Chapeau de Poupe')[14], where the coming and going of her aristocratic clientele conceal her store's true purpose: a clandestine front to the mechanically innovative workshop tucked in the cellar beneath the shop's floor. Both Alexia and her friend Ivy are fashionable, feminine women who first attend the shop to collect a commissioned gift from Alexia's husband when they are startled from their perusal of goods by the proprietor's abrupt entrance. Both

[13] In the novels, Carriger's omniscient third person narrator refers to her as either Madame Lefoux or simply Lefoux, never Genevieve, while using Alexia's first name. The narrator's choice reads as a thoughtful acknowledgement of Lefoux's queer identity and, as such, I have mirrored its use in my own writing.

[14] I speculate that this name is a pun, as 'poupe' translates to 'stern', and the similarly pronounced 'poupée' to 'doll'; the changes in pronunciation are, to the English-speaking ear, quite subtle. As such, the shop's name may equally suggest Lefoux as *the* authority on hats, while also suggesting the hats' delicacy and her desired clientele. It also makes a cheeky jab at her English customer base, as it hints to Lefoux's double identity.

Alexia and Ivy are taken aback by the woman before them, whose dress deviates from the gendered conventions of nineteenth-century London society:

> Ivy gasped upon seeing her. This was not because of the hair. Or, not entirely because of it. This was because the woman was also dressed head to shiny boots in perfect and impeccable style – for a man. Jacket, pants, and waistcoat were all to the height of fashion. A top hat perched upon that scandalously short hair, and her burgundy cravat was tied into a silken waterfall. Still, there was no pretense at hiding her femininity. (Carriger 2010: 64)

Whether knowingly or otherwise, Carriger invokes and subverts Jeter's problematic description of Hocker's reaction to Tafe's choice to wear a suit:

> The elegant cut and the confidence with which she wore it all served to disguise her femininity from anyone who was not aware of her true status. (Jeter 1979: 63)

While Lefoux's gender performance and cross-dressing initially shock the two English society women and their alternative 1870s sensibilities, Alexia and Ivy's surprised responses stem from the unorthodoxy of the garments, rather than Lefoux's person. That is, they are surprised that Lefoux can be so confidently feminine while wearing male-gendered clothing. Where Jeter's Tafe is rendered sexless through her continued affectation of, and comfort in, men's garments, Carriger's Lefoux's choice to wear suits rather than skirts has her 'dressed as impeccably and inappropriately as always' (Carriger 2010: 122), suggesting that Lefoux toes the line of impropriety through her precise adherence to masculine fashion trends.

Again, Lefoux's female gender identity is not in question, and the novel's attitude that she is self-expressive through suits provides the narrative space for her to perform female masculinity. Carriger's framework, though occasionally clumsy in her allusions to Lefoux's lesbian sexuality, allows Lefoux to be complex rather than a one-dimensional token. Madame Lefoux is one of the few major characters to have a prominent role across all of Carriger's novel series: *Finishing School* (YA), *The Parasol Protectorate* (NYT Best Selling), and the in-progress

Custard Protocol, delving into Lefoux's backstory and the *becoming* narrative that informs her gender performance.

Lefoux was not the only cross-dressing female character to appear in a steampunk romance novel in 2010. In Hobson's *The Native Star* (2010)[15], Emily Edwards sells her long hair and trades her dress for a three-piece suit in an effort to disguise herself from corrupt military official on an arduous transcontinental journey. With the novel set in 1876 California, Emily's cross-dressing disguise brings with it the further complication as she struggles to 'pass' as male with her travel companion/love interest Dreadnought Stanton regularly commenting on her clear lack of masculinity. In Hobson's novel, passing and cross-dressing are plot devices that resonate more with the slapstick 'gonzo' of Jeter's later works than the thoughtful probing of gender and *becoming* written by Carriger and Priest. Though Tafe, Emily, and Lefoux all gravitate towards gentlemanly menswear, their contexts clarify both perception and gender to such an extent that Emily's garments are again underlined as comedic rather than an identity performance.

Lefoux's surname is itself a comment on her female masculinity and its reception; I believe that the stem of her surname 'le fou' ('crazy' or 'the fool'), is a comment on the social implications of intelligence in a society that has yet to acknowledge women's abilities in the realm of science and engineering (something that contemporary society also struggles with). In the *Finishing School* series, readers are introduced to Lefoux as a young tomboy living with her aunt at Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing School for Young Ladies of Quality [spy training]. The young Lefoux moves freely through the school, dressing as a

[15] *The Native Star* (2010) faithfully follows Regis's formula, though spends far too many pages on background information and scenery, while also relying on the popularity of Carriger and Priest as a preface; Hobson's narrative briefly mentions werewolves and zombies, however does nothing of substance with these concepts as her story focuses on the source of magic and a thinly-veiled critique of fracking's environmental impact. I can best describe the plot of *The Native Star* as chaotic and overambitious, and it is for this reason that I elected to analyse it in the context of other, stronger works.

boy and using a shorthand version of her name: Vieve. In the second novel, *Curtsies & Conspiracies*, Lefoux is eleven and determined to join Bunson and LaCroix's Boys' Polytechnique to develop her natural talent for engineering and curiosity about machines and gadgetry.

Her life at these two gendered schools demonstrates Lefoux's plural identity keenly; a tomboy too masculine to be finished as a 'honeypot' spy, yet wanting in maleness for the technical training that calls to her. Caught in this intersection, Lefoux's performance moves from a youthful androgyny – an ambiguity that mixes genders – into a purposeful, masculine performance (Halberstam 1998: 57). Her previous transvestism will not allow for Lefoux to 'pass' as male and achieve acceptance at the boy's school: her body, gender performance, and attitude must all take on adequate masculinity to convince under scrutiny. And, as none of the novels suggest that Lefoux is transgender, this performance requires consciousness to achieve conformity. Lefoux continues her male impersonation into university as 'Gaspar Lefoux' and, having been inducted into the prestigious (and all-male) Order of the Brass Octopus, Lefoux chooses to shift her gender performance towards androgyny, once again including femininity, signalled by Alexia's impression in *Changeless*. Having achieved her goals, she drops the pretence of *being* (performing) Gaspar, and incorporates it into her *becoming* androgynous Genevieve.

Placing Lefoux's adoption of masculine dress – when she is again openly female as Genevieve Lefoux – in historical nineteenth-century context leads to comparisons with her countrywoman Rosa Bonheur who cross-dressed with the government's blessing to facilitate her painting *en plein air* (van Slyke 1988: 327).[16] Masculine clothing, for both women, was a liberating tool. However, where Bonheur wore traditionally female clothing at home (van Slyke 1988),

[16] Bonheur did not maintain her masculine dress in private, however: her choice to wear trousers has been recorded as utilitarian rather than an overt performance (van Sylke 1988: 173-75).

Lefoux's wears suits for both public and private life. Beyond Bonheur, trousers were slowly becoming an option for women seeking dress-reform. In her discussions of women's crossdressing in the nineteenth century – and its link to bodies in gothic fiction – Catherine Spooner notes the link between Amelia Bloomer's 1851 innovation of 'Turkish-style' trousers and 'modern' femininity:

> Later in the century, trouser were associated with the new-fangled sport of bicycling, thus becoming a signifier of modernity, and specifically of modern femininity, mobility, healthy and independent. Despite cartoons depicting the unsophisticated mistaking lady bicyclists for young men, it should be stressed that trousers did not invariably signify masculinity in women. (Spooner 2004: 109-110)

Therefore, the retro-historic implications of Lefoux's affectation of traditionally male dress, social confusion over the link between masculinity and trousers when worn by women, and Carriger's emphasis of Lefoux's obvious femininity strike a note that creates space for Lefoux's fluid gender performance while also again paralleling her surname. The addition of an 'x' to the end of 'fou' is a subtle linguistic hint that pluralises her identity; in French, 'the fools' would translate to 'les fous' rather than using the x used in irregular plurals (for example the eye/s: l'oeil/ les yeux). The addition of an 'x' to the end of Lefoux does not change its pronunciation, it only suggests irregular plurality, or rather, alludes to the social confusion over her gender. Equally, her surname could be a play on the word 'faux' (false), as if suggesting that her personality, demeanour, and gender performance are slanted towards imitation or falseness.

Returning to the first encounter between Alexia and Lefoux, Carriger reveals further information about Lefoux through the cipher of dress (Figure 12):

> Alexia noted with interest that she wore two cravat pins: one of silver and one of wood. Madame Lefoux might keep night hours, but she was cautious about it. (Carriger 2010 *Changeless*: 65)

Figure 12 Carriger, Gail and Rem. 2012. 'Madame Lefoux'. *Soulless: The Manga* Vol. 2. (Yen Press LLC, New York NY USA)

The subtle inclusion of these two supernatural talismans – silver and wood – mirrors Alexia's ubiquitous parasol, whose tip contains shards of both to protect against any aggressive vampires and werewolves she may encounter while moving through the city during evening hours. These two analogous objects, a parasol and cravat pins, are gendered items that respectively perform traditionally ideas of feminine and masculine dress, encoded with personal information while also serving the purpose of self-defence; Alexia's parasol is rendered useful both in the sunlight hours as a feminine affectation of her social class, and after sundown as a defensive object, with the unfortunate side-effect of a socially inappropriate accessory brought far from its outdoor context. Lefoux's pins are, likewise, at once appropriate for purpose, and inappropriate socially.

Madame Lefoux's exploration of the hybridised New/Fallen woman manifests in dress in a manner correlated to, though distinct from, Alexia. Where Alexia's relationship with her corset, and the related dress compulsions of snug bodices and full skirts, serve to highlight her cisgender identity and feminine performance, Lefoux's choice to eschew women's fashion is a performance of her comfort in masculine suiting – and thus a more masculine gender performance – alongside her female gender. Lefoux's gender identity is never described as masculine, nor does she seek to live her life as a man outside the conceit of her university tenure. Rather, she exists in a fluid state of femininity and androgyny; wherein her gender performance reflects situational needs, rather than the consistency of her gender identity. To the point, Lefoux's only interest in passing as a male – *being* male – is linked to potential gains, and outside these instances she performs an androgynous femininity. In this way, she is again an evolved heir to Bonheur who saw what the affectation of more masculine traits could afford her. So, where Alexia laments the physical limitations of her dress (bustles and skirts) but endures them as trappings of her gender, Lefoux casts these objects aside as unnecessary to her own form of femininity.

Lefoux's disavowal of corsets is never stated outright, though their omission from her suited silhouette is alluded to. In *Changeless*, Alexia re-dresses an unconscious Lefoux, mentally noting the significant ease in arranging masculine clothing as compared to the feminine counterpart. This suggests that a corset is not among the garments, as attempting to lace an immobile participant would render these revelations moot (Carriger 2010 *Changeless* 244). In the subsequent novel, *Blameless*, Lefoux and Alexia find themselves the prisoners of a clandestine order of Templar Knights as they search for answers about Alexia's father and their shared preternatural abilities.[17] These so-called Knights not only

[17] In Carriger's texts, the Knights Templar were more than upholders of Christianity against pagan/heathen worship; they were a cult of vampire and werewolf hunters seeking to eradicate the supernatural people of Europe.

separate themselves from all women as law, but also fail to understand that a shared biological sex does not render all women identical in terms of gender identity, let alone performance. As such, Lefoux suffers a significant indignity in her captivity, and is forced to perform a gender contrary to her own:

> 'Well, this is unconscionable!'
>
> Alexia and Floote exchanged startled looks.
>
> A tirade of French outrage flowed out of the still partly open door.
>
> Alexia knocked timidly. 'Are you quite all right, Genevieve?'
>
> 'No, I am not! Imbeciles! Look what they have given me to wear!'
>
> Alexia nosed her way in to find Madame Lefoux, a look of abject horror on her face, holding up a dress of pink gingham so covered in ruffles as to put Alexia's nightgown to shame.
>
> 'It is an insult!' (Carriger 2010 *Blameless*: 186)

In this exchange, Carriger makes a commentary on the cultural issues surrounding acceptance and understanding of non-binary gender expression in contemporary Western cultures. The replacement of Lefoux's tailored suits with a hyper-feminine gown (both ruffled and pink[18]) is a policing of her body by a patriarchal institution which views her as doubly problematic for being both female and non-conforming. She must ultimately concede to the insult as her custodians refuse to furnish her with anything else. As such, she spends an afternoon coerced into a body she neither recognises nor identifies with, one crafted in gingham and the male gaze. While this exchange is likely meant to enhance the novel's farcical nature, it is also the point where Lefoux's *becoming* is brought into focus. As with Mattie in *The Alchemy of Stone*, the external pressures of what it means to be female – and to have the validity of your gender performance questioned as fraudulent or wanting – informs Lefoux's own response to the suggestion that her suits are unacceptable and that she must

[18] In Carriger's alternative 1870s, pink was likely still a male colour, or gender neutral. However, as her readership is contemporary – and pink the currently popular feminine colour – the pinkness of the gown may read at once as excessively feminine as well as a concession to the masculine aspects of her genderqueer identity.

conform to the patriarchal expectation of femininity lest she be exposed as a fraud.

The questioning of gender identity, and the pressures of gender performance, infiltrate *The Parasol Protectorate* – Alexia's overlarge body and Lefoux's androgyny – and steampunk romance narratives as a whole. The ways in which the female characters disclose their relationships with their bodies, fashion, *becoming/being* identities, and romantic entanglements are what make them relatable to readers, and a source of inspiration for the readers' own steampunk productions. The ways in which female characters respond to gendered garments, and the corset in particular, provide access points for the romance reader to signpost femininity and explore diverse and transgressive gender performances (Taddeo 2013, Pagliassotti 2013). And as more research is devoted to the use and impact of fashion in steampunk fiction, academic readings of romance become more nuanced – and the romances, in turn, take on greater depth.

PRIEST'S *BONESHAKER*: DIVERGING FROM ROMANCE EXPECTATIONS

Cherie Priest's *Hugo Award*-nominated and *Locus Award*-winning *Boneshaker* (2009) is, like Carriger's debut, a novel that uses steampunk as an aesthetic tool to frame her paranormal narrative. Different from *Soulless, The Alchemy of Stone*, and *The Clockwork Corset*, *Boneshaker* is set in an alternative, post-apocalyptic version of 1879 Seattle. A resident of Seattle herself, Priest spent countless hours meticulously researching the realities of the city's layout, underground tunnel system, economy, and society during the historical nineteenth century before revising it to suit her speculative needs; the novel pays homage to Seattle's gold-

prospecting roots, large population of Chinese diaspora, and the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest (Priest 2009: 415-416).[19]

Boneshaker's key protagonist – Briar Wilkes – is in a difficult social position, living in the mudflat outskirts of Seattle's quarantine wall. While her father Maynard Wilkes is considered a traitor by those outside the wall and folk hero to those who dare remain inside it, her husband – Dr Leviticus 'Levi' Blue – destroyed Seattle with his Boneshaker drill when it struck a vein of poisonous gas that swiftly infected those who inhaled it, leading to a familiar zombie apocalypse scenario. The men in her life have left her disappointed, bitter, pregnant, and alone to fight for survival in this new, damaged world. The novel is set sixteen years after this event, The Blight, with Briar and her teenage son Ezekiel 'Zeke' Wilkes (she has disowned Blue's name) living in the survivors' colony as the American Civil War continues to the east. Briar is an outcast, tormented by her co-workers at the water treatment facility. Zeke is likewise tormented for the sins of family members who died before he was born, and is determined to prove that his grandfather Maynard died nobly, saving the jail's inmate from death or turning into a 'rotter' (Priest's version of zombies). When Briar realises that Zeke has left the relative safety of their home on the outskirts of town to enter Seattle-proper, she begins a retrieval journey that reveals unknown truths about Maynard, Dr Blue, Briar, and the state of life inside the city's walls.

[19] At times Priest's characterisation of people of colour veer into problematic territory: protagonist Briar is surprised at both Fang and Huojin's English skills (Priest 2009: 99, 280-283), Briar's needing to be reassured that Fang is 'good people' (Priest 2009: 100, southern American slang for a simple and humble person), and Lucy's micro-aggression shortening of Huojin to Huey (Priest 2009: 280). These hiccoughs aside, Priest's work is generally successful in giving voice to characters of colour, and is among the first steampunk authors to sympathetically incorporate cultures outside whiteness in her work (Goh 2017: 188). This is in contrast with Hobson's *The Native Star*, which makes active use of racial epithets to situate her narrative in the late nineteenth century. Like Priest, Hobson's text attempts to incorporate indigenous people, however her work shares more with Bear's RaceFail'09 catalysing- attempts than Priest's accidental micro-aggressions.

Briar is most similar to Tafe as Hocker first experiences her, a rough woman living and acting with single-minded focus. Priest is blunt and restrained in her characterisation, refraining from making romanticised overtures about Briar's appearance:

> One arm at a time, Briar pried herself out of the overcoat and left it hanging on a peg. Without the coat, her body had a lean look to it – as if she worked too long, and ate too little or too poorly. Her gloves and tall brown boots were caked with the filth of the plant, and she was wearing pants like a man. Her long, dark hair was piled up and back, but two shifts of labor had picked it apart and heavy strands had scattered, escaping the combs she'd used to hold it all aloft. She was thirty-five, and she did not look a minute younger. (Priest 2009: 22)

Where Tafe's femininity is hidden by her preference for menswear and Lefoux's heightened by it, Briar's is conveyed with near resignation. She is a woman wearing trousers, and it conveys no meaning of preference or gender. Unlike Tafe, who is fighting for survival when first encountered in trousers, Briar has already survived the apocalypse and has accepted the stigma of a fallen woman as penance for her perceived naivety in misjudging the men in her life (her husband, and more painfully, her father). As Briar navigates the new Seattle – a subterranean maze of tunnels and boltholes – she encounters the unknown population who've chosen to remain in their city. The other two women who appear in the novel – Lucy O'Gunning and Angeline – present themselves differently.

Lucy is the barkeeper and de-facto owner of Maynard's, the underground pub named in honour of Briar's father. Priest slowly releases information about Lucy across several pages, revealing details in their order of noteworthiness to Briar:

- 'a large-boned woman with only one arm tapped her foot in time to the tune…' (Priest 2009: 185)
- '…a cigarette-rough voice.' (Priest 2009: 186)
- 'Briar must have looked closer to tears than she hoped, because the older woman came forward, adjusting her shawl.' (Priest 2009: 187)

- ‘Briar wondered about the glove Lucy wore on her sole remaining hand. It was brown leather and it reached up to her elbow, where it was held in place by a series of tiny buckles and straps. There was stiffness in Lucy’s fingers, and a faint clicking sound as they squeezed the towel and flapped it open.’ (Priest 2009: 188)

- ‘Again, and without meaning to, through eyes that watered from the burn of the beer, Briar was looking at Lucy’s hand. Where her other arm ought to have hung, her dress sleeve had been stitched shut and pinned to her side.’ (Priest 2009: 188-189)

- ‘“Bleeding? Oh no, sweetheart. That’s just oil.” She flexed her fingers, and the knuckles popped with a tinny lack. “The whole thing’s mechanical. Just gives me a little leak, every so often.’” (Priest 2009: 189)

Priest writes Lucy as a motherly figure who uses pet names like ‘honey’, ‘baby’ and ‘sweetheart’, as well as gentle, soothing language while asking Briar questions about Zeke. The maternal elements are pushed further as an intrinsic element of Lucy’s *becoming* and gender performance, as she – the landlady – is the only woman in a room with around twelve men (Priest 2009: 185-186). As Briar, Lucy, and their companions from the bar (including Briar’s new ally Jeremiah Swakhammer who led her to Maynard’s) move through the underground maze towards Zeke’s target – Briar’s old matrimonial home in Denny Hill – Lucy is the clear leader. At each turn, and with each ambush for the rotters, the group defers to ‘Ms Lucy’s’ judgement. Lucy’s mechanical arm, a tool she needs to survive in her dangerous home, is a strings-attached gift from apocalyptic Seattle’s overlord Dr Minnericht. The usually buoyant and fearless Lucy appears terrified of this man (Priest 2009: 306-314), and briefly seeks to placate him. Despite this initial impulse towards self-preservation, Lucy rapidly overcomes this subservience when she believes that the power-mad Minnericht poses an immediate threat to Briar. This surrogate mother/child relationship – and Lucy’s maternal instincts – are a foil to Briar’s own failures to keep Zeke safe from harm.

Another motherly – though opposite – figure is Angeline, a Native American woman who rescues Zeke from the wreckage of an airship crash:

> Almost androgynous with age, the face belonged to a woman, Ezekiel decided. She was old enough to be his grandmother, he was certain, but it was hard to be more precise by the light of her lantern. Her skin was a shade or two darker than his own, the color of a good suede tobacco pouch or the hair of a deer. The jacket she wore had belonged to a man, once. It was cut to fit someone bigger, and her pants were rolled and cinched to keep them from falling down. (Priest 2009: 205-206)

Like Briar, Angeline chooses menswear over more traditionally feminine garments. However, through Zeke's eyes, the reader is led to understand that Angeline's adoption of men's clothing is different from that of Briar:

> 'Why do you dress like a man?'
>
> 'Because I feel like it.'
>
> 'That's weird.'
>
> She replied, 'Good.' (Priest 2009: 210)

From Zeke's perspective, Angeline's clothing is demonstratively masculine whereas his mother's is either unnoticed or simply practical for her blue-collar job at the water treatment plant. This thought process shows Zeke's naivety – similar to that of Hocker in *Morlock Night* – in gendering clothing before contextualising its use. Angeline's flippant 'Because I feel like it' remark is both a performance of earned bravado and an expression of reality. Likewise, this levity demonstrates that she herself doesn't view the clothing masculine and that the question itself is undeserving of a more complete answer. Angeline is fiercely independent, and equally pleased by and dismissive of the idea that her clothing choice is 'weird'. Her only concerns are survival and avenging the wrongful death of her daughter Sarah.[20]

[20] 'A long time ago, he was married to my daughter Sarah. He drove her mad, and he killed her.' She didn't swallow, and her eyes weren't warming with tears. This was something she'd known and held against her chest for years, and merely saying it didn't make the truth of it any worse. (Priest 2009: 373)

With the exception of Briar's occasional reminiscences of her ill-fated marriage to Leviticus Blue[21], there are no romances in *Boneshaker*. Priest consciously writes Briar and Jeremiah Swakhammer as allies, making certain to use language that cements their relationship as platonic. From a speculative perspective, had Priest chosen to follow this pairing and included small allusions to attraction across the duo's earlier interactions, then Swakhammer's unsure fate after the rebellion against Dr Minnericht's tyranny would transform into a *ritual death* and she could have written them a happy ending, thus meeting the eight-step formula (Regis 2003). However, Priest consciously chose *not* to move in this direction, garnering disappointment for not meeting the unspoken expectation that she – a female author – would do so (Perschon May 2011); the gendered link between romance and women and, by extension, romance and female authors, impacts the reception of female-written novels that exclude romance. What Priest chose to write instead is a complex narrative of mother/child affection. And she did write a love story, though it was not what the aforementioned audience anticipated.

The love between mother and child is not a romantic love. It is, however, a deep-seated love. Each of the female characters in *Boneshaker* is informed by their maternal instinct, protecting and caring for children biological and adoptive. The *becoming* of each woman in Priest's novel is influenced by their maternal impulses, and informs how they dress themselves and present their identities. Briar lives for her son, Lucy uses sincere mothering language and emotion as a leadership tool, and Angeline is consumed by affection for her departed daughter. Furthering this theme, Angeline is fiercely angry with Zeke for the torture he's enacting on Briar with his absence:

[21] 'She'd honestly loved her husband once, and there were reasons for it. Some of them must not have been spun from girlish stupidity, and it wasn't all about the money. […] She could tell Zeke stories of flowers sent, of notes composed in ink that was almost magical for the way it glittered, burned, and vanished. There were charming gadgets and seductive toys.' (Priest 2009: 46)

> 'It ain't right, to do a mother like that. You got to get yourself home. You already been gone all day – a whole day – and it's past nighttime [*sic*] again, practically morning.' (Priest 2009: 208)

Motherhood and motherly sentiment drives the novel's subplot climaxes: Briar's imprisonment is the catalyst that causes Lucy to rouse the survivors into a long-awaited rebellion against Minnericht's regime; Angeline avenges her daughter's death by killing Minnericht; and Briar and Zeke are reunited with Zeke finally learning the truth about his father's drilling accident and ultimate death. None of these women are concerned with fashion, sexuality, or social conformity and their single-minded love, tough spirits, and matching costumes channel a form of femininity that evokes compassionate self-reliance.

KRESS: INVERTED FORMULAS AND CRAFTED BODIES IN ROMANCE

Adrienne Kress's *The Clockwork Corset* (2011) is a coming of age romance that follows Regis's eight steps exactly, with a slight inversion at its conclusion. The novella is set in alternative nineteenth-century England (evidenced by references to specific locations, *definition of society*) with an unnamed Queen that is constantly engaged in some war (Kress 2011: 195). The protagonist – Imogen – is from a wealthy factory-owning family who, in the absence of her late mother, is raised as a tomboy by her doting father. In the first paragraph, fourteen-year-old Imogen is in the middle of an argument with him; he has decided that she must begin to make behavioural changes and act in a more feminine manner as she approaches womanhood. Incensed by the shift in rules and expectations, she lashes out at her best friend Rafe – the clock winder's son – when he reminds her that someday they will both be adults:

> 'I don't want you to be a man.' What an awful thought. Oh! Imagine him with a beard. How frightening.
>
> Rafe shrugged. 'I think it's inevitable. Just like you'll become a woman.'
>
> 'I most certainly will not!' I stood up and placed my hands at my hips. How dare he suggest such a thing.

