

The Ends of Empire: Australian Steampunk and the Reimagining of Euro-Modernity

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STEAMPUNK is a contested genre. Born in the late 1980s, steampunk is less of a subgenre with clear and specific boundaries, and more an amorphous mélange of signifiers, including tropes of a Victorian or pseudo-Victorian setting punctuated by anachronistic clockwork/steam-powered technologies or technology-like magic. Whether set in our own (primary) world or an imagined (secondary) world, steampunk often operates on alternate-history principles, where a point of divergence creates a radically new historical timeline that facilitates technological and socio-cultural variation from our own history. Yet beyond these signifiers, steampunk remains subject to debate: is it the sickly cousin of cyberpunk, devolving into ruffles and romance? Is it a vibrant maker-culture, to which the fiction itself is secondary? Is it an uncritical observation of, in Simon Joyce's term, the Victorians in the rearview mirror? Since the explosion of steampunk works in the early 2000s, it has been critiqued for being all of the above, and more.

'Steampunk' remained a relatively stable term for nearly two decades after author K. W. Jeter coined it in a tongue-in-cheek letter to *Locus* magazine in 1987, where he identified his work and that of other early steampunk authors as 'gonzo-historical' explorations of fantastical Victoriana and alternative technologies (qtd. in Nevins 513). More recently, contention has arisen between prescriptivists (who adhere to Jeter's definition) and descriptivists (who favour a much broader geo-political and aesthetic application of the term); this, as Jess Nevins has argued, has made steampunk 'a catch-all term without an agreed-upon definition' (513). Nevertheless, works that authors, publishers, or readers identify as steampunk continue to proliferate; despite, or perhaps because of

its flexibility, the genre continues to resonate. As critics, while we lean towards the prescriptivist approach, we also recognise that ‘defining steampunk as a spectrum of constitutive tropes and motifs rather than a coherent and discrete literary subgenre will ultimately be a more profitable critical approach’ (Nevins 517).

We come to steampunk out of an interest in the critical and political roles of the stories we tell. We make this approach from our entangled positions as fascinated readers, critical scholars, and settler-colonials writing on stolen land. Steampunk arises as a subject of study, then, out of interest in the unique worlds and narratives it produces and the entangled relationship it maintains with modernity, coloniality¹ and history. The messiness of a subculture with an imaginative but often confused relationship to its subject matter complicates our appreciation as readers and propels our research as scholars.

The background for this research is a critical bibliography compiled for the *AustLit* database between December 2016 and February 2017, in which we identified and contextualised 333 works of ‘Australian steampunk’, which encompassed both steampunk by Australian authors and steampunk set in Australia. While this bibliography cannot be truly comprehensive, it aims to represent the variety, scope, and thematic concerns of Australian steampunk.² Simultaneously, it showcases the difficulty in precisely defining what steampunk is and, therefore, which works can be considered steampunk. Steampunk’s generic looseness (or, less charitably, its incoherence) requires a critical approach that engages it as an assemblage of traits rather than a rigid template or structure. As we write on *AustLit*, we seek to avoid a tendency we identify in many scholarly engagements with steampunk, namely, the ‘difficulty of definition and the simultaneous desire to find a definition, a marginalisation of the writing in favour of the more dramatic aesthetic aspects of the movement, and a focus on canonical texts that worked to diminish and obscure the writing on the margins of the genre’ (Mills and Hondroudakis).

We are concerned, then, with what kinds of steampunk stories are told and what kinds of steampunk stories can be told. To put it simply, as Lawrence Grossberg does, we are concerned that ‘bad stories make bad politics’ (67). We would add, inversely, that bad politics can make bad stories. As critical literary

¹Given our focus on Indigenous characters and cultures in steampunk and the contested nature of the term ‘post-colonial’ from Indigenous perspectives, we use instead ‘colonial’ and ‘coloniality’, except in quotations from other sources. (See Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala*, particularly 43–46, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘I Still Call Australia Home’. These debates are also reviewed in Polak 71–73).

