LETTING OFF STEAM: NEO-IMPERIAL ANXIETIES IN POSTCOLONIAL

STEAMPUNK LITERATURE, AESTHETICS, AND PERFORMANCE

_____

a thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri - Columbia

_____

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

_____

by

RACHEL COCHRAN

Dr. Karen Piper, thesis supervisor

MAY 2014

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

LETTING OFF STEAM: NEO-IMPERIAL ANXIETIES IN

POSTCOLONIAL STEAMPUNK LITERATURE, AESTHETICS,

AND PERFORMANCE

presented by Rachel Cochran,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Karen Piper
Professor Rebecca Dingo
Professor Julie Elman

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Karen Piper for her encouragement and guidance. Studying postcolonial theory with her has regularly driven me to challenge my assumptions, and this thesis is the result of all of my paradigms shifting. Drs. Rebecca Dingo and Julie Elman also supplied passionate and engaged feedback that has been instrumental in my completion of this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Introduction. Defining and Situating Steampunk as a Postcolonial Phenomenon

In a postcolonized or postcolonizing world, any movement that seeks to

repopularize imperial sensibilities might expect to be met with a few lifted eyebrows.

This fate has not yet befallen steampunk, the practice of reimagining 19th century

European (most frequently British Victorian) lifestyles through an edgy, punkish lens.

Partially, steampunk's safety from criticism lies in its own nebulous boundaries. It is

difficult to say with any definitiveness whether something is or is not steampunk, or

indeed whether steampunk is itself a genre, movement, culture, lifestyle, aesthetic, or

some combination thereof. Steampunk does not center around any one medium the way

the punk subculture centers around music. Instead, steampunk filmic, musical, and

literary works exist in abundance, as do artistic, fashion, and interior design elements and

motifs. As such, the phenomenon has, by and large, escaped criticism for its nostalgic

revival of an imperial state. In the following pages, I consider steampunk as a reaction by

the ex-colonizer nations to the shifting economic, cultural, and political dynamics of the

global postcolonial climate.

Of particulfar curiosity is America's role in this reconstruction of Europe's

imperial past. Steampunk is, counterintuitively, largely an American movement. Large-

scale steampunk conventions like SteamCon and The Steampunk World's Fair are based

in America, as is *Steampunk Magazine*, and the most famous writers and editors in the

genre tend to be American rather than British. The relative reluctance of 21st century

British men and women to reenact their nation's violent colonizing past is

understandable, but it calls into question American steampunks' enthusiasm for affecting

(often stereotypically) British personae, histories, and ritual. Whether critical or nostalgic,

American steampunk unerringly reconfigures British history in order to enact it from the British perspective, taking for granted the so-called special transatlantic relationship in order to assume ties of cultural kinship and even identity. Although a portion of the specific writers, filmmakers, and performance artists I examine do not originate from America themselves, the greater part of this project will be dedicated to understanding steampunk as an American cultural phenomenon.

Since defining steampunk poses such a challenge, a project such as this one, which hopes to assess the movement as a collection of neo-imperial elements and trends, must first establish some solid, dependable parameters for defining the genre. I begin with a discussion of steampunk as a retrofuturist movement, a claim that requires the tracing of steampunk's 19th-to-mid-20th-century antecedents. In exploring the ways in which the characteristics of imperial adventure and domestic Victorian fiction inform steampunk literature and culture, this study hopes to understand how and why steampunk writers and practitioners negotiate new meaning out of historical perspectives. Then, in order to map the trajectory of steampunk's rises and falls in popularity and to understand the movement as an evolving phenomenon driven by and therefore changing under the influence of shifting societal pressures, I distinguish the first and second waves the genre has experienced from the 1990s into the 2000s and to the current day.

After establishing the various temporalities of steampunk fiction and practice, I isolate the elements that characterize steampunk literature, aesthetics, and fashion in order to examine them as responses to postcolonialism. Because there are few, if any, essential qualities of steampunk, it is perhaps more helpful to think of steampunk works or creations as situated amongst a constellation of characteristics. In my discussion of

steampunk literature, I continue to interrogate the genre's reliance on Victorian intertextualities. Specifically, this section considers the severely contrasting juxtapositions of historical-factual and historical-fictional events and characters, a device that is most evident in the introduction of Victorian authors and their fictional creations into the same constructed space, as in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* and Kim Newman's *Anno-Dracula*. My analysis continues by identifying staples of imperial monster narratives in first- and second-wave steampunk traditions, particularly arguing the implications of the revenant as a representation of the (post)colonized in works like *Anno-Dracula* and Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker*.

In Chapter 2, my emphasis on the visuals of steampunk continues with a close exploration of some of the aesthetic's primary tendencies and symbolic motifs. First, this section delves into the racial implications of a monochrome-brown palate. Other significant symbols of steampunk--cephalopods, clockwork, cogs, and factory machinery--are also explored for their specific meanings in the contexts of the digital age and postcolonial globalization. Chapter 3 considers fashion, both as an extension of the aesthetic movement and as an aspect of steampunk identity, performance, and community.

Fractured Timelines and Neocolonial Retrofutures

The most disorienting aspect of steampunk is its convoluted temporality. Simply put, steampunk necessitates a fractured timeline. In most forms, the creation of a steampunk world involves an act of retrofuturism--that is, a sort of divergence of events at a distinct historical point. Retrofuturism, or "the use of a style or aesthetic considered futuristic in an earlier era" ("Retrofuturism"), might be more easily understood as any

reimagining of history stemming from a 'what if' question. Such a speculative take on the historical record is far from specific to steampunk; works like Quentin Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds* (what if Hitler had been assassinated at the height of World War II?) and Sesshu Foster's 2005 novel *Atomik Aztex* (what if native tribes in the Americas had resisted European colonization and had become colonial powers in their own right?) both fit the bill. Retrofuturist fiction may range from wish-fulfillment fantasy, as with *Inglourious Basterds*, to philosophical and sociopolitical thought experiments along the lines of more traditional speculative futures. Steampunk fictions constitute a specific brand of retrofuturism, one which imagines the historical fracture to have occurred at some point during the nineteenth century. Alternatively, steampunk fantasy might occur in a world recognizably similar to ours and which might have developed along the same lines, but a significant difference or event has altered its evolution.

Because retrofuturism focuses on the "style or aesthetic considered futuristic in an earlier era," original nineteenth century science fiction contains important inspirational elements for creators of steampunk worlds, offering insight into the imagined futures of actual speculative minds of the period. Jules Verne, for example, is a significant figure in the world of steampunk although his work predates the genre's inception by a century. An article in *The Examiner* touts Verne as "the original steampunk," claiming that he "was writing steampunk before anyone knew what it was" (Dixon). However, the driving impulses behind steampunk--in particular its overt temporal playfulness and the fond nostalgia at the heart of the movement--are available only to those engaged in an act of looking back. Writers like Verne therefore do not qualify as steampunks themselves, but

they and their works are ready objects for study, reverence, and fetishization by modern steampunks. In fact, extreme intertextual awareness of and narrative borrowing from 19th century texts is, as I will explore below, one of the primary characteristics of steampunk literature; these primary source novels, most of them situated conveniently in the public domain, serve perhaps as raw materials or 'found objects' steampunk writers can mine and reconfigure from their position of privilege as rewriters of the past.

Steampunk is difficult to define not only in *what* qualifies, but also *when*; there have been media that might now be unambiguously categorized as 'steampunk' produced as long ago as the 1950s, with filmic adaptations of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days* being produced in that decade. The 1960s television show *The Wild, Wild West* also features visual and thematic elements that would later become characteristic of the genre. However, it is difficult to understand something as rising from a 'steam*punk*' sensibility before an understanding and practice of *punk* have been established. Such examples from the pre-punk period might be seen as earlier productions to have been inspired by Victorian science fiction, but not yet to the extent and with the self-awareness of the steampunk movement. By asserting that steampunk is 'self-aware,' I mean that contributors to the genre have done so with a demonstrated awareness of the trappings of the form; a writer cannot unconsciously produce a steampunk novel the same way he or she may unconsciously compose a lyric poem. Although no single rule distinguishing the genre is incontestable--that is, a story may be recognizably 'steampunk' even if it does not feature any one given element of those mentioned here--a steampunk novel will fit somewhere into a constellation of characteristics as defined by the pioneers of the genre. For these reasons, steampunk is by

definition self-conscious and self-aware, and those seeking to contribute to it, or even to challenge it, do so with a knowledge of the community, the aesthetic, the body of literature, or at least the movement's basic tenets.[1] As such, canonical steampunk works can only have existed as the genre was being defined or in the years since then. Recognizably steampunkish elements in works produced significantly before the genre's establishment--the steam-and-chrome visual stylings of mid-20th century Jules Verne filmic adaptations, for example--should be considered as retroactively co-opted by latter-20th-century steampunks rather than a forecast of the movement to come.

In order to understand the first wave of steampunk, in which the genre was established and first tentatively defined, it is necessary to consider cyberpunk and, to a more general extent, punk as subcultural movements. The demographics of punk are, by and large, characterizable as white, Western, middle class adolescents, reacting against the superstructures of their society from a position of relative privilege. Cyberpunk, which concerns itself with speculative and often dystopic imagined futures in which cybertechnology has grown more prevalent and powerful, emerged as a literary and filmic genre as well as a counterculture in the early 1980s. As cyberpunk fiction developed a reliable readership, writers like William Gibson, himself an established cyberpunk novelist, began to imagine retrofutures situated within a Victorian consciousness. Working with novelist Bruce Sterling, Gibson wrote what many consider to be the inaugural steampunk novel, *The Difference Engine,* which was published in 1990. In the novel's wake, the early nineties saw the release of several other steampunk

---

[1] Any piece of media that uses recognizably steampunk elements--this most often occurs in post-steampunk visual media that, knowingly or unknowingly, co-opt elements of the movement's aesthetic--without demonstrating self-awareness as 'belonging' to the genre, I will refer to as *steampunkish*.

novels, and a panel at the 1993 Anglicon--a convention devoted to celebrating British media, particularly television ("Anglicon")--discussed the possibility of a Seattle-based convention devoted to steampunk, an idea that would much later develop into prominent convention SteamCon. The early '90s might therefore be termed the first wave of steampunk, as the genre became self-aware and began to cater to an interested community, which was itself developing ambitions toward large-scale organization.