> Finally, he looked up at me from his spot on the floor. 'You can't *not* be a woman. That's what happens. We all grow up.'
>
> 'You take that back!' […]
>
> A woman was someone who had to sit around all day and talk about the weather. Who drank tea out of tiny cups that allowed for maybe two good gulps at best. Women nibbled at biscuits and left them half-eaten. Women wore tight uncomfortable corsets. I was not planning on becoming one of those.
>
> I took another step towards him. 'Take. It. Back.' (Kress 2011: 196)

Imogen considers *becoming* a woman a disturbing possibility, and one that she refused to face as she believed it would bar her from any form of active life. In passages that describe her upbringing alongside Rafe, she notes that at eleven she 'was far more masculine than he' (Kress 2011: 193), equating masculinity with fencing, hunting, climbing trees, and racing, i.e., physical outdoor pursuits that her society deems male. From a young age, Imogen reads gender and sex as unified and binary terms: male/masculine as active, female/feminine as passive. She believes that accepting her sex – and *becoming* a woman – would mean foregoing entirely the adventurous lifestyle she'd grown accustomed to. And thus, by refusing to *become* a woman and maintaining her childish masculinity, she believes she can avoid a life spent in corseted discomfort. Returning to the two friends heated exchange – where Rafe understands that a *becoming* adult is inevitable and this acceptance of biology offends Imogen – sets the tone for the next page, where the narrative jumps two years into the future. Imogen is now sixteen and reminiscing about her youth as her servant dresses her for a ball – her society coming out – which she had refused as inevitable scant paragraphs before:

> And here we were. The ballroom aired out and ready for many unpleasant suitors to pass through its doors. Let us celebrate that Imogen is a woman. The one thing she never wanted to be. (Kress 2011: 198)

Imogen is a passive actor in this, with her narration suggesting that she's found herself dressed in a corset and white gown, a vision of refined, chaste womanhood. A corset whose tightness she is reminded not to complain about

(ibid). Her response to these garments – that the time between insisting she'd never become a woman and this induction ritual passed 'in a flash' – is that she somehow allowed becoming a woman to creep up on her (Kress 2011: 197). This ball is a symbolic erasure of her unorthodox youth, a baptism into her society's cult of femininity. After the guests depart and she's removed her finery – ritual trappings of the debutante – Imogen reflects on the party and its symbolism, telling her dearest friend that none of the suitors had proved a tempting prospect. When Rafe expresses relief at this, Imogen comes to the conclusion that he is in love with her; and Imogen responds in kind when Rafe is ordered to the war's front lines on a covert repair mission for one of his inventions (Kress 2011: 203-204, *attraction* and *barrier*).

At this point in the novella, Kress's plot moves in an expected direction: the tomboyish Imogen diverges from the socially anticipated *becoming* woman narrative, choosing instead to cut her hair, steal Rafe's clothing, and follow him to the front disguised as a young solider (Kress 2011: 207). She is convinced that Rafe is incapable of protecting himself, and equally convinced that only she can keep him safe and ensure his returning home uninjured. Much like Carriger's Lefoux, Imogen uses her female masculinity as a tool, *being* male to achieve a goal. Imogen's concern with passing – her hyperawareness of her female body (Kress 2011: 207, 211) – reminds the reader that despite Imogen's discomfort in traditionally feminine clothing, she is equally ill at ease in her male disguise. Imogen's preference for 'masculine' activities and struggles with accepting womanhood as parcel to her *becoming* is relatively unique among cisgender, heterosexual female protagonists in romance; femaleness, with its diverse variety of gender performances, is at the crux of romance's appeal.

However, this divergence is one of the elements that makes Imogen a relatable character. Her desire to be her masculine self – and to disavow womanhood as the killjoy of adventure – is matured and tempered by finding love, and finding a way to be both a woman and an adventurer. Where earlier in the novella Imogen informed the reader of all the ways she was more masculine

than other women, this concluding third of the text explores how she is more feminine than the soldiers around her – mere boys themselves (Kress 2011: 211-212). As she moves closer to Dover – and the airship that will transport them across the channel to the unnamed war – Imogen's interactions with other soldiers expose the realities of her normal gender performance: *being* masculine is a personal epiphany that reveals her femininity (Kress 2011: 211).

The eponymous 'clockwork corset' arrives scant pages later when Imogen sacrifices herself to save Rafe from an enemy soldier as he repairs the malfunctioning machinery (Kress 2011: 226-227, *ritual death*); when Imogen awakes she discovers that her heart only continues to beat because of Rafe's clockwork masterpiece (*recognition*):

> 'I'm in a corset?'
>
> Rafe nodded. But it wasn't an ordinary corset. It was made of tough leather and covered in moving pieces. Winches and wheels, and leather straps holding it together. And over my heart was a forest of tiny gears in constant motion.
>
> 'Did you make this?'
>
> Rafe nodded again. […]
>
> 'You saved my life.'
>
> 'Well,' he said leaning in towards me, 'you did save mine first.'
>
> I laughed a little, but it hurt, so I stopped.
>
> We both looked down at the corset once more. The clockwork pieces ticked in perfect order, a moving work of art. And now my permanent fashion statement. (Kress 2011: 229-230)

As Rafe explains that Imogen will need to wind her clockwork corset, she retorts that she will need to hire a professional to manage the instrument round-the-clock (*declaration*) as a subtle marriage proposal – which Rafe accepts (Kress 2011: 231, *betrothal*). *The Clockwork Corset* plays with gender roles and performances inside the low-risk space of the romance formula, with the dramatic *ritual death* ending in the requisite happy ending of *betrothal*. Imogen is a headstrong young woman who disrupts the typical romance narrative by inverting the gendered fairy tale expectation by rescuing her prince charming

and further bucking traditional gender roles by proposing to Rafe (Pagliassotti 2013: 71). That Rafe in turn rescues Imogen with his inventions crafts an egalitarian romance, and gives a tangible anchor for Imogen's complex gender performance: the clockwork corset.

Social expectations would have required she again wear a corset upon returning from her adventure to the front – an object she repeatedly states as 'tight' and 'uncomfortable'. As such, the reader expects outrage or anger that, in his efforts to save her life, romantic lead Rafe uses a corset as the structural support for her clockwork pacemaker, forever fusing a hated, gendered object to her body *without consent.* This development is met with a surprising lack of anger, as Imogen easily accepts this corset, constructed from leather and Rafe's clockwork ingenuity, as part of her body. The hard leather and gears – the utilitarian aspects – distinguish this corset from the body-shaping versions she so vehemently detested wearing. The clockwork corset, though applied without her consent, captures her hybrid gender performance in a manner than she can accept and find beautiful. And this fusion of fashion with technology and adventure is paralleled in steampunk women's dress practices.

III. CRAFTED NARRATIVES, CRAFTED BODIES

The Design, Construction, Application, and Performance of Women's Steampunk Clothing

Built upon the previous chapter's historical framework of steampunk fiction, this chapter constructs a rigorous analysis of steampunk women's dress and its fictional contexts. With respect to the fictional context, my analysis gives preference to descriptions of female characters regarding identity, gender, body, sexuality, relationships, and relatability. Regarding materials, I focus on the community members' cosplay, dress, and 'steampunk light' looks in terms of their use of DIY, bricolage construction, history-led aesthetic, and gender performance as they visually define their own viewpoint of steampunk. In this investigation, I build on my discussion of gender narratives and *becoming* and *being* performances, adding *inverse ekphrasis*[1] as a tool to further unpack the reciprocal flow between steampunk fiction and fashions.

Ekphrasis is the translation or description of a known, or given, work of art into prose or poetry, such as John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820) or Oscar Wilde's eponymous *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) (Heffernan 1991). *Inverse ekphrasis*, is, as the name implies, the physical inverse of the literary practice: a tangible simulation/representation of the virtual (literary) object. In the instance of steampunk dress, the fashions and accessories are produced as either quotations of literature or as the totem of fictional narratives. Therefore, *inverse ekphrasis*, has a powerful potential, and were it better known, it could be employed widely as a tool for transmedia studies. Its allowance for intertextual readings rests comfortably alongside a variety of cultural theories that themselves depend on reading progressive influence, including Bourdieu's

[1] I briefly thought that I had been the first to coin this term, as I had never come across it before. However, research led me to *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications* (Domínguez et al 2015: 116-120), which outlines the use and disambiguation of the phrase in discussing intertextual literature.

habitus and Judith Butler's *becoming/being* as they both critique cultures based on production and activity:

> Both Bourdieu and Butler understand the body as culturally constructed and see this occurring through a notion of productive "practice"; although for Bourdieu, it is through 'habitus' that tastes are ritually installed and memorized within the body, manifesting themselves as physical dispositions (the bodily "hexus"). (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 11)

Culture as a productive practice syncs with *inverse ekphrasis* in a manner that I can best describe as harmonious. The poetic implication of *inverse ekphrasis* is seductive, to the extent that restraint is necessary lest it be overly-credited. To this end, I have elected to clarify my application of these entangled concepts with a brief, illustrative case study before moving forwards with a layer-by-layer exploration of women's dress practices.

CASE STUDY: *BECOMING*, *BEING*, AND *INVERSE EKPHRASIS*

In 2016, road collision survivor Maddie Cable gained viral attention with *The Huffington Post*, *Today.com*, and *Buzzfeed* each covering her story as an inspirational human-interest piece (Wanshel 2016, Flam 2016, Caporimo 2016). Cable's post-accident injuries required spinal surgery to stabilise her T12 vertebrae. This surgery brought with it a mandated six-week recovery period in a brace (Caporimo 2016). When speaking with *Today.com*, Cable expressed concern that, 'I felt like they saw the brace and not me' (Flam 2016). The North Carolina native discussed her social discomfort with the rigid compression brace's appearance and drew attention to her injury: 'I felt like all they were thinking about and looking at were the brace and the accident and not me or who I am' (ibid). The external focus on Cable's *being* injured – and thus, a victim – catalysed her to reclaim her identity narrative from the white brace's cool performance. Cable and a friend decorated the brace to change its context to one where she (Cable) could find agency and strength:

> 'But then Sarah [Chacko] brought up the idea of steampunking it, which I loved.' The two girls, who have been friends for about 10 years, share a love of all things steampunk. (Caporimo 2016)

Cable and her friend [Sarah] used cog and gear stencils, spray paint, chains, and appliqués – materials readily available at many of the crafting outlets popular throughout the USA – to transform the brace from a medical object into a faux-metal corset-breastplate (Figure 13).

Figure 13 Maddie Cable's medical backbrace, before and after 'steampunking', via Caporimo 2016 (courtesy of Linda Cable, Maddie Cable's mother)

This surface-level change transitions the object's performance from an injured *being* into a feminine *becoming*. Following these modifications, Cable reported an increased feeling of self-confidence and self-esteem (Flam 2016), with Cable's mother elaborating:

> 'If she goes out, she doesn't mind if people stare because odds are, they're going to make a comment and that's usually a compliment. […] They no longer see her as a victim. They see her as somebody who has decided she's going to thrive.' (ibid)

Cable's determination to thrive in the face of adversity and her use of steampunk to this end are encapsulated in the impulses of *inverse ekphrasis*: her

reinvigorated brace (life) imitates the many armoured corsets – like those of Imogen in 'The Clockwork Corset' or Flavia in *Flavia's Flying Corset* (Kelly 2010) – populating steampunk fiction (art). While the images published by *Buzzfeed* only show Cable's modifications in the context of a posed steampunk look (black ruffled blouse, black skirt, holding a top hat, etc), the report from *Today.com* shares an image of Cable wearing the brace over a more casual, at-home look of sweatpants and a t-shirt. As the steampunk modification occurred in the first week of a six-week medically mandated course of support, Cable almost certainly wore the brace with a wide variety of recovery-compliant garments, excluding this piece from the designation of 'costume'.

On a technical level, Cable's bricolage runs afoul of Pikedevant's musical critique (*Just Glue Some Gears on It*), as the object's metamorphosis is a surface-level application of the aforementioned non-functional gears akin to that of Nagy's *Steampunk Laptop* (2007). However, neither this nor Nevins's criticism of the contemporary steampunk as a shallow decorative trend captures the *ekphrastic* impact of Cable's crafting. As this chapter will go on to explore in greater depth, bricolage and Do-It-Yourself are the crucial technical elements of steampunk fashion – not mechanical functionality. Through her use of Neo-Victorian steampunk's visual vocabulary, the seventeen-year-old regained agency over a traumatic situation protracted by a symbolic garment of disability.

In this light, Cable's modification resonates with Taddeo's reading of the corset as a form of armour (Taddeo 2013: 45); the brace moves from an invasively alien object into an introspective prosthetic that grants agency and strength, much like Imogen's clockwork corset. Revised as steampunk armour (Flam 2016, Caporimo 2016), the object shifts from a signal of disability into one of strength, which Cable can take pride in: 'I enjoy wearing it now. It makes me feel more confident.' (Caporimo 2016). The brace, now re-coded as a costume (ibid), shifts her narrative from *being* injured into her *becoming* identity – using steampunk and *inverse ekphrasis* as a vehicle.

In this chapter, I explore how a selection of authors, designers, and makers first found steampunk. I use these anecdotes as a springboard to contextualise steampunk dress inside popular, contemporary fashion with particular reference to the importance of punk style. From this foundation, I present a thorough investigation of steampunk fashion before directing focus to the ways in which women's dress: performs gender and expresses *becoming* narratives; interacts with romance fiction; and expresses their own narratives via their steamsonas (personal fiction) and *ekphrasis*.

FASHION ORIGIN STORIES: DISCOVERING STEAMPUNK DRESS

As Elizabeth Wilson explains in the introduction to *Chic Thrills*, dress holds substantial power in culture as a mode of conformity, normativity, transgression, and subversion:

> Clothes socialise our bodies, transforming them from King Lear's 'poor forked thing' into the cultural being. Our dress constitutes our 'appearance': the 'vestimentiary envelope' produces us as social beings. […] Dress is the cultural metaphor for the body, it is the material with which we 'write' or 'draw' a representation of the body into our cultural context. (Wilson 1992: 6)

Dress is a performance of external and internal factors. It can be a form of personal expression, but it can equally be a defensive force that shields people from the gaze of others' judgement. It can adhere to cultural expectations or subvert them. When evaluated as fashion, dress has the power to communicate in a non-verbal language, shifting context and communicating new meaning as the body moves through space (Breward 2003, Entwistle 2015). This powerful tool can also be misinterpreted, or redefined by dominant cultural narratives surrounding gender, identity, class, and morality.[2]

[2] See methodology for disambiguation of dress/clothing/fashion.

The mid-twentieth century and Europe's post-war culture changes marked a body revolution for women's fashion: Christian Dior unveiled his utilitarian-chic New Look in 1947 while Cristobal Balenciaga leapt away from body-conscious design with barrel, sack, tunic, and babydoll silhouettes (Van Godtsenhoven and Arzalluz 2017, Breward 2003).[3] This re-contextualising of the female body beyond its biological shape laid the foundation for the twenty-first century's most celebrated avant-garde designers like Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo, Demna Gvsalia, John Galliano, Alessandro Michele, Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen – all of whose work plays with history, the body and idiosyncrasy (ibid). Freed from the concept of a singular silhouette, twenty-first century fashion design has become a more overt space for object abstraction and political/personal expression with designers such as Gvsalia (Vetements and Balenciaga), Michele (Gucci), and Galliano (Maison Margiela) directly referencing contemporary consumer practices and cultural concerns in their 2018 collections.

As the distillable elements of leading fashion – colours, fabrics and construction innovations – move from these designers into mainstream style and fast-fashion outlets (Zara, H&M, ASOS, FashionNova etc), people make choices regarding how – or if – their dress behaviours will change to match pace with the ever-evolving global trends. And according to iconic Boston-based steampunk figure Jake von Slatt, the social pressure to keep pace with contemporary consumer trends is among the chief catalysts that draw people to steampunk style and making. Steampunk's focus on history and its Do-It-Yourself culture

[3] *Game Changers: Re-Inventing the Twentieth Century Silhouette* 2016 exhibition at the Antwerp Fashion Museum (MoMu), curated by Karen Van Godtsenhoven and Miren Arzalluz. During my six-month internship with Karen and the MoMu curation and conservation teams, I translated Karen and Miren's curatorial work into a digital exhibit for the Google Arts & Culture platform (Van Godtsenhoven and Arzalluz 2017). Karen is now a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute in New York.

encourage people to learn through creation and to side-step the trend cycle by making things that will last – and that the makers will cherish.

Von Slatt's written work addresses these points alongside his feelings of alienation and dependency stoked by contemporary technology cultures – specifically citing the push of Amazon's pricing and pull of Apple's annual innovation in his *Steampunk Manifesto* (von Slatt 2011). He suggests that steampunk's thematic popularity is directly correlated to the loss of agency in popular culture's short-term trends and streamlined technologies' planned obsolescence. Likewise in his 2010 essay for Jeff and Ann VanderMeer's second steampunk anthology, von Slatt makes the case for steampunk makery's appeal as a response to an internal yearning to create from inside a paradigm that stresses craftsmanship and takes its inspirations from history. This paradigm is malleable, as the aesthetic – the inspiration – can vary while the impulses remain the same. For von Slatt, the paradigm takes a revisionist Victorian aesthetic that leans heavily on industrial sensation and machine literacy, a practice that resurrects techno-literacy through tinkering (von Slatt 2011: 406).[4]

Alongside his creative technical practice, von Slatt is both an active participant in steampunk physical spaces like conventions and meetups as well as in virtual spaces such as forums, blogs, and online communities. When inhabiting these spaces his dress affects a Victorian slant that syncs with his technology, merging leather protective gear and goggles with pinstripes, paisleys, waistcoats, and top hats. When recalling his first encounter with steampunk, von Slatt explained that, from his maker-perspective, steampunk's history-referential aesthetic presented a sense of belonging, representative of his feelings towards antique technology that had previously lacked a name. Author Gail Carriger

[4] Earlier in the *Steampunk Manifesto*, von Slatt refers to the loss of Radio Shack, crystal set making, and hobby-based techno-literacy as a catalyst for his steampunk creativity (von Slatt 2011).

experienced the same epiphany, realising that she could put a name to her love of mixing vintage design and heritage textile:

> Long before I discovered Moorcock, when I still thought Jules Verne was destined to remain safely trapped away in the 1800s forever, I wore Steampunk. I proudly donned my Victorian silk blouses and little tweed jodhpurs. I didn't know there was Steampunk to *read*, I only thought there was Steampunk to *wear.* (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 64)

This feeling of recognition – that steampunk's culture is an answer to an unspoken identity question – is a common phenomenon among community members across the globe. Many authors and makers personal accounts reveal their discovery of steampunk only after operating from a similar aesthetic direction for months, sometimes years (Gleason 2013). Costume Mercenary's Jeannette Ng, whose designs use both Victorian and Asian source material, reveals that her introduction to steampunk emerged from finding a gear-and-screw button while in Hong Kong with her partner for a material-sourcing trip – an encounter that has led to a booming bespoke and commission business (Gleason 2013: 52). Another account from New York-based designer Brit Frady-Williams explains that her designs only became knowingly steampunk after other craft vendors at fairs mentioned the aesthetic resemblance: 'I was just designing what I liked, which tended to fall either into the Victorian or retro-futuristic categories' (Gleason 2013: 24).

Neo-Victorian aesthetic has been the dominant style in steampunk fiction since its inception (Jeter 1987, VanderMeer and Chambers 2011, Perschon 2012, Goh 2017). Expositional reliance on nineteenth-century Britain (most often mid-century London)[5] for context has, by extension, manifested in the subculture's dress and fashion conventions. A cursory glance at any steampunk fashion image

[5] As a sample across the first- and second-wave, in chronological order: Jeter 1979, Blaylock 1985, Gibson and Sterling 1990, Di Filippo 1995, Carriger 2009-onwards (5-novel *The Parasol Protectorate* series as well as *The Custard Protocol* series), Hodder 2010-onwards (the full *Burton and Swinburne Chronicles* series).

conveys design beyond imitating Victorian aesthetic – steampunk looks rely on interpretation (Pho 2013) and are created using bricolage, whether in the sense of applying decoration to an extant object – as with Cable's brace – or layering contexts to create a new whole. In this way, steampunk style is as reliant on Neo-Victorian visual identity as it is on bricolage, with 1970s punk's practice laying the foundation. The 'punk' in steampunk is no longer merely a tongue-in-cheek reference to cyberpunk as Jeter intended, but instead a manifestation of what Pagliassotti calls, 'steampunk's "punk" ethic of renewing, recycling, and reinventing' (Pagliassotti 2013: 66).

DIY, BRICOLAGE, INTERTEXT AND THE 'RULE BOOK'

Vivienne Westwood is undisputed punk royalty, widely credited with refining the community's dress culture. Alongside her partner *Sex Pistols* manager Malcolm McLaren, Westwood's genre-defining garments mixed explicit T-shirts, subversive political messages and a wide variety of textiles to create complete looks that mixed historical and fetish references into one rebellious, intertextual movement. Taking inspiration from both the earlier teddy-boy culture and its short-hand Edwardian quotations, McLaren's aesthetic and Westwood's mixing of leather, mohair, and latex demonstrated a departure from mainstream 1970s style. This multimedia approach to fashion design intersects with the artistic concept of bricolage, the practice of combining uncommon objects into a new, cogent whole.

While punk culture had already developed prior to Westwood's most iconic designs – like the 1975 screen printed 'Cowboys' T-Shirt – McLaren's use of the *Sex Pistols* as breathing mannequins led to her ubiquity with punk's fashion identity. Equally important was the influence of Jordan, whose innate understanding of punk's ethos and combinations of mainstream vintage pieces and lingerie served as catalyst, sometimes-muse and gatekeeper for SEX, the then-name of Westwood's store. Describing her style on the first day she entered the shop, Jordan explains, 'I was wearing some kind of 1950s net skirt with a pair

of stilettos and suspenders and a little basque top – all original vintage pieces' (Baron 2016; Figure 14).

For Jordan, punk's confrontational style and focus on performing individuality provided a vehicle for both her self-expression and empowerment. Punk's DIY ethos hinges on the 'Y': yourself. The body's interaction with punk garments creates an identity performance that at once shows the community member's unique personality while also demonstrating the reactive energy of the culture. This bodily bricolage depends on the mix of DIY with design.

Figure 14 Jordan in her sheer net skirt. c. 1974. via *Another Man Magazine* (2017)

Westwood diverged from the explosive aggression of punk in the 1980s, again revising the direction and style of her King's Road shop. Moving her creative space to a Camden Town workshop, she began designing collections that contained the same political irreverence of punk while exploring new ways to provoke and challenge the fashion world. Her designs after punk built on her love affair with history and the DIY aesthetic's intrinsic roughness, embracing a heightened level of intertext and a more refined sense of bricolage.

For her July 1990 runway at the Pitti Palace in Florence, Italy, Westwood's 'Cut N Slash' menswear collection merged the Renaissance fashion of slashed

tunics with the contemporary readings that can be placed on sliced fabric. The collection performed a critique of complex themes surrounding constructions of the body, its cultural and historic functions, and its potential for androgyny (Ash 1992: 167-85). In her typically unorthodox manner, Westwood's opening silhouette – a long white Oxford shirt – was modelled by a woman. As she rounded the second half of her walk, the solitary model paused her stride to shave a male model's lather-covered face with a straight razor, viscerally introducing the 'slashed' pieces (Ash 1992: 168, 172) and reminding the audience of her hands-on design pedigree. In the same breath, Westwood nonverbally asserts flexibility of gendered garments and undermines the constructed aspects of identity, effectively slashing through assumptions. As a finale to her provocative collection, Westwood surprised her audience with a direct reference to art, gender, and the past. In her own words:

> And I came out with the fig-leaf tights on (at the end of Cut 'N Slash) and with a shirt on over. I like to put the cat among the pigeons, so I just came out with those flesh coloured tights. […] Some people from *Vogue* were saying how it would have looked vulgar if it wasn't for Vivienne being able to carry it off on the catwalk. And others said, 'My wife's her age, and if she ever contemplated such a costume, I'd turn her out of the house.' So I liked that. (Ash 1992: 170)

Westwood's unique bricolage approach that merges identity performance and textile grasps contemporary anxieties surrounding the body – appearance, gender performance, exposure – and quotations from historical costumes and art, deftly applying all to the fashion-object. The bricolage evident in Westwood's fig-leaf tights (Figure 15) distil these key elements into a singular, empowering, and performative garment.[6]

[6] These confrontational tights use a historical motif to comment on contemporary issues surrounding the body, modesty and covering. They mimic the sixteenth-century Catholic conceit of the fig leaf, whose retrospective application onto the genitals of classical Greco-Roman statuary was intended to shield eyes from the figures' immodest nudity. This matched the contemporary Renaissance practice of coyly hiding nudes' genitals and breasts behind tactful branches, hands, and hair. These conventions work to instate modesty and a sense of Christian morality. The fig

Westwood can easily be described as having cut her teeth and developed her style during the meteoric rise of punk. Each of her signature elements – i.e. playing with historical quotations and highly tactile materials like leather and latex, subverting traditional rules of patternmaking with exaggerated drapes or purposeful lacunae – reappears in each post-punk collection she reveals. And while British history is her preferred well, Westwood's historical references all hinge on a sense of romanticism and drama.