²This research dataset, published as ‘Beyond Goggles and Corsets: Australian Steampunk’, is available at www.austlit.edu.au/steampunk, including the full list of works. We are grateful to *AustLit* for the ideas the research sparked for this more intensive analysis of steampunk and empire.

scholars and interested readers, both formulations of the problem concern us. Specifically, we are concerned with the kinds of bad politics that elide the colonial entanglements of steampunk's favoured Victorian source materials. The danger of 'bad politics' for steampunk has much to do with the risk of uncritically reproducing a romanticised idea of the Victorian period. In so doing, such stories may contribute to a whitewashed history, where the fetishised aesthetics and manners of a historical period can be wholly divorced from the era's ongoing legacies of colonialism, class struggle, and sexual oppression. Indeed, such concerns emerge not only from the academic realm, but also from steampunk readers and writers. As Monique Poirier, a Wampanoag steampunker, writes from a North American perspective,

despite alternate histories that allow for magitek and phlebotinum and aether-powered airships and steam-powered, clockwork everything from cell phones to teleporters to ray guns . . . there is still an assumption that NDN [Indian] genocide took place. That European contact can only have occurred in the 15th century and that it can only have resulted in colonialism, slavery, resource theft, land theft, and genocide. Come on, people. We can have clockwork robots but not POC civilizations?

Notably, of the 333 works in our bibliography, not one story set in Australia imagined it as other than a colonial space. Our focus here is on the questions this poses about both the functions and limits of steampunk as a genre.

In this paper, we draw on the full range of texts in our dataset for two purposes. Firstly, we identify common concerns of the genre (what we will, in the next section, identify as the problem-space of steampunk) and situate them against steampunk's relationship to Euro-modernity. Accounting for steampunk's common threads allows us to highlight the margins, conflicts, and struggles within the genre. Secondly, we isolate specific texts that display Australian steampunk's general characteristics but approach issues of colonialism and modernity in ways that open up new avenues for writing steampunk in Australia. While Australian steampunk may be embedded in the settler-colonial imaginary, this imaginary need not remain in active support of the settler-colonial project, but can act as a productive space for its interrogation. The texts examined here challenge the supremacy of industrial Euro-modernity in steampunk. They create spaces for thinking through how modernity was built, and how it could have been built differently, based on different institutions, different harms, different technologies, histories, wars, or cultures. They attempt to reimagine, not merely reproduce, the legacies of the past.

Steampunk and Modernity

Steampunk, as an aesthetic and narrative schema, can be thought of as the refiguration of a (usually Euro-modern) nineteenth century's imaginary with science-fiction or fantasy technologies. It combines reflection on the past with re-imagination of the future, and so also allows, inversely, for re-imagination of the past and reflection on the future. It is a genre of conjunctions between times and technologies, practices and texts, conventions and tropes that in modernity have often been treated as separate and unrelated. Indeed, this framework of entanglement or conjunction is a feature of steampunk's subject matter. We argue that steampunk is a cultural form reflective of struggles over the shape of modernity. When approached in this way, the apparent generic incoherence or *bricolage* of steampunk becomes a reflection of the contested and plural conceptions of modernity.

Struggles over history, technology, and who modernity benefits and harms are, as Grossberg argues (71), the very processes by which modernity is made. Steampunk, approached as a set of literary and aesthetic tools for reimagining modernity, inherits these struggles, as well as the representational difficulties they pose. The genre's devotion to industrial modernity's imaginary (from technology to social struggle) and to intertextuality and *bricolage* makes it uniquely positioned to interrogate modernity's shadows. If we are to explore the notion of plural conceptions of modernity, it must, however, be in relation to the hegemonic conception of modernity that dominates thought and practice on the subject. We refer to this dominant framework as Euro-modernity, meaning the specific mode of modernity that grew out of a lineage of European institutions, philosophies, practices, and technologies, and is associated with the form of modernity embodied in the nation-states of not only Europe and Britain, but of the United States and other industrialised settler-colonial states, including Australia (Grossberg 71).

