

## ISSUE NO. 5

# Steampunk Practices: Time, Tactility, and a Racial Politics of Touch

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*Sara met me at the train station. Dressed in black, well-tailored clothing inspired by the turn of the last century. At the house in the Swedish countryside, I got a quick tour. Upstairs a sewing room with mannequins and big closets, a four-poster bed with parts of the latest LARP (live action role-playing) project all spread out. Downstairs the living room with all kinds of flea market finds, among them an old gramophone. The conversation circled around the allure of steampunk. For Sara, it has to do with a passion for alternate history and do-it-yourself practices. “Steampunk is very forgiving”, she said, “there’s not just one way of doing it. You can bend it, make things up, fantasize.” For her husband Pierre, steampunk is a relatively abstract attribute that can be added to other things, but the specific combinations are important, so that “it feels and tastes steampunk.” Steampunk needs to be in touch with the era of steam-powered technologies, they argued, and the materials and fabrics need to have the right “feel”. It is difficult to put brass, cogs and cogwheels next to plastic and rubber and still call it steampunk. This is something I’ve heard repeatedly since; “it needs to have the right feel.”<sup>[1]</sup>*

Steampunk has been defined in a multitude of ways. As a humorous riff on cyberpunk, steampunk was a tongue-in-cheek proposition in 1987 by the science fiction author K. W. Jeter as a name for his own literary production (along with James Blaylock and Tim Powers) in the area of Victorian fantasies, retro-futurism and alternate history. It started out as a contemporary science fiction subgenre, with roots back to Victorian science fiction of the Jules Verne and H. G. Wells variety. But it has also come to materialize and proliferate as a 21st century Do-It-Yourself subculture populated by tinkerers, ‘makers’, costumers, fashionistas, role-players, lifestylers, gamers, artists, performers, designers, writers, and activists. Steampunks gather in online communities and at fan conventions, in parlors and performance spaces, dressed in slightly distorted Neo-Victorian gear: top hats that hide or support technological gadgets, crinolines and corsets that leave part of the construction bare. Apart from being an interesting cultural phenomenon, steampunk provides an example of a tendency in contemporary popular culture to increasingly turn toward the past, as evident in various vintage and retro cultures, as well as in alternate history movements at large. In turning toward the past in a present tense, steampunks engage with the material, affective, and tactile dimensions of the late 19th century. In that sense, steampunk offers an intriguing set of configurations of temporality, sensation, tactility, and materiality in the registers of, for example, gender, sexuality, and race.

This article is part of a larger research project, which through ethnographic fieldwork among makers, costumers and lifestylers explores notions of technology and embodiment in steampunk material culture.<sup>[2]</sup> In doing so, it uses an understanding of materiality that takes into account not only the obvious physicality of steampunk materials, such as brass, leather, and tweed, but also the materiality of the virtual (cf. Sundén, 2003). Steampunk objects are often viewed and touched by the eyes, and not by the hand, or the skin, completely dependent on digital imaging and circulation of images online within the community. My work takes as its point of departure local gatherings and online communities of the emerging steampunk scene in Sweden. But given the intrinsic transnational quality of the movement, it also branches out to large conventions in the UK (The Asylum) and the USA (SteamCon and the Steampunk World's Fair), as well as to important cultural nodal points online, such as the ambitious fanzine *Steampunk Magazine*, as well as anti-racist, postcolonial steampunk blogs like Silver Goggles and Beyond Victoriana.

This article deals with the aesthetic technological practices of steampunk and their theoretical ramifications for feminist knowledge projects. It consists of three parts, which roughly correspond to different phases of fieldwork and an oscillation between distance and closeness. First, I discuss anachrony and feminist ambivalence in fieldwork. This ambivalence is partly due to a tension between an early research interest in the critical, political, 'punk' potentials of steampunk and numerous encounters with participants of a movement seemingly more invested in ornate surfaces and the 'feel' of futures past. This tension between politics and aesthetics has also been the topic of heated discussions among steampunks. With time, I got increasingly suspicious of this divide, which implies that politics and aesthetics can be securely separated. It also suggests that there is nothing political about how things look, and how they feel. This led me to move closer to the material, tactile dimension of the culture, to investigate the feminist, political implications of such tactility. Thus, in the second part of the article, building on Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) notion of 'erotohistoriography', and Laura Marks's (2002) 'haptic criticism', I concentrate on how steampunk offers a tactile, embodied understanding of the past. Then again, to move close to the materials and costumes of steampunk is, simultaneously, to move close to and play with questions of race, racism, and colonization. Therefore, in the final part of the article, I address the racial politics of touch and tactility, by turning to the significance of touching or being touched by a certain kind of imperialist subjectivity. This discussion includes Saidiya Hartman's (1997) account of how white witnessing of slavery involves a particular opacity of feeling.