The genre took a while to find its footing. After *The Difference Engine*, a regular trickle of steampunk novels was published throughout the late '90s and the early 2000s, but few met with much success. Some, like Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, were less grounded in the genre, more steampunkish than canonical, and therefore succeeded on their own terms and not, as had *The Difference Engine*, in a way that brought the genre into wider popularity. In film, the dry period of steampunk was far more pronounced. Although some movies released from the late '90s through the first decade of the 2000s were able to incorporate steampunkish visual elements and achieve relative success (Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 *Howl's Moving Castle* and Christopher Nolan's 2006 *The Prestige* constitute meaningful examples), Hollywood's multiple attempts to bring canonical steampunk visions to the big screen were all disasters. Critically, Barry Sonnenfeld's 1999 *Wild, Wild West* took a beating, and, despite its hype and star power, its earnings were far from enough to inspire a sequel.[2] Disney's 2001 *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* was a financial disappointment, and the next year's similarly steampunkish *Treasure Planet* was even less successful. Stephen Norrington's 2003 *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* followed the same pattern of dramatic underperformance after

---

[2] All box office statistics come from BoxOfficeMojo.com.

too much hype, and Frank Coraci's 2004 *Around the World in 80 Days*, a loose adaptation of the Jules Verne novel of the same name, bombed so spectacularly that it lost approximately 86 million dollars in the box office. For nearly a ten year period, it seemed as though steampunk had become a kiss of death to Hollywood projects, and relatively fewer steampunk novels were released.

Near the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the tide began to shift, both in literature and in Hollywood. In 2008, Jeff and Ann VanderMeer edited an anthology called *Steampunk*, which collected stories and essays and served as a definitive assertion of the reading public's revived interest in the subgenre. Guy Ritchie's 2009 *Sherlock Holmes* struck a successful balance of *steampunk* versus *steampunkish* and earned nearly six times its $90 million budget. Holmes's London did not occupy the alternative history of *Wild, Wild West* or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*; there was no altered past or fractured timeline for viewers to re-learn or whose extreme playfulness challenged viewers' sense of verisimilitude. Instead, the steampunk aesthetic had been intelligently mined, so that the film might make overt visual references to the movement--bursts of steam, flashes of bronze, and gadgety weaponry--without crossing the line into re-history. The film's success forecasted the trend of steampunk's second wave: the mainstreaming of first-wave steampunk, a movement that had largely been fringe and high-concept, into more openly accessible material. At least partially, the second wave of steampunk was more popular because it took such pains to be popular. Second-wave works might follow the *Holmes* model of silent reference to the genre without claiming membership; alternatively, a more canonical second-wave work might water down the high-concept markings of the genre with narrative irony, a humorous conceit, or a heavy focus on

8

elements that are already popular external of steampunk.[3]

The mainstreaming that has occurred in steampunk's second wave has led to a recent proliferation in steampunk film and literature. The movement's newfound popularity, while not entirely bringing steampunk out from the fringe, has manifested in popular video games, big-budget television serieses, and even a Prada menswear campaign. By examining the movement as a neoimperial reaction to a postcolonial condition, this project will seek to understand steampunk's first and second waves, particularly for American audiences and artisans, as responses to two distinct historical moments and pressures. For the first wave, I will explore steampunk as a means by which Americans might vent anxieties over the rise of the digital as well as outsourcing and the globalization of labor. Considering the second wave has yet to end, the exact pressures to renew popular interest in what had been a fringe counterculture are more challenging to define. However, this project ultimately argues that, in addition to responding to the same economic and technological pressures evident in first-wave texts, the second wave of steampunk represents in part an American audience's attempt to negotiate its role as a (neo-)colonizing force in light of American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chapter 1. Alternate Intertextualities: Narrative Colonizing in Steampunk Literature

The specific historical fractures that generate steampunk worlds may assume

---

[3] For an example of a canonical second-wave work that incorporates all three of these techniques, consider Gail Carriger's 2009 novel *Soulless*. Carriger's universe is an alternate Victorian London, but she softens the effect with irony, humor, and popular supernatural beings (the book's cover touts it as "a novel of vampires, werewolves, and parasols").

many forms but often focus on technological elements, changing or enhancing existing gadgetry or mechanical capacities in a way that puts the new technologies in a position of increased value and visibility in their imagined milieux. In steampunk novels, the fracture will often be made clear early in the book in order to establish the ways in which the laws governing the novel's internal universe differ from the reader's knowledge of history. Many of these changes involve a single distinct difference in the evolution of technology that has resulted in far broader variances from the historical record. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* imagines that Charles Babbage's analytical engine had been perfected and produced, and it traces the possible ramifications of a digital age that is ushered in during the nineteenth century.

By setting up a universe where twentieth-century philosophical debates over humanity's interaction with the digital are pushed deeper into history, the authors are able to explore the ways historical context may or may not change the nature of the machine. *The Difference Engine* posits a universe that has rapidly become depersonalized by technology; one of the many functions for which the newly developed digital processes are used is as a cataloging tool which keeps thorough files on each citizen's activity, literally digitizing the human experience. Altering historical technology significantly alters political development. In *The Difference Engine*, a world map covering the first few pages prepares the reader for the extreme difference he or she is about to encounter. In Gibson and Sterling's 1855, the changes are numerous: the Catalan Republic has been formally recognized; the Royal Niger Company, which historically was not chartered until the 1870s ("Royal Niger Company"), is already situated along the Niger River; and much of North America is divided between French Mexico, the Republics of California

and Texas, the United States, and the Confederate States of America. The severity of these political changes serves as a testament to the power of technology in redistributing power on a massive scale.

Despite its carefully reconstructed 19th century setting, *The Difference Engine* is demonstrably a postmodern text, interested in a true intertextual variety. The plot and cast of the novel blend the factual and the fictional events of history. Naturally, any historical fiction requires a similar act of blending, in which famous political figures of the past appear or are referred to in a plot populated and driven primarily by constructed characters. *The Difference Engine*, however, blends these elements with more vigor, blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction with a bold, postmodern carelessness in which the fictional continually challenges and changes the historical--a move that reinforces the alternate history's disruptive and speculative power. The authors employ the technique of narrative borrowing, heavily mining aspects of their book from original Victorian texts; one of the lead characters, Sybil Gerard, is an alternate imagining of the title character of Benjamin Disraeli's 1845 *Sybil*. The choice is a significant one, considering Disraeli's dual role as politician and novelist reflects *The Difference Engine*'s dual political and literary interests. The authors' borrowing from *Sybil*, a pro-Chartist social problem novel criticizing the superstructures of British society that disempower the working poor in favor of the growing middle class, indicates a larger propensity toward narrative borrowing characteristic of first-wave steampunk literature.

The intertextual characters are capable of recalling and subverting the theses contained in their texts of origin. For example, *Anno-Dracula*, whose 1992 release places it within the first wave of steampunk fiction, clearly refers to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, not

merely in its subject matter (vampires) nor even in the specific character of Dracula. *Anno-Dracula* serves as a speculative sequel to Stoker's original work. Newman's book therefore engages in a specific mode of historical fracturing in which it speculates on a divergence from a well-known fictional canon. Newman's Victorian England is one in which Stoker's Dracula succeeded in his attempts at invasion detailed in Stoker's *Dracula*. Newman not only revives the imperial anxieties of his source text, but he also realizes them; the story of Dracula is no longer one of a possible threat of invasion and miscegenation, but of one that has already and irrevocably taken place. The text engages in extreme narrative borrowing, lifting characters from nineteenth-century literature-- from *The Vampyre*'s Lord Ruthven to Mycroft Holmes to Doctors Jekyll and Moreau--as well as from history. The presence of Daniel Dravot from "The Man Who Would Be King" immediately brings to mind the themes of Kipling's original story, in particular imperial hubris and English anxieties over racial inferiority. Newman has repurposed Dravot as a vampire in the employ of the Diogenes Club, a society that has tasked itself with the pursuit of Jack the Ripper. Dravot's inferiority as a colonizing specimen has led to his own body being colonized by vampiric forces. If Dravot stands in for overambitious imperial designs, then he is punished by becoming himself one of the infected, colonized bodies--a reverse-colonial dynamic that will be explored further on. Repurposing this familiar character gives Newman a shorthand method of making his argument. Newman uses Dravot, and other recognizable and easily referenced characters, to point to the failings in British history and character that have led to this invaded London--both the vampire-infested London of the novel and Newman's own vision of an ethnically hybrid postcolonial London.

12

As in *The Difference Engine*, one of the historical figures included in *Anno-Dracula* is the author responsible for creating some of the borrowed fictional characters also present in the novel. In Gibson and Sterling's novel, not only does is Sybil Gerard patched into their original narrative, but Disraeli himself also appears as a character. In *Anno-Dracula*, Bram Stoker appears amongst a large cast comprised of his fictional creations, including Lucy Westenra, the Harkers, and Dracula himself. The introduction of creator and creation in the texture of the same universe performs several functions. First, such a move makes oblique reference to the original Victorian fiction's pretenses to reality: *Dracula* carefully labels its epistolary documents as evidence of its possibility, and *Sybil* begins with the an advertisement from the author, disclaiming that he has not "[exaggerated] in the scenes which he has drawn and the impressions which he has wished to convey." By placing Stoker and Disraeli in the same worlds as their creations, the authors are lending credence to the metatheses of the original novels, both of which assert that the events contained therein are either already occurring unacknowledged (as in *Sybil*) or else might imminently come to pass (as in *Dracula*). By so doing, Gibson, Sterling, and Newman augment the real-world social commentary of their own works, the capacity for the social troubles explored in their fiction to escape into the corporeal realm--or, more accurately, the authors indicate that they are using their fiction to criticize problems they have already recognized of their age. Additionally, introducing creator and creation into the same plane has *Frankenstein*-ish implications, serving as a warning against hubristic acts of creation.

Most particularly, however, steampunk's interest in the mixing of historical-factual and historical-fictional figures together, particularly those whose existences

depend on being separated, demonstrates a postmodern disdain for orderliness that

characterizes the rest of the movement. Not only does steampunk transgress the lines of

fact and fiction, but it is particularly interested in mashing contradicting elements

together in a messy way. This impulse betrays the authors' own privileged positions.

They sit at an elevated place in history, able to survey the documents of the past, which

they deem to be infinitely open to the extraction of resources. The hectic pastiches of

first-wave steampunk novels like *The Difference Engine* and *Anno-Dracula* are

themselves steps toward a kind of temporal colonization, moving into the past armed with

a willful irreverence of history's native boundaries. The mainstreaming of steampunk's

second-wave has led to less heavily referential literature, though steampunk's tendency to

consider information and history as 'found objects,' open to reclaiming and repurposing,

has come to manifest less visibly but more pervasively in aspects of steampunk aesthetics

and fashion.