Defining modernity itself is a fraught endeavour, as contested as the genre of steampunk. Yet we wish to recognise that there has been a certain hegemony of ideas and material approaches where modernity is concerned. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, modernity 'is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe' (4). We refer to Euro-modernity, rather than to modernity in general, so as to particularise or, to borrow again from Chakrabarty, 'provincialise', Euro-modern ways of doing and being. Therefore we assert, as do many of the texts discussed in this paper, that there can be non-European ways of being modern. Thus Euro-modernity can be understood not as the anthropologically universal

mode of modernity, but rather as the particular configuration of philosophies, technologies, institutions, and practices that has been, due in many parts to the convergence of colonialism and global capitalism, the dominant framework of modernity.

As with steampunk, then, modernity should be understood as a conjunction of elements – not merely technological, cosmological, or political, but the confluence of these and more. That is, modernity is a ‘problem-space’, as David Scott conceives it. Scott’s problem-space, articulated in *Conscripts of Modernity*, is ‘an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs’ (4). Scott argues that while the problem-space is ‘a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power’, it is also ‘a fundamentally temporal space’: that is, ‘Problem-spaces alter historically because problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes’ (4). In Scott’s work, this arises from an examination of the tensions between early twentieth-century anti-colonialists and late twentieth-century post-colonialists (3). Here, three problem-spaces are in play: modernity (in the age of steam and the age of steampunk), steampunk (in its earlier form and more recent re-articulations), and coloniality (as a distant historical moment and a lived reality).

Lawrence Grossberg adopts Scott’s problem-space as a means of thinking through unexamined assumptions of modernity, employing it as a shorthand for ‘the way the various crises and contradictions of a conjuncture are articulated and lived as a singular political crisis or struggle’ (58). Like Scott, he is concerned not with answers but with how we frame questions (Scott 3; Grossberg 4). The multiple versions of modernity that contest both historical reflection and the imagination of the future are showcased in steampunk’s grab-bag approach to genre. At the fore of steampunk loom the twin figures of industrialisation and the British Empire: they offer steampunk a technological landscape and fetishised customs, dress, and social mores. Texts that draw on this imaginary must engage questions of gender, class, and coloniality, from the social dynamics of transplanted Victorianism to the Industrial Revolution’s working conditions, to, as Elizabeth Ho argues, the Victorian era’s socio-political and aesthetic significance as ‘a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination’ (5).

Yet it is important to recall that one of the central concerns of steampunk is a re-imagination of technology. Indeed, it is unlikely that a text lacking technological engagement can even be considered steampunk. Steampunk artist Jake Von Slatt’s rationale for steampunk is instructive here: ‘Our world is full of technology and almost all of it began during the 19th Century and the Industrial

Revolution. By exploring this time we lay a foundation of understanding for technology and its role in history and daily life' (qtd. in Forlini 77).

Steampunk's retroactive re-imagination of the origins and legacy of industrial Euro-modernity occurs through a technological lens. Even when the genre shifted through the 2000s to emphasise romance and magic ('second-wave steampunk'), it was technologised, not wild, magic, operating by specific, codified rules. As Dave Freer writes of the steampunk world of his novels, 'Most alternate-history stories revolve around a battle coming out differently or a famous general dying . . . However, wars are not the only things that have changed or can change our world. Scientific discovery has done so far more often than wars' (292). Steampunk recognises this in its worlds: even in narratives that seem to emphasise military or political changes, the technological aspect cannot be ignored. And yet we wish to avoid the danger Grossberg identifies in a tendency to focus on the changes to a society's productive systems at the expense of social and cultural changes (59). Modernity is not simply reducible to the development of industrial technologies or the emergence of particular social and political structures.

