Towards Chromatic Chronologies:
Using the Steampunk Aesthetic for Postcolonial Purposes

by
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Since 2008, steampunk has becoming a rising phenomenon: there are several books and anthologies marketed as steampunk; more steampunk-themed conventions have sprung up across the United States, and more groups have been formed to connected fans of antique styles, high adventure explorations to rival Golden Age science fiction, and unashamed attempts at time-travel. The steampunk aesthetic moved beyond fiction for a time into the broader world encompassing DIY culture, fashion, visual media and even discussions on anarchy and environmentalism. Having permeated the gamut, steampunk is coming back to its literary roots, that of science fiction set in a milieu inspired by the Victorian era, now even informed by the DIY and fashion circles it traveled in. Steampunk enthusiasts sometimes erroneously describe steampunk as "Victorian science fiction," citing enthusiasm for writers such as Jules Verne and HG Wells, although Verne and Wells, who are Victorian-era science fiction writers, predate the term "steampunk". Steampunk more accurately refers to a modern retrofuturistic sensibility that turns to the past for inspiration, whereas Verne and Wells were writing about the future of their time. Many are unaware of the origins of the term.

The term itself was originally coined by K.W. Jeter, who, with James Blaylock and Tim Powers during the 70's, wrote novels set in the milieu of the nineteenth century. Much like how steampunk today encompasses a wide variety of material manifestations and narratives with only the aesthetic as the unifying factor, the milieu of the nineteenth century was the only thing these writers had in common between their books, as their works ran the gamut of mystery, adventure, hard science fiction and fantasy. A major work that is called proto-steampunk is Michael

Moorcock's *Nomads of the Air* trilogy, in which "fierce battles between opposing fleets of airships, along with complex political and military intrigue" (Chambers and Vandermeer 56) were "intended as an intervention ... to an emerging American Empire as to a declining British one" (Moorcock, quoted in Chambers and Vandermeer 56). Jess Nevins, an aficionado of pulp fiction, traced the tropes of recent steampunk back to the Edisonades, an eighteenth century pulp fiction genre featuring lone genius inventors using technology to face off large numbers of enemies and conquer the frontier of the Wild West. In the 80's, Bruce Sterling and William Gibson wrote *the Difference Engine*, now considered a seminal work of steampunk, which is a very different animal from the stories created by Jeter, Blaylock and Powers; Chambers and Vandermeer call it "historical cyberpunk" (56). In between these novels and the more recent, late 2000s novels, "works came into print [that] were either described as science fiction, science fantasy, or alternate history" (58) that might well have fit the bill of steampunk, except marketing had yet to pick up on the term.

Situating This Project

None of the forms that steampunk has taken on are immune to problems within the larger science fiction and fantasy (SF/F) sphere and this project comes out of a space addressing one of these flaws: the identification of Eurocentrism in North American English-language science fiction and a growing awareness of racialized issues in SF/F. SF/F has for most part glossed over issues of race and marginalization, either treating such issues as irrelevant since "it's just fiction" or writing stories of marginalization in a way that is palatable for dominant-majority audiences. Science fiction, in particular, often being set in distant futures, tends to posit a post-racial outlook, the reasoning being that since the milieu is so far in the future, current racial issues would no longer matter. RaceFail in 2009 was the latest event that ruptured this veneer of post-

racial progressiveness in SF/F fiction. This was a months-long online conversation that erupted from a discussion of cultural appropriation and covered a range of themes and issues: the white-dominant default in popular media; the erasure of racialized experiences of both fictional characters and actual fans; the treatment of fans of colour in fandom; the centering of white people's opinions and feelings over those of people of colour in discussions; the tendency of writers and other producers of pop culture to default to harmful norms.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, sum up the tendency of Eurocentrism in media thusly: “Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history while patronizing and demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements—science, progress, humanism—but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined” (3). Between fandom and academia, the default of the straight, white male protagonist has been widely-identified to be the measure against which other types of protagonists are held up to determine marketability. This issue permeates all levels in the production of cultural product: audience members must be critical of what they read to better understand where a work is problematic and to demand better representation; editors must be able to sell multicultural works to publishers to boost non-white representation; publishers must find confidence in non-white stories and authors, not shy away from them under the perception that they will not sell; authors must be aware of tropes they reproduce in their own work. In essence, everyone involved must learn to, as Ella Shohat puts it, “unthink” their long-held notions on what constitutes a good story, a main character, or a progressive and liberal approach to diversity. As this is a large issue, my project is limited to textual analysis of steampunk works produced in the last ten years, in order to identify a way to think through issues of colonialism and Empire in an anti-racist framework for the benefit of a writer, who may also be an audience

member and self-editor. It is also for the steampunk reader-at-large, to know that the steampunk aesthetic, far from being limited to glorifying the age of Empire, has the potential to expand and interrogate current awareness of history. Through this expansion, writers can add to the growing number of works in which non-whites are neither footnotes nor afterthoughts, but agents in our own stories.

I write this project for a specific audience: other fans and writers of colour who have repeatedly expressed frustration with how our populations are frequently misrepresented or are simply missing in SF/F. I also write this project for storytellers of colour who have populated their worlds with cultural defaults that we ourselves don't fit and are unsure of how to identify ways to proceed. Others have delineated more clearly than I the intergenerational flaws and stakes of SF/F; organizations such as the Carl Brandon Society exist to address the lack of racial diversity in SF/F publishing and fandom. And mostly, I write this project for steampunks of colour like myself who question where the alternate history that belongs to us is, amidst all the neo-Victorian paraphernalia that currently permeates the steampunk aesthetic.

Steampunk as Aesthetic

This neo-Victorian paraphernalia associated with the steampunk aesthetic is often accompanied with a celebratory nostalgia for an age of innocence, exploration and discovery, among fans who refurbish antiques and re-tool defunct items into usable props. Cory Gross explained that "Nostalgic Steampunk is the idealized Victorian Era, the nineteenth century as it ought to have been. Nostalgic steampunk revels ... in the elegance and spectacle of Empire" (62). Costumers pull together elaborate clothing; corsets, lace parasols, bustles, dirtied up chaps, smudged shirts and other types of fashions are bought, sold, made or altered from existing clothing into outfits to fit archetypes such as the Street Urchin, the Explorer, the Aristocrat, or

the Mad Scientist. Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Makers build props that might have furnished a 19th century with technology anachronistic to the time period; Datamancer, a Maker, modifies computer hardware by imagining how Victorians would have designed the look and feel of a computer, for example. Role-playing groups, artists and costumers work together to bring stories to life.

Given this variety, it is useful to think of steampunk as an aesthetic in describing how it is constituted. In its more material manifestations, such as costuming, steampunk is a mix-and-match sort of fashion, and costumes are often pastiches of different items from different sources, allowing for a lack of uniformity. The mass markets of capitalism have picked up on this, in what Laura Donaldson calls "one of the most important innovations of contemporary commodity consumption: the rummaging through of imagined histories ... to envision a different life for oneself" (682). Donaldson was referring to New Age Native Americans, in which indigenous cultural items with their own cultural and social histories and significances are stripped of specificity or contextual depth, interpreted "within a colonial logic of cultural commensurability" (682). A similar argument can be made of items sold in steampunk circles, except instead of cultural significance, they are deterritorialized temporally, and sometimes, functionally, to create a pastiche that may seem incongruous, but within steampunk, has its own logic. Hence, a technology developed in the 1930s can be housed in cashing designed in the 1880s. Fingerless lace gloves are fashionable but also "allow mobility ... to jumpstart that greasy, rumbling perpetual motion machine that always seems on the verge of failing" (Chambers and Vandermeer 155).

Steampunk is compelling for several reasons. There is a strong DIY component in the subculture that encourages hands-on skills that have fallen out of use in more mechanized and

post-industrial societies. Sharing knowledge through workshops, tutorials and at gatherings fosters a strong sense of community that runs alongside a lack of uniformity—few steampunks look exactly alike, even if the styles are similar. The DIY and mix-and-match elements also encourage the refurbishing and recycling of old things into new uses, which both defeats and supports commodification. Even though it is an alternative mode of expression, like goth, it is one that manages to be acceptable, unlike goth; it is a family-friendly subculture that has a lot of intergenerational activity, something which goth does not have. Steampunks get excited by the research they do, making it a sphere that supports self-education.

Because this enthusiastic discourse tends to get the most distribution through visual media, with the most recent interpretations blotting out earlier, grittier forms, steampunk has drawn criticism from those outside the subculture for its seeming glorification of Empire and imperialism, such as Charles Stross' rant, in which he writes, "We know about the real world of the era steampunk is riffing off. And the picture is not good. ... It was a vile, oppressive, poverty-stricken and debased world and we should shed no tears for its passing ... Nevertheless, an affection for the ancient regime is an unconsidered aspect of the background of most steampunk fiction." Even recognized names within the community, who have watched the development of steampunk, have negative observations about it: "Steampunk is when Goths discover brown," remarked Jess Nevins, referring to the fashion explosion of steampunk. Michael Moorcock, author of proto-steampunk trilogy *Nomads of the Air*, was dismayed to find that "the very nostalgia I had attacked [in his books] was celebrated!" (quoted in Chambers & Vandermeer 56). This nostalgia for the past has led to the shaping of many different kinds of imagined histories, so varied that it is difficult to pinpoint the conventions of a steampunk story.

These criticisms come about from this aestheticization of things that steampunk uses—steampunk adopts forms of the past and there is often very little visible engagement with the histories of which these items are a part: histories of oppression are not what steampunk outfits are meant to convey, but that is what they do anyway. Alongside the temporal deterritorialization is a depoliticization of the aesthetic, whereby steampunks take on these outfits and create these stories for entertainment only, distancing themselves from the problematic aspects attached to the pieces and elements they take on. Not all steampunks depoliticize that which they deterritorialize; deterritorialization is sometimes a method of making a political statement, as this paper will point to. An aesthetic will always convey a politics, intentionally or not, and steampunk participants would do well to be constantly aware of this.

However, if the chosen elements of the steampunk aesthetic can convey depoliticization, an unconscious celebration of everything wrong in the past, and an uncritical view of Empire, then it stands to reason that they can convey the opposite as well. Corsets, for example, have a history of immobilizing women's movements by reshaping their bodies, thus affecting their health; today they can be made to support breast sizes that most mass-market bras cannot, thus help improve posture. If steampunk is a pastiche of different elements, and each choice of elements signifies a certain politics, or a refusal of a politics, then a steampunk pastiche can also comprise elements that signify an alternative politics that challenge the status quo. In order to understand, however, how this is done, one must first tease out the conventional elements of steampunk.