Figure 15 Vivienne Westwood. c. 1989. 'Fig Leaf Tights', modelled by Sara Stockbridge.

Her 1988 'Time Machine Suit' (Figure 16) recalls Victorian Imperialism and her then-recent collaboration with Harris Tweed. The 'Time Machine Suit' is a return to nineteenth-century fabric[7] and construction practices: Harris Tweed is a

leaf itself has biblical connotations: following Adam and Eve's fall from grace and their new-found shame in nudity, they surreptitiously cover themselves with leaves, most often represented in art as from the fig tree. Westwood's tights with their glass fig-leaf turn this viewpoint of the body on its head.

[7] During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, wool was considered the most hygienic and desirable fabric as it protected the body, was easy to brush clean, and maintained its shape. As such, wool was a dominant fabric in nineteenth-century clothing alongside muslin, silk, and later jacquard silks, linens, and cottons.

nostalgic material, with a brand mythology that recalls cottage industry artisan weavers in the Outer Hebrides and Scottish heritage. From the construction perspective, the suit's cut mimics the shooting costume of a late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century gentleman. However, the overall effect of the ensemble is more evocative of a child's parody of adult clothing with its high socks, scuffed brogues and light camel cap.

Figure 16 Vivienne Westwood. AW1988. 'Time Machine Suit'. held at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The stately masculinity of the look's source material is thus turned on its head, with the sensation of juvenile mimicry. It is from the context of looks like 'Time Machine Suit', 'Fig Leaf Tights' and Jordan's introspective bricolage that steampunk is born. It owes its aesthetic foundation to Westwood's reinvention of nineteenth-century shapes and the punk subculture's relationship with bricolage and DIY spirit. From the perspective of subculture, the impulses behind 'renewing, recycling, and reinventing' (Pagliassotti 2013: 66) are found in introspection, community, and subversion. And as McRobbie's analysis of punk *bricoleurs* attests, bricolage is a material protest to patriarchal normativity, and that gender plays a critical role in *how* these bricolaged items come to be (McRobbie 1980: 25-26). Before delving further into this discussion, it behoves

the argument's rigour to first address the context of steampunk fashion in general before moving into the specificities of gender. With so many perspectives on what makes an object or garment steampunk, the desire for a comprehensive guide is understandable. From my research, there are two key style guides in terms of distribution and content.

STEAMPUNK FASHION: ARE THERE RULES?

G.D. Falksen's *A Sense of Structure: Steampunk Fashion Rules* (Tor.com, 2008) is among the earliest guides to steampunk fashion that I've found. Republished for a wider *Buzzfeed* as *The 6 Rules of Steampunk Fashion* (2013), this brief text advises those new to Steampunk style to begin with steampunk fiction as a foundation, as the fashion is a direct quotation thereof (Rule One). With the literary canon at the front of his mind, Falksen suggests that people new to steampunk dress layer their ensemble with pieces or objects that invoke or mimic Victorian aesthetic (Rule Two). He also recommends the thoughtful use, or disuse, of 'steampunk status symbols' like goggles (Rule Three). Objects like goggles have become ubiquitous in steampunk fashion, and function in a way that semioticians could comfortably describe as signposting (Hebdige 1979, 1983; Hall 1980, 1996). This Saussurian comprehension of loaded social objects and materiality would suggest that goggles be read as the steampunk equivalent of the punk's leather jacket or the mod's tailored suit.

However, I find reading steampunk material cultures in semiotic terms lacking. It suggests an aesthetic checklist – rather than the toolkit suggested by Perschon (2012) or spectrum pioneered by Priest (Nevins 2011) – and relies heavily on visual signposting, something that is at once contested and consistent in subculture studies (McRobbie 1980, Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003, Klein 2003, Entwistle 2015). In Falksen's final rule, the deviation from Hebdige's conventions comes into focus:

> Have fun and be yourself. That's what this is about. Don't feel compelled to conform with everyone else. Don't feel shy about posting just because you don't want to dress like the other people

> who you've seen post. And don't post with the question "do you guys think this is steampunk enough?" Post with the statement "I feel that this is steampunk, and here is why I think so." (Falksen 2013)

In this final rule, Falksen strikes at the crux of many researchers' key hurdle while unpacking steampunk: when you step away from semiotic readings of cultural dress, you are confronted with the issue of explaining how or why the garments fit securely inside that culture. While the above passage from Falksen (Rule Six) alleges that personal taste and choice are key to steampunk dress, the previous five 'rules' impose strictures of aesthetic and influence that play directly into the 'plug-and-play' methodology. Falksen encourages the wearer to justify how their choices are part of the steampunk narrative rather than asking their peers on Internet platforms if it meets *their* criteria for steampunk, meshing with McRobbie's revision of Hebdige (McRobbie 1980). This latter tactic tends to lead to a fairly even split of answers: around half (or sometimes more) will encourage the person to continue growing their steampunk style, while the other half will highlight the asker's points of deviation from what they – the armchair connoisseur – perceives as real steampunk. Without the semiotic rigidity of signposted or not signposted, analysing steampunk's aesthetic becomes further complicated because each time we must answer the question: what is steampunk?

On the surface, Falksen's sixth rule suggests that there's no need to answer this question up-front. That by confidently wearing and asserting the steampunk-ness of an object or ensemble it becomes such. However, in practice, his earnest content maintains a sense of policing and 'correct' actions. This comes to particular focus when re-read alongside his fifth rule, which suggests that interest in other genres be held separate from Steampunk dress:

> You are allowed to like other genres. If you like a style of fashion that does not fit into steampunk (Enlightenment era, Pulp Adventure, Mod 60s, Medieval, etc.) be proud of it. Do not feel compelled to try and wedge it under the steampunk caption […] you are all diverse and well-rounded people with differing interests. Let that be a source of pride. (Falksen 2013)

On the surface, this is a positive statement that acknowledges that people have a broad interest in fantasy – and that they don't have to feel boxed-in by the steampunk aesthetic. However, it also suggests that steampunk and the Enlightenment era (for example) cannot coexist in a singular aesthetic. This contradictory statement is as potentially damaging as it is incorrect. Take as an example Tom Banwell's 'Dr. Beulenpest' and 'Ichabod' masks (Figures 17A and 17B), which are widely acknowledged as part of the steampunk canon and take seventeenth and eighteenth-century plague doctors as inspiration (Donovan 2012).

Figure 17A Tom Banwell. 2010. 'Dr Beulenpest' plague doctor mask.

Figure 17B Tom Banwell. 2011. 'Ichabod' mask.

Banwell began his plague doctor leatherworking project in 2010 with a goal of historical accuracy. Using seventeenth-century engravings as his source material, Banwell stitched together his 'Classic' mask. Designed to combat the spread of disease via miasma – the theory that foul odours and putrid air carried infections – the original mask shielded the wearer from this disease-causing air, replacing

it with the aroma of perfumed clothes packed into the long cone (Banwell, undated).

Figure 18 'Classic' plague doctor mask (2010)

While working on the 'Classic' mask (Figure 18), Banwell began to tinker with how he could translate this early-modern medical style into a piece of Steampunk costume. Worked in vegetable-tanned leather – a trait all Banwell's masks have – the 'Dr. Beulenpest' mask was his first merger of the two worlds. Adding a cold-cast resin beak to the cone and mis-matched eye sockets, the mask's riveted and hand-stitched appearance diverges from the 'Classic'. These aesthetic, avian changes introduce a mix of materials that match the vibe of steampunk without relying on any of its signature signposts. The leather has a violet undertone, the noseplate a brass finish, and the mis-matched eyepieces mimic nuts and bolts in their shape.

Moving in a more refined direction, the 'Ichabod' has a crane-like face with a cold-cast beak and eye sockets featuring subtle bas relief. When styled with Banwell's 'Top Hat', the 'Ichabod' takes on the vibe of an aristocratic dandy, perhaps attending a costume or masked ball. So, while 'Dr. Beulenpest' matches assumptions about traditional steampunk colour palettes, 'Ichabod' meets the gentlemanly grandeur that Falksen's essay articulates. And yet, Falksen's arguments exclude Banwell's plague doctor collection. Despite there being no

clear link to the nineteenth-century or Neo-Victorian style, the 'Dr. Beulenpest' and 'Ichabod' masks are readily recognisable as steampunk (Donovan 2012). How can this be?

I believe that reasons behind the ready inclusion of Banwell's entire oeuvre in the steampunk material canon – despite its earlier source material –is two-fold. Firstly: many of Banwell's other works fit comfortably inside the strict steampunk visual canon as Falksen describes it. For example, Banwell's 'Underground Explorer' (Figures 19A and 19B) was featured at *Steampunk*, an international exhibition of steampunk materials at the University of Oxford Museum of the History of Science (2009-2010), curated by designer Art Donovan.

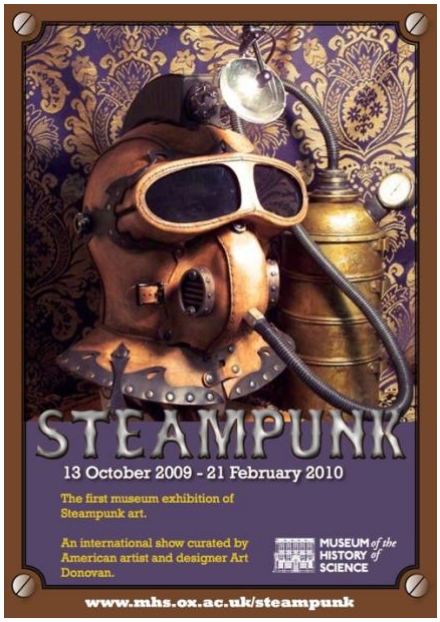


Figure 19A *Steampunk* exhibition programme (2009) and Figure 19B 'Underground Explorer' mask (2009)

For this piece, Banwell took inspiration from a toy spaceman's helmet, using its shape to create the pattern for an adventurer's helmet. In terms of materials, Banwell uses his signature leather and resin for 'Underground Explorer', utilising plastic and fibreglass to support the helmet's structure as well as sculpt the headlamp's comb mount. The dynamic leather trims, metal rivets and respirator with coordinating saddle-brown oxygen tank are a direct match to the Jules Verne-esque technoaesthetic that Falksen describes. This same attention to detail

in the colour palette, hand-stitched leatherwork and riveting is carried across all Banwell's pieces, which leads to the second half of the argument.

This side is more emotional, more intuitive: all Banwell's masks – the plague doctors included – *feel* steampunk. His aesthetic attention – i.e. those fine details – as well as his creation of full [steampunk] fictional storylines for each piece solidify Banwell's intention and execution. When Banwell begins a project, it is with his personal reading of steampunk in mind, and his work practice flows from this personal space. Looking at objects such as this, Falksen's 'rule' about including inspiration outside of the Neo-Victorian becomes more problematic. He – Falksen – operates from a common perspective that clear Victorian influence is a requisite for steampunk style, i.e., that makers' work can be included or denied following a semiotic approach. And Banwell's plague doctors miss many of the Victorian signposts. The plague would be an unlikely subject for Neo-Victorian fiction, as there were no major outbreaks of the plague in the long nineteenth century. Additionally, these masks follow the low-tech miasmic air filtration approach – visible as small holes along the underside of the cones – rather than integrating respirators as the vast majority of his masks do. And, returning to Falksen's rules: if the importance of a semiotic case must be made, then the argument is fairly straight-forward: both 'Dr. Beulenpest' and 'Ichabod' integrate protective lenses that can easily be read as a riff on the ubiquitous brass goggles, thus meeting subjective aesthetic criteria in an objective manner.

That established, Falksen does take pains to point out that goggles are not a requisite to steampunk dress and may of course be left aside if they don't match with your character's storyline. And so, the plague doctor collection could be left in a limbo following just Falksen's list. However, this refusal isn't the spirit Falksen intended: his proposed rules are meant to provide structure and suggest that steampunk stick to Victorian shapes and styles if not a Victorian colour palette. In this way, the rhetoric of *A Sense of Structure* simultaneously encourages steampunk community members to investigate their own sense of style, while also contending that they will have to defend their choices and keep

clear of other fantasy categories. And with the entire oeuvre of a known maker like Banwell not sitting comfortably inside the rulebook – despite its appearance in steampunk's international museum debut at Oxford – then how can any maker feel confident in their design choices? This begs the question: does Falksen's article illustrate the dominant thoughts on steampunk dress culture? Or is he instead just one voice in many?

G.D. Falksen's is not the only steampunk style-guide readily available online and enjoying high circulation. Published a year prior to Falksen's *A Sense of Structure*, Libby Bulloff also uses a list structure to deliver her 'Steam Gear: A Fashionable Approach to the Lifestyle' (*SteamPunk Magazine,* 2007). Unlike Falksen's decidedly Victorian and contextual list, Bulloff approaches her article as a list of aesthetic archetypes that can be adopted as either a starting point or a source of inspiration as garments and looks are refined. Again unlike Falksen, Bulloff's guide accounts for the prominence of steamsonas, as each of her four archetypes provides stage directions for character performances. These four non-gendered archetypes – the street urchin/chimney sweep, the tinkerer inventor, the explorer, and the dandy/aesthete – all provide a foundation stone for steamsona building: a subject that Falksen excludes.[8] Indeed, Falksen's prescriptive list includes very little on character work, instead focusing on the importance of meeting aesthetic checkpoints (semiotics). Bulloff, by contrast, signals a shift to McRobbie's understanding of bricolage, and the shifting contexts achieved through gender, identity, and response to patriarchal expectations and social configurations. These four character groupings cover a range of socio-economic classes and engage with both vocation and lifestyle.

Bulloff's casual writing style and friendly tone encourage readers to explore clothing that incorporates wider historic contexts, silently considering

[8] Later retitled 'Steampunk Fashion: Four Styles', the text is reproduced in Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chamber's *The Steampunk Bible* to introduce the materials and modes of Steampunk dress. (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 138-141)

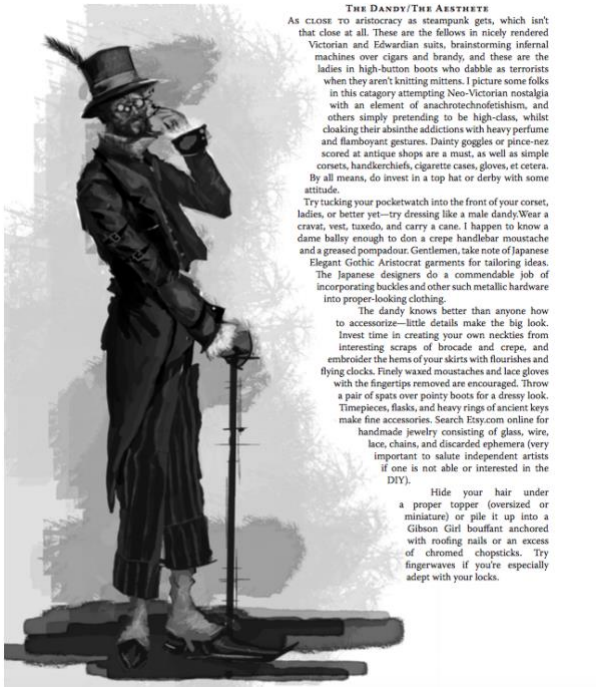
that her readers come from a variety of backgrounds and may look for inspiration beyond a specific reading of Neo-Victorian cultures. Of the many non-Victorian cultures that Bulloff alludes to as influences to steampunk, she specifically cites punk and the Gibson Girl. As this is a popular rather than academic work, this practice is more of a name-drop than description, leaving the reader to understand in what ways the Gibson Girl's fashionable, feminine, and athletic style – the gold standard of early twentieth-century American women – can be used as an influence for steampunk dress. This reader imagines that Bulloff's quotation of the Gibson Girl stems from her signature curled up-do, her independence, and her iconic S-curve corseted body. The Gibson Girl's style was fashionable, but also facilitated her ability to move freely in public spaces. Her world was one of refinement and subtle rebellion, an ideal springboard for Bulloff's 'aesthete' group.

Where many online steampunk style guides I've uncovered take pains to preface their outline with the critical relevance of Victorian or Edwardian-inspired source material (Falksen 2013, *Steampunk Heaven* 2017; *Steampunk it!* 2018; *Historical Emporium* 2017; etc.) and in doing explain how to be 'included', Bulloff openly announces that she won't engage in this practice. She's averse to such pre-emptive explanations of worthiness, stating:

> […] we rotate in circles online that challenge traditional Victorian societal restrictions, so I have endeavored to classify these subsequent modes of dress in a manner that does not restrict any steampunk to one specific assemblage (Bulloff 2007: 8).

Bulloff's introductory passage is one of inclusion, which acknowledges that her audience may be more interested in the more hands-on, subversive elements of steampunk. In his essay on the subject broads, iconic maker Jake von Slatt explains that in his experience, many people are drawn to steampunk as it spurns the digital for a simpler, more hands-on culture (von Slatt 2010). Bulloff's style guide engages this secondary group alongside those with Victorian interests, immediately informing them that, however they engage with steampunk, their mode of dress is correct and appropriate: they shouldn't feel the need to explain

why it's steampunk. Bulloff's reading of the subject is as a fluid, generative field. While steampunk was (at Bulloff's publication) and still is a charged cultural environment, it is also malleable, which the accompanying illustrations (Figures 20 and 21) underscore.



THE DANDY/THE AESTHETE

As close to aristocracy as steampunk gets, which isn't that close at all. These are the fellows in nicely rendered Victorian and Edwardian suits, brainstorming infernal machines over cigars and brandy, and these are the ladies in high-button boots who dabble as terrorists when they aren't knitting mittens. I picture some folks in this catagory attempting Neo-Victorian nostalgia with an element of anachrotechnofetishism, and others simply pretending to be high-class, whilst cloaking their absinthe addictions with heavy perfume and flamboyant gestures. Dainty goggles or pince-nez scored at antique shops are a must, as well as simple corsets, handkerchiefs, cigarette cases, gloves, et cetera. By all means, do invest in a top hat or derby with some attitude.

Try tucking your pocketwatch into the front of your corset, ladies, or better yet—try dressing like a male dandy.Wear a cravat, vest, tuxedo, and carry a cane. I happen to know a dame ballsy enough to don a crepe handlebar moustache and a greased pompadour. Gentlemen, take note of Japanese Elegant Gothic Aristocrat garments for tailoring ideas. The Japanese designers do a commendable job of incorporating buckles and other such metallic hardware into proper-looking clothing.

The dandy knows better than anyone how to accessorize—little details make the big look. Invest time in creating your own neckties from interesting scraps of brocade and crepe, and embroider the hems of your skirts with flourishes and flying clocks. Finely waxed moustaches and lace gloves with the fingertips removed are encouraged. Throw a pair of spats over pointy boots for a dressy look. Timepieces, flasks, and heavy rings of ancient keys make fine accessories. Search Etsy.com online for handmade jewelry consisting of glass, wire, lace, chains, and discarded ephemera (very important to salute independent artists if one is not able or interested in the DIY).

Hide your hair under a proper topper (oversized or miniature) or pile it up into a Gibson Girl bouffant anchored with roofing nails or an excess of chromed chopsticks. Try fingerwaves if you're especially adept with your locks.

Figure 20 Colin Foran for *SteamPunk Magazine*. 2007.'The Dandy'.

Bulloff's assertions are ultimately egalitarian: while some steampunk dress is linked to Victorian or nineteenth-century class structures and history, those people who choose to work outside that contextual structure are not only free to do so, but their reading of steampunk is equally valid. When describing the 'tinkerer/inventor' archetype, Bulloff suggests that occupation (i.e. a career or hobby in science, technology, and/or engineering) is not, and perhaps should not, be considered a requisite for donning an aesthetic of goggles, tools, and protective clothing. If this were the case, there would be significantly fewer steampunks who identify with the 'dandy/aesthete' archetype (Figure 20), dressing with an aristocratic flair. This type is one of the few moments that Bulloff localises on Neo-Victorian style, with the 'dandy/aesthete' described with some nineteenth-century historical accuracy as a form of social affectation:

> I picture some folks in this category attempting Neo-Victorian nostalgia with an element of anachrotechnofetishism, and others simply pretending to be high-class, whilst cloaking their absinthe addictions with heavy perfume and flamboyant gestures (Bulloff 2007: 12).

Rather than diving into what these characters wear, or how they present themselves, Bulloff instead focuses on the emotional appeal of high-class or street-smart roleplay. Via steampunk, a self-described member of the contemporary working class finds equal freedom to role-play and engage with the aesthetics and attitudes of a Dickensian street urchin or Parisian aristocrat.

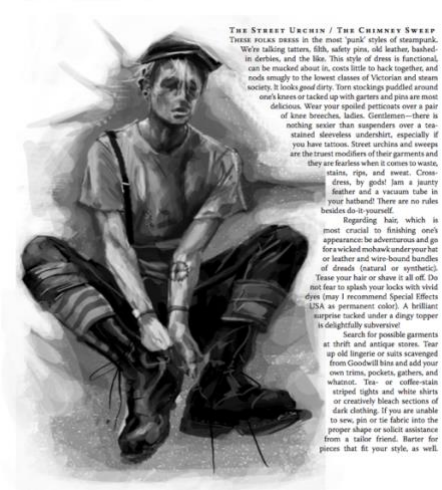


Figure 21 Colin Foran for *SteamPunk Magazine.* 2007. 'The Street Urchin'

Bulloff presents her research not as a set of rules or guidelines, but more as a bird's-eye view of the most popular steampunk styles in 2007 – and how to access them. During that time span, the majority of looks circulating both in print and on the internet were strongly influenced by nineteenth-century history, steampunk fiction and graphic novels, and to a lesser extent the burgeoning steampunk music scene. Steampunk fashion is widely acknowledged to have had its start in New York City in the 1990s, with Kit Stølen's Edwardian-meets-grunge club attire at its nexus (Figure 22) (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 132). Stølen's gritty, dark vibe is present in early 2000s/2010s steampunk dress cultures. From there steampunk clothing grew as a form of cultural dress, worn to designated events where intricate and eye-catching garments were not only

appropriate but expected. Unsurprisingly, the world of couture took notice with houses including Alexander McQueen and Prada capitalising on the sudden surge of Neo-Victorian pattern popularity.

Figure 22 Nadya Lev'. c. 2008. Portrait of Kit Stølen

In 2010, Bulloff followed-up her first fashion guide in *SteamPunk Magazine* with an essay addressing the contemporary state of steampunk style (Bulloff 2010). 'The Future of Steampunk Fashion: In Two Parts' begins with what she refers to as 'Bitchin' About the State of Things', where Bulloff addresses one of the chief issues community members cite about the culture: that they find it nigh impossible to dress steampunk in everyday life due to the extravagance of the garments or because the appropriation of steampunk semiotic signposts in mainstream dress cultures is reducing the style to a fad (Bulloff 2007: 34). Bulloff calls out these statements as fallacies while pinpointing the crux of the issue:

> Thus, it's not mainstream interest that makes steam fashion fadlike – 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 steampunk look. […] Casualizing steampunk is as simple as seeing the aesthetic as broader than just cosplay affectation. The props involved in much of steampunk convention-wear, whilst interesting, are

> cumbersome and alienating, or just downright ridiculous for the office of the grocery store. (Bulloff 2007: 34)

This passage highlights the key difference between steampunk and other contemporary subcultures' dress practices: goths, cross-fitters, sneakerheads, gamers and virtually any other Anglo-American dress-led group is able to engage in their culture's fashion in a casual, daily manner that can be twisted to fit any dress code. For example, those that identify with goth culture can integrate elements of their weekend wardrobe into their office looks by mixing a garment that appeals to their goth side with a professional counterpart, or through the thoughtful integration of a cherished accessory like brooches or buttons.

As the workplace becomes more casual, it is becoming even easier to mix pieces. With the athleisure trend still dominant after ousting jeans as the ubiquitous fashion product years ago, cross-fitters can also easily integrate elements of their gym look and leisure into work attire. And the acceptance of graphic T-shirts in professional spheres allows gamers and goths alike to wear their interests whenever they like. Last but not least, the humble sneaker: with the rise of the 'dad' sneaker in 2017, the breakout success of Balenciaga's 'Triple S' and the frenzy surrounding Kanye West's Yeezy collaboration with adidas, sneakers have moved from the confines of subculture into both mainstream and luxury fashion markets.