Reanimating Monster Narratives

If the reappropriation of distinct characters from Victorian history and literature

constitutes an invasive, colonial act on the part of steampunk novelists, then the

appearance of more general tropes like familiar monster narratives serves as a milder but

more thematically significant act of borrowing. In particular, the figure of the revenant--

the undead or the living dead--features prominently in both waves of steampunk

literature, most visibly in the forms of the vampire and the zombie.[4] In the hands of

---

[4] The revenant is a useful figure to consider in distinguishing between the trends and impulses behind first- and second-wave steampunk, as vampires and zombies are popular enough figures to have appeared in samples from both periods. I will use continue to use Newman's *Anno-Dracula* as emblematic of first-wave literature; for the second wave, I consider American novelist Cherie Priest's 2009 book *Boneshaker*.

Western writers, both vampire and zombie imply an ethnic Otherness. The vampire is an ethnically ambiguous, mutable, and even a subversively trans-ethnic figure, and the African religious origins of zombie lore--and particularly its later diasporic Caribbean incarnations--mark both of these monsters as geographically marginal in Western tales. Their presence in these stories therefore inherently is one either of journey (the Western subject forays into a remote Gothic landscape for an encounter with Otherness) or of invasion (Otherness encroaches on the territory of the Western subject).

Specifically, the undead nature of both of these monsters reflects patterns of Western thought concerning the nonwestern figure. The revenant no longer lives and grows; progress has been stunted, and the only possible change is decay. Both types of revenant imply a history--for the vampire, a lengthy personal history, an innate quality of antiquity. The zombie holds in its death the implication of the life it had lived and lost, as well as the sense of belonging to a 'primitive' tradition. The revenant's ties to history echo Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, which claims that European imperial thought placed the fringes of empire in a sort of atavistic space that was developmentally and temporally displaced from Europe, occupying some developmental rung Europe had already faced. For the Western subject to engage with the revenant, surely an atavistic invader, then is for him to engage with the lost past--a past that can never transcend its own historical marginalization. Steampunk's postcolonial context means that vampires and zombies within the genre consciously hearken back to this colonial temporality, rendering the postcolonial nation a product of history, confined to to the trappings of the past and subject to eternal decay.

Steampunk fiction offers opportunities to consider this postcolonial repurposing

of Victorian monster narratives. *Anno-Dracula* reimagines the traditionally Victorian monster narrative according to first-wave steampunk ideologies. By juxtaposing *Dracula*'s industrial, imperial Britain with *Anno-Dracula*'s digital, postcolonial one, Newman's text is able to identify the vestiges of Victorian anxiety in the author's own time. Primarily, the state of *Dracula*'s imperial seat--the London whose purity is to be defended--has significantly altered. Vampires now live openly among human Londoners, hybridizing and transforming the population, many of whom have been converted to vampires themselves. The narrative of reverse colonization identified by Stephen Arata in his essay "The Occidental Tourist: 'Dracula' and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization" has been realized; what was to the Victorians merely a threat of possible invasion has, for Newman's world, come to fruition.

In a postcolonial context, the hybridization of London's communities in the novel mimics the influx of immigrants from decolonized nations into the former center of empire. Arata's model for the late Victorian version of this narrative parallels the actual shifting of demographics that had occurred in England a century later: "this narrative expresses both fear and guilt… that what has been represented as the 'civilized' world is on the point of being colonized by 'primitive' forces" (623). The interactions between human and vampire populations in Newman's London, however, more faithfully represent English anxieties over 'invasion' by postcolonial bodies than the reality of shifting British demographics after the breakup of empire. Newman's vampires are themselves a power-hungry colonizing force who, rather than harmoniously settling alongside human communities, have threatened, unbalanced, and overtaken them. They are able to infiltrate and reconfigure the superstructures of government and society in

order to become themselves the empowered 'race' of England. Human Londoners truly behave like a population that has been colonized and settled; any dissent must happen underground, as in the form of the (primarily human, white, male) Diogenes Club. Significantly, the vampires have been able to achieve this feat of reverse colonization through the seduction of Queen Victoria by Dracula himself. The threat of miscegenation has now been severely heightened; rather than the impulsive, aberrant feminine sexuality that is explicitly under threat in *Dracula*, the nation itself, as represented by Victoria, has begun to interbreed. Newman's vampire-infested London bears remarkable resemblance to the paranoid fears belonging to an ex-colonizing nation--fears of postcolonized bodies flooding and overpowering the capital in the wake of decolonization. The constant fear under which the colonized population of *Anno-Dracula*'s white, human Londoners are forced to live represents a knee-jerk response to the threat of Otherness in what had once been Britain's racially homogenous society.

The revenant has the ability, as does any monster, to prey on the living subject. A vampire or zombie may consume the living being entirely and therefore retains a threat as something capable of unbalancing man's supremacy. Such a focus on the revenant's consumptive impulses recalls imperial Western rhetoric of the nonwestern figure as a creature slavishly devoted to appetite. For both vampires and zombies, the primary impulse is to feed. The zombie in particular, with its appetite for human flesh, parallels imperial discourse of the nonwestern figure--and, more specifically, the figure of African origins--as cannibalistic. In its colonial context, therefore, the zombie stands in for imperial anxieties concerning the dangers of the ethnic Other to consume the West corporeally. Not only is the zombie itself a figure of halted progress (death) or even

regress (decay), but the zombie also contains the potential to halt the progress of the Western subject by deconstructing its corporeality, the virile Western male body whose penetrative power constitutes the driving engine of empire. In the wake of the breakup of empire, the fact of this penetrative power might reasonably become vulnerable to doubt. As such, cannibalistic figures of colonized peoples, such as those the revenant represents, might reasonably become an even more prevalent symbol for anxiety. Essentially, for the postcolonizer, the revenant is the history of colonization made animate (if not exactly brought to life) and sent to deconstruct and consume.

The universe of Cherie Priest's 2009 *Boneshaker* co-opts a different monster narrative--that of the zombie--to imagine a post-apocalyptic wasteland of nineteenth-century Seattle. *Boneshaker*'s apocalypse has arisen as a result of unchecked technological advancement. In the story, scientist and inventor Leviticus Blue has created the Boneshaker Device, a drilling machine meant to mine the Klondike for its gold. However, before the events of the novel take place, Blue unleashed the machine beneath Seattle, wrecking the city and releasing a gaseous infection called "the Blight" that converted many of the city's inhabitants into "rotters," the novel's walking dead. Filled with rotters and Blight, Seattle has been surrounded by a wall. The novel takes place more than a decade later, when the two white protagonists--Blue's young son Ezekiel "Zeke" Wilkes and his mother, Briar--enter the evacuated city. The city clearly represents a type of internal colonization in itself, a sort of ghetto made for the concentrated containment of the rotters. However, another colonial relationship exists within the walls of Seattle. Zeke and Briar are shocked to find some humans living amongst the rotters, their entire existence nearly underground. As in *Anno-Dracula*, the relationship between

colonizer-monster and colonized-human is perilous for the surviving humans. In the case of *Boneshaker*'s Seattle, the human population must constantly defend itself not only against the rotters--whose very name focuses on the revenant's processes of eternal decay--but also against infection from the Blight gas which is still pouring out from underground.

Despite their hardships, Zeke and Briar certainly occupy a position of racial privilege in their alternate 19th-century American landscape. More than once upon encountering the ethnic hybridity of Seattle's surviving human population--a group that is made up of black Americans, "Indians" (including Angeline, an "Indian princess" [124], and clearly representing the potential for a system of power to fail and become displaced by an external colonizing force), and many immigrant Chinese workers--the white protagonists respond with fear or suspicion. Although the rotters are surely dominant in their designated terrain, the fact that they are penned in and kept separate indicates their status as an undesirable population. What results is a portrait of colonization as a necessary act of control and containment, though one that is ultimately doomed to failure. Like in *Dracula*, the revenant constitutes a tangible threat that has been experienced--Dracula's attempt at invasion and the first releasing of the Blight that created the early rotters did manage to rack up a body count--but has ultimately been contained. However, as in *Dracula* and other Victorian adventure novels such as *The Coming Race* by Edgar Bulwer-Lytton, *Boneshaker*'s narrative hints at a tangible future threat. As Lucy, one of the humans living under the threat of the rotters and the Blight within the city, forecasts, "'[T]hese walls are just a bowl--and a bowl can only hold so much. The Blight is coming up from underground… [p]ouring more and more into this sealed-up shape…. [O]ne day

it's going to overflow, right out there to the Outskirts. Maybe it'll overflow and poison the whole world, if you give it enough time'" (245). This threat is not mitigated by the end of the novel, when Zeke and Briar are able to reclaim their privilege and personally remove themselves. There may be narrative fulfillment in the protagonists' escape of the wasteland of Seattle and the troubled and possibly doomed Outskirts, but the Blight and the rotters are a growing threat.

If *Anno-Dracula* represents first-wave steampunk's completion of the imperial reverse-colonization narrative as a reaction to postcolonial bodies 'invading' the ex-imperial center, then rotters and the Blight are helpful means by which to measure second-wave steampunk's developed understanding of ethnic and cultural hybridity in the 21st century. The fact that the Blight comes from underground draws connections to a breadth of 19th-century fiction that focuses on the perils of underground exploration, dreaming up possible living threats and populations that might exist beneath the Earth's surface. As Rosalind Williams explains in the introduction to her book *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination*, the specific intrigue of the underground for European writers of the 19th century was how the subterranean functioned as an entirely manufactured setting. Like submarine or interstellar travel, a human could not engage in subterranean ventures without the assistance of technology, and underground habitats had to be carved out or otherwise inorganically created. As such, the underground became associated both with a regress to an earlier, natural state--such as the dinosaur-like creatures in Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*--and, counterintuitively, with a realm of more advanced technological possibility. The nature of the Blight fits both criteria, rising organically

from the underground in unknowable quantities and therefore seeming of entirely ancient

and natural force, but linked inextricably with the mechanical and the manmade,

unleashed as a result of the hubristic and greed-driven[5] power of Blue's Boneshaker

contraption. The paradoxical conflation of both developmentally advanced and regressed

phenomena into one form continues with the figure of the rotter. Although its eternally

decaying state and consumptive appetite render the zombie an atavistic figure, the

creature's single-minded, drone-like movements conversely indicate the zombie's

mechanical nature. Indeed, an alternative definition for 'zombie' is "one who looks or

behaves like an automaton" ("Zombie"). The zombie is both atavistic and therefore

situated in a developmentally inferior position to steampunk's white, able-bodied

protagonists, yet also a symbol itself of the machine and the mechanical. Such a division

represents over its own relationship with technology and the natural and situates the

revenant as both a past and future threat.