The Steampunk Toolbox

Mike Perschon, a steampunk scholar, defines steampunk as made of some fairly consistent, though not always present, elements: technofantasy, deploying "the *appearance* of

the modern scientific method" with "discarded theoretical substances, such as phlogiston and aether, entirely fictional substances like the 'hydrium'" (91); an alternate world setting that is either an alternate history in which the technofantasy has caused events to diverge from recorded history, or a secondary world altogether that strongly resembles our primary world (89); and evocation of the look and feel of the Victorian era (88). This is a basic list that allows us to identify steampunk in a wide variety of methods, modes and philosophies of participation, especially considering the changes in steampunk literature over the years. From this list, we can see the different kinds of choices steampunk make from each category, and that there is a fairly conventional combination of choices made in most steampunk today. I will rearrange Perschon's quick list into three different boxes from which we can "compose steampunk," so to speak, like a toolbox of elements: the choice of historical setting; the choice of technology; and the choice of alterity.

The choice of historical setting provides the "anchor", to use Margaret Rose's term (325) for the "flamboyantly wrong imagined past" (319) to be produced. If this history has been recorded, then specific historical detail will often be the hints as to the time period and geopolitical space chosen to tell this story. There are various other clues used to evoke the past, such as mannerisms, aesthetics, language, or general social trends.

As evidenced in the term and choice of fashion, the choice of historical setting or temporal period evoked in most steampunk is the Victorian era, or more generally, the nineteenth century. There are a few themes that draw interest to this time period: it was the era of the Industrial Revolution, with the rise of the middle-class and mechanization leading to class conflict. Many problems of the twentieth and twenty-first century have nineteenth century equivalents, so writers find it a convenient site for allegories to recent problems. There is also an

idealization of the manners of the Victorians, adopted into Neo-Victorianism, and nostalgia for an age of exploration tied to the colonial project of Empire. This romanticization of exploration often unwittingly leads to a romanticization of oppression, or a purposeful elision of it—we want the good, but not the bad. Another reason for how natural it feels to turn to the nineteenth century is the availability of material from this time period for inspiration and refurbishing.

This availability of an archive is compounded by and feeds into the problem of Eurocentrism. The perception of the nineteenth century is often narrow to begin with, especially when informed by pulp references of that time period. Steampunk writers looking to writers like Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and other Victorian and Edwardian science fiction writers tend to reproduce the same Eurocentric ideals that consider the Victorian era as a golden age of discovery, taking away power from other temporal and geopolitical locations. Although there is a shift occurring in steampunk to embrace other time periods and places, ideals of multiculturalism still relegate the histories of non-white peoples to either irrelevance or to Eurocentric framing in which whiteness remains a cultureless default. Victoriana, the milieu of the British Empire centered in Victorian England, remains the default historical setting from which to create steampunk works in North America.

Victoriana, however, is not the only archive available, and thus steampunk creators should not limit themselves to Victorian England. Although not as common, and a lot less accessible to English-language speakers of colour, many archives featuring non-Eurocentric histories do exist. Even so, there are still many archives destroyed, or passed down in oral or some other cultural forms unframed by conventional archiving systems. The choices may be limited, but for people of colour to recover and reclaim these histories often set aside is a necessary act. A less limited choice, perhaps, would be to create an archive around an existing

lack of one, using what little existing clues and knowledge to guide the formation process. Thus, the project of unthinking Eurocentrism becomes even more needful to create new worlds free from Eurocentric frameworks, or at least, counterhegemonic to these frameworks.

Once a historical setting has been chosen, the next choice tends to be the most visible aspect of steampunk: technofantasy. Just as there are many kinds of histories to choose from, there are many different kinds of technologies to inject into our chosen setting. The choice of technology points to a certain kind of relationship with nature and a certain understanding of science. Heidegger points to the shift in eighteenth century attitudes about nature, from independent entity to conquerable resources, and how modern technology came about from a changed relationship with nature—rather than adjusting to nature, modern technology changed it (Garlick 161). Thus, often what happens is we take a piece of modern technology, or a more recent understanding of science, and we set it into the historical setting of choice to ask: how would people of this past have processed this kind of technology? How would this technology have manifested aesthetically and functionally? Sometimes, a technology of the past is chosen, and a modern understanding of how it could have worked better is inserted instead, accelerating its development. The transformation of the anachronistic technology shapes the alternate history aspect.

If technofantasy entails "the *appearance* of the modern scientific method" (Perschon 91), then it is worthwhile interrogating the link between modernity and technology. That certain kinds of technology are more readily associated with the concept of modernity is significant, particularly given the conventional milieu of steampunk, in which modernity was part of a civilizing project that justified colonialism. If we can see technology as a manifestation of our relationship to nature, conventional modernity signifies a certain way of viewing nature. To

privilege modern technology over others, then, is not a benign apolitical choice, but requires that we interrogate the usage, origins and impact of the technology we wish to temporally deterritorialize: who uses it? Why? How are raw materials for this technology gained and what are the results? As one of the tropes for steampunk is that of Mad Science Gone Wrong!, we can issue interesting challenges as to the ethical scope of technology as our mediator between ourselves and nature, or between each other, to create alternative ways of defining modernity and technology.

Technofantasy, being the appearance of scientific methods, with "discarded theoretical substances" and "entirely fictional substances"(Perschon 91) gives us huge leeway in choosing a technological framework that does not hinge on the project of modernity. If different kinds of recent technology serve different social functions (e.g. agricultural advancements in understanding soil composition, or wireless communication), we should think on how we deploy them in our given milieu—it makes a difference if aether communication is available to the masses or is limited only to the rich and powerful. If different cultures have different ways of viewing nature, this, too, should be reflected in the nature of the technofantasy chosen to anachronistically furnish the chosen temporal and geographical milieu. We should be wary of simplistic modern/primitive binaries of viewing technology, or assumptions that technology develops in a single linear progression. It is even more problematic to assume that a seemingly backwards, often non-white, group would be incapable of grasping recent scientific advancements without the knowledge forced on them through specific means. The methods of transmitting technology are not apolitical, either. These are all examples of choices made with regards to technofantasy that must be taken into consideration when world-building.

The framing of technology injected into a certain history is important, as it heavily impacts the third element of steampunk: its alterity from the recorded timeline we call actual history. Alterity can take different forms: either as a secondary world resembling our primary world, or our primary world history, both different from recorded history in some way through the injection of technofantasy. Alterity can also involve a host of social anachronisms as well: Mary Wollstonecraft with third-wave feminist ideals would have written a very different *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, for example, and warfare might have played out differently with full gender and racial egalitarianism. Different kinds of alterity depend on the social restructuring of this imagined past.

Alterity can be superficial, but it can also be deeply profound; we highlight certain aspects of the past, and through the introduced anachronisms, demonstrate how the progression of events could have been different. Ideally, the alterity of the imagined past will change how we view the past, and by extension the present, by highlighting an aspect of the past that may not receive much attention otherwise. This bifurcation lends to the “alternate” in the alternate history of steampunk pasts, but as with the other elements, the framing and perspective of the alterity will provide the gauge of just how alternate the alternate history is. That is to say, we should still ask of our alternate histories: what actually changes?

The choice of alterity often begins with our perception of the chosen past; for example, as mentioned before, one of the draws of steampunk is the perception of the nineteenth century as an age of exploration, when there were still uncharted areas on the map. The next question to ask, then, is, whose map is this? The project of colonialism that informed exploration is often elided for a depoliticized aesthetics of navigational gadgetry and ideals of good-natured curiosity, which is arguably a very alternate history from that of recorded history featuring

efforts to manage indigenous wilds for the comfort and fantasy of colonial explorers, but not too terribly different from the popular propaganda justifying them. Currently, steampunk as a series of technofantastic what-ifs in the Victorian era do not present imagined histories that are so alternate for those not included in general knowledge history books, particularly Eurocentric history books that frame civilization as linear and singular. We still generate "what if" questions within frameworks that have had centuries to be made the norm.

Steampunk and Postcolonialism

There are, of course, various ways to challenge such norms, as many as there are ways to justify and reproduce them. This requires an understanding of how they are produced, which steampunk should enable, as it is an aesthetic that "places a premium on minutely accurate historical detail, within flamboyantly wrong imagined pasts, in order to explore the ways in which the conventional historical sensibility gets it wrong" (Rose 319). Since steampunk requires so much in-depth historical research, creating steampunk can also lead to understanding historical patterns and how to change them through re-arranging historical details. It is the commodifiable pastiche nature of steampunk that lends it so well to postcolonial frameworks of identifying colonial narratives present in specific texts and ways to open up narratives that center the formerly colonized. Although certain quarters of steampunk firmly believe in maintaining the neo-Victorian facade of current steampunk, there is little to stop the appropriation and inversion of steampunk elements by people who may not be part of the commonly imagined Neo-Victorian landscape.

The combination may seem incongruous: steampunk, at first blush, glorifies what postcolonialism critiques, as Charles Stross and various critics of steampunk have pointed out. Moreover, postcolonialism is an ambiguous term; Ania Loomba and other postcolonial scholars

have summarized the different approaches of understanding the term and the various temporal, political, and theoretical ways that the term has been taken up. In using a single postcolonial approach to identify colonial narratives, it is possible to conflate whole swathes of histories into a single process, a linear history of colonialism, decolonization, and post-colonization when attempting to historicize global narratives of international relations. Furthermore, in steampunk circles, postcolonialism is by and large an academic, abstract term that does not seem to be of immediate relevance. However, the term itself points to a history of colonialism, and in application to steampunk, forces the reader to acknowledge that if steampunk evokes the past, then it will also evoke colonial histories, and a responsible writer will explore how inequalities were imposed on colonized peoples.

Postcolonialism as a field in its many forms matches steampunk's predilection of looking backwards; where steampunk does so to mine for inspiration, postcolonialism does so partly to understand the "specific historic legacies" of different cultural and national contexts "in a retroactive way" (Gunew 2)—so steampunk informed by postcolonialism offers a cultural product that transmits historical understanding to a genre-reading audience. Both explore the notion of hybridity; postcolonialism in cultural terms, steampunk in temporal ways, allowing a writer of colour to dabble in anachronism and think through hyphenated and multi-heritage identities. The formation of cultural identity involves histories of migration flows, assimilation and segregation, enabled or hindered by various forms of technology. By using anachronism to tamper with timelines, a writer of color can also tinker with how migration, assimilation, segregation, and other such cultural movements occur; this makes visible how identities are shaped by such histories, and how they could be shaped otherwise. This tampering also allows us to think through the process of colonization and methods of empowerment. Not only that, but the

resistance to fixed conventions in steampunk literature refuses a homogeneity that people of colour writing from a postcolonial framework can use to trouble imperialistic efforts to enforce a single ideal, no matter what manifestation.

Using a small sample of recent works that contain all the elements of steampunk that I have listed above, this project will discuss a spectrum in which racially-marginalized peoples in different contexts play varying roles of importance. These works demonstrate how the steampunk aesthetic can be used in varying degrees of supporting or critiquing colonialism, beginning with a text that centers the more familiar white male protagonist, and shifting in both racial and gender lines to a text that centers a woman of colour. By analyzing what these texts do and how, steampunk creators can tease out strategies to work with all the elements of steampunk to create works that will be recognized as a steampunk narrative, but which will at the same time contain a counter-hegemonic discourse that centers and empowers racially-marginalized peoples.