With other groups able to integrate their interests into their casual looks, Bulloff's comment on steampunk strikes a difficult note. The props and extravagance that Bulloff notes are directly related to the steamsona. The steamsona identity lives in an alternative world where other community members readily participate in the fantasy, whereas colleagues at a day job do not – and a steampunk baroness would be out of place at a desk job. The steamsona – and its fashions – are an escape, whose storytelling is completed with the goggles, ray guns, 'functional gears' (Bulloff 2007: 34) etc. As Bulloff continues, it becomes more apparent that her frustration with the lack of casual steampunk dress may be pinned to questions of cultural reading:

> Clothes can be costumes, but not all costumes are clothes. On the other hand, the inherent timelessness of all steampunk clothing is what makes it attractive on a day-to-day basis. The finest steampunk outfits are a flirtation of formal and casual, a blend of old and new. (Bulloff 2007: 34)

The opening statement of this passage questions the meanings and performances conveyed through clothing. In the case of a wedding or dinner at a fine restaurant, the person in question wears clothes though they may feel like a costume. In these instances, the person may feel they are performing a different, more sophisticated version of themselves and with this comes a shift towards normative gender performance or shielding of behaviours. Literature from gender theorists like Butler and Halberstam asserts that this is a normal emotion that many women hold: that being in a certain space, wearing certain clothes, leads to a one-off identity performance that fails to reflect the daily self. Butler frames these situations as the performance of a *being* state; one is *being* another character, but will return to their equilibrium *becoming* performance when *being* ceases (Butler 1991). But it is not an accurate representation of who you are long-term, who you have worked on *becoming*. There is a social pressure intrinsic to many *being* performance, an expectation that in the time, space, and costume you are meant to *be* someone may not match your casual identity.

This dichotomy of *being* and *becoming* resonates with Bulloff's statement that "clothes can be costumes, but not all costumes are clothes." (Bulloff 2007: 34) Take for example the intricate costumes that women wear in steampunk spaces – conventions, Whitby Gothic Weekend, or Asylum in Lincoln. Here, the steamsona is part of a *being* performance, one that these women may not know (or care) to translate the key elements of their style into the casual-wear that demonstrates their *becoming* narratives. Bulloff sees the resolution to this issue to be readily at hand. She believes that the solution is the same bricolage design ethos that Jordan, Westwood, and countless punks engaged with to create their everyday looks that are at once clothing and costume – and not necessarily Victorian:

> Fighting the mainstream by DIY is both cunning and affordable. One does not have to be rich or thin to look great in casual steampunk garb, and the most fantastic items for padding your steampunk wardrobe don't have a little label discerning them as steampunk, either. […] Don't limit yourself to wearing only clothes with a Victorian flair. Other antique, vintage, and ethnic influences definitely bring new interest to your wardrobe, and keep the mainstream from copying your look. (Bulloff 2007: 34)

As this passage exposes, Bulloff champions steampunk that pushes boundaries and does not rely on semiotic markers – like goggles, gears, bustles, or corsets – to create its looks. This advice, more so than that of Falksen, is visible in the wardrobes of iconic steampunk women. Women whose modes of dress hinge more on their *becoming* – their identity, gender performance, and bricolage approach – than their adherence to Neo-Victorian tropes or a set of rules. Reading the looks of these women as a female steampunk canon, rather than relying on style guidelines, ushers in new context – and a wider field – for subcultural dress. These women are visible on social media, television, and the convention circuit; they are not a 'bedroom' culture (McRobbie 1980), they are digitally pervasive.

ICONIC STEAMPUNK WOMEN, BRICOLAGE, AND *EKPHRASIS*

Kate 'Kato' Lambert is a Los Angeles-based steampunk designer, model, and public figure whose Instagram account chiefly features highly styled or costumed images that appeal to fans of steampunk, goth, and neo-punk erotica. Alongside these images, Kato's gallery features her casual looks. Her day looks incorporate stripes, leather, buckles, boots, leg warmers/long socks, fingerless gloves and a neutral colour palette combined with popular – or mainstream – elements like ripped jeans, knit caps, large-lens sunglasses, blanket scarves, or platform shoes (Figure 23).

Figure 23 post from January 19, 2018

As a judge on the 2015 Game Show Network (GSN) programme *Steampunk'd*, Kato appears in looks that are in the liminal space between casual and formal that Bulloff describes. Combining elements from *Project Runway*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *The Great Interior Design Challenge*, and the wider elimination competition trend, *Steampunk'd* challenges makers from across the United States to design and execute a story, set design, characters and costumes in a three-day window using their DIY skills. Alongside Thomas Willeford (Brute Force Studios) and Matt Yang King (*World of Steam*), Kato is a permanent judge who is chiefly responsible for delivering the costume design challenges and critiquing the execution of sewing projects. Unlike host Jeannie Mai's theatrical costumes, Kato consistently chose more understated looks that combine simple pieces with statement garments from her Dracula Clothing: Steampunk Couture line.

Figure 24 *Steampunk'd*. September 9, 2015. screencapture of Kato in Season 1 Episode 4

In episode four of *Steampunk'd*, Kato delivers a thrift store design challenge wearing a look that encapsulates Bulloff's argument, with added flair (Figure 24). For this ensemble, Kato integrated a basic black tank top and striped trousers (her own design) – with more recognisably steampunk elements like goggles, flying cap and aviation-inspired leather bolero. Kato appears simultaneously comfortable, casual, coherent, and tastefully sexy. When worn by the visibly confident Kato, even costume elements begin to feel like clothing: the flying cap and goggles feel natural and unforced, easily integrated into her look as casual accessories. She performs these garments as her *becoming*, which is understandable given the importance of her persona as 'Kato' to her fashion and erotica empire. Kato's attitude is a punk, Do-It-Yourself ethic that her designs readily convey: her pieces are inspired by upcycling, mixing vintage and contemporary pattern elements, and are the product of bricolage. Though Kato's style keeps with the Neo-Victorian side of steampunk, her integration of bright colours – usually via hair dye or a vibrant tank-top – demonstrates the flexibility Bulloff craved in 2010 and a trend shift I've noticed in the past two years.

The majority of my early visual research has shown browns, blacks, white, creams, navy, burgundy, royal purple and arsenic green as the most popular

colours for steampunk garments. I noticed that a small minority elected to step outside these Victorian colour palettes, with a select few electing to dress in bright hues like pink, lime, orange, cherry red, or pastels. Those who did were often referencing a time outside the widely touted Neo-Victorian catchment – for example, French Rococo or nineteenth-century Vietnam – and as such were faced with the task of explaining how their look fitted steampunk (Falksen 2013). The combination of Victorian style with loud colour schemes seemed to exist only as outliers. Victorian influence again reigned over patterns and prints with jacquard, paisley, plaid, and stripes appearing the most often.

Again, the use of a fabric like silk brocade or featuring a contemporary print was limited to a select few who explore cultures outside the Victorian scope. In these instances, the steamsona or cosplay character are cited as the explanation of why the costume falls outside the expectation of a Neo-Victorian aesthetic. One of the earliest 'outliers' is blogger, activist, and science fiction editor Diana M. Pho. In her alter-ego, Ay-leen the Peacemaker, Pho merges her desire to improve steampunk's representation of other cultures, while celebrating her Vietnamese heritage and American upbringing. Describing her steamsona Ay-leen in VanderMeer and Chambers's *The Steampunk Bible* (2011), Pho states her viewpoint on steampunk as:

> A transcultural blend of East and West… My 'steamsona' has a backstory based on alternative historical Indochina, where China and Japan are superpowers actively competing with European nations for control over Southeast Asia, and that's how the area becomes a center for multicultural interaction. (148)

Pho's narrative engages with a similar historical impulse as Neo-Victorian steampunk. Pho uses cultural building blocks like Vietnamese traditional dress and literature to grow her aesthetic, and to develop her looks (Figures 25A and 25B):

> My character wears Vietnamese *áo dais* with tall Victorian boots and waistcoats, she gets Empire dresses made from silk brocade, and she totes a steam-powered Chinese hand cannon as her weapon of choice. She speaks French, Vietnamese, English, and

> pidgin Chinese, and she's able to share in other cultures while remaining proud of her own. (VanderMeer and Chambers: 148)

Pho is regularly photographed in an *áo dài* look (Figure 26A) that hinges on its bold colour blocking. The tunic is half red/half black, with its sharp vertical split drawing attention to the garment's length. Rather than choosing the traditional flowing silk palazzo-style trousers that generally accompany the tunic, Pho chose a more fitted style that allows her to integrate tall lace-up boots. The waistcoat facilitates the addition of buttons and other accessories without risking damage on the *áo dài*'s delicate material. And providing structure that the flowing *áo dài* traditionally does not, Pho wears a brocade underbust corset between the tunic and waistcoat.

Figure 25A (left) Rachel Shane. May 2013 Diana M. Pho as Ay-leen
Figure 25B (right)Rachel Shane. May 2013. Pho's author headshot

Like a majority of steampunk looks, Pho's *áo dài* is far from minimalist. It layers contexts, textures, diverse fabric and personal history to generate a unified scheme that performs her steamsona while still representing her *becoming*. To achieve this scheme, Pho relies on bricolage. Without the aesthetic structure of her character's personality, this intertextual mixture of traditional Vietnamese garb and Neo-Victorian steampunk staples (corset, boots, and lace mitts) would read as discordant rather than achieving her autobiographical intent. In terms of

gender performance, the *áo dài*'s mythologised heritage and diaphanous character are strongly linked to portrayals of youthful femininity and a link back to their homeland for the Vietnamese diaspora (Lieu 2000: 131). That the *áo dài* is a loaded, significant garment for a second-generation American like Pho furthers the impact of its use in her steampunk looks; the *áo dài* is a form of introspection, and its signalling of her *becoming* is honoured through her bricolaged steampunk look.

Likewise, in her 'Empire' – read: Neo-Victorian – gown, she again uses bricolage to mix brightly coloured Asian-inspired silk brocade into a corseted-and-bustled silhouette (Figure 25B). This garment is a more obvious fusion between Pho's cultural heritage and steampunk's Neo-Victorian origins. While watching a behind-the-scenes reel of Pho's photoshoot with Rachel Shane, the garment's movement and details become clear (Rogers 2013). The two-piece gown mimics the 1880s robe á la polonaise revival, with several deviations from the original pattern that explore Pho's personality. The brocade bodice's faux stomacher is worked in black silk with gold embroidery, with the lapels and sleeve cuffs cut from the same cloth. Providing necessary colour contrast, the remainder of the gown is cut from a lustrous cobalt blue brocade, again heavily worked in gold, with a subtle bustle and a few of the polonaise's signature swags. Accessorised with the same black lace mitts as her *áo dài* ensemble, Pho's two styles demonstrate the diverse influences she considers while creating her looks. Where thoughtful bricolage creates each look, its context pulls Pho's full steampunk wardrobe into a cohesive whole. And that context is her steamsona.

My research evidences that steamsonas are linked directly to steampunk's origins in fiction, and that narrative is in turn the critical building block for all forms of steampunk dress: whether costume or clothing. Furthermore, I argue that the steamsona is not merely a form of personal narrative – an intermingling of introspection, culture, and comprehension of steampunk aesthetic – but also a form of romance. The character's motivations are built following a truncated formula of *definition*, *attraction*, *barrier*, and *recognition*; the key difference

between the steamsona and literary romance is that the relationship is between the creator and steampunk subculture itself. The steamsona is a ballad to the culture and to self. And its performance – the performative utterances of costuming and acting – is a feedback loop of *definition/recognition*. This intertextual formula is further penetrated by *inverse ekphrasis*, wherein the actor's art – the steamsona and their costume – mimic an inward-looking truth.

For those who do not engage in character work – like Carriger (Wolfe 2009) – the *inverse ekphrasis* of their steampunk *becoming* narrative substitutes the fictional personality. Any costume requires some level of narrative – of fiction – to create a context which explains the looks details, and as fiction is the foundation of steampunk dress, this material narrative alongside the *becoming* data of the look's creator stands in lieu of a character. I believe that canonical steampunk literature's reliance on nineteenth-century history has led directly to the misconception that dress must link directly to Neo-Victorian aesthetic in order to qualify as steampunk.

I would argue against this impulse. Looking only at the small sample of looks I've discussed up to this point, Neo-Victorian aesthetic alone does not account for each look. For steampunk, expression style and personality is a principle priority – whether that of personal identity, a steamsona, or a cosplay character. The garments are the expressive vehicle personal narrative, whether it be in costume (*being*) or clothing (*becoming*). And while I do believe that the consumption of canonical material is a core starting point, it is the wider scope of steampunk culture and popular entertainment (novels, music, film, maker content, etc.) that generate the bulk of the aesthetic's source material: source material that is uniquely combined by each maker and community member via bricolage.

BRICOLAGE, THE PILLAR OF STEAMPUNK STYLING

Speaking on the appeal of steampunk fiction, *i09* contributor Annalee Newitz remarks:

> *Boneshaker* is squarely in the Steampunk wheelhouse, though I love that it can also be read as an alternative history of the Civil War. Is it commercial? Yes, but Steampunk has always been commercialized – that's the story of all punk, really, going back to Malcolm McLaren marketing the Sex Pistols as a brand (VanderMeer and Chambers: 64).

Newitz's comparison of punk and steampunk to a brand resonates with the argument that steampunk is an evolving aesthetic amalgam rather than a canon. From the perspective of my experience in fashion marketing, teasing brand DNA out of a collection in a way the market will understand feels shallow and commercial. And yet, the brand's DNA – the thing that makes it commercial – is also the very thing that makes it unique. For both punk and steampunk, the core genetic block is the same: bricolage. Where punk fashions layer strong material contrasts – mohair cobweb jumpers and latex A-line skirts– with confrontational style, steampunk's DNA is the layering of time periods, mixing soft materials with industrial grit, and above all practicing introspection that moves beyond the binary scope of patriarchal social structures.

The combination of a reinforced leather corset with a ruffled silk blouse, or copper juxtaposed with stiff wool can immediately communicate steampunk in a manner that semiotic signifiers such as goggles or top hats alone cannot. They *feel* and perform steampunk, without the utterance of 'Victorian'. Their tactile assembly is communicative, is performative. In this material context, Bulloff's push for casual steampunk clothing suddenly feels attainable. That punk and steampunk's respective identities rely on bricolage, and are developed through experimentation, means that professional designers, self-taught makers and amateur DIY-ers have common ground where they can comfortably meet the culture. Thus, bricolage brand DNA translates into the cultural commerciality that Newitz references. As anyone can layer objects and generate meaning, these 'punk' cultures are accessible for a wide scope of consumers and creators alike.

As with punk, choosing which elements to layer – and which to remake or create – is the most personal element of steampunk fashion and is what makes theoretically contextualising each look difficult. This crucial element – bricolage

practice – is what makes steampunk and also can break it. The flexibility of personal choice is what leads writers like Falksen and Nevins to become critical of looks that deviate from their Neo-Victorian perspective, or lack any semiotic markers. This same level of personality and choice is what I believe causes the arguments and pre-emptive comments that argue whether something is or is not steampunk based on its aesthetics. In particular, the conflict over whether or not the application of gears onto an object/garment makes it 'real' steampunk, or if non-Victorian historical references are 'authentic' regularly play out.

The resulting suggestion that any non-Victorian steampunk is a simulation or self-parody both alienates and harms the culture's growth and stymies creativity. Because bricolage – the building block of both punk and steampunk style – is personal, those who disagree on a personal level feel justified to explain why something fails or succeeds to meet their expectations. Yet this same negativity is a positive force as it is among the *raisones d'être* for communities like the British Steampunk Community, the Ministry of Steampunk Artistes, the Edinburgh Steampunk Society, the Glasgow Ubiquitous E. Steampunk Society, the Pandora Society, the Big River Steampunk Convention, Weekend at the Asylum, Whitby Gothic Weekend and more: they create a safe space for local expression.

In analysing DIY practice in steampunk womenswear, I've found that there's a divide between two forms of making: upcycling garments and dressmaking. Upcycling includes thrifting, adapting, and reworking vintage or contemporary garments to fit with the wearer's synthesis of steampunk aesthetic. For vintage or second-hand objects, the bricolage upcycle gives the piece an afterlife – and has the added attraction of being more sustainable than off-the-rack purchasing (something that steampunk makers are becoming increasingly more conscious of). Upcycling as an element of bricolage introduces aspects of personal taste to an extant object, crafting a new message through previously unrelated objects. When upcycling a garment, there are several different methods that makers use to create garments. One option is additive:

keeping the garment's shape and changing its appearance through embellishments. Among the more iconic pieces in the steampunk convention circuit is steampunk romance author Gail Carriger's 'Spoons' corset.

UPCYCLING CASE STUDY: GAIL CARRIGER'S 'SPOONS' CORSET

Between 2006 and 2007, Carriger reworked one of her older, slightly worn-out corsets with buttons, beads, and brass spoons (Figure 26). Describing the corset's make-up, Carriger explains, 'the top part is a Dark Garden corset that I deconstructed (read: tore apart)' (VanderMeer and Chambers: 143). Dark Garden, based in San Francisco, California, is among the top corsetry specialists in the US, counting neo-burlesque icon Dita Von Teese among their clientele.

Figure 26 Gail Carriger's 'Spoons' Corset (posted to Instagram December 24, 2017)

With an ethos that celebrates body positivity and actively allies itself with the San Francisco queer community, Dark Garden's relationship with California-native Carriger is a natural match, particularly given Carriger's past working as a corsetiere (North 2012). Following her Instagram, it appears that Carriger is a devotee of the brand, as she references Dark Garden as the designer of nearly

every corset she's seen wearing. To create her 'Spoons' corset, Carriger began by removing the tattered lace overlay and repairing the elements that were in disrepair (Figure 27). The red satin lining then became the dominant colour. To make the corset her own, Carriger then attached a chain belt (1980s) with nylon thread along the bottom seam. This belt serves an aesthetic purpose as well as practical: Carriger regularly uses the hoops to hang pouches, pockets, and convention badges. Moving upwards, she stitched silver and gold metal buttons as well as glass beads to create a shimmering pattern. Along the bustline, Carriger attached brass teaspoons (1940s or 1950s)[9] thrifted from a garage sale.

Figure 27 'Spoons' corset, before upcycling. 2007.

Though she doesn't state this outright in the blogpost dedicated to this project (Carriger April 2013), I've deduced that the teaspoons' inclusion in the silhouette is a reference to her love of tea. In every novel, the act of drinking or taking tea is included – and is something Carriger blogs about frequently. The occurrence of tea-related fashion extends beyond the 'Spoons' corset, as she has shared images of herself wearing a leather teacup holster on her waist and carrying a teapot-shaped handbag (Figure 28). So, while the eponymous spoons lend an air of

[9] Carriger gives two different bracket dates for these spoons. In *The Steampunk Bible* she explains that they're from the 1950s. However, in her blog, she describes them as being from a decade earlier. As her blog post is more recent (2013), I will guess that its dating information is closer to the truth. (Carriger April 2013)

whimsy to the garment, they are also a direct link to Carriger's personality – and by extension, her personal narrative. And personal narrative, as I will explore in the next chapter, is a crucial element of any type of steampunk dress.

Figure 28 Carriger carrying her black teapot handbag (Posted to Instagram August 20, 2018)

Returning to 'Spoons', Carriger originally finished the corset's aesthetic by attaching buttons over the busk using brass paperclips to anchor them. As Carriger's blog explains, these make-shift busk cover buttons were later replaced with purpose-built items sourced from online marketplace Etsy (Ibid). Carriger's layering of new, vintage and tired objects is a prime example of bricolage's creative power for upcyclers. However, just as with punk, not all steampunk garments are the product of DIY upcycling. Some are the product of established and developing designer talents. This is the case with Carriger's consciously-ekphrastic *Changeless* gown.

The cover of *Changeless* (2010) features Alexia in a teal walking gown. The cover is again modelled by Donna Ricci, who wears one of her own Clockwork Couture designs. After the book's release, Carriger commissioned a copy of Alexia's gown to wear at events (see p. viii). On her blog, Carriger explains this decision:

> *Deeper meaning*: It matches the cover of my second novel, Changeless. Although I've made some adjustments and modifications. It isn't a color I would normally choose but the teal

> is one of the reasons I love it, it stands out. I use this outfit to emphasize my author activities.
>
> *How I acquired it*: I ordered the top and skirt in a custom color from Clockwork Couture. I paired it with my Dark Garden pinstripe pointed Victorian under-bust corset with vest detailing, over a black Max Studio 1920s influence dress. (Carriger Nov. 2013)

In a previous blog entry devoted to her heroine's wardrobe – 'Alexia's Clothes' (Carriger August 2012) – Carriger describes her commissioned gown as 'self cosplay', a concept that presents an interesting duality. On the first level, 'self cosplay' could refer to a convergence of Carriger and her own literary creation. However, on the second, 'self cosplay' could refer to a liminal *being* action of guising as the imagined self. Carriger's clothing forms a *being* author instance rather than a longer-form *becoming* author. Following this second programme of cosplay images, Carriger reveals that she wrote herself into Alexia. That Alexia's story grew into Carriger's own *becoming* narrative that, through dress, negotiates her own multivalent identity. This writerly *inverse ekphrasis* neatly takes the place of a steamsona, and contextualises Carriger's purchased steampunk looks, where DIY would be insufficient to create the relevant garment.

Dressmaking includes pattern making, needle skills, tailoring, and a feel for different materials: skills that aren't entirely necessary for upcycled looks. Whether by a hobbyist or designer working on inventory and bespoke pieces, each garment is designed with a woman's body in mind. This presents yet another distinction from upcycling, where often the base garment is pre-existing and tailored for its new life. Among the more commercially successful steampunk designers I've uncovered, Kim Ryser's *Steam Ingenious* Etsy shop sells patterns, read-to-wear, and bespoke garments.[10] In the spirit of providing a direct comparison, the following case study will again focus on corsetry.

[10] Since my last communication with Kim in 2015, it appears that her shop and blog have gone quiet. As she suffers from chronic back pain, it's possible that her projects are on hiatus. I wish her the best of health, and am as-ever thankful for her ready participation in my thesis research.

DRESSMAKING CASE STUDY: KIM RYSER'S FLORAL WELT CORSET

Kim Ryser, also known by her steamsona Baroness Violet von Mickelsburg, is the owner, operator, and seamstress at *Steam Ingenious*. *Steam Ingenious* is a *Steampunk Chronicle* Reader's Choice winning dressmaker, bespoke corset service and craft blog.[11] Ryser is a self-taught corsetiere, whose blog posts span reviews of popular pattern manufacturers, cosplay pattern ranges from mainstream imprints, and construction notes on her own projects and commissions – all available for purchase via her Etsy shop 'Steam Ingenious'. With the exception of her production models, each of Ryser's corsets are made to order with the customer's measurements and specific body shape in mind (Figures 29A and 29B). Ryser is particularly well known for her dramatic hip-springs and dedication to fitting women's bodies competently and comfortably. As with the majority of makers my thesis explores and, I suspect, nearly every member of the steampunk community, Ryser's thoughts on how to quantify steampunk – what steampunk *is* – informs her work. Looking to Falksen's analysis of steampunk dress, Ryser would be expected to explain *how* her work conveys the steampunk aesthetic. And, by contrast, Bulloff's analysis asserts that this is unnecessary: if Ryser labels her work as steampunk, then it is valid and authentic.

[11] *Steampunk Chronicle* is a digital periodical and digest of global Steampunk events and creativity. Their annual awards celebrate the best in Steampunk culture, with other recipients including Diana M. Pho's *Beyond Victoriana* political and feminist activism (2013) and fiction (2015), Sarah Hunter (Lady Clankington) as Steampunk Fashion Icon (2014), Thomas Willeford's maker book *The Steampunk Adventurer's Guide* and Brute Force Studios (both 2014), The Asylum in Lincoln as Best International/Non-US Convention (2012 and 2014). Their mission statement: 'Steampunk Chronicle aims to bring you the latest happenings on fashion, media modding and events relating to the steampunk genre. Our reporters scour the world far and wide to bring you up to the minute information. Bringing you the latest news from the grease stained workshops of the makers and modders to the elegant ballrooms of the world of high fashion.' (*Steampunk Chronicle* Accessed June 2016)

Figure 29A and 29B Kim Ryser. 2013. bespoke floral welt seam corset, made and modelled here by Ryser

Through her years of sewing and community engagement, Ryser has concluded that the fraught relationship between women's design work and labels of 'authentic' steampunk are informed by questions of gender:

> Here's the big thing that gets me about this attitude: it is seeking to define and limit what's "real steampunk." Real steampunk crafting, by their estimation, involves a workshop and heavy machinery. It involves skills that take years of training to achieve. It's also, by the way, an attitude that elevates traditionally masculine skills above traditionally feminine skills. When it comes down to it, I don't want to be part of any conversation that seeks to define "real steampunk" over "poseur steampunk" (2013).

Ryser's comments echo the sentiments of most women I've encountered, an incidence that I cannot mark as coincidence. Using Jess Nevins's terminology of 'prescriptivist' (Victorian canon, linked with first-wave 1990s fiction) and 'descriptivist' (aesthetic-driven, Victorian-optional, 2000s fiction), Ryser, Bulloff, and Carriger are in the 'descriptivist' category, along with Priest, Pho, Kato, and the majority of writers and makers I discuss in the course of my thesis. By contrast, the 'prescriptivist' camp is largely anonymous online commenters (Perschon 2012) or men like Nevins or Falksen who look to create parameters

for creativity. Ryser's support of this 'descriptivist' camp that supports makers of all skill and interest levels contrasts with the 'just glue some gears on it' response (Pikedevant 2011). The nay-saying of Nevins, Falksen, and Pikedevant hinges on the authority – the intrinsic correctness – of the first-wave steampunk canon. The infernal devices, masculine adventures, and Mary/Magdalene women frame the prescriptive. This dichotomous thinking situates the descriptive – figure-headed by the work of Sedia, Carriger, and Priest – as deviant. The ramifications of relating to female-authored fiction are coloured as 'soft' by the gendering of romance fiction, and assumptions surrounding women's authorship and romance (Hobson 2009, 2011; Perschon 2011, 2012). As Ryser's blog readily discloses her love of Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* novels (Ryser 2016), she opens herself to the criticism that her work is also soft, as it pulls inspiration from the same aesthetic well.