Steampunk is a decidedly embodied, sensuous phenomenon, offering an understanding of history and imagination that uses the body and the senses as ways of knowing. The sense of touch is central to the insistence on how steampunk garments and technologies need to have the right 'feel'. As I will argue, steampunk seems to demand a tactile, or 'haptic' method. A framework dealing merely with steampunk as visual spectacle, or with the politics of representation, is not enough to capture the love for materials, fabrics, and objects in the movement. By focusing on modalities of touch in steampunk practices as well as in research, the article contributes to discussions of the senses and of sensation in general, and of touch in particular (see, for example, Classen, 2012; Paterson, 2007). Then again, if there is a tendency in cultural theory to think sensation (or affect, for that matter) as something universal and autonomous that short-circuits questions of signification, criticality, and politics, I side with feminist thinkers who argue that there are certainly politics in sensation, in how things feel (cf. Ahmed, 2004; Manning, 2007; Papenburg and Zarzycka, 2013; Sedgwick, 2003). It seems important from a feminist point of view to look into how specific ways of touching and being touched are available to some and not others, and, importantly, how the sensation itself might change depending on the material specificity of bodies and their enfolding in time.

As a movement fueled by the web that uses as its core inspiration the industrial revolution, imaginatively entwined with the Victorian Era, there are both local variations and similarities across cultural contexts. In my interview with Sara Salkvist and Pierre Salkvist (both organizers of the first Swedish steampunk convention), they emphasize that steampunk looks and feels different in different places, depending on whose late 19th century is available for play. US steampunk has clear Wild Wild West influences, and British steampunk is (not surprisingly) unmistakably Victorian. They argue that Swedish steampunk thrives around the turn of the last century, since industrialization came slightly later to Sweden. They envision Swedish steampunk as light and playful, but also as something that embraces darkness and that has certain weight.<sup>[3]</sup> Then again, what ties the culture together on an international level is the fairly pervasive use of (Neo)-Victorian influences, that in a colonial manner seem to travel globally within the movement

### **Anachrony and feminist ambivalence**

The term anachrony was used by Gérard Genette (1980) to designate a non-chronological narrative order. To Genette, there are two types of anachrony: 'analepsis', or flashback, and 'prolepsis', or flash-forward. In steampunk, anachrony functions as

the baseline in ways that link analepsis to prolepsis. It is a form of anachrony that operates through flashbacks as a manner of flashing-forward. In other words, it consists of a moving backwards into the future. From a feminist point of view, I cannot help but wonder, what does it mean to look back, or to move backwards, as a way of looking and moving forward? What does it mean to formulate feminist politics through analepsis as a way of thinking differently about the present and the future, as a way of entering a feminism of prolepsis?

There are elements of steampunk that appear to move merely backward, as a retrograde step, without much of a simultaneous forward motion. On the website of The Victorian Steampunk Society (organizers of The Asylum in the UK, which is the largest steampunk event in Europe) they state: “We value good manners and polite conduct and try to encourage this by setting an example for others.”<sup>[4]</sup> At first, I thought that statements like these were, perhaps, satirical. But soon I realized that they are actual guides to conduct, and in particular in the UK setting. Victorian etiquette and good manners is a deeply gendered story, and one in which women had little room to maneuver independently of men. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster refers to Victorian manners in terms of “psychic corseting” that separates off desire from social life: “These manifestations of Victorian fetishism in etiquette function as a metaphoric ‘chastity belt’, rigidly defining boundaries of social respectability and disciplining the performing self within these boundaries” (2000: 5). What follows is from my fieldnotes from the US convention SteamCon IV in Seattle, outlining an encounter with a man in his twenties invested in live action role-playing (LARP):

*We talked about Victorian manners and the (re)creation of gender roles from another era. He said that what you find in steampunk may read as sexism, but that women appear to enjoy it (the special treatment) too. He talked about the mannerism as a game played on front stage, but that all kinds of things may be going on back stage. I found myself feeling rather uncomfortable walking around with him and his gentleman manners. For example, he gestured to me to walk before him while entering the downward escalator. Such gestures always make me feel a distinct kind of feminist discomfort<sup>[5]</sup>.*

Critical discussions in steampunk around questions of gender, sexuality, and race (which I will return to) do exist. But these conversations rarely seem to cross those concerned with etiquette and manners, as if such matters could be easily separated. The dominating straightness and whiteness of the movement at fan conventions and other events make and shape the bodies of participants in certain ways. Then again, the young LARPer quoted above talked about steampunk as providing a “visual distance” to

mainstream culture – a “visual critique” that is recreating or re-envisioning a moment in culture when things were both beautiful and functional. While performances of gender through manners may generate feminist discomfort, I find this emphasis on the visual aspects of steampunk culture and their critical potentials promising.

It is important to point out that steampunk communities hold plenty of ambivalence, a tension that often plays out between romantic nostalgia and darker, more cynical criticism. In other words, it is a tension between ‘steam’ and ‘punk’. Cory Gross (2007) traces the main difference in steampunk experience between a Vernian kitschy, nostalgic, whimsical Victoriana and a Wellsian, more decidedly political standpoint that does not shy away from a dirty, gritty street perspective. Jess Nevins (2008: 8) similarly distinguishes between first and second generation steampunk literature, according to which the second generation steampunk authors (after *The Difference Engine* by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling in 1990) “changed steampunk from an argument to a style and a pose, even an affectation.” If previously, steampunk was “rebel[ling] against the system it portrays (Victorian London or something quite like it)” (p. 10), it has since, according to Nevins, become an affective surface obsession, invested in merely fetishizing the paraphernalia of imaginative Victoriana.