Continued Colonization in S.M. Stirling's *The Peshawar Lancers*

English-language SFF in general is filled with cultural defaults and conventions, many of which can be expressed using steampunk elements. *The Peshawar Lancers* by S.M. Stirling is an example of a novel from the early 2000s that uses identifiably steampunk elements to tell a fairly conventional Eurocentric and male-centered world-saving adventure story. In this text, the secondary world twenty-first century evokes the nineteenth century's hierarchal, monarchical, and patriarchal mores, combined with a technofantastic plot involving a chaos/order binary to create an alterity that normalizes continued colonialism, military imperialism and a larger Eurocentric status quo. It is, at best, a work supported and informed by dysconciousness, an "uncritical habit of mind (i.e., perceptions, attitudes, assumptions and beliefs) that justifies

inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (Cornel Pewewardy as quoted in Johnson 110).

This text's chosen milieu is ostensibly a twenty-first century India, the Year of Grace 2025 (Stirling 32). It makes reference to the Victorian era prime minister Benjamin Disraeli as a looming historical figure, and there is brief mention of royal portraits from Queen Victoria's time to the present (301). Any clues that this setting is in the twenty-first century ends here, as much of what it evokes is a nineteenth century Britain; among the superficial markers of the time are the horses that remain a common mode of transport, and "serious talk about giving women the vote" (31). Moreover, the relationship between Euro-descended protagonists and the Asian side-characters, the language chosen to reflect the speech of non-white characters, and the language of overt military and political imperialism all pin the temporal milieu to the nineteenth century, imposing it onto a changed geographic location.

The framing of what constitutes a default is set up for the reader early in the text: "It was still the *British* Raj, although usually you simply said *the Empire* ... with no need for further qualification" even though "[t]echnically there was a mort of empires in today's world" (Stirling 44, original emphasis). The emphasis on the Britishness of the Raj is an embrace of the colonialism that marks its history in which the people of the South Asian continent never reclaims, even after two Mutinies. It is an empire so supreme that it requires no qualifications to mark it, and one which measures the prosperity of the British "we" in British India in relation to the Victorian era, as if the Victorian era's prosperity is an ideal to be attained, sustained and improved on. To further place the story geographically, the text trots out the multiculturalism of the setting; various non-British ethnic groups are named to indicate that this space is not the usual Western setting, as there are Sikhs (33), Bengali (23, 34), Goan (27), "Arab, Persian,

Afghani, or northwest Indian" (61) and Jews (210). This encompassing and recognition of ethnic minorities named in the text within the British Raj, and the lack of naming what ethnicity the British-descended characters are, coincides with the 1948 legal conception of Britishness—"homogenous, interchangeable, everywhere alike" (Baucom 10). This muddying of British identity, its being able to "incorporate local differences" (Baucom 10) without being defined by them, is illustrated when Henry de Vascogne comments on the English food of "garlic nan, vindaloo, stuffed eggplant ... and okra" (Stirling 43)—food the reader would recognize as culturally Indian—Sir Manfred replies, "we're scarcely English. British, of course, by descent" (43). Mostly, the protagonist Athelstane King thinks, and the text meanders into an interior dialogue commenting on his genealogy that involves "a Rajput noblewoman" (43) and an Afghan princess in Sir Manfred's family tree (44). Later, Cassandra King and Crown Prince Charles would contemplate their aversion to beef, a cultural and emotional inheritance from being born in India (176), with its "thousands of castes ... and each with its own weird complexity of rules about food" (175). Reading this using Baucom's formulation of Britishness, if Britishness allowed England to both "claim and disclaim the spaces and subjects of its Empire" (7), then Sir Manfred's comment and the British-descended characters' embrace of "local differences" point to claiming the spaces and subjects of Empire, while disclaiming Englishness and the spaces of England. The homogeneity of Britishness becomes a symptom of Empire, of colonialism, whereby the descendents of colonizers no longer need to differentiate between themselves, but against their colonized subjects.

The Britishness that Sir Manfred lays claim to is sustained by this British Raj's cultural mythos and systems of governance. In this alternate world setting, comets rained down on the Global North during the nineteenth century in what is known as the Fall, prompting the Exodus,

in which most of the European countries of the Global North pack up and move operations to their southern colonies. The Exodus is memorialized in the "epic *Lament for the Lost Homeland*" by a fictional Rudyard Kipling which "generations of schoolchildren have memorized ever since" (25) and which provides the inspiration for the mural backgrounding the Lion Throne, "Lord Leighton's *Martyrdom of St. Disraeli*" (24). Though this is now "ancient history" (25), the cultural memory of the Fall, the Exodus and "Mahatma Disraeli" (110) is touched upon throughout the text, the latter often in reference to the smooth maintenance of British governance in the translocation from the British Isles to the Indian subcontinent. This government remains headed by British-descended royalty, led by a King-Emperor and Queen-Empress, harking back to Queen Victoria's simultaneous ranks as queen of England and empress of India. The fact that the British ruling class traces lineage back to English roots points to a cultural identity that depends on British colonialism, despite Indian cultural markers.

It is in this relationship between the British-descended ruling class and their colonial subjects, particularly the Sikhs and Gurkhas, and the Pathani Muslims who raid their borders, that we see the remnants of traditional Orientalism within the text. The Sikhs and Muslims have long been characterized in Orientalist discourse as violent, needing to be contained. Not only have the Sikhs' violence have been apprehended in Stirling's British India to serve the colonizers' militia, but there is a relationship of affection between colonized and colonizer: Narayan Singh, Athelstane's right-hand man, compares the Kings' estate, Rexin Manor, favourably to the Punjab homeland, which is "far too flat and harshly dry for his taste" (109). Ibrahim Khan, despite being a prince of his tribe, is an ornery servant, a "border wolf" and wild, which Athelstane tolerates as he is "familiar with the manners of the Afghan highlands, where insolence was a way of life" (97). This contrast between the difficult Muslim Afghan thief and

the tolerant British-descended soldier re-affirms the continued stereotypes of Muslims as demanding and uncivilized versus the civilized Westerner.

The language of conquest and territorial expansion, alongside the supremacy of the British Empire headed by the descendents of Queen Victoria, builds the Orientalist tone of the text, in using a foreign space in order to define oneself against: in one scene, the Crown Prince of India, Charles, soothes his sister, Sita, from her anger at an arranged marriage to the prince of France, by saying, "you'll be queen, there, soon enough. And one from the Raj—the Empire—at that. You'll set the fashion; have 'em all dressing civilized in saris or shalwar qamiz in no time" to which Sita asks, "*are* they civilized?" (66). Later, Charles reminds the French envoy, "our two realms are the last of the seed of Europe, of the West" (68), as they discuss an alliance against the Muslim Caliph who rules "from the Danube to Baluchistan" (44). Contrasting self against an uncivilized sister realm, to allying with the sister realm against a Muslim enemy—also a common target of Orientalism that Edward Said pointed to—the British Empire within the pages of *the Peshawar Lancers* remains an Empire that puts its own interests first, as a Western entity fortifying itself against a Muslim borderland, an "East Asian colossus" (44) and Russian cannibals in Central Asia. Accompanying these relationships are sentiments that reflect the colonizing mindset that sees territory not as regions filled with self-defining peoples, but as prizes "ripe for the plucking" such as the Sultanate of Egypt (45) or a potential new province to add in a generation or two through royal marriages (66). Conquest is good, and imperialism is a normal state of affairs to be discussed casually over lunch, without benefit of ethical criticism; the political position of the speakers make this discussion natural, thereby excusable, all the while maintaining various binaries between civilized and uncivilized, Euro-descended and Asian, or ally versus enemy.

Having made clear the inspiration for this twenty-first century India—a nineteenth century British Raj—we can place the technologies mentioned in the text. They are fairly conventional to steampunk: Oxford University houses a Babbage engine; Charles Babbage's failed calculating machines are often re-imagined to be have succeeded in many steampunk alternate histories. Another technology that evokes the nineteenth century favoured by steampunk is the dirigible, and the Royal Family owns one: the Garuda, "a great whale shape of silver ... the silent air engines drove it around the city" (159). Besides a means of transport, the Garuda signifies the status of the Euro-descended royal family. What gives the text its fantastic feel, however, is the main conflict: the Czar of Russia, in his bid to throw the British Raj into chaos, backs the antagonist, Ignatieff, who is a religious zealot of the Tchernoberg cult and wishes to bring about the end of the world. In bondage to Ignatieff is Yasmini, a clairvoyant that the cult breeds to aid the Russian royal family. Yasmini predicts that the end of the world will be stalled as long as the King family line lives, although it is not clear why that family in particular is so important. This sets the plot in motion as assassins and various other free-ranging elements zone in on the pair. This conflict between empires sets up a simplistic binary opposition between good and evil: of course the "bad" empire backs the antagonist who wants to end the world, as well as condones the slavery and abuse of women. This kind of plot also individualizes world destruction and salvation: the villain wants to destroy it all, and the survival of the world hinges on the hero and his compatriots. It is a wish fulfilment fantasy that ignores the systemic destruction that is already occurring in favour of an epic catastrophe that only one man and his companions can prevent.

The grand scale of human ingenuity used to beat nature, as is properly modern, is expressed through Benjamin Disraeli's Exodus, "the mad three-year-long scramble to escape

from the frozen charnel house of Europe" (44). Due to the meteor disaster, referred to as the Fall, the political geography of the world has shifted into various different empires: the center of the British Empire in the British Raj; "the East Asian colossus that Akahito ruled from Peking as Mikado and Son of Heaven; the [Russian] Czar's hell-born cesspit in Central Asia; ... Napoleon VI's own Algiers-centered imperium around the western Mediterranean" (44). As such, England no longer exists as the base of the British empire—their descendents identify themselves as British descendents, not English. England's physical site has been destroyed by comets, and now exists as a barren, struggling colony.

At first glance, *the Peshawar Lancers* presents an alterity that turns the tables of the Victorian British Empire, inserting Indian cultural references into what is a Victorian-esque milieu. Though possessing an Anglo-Saxon name and part of the British army, Athelstane King participates in Hindu celebrations, taking leave and going home for Diwali the way a Western, culturally Christian reader may go home for Christmas. When he and other British-descended characters swear, they do not invoke the Judeo-Christian god, but Hindu deities. The identification with the colonized culture can be read as off-setting the colonial history, showing how the colonizing class has become part of the colonized through prolonged contact. This transformation of the British identity, from English to Indian, flips the script of Empire: instead of the English colonizing India, Indians colonize England; India, not England, is the site of progress.