Ryser's blog expresses this concern that her art – pattern making and sewing – is not considered authentic steampunk as it doesn't involve 'heavy machinery' or an engineering workshop to accomplish. This again parallels with the state of steampunk fiction, where the female work is considered 'soft' in comparison to the canonical male forms (Perschon May 2011). Her anxiety is, thus, two-fold. The first side is the policing of what is considered steampunk, and the second is how craftsmanship impacts this worthiness. At its crux, Ryser's grievance is that this separatism of authentic vs. inauthentic, prescriptive vs. descriptive steampunk suggests that 'real' Steampunk materials are masculine, and the 'traditionally feminine skills' are less so. This devalues to *becoming* narratives of women and their identities, while reinforcing their *being*-relation to the binary male counterpart – as with the first-wave's fiction.

And yet, without these 'feminine' skills – and without the competent design skills of women like Westwood, Kato, and Ryser – there would be no steampunk dress: 'authentic' or otherwise. The suggestions that sex or gender are relevant to authenticity is itself a shambolic statement, representative of anxiety – likely towards the link between cultural popularity and commercialism – rather

than craftsmanship. And unlike upcycling, dressmaking as a process can circumvent contemporary garments entirely. Ryser begins with historical specialist patterns or costume patterns from major companies like Butterick or McCall's, then redrafts to suit her creative design and ensure fit. Each of her corsets and costumes is based on the wearer's measurements and client briefing (where applicable). And as Ryser explains in her blog, she frequently wears a corset to help her chronic back pain. This disclosure raises the following questions: aside from the garments she directly labels as convention costumes or cosplay, is there a line between steampunk costume and clothing. And, if so, is this demarcation personal preference or spatially invoked?

STEAMPUNK COSTUME OR CLOTHING: CAN IT BE BOTH?

Where the line between clothing ends and costume begins is complex and, as Bulloff explains, this space can be difficult to locate let alone explore (Bulloff 2010). Where Bulloff sees costuming – at a convention, at a meet-up, in a stylised photoshoot, during roleplay – others may see clothing. For example, the Weekend at the Asylum website takes pains to explain in that while they refer to the event as a 'costume parade', they do not mean to suggest that all participants consider their garments as costumes:

> Whilst many steampunks wear clothes rather than costumes, The Asylum Steampunk Costume Parade is the perfect place to deck out in your most splendid and eye catching outfit.
>
> (asylumsteampunk.co.uk 2018)

I find this subtle hedging indicative of the caution with which many approach steampunk dress as a subject, and the case-by-case nature of steamsona adoption. I understand this caution – or rather precaution – as being motivated by the concern of causing offence. Given that cultivating a steamsona is a popular foundational element of crafting a steampunk look, the key question for unpacking the importance of a steamsona for identity performance is if this secondary (fictional) life is a 'costume' mantle taken up (as in cosplay), or an extension of an extant identity. If this steamsona is performed as an external

entity, then the designation of costume – even cosplay in the case of behavioural changes – is appropriate. However, if this look is an extension of daily identity, then it sits most comfortably under the designation of clothing. These are the garments that clothe the person, not the character. And, as semiotic signifiers are inappropriate as labels for steampunk broadly, a similar action is equally inadequate for identifying a costume.

The Asylum's language validates its community, crafting an inclusive space. The terminology or performance choices made by its community members are what decides whether a garment is costume or clothing. And with these terms now defined on an individual level, the line between categories of steampunk women's dress becomes more complex. With this in mind, Bulloff's comment that the use of corsets, bustles, and dominance of accessories like props, weapons, goggles, spats, and hats are the critical elements that makes committing to living in steampunk dress difficult for many strikes a chord similar to the closed system she intended to avoid in her 2007 article. And, from my research of community communication, the distinction between costume and dress is something with which people continue to struggle.

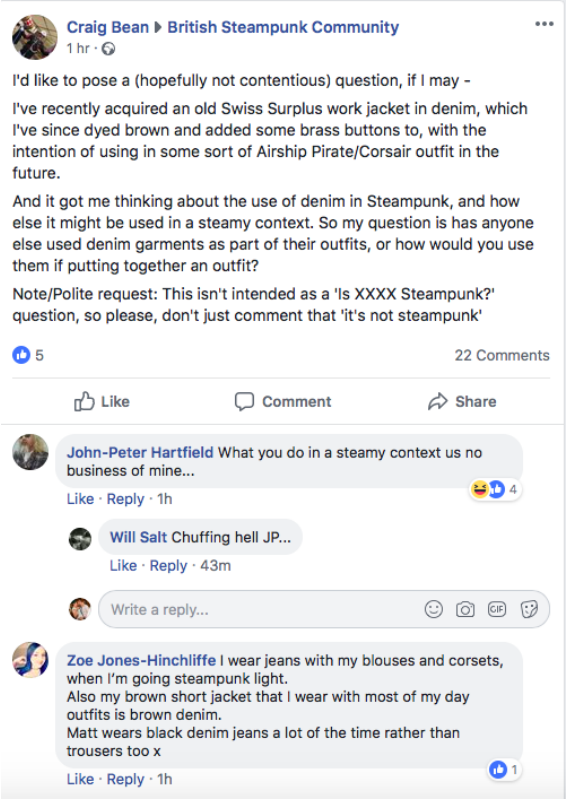


Figure 30 discussion thread on the British Steampunk Community Facebook group (posted September 5, 2018)

In this discussion, the poster pre-emptively states his disinterest in suggestions that denim is not steampunk: his question is purely positive, looking to see who has used denim in their looks and how they've gone about working with the textile. Some responders comment on denim's long history in protective clothing for labourers – and thus its appropriateness for engineer looks. Other commenters noted having seen denim worn by steampunks previously, so they didn't see an issue with it. But the comment that struck me the most came from one particular poster who mentioned that she 'wear[s] jeans with [her] blouses and corsets, when [she's] going steampunk light.' (Figure 30)

This concept of steampunk light – or 'lite' as I have also seen it styled – is intriguing. It strikes a similar chord to Bulloff's suggestion that stripping back the more costume elements of steampunk dress can lead to daywear steampunk clothing. However, a blouse and corset would still be considered costume under the analytic gaze of Bulloff. Additionally, rather than referring to an 'every day' look that could be office appropriate, it refers to a 'day' convention/meet-up look.

Steampunk light is thus situated on the accessible side of costume, realising a new liminal space between steampunk costume and clothing. This introduction of a third category of steampunk dress further complicates the already diverse field, particularly as it muddies the divide between costume and clothing.

This also leads me to question: how many of the looks I would have ordinarily read as an accessible or comfortable costume are, in actual fact, steampunk light? Steampunk light represents an opportunity to be more accessible, to move more freely – and arguably more comfortably – while still dressing boldly. The dramatic, costume version is the carte blanche to play and explore, however the bricolage and emotional context remain the same. And yet, women operating and living in steampunk spaces not only create their garments, but also defend them as part of the steampunk dress culture. Despite the potential exertion of defence, the Anglo-American steampunk community continues to grow. As Priest's editor Liz Gorinsky explains, the appeal of steampunk has an emotional, intrinsic feel:

> So many of the elements of the genre are things I've liked forever – the fashion, the gadgetry, the use of high-flown prose to add literary merit, even to action sequences…I got excited by the extent to which the fiction and the community is pro-history, science-positive, with reverence for physical technologies. (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011: 64)

As this comment from Gorinsky, as well as those from writers and makers at the chapter's opening explain, women are drawn to steampunk because it speaks to many diverse interests they've held 'forever': fashion, romance, adventure, technology, intelligence-positive. It is not only safe to be smart or intellectually curious in steampunk, it is part of the canon – part of the culture's history. Playing with history is where steampunk began, so it is only appropriate that that is how it continues: with community members playing with what steampunk can be virtually through fiction – and visually through fashion.

GETTING DRESSED: THE ROMANCE OF STEAMPUNK FASHION

In works of fiction, physical descriptions are crucial storytelling elements. These details are what entice the reader to turn the page, and can be the touchpoints that build comradery and engender feelings of representation between the character and the reader. This sensation of finding a creative work that resonates with the reader's *becoming* has powerful implications in the fiction-based steampunk subculture. With the first-wave's *being*-centric female characters, women are more prone to link themselves with the second-wave's diverse cast of female characters, many of whom are either written from a romantic perspective or are coloured by the gendered expectation of romance. Just as an author moves layer-by-layer in describing their characters, I will use this same approach as I analyse the individual garments most-often employed in Anglo-American steampunk women's dress. As stated in the first chapter, I have relied on Instagram to source these materials as they include self-disclosures on the garments components, photograph location, data on the wearer's *becoming* (or social media *being* in the case of public figures like Kato and Amy Wilder), and the benefit of having been shared publicly.[12] With each garment type, I situate the historical context – generally nineteenth-century – alongside the contemporary execution, with reference to gender performance and *ekphrastic* character building.

CHEMISE AND UNDERSHIRTS

In the nineteenth century, as well as in centuries prior, a chemise would be the layer closest to a woman's body. This knee or ankle-length garment was body skimming and typically cut from a breathable, durable fabric like cotton or linen. This served a dual purpose: the chemise would be light enough to allow the skin to breathe under the many layers while also being strong enough to endure regular and thorough cleanings. The chemise not only protected the woman's

[12] Again, my experience in digital marketing for a fashion brand has provided me with key insights on how to read a social media image for authenticity, brand ques, and intent.

body – it also protected her clothes from sweat and soiling. By the time a woman was fully dressed, her chemise may have been entirely covered by her other layers of clothing. And, as the chemise was seldom ornate – beyond potential embellishments at the wrist and necklines – due to laundering requirements, this simplicity would not have impacted the wearer's appearance.

Throughout the twentieth century full slips – thin dresses generally cut from a slinky material like silk, polyester or rayon – were still an integral element of a woman's wardrobe, only becoming truly optional in the latter half of the century as the social necessity of shapewear faded. Like the chemise, the slip would seldom be seen fully and served as a layer between the body and outer clothing. And, like the chemise, a slip is only occasionally visible. Outside the practical perspective, both the chemise and the slip's visibility can hold a semi-sexual appeal as it is considered an undergarment in the same vein as brassieres or underpants; exposure of the garment, or being seen without any covering layers, can move into an eroticised and gendered zone as both garments are suggestive of the nude body beneath. I have observed that the chemise – and its modern cousin the slip – appear in diverse forms in Steampunk dress, most often described as an undershirt.

Figure 31 Gail Carriger in 'casual' look (2012)

Like its nineteenth-century cousin, the steampunk 'undershirt' chemise is a first layer beneath a woman's shapewear. In Figure 31, author Gail Carriger's look for San Diego Comic Con (SDCC) 2012 features a lace short-sleeved blouse layered beneath her signature 'Spoons' corset, paired with a coordinating skirt with similar red satin ribbon detailing. The complimentary nature of the red ribbons gives the illusion of a single piece and echoes the corset's wine-red colourway giving a unified aesthetic performance. Carriger regularly chooses to wear some form of black undershirt layered with her darker-coloured corsets; this combination of sheer or lightweight black is a popular choice for undershirts, likely as it is a strong basic that serves as a foil for other wardrobe elements.

Figure 32 Skye Wilde (@steamgirl_skye) in dark undershirts with three different black/brown looks (2018)

Figure 32 features a spread of three looks from Scottish steampunk and model Skye Wilde (alias) in three different looks, each executed in black and shades of brown with an emphasis on leather and brass detailing. Her gritty feminine look engages directly with two of Bulloff's subtypes (tinker and urchin) while combining soft and sturdy materials for a feminine, industrial effect. Beyond Bulloff, Wilde's looks also owe a debt to Priest's fearless and resourceful Briar

Wilkes, with the inclusion of leather belts and braces referencing hands-on adventures. Her modelling persona is adventurous and, as her name hints, wild. Wilde wears one of Kato's Steampunk Couture pieces – the 'Vex' skirt – in the left and centre looks, relying on the dark undershirt for continuity of the industrial vibe of her leather accessories and dark corsets.

Were she to have chosen a cream chemise, it would ruin the narrative effect of Wilde's adventurer look due to the risk of staining. The dark colour, therefore, adds an extra layer of both protection and plausibility. Wilde's use of slinky fabrics, ruffles and lace bring softness to her industrial silhouettes, while also providing a necessary barrier between her skin and the faux leather of her commercial-grade corset; I suspect both the centre and right garments are from commercial retailer Corset Story, whose construction and comfort have been negatively reviewed by Ryser (2011). This practical usage reinforces the link with a nineteenth-century chemise whose role was to protect the body from direct contact with the corset – and vice versa. A final note on dark chemises in steampunk looks: though black is popular for those seeking a darker – industrial, witchy, or Dickensian – look for their character, white or cream undershirts are among the most popular.

Along with being a brighter choice, white or cream chemises also portray a higher level of gentle femininity than the black counterparts can accomplish due to the intrinsic link with hygiene, wealth, and virtue.

Figure 33 'Ruffles and Rivets' wild west pin-up photoshoot (2018)

Wilder's cream lace off-the-shoulder piece with its gossamer skirts (Figure 33) is a closer match to the nineteenth-century chemise than any of the previous black styles. Because of this, Wilder's corset – one designed to be worn as outerwear by Thomas Willeford of Brute Force Studios – reads as an undergarment. This, combined with the saloon backdrop, gives the effect of a wild west bordello, a visual choice that matches Wilder's penchant for high-style erotica as well as the 'Ruffles and Rivets' pin-up photoshoot staging. The character's use of cream reads as a traditional gender performance of femininity, with the few shades' distance from pure white enforcing the bordello reference. The frothy appearance of the lace chemise, likewise, is a foil to the hardness of the leather corset and brassiere and reinforces Wilde's quotation of the so-called spaghetti western damsel who is, in fact, tougher than she appears. Again, the narrative of the space itself confers with the participant's own storytelling. In this setting, the cream chemise, more than the corset, is the look's pivotal garment performing a softly sensual femininity. However, not every look relies on a cream chemise to convey femininity; for other silhouettes, it is a clean backdrop for bolder pieces.

Figure 34 striped trousers/jacket look from Dracula Clothing (2018)

In Figure 34, alternative photographer Genevieve models a look from Kato's Steampunk Couture line. Following Kato's signature design style, the silhouette is replete with different textures and layers that build into a luxurious yet gritty steampunk presentation. And her choice to style this brown-and-black look with a crisp white undershirt gives a much-needed lightness to what would otherwise have been oppressively dark on the model's slight frame. The white shirt also injects a sense of grandeur to the look, focusing attention onto the brass buckles and buttons. Unlike Wilde's look, which also strongly quotes the American west, Genevieve's look skews more towards a British gentleman adventurer model. This look is more akin to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fiction and Neo-Victorian steampunk aesthetic with gravitas. In terms of gender performance, the look trades on menswear staples while still radiating femininity.

Neutrals like black, white or brown are not the only colour options for steampunk undershirts. Pastels, prints and bright colours are becoming increasingly more popular as steampunk style matures and diversifies. This is especially true in steampunk silhouettes designed by people of colour. Returning

to Pho's *áo dài* look in Figure 25A, the black and red tunic layered beneath her waistcoat is an immediate indication that Pho's style expands past Neo-Victorian influence. Afrosteampunk[13] is another space where neutral undershirts are eschewed in favour of colour and prints. As Ariel's look in Figure 35 exhibits, there is no one colour palette or historical anchor point for steampunk looks. Ariel's wax print undershirt is a vibrant, personal piece that is echoed through her trousers and headwrap. Her choice to use a bright print under a coordinated cincher corset maximises her personality and individual approach, while also working harmoniously with expected Neo-Victorian steampunk tropes like the corset, goggles and armour.

Figure 35 Ariel aka @ladymakeupsiren at MomoCon, Atlanta GA (2017)

In other posts of the same look, Ariel explains that she was inspired by the blockbuster success of *Black Panther*, the 2018 adaptation of the Marvel comic series of the same name. Ariel channels the powerful storytelling of Wakanda

[13] Afrosteampunk is linked to Afropunk, a festival and celebration of how African Americans and black Americans engage with established subcultures like punk as well as creating a space for black artists operating outside mainstream spaces to create and celebrate their work.

through the lens of steampunk to convey a narrative of her own self-discovery through cosplay; this cosplay is both an exercise in *inverse ekphrasis* and a celebration of her *becoming*. While this is not directly linked to any of the novels referenced in the previous section, their service as relatable source material is innate in Ariel's romantic revision.

As with Sedia's Mattie, the corseted waist is a performance of femininity that belies inner strength and self-esteem. This confidence of character is most poignant in the wax print undershirt, her first physical layer, which holds the key to her bricolage and ties the complete look together. As most of my visuals have shown, discussing the performance and qualities of a woman's chemise sets the narrative tone for her look, and they are inextricably linked to discussing the next physical layer: the corset.

CORSETS

Corsets never left the contemporary fashion lexicon, they have simply evolved into different forms. They became outerwear, with hook-and-eye fronted camisoles performing the look in the early 2000s and whale-boned-and-lace-backed tops and gowns appearing every season. They remained underwear as both foundations (girdles, Spanx and 'waist-trainers') and fetish objects. An object traditionally held as feminine, the corset has historically served as a dual vessel: one both to shape a woman's body and to contain and perform her gender conformity (Steele 2001). Appropriated as it has been in fashion – from *couture* to the high-street – the corset's survival in twenty-first century fashion design is a testament to continued revelry and enjoyment of the object.

This contrasts with a nineteenth-century convention of the corset as an object that allegorised a woman's virtue; she was only fully dressed and modest while wearing it. Likewise, tightlacing a corset equally indicated a shallow, frivolous woman uniquely interested in fashion and flirtation.[14] The practice of tightlacing involves exerting significant force on the corset ribbons, constraining the ribcage for maximum figure change (see Figure 36).

[14] Tightlacing, the practice of using a corset to significantly reshape the waist beyond the standard few inches, was seen as a folly of the young and fashionable, with 'sensible' women recognising that the undergarment was meant as a foundation rather than a transformation. So prevalent and broad reaching was the vilification of this practice, that Valerie Steele's *The Corset* (2001) devotes the entirety of chapter four to contemporary debates surrounding the validity of the archived reports. Famous twentieth- and twenty-first century practitioners include Fakir Musafar, Cathie Jung, Mr Pearl, Dita Von Teese, Kelly Lee Dekay, and Gabriel Moginot (of Maison Moginot).

Figure 36 Midori. 1990s. tightlacing professional Midori in a Victorian-inspired Dark Garden tightlacing corset (posted June 8, 2018)

This significantly reshaped the waist beyond the standard few inches and was widely thought of as a folly of the young and fashionable, with 'sensible' women recognising that the undergarment was meant as a foundation rather than a transformation. So prevalent and broad reaching was the vilification of this practice that Valerie Steele's *The Corset* (2001) devotes an entire chapter to contemporary debates surrounding the validity of these archived reports.[15] Recent scholarship disagrees with this nineteenth-century suggestion of vapidity:

[15] Steele argues that the regularity or extent of damage originally connected to tightlacing is difficult to quantify, though she conceded that there certainly were instances of the act leading to reports of ill health including crushed organs, punctured livers, and distorted ribs related to overlong compression. Steele's investigation suggests that while some of the reported side effects of corset-based compression have scientific merit, she stresses that the information is biased and based on the skewed perspective of untested medical hypothesis. (Steele 2001)

> So while the corset is seen by some feminists (Roberts 1977) as a garment setting out to discipline the female body and make her 'docile' and subservient, and 'exquisite slave', Kunzle (1982) has argued in relation to female tight-lacers that these women (and some men) were not passive or masochistic victims of patriarchy, but socially and sexually assertive. (Entwistle 2015: 24)

The corset – and its role in Victorian fashion – were not a negative eroticising force, but rather an informer of beauty and a mode of performance (Entwistle 2015, Steele 2001). Indeed, Steele's viewpoint on the corset is that its intrinsic eroticism is both a form of display and a binding agent – the latter of which has led to the object's fetishising. Though the corset is still a fraught and controversial subject in dress history, its visibility in contemporary fashion suggests that in the current climate, corset wearers are prepared to renegotiate the garments' erotic qualities and reclaim them for fashion.

Contemporary corsetry is easily accessible at a variety of price points, waist cinching levels, styles and fabrics. A glance at the webshops of fast-fashion and accessible retailers like Ann Summers, Orchard Corset, What Katie Did and Corset Story establishes the wide variety of corset styles and shapes that are available for under £150.[16] On the opposite end of the spectrum are high-end specialist retailers like Dark Garden whose average price for a standard-sized corset is around £600.[17] In between these two brackets are online makers like Ryser, Brute Force Studios, Dracula Clothing, and Isabella Corsetry, who sell both ready-to-wear and made-to-measure pieces and offer designs that cater to the Neo-Victorian steampunk style. With corsets being a dominant element of most women's steampunk looks (whether as a foundation or outerwear) – their character and design versatility – I will spend the greatest length of time on this garment.

[16] Pricing accurate as of autumn 2018.

[17] The cheapest Dark Garden corset is a £305 waspie, with the most expensive standard-fit corset (the Dollymop range) costing £1,443. Prices accurate as of September 2018.

Figure 37 'Maps' shoulder corset by Dracula Clothing (2018)

Each contemporary corset shape has a distinctive name. Overbust and underbust corsets are self-explanatory, with their names coming from where on the wearer's bust the corset ends. Out of this split, overbust corsets can be described by their neckline and waist shaping. 'Victorian' styles have a subtly curved or straight neckline with a straight waist and long pointed busk, where 'sweetheart' styles mimic the bosom's curve and nip in at the waist for a softer figure (see Carriger's 'Spoons' corset, Figure 31). Underbust corsets are also named based on their shaping: 'waspies' are short corsets that give a narrow waist (hence the wasp reference), 'cinchers' are wider, more belt-like garments (Figure 35), and 'shoulder' styles feature straps that run from under the bosom and over the shoulders, leaving the chest open (Figure 37). With this wide variety of shapes to work from, corset makers must instil their tone of voice – and that of their community – in their materials, designs, and finish. With corsets being strongly gendered as feminine and regularly considered a fetish object (Steele 2001, Summers 2001), designers also must navigate the social implications of wearing a corset in steampunk and popular spaces alike. The attitude towards gender

performance and sexuality from both designer and wearer rapidly become apparent based on construction and styling. In each instance, the corset reads as a performative object, whose wearer crafts a new body; a new body to house their personal approach to steampunk fashion as well as their character's narrative (where applicable).

Steampunk analysts, like Taddeo and Pagliassotti, as well as community members, like Cable and Ariel, have made the comparison between steampunk authors' allusion to corsetry as a form of armour and an 'announcement of a woman's place in the public sphere clad for battle' (Taddeo 2013: 45). The corset is a performative object of gender and sexuality, to be certain. It is imbued with baggage on what it means to be womanly and carries with it divisive debates on the suffering that women may have experienced across centuries in the pursuit of good posture and a fine figure. In the current era, it holds value as both a 'retro' object (with most accessible retailers noting the inspirational era or concept for a given garment) as well as an emblem of femininity.

The corset as a material garment has received a surge of popularity in both the popular and academic spheres, with period television programmes and exhibitions like those hosted by the Museum at the FIT alike drawing new attention to corsetry. In her post-punk collections, Westwood revived the corset, bringing it into the realm of sensual outerwear alongside Jean-Paul Gaultier and Issey Miyake (Steele 2001). And yet, the juxtaposition of material hardness and femininity brings to mind the visceral, medical translation of corsetry in Alexander McQueen's medical corset look in his Spring/Summer 1999 collection (Figure 38). The hard leather, industrial topstitching and cast-like rigidity of McQueen's design strike a similar, though darker, note to Thomas Willeford's 'Clockwork' corset (Figure 39).

Figure 38 Alexander McQueen. SS 1999. Leather corset

Figure 39 Thomas Willeford. 2018. Clockwork corset and brassiere,

Both give the illusion of prosthetics, like Cable's brace, and both query what it means to be at once a human female and shaped by a rigid, alien force. Both bring to mind Spooner's comment on the corset as an intrinsically Gothic object:

> [...] nevertheless in the twenty-first century, the corset seems an archetypally Gothic garment, troping on a form of physical imprisonment and bodily torture that our enlightened age no long inflicts on women. (Spooner 2004: 16)

The action of being held into place by strong leather – of being stitched into a protective hide – stretches the culturally feminine meaning of a corset. Where they differ, however, is in the grotesque. McQueen's leather corset is meant to trigger feelings of restriction and discomfort – and perhaps even revulsion at its Frankensteinian allusions – Willeford's is intended to perform as a playful technological wonder that enhances the body into a sensual clockwork fantasy that recalls Kress's *The Clockwork Corset* (2011). Where these two hard leather corsets diverge is in the definition of fantasy, and by connection, the fantasy body. This personal fantasy form is crafted, via an *inverse ekphrasis* that breathes life and shape into the desirable mould. Where for McQueen this fantasy leather-clad body is frail underneath the stitching, Willeford's embodies feminine strength as it is manipulated into shape by the male gaze. The wearer's styling – and thus communication – conveys a gender performance that is thus representative of their *being* or *becoming* as it relates to the romance of Willeford's fantasy.