The steampunk technologies that drive and suffuse the genre's texts parallel the effects of industrial modernity's technologies by dramatically reshaping and problematising class, gender, and, of particular interest here, coloniality. Advanced steampunk technologies further emphasise the changing nature of modernity's productive systems, and thus the material conditions of class. Steampunk, then, often affects an urban world of slums and palaces, overcrowded undercities, untouchable (even airborne) overcities, and rampant crime: a divided world that actualises the social, political, and economic divides of industrialisation. Similarly, steampunk enables a disruption of conventional nineteenth-century gender models. Women often take the lead in steampunk, especially second-wave steampunk: they stare out of covers as private detectives, inventors, pilots, even vampire hunters. But steampunk technologies complicate this process: the steampunk woman's body is a cyborg one, liberated and constrained by technologised Victoriana such as steam-powered corsets and crinolines on wheels. The genre's fascination with Victoriana makes problematic gender politics omnipresent, as in the ongoing debate over whether a heroine is truly liberated if she is still wearing crinolines and corsets, steam-enhanced though they may be (see, for example, Taddeo and Taylor).

For both Australian steampunk and our concerns here, the intersection of these concepts with coloniality is of particular importance. Imperial relations are certainly present in works set in London: where, after all, do the raw materials of empire (rubber, brass, copper) originate? But they are exacerbated

by the colonial setting of Australia. The technology of steampunk, rooted in the iconography of industrial Euro-modernity and often serving to replicate the British Empire, relies either implicitly or explicitly on the Empire's colonies. But as a result, steampunk often buys into problematic assumptions drawn from a mythologised Euro-modernity. Among the wealth of Australian steampunk, the unique spaces of Australian colonial experience can remain tokenised, marginalised or ignored.

Given the disparate and interconnected nature of steampunk's conjunctures, the toolbox becomes an apt metaphor for an approach that seeks to identify the common tendencies of steampunk writing and the wide variance in the applications of steampunk elements. As we have argued, steampunk is a set of tools for speculating on and reimagining modernity. The question is whether these tools can be used to imagine modernity in ways that neither obscure nor deny the present and historical structures of oppression built into the institutions and social relations of Euro-modernity. Can steampunk write honestly about the oppression inflicted by its referents and actors? Can steampunk tools be used outside a Euro-modern context, or do they serve a genre that, by its very nature, cannot help but recapitulate discourses that suppress, ignore, and dehumanise non-hegemonic people and cultures? The following analysis rests on the twin ideas that steampunk cannot be recognisably steampunk without engaging at least the iconography of industrial modernity, but that it can act as a creative space for reflection and re-imagination of modernity in Australia. Given this interest in Australian steampunk, we focus particularly on the re-imagination of coloniality. Beginning, then, with texts that do not account for uniquely colonial spaces, we examine how the international movement towards recognising colonialism and Indigeneity in steampunk manifests in Australian steampunk worlds and the different ways in which authors engage the shadows of Euro-modernity.

Steamroller: Indigenous Australia in Steampunk

When steampunk invests strongly in colonial spaces, the resulting texts often draw uncritically from a mythologised Euro-modernity. To take one example, Canadian author Arthur Slade's popular *Hunchback Assignments* were published between 2009 and 2012: defined by the author as young-adult (YA) fiction, the novels followed the protagonist Modo through a steampunk world centred on London. The third book in the series, *Empire of Ruins*, drops Modo (quite literally, from an airship) into the Queensland rainforest, where he meets the Indigenous inhabitants, 'tribesmen' with 'white-painted' faces and necklaces 'of what looked like shrunken heads' (4). Eventually, Modo positions himself against his mentor (who wishes to use the men as foot soldiers against a su-