The cultural dominance of the British, however, is obvious, especially in the choice of protagonists: an ensemble cast, those who are traditional protagonists, moving through arcs that develop their characters, are the British-descended characters (and the one French character). The plot is pushed along by the machinations of the new Oriental threats that would like to see

the British Raj in chaos, and all Athelstane and his twin sister Cassandra have to do, according to the clairvoyant Yasmini, is survive, which entails stopping the bad guy, the Russian Ignatieff, with the help of French envoy Henry de Vascogne, political officer Sir Manfred Warburton, Prince Charles and Princess Sita. As they hurtle towards the traditional heteronormative happy ending, Athelstane enlists Ibrahim Khan, and Yasmini joins him, to better humanity's chances against the cult she has been enslaved by. Although many of these characters have been influenced by their adopted culture, and the influence is said to have gone both ways—the Angrezi class adopting the mores of the people they have colonized, even as the colonized have adopted the new ruling class into their religious system of belief—the influence is not demonstrated in any of the non-British characters. Narayan Singh is a family retainer, but he does not act nor code as European in any mannerism he exhibits. The only Anglicized Indian character is the King Emperor's aide, Lord Pratap Batwa, who speaks with the same inflections that the British characters do, yet his role is minimal. All these characters are attached in some way to aid one of the main Angrezi protagonists; none of them have arcs of their own in which they exhibit self-driven agency. The exchange is for the seed of Europe, growing in the lands of Asia, with little input from the seed of the Indian subcontinent on how it is ruled. The presence of the non-white characters, as well as all the named minority groups, point to a rhetorical multiculturalism, a "symbolic inclusion of the marginalized Other" (Chandy 419) in which the recognition of and labelling to identify difference perpetuates exclusion (427).

This identification of difference is furthered by dialogue choices in the Peshawar Lancers: in the appendix, the author notes, the Imperial English is "a creolized English-based pidgin, one which would have been barely comprehensible to their Victorian ancestors. It was at least one-third Indian in vocabulary, with major loans from ... Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Bihari,

Pashtun, and Tamil; syntax had also changed" (Stirling 475). Yet the text does not reflect this; the conversation between Angrezi characters flows casually, with grammatical contractions, colloquialisms and other syntactical variations that make dialogue sound as close as possible to our contemporary dialogue, despite the appendix that states that the British characters are speaking a Hindi-influenced pidgin.

The facade of a multicultural, Hindu-influenced British identity is further cracked when we analyse how the non-British-descended characters, speaking languages other than English, are transcribed: when characters such as Narayan Singh or Ibrahim Khan speak, their sentences are formal, with 'thee' and 'thy,' echoing Kipling's translation of his own Indian characters. David Stewart calls this a narrative technique that is "an aural switch between languages" (51), particularly in interactions between English speakers and Hindi speakers. In the case of Narayan Singh and Ibrahim Khan, the aural shift from contemporary English into a Shakespearean-esque dialect serves to mark their Other-ness within their own context in the land that the British continued to colonize. Although it is historically accurate that native Anglicized Indians were taught through old English literary texts, making their English dialect sound Shakesperean, in an attempt to mimick their betters, this is not a case of mimicry on the part of the colonized; it is a filter from a native language into an English that reflects that native language. Hence, the reader notes them not only as speaking differently, but in a dialect unnatural to English speakers today.

Given the Eurocentric framing of the text, these changes to the Victorian-inspired milieu do not ring true as empowering the colonized India; the clever changes to the script are instead a form of cultural appropriation, in which cultural markers traditionally signifying the Other are taken up by the default dominant majority to make the latter look more sophisticated and properly changed, without analysing the power relations that maintain the Other's marginalized

position. Athelstane King is read as Indian only through a technicality of his birth, and his engagement with Indian culture is through the terms of colonization, made possible because of the only major alterity present in the text, the Fall, the result of which is that empirical powers solidify their hold on their territories, even expanding to encompass whole continents and centralizing their rule.

Empire is a natural response to a global catastrophe in this text; continued colonization is its result. It is coupled with a form of human slavery on the part of the Russian antagonists. Yasmini is part of the technofantasy of this universe: her power of clairvoyance is harnessed for specific purposes, making her a tool, first abused by Ignatieff. As a tool, she has no arc of her own; the only agency she displays is her choice to join Athelstane and aid him in defeating Ignatieff. Her lack of self-determination is peculiar, given her education (Stirling 236), insight into both the past and near future, her understanding of and alignment to conventional morality that condemns the cannibalistic practices of the Russians (307), and the skills instilled in her to accompany her master (203). Her skill is tied to ideals of sexual purity: "the [Dreamer women] only dreamed true while they were virgins" (98)—it is also tied to ideas of genetic purity: "dam was bred to son and sibling to sibling over generations; that kept each line pure" (98). Yasmini's story is one of animals; there is no investigation of the ethics of breeding animals, but presumably the conventional reader understands that it is a heinous practice to subject humans to breeding programs, recalling the eugenics experiments of the Nazis.

Yasmini's arc is a signpost of the kind of alterity—or rather, the lack thereof—that *the Peshawar Lancers* engages in. From Athelstane's perspective, it is surprising that she is so capable of handling herself and weaponry, as he is the product of what we would consider nineteenth century gender norms. However, as her powers of clairvoyance quickly spin out of

control, she must ask him to provide her with relief through a heterosexual union, reflecting a gender ideal in which heterosexuality is a categorical benefit. Even as the text, through the protagonist, recognizes this as an illogical trope, it nevertheless indulges in it without challenging nor questioning it deeply, rendering it into a cheap storytelling plot point that both neutralizes Yasmini as a threat, since she can no longer be used by the enemy or even use her power for herself, and places her into the conventional position of the main character's love interest. As the love interest, racially speaking, Yasmini provides yet another outlet for the universe's supposed alterity: Athelstane, as a product of India, finds Yasmini exotic and unusual, a description normally applied to non-white characters in Eurocentric fiction. The denouement in which she successfully supplants the long-time lover, brown-skinned Hasamurti as Athelstane's wife fulfills two conventional tropes: the one where the exotic and unusual lover marries the hero, overcoming any cultural differences (usually assimilating into his), and the one in which whiteness, embodied in Yasmini's blonde hair and blue eyes, triumphs over the inferior brown Other. The Eurocentrism of the text prevents the normalization of the non-white characters, and the conventional attitude of technology as a power to be harnessed or neutralized by a heroic figure prevents any meaningful alterity that would render this alternate twenty-first century truly alternate.

Mixed with the rest of the narrative choices made, the text becomes a glorification of Empire that critics accuse steampunk of, because it makes no space to center a perspective that is not in line with the status quo of good/evil binarism. Thus, Ibrahim Khan is resplendent as a prince of Pashtuns, or close to resplendence, only towards the denouement; Narayan Singh will be wounded and tortured for Athelstane's sake, and black-haired, strong-featured Hasamurti must die in order to make way for the slender, pale-skinned, pale-haired Yasmini with the

"astonishing blue-green eyes" (447). The cannibal Russian and his cronies must be thwarted. The story is not for those who recognize their heritage in the colonized, unless they are willing to ignore the continued history of colonialism and its effects on lived reality; it is, once again, for those who are descended of colonizers, who have the privilege to ignore history for an adventure that recalls all the greatness and none of the pain that Empire wreaked. Reading against the grain, *the Peshawar Lancers* reproduces several tropes that a writer seeking to produce a more racially equitable text would do well to avoid. We cannot call it neo-colonial, because the forms of colonialism in it are so reminiscent of colonialism in the nineteenth century, nor can we call it post-colonial, because there is no critique nor move to understand the effects of colonialism on the colonized subjects. Any exploration of cultural exchange is done on the colonizer's terms, which still happens today. Because this issue is so pervasive, it may not occur to writers to think of this as a problem, for various reasons. Nonetheless, they are, and keeping steampunk rooted in Victoriana makes it prone to falling into such colonialist tropes, whether in writing or in performance.

Race Relations Through White Bodies in Cherie Priest's *Dreadnought*

We are fortunate, then, that in steampunk, one of the most critically-acclaimed commercial novels is a text that deals with more nuances in historical race-relations. In Cherie Priest's *Clockwork Century* series, technofantasy lends itself to the alterity of a protracted Civil War, the evocation of which allows for the exploration of race relations as did or might have happened. This section will deal with *Dreadnought*, the second book of the series, which follows Mercy Lynch, a Confederate nurse, on a cross-country journey, and through her, an alternate history unfolds in which the prolonged Civil War has given rise to advanced military technology. The racial nuances of the text, however, do not necessarily center the experiences of racially-

marginalized peoples, even as it does the work of including them as part of the social landscape, which is important given the Civil War milieu and the history of U.S. American race relations.

The temporal milieu is clear through the presence of certain more benign technologies, such the telegraph and the train, both of which were in use by this time. Then there are the only-slightly-modified historical details, such as the establishment of the Red Cross by Clara Barton before the actual 1881 founding and the Salvation Army; the presence of these organizations as well as the insertion of actual historical figure Clara Barton (16) are part of the "minuteness of detail with which historical events are presented that lends the sense of genuine historicity to these fictions" (Rose 324). The conflict between Union and Confederate states provide the conflict that the text addresses and explores using technofantasy.

The modified technologies of this terrain are, again, fairly conventional: Priest accelerates the production of technologies that look old in primary world history, but are impressive given the present time of the texts: dirigibles, which would not be developed until the 1900s in our world, make transcontinental flights (43); diesel fuel and engine production, which in recorded history would not be invented until 1892 and 1893 respectively, is on the rise, among other experimental engines "as the Texians searched for more ways to make use of their oil" (215). The titular train Dreadnought is a technofantastical addition to the still-fraught Civil War—a duel-fuel transcontinental train loaded and armed with weapons, designed to "[tear] through [Confederate] blockades like they were made of pie dough" (83); its only possible Confederate match is the Shenandoah, "the swiftest of the swifties ... meaning the lightweight hybrid engines that were notorious for their speeds" (215).This technofantasy made manifest in military warfare points us to the political nature of technology, and its ramifications on the various peoples involved in the conflict.

The choice of exploring military technology in the *Clockwork Century* setting has led to the alterity from recorded timelines: *Dreadnought's* Civil War still rages in 1879, fifteen years longer than in reality. The Republic of Texas, which was annexed in 1845, still exists and constantly negotiates its borders with the Empire of Mexico, while secretly supporting the Confederacy. Moreover, by this time, many Confederate states have abolished slavery, except for Mississippi and Alabama; this happens as "a matter of practicality ... the Confederacy needed to harness a few of its own or, at the very least, quit using them to police its vast legions of imported labour" (110). As a result, freed blacks are part of the *Clockwork Century* Civil War landscape, creating the question of why the war still rages on. Using the Civil War as the backdrop, however, allows for an engagement with the politics of the time, particularly the racial tension that results from anti-black racism. The divergence from actual history allows for, perhaps, a softer integration of black former slaves into white civil society, a vision of alternate race relations.