The tension between ‘steam’ and ‘punk’ is equally evident in steampunk cultural practices, and as such it vibrates through my fieldwork experiences. As a queer, feminist scholar of new media and technologies, my relation to contemporary steampunk cultures holds fascination and attraction, but it also involves unease. I am seduced by the strikingly beautiful machine aesthetics and the fetishistic laying bare of the under-workings of clockworks and fashion – cogs, cog wheels, hoop crinolines and corset boning.<sup>[6]</sup> Machines turned inside out, their mechanics on the outside. I am drawn to the playful, imaginative, affective, and tactile ways of relating to technology as well as to time. I am intrigued by the creative, thrifty Do-It-Yourself strategies and ethics. Steampunks have a way of modifying and punking digital technologies, shifting their affective relationality, or of upcycling in junkyards and thrift stores, making use of what is already there, unique and beautiful if yet a bit rough and rusty around the edges.

At the same time, I am troubled by the seemingly pervasive Neo-Victorian politeness and mannerisms in steampunk costuming practices, by the endless lines of graceful, corseted ladies in extravagant dresses, and the legions of well-mannered, suited gentlemen. In an interview with the Swedish steampunk blogger and science fiction fan

Anna “Åka” Davour, she argues that there are examples of gender bending in contemporary steampunk fiction, but that such ways of twisting gender are often lost in appropriations of the Victorian era in contemporary steampunk costuming and roleplaying practices. I also asked her about whether she thought steampunk was a movement with room for social commentary or critique:

*Åka: There are interesting discussions about, what should we do with this? Which aspects of the Victorian culture do we pick up? And which of them are actually quite bad? And where do you need a critical perspective? That discussion is really interesting. And one of the things that I've always found had a lot of potential is that if you want formulate social criticism, then the 19th century is a very interesting era, since it has much more polarization than we do today. So if you want to isolate something... It's the same thing with science fiction, if you want to isolate a particular question you put it in an environment where it becomes more distinct. And then you can see it more clearly. There's a potential like that in steampunk.*

*Jenny: What kind of questions could that be?*

*Åka: Well, things such as social justice, and privilege, and power. I mean, there are ongoing discussions during this time period about how to organize society in a good way. And I think that ideologies have lost both some of their charm and their sharpness nowadays, so if you want to go back to, if you want to pick up what was there that could be interesting to think about further, then it's interesting to go back. I think things like that are really interesting, and I think that it's dead boring to walk around in fancy silk dresses, just for the sake of looking fancy. I find that really boring [laughter]. But I like machines. I really, truly like machines, of all kinds. And there you have, the machine aesthetic potential, you get a lot of that [in steampunk], so I like that. [7]*

Here, extravagant silk dresses have very little to do with the allure and the rich presence of machines and machine aesthetics in steampunk. What becomes evident in this passage is that there are ways of playing with time for political ends, by placing discussions of privilege and power in an era where such questions become particularly clear. To turn back, or to go back in time, here, is not a matter of romanticizing a particular past, but of using it as a context for *thinking more clearly* about questions that have mattered and that have kept mattering in pressing ways. Or, as Bowser and Croxall (2010: 29-30) put it, “steampunk is more about instability than any other single characteristic. [...] Through its own instability, enacted via nonlinear temporality and blended surfaces, steampunk reminds us of the instability and constructedness of our concepts of periodization and historical distance.” In this sense, steampunk is about

recognition of “what is familiar about the Victorians and what is ‘other’ about ourselves” (p. 30).

Jess Nevins’ (2008: 8) distinction between different strands or orientations in steampunk – one being a political argument set at street level, another being a steampunk of ornate surfaces with little or no ‘punk’ – resonates in obvious ways with my own encounters and experiences with steampunk. And perhaps precisely for that reason, I need to ask, what if this distinction is an oversimplification? What if aesthetics and politics are not quite that easily separable? Could perhaps steampunk as style, as pose, and as ‘affectation’ (as Nevins puts it) hold important critical potentials? What if there are lessons to learn for oppositional politics in how things are felt? In contrast to Nevins, Bowser and Croxall (2010: 30) argue,

*The subversive and radical components of steampunk aesthetics, which revise historical gender relationships, imperial relationships, and the relationships between man and machine may seem like a fantastical correction of a conservative period, but the top hats and corsets simultaneously indulge our desires to experience the period.*

The dress-up party, which from one vantage point may appear oppressive, might from a slightly different angle appear to invest in interesting ways of experiencing and sensing history, expressed as a desire to feel the past as it presses up against the body. Steampunk is an invitation of sorts to relate to history in strikingly tactile, material ways, quite different from the “don’t touch” modus of museums as well as from a cooler, more ‘objective’ scientific approach prevalent in much historical scholarship. In trafficking within the domain of alternate history, steampunk contains alternate ways of relating to history with consequences for how tactility can be used as a feminist method and mode of thinking.