For all its mutability, the specific power of the revenant does not lie in its ability

to assimilate; it can never bridge the cultural and temporal distances that separate it from

the living subject. The most valuable weapon available to the revenant is infection. That

is, interaction by the living subject with the revenant carries with it the possibility, not

that the Other will permeate the boundaries of identity and assimilate to the Self, but that

the Self will be, without its consent, recoded into the Other. Specifically, infection gives

the revenant the power it needs to invade or colonize what had been stable populations.

---

[5] Considering the Boneshaker machine's original intent was to mine the untapped
Klondike for gold, Priest's novel might be considered a cautionary tale against
technologically-empowered travel for the purpose of resource extraction--the same
imperial anxieties that manifest in Victorian adventure stories like *Dracula* and H. Rider
Haggard's *She*.

So, the revenant is dangerous because it weaves its own qualities into the inviolate European Self, that paragon of masculinity and progressive power whose sustenance depends on the myth of its own impenetrability. Although critical of the imperial tropes it resurrects, steampunk fiction betrays a colonizing attitude when it comes to the extraction of its own resources, and the use of the revenant as a frequent oppositional force demonstrates a growing distrust for postcolonial ethnic hybridity. These characteristics firmly situate steampunk as a practice of privilege, dismissive of alternate voices despite its protestations to the contrary. In the following section I will consider how the same homogenizing, imperially sustaining tendencies code not only specific literary works but the entire aesthetic of steampunk.

Chapter 2. "Cogs, Clocks, and Kraken": The Aesthetic Symbology of Steampunk

Awareness of steampunk outside of the community mainly consists of the steampunk aesthetic. Even those who have never read a steampunk novel, watched a steampunk film, or attended a steampunk convention may have a conceived visual of what "steampunk" means. There are usually a) gears, b) corsets, and c) various shades of brown. Aesthetic is a crucial part even of literature. One of the most canonical works of the genre is Alan Moore's comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which began publication in 1999. The comic follows many of the patterns of first-wave steampunk outlined in the previous section; it co-opts and repurposes famous characters from Victorian or other 19th-century European literature--*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*'s Captain Nemo, *Dracula*'s Mina Murray, and Allan Quatermain from H. Rider Haggard's adventure works--banding them together to form a league interested in the

protection and maintenance of the Empire. That one of the primary works of steampunk

literature should be a visual text demonstrates not just the subculture's interest in using

multiple forms of media for expression. Other comics such as Bryan Talbot's 2009

Grandville and Warren Ellis's 2008 *Aetheric Mechanics* effectively communicate

alternate steampunk worlds by coupling literary and visual motifs, as do books like Philip

Reeve's 2006 children's novel *Larklight*, which updates the practice and style of

frequent, full-page Victorian illustrations, interweaving text and picture on the page until

they each seem as organic a portion of the text. These successes indicate that steampunk

is, perhaps above all else, a visual culture and practice.

Because the most recognizable aspects of steampunk are visual rather than verbal-

-a work is more likely to *look* like steampunk before it *sounds* or *reads* like it--it is

important to examine attentively the ways steampunk adopts and adapts historical

aesthetic motifs. As with elements of 19th-century literature, original Victorian visual

culture are considered 'found objects' to be reworked to suit a new context and agenda.

In the following sections, I will examine some of the primary visual aspects of art,

illustration, photography, and design.

The Postcolonial Racial Politics of Brown

Comparing steampunk aesthetics with other alternative fashions, Jenny Sundén

claims that they "may at first glance reminisce of industrial Goth, but where black is

turned sepia, lacquer turned tweed and brown leather" (371). The overwhelmingly

monochromatic scope of steampunk as an aesthetic statement is so prevalent that the fifth

issue of *Steampunk Magazine*, the first to be printed in color, rather than taking advantage

of its new colorful capabilities with a broad spectrum, features cover art rendered entirely

in brown tones.[6] The artwork (see fig. 1), created by freelance artist Fabiola Garza and

containing all three of the above-listed stereotypical aesthetic criteria, depicts a sky scene,

in which a hot air balloon contraption hoists four youthful, jubilant figures in the air. Two

Figure 1. Garza, Fabiola. *Cover of Steampunk Magazine Issue 5: Long Live Steampunk! Lifestyle, Mad Science, Theory, & Fiction.* **2009. Web. 21 Nov. 2013. JPEG file.**

hoist pennants over their heads, and the magazine's subtitle cries in slanting letters: "long live steampunk!" Colors range from a bright ecru (the sky, the figures' skin, patches of reflecting light) to a neutral caramel (the clouds, some minor articles of clothing) to a deeper chestnut (the more featured items of clothing such as overcoats, corsets, waistcoats, wristbands, gloves, goggles, as well as the pennants and the aircraft themselves). The jubilant tone of Garza's artwork celebrates the

conventions of steampunk as both literary genre and unified visual movement. If the

drawing is therefore a celebration of steampunk, then the pennant flags hoisted by the

figures are the flags of steampunk itself. They bear no text or image but are simply a

solid, dark brown, more explicitly linking the genre and the hue. Other artists such as

James Ng, Brian Kesinger, and Mike Savad regularly use brown monochrome to

reinforce the steampunk elements in their work, and accessory, fashion, and interior

designers[7] make use of the color by turning frequently to leathers, burlaps, corduroys,

---

[6] The covers of Issues Six and Seven of *Steampunk Magazine* are also monochromatically brown.
[7] Because steampunk fashion is primarily a DIY movement, prominent steampunk fashion designers are more difficult to name, but steampunk-inspired project tutorials on

woods and varnishings, and metallic browns such as copper and bronze.

So, brown serves as a unifying factor in steampunk art and design. The significance of the raw, the unfinished, and the natural in a twentieth and twenty-first century DIY countercultural movement lies in its ability to reject by contrast its polished, synthetic, cyber-age context. Furthermore, brown acts as a signifier of Victoriana, the nineteenth century, and the larger tendency of the backward gaze. Brown is the color of European imperial commodities: tea, coffee, rum, and exotic spices such as cinnamon and vanilla, as well as the crates, barrels, and sacks in which these commodities are transported. Metallic browns constitute coinage, factory machinery, and conducting wires, signifying the economies, industries, and technologies of the nineteenth century. Brown indicates agedness; a brown-washed document is either authentically old or affects to be so. In contemporary film and photography, a brown-tinged lens indicates flashback, and frequently one of considerable distance. In an American context, this color filtering technique, called *sepia*, often entails an invocation of the American Wild West-- dust, saloons, leather[8] straps and gun holsters, chestnut ponies, all images of the nineteenth-century frontier. It is unsurprising that the American steampunk frequently visits the Wild West, considering the frontier lifestyle glorifies the basic tenets of a contemporary DIY movement. Significantly, many of the largest steampunk communities and conventions take place in the American West such as Austin, San Francisco, and Seattle.

---

instructables.com or products on etsy.com provide a variety of helpful examples to this point.

[8] The overvaluation placed on leather and leather products among steampunk enthusiasts carries with it clear colonial implications. Leather, the literal appropriation of another being's skin, stands in for the larger colonial practice of commodifying Other bodies.

The power of brown not merely as unifier and signifier but as homogenizer reveals the exclusive nature of steampunk. After all, for a movement to have a uniform, a code of dress by which to mark its adherents, then members of the movement can similarly identify those who are not included in the group. In order to understand *whom* the lifestyle implicitly excludes, it is necessary first to look critically at *what* is excluded by the steampunk aesthetic: color. In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor argues that "in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished, and degraded" (22). With this in mind, the preference in the steampunk community for the color brown in fashion, art, and design assumes a more geographically and ideologically situated meaning. A dull color, brown avoids the vibrancy the imperial West associated with the "tacky", "garish", colorful textiles and art from the (specifically African and Indian) colonies. The brownness of steampunk aesthetics also has racial implications. In order to effect the dramatic visuals characteristic of steampunk, brown-dominated fashion implies a contrast between the tones of textile and skin. The wearer of steampunk garments, therefore--the inevitable subject--is overwhelmingly white, the paler the better. If the steampunk wardrobe is brown, therefore, the wearer's skin cannot be. It is unsurprising that chromophobia "manifests as the valorization of white as the color of rational, clean, controlled spaces, while color is seen as dangerous, superficial, and potentially contaminating" (Purnell). Like the nineteenth century fashion that serves as its inspiration, steampunk's monochrome might be considered *chromophobic* in its glorification of white, not by affecting whiteness but by self-consciously framing and complementing it as the assumed subject. There is little room for the Other, the nonwhite body, within the canonical steampunk color spectrum.

26

Bringing together these two strands--the rich Victorian tradition of commodifying

brownness and the steampunk wardrobe's exclusion of the black and brown subject[9]--

renders the nonwhite figure steampunk's eternal Object. Brownness is celebrated because

of its contrast with Whiteness, because it is Other, because it can be made to function in

service of Whiteness. After all, the invocation of sepia as the backward gaze to resurrect

the American West reenacts Manifest Destiny, the westward push of white invader

bodies into native lands, subjugating the racial Other. Fetishizing the brownness of

colonial commodity must also reckon with the fact of the slave trade--recent history to

the Victorians--and the literal commodification and import of nonwhite bodies, as well as

the continued mining of resources from colonized spaces into the colonizing nation. The

very favoring of brown at the expense of color in fashion accommodates the white

subject at the expense of the nonwhite. It is no mistake that in Garza's cover of

Steampunk Magazine the figures are the palest shade present, that their commodities

stand out in dark relief around them. Garza commodifies darkness to celebrate whiteness.