Placed in the center of the conflict is Mercy Lynch, a white woman whose occupation as a Confederate nurse and her journey offer the reader to engage with the historical reality of the Civil War on a level that may not be dealt with in history textbooks: within the first chapter, the text details the smell of the Robertson Hospital that Mercy works in, produced by wounded soldiers continually brought in from the war front: "the ever-present scent of dirty bodies, sweat, blood, shit, the medicinal reek of ether, the yellowy sharp stink of saltpetre and spent gunpowder, and the feeble efforts of lye soap to combat it all. More soap would never scour the odours of urine, scorched flesh and burned hair. No perfume could cleanse away the pork-sweet smell of rotting limbs and gangrenous flesh" (14). Even with fiction, the text asserts the

historical reality of conflict and war, providing a critique of the conflict that rages on in the pages, and indirectly critiquing conflict in the primary world.

The alterity of the setting also affects race relations, and enables Mercy to come into contact with non-white characters. The technofantasy of the universe involves transportation, facilitating large travel flows that still maintain racialized aspects: at Fort Chattanooga, Mercy is informed that the only tickets available are in first class, "the coloured car, or nothing at all" (21) and two grateful soldiers enable her to get a seat in "the *fancy* Pullman car, all the way to Memphis" (122, original emphasis). Once there, she meets Mrs. Agatha Hyde, "a mulatto woman ... dressed in clothing nicer than Mercy had ever personally owned" (122), and the owner of the Cormorant restaurant franchise who is seeking medical attention for her son's foot injury. Mrs. Hyde chooses to approach Mercy because "there's not a doctor on this train, and even if there was one, I don't think if he'd bother with us. But I thought maybe a woman [would help]" (125). The other passengers in the fancy Pullman car are clearly uncomfortable and indignant at Mrs. Hyde's presence, "shift[ing] and adjust[ing] their luggage, and either pretend[ing] not to look, or made a point of looking" 123). Even Mercy is at first uncomfortable with both racial and class differences between herself and Mrs. Hyde: "she hadn't had little boys in her care too much ... small coloured children were even farther from her realm of expertise, and small coloured children with monied parents went right past her threshold of experience" (125). Mercy, coming from a state that formerly owned slaves, is used to black people, and the text remarks on the lack of them when she arrives further West. Being used to black people does not necessitate cooperation or a positive relationship with them, though, and Mercy's choice to treat Mrs. Hyde's son speaks to an intent to get beyond racial prejudice, on the part of a white person.

Moreover, the changes to primary world history, caused by the technofantasy, enables an exploration of the relationships between varying groups and geopolitical regions: for example, the maintenance of the Empire of Mexico and the country of Texas. In the text, the Empire of Mexico has mysteriously lost an entire regiment of soldiers, and Mercy meets the two inspectors who have been sent to investigate. To foreshadow this meeting, the reader, through Mercy, is treated to an info-dump conversation that outlines how the disappearance occurred—a Texian cargo manager she meets on an earlier leg of her journey explains, "even when we can agree with [Emperor Maximilian III] on where the boundaries are, the people who live there sometimes don't ... when the lines got redrawn ... this most *recent* time, a bunch of citizens got right peeved about paying taxes to the Republic [of Texas], when they thought they were Mexicans" (157, original emphasis). This land dispute within the text evokes commentary on different levels: reference to actual historical conflict in which Mexico lost the territory of Tejas, how arbitrary legal border-creating decisions in high-level government offices affect the people living in the regions, and U.S. America's current anti-immigration prejudices targeting Mexican border-crossers. Through Mercy's plain-spoken lack of understanding political motivations, the text drives in the absurdity of the dilemma and illustrates how prejudice stalls inter-racial and international communications; when Horatio Korman, a Texian Ranger also investigating the disappearance of the regiment, points out to Mercy their new Mexican fellow passengers, she suggests he work with them, only to have him say, "Hush up, woman ... They're tyrants and imperialists, every last one of them;" to which Mercy retorts, "and I guess you've talked to every last one of them, to be so sure" (214).

The other major ethnic group referred to, but not present until the end of the novel when Mercy finally reaches Seattle, are the Chinese, in reference to the first waves of Chinese

immigration of the time period. Mercy discovers part of the reason why the Dreadnought is going the direction she is—west—is to recruit Chinese people, who face discrimination there. Ranger Korman explains, “some places even done passed laws to keep them from bringing their women and children here, that’s how much they want to be rid of them” (289), and through this, the text references the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and capitalizes on this anachronism to furnish further the racialized biopower politics of the setting. Although Ranger Korman’s continued info-dump simplifies the race relations, it offers a look into how populations are chosen for exploitation, with little expectation for their prosperity, for the benefit of the reader:

> “[The Chinaman]’re the only folks who might be able to be bought ... there’s a surplus of ‘em, and they’ll just about anything for a little respect. That’s what the Union’s offering them. Thirty acres and start-up capital for farming, out in the middle of noplace where they won’t bother no one but the Indians. Once they’re out there, they can fight each other or make best friends, for all the shit the Union gives. I don’t expect the government has thought that far ahead, to tell you the truth” (281).

The protraction of the Civil War invokes the long-term prejudices that black slavery created: Mrs. Hyde is a freed slave from Confederate state Tennessee in the Clockwork Century world. The portrait painted of Mrs. Hyde, as a generous businesswoman and ordinarily harried mother, is a positive one, both an anti-stereotype of the long-suffering slave and an archetypal rags-to-riches success story. Her presence serves to remind the reader of the anti-black prejudice of the time period and illustrate how even class mobility does not diminish it. Mercy, a working-class white women, does not sympathise with Mrs. Hyde’s racialized position at first; she acknowledges that she is “not much more out of place in the coloured car than in the rich car” (125) and when she stops herself from saying out loud her realization that Mrs Hyde and her sister were “house niggers,” it is because “suddenly it seemed impolite, or maybe she only felt outclassed” (128). By the end of the encounter, Mercy is genuinely impressed at Mrs. Hyde’s acumen, and thankful for the offer of a free meal at the Cormorant outlet in Memphis after

refusing payment, enough that she when she sees the hint of anti-black prejudice on her white dining companion's face, she defends Mrs. Hyde: "she said, at risk of being rude, 'she was nice to me, and she can cook like the devil'" (132). Yet the story of the successful former slave is a play on the bootstraps myth, in which hard work and tenacity makes the marginalized Other worthy of defence as they have exhibited the values of the conventional majority.

Drawing from this history also allows this alternate history to invoke the racial violence of slavery, embodied in Jasper Nichols, a porter on the Dreadnought who joins in the fray when the train is attacked to assist the captain. He is first referred to as "a colored man" (245) but when Mercy expresses surprise at his volunteering to fight, he replies, "I'm from Alabama," which explains his sympathies and loyalties to the Union army, as Alabama remains a slave-owning state. "Why didn't you enlist?" Mercy asks, and Jasper answers, "I'm missing a foot. Got it cut off when I was small, for disobeying" (247), revealing a background as a runaway slave, without referring to it outright. His role does not end there: he and his cousin Cole Byron remain active characters for the remainder of the text, assisting during clashes despite lack of military training. However, like Mrs. Hyde, Jasper Nichols is a side-character, and not a focal point; he fleshes out the landscape and provides a minority character with whom Mercy can demonstrate interracial cooperation.

Dreadnought shows how groups "exist not autonomously, but rather in a densely woven web of relationality" (Shohat and Stam 48). It offers a particular reading of race-relations in which minorities have assimilated enough to become success stories (the blacks) or have the potential to (the Chinese), but glosses over minorities who have not and are displaced (the Natives). *Dreadnought* may be more nuanced than *the Peshawar Lancers*, but the following

Clockwork Century novels must take up the challenge of addressing how this changed Civil War landscape affects people of colour directly.

It must be reiterated, then, how the steampunk aesthetic is not inherently one of imperialism nor the glorification of Empire. Without compromising on its entertainment value, *Dreadnought* offers an example on how the steampunk aesthetic can be harnessed onto a recorded history to make a commentary on the prejudices of the time that are present today and on a politics that places a premium on wreaking destruction. As *Dreadnought* demonstrates, the accelerated technology is to be feared for its effects on living populations. Through its modifications of the past, the text explores war and biopower politics. Its evocation of the past highlights a working class sphere that refuses to glorify the ownership of power by portraying it as a terrifying weapon, appealing only to those who value power for its own sake. It damns both sides of the Civil War even as it boils the reasons down to the combatants "fight[ing] for home, in the end" (23).

However, *Dreadnought* does not center the experiences of populations which are racially marginalized through slavery and colonialism. There is no mention of Manifest Destiny, a fairly quintessential American-historical concept. What this text also does, troublingly, is divorce the Civil War from the heart of its conflict—slavery—to explore the effects of the resultant technofantasy. While it makes no move to shy away from hints of slavery and anti-black prejudice, it remains limited in its engagement through a white body. Given the popularity of the *Clockwork Century* novels—the first novel *Boneshaker* remains widely-cited as a leading steampunk novel (Chambers and Vandermeer 64)—and Priest's commercial success—she is "the high priestess of steampunk" (Gwinn, np)—we must look closely at the significance of a white body and perspective being used as the lens with which to re-write a specific history that has left

a lasting legacy on lives that whiteness has, historically, had no interest in uplifting. Though Mercy serves as filter for a multi-racial cast, the third-person limited narrating voice remains centered on her, and while her whiteness is not of exceptional value within the text itself, it is noteworthy beyond. Mercy's white body exists in a context of other books in which the readers' access point to multicultural settings is through white bodies, or some similar parallel. The book deviates from the white male default that has dominated SF/F for so long, yet whiteness, specifically U.S. whiteness, remains the focal point. Although Mercy is recognizably "a good person," evidenced in her willingness to help people in need, she is nonetheless representative of a status quo established long before she exists in her present, and is not invested in certain minority struggles that may occur as a result of them. Mercy as filter does not, and cannot, give us the framing needed to lend the text a postcolonial perspective.

If postcolonialism adds to steampunk an approach to interrogate colonialism and offer a counter-discourse, then *Dreadnought* falls short as it centers a white body and maintains, even prolongs, a narrative of ideological and military conflict that stems from racist oppression. This shortcoming does not write off its nuanced treatment of race relations, but points to the need for a more multivocal narrative which the *Clockwork Century* series may come to embody in time.

Indigenous Voices in Karin Lowachee's *the Gaslight Dogs*

For a more multivocal story, I turn to Karin Lowachee's *Gaslight Dogs*, which looks at a history that is largely elided from textbooks, through a secondary world setting in which technofantasy is explored through the mystic native trope, creating an alterity that makes visible the imperial impulses of a colonizing force and compels an interrogation of the relationships between indigenous peoples and settlers.