perior force) to adopt a stance of benevolently patriarchal colonialism: ‘back on the ship you said we shouldn’t interfere with these tribes, that they were children’ (220). As reviewers noted, the novel engages predecessors such as H. Rider Haggard’s Allan Quatermain and Lester Dent’s Doc Savage (Perschon): Slade’s work, then, mythologises Euro-modernity via texts that have already performed their own myth-making. The result simultaneously reinforces Australia as a colonial space and ignores its specific signifiers in favour of the generically exotic. Nor is this unique to Australian settings: Susana Loza, writing about ‘the stubborn persistence of imperialist amnesia in steampunk’ (59) with a particular focus on Native American steampunk costuming, argues that ‘[s]teampunk is filled with auto-exotic, cross-ethnic, and peripheral Orientalist drag that exceed the white/non-white dichotomy’ (60).

It may be that what we position as failings—the tokenisation and marginalisation of Indigenous experiences—are instead a problematic but necessary function of the genre; that there is no escaping the genre’s embedded western-technocratic teleology; that the story of steampunk for an Indigenous subjectivity is necessarily a story of the West, of survival, genocide, or defensive adaptation. But even if we accept this critical position, it does not follow that a background of Euro-modernity negates nuanced, referential engagement with Indigenous experiences of empire, that it must be, as Loza argues, Orientalist or, as we suggest of Slade, generic in its exoticism. Indeed, to do so would be out of step with current movements in genre fiction, including the rise of Indigenous futurism, works that ‘combine elements of YA dystopia, cyberpunk, postcolonial sf, and Afrofuturism’ (James 152). However, Indigenous futurism has the advantage of being set in the future. Steampunk is welded to the colonial mythology of Euro-modernity, no matter how explicitly it acknowledges this connection, and therefore requires a different set of practices. Authors are increasingly exploring potential paths through the quagmire of colonialism in steampunk: recent examples include Nisi Shawl’s explicitly colonial *Everfair* (2016), set in a steampunk Belgian Congo; Balogun Ojetade’s coining of ‘steam-funk’ to describe steampunk written from a black/African perspective; Karin Lowachee’s fictionalised First Nations culture in *The Gaslight Dogs* (2010), which Terri Doughty argues is ‘a form of postcolonial steampunk’ (43); and Dan Rabarts’s increasing body of Māori steampunk stories, such as ‘Oil and Bone’, whose protagonists negotiate ways of remaining culturally Māori while using colonial Pākehā technologies.

Such works, with central Indigenous characters or explicitly non-colonial concerns, are rare, even with the genre’s recent shifts in perspective. So how does Australian steampunk expose the conjunctures and problem-spaces of Euro-modernity? In what manner does technology pull into play gender, class, and

(especially) race in this colonial space? Here we trace three ways in which authors writing Australian steampunk introduce non-hegemonic subjectivities and settings to their works: secondary worlds that echo but distance primary-world colonialism; alternate-history that posits a mediated space; and superficially traditional steampunk that explicitly confronts colonial brutalities.

Modernity as Coloniality

While most steampunk that deals with Australian history is set in an altered version of our own world, certain works invent a secondary world, such as D. M. Cornish's *Monster Blood Tattoo* trilogy. Even the setting of an imaginary world does little to separate the texts from their associations with the steampunk imaginary of fantasised Euro-modernity. However, in Cornish's case, these relationships are not presented in the uncritical, flattened dimensions of the examples above. Instead, he subtly highlights and explores the violent struggles involved in making a colonial modernity. The novels, detailing the adventures of a young orphan setting out into professional life, take place on the Half-Continent, where a pseudo-Victorian human society occupies the coastal fringes of a vast, wild landmass whose central regions are both unsettled and hostile to colonials (though not to their native inhabitants). The novels are set far from the imperial centre, venturing at times into the antipodean fringes of the colonising push into the landmass, where the protagonist, Rossamund, is sent to train as a lamplighter, keeping the roads safe for travellers, literally bringing the light of empire to the dark continent.