### **Tactile temporality**

The tactile dimension is an integral part of steampunk aesthetics, eloquently formulated by an audience member at SteamCon as “a tactile aesthetic sensation”.<sup>[8]</sup> This notion weaves together the look of something – a garment, a technological contraption – with its feel. The material practices of makers and costumers in steampunk are dense with brass, wood, leather, velvet, silk, clockwork mechanisms and watch parts possible to touch, to hold, to wear. As Rebecca Onion notes, “Steampunks seek less to recreate specific technologies of this time than to re-access what they see as the affective value of the material world of the nineteenth century” (2008: 138-139). In

an interview that I did with Kristin Thorrud, a costume historian and science fiction fan, she talks about her fascination with steampunk costuming, and in particular the tactile dimension:

*I think that you can feel incredibly well-dressed in a pseudo-historic garment in a different way from what you do in modern clothes like jeans and t-shirt. The tactile sensation of a trailing dress or of a tailcoat and a top hat. A starched collar, white shirt and cufflinks. To be able to play with masculinity, not in a macho way, but more in a gentleman kind of way, hand-kissing the ladies and such, or to play with femininity but without showing skin. Or to be androgynous. Which becomes apparent if you're not wearing feminine clothing in a time when men wore pants and women dresses. If you place your steampunk era to that time, that is.<sup>[9]</sup>*

There are several things at work in this passage, one of which is a particular feel of the past as it touches and shapes the body and its movements. The tactility of the past is, furthermore, intimately entangled with a play with gender through time, alluding to what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) terms 'temporal drag.' Temporal drag is an embodied performance or experience of anachrony, a visceral, tangible pull of the past that puts pressure on and questions the seeming radicalism of the present and the future. If queer theory has had a tendency to be oriented toward the future as that which holds the most promise, even while turning to the past in an attempt at rescuing queer subjects, this is an attempt to explore the excess of historical signification of for example camp, or butch-femme, or male impersonation, and drag as something primarily temporal, as something that shuttles through time. The androgynous gentleman drag with its tailcoat, top hat, and white starched collar is both cross-dressing within a Victorian framework of sorts, but also and perhaps primarily a crossing through time that plays a certain kind of Victorian masculinity up against a female body in the present, creating a particular kind of temporal queerness. It brings to mind acts of male impersonation in the Victorian music hall context, as well as Neo-Victorian adaptations of such performances (as in *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters from 1999). To wear trousers as a woman within the bounds of time play with an era when this was highly unusual has a radical edge to it, but one that becomes considerably softened when read in and with the present.

Steampunk costuming practices are tangible modes of knowing a different time period, which here materialize as the tactile sensation of the trailing dress, or of a fitted tailcoat. This tactile relationship with the past is a form of touch, of feeling certain fabrics against the skin, but one that also incorporates a broader haptic register of kinesthetic dimensions of bodily positioning, weight, movement, as well as



proprioception, the sense of bodily boundaries, of where the body ends. In contrast to seeing and hearing, touch has no singular sense organ to which it relates. The tactility of the silk, the lace, the velvet of the trailing dress and its stiff bodice is a matter of touching and being touched differently from the feel of loose-fitted cotton and tighter denim, it shifts how the body feels, and also how it moves. It appears to give the step of the dresser a certain bounce, and it highlights how the sense of touch is a manner of simultaneously touching and being touched, which renders unclear the boundaries between subjects and objects.

Freeman's way of writing about queer historiography as an embodied way of knowing history outlines a haptic method, "a tactile relationship to a collective past, one not simply performative or citational but physical and even erotic" (2010: 93). She terms this tactile, temporal relationality 'erotohistoriography':

*Erotohistoriography is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with historical sensations. (Freeman, 2010: 95-96).*

As opposed to the contemporary practice of historical re-enactment and its involvement in notions of authenticity and accuracy ("the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times"), steampunks are rather historical re-imaginators with a more playful attitude to the technologies and materialities of late 19<sup>th</sup> century, interested in creating a particular feel of 'the could have been' of this era. Freeman's erotohistoriography speaks to the impulse in steampunk of desiring the past as a manner of approaching the instability and hybridity of the present, as well as of taking pleasure in bodily encounters with history. In using the body as method, erotohistoriography is not so much a moving backwards through time in an attempt to leave the present behind, but rather a means of embodying an encounter between different and overlapping temporalities, something that is at the very core of steampunk costuming practices.

As with her temporal drag, Freeman's erotohistoriography is a queering of the past. In a panel on gender issues in steampunk at SteamCon, the discussion came to circle around

the attention to detail and appearance within the movement across gender lines.<sup>[10]</sup> In particular, the participants discussed the consequences this might have for ways of performing masculinity. A man caring about appearance in mainstream culture runs the risk of confronting homophobia, whereas in steampunk he is not necessarily read as gay, and his flamboyance is celebrated. There is an interesting, possible opening here for ways of redefining and queering (straight) masculinity by playfully embracing 19<sup>th</sup> century male vanity in a contemporary context. Or, as I overheard one young man greeting another in the morning of a Swedish steampunk convention, “you may want to re-wax your right moustache”.<sup>[11]</sup>