In *the Gaslight Dogs*, the use of a secondary world setting allows for the exploration of a specific history—the history of indigenous displacement in the Americas—without invoking "specific historical people and events" often used to "anchor steampunk in 'real history'" (Rose 325). The Ciracusa military is fighting a war on two fronts, clearly derived from the American Revolutionary War, in which the colonies of America fought against taxation without representation by Britain, and the European colonization of the Americas, stretching from the 16th century and continuing today, in "a war by sea against Sairland and one by land against four of the six Nation tribes" (71). The aboriginals themselves are only beginning to be conflated—there are still distinctions between the tribes that at least military men like Captain Jarrett Fawle recognize; though he refers to his inland foes categorically as "abos", some of the tribes are named: the Whishishian and Morogo are allies of Ciracusans, the Soraganee are enemies of "both Ciracusa and many tribes of the [Pangani] Nation" (71). In this, the text harks back to a period when tribes were still seen as separate before widespread oppression and continued anti-Indigenous propaganda reduced them to singular stereotypes, and assimilation forced them to hide their traditions so they could fit within the legal confines imposed by the colonizing class.

Instead of merely alluding to crimes against Native peoples, the text invokes them directly through two major characters: Sjennonirk and Keeley. Sjennonirk and Keeley are steampunk characters in the way they represent the consequences of modernity and how they reject it, although Keeley has been forced to assimilate in some measure; however, their resistance is less nostalgia for the past than a refusal to give up a threatened and uncelebrated heritage. "The future we [the Whishishian] see is full of Ciracusans," Keeley tells Sjennonirk (304), a portent for both their peoples that a reader familiar with American history would understand spells future oppression; Keeley's past could become Sjennonirk's future, unless

things shift enough for Sjennonirk's past to offer potential for Keeley's future. They are also postcolonial in that they force an interrogation of the relationship between colonized and colonizer without their voices being shunted off to the sidelines, even as their arcs are stories of unfolding colonization.

Keeley's presence in the text evokes the history of residential schools: Jarrett almost immediately identifies Keeley as "one of those buckfoot children. ... Transplanted children, taken from their tribes and reared in Ciracusan schools. Not with Ciracusan children, though" (68), a sinister parallel to our primary world residential schools. However, instead of hiding the intent of these schools behind "liberal-education-for-others—education in Christianity, literacy, prudent economic practices and tradeable skills for participation in the 'modern' world" as in recorded history (Henderson 1), the text, speaking from Jarrett's colonial mindset, states, "the idea had been to tame them. Instead, they'd become merely trained, and like wild beasts, they'd found ways to disobey" (Lowachee 68). The immediate consequences are also clear: the "buckfoot children" are rejected by their families for having been "tainted" by Boot People (Ciracusans) or "simply hadn't made it back" (Lowachee 68). Even those who remain in Ciracusan cities, as paupers, beggars, whores, or employees for Ciracusans, like Keeley, face prejudice. Jarrett continues to mistrust Keeley simply for being an aboriginal: "Whishishian children revolted in those schools as well as any Soraganee" (71). Keeley's history hints at "continuing cycles of ... intergenerational trauma, within Aboriginal communities [that] are considered residual effects of the residential school experience" (Woolford 85) within the *Gaslight Dogs* world, a history that will be compounded by "stories about the first clash between the early settlers and the Soraganee tribe more than two hundred years ago" (Lowachee 10). It is a long-term conflict that Sjennonirk tries to understand, and when she asks Major Kaje Dirrick, Jarrett's commanding officer at the

frontier garrison, why the conflict has continued so long, his dysconscious reply is, "They say they were here first, though I don't see how that matters anymore. It's been too long for that sort of thing to matter" (307). Yet Major Dirrick is aware of how difficult Sjennonirk's questions are: "too much blood has been shed for there to be a quick peace" (307). As a frontier soldier, he knows that the decision to fight, or invade Sjennonirk's tundra homeland as she fears, lies in the hands of "someone like General Fawle" (308), pointing to the power hierarchy likely responsible for the continued conflict on both fronts. The settling of Ciracusa onto the Pangani Nation points to an uncompromising relationship of imperialism, in which the conflict becomes more difficult to resolve as time passes, even "if it came down to a choice between fighting their backward ancestors from Sairland and the hostile tribes of the Nation, Jarrett would take up arms against the Sairlanders and call it a day" (10), hinting that others of Jarrett's rank feel the same way.

Sjennonirk is a different kind of character, and a different kind of history. She is a young Aniw woman who has been stolen from her tribe. Sjennonirk's character is more uncommon in commercial fiction; she is an indigene unused to colonizers: the text opens with her observing Ciracusan soldiers landing their ship on the shores of her tundra home, with guns; she knows what they are, from the explorer-priest Father Bari, "who taught her with books from the South, and from these things she'd learned of war," and she also knows "some Southern deeds weren't wanted on the Land" (3). Her perspective troubles the Eurocentric, Western-educated modernizing default, and she experiences Ciracusan norms as alien: "the form [of the Ciracusan dress she is forced to wear in Nev Anyan] was wrong in its patterns and cut, in its lack of fur and soft skins. These weren't Aniw lines, or Aniw texture" (98). Her arc is one of displacement from her tundra home to the Southern Ciracusan city (and later to the frontier), coerced teaching of her

ancestral spirit ways to Jarrett Fawle on the orders of his father, General Cilien Fawle, and inter-tribal uneasiness, as manifested in her interactions with Keeley.

Into the midst of industrializing Ciracusa, and the cause of Sjennonirk and Keeley's histories, lies the technofantastic plot element of the novel: a force residing within certain individuals that aboriginals of the land call the Dog. Unlike other technofantasy devices which come in the form of artifices that are the result of human crafting, such as dirigibles or chemical substances, the Dog is more a supernatural device, a latent otherworldly entity visible in what is called the "middle light" or when called from the host body into the material dimension. As such, it is not a technology as articulated through modern lenses, but it is still a manifestation of a relationship connecting humans to nature as part of it, and part of a community and cultural history, as Sjennonirk tries to explain to Jarrett:

> "We call it the dark light. It's just the truth of my people. It's the power of our Land. My ancestors were great spirits, and long ago they mingled with the Aniw. They loved us and we loved them. And from their spirits come the *ankago*. ... They are my ancestors. ... They appear as dogs. And dogs have always been a great help and companion to my people. But they are not dogs. That's just their form, like your form is this. ... And mine is this. ... Why is one stranger than the other? This world is full of different forms, from your horses to your cats and birds. Like my bears and whales and walruses. You have gods that are in your form as well. Why that form and no other?" (155-156)

This expression would be more closely aligned with religious philosophy than with modern science, but Sjennonirk's understanding is not rooted in Jarrett Fawle's religion/science binary. Her powers are simply a part of her identity and culture, and she does not require modern science to understand its workings, nor does she cleave to the idea that it *should* be understood in a scientific framework.

This understanding is brought to the forefront into conflict with another modern attitude—nature as exploitable resource, espoused by General Cilien Fawle. General Fawle believes in the power that Sjennonirk and other people in the aboriginal tribes hold, but what to

them is a symbiotic relationship between humans, nature and their shared history, is to General Fawle a resource of power to be reaped from the aboriginals and harnessed by Ciracusans for war. This attitude, present in both previous texts, takes on a distinct racialized and cultural aspect in this text: it contributes to further dehumanization and abuse of aboriginals, and is a mainstay of Ciracusan identity driven by imperialism, involving not only the Ciracusan army, but also "consuming every ragged tribe and barely established frontier town in Ciracusa's infant life" (72). Justified in Jarrett's reasoning as a fatalistic feature of "both men and countries to always war with their forefathers in some way" as he does with his own father (72), the conflict with Sairland provides rationale for General Fawle's own paternalism and dehumanization of others. Sjennonirk's and Jarrett's suspicion of the Ciracusan Army's presence up north is reasoned away as protecting the Aniw: "You forget how far [the Sairlanders] travel to attack us. It's only a matter of time before they leave their barbaric mark on this entire continent," General Fawle replies with no trace of irony (119). Just as he sends troops to the north to ostensibly protect the Aniw, General Fawle extends a paternalistic bargain to Sjennonirk, to help him in exchange for getting her out of prison, and, supposedly, Ciracusa: "I would like you to teach [Jarrett] the ways ... of your spiritwalkers" (99). Yet the unevenness of the bargain is clear: "You won't be returning to your people until you do this for me" (100). At her first acquiescence, he smiles approvingly, saying "Good girl ... Good, good girl" (93) as if she were an animal. This kind of dehumanization in unequal power relations resonates throughout the text, whether it is Jarrett's lack of concern towards Sjennonirk's conundrum, his constant view of aboriginals as savages, the frontier garrison's ostracism of Jarrett, Keeley and Sjennonirk, or the demonization of aboriginal power by the Church.

The choice of highlighting this marginalized relationship with nature held by aboriginal peoples, embodied in Sjennonirk, against the more conventional, consumeristic attitudes that enables military hegemony lends to an alterity that is not so much about changing established timelines, but about revealing the workings that prop them up, indirectly providing commentary on similar racist histories and systems in our primary world. For example, General Fawle's dehumanizing tactics stretch to yet another sinister parallel: eugenics. Jarrett finds the first inklings of this in Keeley: "though they were on the opposite sides of every aspect of life, the more he looked, the more he saw some glimpses of common scenery," but he misunderstands the full implication at first: "You... my father... no wonder he ran off the frontier" (175). It is spelled out for him by Sister Oza, a member of a militant order within the Church that has been tracking Father Bari's travels and General Fawle's activities:

> "[Father Bari] didn't condone breeding with [the abos]. ... You are not your father's first attempt to infuse some magic in the Fawle line. You think him so careless to impregnate some Whishishian squaw to get a son by her, then seek out this son because he cares? ... He thought it would be easier inherited that way, since the abos come from creation with their magic. But he was looking in the wrong place, and here you are, a surprising new avenue" (224).

Sister Oza's revelation displays how the tendency to dehumanize permeates both public and domestic spheres; to fuel a military industrial complex, General Fawle participates in what might have been nurturing relationships and transforms them into sources of biopower, much in the same way Nazi breeding programs used women. As such, the text does the political work of troubling the idea of military protectionism as a categorical good.

Sjennonirk's power, and relationship to nature and the connected supernature, also clash with another familiar philosophy: that of organized religion. Sister Oza's prejudices and position run another parallel to primary world history: the demonizing of indigenous spiritual forms. The technofantasy of this setting offers hints at a different, perhaps justifiable, reason for the

anathema to Sjennonirk's Dog, but the results are the same. "You and that girl are abominations," Sister Oza tells Jarrett as he is recovering from an expected manifestation of his Dog (251), even as she offers Sjennonirk help to escape, so that "this wrong will be no more" (274). Her demonizing prejudice is representative of a larger one: "The Church claimed no commonality among the people, anyway, but rather a superiority" (161). This religious conflict echoes the Puritans' departure for the New World, and adds another layer to the Ciracusan war against Sairland: "We did not leave one land of demons to come to another and be consumed" (274). Though the text does not elaborate, it hints at a religious split as a result of the power imbalance caused by using the Dog as a weapon of war, creating a perception of people with the Dog as evil to be reviled. Hence, all subsequent generations who may possess this latent power, such as Jarrett, are ignorant of this supernatural force's existence. Demonization is thus a tool to control the Dog in Ciracusans by making co-existence with it or even acknowledgement of it unnatural. This culturally-ingrained demonization strains Jarrett's relationship with Sjennonirk, antagonizing her further and indirectly contributing to Jarrett's suffering caused by his ignorance of the implications of the power within him. It provides a subtle parallel to how the demonization of racially marginalized groups contribute to racism and the resultant difficulty for conflict resolution in our primary world.