Cephalopods and Machines

The specific role of sepia, however, contains far broader implications. The word

derives from the Greek name for the cuttlefish, as the sepia hue originally comes from the

cuttlefish's ink, which was used before the nineteenth century as a brown-tinted ink for

writing. It is fitting that steampunk's nostalgic backward glance should be colored by the

---

[9] References to brown subject and bodies use Kumarini Silva's definition of "the
historically brown bodies of Latin American migration, the brown bodies of Asia and the
Middle East, the globalized bodies of migratory labour, or the queered bodies of alterity"
(167). This conflating element of this definition is deliberate, rising not from the attempt
to construct any sincere collective identity, but rather to criticize the conflating tendency
of the steampunk community in its definition and exclusion of the Other.

cuttlefish, considering the cephalopod represents another point of fascination in steampunk art and literature. Sally-Anne Huxtable names "cogs, clocks, and Kraken" as the three primary symbols of the steampunk design aesthetic, tracing the relevance of the Kraken, the giant cephalopodic being that in some ways serves as steampunk's canonical monster, to the figure of the giant squid or octopus in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (227). The reason for steampunk's fascination with the Kraken and its fellow cephalopods is initially unclear, as the single literary origin does not justify the frequency with which squids, octopi, and Kraken appear in steampunk fashion and design. Of course, Verne's text indicates a broader nineteenth century interest in seafaring, global mobility, and discovery. As travel technology improved, physical mobility into uncharted territories quickly became possible. Both historical contexts, nineteenth and late twentieth centuries alike, were periods of extreme technological advancement. Living in a world where technology was rapidly increasing globalization and cybertech was developing and traversing new frontiers, steampunks of the 1980s could also easily find the Kraken--a monster who tellingly attacks voyagers who are out of their depth--a cautionary tale against allowing technological advances to drive a society too far into unknown spaces.[10] The historical use of the Kraken and other sea monsters to decorate unexplored areas of the globe also casts the cephalopod as the checking force behind reckless expansion.

Political cartoons of the nineteenth century began to use the octopus as a symbol of global economic powers. In an attempt to render the corporation corporeal, cartoonist

[10] Desmond Davis's 1981 *Clash of the Titans* constitutes another 1980s example of fascination with Kraken imagery, co-opting the monster out of Old Norse mythology and dropping it into an unrelated Ancient Greek narrative.

Udo J. Keppler's 1904 cartoon *Next!* casts an octopus as Standard Oil. The comparison of corporation to octopus was already a familiar one; as early as 1882, G. F. Keller's *The Curse of California* used an octopus to depict the Southern Pacific Railway monopoly, and Frank Norris's 1901 novel *The Octopus: A Story of California* had already extended the metaphor beyond the realm of political cartoon. The comparison is far from flattering. Each cartoon's octopus's many arms signify the multiple forms of its greed and its ability to grip and strangle various kinds of resources all at once at the expense of the white worker. Keppler's *Next!* cartoon is significant in that the corporate octopus of Standard Oil straddles the globe, the curve of the Earth distinctly visible behind, the octopus's arms demonstrating a transoceanic spread. The breadth of the cephalopod's many-armed reach and its suckers' capacity for accumulation link it not only with the machine but with the machine of imperial economics itself; in the nineteenth century, the image of the octopus could symbolize the power of imperial industry, whose transoceanic reach and comfort in the water, the perilous and liminal milieu of travel from colonizing to colonized spaces, gave such firms immense monopolizing power. Indeed, the figure of the 'corporate octopus' stands in for globalizing industry. The machine of empire and of industry alike find representation in the image of the greedy octopus; it is up to the European colonizers to tame this machine and commodify it for their own purposes. Resurrecting the cephalopod image during a period of industrial outsourcing like that of the late twentieth century indicates an awareness of the similarity between multinational corporations under the colonial and the capital models alike.

In many ways, the cephalopod stands in not merely for the possible pitfalls of too-rapid technological growth, but for the machine itself. Its many appendages make it

capable and efficient, if redundant; the cephalopod's arms, long and tubular, remind the

onlooker of metal tubes and pipelines, and the bulbous head and body call to mind an

engine or processing center. The cephalopod's translucence lays bare the (organic)

machine, rendering visible what once had been hidden like exposing pieces of clockwork.

Brian Kesinger's illustrated book *Walking Your Octopus: A Guidebook to the*

Domesticated Cephalopod humorously depicts one young steampunk woman--

significantly named Victoria--as she attempts to introduce her rowdy pet octopus into her

privileged, commodity-rich lifestyle. The octopus, Otto, is sometimes disruptive and/or

destructive of the Victorian world into which he has been transplanted, as when he leaks

ink over Victoria's armchair and rug and Victoria is forced to chastise him, pointing

accusingly down at the dark stain he has left (see fig. 2). At other times, Otto assists

Figure 2. Kesinger, Brian. *Walking Your Octopus: A Guide to the Domesticated Cephalopod.* **Baby Tattoo, 2013. Web. JPEG file.**

Victoria in her own Victorian rituals, using his many arms to help her lace up her ivory corset or clutching Victoria's many startled suitors in his grasp while his amused owner

chortles at their expense. Otto is simultaneously pet, exotic Other, and machine. The

phonic pun of his name (Otto/Auto) reinforces his efficient, mechanical helpfulness, the

automatic convenience of his ability to assist Victoria, to make her more comfortable in

her own world, in which he is a curio, a pet, a figure of amusement. In all of its forms,

therefore--as sea monster, symbol of industry, and Other-machine--the steampunk

cephalopod represents both a potential threat and a potential boon, reinforcing the steampunk's call of duty to assert force in taming the monster and putting it to use.

Progress, Cogs, and Clockwork

In her exploration of the steampunk aesthetic--specifically, "the affective relations of the somatechnics of steampunk" (376)--Jenny Sundén claims that "[w]hat seams [sic] to be at stake is a desire for machines that can be felt intensely, for technologies that have not been slimmed down and hidden behind plastic, disposable shells," machines that are "tangible and open to modification and transformation" (372). Sundén equates the steampunk obsession with the cog as an obsession with "a laying bare of technology" (371), rendering steampunk "a deconstructive practice" (380). Steampunk began as a deconstruction of and a rejection against the cyber age. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's 1990 *The Difference Engine*, often considered the inaugural steampunk novel, imagines the invention of the computer in a mid-nineteenth century context. The conceit creates a thought experiment that, like a chemist testing a reactant in contrasting solutions to divine its properties, better allows readers to understand the impact of cybertechnology in their own time by witnessing its introduction in a different milieu. Far from ushering in a Victorian utopia, the computer of *The Difference Engine* has rapidly created an age of apathy, disconnection, and dehumanization, wherein British citizens are reduced to numbers on a file that, though they can be wiped and reinvented by the privileged or savvy, hold more worth than the humans they signify.

The rejection of the cyber within the steampunk community results in a regression to earlier mechanical forms. In the world of postcolonial economics, a Western prepossession with the image of the cog or the gear--what is inherently a factory image--

31

must come to terms with the fact of the increasing displacement of factories from the West via outsourcing of industrial labor. In fact, it is in part through this very displacement that the colonial myth survives in economic rhetoric, which seeks to place the nations of the world on the old imperial timeline; what used to be colonized spaces are now considered "developing", a reference to their industrial development (in contrast with the already "developed" West, which loses the industrial in favor of the digital and relies on global economic ties--the living ghost of colonial trade ties--to import industrial goods from countries where labor is cheaper). If the Western economy is the digital-- what Sundén described as "slimmed down and hidden behind plastic, disposable shells"-- then the postcolonial world is the world of industry, of cogs and gears, of technology laid bare. This does not only refer to the specific technology of production--the factory--but to the global distribution of technology. In a postcolonial country, the global economic system is "laid bare", the labors and processes behind production that sustains Western countries visible and exposed. The cog as an image of the postcolonial nation is an ambivalent one. On one hand, the single cog is individualized, interlocked, made important; its failure means the failure of the entire machine. On the other hand, the cog is uniform and easily replaced. Its agency is both powerful and powerless. The expendability of cheap laborers is one of the major incentives for the outsourcing of U.S. factories to postcolonial nations. That the cog as today's postcolonial industrializing nation should fit so cleanly into nineteenth-century imperial rhetoric--the references to the British empire as a well-oiled machine, situating Britain as the processor and its colonies as the inner workings--signifies a compulsion within the steampunk aesthetic to interrogate the power dynamics of today's global economic structures, the ways in which

colonialism has sustained itself.

Though the image of a cog may be a static one, interlocking parts of a machine carry an implied temporality. The cog's function, after all, is to continue motion at a regular and controlled rate. Cogs in steampunk are often specifically clockwork cogs, occasionally coupled with ornate clock hands or faces in order to connect this temporal element more closely with the exposed machine. Of course, a steampunk's prepossession with time might spring from the genre's own playfulness with the timeline. Since steampunk often does not involve merely looking to the past but constitutes an act of retrofuturism--looking back to a specific point, fracturing the timeline, and moving forward again according to that fracture--time is something that must be carefully established in nearly every steampunk setting.

That the cog's implicit temporality indicates a kind of potential for progress within the machine neatly parallels the condition of the so-called developing postcolonial nation. As Chakrabarty puts it, this idea of progress and development toward some goal serves to settle the postcolonial nation into "precisely the argument of the colonizer--the 'not yet' to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her 'now'" (9). The myth that the 'developed' have comfortably attained what the 'developing' are striving towards is what allows Victoria her appearance of absolute comfort, amusement, ease while Otto toils in her service; she expends effort only in the scene where she remonstrates Otto for his ink-spill, reaffirming the role of the developed as benevolent overseer and model upon which the developing might base their own performances and behavior. The developed are the sleek, covered machine which, if it toils, does so without the appearance of work or movement. The visible progress of the exposed machine implies

33

both strain and an ultimate goal which is absent from the veneer of self-congratulatory leisure present in Chakrabarty's 'now' nations.

Associating the postcolonial nation with the machine continues the tradition David Spurr identifies in *The Rhetoric of Empire* of colonial Europeans conflating the concepts of machine and Other. Spurr specifically notes instances when the machine is likened to Other bodies, such as the comparison of the black male with the "human machine" to refer to his voracious sexuality (65). Similarly, Spurr reports Flaubert's remark that "'[t]he Oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another'" (175). That nineteenth-century Europeans used the machine as a method of discussing Other sexualities obviously reveals more about the anxieties of those constructing the metaphor than about the figure under discussion. What Spurr calls "the language of serial repetition" links the Other's sexuality, in the mind of the European, with the image of rapid, mechanized production (175); contemporary rhetoric focusing on overpopulation in postcolonial countries similarly emphasizes the productive element of Other sexualities, rendering the Other inorganic by favoring statistics over cultural realities just as the rhetoric of empire did by speaking in terms of the machine. The eroticization of the machine circles back to Sundén's concept of exposure, "a revealing of the underlying mechanisms" (380), as one of the primary interests of the steampunk community. Steampunk's invocation of the imperial Other-as-machine rhetoric denotes a continued eroticization and commodification of Other bodies. Just as brown skins are subjugated and commodified in the monochrome of the steampunk aesthetic, the obsession with the cog denotes a continued reliance on the Other-machine.