When corsets still depended upon whalebone to provide shape, corset makers were predominantly male as they possessed the necessary strength to cut and bend the stiff material into position (Steele 2001). However, with the advent of pliable steel boning, women began to enter the domain of corsetry. Dark Garden in San Francisco boasts an entirely female-run team, with all designers and coordinators having their own tastes and styles in corset wearing. This gender split of male maker and female maker is curious: with only one highly

visible male steampunk corsetier[18], what differences are there to material and fit? Before diving into the corset wearing, I first investigated this practical side of corset making. For the sake of parity, I have elected to only compare styles in leather or faux leather.

LEATHER CORSET DESIGN BY MEN: BRUTE FORCE STUDIOS

An artisan leatherworker and iconic maker, Willeford and his work at the helm of Brute Force Studios (BFS) has enjoyed wide exposure on several network and cable television programmes as well as in print media. Willeford served on the permanent judging panel of the *Steampunk'd* competition alongside Kato, currently has two DIY project books in circulation, and according to his website 'has been making all manner of custom corsetry, fine art, and steampunk accessories since 1996' (Willeford 2006). Of all Willeford's creations, his leather corset and brassiere designs enjoy the greatest product diversity and appear to be the most commercially popular, based on their regular appearance in Willeford's Instagram gallery (@bruteforcestudios). Each BFS corset or brassiere is a unique sculptural piece, handcrafted to the wearer's measurements. Among the most widely photographed is his bra/corset suite that features the 'Leather Clockwork Underbust Corset' and co-ordinating 'Leather Clockwork Bra' (Figures 33, 39 and 40).

[18] Other men in the corset industry – like Moginot and Mr Pearl – are couturiers with starting price points in the thousands, multiple fittings, and minimum turn-around times of a month (van Neuschatz 2013). Mr Pearl is the most famous contemporary male couturier, who has worked with Thierry Mugler, Vivienne Westwood, and Alexander McQueen in his thirty-year career (Allwood 2016). For Mr Pearl, daily corset-wearing is a sensual performance that requires discipline and mindfulness. He eschews the idea of mass produced corsets, like those sold on Corset Story or What Katie Did, explaining that their ill-fit contributes to the ongoing stigma surrounding contemporary corsetry: 'But people have a fear of this particular garment, because it has a mystery about it: people believe it to be extremely dangerous and unhealthy, for one. That comes from when corsets started to be mass-produced, but you cannot mass-produce this garment, because it needs to fit you like a glove – every body is totally different. So if you off to the shop and buy an off-the-peg corset, it can never hope to be totally comfortable. I think that's why people have this fear of corsets, because people rushed off and bought them, hoping to obstain a wonderful hourglass figure overnight, and caused damage to themselves' (ibid).

Figure 40 Jesse Walker. January 20, 2017. Dilara in the 'Clockwork' suite, photoshoot outtake (Posted January 27, 2017)

The 'Clockwork' corset is cut from BFS's signature 'parchment' hard leather, and the clockwork patterns are laser-etched into each panel before they are hand-painted and riveted together. As this style lacks a traditional busk, the back laces must be either significantly loosened or removed before being retied for each wearing. Featured in an episode of the Nathan Fillion-fronted crime drama 'Castle' (ABC) and one of BFS's most popular designs, in 2018 Willeford announced the full 'Clockwork' suite would be moving into a Limited Edition ten-piece production run, with only three commissions remaining as of September 2018. With each piece handmade at the BFS workshop in Pennsylvania, each is a unique artisanal object (Willeford 2016). In both material and practice, the 'Clockwork' suite – and all Willeford's corsets – are created in a space located between bespoke and couture fashion. Couture suggests that the design is an entirely individual piece without peer, where bespoke designated an object created specifically for the wearer. I view the 'Clockwork' suite in a space

between, as the hand-painted finishing and resulting colour variations make each piece peerless.

Figure 41 Thomas Willeford. 2018. 'Clockwork' corset detail shot, via BFS Etsy shop

In terms of construction, this underbust corset is not Victorian in shape nor style. Willeford's leather designs eschew front closures, with the 'boning' effect coming from the riveted panel seams and the leather's stiffness accounting for the demonstratively absent busk. And unlike soft-fabric busk corsets, the BFS hard leather corsets will not provide a visible waist-reduction. The stiff leather will hold its shape rather than moulding the wearer's curves, something that will give the illusion of a curved waist without overtly changing the body.

Looking to the lacing and complex 'O' ring and buckle system for the brassiere, the shift in focus from support garment to decorative design becomes immediately apparent (Figure 41). In the nineteenth century, rigid lace corsets were used by the likes of Empress Elizabeth of Austria to maintain significant waist-reductions; lacing such a corset is a time-consuming process, recorded

from nineteenth-century French practitioners as taking up to an hour (von Neauschatz 2013). With this context to mind, and Willeford's use of satin ribbons for lacing, it is unlikely that Willeford is quoting these historic garments beyond a surface resemblance. And, as Willeford creates these corsets via an Etsy shop using measurements taken by his clients, the fit of each custom 'Clockwork' corset will never achieve the 'glove'-like fit that corsetiers like Mr Pearl profess as critical for comfort, shape, and health (Allwood 2016). Willeford places far more focus on the mechanical detailing and industrial finishing than on figure sculpting, a shortcoming that solidifies his work as a costume piece worn for occasion; it would be both unlikely and unpractical to wear the Clockwork corset as a foundation garment beneath other layers of clothing as it would create more bulk through the torso, thus rendering the word 'corset' inappropriate. It is an object that conveys strength and protection. Simply put, the 'Clockwork' corset is armour; its hard edges and riveted seams read as a breastplate, with the matching brassiere continuing this protective conceit.

As a unit, the clockwork motif is both aesthetically steampunk in its industrial quotations, as well as suggestive of the technological body modifications and augmentations that are intrinsic to steampunk literature. Willeford's design of a fantasy body has developed from his two assistant/muses: Amy Wilder and Sarah Hunter. Wilder works closely with Willeford, having apprenticed at the workshop, modelled his creations and worked as retail staff at the BFS booth's convention and fair appearances.[19] In a 2014 interview, Wilder credits her first encounter with Willeford's corsetry as the point where she embraced steampunk and a career in modelling, explaining:

> Thomas is one of my all-time favorite people. I had been a fan of his work since I tried on a corset at my first Dragon*Con [Atlanta], his work is actually what first got me interested in steampunk. It

[19] As of 2018, Willeford and Wilder's social media profiles suggest that their professional relationship has changed circumstances, and that they are now in a romantic relationship which may impact how she styles his creations..

> wasn't till years later that I got up the guts to introduce myself and ask if I could model for him. […] Without his advice and support, I don't think I would have taken my love of dressing up a step further and started modeling seriously. (Bradley 2014)

I briefly communicated with Wilder via Facebook Messenger in June 2016, discussing her long-term interest in corsetry and its use in her modelling work. In the course of his discussion, she disclosed having penned her first-year fashion paper on the garment. In the years since university, she has continued her intellectual engagement with corsetry, sitting regularly on festival and convention panels dedicated to the subject. From its regular appearance on her Instagram gallery, the 'Clockwork' suite is a staple in Wilder steampunk modelling wardrobe. Her styling of the suite is situational, depending on the photoshoot or event, however her looks tend to gravitate towards western looks that play on the binary of hard/soft, dirt/purity, masculine/feminine. For her erotic or glamour shoots, like 'Ruffles and Rivets' (Figure 33), Wilder styles the pieces with sensual confidence, using the leather's rigidity to highlight her soft femininity and the clockwork designs to drive the steampunk angle. Her other garments tend to layer feminine softness with cream lace or ruffled latex, which again performs a soft and sensual femininity. When she's photographed in the corset while working as BFS promotional staff, her looks take on the character of the convention she is attending. For example, at the 2015 'Wild Wild West Con' in Tucson, Arizona, Wilder styled the suite with a white blouse, knee-high boots, and 'Vex' skirt from Steampunk Couture that takes inspiration from Hollywood high-low saloon girl styles (Figure 42).[20]

[20] 'I am SO pleased with all the gorgeous images I'm getting back from Wild Wild West Con!' (Wilder March 2015)

Figure 42 Ben Stadler-Ammon. 2015. Amy Wilder at Wild Wild West Con, wearing Steampunk Couture 'Vex' skirt and BFS Clockwork suite (posted March 11, 2015)

Many of Wilder's Tumblr and Instagram posts indicate an interest in American steampunk, specifically 'Wild West' retrofuturism, clarifying that the American west is where she situates her steampunk identity. She shares this preference with Willeford, whose designs tend to take inspiration from outside the Neo-Victorian. In both types, Wilder styles the 'Clockwork' suite as a form of armour against the outside. This analogy is the clearest in Wilder's highly-staged erotic photosets – such as 'Ruffles and Rivets' – when she reveals a hidden element of the 'Clockwork' suite. Her bespoke 'Clockwork' G-string, an item that contorts the suite from suggestively cyborg into sexual armour (product detail, Figure 43), has the same leather-cog motif as the brassiere and directly engages with ideas of a clockwork woman protected by her own machinery. In the wild west context, the leather trio are metaphorical protection from the frontier's harsh conditions while also serving as a foil to the softness of her femininity. Much like Kato, Wilder's work in erotica is a performed *being* that, though an element of her wider *becoming*, is a narrative that protects her privacy. The character of Amy Wilderness is a brazen, bisexual, and confident woman whose styling captures a fetish of female delicacy while also projected raw strength. Wilder's styling of the 'Clockwork' suite is nearly identical to that of other women, and yet reads as far

more seductive due to her careful attention to small details like hair, makeup, and jewellery. And, as with the McQueen corset, the body becomes a leather-bound fantasy whose context is shaped by a male gaze.

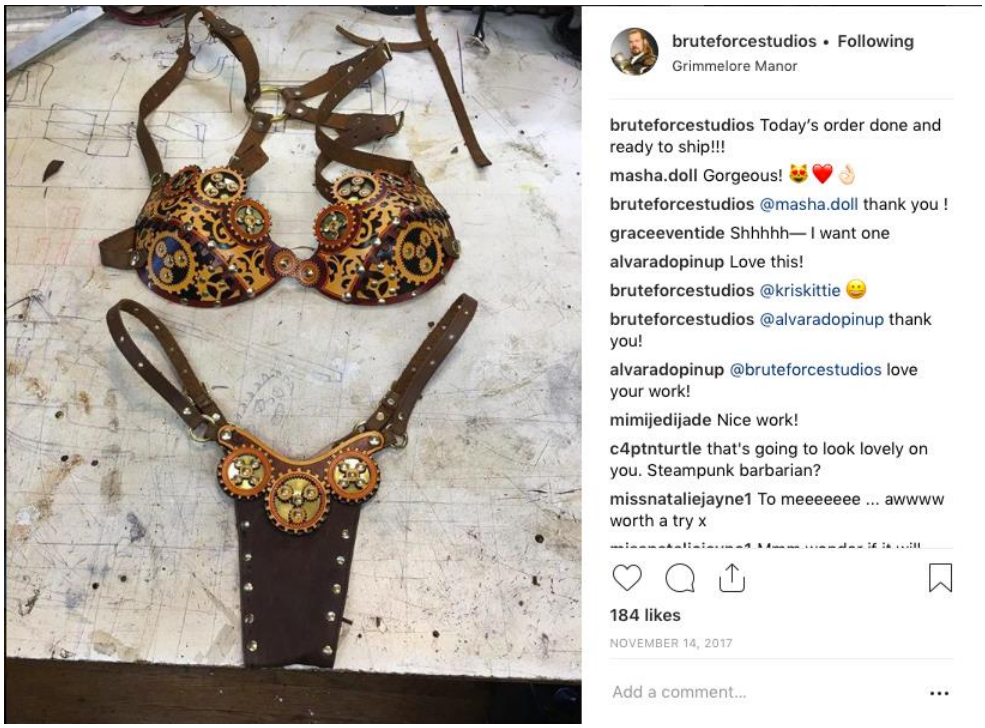


Figure 43 Thomas Willeford. 2017. 'Clockwork' brassiere and thong commission (posted November 14, 2017)

While the binding element of the corset may be understood to the point of mundanity (Dasler 2001, Steele 2001; Summers 2001; Field 1999, 2003; Taddeo 2013, Taylor 2014), the brassiere is ubiquitous item for Anglo-American women. Its role is to support and shape the bosom, and these shapes have changed across the decades from the bullet bra of the late 1950s into the natural and push-up styles popular in 2018. However, Willeford's version is more in keeping with McQueen's twist on a medical corset than Wonderbra; it suggests augmentation and cyborg hybridity (Haraway 1985, Pho 2013: 188f). Looking to the commissioned 'Clockwork' brassiere and G-string depicted in Figure 43, this matching duo is suggestive of clockwork sexuality, and a fantasy woman who is part flesh and part machine.

With each image I encounter of the 'Clockwork' suite, the more I realise that it is a hyper-sexual collection that demands a confident performance from its wearer. In an iconic image of Sarah Hunter, a now-retired adult entertainer and novelty designer, Hunter is captured wearing the suite along with the BFS faux-hydraulic prosthetic 'Dr. Grimmelore Superior Replacement Arms' (Figure 44).

Figure 44 2011. Sarah Hunter in the 'Clockwork' suite, via BFS Etsy shop

This photograph has become so ubiquitous with steampunk that the Cincinnati-based *Pandora Society* asked Hunter how it feels to be 'one of the most recognizable faces in steampunk?' (Hood 2015). Like Wilder, Hunter (aka 'Lady Clankington') has also been linked to Willeford's workshop as an assistant, and also chooses to style the 'Clockwork' suite with a white undershirt and ruffles. Hunter's styling reveals less skin than Wilder's yet exudes greater levels of physicality; Hunter's look is more mature than Wilder's, less girlishly feminine. Hunter, in her steamsona of Lady Clankington, is a worldly woman whose gender

performance outshines the performative aspects of Willeford's creations. That Hunter's personality is still visible beneath such a heavy look of metal and leather is a testament to the power of her own performance.

Regardless of styling, posture, or location I have observed that the 'Clockwork' suite always appears as part of a costume. In my social media research I have observed it worn as a costume at steampunk, science fiction, and fantasy conventions; at a Renaissance Faire; as a plot device in American network television[21]; in photoshoots and erotica. And in each instance, it has read as a fantasy version of femininity: a woman's body both bound and freed by leather and clockwork. The objects themselves are fine works of craftsmanship, and yet I find them as unsettling as I find them beautiful. Having spent years observing the online boom of steampunk material cultures, researching under the umbrella of gothic studies, and tutoring in visual culture, I can pinpoint the element that unsettles me about the BFS 'Clockwork' suite: it is the clear influence of the male gaze.

The 'Clockwork' suite is Willeford's fantasy in a different manner than other contemporary designers who create corsets – like Gaultier, Westwood, and McQueen – and inject their fantasy of women's bodies into the garment. The critical difference between the uncanny bodies Gaultier, Westwood, and McQueen sculpt and that of Willeford is the sense that Willeford is designing not only for his own gaze but also his own romantic desires. This is what I find the most intriguing about the 'Clockwork' suite and its popularity: it toes the line between costume and fetish. Willeford's preference for hard leather is unorthodox and has become his calling card. In the past two years, his Etsy shop has discontinued all textile corsets and refocused on leather. The harness-like attachments for the brassiere as well as the restrictive qualities of the hard leather further the link between the 'Clockwork' suite and fetish. I found the work

[21] ABC's 'Castle' in 2010 and CBS's 'The Bold and the Beautiful' in 2016.

of female corsetieres different in terms of material choice, body sculpting, fantasy, and the male gaze, and ideas surrounding gender and femininity.

LEATHER CORSET DESIGN BY WOMEN: DARK GARDEN & STEAM INGENIOUS

Founded by Autumn Adamme in 1989, San Francisco-based boutique Dark Garden is an inclusive corset designer, supplying the garments spanning accessible and couture price points. Skillfully handcrafted, Dark Garden counts Dita Von Teese, tightlacing Guinness World Record holder Cathie Jung, and author Gail Carriger among its clientele (Adamme 2018, Jung 2015). Adamme has spent decades honing her corsetry skills, has collaborated with Mr Pearl (2014) and neo-burlesque icon and costumer Catherine D'Lish, and has assembled an all-female team to work on crafting their hand-cut, historically-inspired corsets. (Adamme 2018) Additionally, Adamme and her team are frequent corset-wearers themselves, and have intimate knowledge of how to sculpt each unique body with their bespoke collection. Like Willeford, Dark Garden is also known for their leather corsets, alongside their satin, silk, wool and cotton coutil. Unlike Willeford, Dark Garden's creations move beyond aesthetic and focus on creating garments that meet the wearer's wants and needs. Adamme's quote in Figure 45 encapsulates Dark Garden's ethos:

> As we learn more and more about gender identification, masculinity, femininity, and fluidity, clothing will continue to help us define ourselves – sometimes by disguising us, sometimes by exposing us. Something I've always loved about corsets is that they convey so much in a relatively small space. (Adamme 2018)

With lines designed to fit both male and female bodies – and perform a variety of genders – Dark Garden is among the most body-inclusive corsetiers in North America. For example, the leather Royal Alexandra that Adamme models in Figure 45 is based on a decidedly feminine Victorian pattern. The triple lacing adds visual interest to the front panels, complementing the shoulder straps' hardware and buckle.

Figure 45 Edward Saenz. 2017. 'La Femme Sauvaged'. (posted January 24, 2018)

The cognac leather's richness is apparent, juxtaposed as it is with the mink-pelt skirt and metallic sheen of the hunting knife. The garment also conveys strength: the triple lace and shoulder straps have a tactical quality that give the corset an illusion of armour. This concept of the corset as armour feels especially relevant to steampunk modes of dress, with characters like Imogen (Kress 2011) and women like Cable distilling the object to its most basic form – a binding – and making it their own, transforming the object into a realm where femininity and strength meet. From the historical perspective, Adamme's leather corset is faithful to its nineteenth-century source material while also injecting whimsy with the use of buckles at the shoulder rather than the more-traditional corded ties.

Outside this intertext, the leather corset challenges ideas of femininity as soft and delicate, and challenges what being womanly means. Dark Garden's leather corsets are feminine in a way that Willeford's hard leather silhouettes are not, and I suspect the makers' approaches to gender – and that of their clientele – inform this. Dark Garden is focused on giving their clients, regardless of sex or gender, the shaping they desire in an aesthetically pleasing vessel. Their

'menswear' silhouettes like Beau Brummel and Dietrich are androgynous and adaptable for those seeking for a masculine contour (Adamme 'Dietrich' 2018, Adamme 'Beau Brummel' 2018). Likewise, the Dollymop silhouette blurs the lines of feminine and masculine, delivering a corset with a slim line, gentle waist curve, and hidden busk. The Dollymop collection also borrows its fabrics and embellishment from traditional menswear mainstays like pinstripe and military adornments, allowing the wearer enough versatility to dress it as masculine or feminine as they desire. With these inclusive designs, and the attention to historic quotations, Dark Garden's off-the-rack options provide a greater level of finish and support than online retailers (Corset Story and What Katie Did), at a price point comparable to that of Willeford.[22]

Figure 46 Gail Carriger. 2017. Carriger in a custom Dark Garden Amazon overbust shoulder corset (posted July 23, 2017)

In Figure 46, Carriger mixes eras with her Victorian-inspired leather and brocade Dark Garden Amazon paired with a retro wiggle skirt and cat-eye sunglasses, a

[22] Custom corsets, such as those worn by Carriger, are a larger financial investment that require multiple fittings and greater design input from the client.

look she's dubbed 'Pin Up Steampunk' for its layering of eras and styles. Again, Dark Garden delivers a leather, shoulder-strapped corset that performs femininity while cinching the waist and sculpting the back. However, Carriger use of corsets is known to be more than aesthetic; she also makes use of corsetry's posture and ergonomic purposes, something that Dark Garden's carefully constructed Victorian silhouettes keep in mind alongside aesthetics. Carriger explains that she wears a corset while she writes for added back support and that a well-fit corset is 'like an ace bandage', a medical wrap that – when worn correctly – is strong and supportive without being restrictive (Gleason 2013: 46). With this knowledge, Carriger's frequent appearance in corsets moves from the *being* state of Wilder and Hunter's photospreads into a *becoming* performance that encompasses femininity, health, and identity.

Another bespoke corset maker working in the USA for the steampunk community is Ryser, whom I've referenced previously in this chapter (p. 195, Figures 29A and 29B). Like Carriger, Ryser also writes in her blog about wearing corsets while performing housework and sewing to provide greater back support (Ryser 2011). Ryser designs and executes made-to-order corsets and attends conventions with a variety of samples available for purchase. Unlike Dark Garden, Ryser works alone with non-industrial looks. Blog entries which feature commissions for highly curvy clients demonstrate that Ryser roughly improvises the necessary padding onto her dressmaking dummy. Likewise, unlike Dark Garden's precision seams and contour matching, Ryser's pieces are rustic and feel home-made (Figure 47).

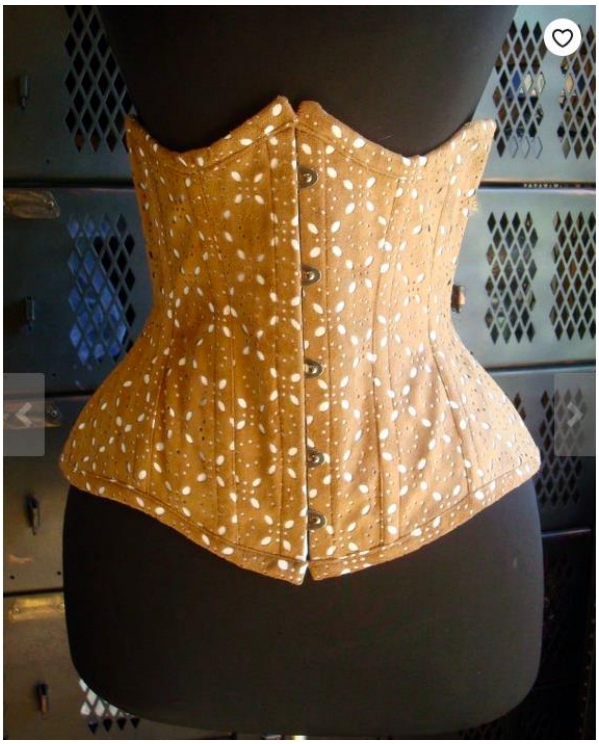


Figure 47 Kim Ryser. 2018. Laser cut faux suede underbust, via Steam Ingenious Etsy shop

Ryser's faux suede underbust corset follows the Victorian hip spring pattern, providing a more comfortable fit along the wearer's hip. This construction also helps smooth the distribution of displaced body mass caused by waist reduction. Dark Garden's Victorian-inspired corsets also feature hip springs for the same reason, and both Ryser and Dark Garden list the possibility of making these more or less dramatic for bespoke pieces depending on the client's body and desired fit. By contrast, Willeford's corset sits high on the hip: something that is not an issue for thin models like Wilder and Hunter, but could prove uncomfortable for women with a more pronounced hour-glass figure.

As a decorative fashion corset – rather than one intended for significant support/reshaping like those from Dark Garden – the £145 listed price (Etsy) for the faux suede corset places Ryser's work is only slightly more expensive that fast-retailers like Corset Story and What Katie Did. Returning to construction, the pointed tips of Ryser's cupid-style underbust are not sharp and the busk appears to sit unevenly on the dress form. However, the bespoke corset from Figures 29A and 29B are better executed with a superior pattern match, evidencing that

Ryser's technical skills may be better than the faux suede's shortcomings suggest – or that she takes greater care with her custom orders than with her off-the-rack looks.

Dark Garden and Ryser's corsets would appeal to different audiences. Where Dark Garden corsets materially acknowledge the controversies surrounding corset use – tightlacing, eroticism/fetish, gender performance – Ryser's work seems to miss this mark, with her corsets feeling almost innocent. I believe that this has something to do with Ryser's corsets being cut from fashion fabrics. Though both the corset in Figures 29A and 29B and that in Figure 47 are lined with the standard coutil, their outer layers have the appearance of fabric or craft store notions. These materials give the corsets a hobby context rather than a professional one. Ryser's pieces access and perform their femininity through fabric and form, where Dark Garden's construction and high-end look and feel are what give the pieces their feminine lustre, striking viewers as voyeuristic or erotic and giving the wearers a sense of upright strength. It is, perhaps, unfair to compare Dark Garden with Ryser, as they are different business models with different client bases. And small-scale makers like Ryser are part of what makes steampunk an enticing community for its members: the hands on, DIY approach to dress is fundamental to steampunk's ethos.

For those like Carriger who profess a long and vested interest in professional corsetry, designers like Dark Garden are an ideal resource. However, for those looking for something handmade that feels DIY, then Ryser is the next best thing to actually doing it themselves. I believe that the reason online retailers like What Katie Did and Corset Story are more popular – or rather more prominent – than specialist designers like Ryser or Dark Garden is price point. The availability of cheap and mass-produced corsets, cinchers and waspies from entry-level retailers mean that steampunks can have more options for lower cost. The choice to shop with a Dark Garden, a Ryser or a Corset Story supplier is down to personal taste and budget. Each will, ultimately, provide a variety of options that can be worn however the buyer desires.