Jarrett's ignorance and Sister Oza's mission point to a reason for the Ciracusan-Sairlander war that is missing from historical records taught in institutional education. Althusser has written at length about the use of education—public education especially—as an ideological state apparatus; thus, the education system becomes an avenue to inculcate specific values that would be valuable to society as the students become adults participating in the shaping and the moving of society processes. The framing of the taught material can transmit completely

different values and perceptions, as well as cover up certain facts from cultural memory that could change the status quo; the framing of the conflict with Sairland as taught in institutional academies of Ciracusa is different from the framing of the conflict that the Church or higher-ranking military officers such as General Fawle use, as Jarrett discovers: "I was taught that the people left [Sairland] because they disagreed with their king, they refused to go to war for him. But in these other readings... Some say it was because Sairland had a separation of belief. Some believed in old gods, and others believed in the Seven Deities. And so they wouldn't fight for the old gods and were driven out. ... there aren't many books that give details of this" (156, 157). Through this educational system, the competition for dominance is hidden under an agenda of self-determination.

The technofantastic clash of the text force Jarrett into a search for knowledge that shakes up his long-held beliefs about his differences from his aboriginal foes; it also implicates him with a possible shared history with Sjennonirk and various enemies of his. Sjennonirk, however, has grown up with this knowledge, and it is woven into how her people live and think, so while at first she flat out refuses to consider the possibility—"I am of my father's people, my ancestors are not your ancestors. [Jarrett] will have no Dog" (100)—when she finds for herself that the Southern people do possess the same power she does, she does not reject the revelation, although it makes her uncomfortable. Even as her frame of understanding attempts to fit in the Ciracusans, she remains aware that this only goes one way: "If the Kabliw were as right as she was right, who, then, belong to the spirits in the sky? ... Would the Kabliw and their gods claim even the night sky from her people like they seemed to claim the Land with their guns?" (295). Sjennonirk understands education as experiential, and to her, it is not "as simple as reading a book" (119) as General Fawle instructs Jarrett. Her effort to teach Jarrett to "be unafraid of her

Dog," so that "then he would be unafraid of his own" (158) is frustrated by Jarrett's lack of understanding of anything that cannot be rationally explained according to the understanding inculcated in him by the Ciracusan academy. Both Jarrett and Sjennonirk find themselves further repulsed from their task by General Fawle's coercion and refusal to share what he knows that could increase their understanding. "[R]ead some more on the history of your ancestors, Captain Fawle ... read what hasn't been taught," is General Fawle's cryptic order to Jarrett (72). He is less gracious to Sjennonirk: "You don't need to [understand] ... I only need you to teach him" (100). The withholding of information, the inflexibility of comprehension, and expectation to fall in line with orders are part and parcel of institutional learning which maintains the status quo that Jarrett and Sjennonirk, and even side-characters like Keeley and Major Dirrick, all fall victim to. In the alterity of the text, all of this becomes visible, and thus questionable, rather than acceptable as a natural course of human action. It also troubles the narrative of Manifest Destiny by allowing indigenous perspectives through the technofantastic device to take center stage, and refuses the comfort of nostalgia that critics of steampunk claim the genre embraces.

Steampunk writers exploring postcolonial concerns should not limit themselves to a specific kind of history. If the steampunk aesthetic is to be used for postcolonial purposes, then it should not merely confine itself to narrative that examine one-way relationships between colonized and colonizer. It can also be a story in which possibilities beyond imperialism can be explored, without treating imperialism as inevitable. In *the Peshawar Lancers*, imperialism is not merely inevitable, but also acceptable, given its status quo remains in place long enough for the descendants of the colonizers to reproduce the power hierarchies their lineage is rooted in. In *Dreadnought*, slavery is beginning to become unacceptable, but this decision remains unilaterally in the hands of legislating bodies, placing a premium on the perspectives of a

dominant class. In *the Gaslight Dogs*, imperialism is beginning to take root, and the text depicts how the colonizer disenfranchises the colonized class, and though the colonized fights back, the similarities to primary world history hint at its inevitability. *The Gaslight Dogs* serves the purpose of illustrating how the steampunk aesthetic can be used in focusing on the colonized to drive in the costs of imperialism, but this examination of imperialism is not the only way to deploy the steampunk aesthetic.

Post-Colonization Uplift in N.K. Jemisin's "The Effluent Engine"

If steampunk can offer an alternative politics and a way of reconceptualising the present, it behoves us to find ways of doing so that center marginalized peoples without the obligation of catering to a dominant majority's perspective as well. It also behoves us to think through alternate timelines in which imperialism and continued economic subjugation after official colonialism are not inevitable, even while we acknowledge the living histories of such. N.K. Jemisin's short story "The Effluent Engine" takes up this challenge of creating a steampunk story that remains true to recorded primary world history events while offering the potential for an alterity that empowers a traditionally silenced group. Though short compared to the other texts, this story uses the steampunk aesthetic to do a number of things that befits a postcolonial text: it reminds the reader of the costs and toll of slavery on black populations through a spectrum of racism observed and experienced by the Haitian protagonist, Jessaline Clerè, and illustrates a vision of empowered blacks using the invocation of the Haitian Revolution and instances of community uplift.

The temporal setting of "the Effluent Engine" is firmly planted two generations, about thirty years, after the Haitian Revolution (31), and the action takes place in New Orleans, where blacks are still slaves and free Creoles maintain a system of racism and colourism to protect their

privileges. France, the text states, is recovering from Napoleon's "endless wars"; "upstart Haiti" is rich from its sugarcane, and needs guns from America, "for all the world, it seemed, wanted the newborn country strangled in its crib" (15). As such, the most suitable antagonists would be white male supremacists, which we find in the operatives of the Order of the White Camellia, a spin on the Knights of the White Camellia, which was created in 1867 with associations to the Ku Klux Klan.

The story of the text begins with an introduction to Jessaline Clerè in New Orleans, and establishes that she is not Creole, thereby unoffended when mistakenly called a "negress" by a visiting New Yorker (14). As a spy on board a dirigible, she manages to pass as a servant or a slave, which earns dismissal and no close scrutiny, or a white man's mistress, which earns enough respect and offence for people to leave her alone (16). As a child of Toussaint L'Overture, she is mindful of the atrocities committed against Haitians during their first revolt, and angrily relates them to a doubtful and sheltered Eugenie who is reluctant to create engines for military purposes: "the last French commander, Rochambeau, decided to teach my people a lesson for daring to revolt. ... He took slaves ... and broke them on the wheel, raising them on a post ... so birds could eat them alive. He buried prisoners of war, also alive. He boiled some of them ... Such acts, he deemed, were necessary to put fear and subservience back into our hearts, since we had been tainted by a year of freedom" (31). Her relationship to the revolutionary figure provides the historical marker and specific attention to history that steampunk indulges in, and it is distant enough that such a character may well have existed off the record, furthering the tantalizing "what-if" aspect of the setting. Jessaline also confronts the Order of the White Camellia's agents who threaten death and violence to both Eugenie Rilieux and her brother, Norbert Rilieux, Creole chemical engineers.

It is not merely the slave-owning class who maintains the status quo—one of Jessaline's challenges is to "make inquiries and sufficient contacts" among the Creoles of New Orleans, who are a "closed and prickly bunch" because "only by rigid maintenance of caste and privilege could they hope to retain freedom in a land which loved to throw anyone darker than tan into chains" (15). This kind of inter-POC conflict still retains power today, and Norbert Rilieux is a manifestation of it; having been educated in Paris as a *gens de couleur libre*, he is among men "who looked down upon any science that did not show European roots" (19). As he suspects Jessaline of working for white men to trick him into helping line their pockets, he blusters, "To them, all of us are alike, even though I have the purest of French blood in my veins, and you might as well have come straight from the jungles of Africa!" (19). Norbert's identity and status as a wealthy Creole hinges on internalized racism, and the text also explores the flip side: Jessaline finds herself attracted to Eugenie Rilieux, despite the latter's half-white looks and Jessaline having "grown in a land where ... darkness of skin was a point of pride" (22). The prejudices of colourism and shadism still retain power today, although not as overtly as before due to rising ideals of multiculturalism and colour-blindness, this text refuses to elide the nature of such prejudices, and, because it is set in the past, can also explore an aspect of how such biases came to be.

The racism need not be overtly expressed either: the text has several instances in which the threat of retribution hangs over the slaves should they dare overstep the jealous owner's bounds. When Jessaline bribes a slave boy with grapes to deliver a message to Eugenie, she reminds him, "You'll have to ... spit the seeds in the fire, though, or Master will know you've had a treat" (27), implying the violence slaves suffer for unsanctioned enjoyment. At the Haitian embassy, slaves huddle at the gates with letters from their owners, unallowed to step on embassy

grounds, because then they would be free (37), and watched by [white] American soldiers who report on any slave speaking to the Haitian Embassy's staff: "It is not illegal to talk, but any slave who did so would likely suffer for it" (38). The threat of violence takes on a gendered aspect as well—the White Camellia operative who reveals himself to Jessaline when she comes to claim the plains tells her, "If I must lower myself to baseness, better to do it with one bearing the fair blood of the French," referring to Eugenie, a Creole (42). Having established that this is an environment hostile to anyone perceived black, there is little need to spell out the threat that they constantly live under.

These forms of racism and inter-POC conflict establish not merely the temporal setting, but also the stakes, individual and institutional, faced by the protagonist, a Haitian woman. These are challenges that would have been in place with or without the technofantastic elements.

The technofantasy of the story cleaves to the familiar: the appearance of modern scientific methods that manifest in material technology, such as Eugenie Rilieux's orders for "metal parts and rubber tubing ... custom vacuum pipes" to build the engine (44), and Jessaline's brass gyroscope from an old lover, a dirigible-navigator (25). The technofantasy is also geographically-specific: Haiti's sugar plantations produce the rum from which the effluent is made. The title refers to Jessaline's mission of recruiting a Creole engineer into designing an engine which will use effluent as fuel. Dirigibles are a common and inexpensive form of transport between the Americas and the Caribbean (16), and the Haitians used them to "bomb the French ships most effectively during the Revolution" (30); as a result, Haiti is the "foremost manufacturers of dirigibles in the Americas" (30), using steam and gases from sugarcane distilleries for their hot-air balloons and blimps (30).