Unsurprisingly, considering steampunk's prepossession with machinery, industry, and the laying bare of production processes, one of the most significant milieux of the greater steampunk world is the factory. Since a factory is a large, dynamic setting, not easily reducible, factory imagery often manifests in small ways that indicate the larger industrial process, as with the cog image explored above. However, for multidimensional aesthetic projects such as interior design themes, factory motifs can indicate visually that a given interior space subscribes to a steampunk aesthetic. There are several coffee shops that publicize themselves along a steampunk theme--Steampunk LA Coffee Bar and Kitchen in Valley Village, CA, and Truth in Cape Town, South Africa, serve as examples of this--but many coffee shops buy into the steampunk aesthetic without advertising it.

Of course, the coffee shop is a perfect setting for steampunk design; the amount of care and ritual that goes into the preparation of coffee at independently owned shops leaves the entire process closely attached to its roots in Victorian commodity culture. Processes of roasting and brewing also require steampunk-approved amounts of gadgetry. Coffee shops might highlight their simultaneously historically-attuned and technologically-advanced take on Victorian coffee culture by incorporating a steampunkish design element; exposed pipes along ceilings and aged brick walls serves as a thematic complement to the brown coffee tones and the hiss of steam escaping from espresso machines. With all of the sights and sounds of industry, a steampunkish coffee shop looks less like a comfortable Victorian one than like a 19th-century workhouse that has been gutted and repurposed. Similar images of the factory (or other sets that visually refer to the factory, such as the dusty, airy warehouse) have appeared in films like *The*

League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, *Around the World in 80 Days*, and *Sherlock Holmes*.

The specific significance of these factory settings lies not merely in the way they reinforce what has already been established about the values implicit in the steampunk aesthetic. What is unique here is the way the steampunk factory has been aged or decommissioned; in one way or another, a steampunk factory is a defective one. The machinery is devoid of function or otherwise divorced from its original purpose. The organic-bodied workers whose purpose it is to interact with and ensure the continued performance of the inorganic-bodied machine are absent. Rust in particular assumes an important role in the steampunk aesthetic. As with a brown-washed document, rust colors that which it adorns with the implication of agedness. The passage of time implied by metal that appears in a corroded state perfectly aligns with steampunk's fetishization of historicity. Like the revenant, the abandoned factory is in a state of eternal, preserved decay. Of course, if these Victorian settings were original to their own time, they would be bustling hives of industry, constructed of new, shining metals. Instead, they are aged and run down, testaments to a functioning past unlikely to be regained. The abandoned, rust-covered factory resonates with the disappearance of the cog-laborer in a digital society; the motif itself serves as an elegy to this loss, the rotting corpse of mechanical labor in a society that has displaced manual labor both geographically and temporally.

The "About" section of *Steampunk Magazine*'s webpage claims that it is "dedicated to a steampunk that is fiercely anti-colonial, anti-racist, and pro-gender-diversity". Its affirmation that it has "no interest in glorifying the rulers of *our* society any further" (emphasis mine) acknowledges that the characters of privilege in the world

steampunk resurrects continue to be privileged in steampunk's contemporary context, and

Steampunk Magazine is one of a rich body of periodicals, anthologies, and online

communities to use a deliberate language of inclusiveness. Possibly, these entities seek to

to bring back the bogeymen of Victoriana because, as Christine Ferguson suggests, "they

can only be successfully exorcised" by so doing (71). However, the aesthetics of

steampunk create a movement not only with "decidedly masculine, straight, US and

European-centred qualities" (Sundén 380), but one dependent on the same subjugation of

the Other as did the Victorian model of colonialism. However, the extreme ambivalence

of steampunk toward each of its primary visual signifiers--the affection for and fear of

color, octopus, and machine--indicates the power of these objects. As Stefania Forlini

makes clear in her article "Technology and Morality: The Stuff of Steampunk",

steampunk is all about "[exploring] the difference an object can make" (72)--or an

Object. American steampunk's fetishization of etiquette and Victorian commodity

lifestyle reinforces the power of the U.S. middle class in the face the outsourcing of

industry to postcolonial nations. It is only because the threat is recognized that it can be

ignored. In a post-*Orientalism* world, such a complete exclusion of the Other while still

pretending toward inclusion is possible only for a movement that situates itself in the

past, that revels in the rhetoric and lifestyle of the Victorians Said criticized.

Chapter 3. DIY Fashion and Identity Performance

The primary fashion impulse in steampunk is to co-opt Victorian fashion

practices, adapting them to an alternative, 'punk' sensibility.The classic Victorian

silhouette alters little in the update: men remain square-shouldered and many-layered,

while women enhance and exaggerate hourglass curvature with corsetry, tapered waists, ruffles, bustles, large sleeves, and broad skirts. Changes from historical costume may contain alterations of accessory, textile, color, cut, or scale. Like living caricature, such alterations have a way of turning a critical, ironic eye inward at the original fashion practice; a too-tall stovepipe hat elongates the line of a man's body, stretching him to a comical altitude, visually satirizing the top hat's inherent property of emphasizing a man's height. In this way, the contemporary appropriation of the Victorian man's fashion staple of the top hat brings up for criticism the Victorian prepossession with tallness as an indicator of masculine virility, and calls into question the performability of such attributes through hat choice. As with the top hat, such alterations may comment on the vestiges of Victorian gender coding in contemporary fashion. Another alteration of scale, for example, might include an exaggeratedly wide and tall leg-of-mutton sleeve on a lady's blouse. The height of the sleeve serves to build the female wearer's sense of presence by rendering her larger in the shoulder; her presence therefore assumes an aggressive, masculine edge, counterintuitively through the enhancement of a fashion technique specific to womenswear. The trappings of femininity, when augmented to the extreme, begin to suggest a sort of performable masculinity. Such an augmented sleeve in a contemporary context also visually references pop fashion of the 1980s as much as of the 1880s, silently indicating *punk*'s origins as much as *steam*'s.

The common steampunk women's garment of the bustle skirt serves as another example of a design technique directly co-opted from its original Victorian context. In Victorian fashion, a bustle could be one of several techniques to enhance the woman's posterior aspect in silhouette. This might include ruffling, gathering, or pleating of large

volumes of fabric up the back of a skirt, and a bustle pad, or a small pillow, might be worn around the waist and under the skirt to bolster the fabric so that the skirts stood out below the small of the back. Because of its excess yardage, the bustle signified affluence, the ability to purchase the extra fabric as well as the labor necessary for creating the intricate effects of the technique. The gathering techniques of bustling also act as veil, an act which serves both to safeguard a woman's sexuality from view and to render the wearer more of an object of heterosexual desire. Bustling achieves these dual effects with its silhouette, which doubly obscures a woman's true shape and enhances the illusion of her feminine curvature, and with the fullness of its gathered folds, which surrounds the female sexual organs with layer upon layer of fabric, restricting access to her genitalia while also emphasizing the area being masked. The Victorian bustle as fashion technique therefore plays to those old stereotypes about sexuality in the nineteenth century: aspects of sexuality are prudishly concealed in a move that appears to be an extension of a barely hidden sexual obsessiveness.

Like lifting characters directly out of Victorian literature, the recycling of a self-consciously Victorian garment necessarily comments on the contrast between the garment's original context and its new one. A common practice in steampunk appropriations of the bustle skirt openly confronts Victorian feminine sexualities by cutting the skirt's front to the thigh. This deviation of cut exposes the woman's legs while maintaining the historical silhouette. The effect of this alteration functions in the same dual aspect as the original garment, both heightening and safeguarding the wearer's sexuality. The exposure, though rendering the woman susceptible to the open gaze, normalizes the wearer's body. Though she is on sexual display, she is de-eroticized. The

severe asymmetry of cut, too, dramatically unbalances the evenness of the modest Victorian hemline. This adaptation of the bustle therefore serves as an emblem of the greater steampunk practice of considering past practice to be found objects, ultimately obtainable and alterable, open to ironic reconfiguration.

Identity Performance and Personae

Victorian society placed immense importance on fashion, coding it specifically to identity; a single garment could speak volumes concerning the class, gender, occupation, and nationality of the wearer. Steampunk fashion recodes these indicators of absolute identity into a new type of identity, one that is removable and changeable and overall more in accordance with the open performativity of aspects of identity characteristic of late twentieth and early twenty-first century identity construction. Central to the implementation of steampunk fashion is the construction of an individual's *persona*, or the character he or she assumes in the steampunk world. Because a steampunk will often dress to suit his or her persona, the dress itself is an integral part of the character itself and the subject's performance of that character. As such, no matter the sincerity of the wearer, the dress is more accurately a costume, which in itself implies performance of something inorganic to the identity of the subject. However, as I will argue after considering various tropes of steampunk performance and persona, although the practice claims to redistribute power away from the myth of the white male Subject, the basic tenets of steampunk fashion practice reenact more than deconstruct narratives of xenophobia and colonization.

As explored above with the example of the leg-of-mutton sleeves, the ability to permeate gender boundaries is characteristic of steampunk fashion, reflecting a post-

Victorian ideology regarding the performativity of aspects of identity the Victorians would have considered inalterable. However, this kind of fluidity is not complete, and unspoken laws still dictate the performance of gender in steampunk. For all that it is regular to see women appropriating elements of menswear, it is uncommon for the performance to ebb in the other direction. If anything, the dandyish fashions common in Victorian menswear that may appear feminizing to later sensibilities have been reduced in the fashion of steampunk canon. So, it is not a freeness of gender expression that is desirable in steampunk, but rather a more conventional and homogenizing ambition toward masculinity. The female wearer empowers herself by assuming aspects of male garments; her other option is to empower herself through exposure, thereby distancing herself from the restrictive Victorian feminine sexuality, as with the cutaway bustle skirt that fetishizes through revealing where the Victorians had fetishized through concealing.

Other boundaries of identity seem to demonstrate a similar one-way permeability. As concerns class and occupation, for example, steampunk personae and character types tend in one of two directions: the idle upper classes who depend on the conservation and perpetuation of Victoriana, and the fringe, subversive groups who are not contributing members of society and represent a threat to the tenets of Victoriana. For male personae, the former tend toward the scientific, the militaristic, and the adventuring; these tropes of character help to drive speculative adventure plots, but roles like these imply capital enough to drive these pursuits. Scientists purchased their educations; military officers purchased their commissions; and all adventures must be funded. The latter category of outsiders and disenfranchised tends toward the subversive countercultures of Victoriana, such as pirates and circusfolk. For female personae, there are those who are assigned

41

traditionally masculine roles; steampunk boasts its fair share of anachronistic female airship pilots and military personnel. Other female characters are by and large some variation on the proper Victorian lady. Any lower-class steampunk ladies assume predominantly sexualized characters, working in burlesque shows and cabarets or else, as is a particularly common trope in the steampunk novel, as prostitutes. In short, the professions of steampunk personae tend toward the glamorous or the subversive.