CORSET WEARING: UNDER, OUTER, NOT AT ALL?

The questions of how, where, and when to wear a corset in steampunk dress are less varied – and less nuanced – than I initially thought. At my first event (GUESS's 2012 Glasgow by Gaslight), many women were dressed in what I would now recognise as steampunk light: simple skirts and blouses, with corsets and accessories like leather belts, pouches, and devices layered overtop. Each look came parcelled with a narrative, which many of the attendees were happy to share when I inquired. It was at this event that I first met Suna Dasi of *Steampunk India*, a website devoted to Dasi's steampunk fiction and photography.

Figure 48 Henry Faber. 2013. Suna Dasi as Deva Dasi, using her listening device

Dasi's version of steampunk is post-colonial, set during the Raj in a hypothetical timeline that combines tropes popular in Victorian-type steampunk fiction with Indian culture through the lens of contemporary gender performance. In her serial short story 'The Tinku Diaries' (2014), Dasi pens a first-person narrative from the perspective of Tinku Ranbir, an upper class Indian woman uprooted from her culture by her husband's research who must now navigate London's society – and her husband's increasing absence and volatility. 'The Tinku Diaries'

exists as part of a collaborative transmedia hypertext, building on the Clockwork Watch graphic novels (*The Arrival* 2012, *Breakaway* 2013, and *Countenance* 2015) and online 'London Gazette' project (2012-2015). For Clockwork Watch's LARP tie-in events in London (2014), Dasi played the role of Tinku – the mother of the Clockwork Watch universe's protagonist Janav Ranbir (Dasi 2015). Dasi discussed this project as her contribution to a steampunk pechakucha event held at the Glasgow School of Art Union (April 1, 2014), highlighting the project as a celebration of people of colour in UK and creating the space for diverse forms of steampunk fiction and fantasy roleplay. As Clockwork Watch is a collaborative hypertext, contributors have the ability to imbue both new and extant characters with traits and backgrounds based on their own creative impulses. The character of Tinku, as Dasi writes her, has the inner strength to integrate into London society – far different from that of occupied India – while also maintaining her own heritage and attempting to provide a stable home life for her son. Tinku's complexity is representative to Dasi's work and her mission to create space for people of colour in global steampunk.

After our first meeting, Dasi and I exchanged several emails and Facebook messages, and met at concerts and events, as well as posing for a photoshoot with Dutch photographer Henry Faber (Faber 2012). For this shoot, Dasi took on the persona of one of her original characters, a 'Deva Dasi' courtesan-spy, living in late nineteenth-century India (Figure 48). This *ekphrastic* look celebrates her Indian heritage, combining a silk sari, blouse and leather waistcoat with her leather and metal accessories. Like Pho, Dasi layers traditional dress with a structured waistcoat, in this instance leather with brass buttons. Though not clear in the photograph, the waistcoat is cut from stiff leather that maintained its shape as Dasi moved around, switching props. As she bent to re-arrange the folds of her sari, the leather did not budge. This structured piece gave the same visible figure accentuation as a corset, without its cultural or gendered baggage.

Dasi's companion at Glasgow by Gaslight, a woman named Alexandra, is the only woman whom I can recall as having chosen a complete Victorian look

that matched the Victorian corset standard – i.e., her corset was an undergarment rather than outerwear (Figure 49). Her copper taffeta skirt, bustle, and bodice shimmered under the stage lamps dotting the Panopticon's seating area. Her posture and regal composure drew the attention of those nearby, her upright figure gliding through the space.

Figure 49 Suna Dasi, by request. 2012. Alexandra in her gown from Glasgow by Gaslight

As the only woman in a full Victorian gown, the difference between the two modes of corset wearing (under or outer) was starkly apparent. Whether as a performance or a matter of fact, Alexandra's range of movement was more constricted than the women without bodices. As the room warmed, Alexandra removed her bodice to reveal a black camisole over her foundation garment. With the removal of her bodice, Alexandra immediately felt more approachable, more accessible. In this daytime setting, wearing her corset as underwear had the sensation of being overdressed. The other corseted women, as a contrast, felt casual and relaxed. The black camisole was an equaliser, bringing her look on par with the scores of women in blouses and underbust corsets.

I noticed that while many of the women at Glasgow By Gaslight wore technically-simple corsets (black satin, chocolate brown twill), others chose to wear deep-yet-bold colours, brocade or pleather. I also noticed that while

overbust corsets were common, underbust cinchers and waspies appeared to be the most popular. While watching the women move and interact, I realised that the reason for this was two-fold: these cincher styles appeared cooler and more comfortable in the warm room, and also felt casual. I came to the conclusion that, at least for this Glasgow-based steampunk community, underbust corsets were a staple for daywear.

At my next GUESS event, the formal Gaslight Soirée, there were far more Victorian-style gowns and evening looks similar to that of Alexandra (neither she nor Dasi attended this event). Corsets as outerwear were again prominent here, though more vibrant and colourful than their daywear relatives. While many black underbust corsets made an appearance, overbusts with rich colours and coordinating skirts were more popular. And, unlike at Glasgow by Gaslight, there were several women who'd chosen to wear their corset as an undergarment. One of the organisers, Kerry Becker, wore an 1850s-inspired off-the-shoulder emerald green satin gown with a large hoop skirt, black lace mitts and a shawl. This participant observation, alongside what I have observed from social media and blogs, evidences that corset style depends not only on the wearer's comfort, but also on the silhouette that she is looking to achieve. And in this aim, the style of skirt – or trousers – informs corset selection and its mode of wear.

CRINOLINES, BUSTLES, AND SKIRTED SILHOUETTES

Across the nineteenth century the shape and style of women's skirts differed widely from decade to decade, with the widest arriving mid-century. Once dressed in their chemise, corset, and other undergarments (pantalettes, bloomers, stockings, etc.) women would layer multiple petticoats, wire petticoats for a small bustle or *tournore* (lobster tail bustle) for a dramatic bustle, don a hoop skirt or cage crinoline, or attach a bustle pad underneath the skirt to achieve the silhouette *du jour*. The voluminous character of these skirt styles, and the impracticalities of a cage crinoline – beg the question of why these shapes became popular in the first instance. For the crinoline, which enjoyed a very short length

of popularity due to it being somewhat uncontrollable in weather and a fire hazard, this popularity is due to the fact that it significantly decreased the number of petticoats needed to create a dramatic, full silhouette; in the following decade, it was replaced by a far slimmer shape (Entwistle 2015: 155).

Women seeking to create a Victorian style steampunk look have a wealth of different shapes on which to base their looks, and how these different shapes are implemented – and by whom – varies. Wearing a cage crinoline is restrictive not only in movement but also by sourcing.[23] And sewing your own crinoline is a task that requires skills and materials beyond casual DIY. Patterns for all these undergarments exist, though some – like the bustle pad in Figure 50 – are more beginner-friendly. For those with intermediate sewing skills, using a kit is a viable option. And with the growing popularity of both steampunk and historical re-enactment, these kits are available to the UK market at an accessible price point (Vena Cava Design 2018). However, for those who take pride in making their own costumes, these projects add to their overall enjoyment in steampunk fashion.

[23] While Edinburgh boasts the exception Armstrong's Emporium, few cities have retailers with whole rails of hoop skirts and petticoats available for purchase.

Figure 50 Kim Ryser. 2016. Pillow-style Victorian bustle pads, via Steam Ingenious Etsy shop

A second hurdle for sourcing a skirt is shape requirements. While I have seen contemporary body-cons and A-lines incorporated into steampunk looks, they are less popular than more dramatic styles like Kato's signature high-low ruffled 'Vex' skirt or fuller Victorian-inspired shapes. With high-street retailers focused on chasing mainstream trends, they can be an unreliable source for new materials. This makes upcycling, sewing and/or purchasing from a community-friendly online retailer or convention kiosk a more realistic choice. Online vendors like Dracula Clothing, Rebel's Market and Atomic Jane – as well as small-scale makers on Etsy –cater to the alternative fashion community, with many of their styles serving both steampunk and goth shoppers.

These retailers focus on stripes, lace, ruffled, bustled, gathered, buckled, and high-low styles that give the illusion of volume without having to use copious fabric. Many begin their designs from a Victorian fashion element – most popular are bustles and aprons – and then introduce contemporary elements like the

high-low hem, elastic waistbands, faux leather, or mini-skirts. And while there are a variety of options regarding colour, patterns, and textile, the 'steampunk' skirts available online blur together, and begin to feel repetitive. And while the ever-present bricolage element means that these skirts will feel unique in each look, those who gravitate to steampunk because of its romantic Do-It-Yourself qualities may find themselves feeling lukewarm at the thought of such a dramatic element being store-bought. These *bricoleurs* instead maintain the punk element of steampunk, sewing and upcycling what they can and purchasing what they cannot (i.e. corsetry).

In his 2011 essay for the fiction anthology *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*, notable maker Jake von Slatt explains that for many in his acquaintance, the ability to make things with your own hands, to build and make something of your own design is a key lure for steampunk (von Slatt 2011). He bemoans the advent of planned obsolescence and dependence on corporate industry for creativity. This sentiment is echoed in *The Steampunk Bible*, *SteamPunk Magazine* articles, interviews with makers, social media, blogs, and conversations. The romance of craftsmanship is an intrinsic element, and bricolage carries this feeling of handcraftsmanship into the work of any steampunk: novice maker and master designer alike. In instances where this romance translates into being a maker first and purchaser second, upcycling and sewing may be the preferred mode.

For my own fledgling evening look, I draped 2 uncut meters of burgundy crushed velvet across a netted ivory hoop skirt (found at a vintage store) and tacked together drapery that I hoped would pass as 1870s-style bustled apron. Whether I succeeded in convincing others of historical authenticity was not my concern: I simply hoped that my attempts at sewing would not land too far astray. While I enjoyed the project, if I'd been able to find a suitable base-skirt at a retailer, I would have happily accessorised it instead. Had I been more than a novice seamstress, I would have worked from one of the Simplicity steampunk patterns that I'd purchased early in my thesis as research material. I could have

then experimented with patternmaking – a practice I know many sewing-skilled steampunk women enjoy doing, as these custom items better suit their aesthetic desires.

One of these women is Amy Stannard-Powell. I met Stannard-Powell by chance in 2015 at a local knitting group held at the Safari Lounge in Meadowbank, Edinburgh. We were both enthusiastic beginners and were delighted to find other common interests. She immediately shared with me her enjoyment of travelling to Asylum in Lincoln and explained that she intended to start sewing a larger percentage of her many looks. Since our first meeting, Stannard-Powell has begun to document her sewing progress on social media, with her Instagram gallery not only showcasing her creations, but also referencing her patterns and fabric sources. For Stannard-Powell, the process of creating her looks is an element of her *becoming*, and their performance is linked directly to her own creative identity.

Figure 51 Amy Stannard-Powell's home-sewn crinoline (2018)

In Figure 51 Stannard-Powell models a crinoline made from the Vena Cava kit. From their Truly Victorian line, the crinoline is a fairly faithful match to the

1860 red cage crinoline on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. The Truly Victorian patterns and kits aim for historically accuracy in silhouette if not material. The line has a happy, faithful following who share their labours on Instagram with the hashtag #trulyvictorian. Alongside Stannard-Powell's post are projects from other steampunk women, professional costumers, re-enactors, cosplayers and Victorian enthusiasts.

The advent of the cage crinoline replaced the multiple-layers of petticoats needed previously to create the fashionable full-skirted silhouette. Ordinarily layered overtop the corset, these underskirts and foundation would hold the gown in position and give the correct, upright silhouette. Stannard-Powell inverts this formula in a formal look worn at AsylumX[24], Figure 52, with her waspie the final garment layered into place.

Figure 52 Amy Stannard-Powell. 2018. Stannard-Powell at AsylumX in the crinoline from Figure 51 (posted August 27, 2018)

[24] AsylumX is the shorthand designation for the 10th Weekend at the Asylum festival, and was used frequently in hashtag form (#asylumx) by attendees.

The skirt of her vibrant green gown follows another Truly Victorian (TV) pattern, designed to be worn over the TV103 cage crinoline. The TV webshop situates both the crinoline and skirt in their 'Romantic and Civil War Patterns 1830-1868' category, describing the skirt as, 'of the style used during the late and post-Civil War period' (Truly Victorian 2018). This nine-panel skirt requires six meters of fabric and has a series of tight gathers across the back to create the necessary elliptical cascade to drape over the crinoline. The top is also from a historical Civil War pattern line, this time from Simplicity. However, Stannard-Powell explains that she's shortened the chemise to be closer to a blouse length, and from the patterns' historical bones Stannard-Powell deviates and experiments. Rather than following the nineteenth-century layering process of chemise-corset-crinoline-skirt-bodice, Stannard-Powell moves chemise-crinoline-skirt-corset, foregoing the bodice altogether: the combination of chemise/corset serves the bodice purpose, a common practice in steampunk dress. And this combination changes the nature of her look.

Stannard-Powell's pattern revisions and looks tend to favour skirt silhouettes that reference 1850s/1860s fashions. Her style is a merger of upper class finery and an adventurer's spirit. Her most favoured prop is a grinning, goggle-wearing plush cat appropriately named 'Cheshire'. For her purple 'Travelling Outfit' (Figure 53), Stannard-Powell combines patterns from three different vendors: the bustled skirt is based on Vogue pattern #8882 ('Misses' Flared Skirts, Vogue Patterns 2018), the waistcoat coming from New Look (an imprint of Simplicity, New Look 2018), and a pannier-style peplum adapted from Simplicity's steampunk costume line (Simplicity 2018).

Figure 53 Stannard-Powell's 'Travelling Outfit' on her dressmaking dummy (2017)

Mimicking the early bustle silhouette popular before 1880, this ensemble combines contemporary and costume patterns alongside a store-bought shirt to create a steampunk look.

Stannard-Powell's 'Travelling Outfit' matches the semiotic signposts of steampunk as recommended by Falksen (Victorian-inspiration, goggles), but also demonstrates the importance of venturing out of convention for the introspection that is so critical to authentic (i.e. identity performing) steampunk looks. The rich purple hues employed in this look, though popular during the mid-late nineteenth century (Matthews 2016), are more expressive of Stannard-Powell's own personality than an attempt at Victorian accuracy or prescriptive adherence. Many retailers offer skirts in neutral or earth tones, burnt oranges, emeralds, and burgundies to ensure sales. For something dramatic and personal – like purple – sewing skills and the patience to upcycle ensure both satisfaction and faithful representation of the wearer's *becoming* rather than their *being* at a meet-up.

Another steampunk maker known for making her colourful Victorian-inspired skirts (and full looks) is *Steampunk'd* contestant and cosplay model Tayliss Forge (steamsona, legal name undisclosed). Like Stannard-Powell, Forge prefers to make her own garments, going so far as to make her own corsets as well. Forge explains during episode four of *Steampunk'd* that she accesses steampunk at its intersection with fantasy, and regularly incorporates elfin characteristics, such as her signature pointed ear cuffs visible in Figure 54, into her looks.

Figure 54 Tayliss Forge. 2018. Forge at WonderCon (posted March 25, 2018)

As her costuming business, fantasy fandom, photoshoot styling and Instagram hashtags demonstrate, Forge tends to wear and create steampunk costumes rather than clothing.[25] Forge's Etsy-based business 'Nonconformity' sells her trademark elfin ear cuffs as well as chokers, leather wrist cuffs, leather underbust corsets and bespoke services. Forge's most intricate designs can be found on her

[25] In the worn-daily, accessible sense of the word as defined on p. 22 .

Instagram, not Etsy, where she shares her costuming and gives insights into the characters who inspired them.

In Figure 54, Forge wears a purple brocade high-low bustle skirt with matching underbust corset all of her own design. This look's styling is, again, entirely dependent on the skirt. The chemise and corset could be worn together with jeans for steampunk light or with a different skirt, however this would change the look. Thus, though the skirt is the most interchangeable object, it is also the definitive one. As with Stannard-Powell, Forge chooses to keep the accessories minimal and allow her fabric choices to be the centre of attention. From a technical perspective, Forge positions herself as an advanced seamstress: the pattern matching on the corset showcases her technical knowledge as well as attention to detail. Her skirt performs her identity and fantasy-laden *becoming* better than a ready-to-wear item might. Forge is a dedicated maker, for whom costuming is a professional and personal passion. In designing and stitching her own looks, she can more easily layer context – specifically her love of fantasy – seamlessly into her steampunk looks and thus perform her *becoming* alongside her feminine gender. Like Kato and Wilder, Forge's Instagram gallery includes several softcore stylised erotica images, using her own designs for storytelling in much the same was as Kato. These sexually-imbued gender performances juxtapose with images like Figure 54 that are simultaneously covered and visually provocative.

Forge's purple and black brocade skirt – along with many of her other skirted silhouettes – evokes the romantic, the Victorian, and the magical simultaneously as her colour palette, jewellery, and props project the aura of a magical character: an elfin enchantress, a medieval sorceress, a Harry Potter pin-up, a nymph. Forge's look comes from the same school of steampunk fashion as the high-low ruffled saloon girl skirts worn by Wilde, Wilder, and Hunter or Carriger's red wiggle skirt from an online retailer like Lindy Bop or Hell Bunny. In each of these looks, the specific and nuanced mix of genres (wild west, Victorian, retro, punk, etc.) come together via the interplay between the women's

skirt and corset. The ways that these garments layer inform the women's gender performance, in turn expressing how they approach concepts of femininity and masculinity in identity and dress.

GENDER, SEX, SKIRTS, AND SUITS: MENSWEAR-INSPIRED LOOKS

Garments like the corset, skirts, dresses, crinolines, and bustles are the geography of femininity. But this does not mean these gendered garments define femininity – or female gender. Whether to wear skirts or trousers is a personal choice, informed by both comfort and identity, with gender performance steering wardrobe selections. During the course of my research, I exchanged emails with Dr Lisa Hager, who identifies as a queer cisgender woman.[26] In an article for Tor.com, 'Queer Cogs', Hager explains that LGBTQIA+ people are readily welcomed in the American steampunk community, and that in her experience steampunk is a queer-positive space where she feels safe in the knowledge that her gender performance, identity, and mode of dress will be accepted:

> For example, many steampunk women have a longstanding love affair with corsets, but, equally important here are the women who crossplay masculine personae, like myself, and the many men who have similar fondnesses [*sic*] for corsets and wear them exquisitely well. (Hager 2012)

When attending steampunk conventions and events, such as Atlanta's annual Dragon*Con, Hager performs a steamsona based on Oscar Wilde's *fin-de-siècle* allegory Dorian Gray (Figure 55), a character that feels more representative of her gender (Hager 2011). For Hager, experiencing steampunk as a woman does not include the corsetry, bustles, or skirts that Carriger, Forge, Stannard-Powell, Wilder, and Hunter prefer. 'Crossplay', a portmanteau of cross-dressing and cosplay, is an opportunity for Hager to explore masculine modes of dress that

[26] Hager is an assistant professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha and an active member of the LGBTQIA+ steampunk community.

better suit her identity. In one of our email exchanges I asked Hager to describe her Dorian Gray crossplay in detail, specifically how the look had evolved over time from the simple styling of its first outing into the elaborate costume in Figure 55. Hager explained that the look had started life as a Halloween costume and that the details and elaborations arrived as she began attending conventions:

> 'My steampunk Dorian Gray outfit has evolved over time. The coat I got as a Halloween costume to be Dorian Gray, and, then when I stared getting into steampunk academically and personally, I used it at the basis for the outfit. The shirt and waistcoat were purchased at a thrift store for that Halloween costume.
>
> Over the years as I have attended steampunk conventions (mostly TelsaCon in Madison, Wisconsin), I have purchased the cravat and jewelry from makers who sell their wares at conventions. It's very important to me in general and particularly in terms of steampunk to add clothing and accessories that are handmade, small-business, and unique – all of which is central to the ethos of steampunk itself. Also, as a Victorian literature scholar, I'm always on the lookout for accessories and clothing that make literary allusions.' (Hager 2016)[27]

For Hager, crossplaying as Dorian Gray is a way to simultaneous explore steampunk's creative space and her own sexual identity and gender. From the green boutonniere referencing Smythe Hichens's *The Green Carnation* (1894)[28] to the goggle-laden top hat, Hager's crossplay uses semiotics to convey her look's narrative. However, crucially, she accomplishes this without relying on those same semiotic objects to signal her gender performance. Instead, Hager's comfort

[27]Email exchange June 8, 2016. 'Re: Concerning Steampunk Dress'

[28]And by extension Oscar Wilde (Beckson 2000)

Figure 55 Lisa Hager. 2016. Hager at a convention in her Dorian Gray crossplay

in and enjoyment of the waistcoat and cravat perform her personal form of female masculinity. Although in her costume Hager takes the guise of Oscar Wilde, the context of crossplay enforces that her gender performance is that of a semi-theatrical female masculinity, akin to that described in Halberstam's analysis of drag kings and nuanced differences between a dramatic masculine gender performance and an identity-linked gender performance (Halberstam 1998). Hager's preference for menswear extends beyond her Oscar Wilde costume, reinforcing that while this look constitutes a *being* state, it is a *being* that contributes to her wider becoming.

Likewise, Lincoln-based photographer and writer Lexy Foxley-Johnson gravitates to menswear-inspired looks for her steampunk wardrobe, as evidenced in Figure 56.

Figure 56 Lexy Foxley-Johnson. 2018. Foxley-Johnson at AsylumX (posted August 26, 2018)

In her Instagram bio, Foxley-Johnson self-identifies as 'dapper femme'. This combination signals that her love of menswear does not preclude femininity, and rather, Foxley-Johnson embraces this specific description of female masculinity as both an identity and gender performance. Foxley-Johnson and her girlfriend, artist and steampunk maker Rose Ablewhite both embrace menswear staples like waistcoats, tweed blazers, neckties, and pocket squares in their every-day style. For their steampunk looks, both women begin with a base of this 'dapper femme' wardrobe and build their look with accessories (see p. 248). Under her leather jacket, Foxley-Johnson wears a leather corset and silk scarf. This direct combination of masculine and feminine garments, hard and soft textures, is a well-curated performance that melds the *being* state of her steampunk accessories and her larger *becoming* gender narrative: dapper femme. Steampunk's aesthetic diversity provides ample opportunities for photographer Foxley-Johnson to play with her interests, presenting opportunities to wear antique-looking equipment (like her hip-holster and cross-body bag) as well as capture images of people engaging with a community that they love.

This mix of corsetry, trousers, and trade tools opens an aesthetic scope for cosplays that engage with masculinity without eschewing femininity. Looking again at Ariel's Momocon look (Figure 35), this silhouette also borrows from menswear by integrating trousers and a utility belt in lieu of a skirt and chatelaine. The rich pattern and colour palette of Ariel's trousers would traditionally signal wealth and celebration, while the arm/chest guards and staff explore the warrior class (also high status) – both appropriate for her Wakanda inspiration. Adding the corset matches both halves: the garment performs as both a breastplate and a reference to cultural diffusion via colonial trade. The corset's appearance next to the waxprint conveys the meeting of two cultures, just as with Pho's *áo dài,* is a celebration of heritage textile and steampunk's Victorian roots[29] simultaneously.

Finally, steampunk light looks – like that described in the British Steampunk Community post (Figure 30) – combine jeans or more casual separates with a semiotic piece like a corset, waistcoat, or military jacket for a look that is aesthetically steampunk but street-wear accessible. This dress phenomenon, more so than costume or cosplay, harmonises directly with *becoming* narratives. With the removal of an aesthetic performance via steamsona character or evening-appropriate ensemble, the community member's personal identity can shine through. In this way, Bulloff's comment on overreliance on accessories as an impediment to daily style takes on greater validity. If the aim of a steampunk look is to encapsulate a *becoming,* rather than an *ekphrastic being*, then steampunk light is the most introspectively authentic. However, for many members of the community these accessories are as important as a corset or well-tied cravat.

[29] On this note, I am compelled to mention the possible colonial contexts of African waxprints. The Vlisco company has exported waxprint fabric and batiks to Europe and America since the mid-nineteenth century, conferring them with luxury status outside Africa.[29] This adds a second layer of cultural friction, as Ariel celebrates Africa while acknowledging – whether knowingly or not – the impact of imperialism.

NARRATIVES: THE IMPACT OF ACCESSORIES

Regardless of style or fashion, accessories have the power to complete a look. Dr Martens combat boots, vintage and high-street finds, and UK based alternative brands like Hades Shoes UK, Banned Retro, and Irregular Choice all cater to the steampunk aesthetic. Hats, fascinators, and toppers can all be found at conventions and from vendors at fairs. Many makers use Etsy to share their work. And in the instance that the sought-after item cannot be purchased, it can be upcycled: books like *The Anatomy of Steampunk* (2013) and *Steampunk Your Wardrobe* (2012) give step-by-step guides for DIY goggles, toppers, boleros, spats, and jewellery that aid novice *bricoleurs* in rounding out their wardrobes.