The distinctly haptic component in steampunk offers an understanding of history that uses the body and forms of embodiment as ways of knowing. The haptics of steampunk also provide a methodological key for feminist research on the material culture of steampunk. In other words, it is a culture that seems to demand a haptic method, or, with Laura Marks’s (2002) terminology, a ‘haptic criticism’. Marks writes about haptic criticism in terms of writing that does not master its object, but brushes it, or almost touches it. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Marks’s haptic criticism operates largely in the area of what she calls ‘haptic visuality’, which could be an interesting analytical approach to the haptic qualities of the digital visual cultures of steampunk.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1988) turn to art historian Alois Riegl and his distinction between optic and tactile forms of perception, contrasting long-distance vision (the optic) with close-range tactile vision (the haptic). They prefer the term haptic over tactile, since it does not create a contrary relation between two sensory modes, “but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this nonoptical function” (p. 492). In other words, there are tactile qualities in vision that involve a sense of touching with the eye. In his writing on the painter Francis Bacon, Deleuze (1981/2003) elaborates further on the notion of haptic and optic vision, and in particular as a relation between the hand and the eye. With Deleuze, the haptic is largely formulated in terms of closeness, but it also involves the action of the hand of the artist, the act of moving the brush across the canvas. Importantly, the haptic is not in opposition with the optic, but rather acknowledges sensory interdependence, marking a moment of variation or transition between hand and eye, modes of touching and modes of seeing.

Marks (2002) draws on this terminology in her discussion of haptic images and ways of looking. Haptic images are images that viewers encounter simultaneously through the eyes and through the skin; they draw the viewer close and turn the eye into an organ of touch. If optical images call for distance and visual mastery, haptic images invite a caressing, stroking gaze that surrenders every attempt at control. Steampunk culture can partly be understood as an aesthetic and exists in its current form due to the possibility of creating and circulating images online. Some would define steampunk as nothing but an aesthetic, a look, or a style (Perschon, 2012). Touch in steampunk practices has a lot to do with concrete, physical materiality, with haptic perception. But the digital visual cultures of steampunk, consisting of an intense circulation of images in online communities, are rather about touching with the eyes, or haptic visuality. These images range from depictions of Neo-Victorian modifications of digital technologies – such as laptops retrofitted with copper keyboards, leather wrist pads, and glimmering brass accents – to the smoother qualities of steampunk costumes and fabrics, if yet starkly contrasted by the metal shapes of goggles and other gadgets.

To Marks, haptic orientations in photography and film operate through proximity, intimacy, grain, texture, and close-ups in ways that make the eye touch, or brush the image. The digital visual cultures of steampunk appear to be the opposite of Marks' haptic visuality in that they rather offer a kind of controlled and penetrating distance touching and viewing through high-resolution images with a clear investment in details. But rather than merely being images that invite optical vision, as Marks would have it, I suggest that the sharpness of these images, the level of detail that makes up their surfaces, invite a different kind of haptic pictorial relationship. Rather than having the poetic graininess and suggestive characters of Marks's haptic images, tempting the viewer to almost brush her bodily surface up against the surface of the images, the haptic quality of digital steampunk images are rather connected to how Deleuze discusses the manual and the action of the hand.

These are objects – technologies, costumes, art – that are often made by hand, leaving traces of manual work and manipulation of materials. The handmade (and the hand-altered or modified) is the very foundation of Do-It-Yourself movements like steampunk, often used as a critique of mass production by mechanical hands. Even if the digital image cultures of steampunk are characterized by visual distance in a domain of optic visuality, which according to Marks “is being refitted as a virtual epistemology for the digital age” (2002: xiii), the objects on display convey a manual closeness of sorts. The artificiality of the mass production of objects and images

characteristic of the late industrial, digital age inserts distance between subject and object, viewer and image. Perhaps paradoxically, digital image practices in steampunk may present something of a counterpoint to this tendency through its engagement with unique objects and by imaging objects of manual production. The quality, circulation and use of steampunk images and imagery thus call for a reconsideration of the digital as something that might invite haptic relationality in the midst of optic vision. In other words, images that invite controlled distance looking may not necessarily discriminate against or exclude a sensuous feel for what these images depict.<sup>[12]</sup>

### **A racial politics of touch**

Steampunk costumes are time-traveling devices in so far as they provide a feeling of, for example, femininity out of sync, through a syncopated interplay between bodies and temporal orders. Then again, this begs the questions: What does it mean to touch, to feel, to wear the history of white, Victorian, bourgeois, imperialist femininity? For whom is this a pleasurable experience? And how does it feel to be out of sync with such history in terms of race, or class, or sexuality? If erotohistoriography recognizes that contact with historical materials can be triggered by “particular bodily dispositions”, what would it mean to be dis-positioned in a certain way – and not another? Whose late 19<sup>th</sup> century is available for steampunky time play? And what about other modes of embodying history, such as pain, grief, loss, trauma, or melancholia? Or, as Freeman (2010: 129-130) puts it, “Is claiming pleasure for historiography a queer act that nevertheless recapitulates the [...] erasure of a specifically black social time, or repeats its disavowal of the founding violence so often enacted upon people of color in the name of white pleasures?”