This dual impulse toward both the conservative and self-critical elements of Victoriana continues the steampunk tradition of extreme ambivalence toward the society it resurrects. Essentially, the characters of interest are either those whom the system sustains or those who reject the system, reflecting the nostalgic and critical impulses of steampunk, respectively. These two categories essentially represent the 'haves' and 'have nots' of the steampunk world. Among the 'haves' is Mr. B the Gentleman Rhymer, a musical performer whose name explicitly announces his privileged status. Mr. B is the champion of "Chap-Hop," a genre which, according to the gentleman's website, seeks "to introduce Hip-Hop to the Queen's English." Mr. B's oeuvre contains collections like *Flattery Not Included*, *I Say!*, and *The Tweed Album*, which sport songs like "How Many Brilliant Minds Are Lost to Work?," "Rude Britannia," and "More Kissing in Porn Please, We're British." Mr. B resurrects trappings of imperial-era England and, tongue lodged firmly in cheek, raps about them. In his own words, he "takes to the stage with his Banjolele [a hybrid between a banjo and a ukelele] and stiff upper lip to perform ditties of pipe-smoking, high society, Cricket, and sexual misadventure." Mr. B's songs and self-presentation fetishize and revere the commodity lifestyle of imperial Britain. He keeps a full, bushy moustache; he and his website both are dressed in stereotypically British

textiles. The Banjolele is itself a foppish and whimsical instrument, and the plunky sound it produces creates gentle, light tones that render his music more suitable to a holiday lifestyle than one of labor. Much of Mr. B's humor comes from the anachronistic juxtaposition: he introduces liberal topics like "sexual misadventure" into a restrictive historical context, backing away neither from the confrontational nature of hip-hop nor from the foppish prudishness of imperial Britain. Like the cutaway bustle or the too-tall stovepipe hat, such a move serves to present each world in contrast to the other, caricaturizing the characteristics of each to ironic effect.

Mr. B's fellow "Chap-Hop" artist and rival, Professor Elemental (see the two pictured together in fig. 3), does not celebrate imperial commodity lifestyle as openly as does Mr. B, though specific aspects of the Professor's persona and performance indicate his privileged class position. Professor Elemental's garb speaks volumes about the character's societal role: he customarily wears a khaki, 'safari'-style suit with knee-length shorts and a matching pith helmet. His position as an academic and an adventurer mark him as a more geographically mobile figure than the leisurely, domestic character of Mr. B. Although the two rappers market themselves as opposites of the other--they have even released targeted rap 'fight' songs aimed at discrediting each other--Professor Elemental's

Figure 3. Mr. B and Professor Elemental. 2013. JPEG file.

subject matter is also prepossessed with imperial commodity culture and Victorian ritual,

as is evident in songs like "Everything Stops for Tea." The Professor's pith helmet, the same worn by the British imperial armies in colonies like India, in particular marks him as an invasive, imperial figure.

If Mr. B is a helpful figure to consider when exploring steampunk's widespread fetishization of the Victorian gentry, Professor Elemental's pseudo-military dress his emphasis on technology--he sings about steam-powered machines and zeppelin races-- render him the quintessential character of the steampunk adventurer. As a imperial figure, traveling through time and space, Professor Elemental enters into an act of silent colonization, the subjugation of an unseen Other population. The Professor's adventures engage in the ultimate postcolonial nostalgic fantasies: a white male Englishman, the Professor is able to enact the masculine adventures of the period of global expansion and colonization without any of the troublesome moral quandaries of actually disrupting foreign structures of power. The only depiction of a foreign body in the Professor's songs is Geoffrey, the monkey butler the Professor has allegedly picked up during his global travels and brought back to England. Like Victoria's octopus Otto, Geoffrey clearly represents the tamed, commodified Other, the spoils of the Professor's imperial pursuits. As a primate, Geoffrey is even more overtly an atavistic representation of the colonized body. Although Mr. B and Professor Elemental clearly inhabit these character types in order to satirize the trappings of extreme Britishness they typify, both characters indicate steampunk performance's tendency to rely on problematic imperial modes of thought. That is, these Chap-Hop artists may criticize the imperial seat, but they not do so out of any sort of postcolonial indignation over empire. The same position of unchecked privilege troublingly underlies many other aspects of steampunk performance, such as the

incorporation of militaristic elements like double-breasting, combat boots, and epaulettes in steampunk costume.

The fascination with subversive elements, those members of society who function outside of social laws and standards of acceptable behavior, belies several impulses and desires within the steampunk counterculture. The pirate in particular represents the steampunk's extreme cartographic interests. A mobile figure, the pirate can travel to any place on the globe with little trouble, breaking down or conniving his way through any boundaries that should arise. The pirate as a narrative trope pays homage to the tradition of European adventure fiction that feeds the steampunk genre. However, the pirate as renegade occupies a liminal space of infinite threat. Although most gender performance in steampunk allows only for female-to-male mobility, the male pirate captain's wardrobe revives dandyish fashion in a way that allows him to occupy a space of gender flexibility; effeminate touches like frilly jabot collars, hat feathers, and lace ruffs are standards of the male pirate's costume. The pirate also possesses a more nebulous sexuality, occupying the traditionally homoeroticized space of the ship at sea, a microcosm to itself, and one flush with masculine bodies. But perhaps the pirate's greatest threat is his threat to the sanctity of the European empire. Economically, of course, the pirate has the capacity to destabilize European overseas commerce. Most significantly, the trade relationships most vulnerable to piratical interference are those between colonizing nations and their occupied spaces. The pirate threatens to break the ties of imperialism that hold the steampunk world together. Because he is a liminal figure, disloyal to rigid European bureaucracy and rule-dictated behavior, the pirate is endlessly adaptable. His relationship to technology in particular empowers him in his conflicts with empire; as well as taking

to the sea, the steampunk pirate is often able to travel the air in steam-powered zeppelins, his technological advancement on par with the empire he fights. A mobile figure, he is able to appropriate elements and resources from all over the world to be competitive.

The pirate essentially represents pre-transnational images of transnationality, a thought experiment that betrays imperial European anxieties over the deconstruction of national boundaries. What in Victorian literature constituted a fear of a possible transnational future, when moved into steampunk's context represents a fear of the real transnational present. Steampunk cartographic fascination nearly always involves a European character venturing into the corners of the map. The European may claim ownership over the discovered territories, but he does not belong to them. The national identity of the pirate is nebulous, Other, unknown, or decidedly non-European--or, if he was born European, his role as turncoat makes him the yet more subversive figure of the anti-European, a former citizen willing to take up arms against the superstructures that had given him relative power. The national identity of the pirate crew is all the more threatening for its mixture of cultural elements. Members of varying nationality and ethnicity work side-by-side, visible and exposed to each other, no longer kept separate by rigid hierarchies or extreme geographical distance. Rules governing hierarchy are disrupted to the extent that ethnic and (in steampunk) sexual Others may rise in rank above the white male subject, even coming to dominate him in the chain of command.

Steampunk's interest in elements of carnivale, as well--circus stripes, ringmaster gear, and freakshow culture recur in steampunk fashion and aesthetic--demonstrates a fascination with hybrid outsider communities of indeterminate origins who have the capacity to unbalance the accepted, homogenous order of things. If steampunk truly is the

conservative reconfiguring of empire that its literature and aesthetics indicate, then for it to celebrate spaces of anti-imperial possibility such as the circus or the pirate ship might seem like a contradictory impulse. Figures who seem to operate counter to the overarching steampunk narrative supply what James C. Scott calls "space for a dissident subculture" (108). In particular, Scott singles out the carnival as a "[ritual] for reversal" (173). The superstructures of empire cannot be reestablished in a post-imperial context without the inclusion of any complementary dissidents, roguish and romantic figures to criticize and attack the reanimation of the old model. These dissenting bodies, however, are themselves figures of agency, far from voiceless subalterns. The hidden elements, generally absent from all aspects of steampunk performance, are the fulcrum on which these rituals reverse: the everyday working classes. Again, the cog is hidden, its service to the machine taken for granted. Reversal, of the piratical or the carnivalesque variety, is denied them, except insofar as these laborers find corporeality in the form of the machine.

Mechanical Bodies

For the steampunk garment, as for the deconstructed machine, labor is emphasized. Because of the movement's emphasis on DIY, the garment itself implies the processes of its own making. At conventions, inquiries into a convention-goer's dress often assume that the wearer is also the craftsman. In addition to serving as a part of the performance of persona, convention garb therefore provides an opportunity to demonstrate one's own DIY aptitude, which is so valued by the community. *Steampunk Magazine*'s submissions page claims to be "more interested by DIY skill-sharing than exhibition of existing work," asking for construction tutorials rather than merely fashion spreads. As well as being included in publications of the genre, steampunk-specific

47

tutorials exist in abundance on craft websites such as Instructables and Ravelry, and searches for 'steampunk' on websites like Etsy or eBay frequently return supplies for steampunk craft and fashion projects--deconstructed watch parts, antique keys or textiles--rather than ready-made products.

The corset may be the item in steampunk fashion that comments most explicitly on the evolution of gender and constructed sexuality in the intervening years between its common use and its punk reappropriation. Because the corset is a relic of fashion, now essentially in use only by a fringe population, for a modern, Western female to wear a corset is to make a conscious nod to historical--and even outmoded--shapings of femininity. The impulses behind such an act of appropriation may be ironic or sincere, critical or nostalgic, or even, in the same garment, mixtures of these opposing forces. In addition to being self-consciously out of fashion, the corset performs a specific role in rendering the female Other. Corsets take the natural and organic form and convert it into something that is unnatural and inorganic. The corseted form is a conscious, patriarchally dictated construction--a woman's repackaging of her own body to better suit expected shapes. The process by which she is made less natural is significant to the steampunk aesthetic, as well: that which makes the woman more 'womanly' is also that which interferes with her humanity, her natural biological shape. The steampunk prepossession with automata--the human nonhuman--and the previously explored conflation of machine and ethnic Other extends now to gender. Not only are all nonwhite bodies mechanized and effeminized in their Otherness, but female bodies are linked with the machine in their femininity.