Much of the narrative concerns Rossamund's attempts to navigate his society's conflict with the land's natural inhabitants, the monsters, considered savage beasts to be killed on sight: a large subset of professions support the mercenary hunting of monsters, and killings are symbolically venerated by the eponymous monster blood tattoos that adorn the bodies of monster-slayers. Over the course of the narrative, it becomes increasingly clear that the monsters are not only sentient, but in many cases far from evil or monstrous. Indeed, Rossamund slowly realises that, although he is of human appearance and was raised in a human orphanage from infancy, he is, in fact, a monster. Thus, the reader becomes sympathetic to the monsters against the often barbaric practices of the human settlers. Despite the secondary world, these factors, from the landscape to the colonial practices, have clear parallels in Australian history (and its present), as allegories for the colonisation of Australia and genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Furthermore, as the protagonist is one of the Othered 'monsters', it is difficult not to observe parallels with Australia's Stolen Generations.

Though mirroring the typical technologies of a steampunk pseudo-Europe,

with pistols, barges, lanterns, and cannons, much of the Half-Continent's technology is organic, from the muscle-like 'gastrines' that serve as 'engines that turn the *screws* (propellers) of rams and other vessels' (*Foundling*, 342) to the fungus that lights the lamps. This use of organic technology becomes significant, as a locus of our technological, class, colonial, and gender conjunctures is the character called, portentously, Europe, a deeply problematic monster-hunter who, over the course of the trilogy, develops a complicated relationship with Rossamund. The key factor here is that Europe draws her monster-hunting prowess (she can generate electrical shocks through her hands) from the surgical grafting of monster organs into her body in a literal exemplification of the colonial dynamics of the Half-Continent, the bodies of the abject monsters serving as the extracted matter fueling the imperial modernity of this world. Europe also embodies the integration of class and gender with coloniality and technology in Cornish's allegorical Euro-modernity, able to afford the expensive surgical process that made her a monster-hunter because she is a wealthy, powerful and aristocratic woman. Furthermore, the 'transmogrification' (*Foundling*, 334) of her body requires constant and expensive maintenance, and presents problems for her as a woman in a somewhat patriarchal society. The cyborg woman is not an unusual trope in steampunk, but Cornish's technological modifications of the body are far more difficult and painful than the more typical steam-powered corset or bodily prostheses.

Europe serves as a cipher for the struggles of the Half-Continent, and through this, the Euro-modern problem-space. Rossamund finds her simultaneously charming and protective, ruthless and abusive, deeply mired in the violence and cruelty of the society in which she holds great power, but not unsympathetic. The very technologies that render her so powerful rely on extracting and absorbing the bodies of the monsters, rendering her unsustainably reliant on technologies she uses to kill the monsters from which they are derived. Furthermore, Rossamund's relationship with Europe, made complicated by his moral reservations and the power dynamic between the two, can be fruitfully read as a metaphor for the difficulty and complexity of colonial relationships. Through such devices, Cornish highlights the necessity of engaging the various elements shaping Euro-modernity and the subjects that are constituted within it. Even in the secondary world, Euro-modernity remains the referential ground from which the novel draws its aesthetics and critical provocations.

Modernity as Mediation

Here, our discussion of Euro-modernity must digress briefly into East Asia to explore how steampunk has imagined alternative modernities: in particular, Australian authors' attraction to the emergent subgenre of silkpunk. Steam-

punk has long tended to split into subgenres, usually along technological lines: ‘dieselpunk’ (post-World War I diesel technologies), ‘teslapunk’ (affordable, portable electrical technologies), and ‘clockpunk’ (Renaissance-era clockwork technologies). But silkpunk is different: silkpunk shifts the genre along geographical lines, de-emphasising the European centre of steampunk. As coined by author Ken Liu, drawing on W. Brian Arthur’s *The Nature of Technology*, silkpunk is ‘hierarchical, recursive and combinatorial’, wherein ‘new technologies are derived by recombining old technologies in novel ways’. As such, it is a conscious rethinking of steampunk. The difference, argues Liu, is in the ‘technology vocabulary and grammar’:

Whereas the technological vocabulary and grammar of steampunk are based on chrome, glass and steam, and on mechanical precision and rigidity — echoed in the look of the corseted body — the vocabulary and grammar of silkpunk are based on organic materials and biomechanics.