This is from the blogger Tiffany at the blog “Truly Sophisticat”, self-presenting as half Cambodian, half Chinese:

*But of course, any sort of fashion that glorifies colonialism is going to have some disrespectful and racist portrayals. Don't get me wrong I love the aesthetic. Beautiful, well crafted items that are useful is totally what steampunk is about. But I don't want to completely ignore my heritage and history. I feel like a traitor every time I put on a corset, or wear lace gloves. Do I really want to put on a costume that represents the people that have completely exploited and fetishized my ancestors?<sup>[13]</sup>*

Steampunk practices craft bodies through a range of mechanical industrial technologies that build on the bodies of workers and the bodies of slaves—the slave trade being the

very foundation of capitalism—the driving force of the machines of industrialization. Touching the other in steampunk is not touching the skin of the other as much as touching that which the other has touched. This is a form of touch that operates within a machinery of Victorian materiality that link present tense bodies with historical struggles and power hierarchies. It is a form of touch that, with Anne McClintock (1995), could be discussed in terms of neocolonial nostalgia (for an era when white, European women found freedom in empire) and imperialist fetishism. McClintock argues that the Victorian middle-class had an especially intense investment in a ritualistic and fetishistic upholding of boundaries. She looks in particular at soap, cleaning rituals, and the white clothes of the colonials, which is an argument that resonates with the abundance of gloves, parasols, and hats that dress many women in steampunk, thick with allusions to practices of keeping white skin white and the dirt out. As Tiffany puts it in the above quote, “I feel like a traitor every time I put on a corset, or wear lace gloves.”

In her analysis of 1950s vintage and queer femininity within the femme movement, Ulrika Dahl (2013) performs a similar argument. Dahl focuses on ways of embodying historical feeling through garments and proposes intimate links between the feeling of vintage, whiteness and imperialist nostalgia. She argues that the feeling of vintage as nostalgia is tied to a particular white, bourgeois imaginary of the past, a longing for a past with ‘better’ values in ways that overshadow the racist and heterosexist orders on which they build. The white-gloved raised fist is a contested symbol of femme union, and while it “can point to the strength of femininity, it also serves as a reminder of a second skin, the preciousness of whiteness and a colonialist and racialized order” (p. 618). There is a similar logic at work in the love of historic fashion in steampunk. This is a love for sustainable garments with ‘the right feel’, connected to a longing for a past in which technologies and clothes were meant to last. At the same time, it is a longing that often sidesteps the racial dimensions of imaginatively embodying this particular moment in history. Such acts of sidestepping the importance of race in steampunk seem to divide non-white steampunks into two groups. One of these emphasizes the more fantastical version of alternate history. In a conversation with a black female steampunk at Steampunk World’s Fair, head to toe in the finest colonial wear, she highlighted the ‘could have been’ of racial pasts and how playing with race counter-historically can be empowering.<sup>[14]</sup> The other group is more openly critical, and draws attention to how the whiteness and lightness of steampunk has a tendency to obscure its symbolic links of to race, racism, and slavery.

In her powerful book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman (1997) explores the complicated and slippery feelings of empathy, a particular ‘opacity of feeling’ in attempts of white subjects to feel for, or with, or even as, the captive body of the slave other. Hartman discusses the philosopher Ian Rankin, who describes the evil of slavery in a letter to his slave-holding brother. In an effort to bring slavery close, to facilitate identification in ways that would convert his brother, Rankin narrates a scenario in which he, his wife, and their child are enslaved, which enables him “to speak not only for, but literally in the place of the enslaved” (p. 18). He does so in ways that make him start feeling for himself rather than for those he intended to reach. Hartman asks:

*Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm black sentience only by feeling for himself? [...] Put differently, the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make suffering visible and intelligible.” (p. 19).*

Hartman attributes the illusive quality of black suffering to a racist optics “in which black flesh itself is identified as the source of opacity” (p. 20). Such opacity of feeling seems to be operating quite intensely in steampunk by obliterating the black bodies underpinning the machinery of the Industrial Revolution, or by letting these bodies function merely as a sentimental resource. I often encounter the notion among white steampunks that the Industrial Revolution in general – and the Victorian era in particular – was “pretty great”. There is certainly an awareness of “difficult issues,” and simultaneously a conscious move away from these to instead “focus on the nice bits, the fantasy version.”<sup>[15]</sup> If the pain of slave others is what lies beneath the steampunk fantasy, this is omitted from view if the feelings and questions of race and racism can neither be reached, nor touched. In Hartman’s line of reasoning, these racist optics make a haptic relationship to race and racism impossible from the point of view of white subjectivity, since its object, the suffering of black bodies, is unreachable and ultimately slips away. The only haptic relationship the white body can create is by turning towards and feeling for itself.

If a re-colonial politics of touch in steampunk is primarily a form of touch that incorporates violation against multiple others within the movement, what would a more emancipatory politics of touch look or feel like? Or as the US-based postcolonial steampunk blogger Jaymee Goh puts it, “How do we take the trappings of the enemy and use it against them without simply assimilating into the imperialist’s culture?”<sup>[16]</sup> If steampunk is tactile to the core, and if it has enough punk attitude of taking control over the means of technological production, would it then not be possible to craft other

bodies and other modes of touching and getting in touch with history, other histories and ways of connecting in and with the past? In emphasizing steampunk stories and performances outside of a Western-dominant, Eurocentric framework, the postcolonial steampunk blogs Silver Goggles and Beyond Victoriana are certainly evidence in this direction.<sup>[17]</sup> The voices of Jaymee Goh and Ay-leen the Peacemaker (Diana Pho) in these blogs keep insisting on alternate histories that are as much part of the ‘steam’ era as the dominant narratives that in a celebratory mode circle around Victorian England. To bring other stories to the table is to show what was there all along, not by forgetting anew how slavery is underpinning Victorian fantasy, but rather by moving through the heart of its presence, and in doing so crafting other bodies, facilitating other kinds of touch.