Steampunk aesthetic has a love-affair with detail, and this is nowhere more visible than in accessory design. Beyond their contribution to style, steampunk accessories are also implemented for storytelling. The name of Pho's steamsona – Ay-leen the Peacemaker – hinges on the eponymous upcycled hand-held canon 'the Peacemaker'; this object is less a weapon and more a symbol of her efforts to raise the voices of people of colour and maintain peace while doing so (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011). Returning to Suna Dasi's look in Figure 48, Dasi's leather belts, pouch, arm guard, and espionage device – the 'Aural Induction Oscillator' – are occupational items that signal her 'Deva Dasi' persona: a courtesan-spy attached to a temple (Dasi 2014). These accessories, like Ay-leen's Peacemaker are also the result of bricolage.

Between each of Faber's camera clicks during the photoshoot, Dasi told me about each of her items in turn, explaining their fictional uses and how she crafted them: the arm guard began its life as a ferret harness and, with the addition of a small toy sword and a length of wire, is now a fantasy weapon. Likewise, her listening device is part re-configured toy (the hand-held transmitter) and part makeup compact (the earpiece). Dasi's look fits comfortably inside the scope of steampunk's aesthetic without the accessories, her silk sari and leather vest layering history, textures, and identity via bricolage. And yet, these objects are an integral element of her storytelling: they are not a

'glue some gear' veneer. With this to mind, Bulloff's concern about over-reliance on accessories to *create* the look misses the mark with women like Dasi who use these objects to augment the story they want to tell; these are the granular *ekphrastic* objects that breathe life into the steamsona's fiction.

Likewise, Carriger's looks at conventions and author appearances are a mix of corseted, skirted silhouettes (like her many stylings of the 'Spoons' corset) and twentieth-century retro looks including pedal-pushers, mary jane heels, headscarves, cat-eye glasses and pussy-bowed blouses. One element that remains a constant is a brass chain that, in place of a pendant, features a pen (see Figure 46). Carriger views this piece as a designation of her profession as a writer, and wears it as a badge of honour alongside her grander, more costume jewellery (Carriger November 12, 2013). Similarly, she regularly incorporates an octopus in her jewellery, in reference to a scientific society in her *Parasol Protectorate* novels. At their core, each of Carriger's 'favorite steampunk outfits' is the same: a corset worn as outerwear, a coordinating skirt, and a hat or headband. Her looks are softly feminine, romantic, sophisticated, and thoughtfully executed. The fabrics set the stage, and her accessories and embellishments perform her romantic storytelling: brass buttons and spoons, statement eyewear, bold jewellery, and dramatic hats. Carriger, Dasi, and every other steampunk woman I've discussed use their garments to share their character, whether personal or fictitious, and rely on their accessories to perform discrete elements of their narrative.

Figure 57 Rosie Ablewhite 2018. Ablewhite wears her upcycled mechanical arm prosthetic at AsylumX (posted August 26, 2018)

These upcycled accessories are not limited to jewellery and small technology. For AsylumX, Rosie Ablewhite created a prosthetic mechanical arm (Figure 60) that rivals Willeford's (Figure 44). Ablewhite created this impactful piece by upcyling toys, wires, lights and clock parts:

> Once I'd sprayed the arm [from an Iron Man costume] black and gold, it was just a question of combining mechanical parts that I'd gathered in a way they could work together. This piece was mostly aesthetic, but it did light up and the fingers move, also. The top sleeve started as an assassin's gauntlet which I reassembled and added to. Overall it worked pretty well, and because it was fairly heavy I put a hook on the underside so it could rest on my belt! (Ablewhite 2018) (Figure 60)

Ablewhite's prosthetic is slim, not overwhelming her slight frame. She shows great attention to detail, with the wires, lights, gauges, and faux hydraulics linked together, giving a convincing performance for the fingers' movement. Accessories and devices require a different level of upcycling execution than garments: the most successful – with success defined as convincing mimicry - are the ones

which strip the context of the original objects and replace them with the new item. And, whether the maker/wearer explicitly acknowledges it or not, these mechanical accessories take a romantic approach to history and design which, in turn, informs the wearer's look. Along with her girlfriend, Ablewhite's menswear-inspired looks rely on the merger of her tailored garments, fine details, and curated upcycled accessories to convey her performance.

With examples from *bricoleurs* like Ablewhite, Ariel, Foxley-Johnson, and Dasi, I believe that Bulloff is too hasty in her assertion that bold accessories are an impediment to steampunk's continued growth as a liveable fashion culture. While mechanical arms or weapons may overwhelm daily steampunk looks – that is, steampunk clothing – they can be the skeleton key that simultaneously reveals the wearer's steamsona, character play, and *becoming*. Thus, these accessories, through their inclusion in a complete look, unifying the romantic *ekphrastic being* with the gender and identity's *becoming.*

CONCLUSION

When I first began research for this thesis, it was with the intention of writing a survey of steampunk culture that would examine the development and repetition of its most popular tropes. I had framed this decision in tandem with IBM's projection that steampunk would be the key mainstream trend for 2012.[1] While this projection proved false,[2] it did correctly prophesise a surge in materials and study on the subject. Since the publication of *The Steampunk Bible* (VanderMeer and Chambers 2011), research and interest in steampunk culture has multiplied exponentially, paralleling the increase of: digital platforms for steampunk creativity and discussion like *Beyond Victoriana*; local groups like GUESS and The Pandora Society; events like SteamCon, Glasgow By Gaslight, and Weekend at the Asylum; and fresh insights on steampunk fiction that promote diversity, inclusion, and introspection. After operating inside this boom, I pivoted my research to address a more nuanced and pressing topic in 2015 – the impact of gender on Anglo-American steampunk material production.

In the years since 2012, my most frequently received follow-up questions at conferences and workshops centred on the corset and feminism; chiefly, how can steampunk dress be read through a feminist lens when the corset – a restrictive and controversial garment – figures so strongly into the dress culture? With practice my response to this query became more streamlined, pointing to intention, primary source testimonials, gender performance, and storytelling to argue that corset-wearing can be a thoughtful and empowering wardrobe choice. The persistence of the question led me to conclude that the most valuable contribution I could make to steampunk study would be a detailed exploration of

[1] An idea they based on proprietary social listening data, as well as popular culture moments including steampunk's appearance in Prada's Autumn/Winter 2012 menswear collection (Sterling 2013).

[2] Steampunk found its way into relatively few high street stores as compared to the popularity of more goth-inspired looks at H&M, Topshop, New Look, and Next.

the ways in which women craft their own narratives and cultivate representation inside the steampunk cultural space, and with what tools they instigate this transformation.

To accomplish this, I set about identifying how women had been represented in Anglo-American steampunk fiction and culture prior to RaceFail'09, before exploring how women represent themselves today.[3] Out of this study, I concluded that the most visible and varied element of steampunk culture – dress – has a direct correlation with the advent of women's authorship and its more diverse representation of women and people of colour. Through the overlap of fiction and fashion, steampunk women rewrote a culture.

In its three chapters my thesis analyses the conditions, inspirations, creative processes, and modes of wearing that impact the modes of steampunk women's dress in Britain and the United States. It situates romance writing and reading as a principle tool for the development of steampunk women's dress through its role in creating diverse gender representation. In my analysis, I have used the concepts of *becoming* and *being* to evaluate and describe these varied representations of gender performances. The outcome of this study is then applied to visual analysis of a variety steampunk womenswear looks, proving that the developments in steampunk fiction since 2009 have a tangible impact on steampunk dress culture.[4] As part of this investigation, I still included the survey of steampunk as a cultural field and fiction genre that I had originally set out to write. However, from this new vantage point my focus and conclusions centred

[3] A similar investigation into steampunk dress in other European countries may have a different flashpoint than RaceFail'09, despite the Internet's global connectivity. Such a study in France, Belgium, or the Netherlands (countries that also contend with colonialist pasts) could yield a significantly different outcome. Likewise, should Carriger and/or Priest's work be relevant to the dress culture of these countries, accounting for translation, international publication dates, and romance reading practices would cause results to vary. This limits the efficacy of my research's conclusions to Britain and the United States, with further study needed to expand its reach.

[4] Future research will need to be conducted to measure the impact of women's narratives and craft practices on Anglo-American steampunk menswear.

on conditions surrounding women's inclusion in the steampunk canon, the thematic angles they employed to create representation, and the reception of their authorship.

Mike Perschon's widely acknowledged definition of steampunk situates fiction (both canonical and second wave) and art as outcomes of a conscious aesthetic. This aesthetic-led definition relies on the convergence of Neo-Victorianism, technofantasy, and retrofuturism thus opening the field of cultural production beyond its original scope. This revised viewpoint that defines steampunk as an aesthetic mixing Neo-Victorian visuals and history with retrofuturistic social structure (Nevins 2011, Perschon 2012) grew out of the Anglo-American science fiction community's ethos-shift in the aftermath of RaceFail'09 (Pho March 2009, Somerville 2009, Reagle 2015, Goh 2017). The increased attention to institutional racism and sexism in science fiction broadly led to more introspective, diverse steampunk creativity. Pho's *Beyond Victoriana* blog, Suna Dasi's *Steampunk India* photo-narratives and writing, and Jamie Goh's doctoral research on steampunk and whiteness all challenge contemporary steampunk culture to create self-aware postcolonial narratives – and to challenge those whose reading of steampunk unwittingly glorifies elements of Imperialism. Likewise, the female-led fiction of Ekaterina Sedia, Gail Carriger, Cherie Priest, M.K. Hobson, Dru Pagliassotti and many others reacted directly to the alienating rhetoric at the heart of RaceFail'09. This wave of new, probing content – alongside the broadening appeal of viewing steampunk in malleable aesthetic terms – crafted space for diverse characters and greater representation, especially for women.

This female-oriented wave of steampunk content, at times met with opposition (Hobson 2011; Nevins 2011, Perschon 2012: 85-86), has been a turning-point for steampunk fiction, fashion, and culture as a whole. Carriger's *New York Times Bestseller* status increased steampunk's visibility using the romance formula to anchor the relatability of her text. Likewise, Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone* introduced readers to a protagonist whose identity as a

female automaton gave a broad touchpoint, invoking a popular science fiction trope (humanoid cyborgs) while also engaging in a nuanced dialogue on contemporary viewpoints of femininity, female gender performance, and the body. For both Sedia and Carriger, as well as for short-form romance writers like Adrienne Kress and Ann Aguirre, situating female characters inside a romantic storyline allows the authors to explore diverse *becoming* woman narratives alongside their adventure plot and interpretation of steampunk's aesthetic. The application of romance as a vehicle for varied *becomings* has, however, brought with it a gendered expectation that women-authored steampunk fiction is *exclusively* romance.

As my thesis addresses, Hobson's mislabelling of *Boneshaker* (2009) as a romance alongside Carriger's *Soulless* (2009) and Hobson's own debut *The Native Star* (2010) is no simple misunderstanding about the content of Priest's novel. It is rather collateral damage of understanding steampunk as a static genre, a reading with Perschon's thesis dubs the 'tyranny of personal taste' (Perschon 2012: 236). Despite *Boneshaker*'s complete lack of romance narrative, Priest's own womanhood proved ample incentive to include her work in the 'bustlepunk' umbrella of steampunk romance. The author's gender, thus, directly impacts the reception and contexts of women's writing, especially as compared to her male counterparts (Prose 1988). The connotation of women as romance writers, likewise, casts a veil of presupposed gender performance over the text itself. Combined, the impact of romance as both a genre and an expectation feeds directly into the portrayal – and by extension the relatability – of fictional female characters. And yet, as my analysis in the second chapter demonstrates, second-wave steampunk fiction includes a wide variety of femininities and performances thereof – and it is these narratives that create the textured inspirations for Anglo-American steampunk women's dress in the past decade.

The canonical authors – Jeter, Blaylock, Powers, Di Filippo, and Gibson and Sterling – included female characters in their fiction in predominantly supporting roles. Their development focused on the women's *being* a foil to the male

protagonist. Jeter and Di Filippo both relied on stereotyping to design their female characters, using a hybrid version of the nineteenth-century New and Fallen Woman (Madonna/Magdalene binary). The work of subsequent authors – such as Sedia, Carriger, Priest, Dasi, Kress, Ayeni, and Scott Westerfield – is a balm to both the canonical steampunk's desert of diversity as well as the vocal hostility of some key voices in science fiction establishment in the wake of RaceFail'09. As Pho's 2009 founding of – and subsequent success with – *Beyond Victoriana* exposed, interest in steampunk had expanded beyond the catchment of the predominantly white British heterosexual and cisgender male protagonists populating the canon. These new voices – in fiction, fandom, and criticism – rallied around a definition of steampunk that views the subject as an aesthetic with Neo-Victorian and retrofuturistic tendencies (Perschon 2012).

I assert that contemporary steampunk fashion and cosplay, whether consciously or not, benefit from the efforts of Pho, Goh, Dasi, Sedia, Carriger, and Priest – women who laboured to create a climate and creative oeuvre focused on providing representation and inspiration for the steampunk community. From this perspective, the stories penned by many second-wave authors employ the familiar romance formula as both a plot device and a point of connection with their audience, using the familiarity to further solidify the *becoming*s of their heroines. These *becoming*s, read through the combined foundation of Butler (1990, 1991, 1993) and Halberstam (1998), explore a variety of gender performances, sexualities, and approaches to the female body and its biology. Priest's exclusion of romance, in contrast, uses motherhood and self-reliance to explore *becoming*. Motherhood is seldom employed in stand-alone, i.e. non-serial, romance novels (Clawson 2005) as this complicates the flow of relationship between the two romantic leads. Priest's novel is, like the others, a *becoming* story that hinges on love and its impact on personal growth and identity. She accomplishes this without the use of romance and, despite the confusion on its exclusion (Hobson 2011, Perschon 2011), provides steampunk fiction readers with a rounded female character that they can connect with. The enriched development of women, people of colour, and LGBTQIA+ characters in second

wave fiction, furthered by the practice of steamsonas, is the connective tissue that explains the boom of steampunk fashion and convention culture in the last decade.

The popularity of steamsonas indicates that costuming the fictional self is a key impulse for steampunk fashion design. For example, Dasi's look in Figure 48 (p. 230) is a direct reference to her original Deva Dasi characters: her espionage device and intermixing of sari with a leather waistcoat references the alternate post-rebellion India where she sets her fictions. Likewise, Carriger invokes her most famous protagonist, Alexia Tarabotti, at convention appearances by wearing a teal walking gown identical to that gracing the cover of *Changeless* (2010). These instances of *inverse ekphrasis*, where life mimics art, are easily discerned and explained due to the proximity between the author and their art, reading as both cosplay and self-promotion. Cosplay is, itself, a form of *inverse ekphrasis*; cosplayers mimic the look and feel of characters from fiction, film, graphic novels, television, and even musicians' personas as they seek an external narrative with which they feel kinship. From this stance the impact of steampunk romance fiction grows, as these storylines provide rounded, interesting characters with recognisable.

My research has revealed that, more often than not, steampunk cosplay takes the form of the wearer's steamsona rather than a known fictional character like Alexia; the romance of personal storytelling takes precedence. This is not to imply that all steampunk looks are character-led. In her interview with Ariane Wolfe, fashion editor of the *Exhibition Hall* zine, Carriger expresses her belief that the question of character or clothing first is personal – and creating a character is optional and entirely at the discretion of the wearer:

> I began with the clothing, but that's because I'm not much of an actor and I simply enjoy the style above all else. Also I incorporate steampunk into my everyday life as well as wearing full on costumes to larger events. This means I like separates and small details, like jewelry, that I can mix with "normal" garb. Starting with a character might work better for those who are planning on

> attending a faire or convention, or those who aren't inveterate shoppers. (Wolfe 2009: 28)

Carriger's modes of dress depend greatly on the venue and her audience. Her looks for book signings and author appearances would fall under the umbrella of 'steampunk light', combining vintage twentieth-century garments with steampunk jewellery accents. By contrast, her convention attire tends to include more extravagant garments such as corsets, lavish hats, gloves, and full skirts as well as larger number of accessories. Most of the ensembles Carriger wears for her public appearances are shared on social media, whether via her blog *Retro Rack*, her Facebook fan page, or (less frequently) her Instagram gallery. Carriger is just one of many steampunks who use their social media accounts to share their creativity with their global community.

This open sharing in public forums provided me with a majority of my primary research into women's steampunk fashion and cosplay since many choose to share their influences, intentions, and locations in the captions alongside the hashtags (keywords) they believe to be applicable. From these primary resource images, I trace the construction, contexts, and influences of different garments, using the order of dressing to provide narrative structure. Beginning with the chemise/undershirt moving outwards, this discussion builds the argument of cosplay as *inverse ekphrasis,* with the fiction's characters creating relatable touchpoints from which to create a personal character, or a steamsona, where applicable and an extension of the self in the case of those such as Carriger. Principally, steampunk fashion acts as an element of larger self-expression intent, with the application of character adding another level to the wearer's identity performance. My analysis of leather corsets, fantasy bodies, and gender performance is a direct response to the many questions I received during my tenure as a graduate student about the relationship between corsetry and

feminism.[5] As this passage concludes, the implications of a corset hinge on the intention, design, and performance of the object in direct relation with the wearer. Where Alexander McQueen's leather corset implies suffering, Carriger's styling of a leather Dark Garden corset conveys self-confidence and personal storytelling.

As I have argued across the thesis, steampunk women's dress is driven by fiction and identity performance in equal measures. The past decade's increase in romance fiction and female-led narratives having had a tangible effect on steampunk fashion. Steampunk dress can serve as a *being* expression for women who use the performance – in both cosplay and fashion contexts – as an exploration of their faceted *becoming.* This *becoming* encapsulates their identity, gender, interests, and lived emotions, while their *being* is more momentary and informed by their situational impulses, space (ex. convention, faire, home, online, etc.), and expectations. Likewise, for women like Carriger (whose identity is wrapped in her authorship) and Pho (whose activism for diversity and postcolonial creativity manifests in her adaptations of cultural dress), steampunk looks are *becoming* performances that serve both an introspective and didactic purpose.

The social expectation to perform a facet of one's identity can shift an element of *becoming* into a mimetic *being* state. Butler frames the performance of *being* a lesbian as an act of mime, whose repeated action may with time transform into an active 'doing', and thus, her *becoming* narrative (Butler 1991: 13; Salih 2006: 55-56). Halberstam's discussion of gendered pronoun preferences for genderqueer and trans individuals highlights the impact of the *becoming* narratives acknowledgement over the *being* state's physicality. Butler and Halberstam's reading of *being* and *becoming* as distinct identities – and thus

[5] In the coming months, I intend to rework and expand on this theme with the intention of submitting the research to a journal like *The Fashion Studies Journal*, *Journal of Social History*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*.

distinct performances – resonates with steampunk dress and its *inverse ekphrastic* approach to fashion. The *being* of a steampunk character in fiction, and its performance, are a facet of a personality and read as relational. This *being* lacks depth of connection between the character and reader, as the example of Jeter and Di Filippo's female characters conveyed. By contrast, works of fiction that prioritise *becoming* narratives over *being* states – such as the work of Sedia, Carriger, and Priest – allow for a greater emotional investment from the reader and, by extension, a higher level of relatability. It is this relatability that is crucial to the *ekphrastic* fashions.

Carriger's debut heroine – Alexia Tarabotti – is a popular cosplay figure; Carriger regularly shares photos of Alexia cosplays on her social media and blog (Carriger February 2016). Not dissimilar to this fictional form, many take inspiration from Isabella Bunny Bennett's Steam Powered Giraffe stage persona 'Rabbit', mimicking her makeup and clothing style for their own looks. [6] Characters with *becoming* narratives like Alexia and Rabbit, alongside a heightened attention (post-RaceFail'09) to writing diverse fiction, creates inspirational touchpoints for those crafting both faithful cosplays and personal characters – the steamsonas – like Pho's Ay-leen and Dasi's Deva Dasi. Regardless

[6] While this is an interesting tangent, it is one that I have left relatively unexplored due to Steam Powered Giraffe's (SPG) own admission that the band's aesthetic is not intentionally steampunk – and that David Bennett aka 'Spine' is not personally interested in steampunk as disclosed in his Instagram Story:

> 'What got you into steampunk stuff?' 'I've actually never gotten into it. Not my thing.'
>
> 'What led to SPG being a steampunk band if you're not into the scene?' 'Goggles on Rabbit I guess and the band's fictional backstory… the names having "steam powered" in it and people hiring us for Steampunk events.' (Bennett December 20, 2018)

Due to this information, I have elected to exclude SPG's makeup and dress aesthetic from the bulk of the thesis, focusing on content whose authors intentionally create from inside their perspective of steampunk.

of tactic, storytelling is a key feature to steampunk dress and evolves out of the extant fiction circulating the cultural space.

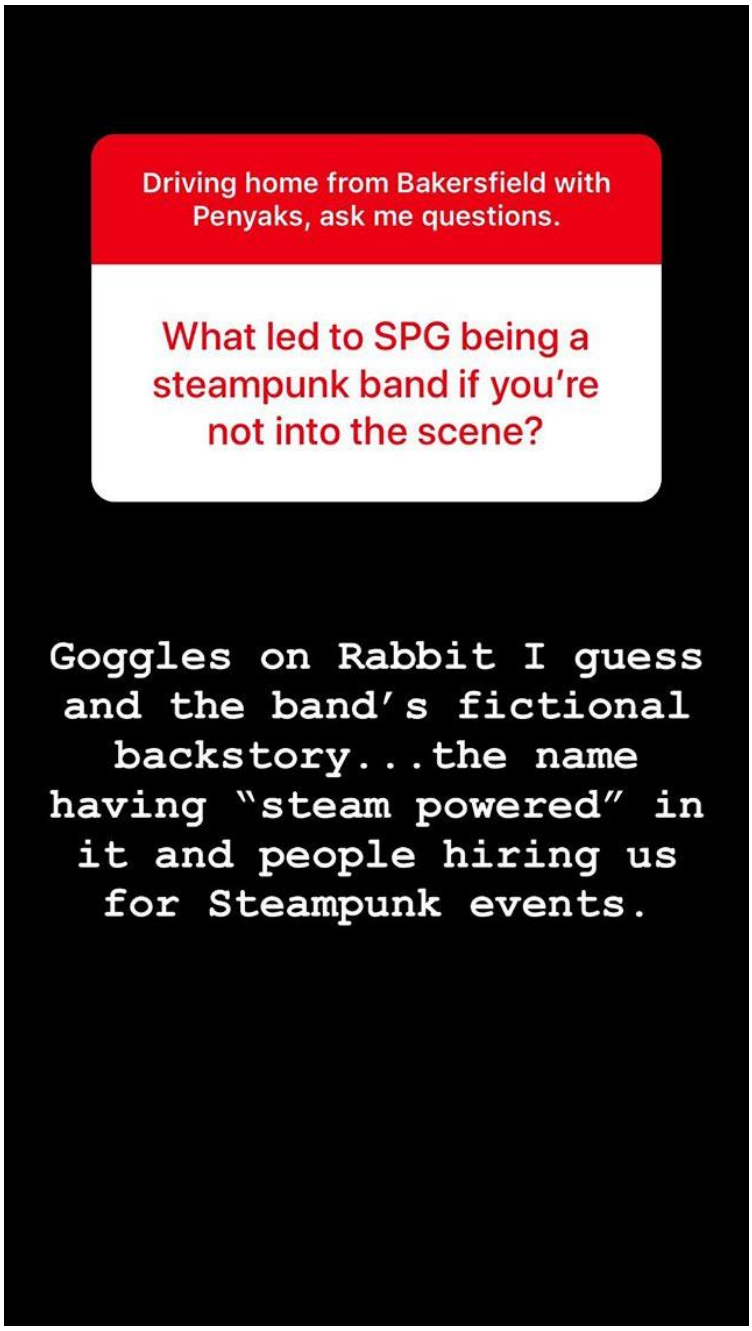
My thesis is the consequence of reading stacks of steampunk romances, attending events, and scouring Instagram for autobiographical primary sources that explore motivation and meaning in a steampunk look. My use of Instagram is one point among many that make my work unique amongst its peers; Instagram marries text and visual media in a form of storytelling unique to the past decade. This decade has witnessed the fallout of RaceFail'09, and redefining to steampunk fiction. Women in Britain and the United States have taken control of the own narratives inside steampunk culture. Science fiction and romance are both formulaic genres, and thus steampunk fiction was a space primed for romantic adaptation. Using this access point, women like Carriger, Priest, Sedia, Pho, and Dasi injected diverse gender performances, sexualities, and cultural backgrounds into a system that was predominantly male, straight, and white.

Romance fiction, steamsona personalities, and event appearances shifted the script. Personifying this storytelling were the women's looks, their manner of dressing in steampunk-coded spaces. Whether in a corset and skirts (as favoured by Carriger), dapper menswear-inspired suiting (as worn by Rosie Ablewhite), or a look that combines Victoriana with cultural heritage (such as Dasi's sari silhouette), women's steampunk fashion choices are led by storytelling and desired gender performance in equal measure. These looks take shape through a combination of craft, bricolage, upcycling, vintage shopping, and bespoke purchases. The execution and polish may vary, however the intention – sharing their craftsmanship and their personal narrative – remain the same.

Word Count: 79,226

APPENDIX: SCREEN CAPTURES

DAVID BENNETT INSTAGRAM STORY 'ASK ME ANYTHING' (AMA): DECEMBER 20, 2018


Driving home from Bakersfield with Penyaks, ask me questions.
What led to SPG being a steampunk band if you're not into the scene?
Goggles on Rabbit I guess and the band's fictional backstory...the name having "steam powered" in it and people hiring us for Steampunk events.

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