These details enable an alterity of empowerment for the black characters, creating a Haiti that is an economic and political force, and not the "apparent state" that scholars of Haitian issues refer to it as (Braziel 129). Moreover, it is a nation that practices gender egalitarianism, out of need: "so many men died in the Revolution that women fill the ranks now as dirigible-pilots and gunners," Jessaline tells Eugenie, "we run factories and farms too, and are highly-placed in government" (Jemisin 32). It gives rationalization to the accepted lesbianism in the text's Haiti and Jessaline's romantic overtures to Eugenie. It also allows the protagonist to fill the traditional romantic hero's role as a woman of color, neatly subverting a popular trope of the conquering white hero in pulp fiction.

With this alterity in place, the text sets a theme of community uplift, in which the characters help each other in some form that does not require a loss of dignity, but also involves a possibility of hope. The slaves outside the gates of the Haitian Embassy may be suppressed and watched, but the staff of the Embassy treats them with respect, through eye-contact, "nodding to each solemnly, touching more hands than was strictly necessary for the sake of work" (35). Having known institutional slavery, and now enjoying constitutional freedom, the Haitian staff attempt to gift their enslaved New Orleans counterparts with "a small taste of respect ... so that they might come to crave it and eventually seek it for themselves" (38). Jessaline tries to do the same for Eugenie, relating of the lack of gendered restrictions in Haiti so Eugenie can imagine "all the things she could do ... where the happenstances of sex and caste did not forbid her from using her mind to its fullest" (32). She appeals to Eugenie's discontent and knowledge of limitation so Eugenie will help in Jessaline's mission and help "a nation of free folk stay free" (30). The promise of future freedom is accompanied by a potential of future prosperity: after Jessaline gives her messenger boy the grapes, he does not throw the seeds into the fire; he

pockets the seeds, explaining that he will plant them near the city dump. Before he runs off, he says, "Maybe I'll bring you some wine one day!" (27). Though it plays into the myth of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, the child's action gestures to a determination to survive in the environment of slavery, taking and investing in Jessaline's gift for his future prosperity, a gift of possibility from one freed black to a still-enslaved kin.

"The Effluent Engine", while remaining rooted in a historical narrative of slavery, resists both Eurocentrism and Orientalism that steampunk is prone to when applied to mainstream conventions, simply by focusing on a protagonist who, in mainstream society, would suffer marginalization. The audience is an important factor in enabling this decentering. "The Effluent Engine" was written as part of "A Story For Haiti" campaign held by Crossed Genres to help raise funds for relief efforts after Haiti's 2010 earthquake. The audience for this story would be a general English-speaking reader with some knowledge, at least, of Haiti and its relationship to the United States. However, that black empowerment exists side-by-side revealing white supremacist systems as themes of the text points to a different purpose and audience—an audience unafraid to confront the United States' sordid history of slavery, or an audience receptive to it so long as it is coated with the veneer of a conventional spy adventure. The former audience is probably an anti-racist one looking for entertainment that does not trade in problematic tropes uncritically, perhaps even an audience familiar with the significance of the Haitian Revolution. But most of all, it is a story for Haiti, and therefore must center the concerns and circumstances that would have shaped Haiti in the nineteenth century—it does not have to cater to the comfort of generalized, and white, audiences because they are irrelevant in the shaping a gift for Haiti. Thus is the most radical purpose, conditions and effect of postcolonial steampunk.

Conclusion

Treated as an aesthetic, a toolbox of elements, rather than as a subgenre with its own conventions, steampunk can be harnessed by anyone, from the neo-colonial to the postcolonial, from the nostalgic to the corrective. Steampunk, in many forms, is a lot of fun, and entertaining pop culture phenomena have served as both records and transmitting signals of cultural norms and values. The rising popularity of steampunk indicates a rising interest in media associated with history, even if the histories are futuristic and fantastic. Just as the kinds of people involved in steampunk are varied, so too are the ways steampunk manifests. All the texts are different, with only steampunk elements as their unifying factor. Critics have identified the worst outcomes of steampunk done uncritically—simply producing simulacra of the Victorian era, mimicking the manners of an imperialist upper-crust society that snubbed and excluded, using oppressive conditions as a form of entertainment. Science fiction has always been seen as a forward-looking genre, and steampunk seems very backwards-looking in comparison. Yet as RaceFail shows, science fiction's futures still remain limited to normative bodies and narratives by and large. If steampunk is to be informed by the past, then all the pasts should find avenues for expression.

In *the Peshawar Lancers*, I have identified how the steampunk elements work together to create an exclusionary text that merely prolongs colonialism and imperialism. Its setting, despite being an alternate future, remains reminiscent of a colonialist nineteenth century England that celebrates empire as a pinnacle of success and fails to interrogate the problematic tropes of pulp fiction it uses in any meaningful way. Moreover, technology is used to display the status of the good ruling class, and must be neutralized if it could be a threat. It has brought not just the aesthetics, but also the social systems of the past into the imagined future, wholesale, and treated the enforced power dynamics as a perfect natural status quo, and those who reject it are

uncivilized at best, demonized at worst. These are structures that are easily repeated despite any claims to "progress" or "knowing better," and are patterns that clearly have been reproduced in the larger science fiction and fantasy world as made visible by RaceFail. Steampunk has no special immunity to them, as evidenced in this text.

Cherie Priest, currently one of the most commercially successful steampunk authors, manages to avoid painting such power systems as acceptable by creating a full cast of characters who are on different sides of a complex conflict, caused by the technofantastic elements of the setting. The type of technology accelerated in *Dreadnought* enables transcontinental travel, allowing the reader to witness the tensions wrought by the technofantasy. The text interrogates the effects of military warfare continued in the name of revenge, power, and conquest, and the reader can extrapolate the biopolitics of the setting that mirrors the biopolitics of the primary world to some degree. The setting's alterity also involves a change in the geopolitics of North America, including a freshly-passed history of slavery that is prevented from dominating the racial landscape. This alterity offers a vision of race relations that at the same time acknowledges the oppression of the time, and offers the White Gaze a model of interracial negotiations which still papers over the extent of racism that dominated the conflict of the Civil War.

In *the Gaslight Dogs*, Lowachee offers a protagonist who filters the setting for the reader with a traditional Othered perspective: that of an indigenous woman experiencing directly the imposition of a colonizer's will onto her life. The technofantasy draws from traditionally subordinated ways of viewing and relating to nature, creating a conflict with an imperialist philosophy that renders nature, and thus humans, an exploitable resource. An exploration into the workings of how settler colonization impacted the North American continent, the main cast is locked into a conflict of interests by the imposing kyriarchy, even as they show signs of potential

alliances. This jars the reader into considering the impact, justification and legacy of historical events, and reframes the narrative enough to question norms of how we relate to nature and each other, and how we see history. Through the steampunk aesthetic, masked as entertainment, *the Gaslight Dogs* interrogates the origins and maintenance of the continued colonization of the Americas. However, the history of being colonized is not the only history of those traditionally marginalized in science fiction, and it would be fallacious and unrelentingly cynical to suggest so.

N.K. Jemisin's "The Efflunt Engine" brings us back to the primary world, and takes us to an actual past of liberation, infused with technofantasy to emphasize the torment and accomplishments made by the new nation of Haiti. It also uses the steampunk aesthetic to bring to the fore a lesser-known history, remembering by name figures who may not be known to a wider audience. It makes clear the unacceptability of kyriarchal institutions of slavery and imperialism, and portrays a formerly-enslaved national identity that will no longer tolerate either on its own land or proxies. The steampunk aesthetic is harnessed to resist the victimizing narrative while clearly depicting how certain systems create and maintain the exclusion of some for the profit of others. A story in which protagonists of colour inhabit intersecting marginalizations, it is a vision of a possible past for a possible future to come.

The choice of temporal and geographical setting, the choice of technological perspectives and the choice of alterity all point to political choices, even if the choices are purposefully depoliticized. The choice to center the height of Empire, accelerate its technology and exacerbate the power dynamics and resultant tensions thereof are alternate only for a few, and retains the status quo for all others, thus maintains an exclusionary nature that perpetuates the alienation of

the marginalized. If steampunk can serve to subvert modernity, then it must be the modernity in service of colonialism, imperialism and oppression that it must help dismantle.

In sum, though the steampunk aesthetic can certainly be used to reproduce tropes of Empire, there are no limits on how to wield it, allowing space for the questioning, challenging and subverting dominant ideology and representations. There are strategies to be gleaned from the available works, on how best to combine an aesthetic that draws from the past to create a story relevant today. As steampunk grows popular, it becomes imperative that people of colour take this opportunity to shape its direction, by centering protagonists like themselves, creating non-white or multiracial casts, exploring less-studied histories, and pointing to the ways of speaking a single language, as varied as the peoples of any given place and time.

There are various histories, each of different significance to different groups. All such histories deserve to be explored; all deserve to be revealed. Steampunk as a subculture remains fettered to the Victorian period, and resultant commodification has often attempted to reflect a "cultureless" or amalgamated ideal in which neither nationality of ethnicity is anywhere to be found. Cultural specificity is immediately marked as "ethnic"—a choice word for "non-white". Writers of speculative fiction need to recognize that specificity comes in different forms, and that universal narratives should not be imposed, because few experiences are universal.

Anxieties of postcolonialism's ambiguities in its lack of spatiality, structure and chronology are a strength in writing postcolonial steampunk, as steampunk collapses the same in order to refashion and retool the old into the new and fresh. Although easily prey to commodification of various cultural elements, steampunk offers people of colour an avenue to explore the narratives of their heritages erased or ignored by mainstream venues. Through an alternate history, boosted by technofantasy, the dynamics of the present can be mirrored within

the fictional recent past to think through how they can be equalized for the future. We need to address the past in order to recognize ourselves in the present.

At WisCon35, I hosted a discussion panel on postcolonial steampunk, on which sat: Diana Pho of Beyond Victoriana, a resource site for multicultural steampunk; Amal El-Mohtar, writer of "To Follow The Waves," a story set in a never-colonized Syria; Liz Gorinsky, Tor editor of Cherie Priest's *Clockwork Century* books; and Nisi Shawl, long-time committee member of the Carl Brandon Society. Amal and I discussed terms we used to describe points of departure from recorded history; she used "bifurcation" and I used "site of rupture". She said, "I like yours; it sounds like a wound that can heal." To which Nisi asked, "but is that what we want? To heal and close the wound?"

Our histories, our present, our existence are scars on the landscape of the conventional, of the neo-colonial march on a singular vision of progress that would have us contained in neat ideals of happy multiculturalism. We must take to our time travel machines and bring back the past to show why we cannot fit in these tidy boxes, why we should not and shall not fade with time. We must take hold of our pasts now, to write our own futures.

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