One stroke of genius in this genre is the creative work that takes shape under the term ‘steamfunk’, which brilliantly shifts the engagement from the whiteness and straightness (in terms of rhythms and perhaps also otherwise) of ‘punk’, to the blackness and syncopated rhythms of funk. Balogun Ojetade’s blog “Chronicles of Harriet: Steamfunk, Steampunk, Sword and Soul” takes shape in the intersection of African and African American culture, steampunk philosophy, and fiction as an expression of blackness within the movement.<sup>[18]</sup> In other words, steamfunk is about changing the pace of steampunk. It is about making room for and creating black bodies as not merely a rhythmic supplement, but as fundamentally part of the bass line that structures steampunk aesthetics and ethics. Similarly, in an interview with Shakila Rainbow-Rossi, a British Indian steampunk, she underlines how steampunk builds on ‘what if’ scenarios:

*We [the non-whites] built the machinery, so we know how to profit from it differently from white folks. If they used it as a springboard for capitalism, then in terms of alternate history, one could imagine a different scenario, a more socialist economy building on public, collective ownership of the means of production.<sup>[19]</sup>*

Alternate history can be a powerful means, not as a racial corrective to normative modes of historicizing, but as a manner of re-writing history and as giving voice to subordinate subjects. Shakila also draws attention to how within a British context – in a movement from punk, to Goth, to steampunk – steampunk is a more acceptable form of rebellion, “especially in the eyes of my Indian mother... the good, old fashioned Britishness, the tweed, the tea, the politeness, and skirts down to the floor.” In an interesting spin on colonial relations, the feel of steampunk with its respectable femininities becomes a possible space for rebellion.

### **Touch as method**

This article has been concerned with contemporary steampunk cultures, tactile time play and the political implications of such temporal tactility. I have explored the feminist potentials in ‘thinking with’ steampunk practices and objects, and in particular as a manner of outlining a method of touch. This method involved tactile, or haptic perception, but also aspects of haptic visuality taking into account the tactile qualities of steampunk images in digital venues. Touch is intrinsically relational, and as such builds on models of inter-embodiment. To touch is also a matter of being touched in ways that make and shape subjects and objects in and through their in-betweenness and inter-relatedness. Even if touch is usually understood in terms of proximity (as with Marks’s haptic visuality), in bringing subjects and objects close, touch as a medium and a mode of communication can as easily create distance. Thinking touch also means thinking the skin as a social, cultural, and political boundary. There is an important doubleness in the notion of ‘being touched’, which in and through the same gesture holds sensation as much as it does cultural implication and complication. Touch is a sensory mode, a medium, or a form of communication, traveling between nerve endings oriented toward temperature, pressure, pleasure, and pain. At the same time, in being a mode of communication, touch holds receptivity, expression, sometimes empathy. It can bring people and objects close, into proximity, but it can also push them apart.

Distance triggered through closeness can also be part of the dynamics of fieldwork. Steampunk communities come together around a mutual love for the materiality, tactility, and pleasurable sensation of a reimagined past. What, then, if the researcher herself does not feel it, or feels it quite differently? Steampunk holds some obvious, if yet subtle, queer potentials (ruffle shirts and Oscar Wilde, or female explorers and aviators á la Amelia Earhart, even if she is early 20th century). And yet, I often find myself at conventions and other gatherings feeling slightly out of place, a bodily discomfort that partly has to do with a sense of having one’s own queerness lost in translation. As a queer, dress-wearing femme, I thought a steampunky dress was the obvious choice. But with that garb comes a temporal discomfort, a pull of the past, of the trailing dress that to me holds little liberation. The “skirts down to the floor,” which for Shakila hold the promise of respectable rebellion, are for me rather something that wears me down and weighs me down. Ultimately I end up feeling more trapped than anything else by the technological trappings of Victorian femininity. In fact, it seems that it is precisely when I move close and let the materialities of steampunk touch and shape me that sets off a feminist criticism that operates in a register of optical, or visual



distance. Contrary to the understanding of touch as something that creates proximity, there are instances in which touch itself creates distance.

And yet, departing from the tactile dimensions of steampunk practices, I suggest that there might be something useful for oppositional politics in how things are felt. If there is a dividing line in steampunk cultures between those who emphasize aesthetics and the affective qualities of Victorian materiality, and those who rather focus on the political potentials in thinking the present through a re-imagined past, touch may operate as something that mediates between aesthetics and politics. In other words, the feel of an object, such as a garment, does not reside in the object itself, but in the relation between bodies, surfaces, and materials. Claudia Castañeda (2001) suggests that touch can be understood as a form of encounter between bodies that do not necessarily take human form. If the technologies of Victorian femininity – such as hoop skirts and corsets – are thought of as part of such an inter-corporeal encounter, then how it feels to be touched and shaped by such technologies depends on the specificity and differentiation of the bodies involved. What is at stake is a coming together of technologies, fabrics, and bodies of the past as these are pressed up against bodies in the present. To be pressed against a particular past will play out quite differently depending on the type of bodies that this past presses upon.