In its interactions between the biological and the mechanical, steampunk reveals

its roots in original cyberpunk impulses and philosophy. The mechanical body and the machine-enhanced body are both central concepts in steampunk. The corseted woman is made into a machine; the state of being corseted renders her inorganic, makes her actions and movements more deliberate, halting, and unnatural. There is a world of difference between the mechanized woman figure, who has been, if not defeated, at least altered by the machine and the mechanically enhanced human subject. Mechanical enhancements enable the disabled, allow them to regain function where function had been lost. The force is not so much an empowering one as a homogenizing one, allowing aberrant members of society to return to the status quo: an amputee might replace his lost limb, for example, with a fully functioning steam- and piston-powered model arm. Typically, of course, such limbs can offer more functionality than the missing biological appendage, but the first function of mechanical enhancement is to give the wearer back his lost, organic capacities.

Since 'machine' can be read as 'Other,' the implications of the distinction between machine-using bodies and machine-like bodies is easily translated into its imperial context. The corseted woman is disabled into becoming the machine, while the man with the steam-powered arm has tamed the Other, thereby making up for his own loss by commodifying and employing the Other to perform his own natural functions. In such an instance, the subject experiences not only a return to 'normal' functionality but an increase in ability, efficiency, or productivity, as processes that had once been laborious and sweet producing are now depersonalized, automated, and distanced from the sense of 'self.' In the context of postcolonial corporate practice, the mechanical arm correlates neatly with outsourced factory labor: what had once been personal and

49

proximal is now Otherized and distant, tamed to the subject's benefit, but itself only a partial component, incapable of autonomy.

Steampunk's fascination with the mechanical body manifests in various ways in the fashion of the movement. As with most punk aesthetics, the steampunk costume is adorned with various hardware. The inclusion of hardware pieces to adorn more malleable garments characterizes steampunk fashion. Brown-range metallics such as brass, copper, gold, and bronze--which, as explored above, help to code something as part of the visual aesthetic--might be added to clothing in the form of buttons, buckles, clasps, chains, grommets, pendants, spikes, studs, safety pins (a true punk staple), and zippers. These pieces might be functional or merely decorative; even traditionally functional closure objects might be repurposed for a solely aesthetic use, such as buttons without corresponding buttonholes or zipper tracks without pulls. When functioning, it is important to consider whether it is controlling the subject, as does the corset, or being controlled by the subject, as with mechanical body enhancements. When worn devoid of function, hardware represents a breaking apart of the machine, demonstrating both mastery and curiosity. The deconstructed machine becomes little more than a marker of status and object of study. Nonfunctional metallic elements in clothing are more like trophies of man's domination over the machine than demonstrations of a machine's use and functionality. As such, these become symbols of the white male Subject maintaining power over the conflated Other, the continuing tradition of Eurocentric, phallocentric thought.

Steampunk's problem of conflating Otherness indicates the larger difficulty of discourse between the organic and the mechanical: the severity of reduction into binary.

After all, at its basest level, binary is the means by which the machine is given commands, the language of 1s and 0s that enables the creation to serve its creator. In the natural world, however, the tendency to reduce conflict and communication to binaric systems has led to the Self-Other, Subject-Object divide. These dichotomies bury subaltern voices and assume that all that is Other must be slowly encroaching, seeking to threaten and overcome the Self. Steampunk is troubled by the machine because the machine represents all aspects of identity other than the white male Subject, whose supremacy and privilege still bafflingly holds out, the last stalwart defender of empire in what is supposed to be a hybridized, postcolonial state. Until the Subject is distanced and decentered from this seat of privilege, even steampunk's most ambitious intentions toward ethnic, class, gender, and sexual inclusiveness will be undercut by the reductive binaric code that has permeated all aspects of steampunk art and performance.

Conclusion: Pressure Valves

In the face of building societal pressures, countercultures like steampunk arise as a sort of pressure valve, a means by which to let off steam. In fact, the hydraulic metaphor of *letting off steam* might provide the simplest means by which to understand the role of steampunk in late-20th and early 21st century American culture. As globalizing trade began to situate the United States at the center of an economic empire, the processing unit responsible for commanding remote labor in distant parts of the globe, the American psyche became vulnerable to the same imperialistic hubris that had fueled Europe's recently decommissioned empires. Surrounded by these imperial *memento mori*s, America's neo-imperial spirit may reasonably have felt anxiety over the

magnitude of its new global ventures. Steampunk provided an opportunity to feel out the failings of the past. In such a context, the invisibility of empire's horrors does not merely implicate the sepia-and-rose-tinted backward gaze of nostalgia; steampunk's specific reinvestment in the white male Subject constitutes a revived and willful ignorance of the new American empire's economic and political exploitation of postcolonized nations.

Although the mainstreaming of the movement's second wave has done little to simplify the steampunk constellation, all of the genre's characteristics taken together in such a way as this study has done begin to shape an overarching steampunk narrative. The impulses that drive steampunks to reenact empire come into focus upon isolating the essential speculative question posed by the genre: How might empire have played out differently if the colonizers had possessed superior technology? And, considering the 'superior' technology of steampunk frequently performs functions that have since been achieved (flight, cybernetics, weaponry, etc.), the question might be rephrased: How might empire have played out differently if the colonizers had possessed *our* technology? Such a strand of thought sounds less postcolonial than explicitly re-colonial, as if performing steampunk fictions provides a helpful opportunity for the testing of empire's shortcomings. Overall, steampunk demonstrates an intense willingness toward nostalgic fetishization, and even the self-critical elements have a homogenizing tendency that attempts to rally once more behind the white male Subject. Postcolonial writers, like Neil Lazarus in his 2006 essay "Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq," have remarked on the impossibility of discussing a "postcolonial" world in the wake of American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, political acts that seem to demonstrate that imperialism is far from having passed into history. This sort of discourse--the

construction of at least a hypothetical empire situating America as the imperial center--

helps make sense of the resurgence of interest in steampunk amongst 21st-century

Americans. As the speculative questions above indicate, steampunk has been repurposed

to serve as a hypothetical testing-ground for empire, simulating the projected future of

America's new empire by deviating from the failed historical models.

Bibliography

"About Mr. B The Gentleman Rhymer." *GentlemanRhymer.com*. Web. 22 Jan. 2014.

"Anglicon." *NWConventionHistory*. Web. 5 Feb 2014.

Arata, Stephen D. "The Occidental Tourist: 'Dracula' and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization." *Victorian Studies*. 33.4 (1990): 621-645.

Batchelor, David. *Chromophobia*. London: Reaktion, 2000. Print.

Carriger, Gail. *Soulless*. New York: Orbit, 2009. Print.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.

Disraeli, Benjamin. *Sybil, or, The two nations*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.

Dixon, Jim. "Jules Verne: the original steampunk." *Examiner*. 23 Jan 2012, Web. 5 Feb 2014. <http://www.examiner.com/article/jules-verne-the-original-steampunk>.

Ellis, Warren, and Gianluca Pagliarani. *Aetheric Mechanics: graphic novella*. Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press, 2008. Print.

Ferguson, Christine. "Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4.3 (2011): 66-90. Web. 08 Nov. 2013.

Forlini, Stefania. "Technology and Morality: The Stuff of Steampunk." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3.1 (2010): 72-98. Web. 05 Nov. 2013.

Foster, Sesshu. *Atomik Aztex*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 2005. Print.

Garza, Fabiola. *Cover of Steampunk Magazine Issue 5: Long Live Steampunk! Lifestyle, Mad Science, Theory, & Fiction*. 2009. Web. 21 Nov. 2013.

Gibson, William, and Bruce Sterling. *The Difference Engine*. New York: Bantam, 1992. Print.

Huxtable, Sally-Anne. "'Love the Machine, Hate the Factory': Steampunk Design and the Vision of a Victorian Future." *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Ed. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2013. 213-233. Print.

Kesinger, Brian. *Walking Your Octopus: A Guide to the Domesticated Cephalopod*. Baby Tattoo, 2013. Print.

Kipling, Rudyard. "The Man Who Would be King." *The Phantom 'Rickshaw and other Eerie Tales*. A H Wheeler & Company, 1888.

Lazarus, Neil. "Postcolonial Studies after the Invasion of Iraq." *New Formations* Oct.

2006: 10-22. *Academic Search Complete*. Web.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Mr. B The Gentleman Rhymer. *Flattery Not Included.* 2008.

---. *I Say!* 2010.

---. *The Tweed Album.* 2012.

Moore, Alan, and Kevin Neill. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.* La Jolla, CA: America's Best Comics, 2000. Print.

Newman, Kim. *Anno-Dracula*. New York: Avon Books, 1994. Print.

Priest, Cherie. *Boneshaker*. New York: Tor, 2009. Print.

Professor Elemental. *The Indifference Engine.* Tea Sea Records. 2009.

---. *Father of Invention*. Tea Sea Records. 2012.

Purnell, Carolyn. "Color, Chromophobia, and Colonialism: Some Historical Thoughts." *Apartment Therapy*. 5 Mar. 2013. Web. 24 Oct. 2013.

Reeve, Philip, and David Wyatt. *Larklight, or, The revenge of the white spiders!, or, To Saturn's rings and back!: a rousing tale of dauntless pluck in the farthest reaches of space.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury Children's Books Distributed to the trade by Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2007. Print.

"Retrofuturism." *Oxford Dictionaries*. Web.

Ritchie, Guy, dir. *Sherlock Holmes*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009. Film.

"Royal Niger Company." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 27 Mar. 2014 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/511502/Royal-Niger-Company>.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Print.

Siemann, Catherine. "Some Notes on the Steampunk Social Problem Novel." *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*. Ed. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2013. 3-19. Print.

Silva, Kumarini. "Brown: From Identity to Identification." *Cultural Studies* 24.2 (2010): 167-182. Web. 07 Dec. 2013.

Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Print.

"Steampunk Magazine » About." *Steampunk Magazine.* Web. 01 Dec. 2013.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Archibald Constable and Company, 1897. Print.

Sundén, Jenny. "Corporeal Anachronisms: Notes on Affect, Relationality, and Power in Steampunk." *Somatechnics*. 3. (2013): 369-386. Web. 17 Oct. 2013.

Talbot, Bryan. *Grandville*. Milwaukie, Or: Dark Horse, 2009. Print.

Tarantino, Quentin, dir. *Inglourious Basterds*. Universal Pictures, 2009. Film.

Williams, Rosalind H. *Notes on the Underground: an essay on technology, society, and the imagination*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008. Print.

"Zombie." Def. 1b. *American Heritage Dictionary*. Web. 2013.