This is not to say that the ways in which bodies are differentiated by gender, sexuality, or race precede the encounter in any simple way. Difference is not in and of the body, but comes into play quite concretely in encounters that, for example, produce particular modes of touch. “I feel like a traitor every time I put on a corset, or wear lace gloves.” To feel like a traitor, in this particular quote, referred to a betrayal in temporal, colonial terms, to an act of wearing the clothes of the colonizer that in and through the feel of deceit marked the body as colonized. “I feel like a traitor every time I put on a corset” could as easily refer to my own ethnographic experiences of queer, feminist ambivalence in fieldwork. To feel less ambivalent, I have made attempts to dress like “one of the boys”, in a nod to Vesta Tilley and other fabulous Victorian music hall male impersonators. Even if this takes the femme out of the equation, it has the advantage of making the queer part more obvious. With Freeman’s queer, temporal drag, the supposedly radical nature of the present is questioned through embodied experiences of anachrony. The pull of the past has, as Freeman has it, a potential of putting pressure on the present. On the other hand, if that pull drags you backward through time in ways that seem to erase generations of feminist work, rather than questioning the present, the sensation shifts.

In their introduction to *Thinking Through the Skin*, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001: 1) similarly call for “a skin-tight politics” with both phenomenological and political sensibilities. They suggest a manner of thinking through closeness or nearness of others, “but a nearness that involves distancing and difference.” To think through the skin then is “a thinking that attends not only to the sensuality of being-with-others, but also to the ethical implications of the impossibility of inhabiting the other’s skin” (p. 7). The method of touch outlined in this article plays out in the midst of a related logic. It is a method that explores the affective and temporal dimensions of closeness to materials, fabrics, and images (through the notions of ‘haptic criticism’ and ‘erotohistoriography’). At the same time, it is a method that investigates the political and ethical implications of such closeness, bringing into the discussion the politics of sensation and “the impossibility of inhabiting the other’s skin.” For what does it mean to wear the ‘skin’ of the Victorians? Or more importantly, how does it feel? As such, it is a method that does not primarily shuttle between closeness and distance (as is often the case with methods), but which rather shows how closeness itself may hold distance through bodily difference and differentiation.

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## Footnotes ( returns to text)

1. Interview on May 3, 2013, with Sara Salkvist and Pierre Salkvist, organizers of the first Swedish steampunk convention: Steampunk-konvent i Alingsås, Sweden, October 11-13, 2013.
2. The research project “Clockwork, Corsets, and Brass: The Politics and Dreams of Steampunk Cultures” is financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ). I am also indebted to the reviewers of the Ada collective whose generous comments greatly improved this article.
3. Interview on May 3, 2013, with Sara Salkvist and Pierre Salkvist.
4. See the website of The Victorian Steampunk Society: <http://thevss.yolasite.com/what-is-steampunk.php>. (November 20, 2013).
5. Fieldnotes from Steamcon IV, Seattle WA, October 26-28, 2012.
6. For a Deleuzian reading of steampunk corsetry through a mechanical model of affect, see Sundén (2013).
7. Interview on November 6, 2012, with Anna Davour.
8. Fieldnotes from Steamcon IV, Seattle WA, October 26-28, 2012.
9. Interview on November 27, 2012, with Kristin Thorrud, co-organizer of Steampunk Festival (Swecon 2014) in Gävle, Sweden, June 27-29, 2014.

10. Fieldnotes from the panel “Better Steam Society: Social Issues in Steampunk” organized by Jaymee Goh at Steamcon IV, Seattle WA, October 26-28, 2012.
11. Fieldnotes from Steampunk-konvent i Alingsås, Sweden, October 11-13, 2013.
12. See Paasonen (2011) for a similar dissatisfaction with Marks’s division between haptic and optic in reference to online porn.
13. See the blog post “POC steampunk and racism”, published 2011 on the blog Truly Sophisticat.  
<http://trulysophisticat.tumblr.com/post/11738161932/poc-steampunk-and-racism> (May 30, 2014).
14. Fieldnotes from Steampunk World’s Fair, Piscataway NJ, May 17-19, 2013.
15. These citations are from the international panel discussion “Steampunk: A World Phenomenon” at Steampunk-konvent i Alingsås, Sweden, October 11-13, 2013.
16. See Jaymee Goh, “The Intersection of Race and Steampunk: Colonialism’s After-Effects & Other Stories, from a Steampunk of Colour’s Perspective [Essay]”, published 2009 on the blog Racialicious.  
<http://www.racialicious.com/2009/06/24/the-intersection-of-race-and-steampunk-colonialisms-after-effects-other-stories-from-a-steampunk-of-colours-perspective-essay/> (May 30, 2014).
17. See <http://silver-goggles.blogspot.se/> and <http://beyondvictoriana.com/> (May 30, 2014).
18. See <http://chroniclesofharriet.com/> (May 30, 2014).
19. Interview with Shakila Rainbow-Rossi at Steampunk-konvent i Alingsås, Sweden, October 11-13, 2013.



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