Silkpunk technology draws from organic materials culturally and economically central to South-east Asia and the Pacific: silk, paper, bamboo, coconut, feathers, coral. Liu’s *The Grace of Kings*, for example, imagines feather-thatched imperial airships and war-kites of paper, silk and bamboo. Like Cornish, Liu ties his technology closely to the natural world, conceptualising ropes as muscles and gas-bags as air sacs and membranes (Whiston 78).

This geographical (and, consequently, socio-cultural) shift emphasises the fact that, as Roger Whiston argues in his analysis of Chinese steampunk, ‘the methods and techniques harnessing steam and translating it into energy are highly dependent upon the continually-emergent techniques reacting to technological change, historical contingency, and cultural engagement’ (77). Certainly, this is also true of steampunk set in Europe. But so endemic is steampunk’s European setting and so pervasive is Euro-modernity that historical contingencies and cultural engagement become part of the broader unexamined underpinnings of the genre. That is to say, while the technology is emphasised, the socio-cultural specificities of its development are not. Silkpunk destabilises this tendency. Liu’s work, argues Whiston, foregrounds the idea that ‘multicultural techniques are dependent upon specific materials and the cultures interacting with them’ and by doing so, ‘exemplifies the power of multicultural techniques to resist the prejudices embedded within progressive technological histories’ (79).

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that Australian steampunk authors might be as attracted to silkpunk as to more traditional steampunk trappings. For

example, Stephanie Lai sets her short steampunk stories in Penang, on the Malaysian Peninsular. The context is still colonial: Penang was influenced by the British East India Company (from 1786), became a British crown colony (from 1867) and finally gained independence with Malaysia in 1957. But these stories are not told by the colonists. As Lai (who describes herself as Chinese-Australian by way of Malaysia) notes in an interview, they ‘do steampunk’ in ‘the South-East Asian way. Lots of water, lots of makan, Chinese airships coming down the straits and exploring opportunities on the peninsula. I want to use steampunk to interrogate our colonial past at the same time as creating beautiful visuals’ (Goh).

In Lai’s futuristic ‘The Last Rickshaw’, a cultural practice disappears under a policy of relentless technological modernisation. The eponymous rickshaw, outmoded by a more advanced high-speed rail network, is already a steampunk rickshaw, incorporating the traditional wheel-and-cart technology with archetypal steampunk engineering. The postcolonising governmental rationale for outmoding the rickshaw is that ‘there is no room for rickshaws in our glorious new Malaysia’, a Malaysia ‘connected to the mainland . . . a central, important part of the peninsula as we move forward’. Though the steampunk rickshaw offers a modernised technological transport network, it is incompatible with a globally dominant archetype of Euro-modernity. What is at stake here is not industrial modernity, but the particular configuration that modernity takes.

While ‘The Last Rickshaw’ is set outside Australia, silkpunk has a significant role to play in negotiating presentations of Australia as a colonial steampunk space. *The Kraken King*, part of American novelist Meljean Brook’s *Iron Seas* series, is alternate-history steampunk: unlike Cornish’s secondary world, the world is recognisably our own, but with a radically altered history. Brook’s history diverges with the smooth transition of power after Genghis Khan’s death in 1227, instead of, as in our timeline, wars of succession and a fractured empire. Crucially, this choice allows her to remove European colonisation from the *Iron Seas* world. Brook’s unbroken Mongol (or Golden) Empire, developing independently in isolation, overruns Europe with war machines and nanotech-controlled zombies before the continent’s own age of imperialism: by the nineteenth century, Europe is occupied by the Golden Empire, Africa by zombies, and both North and South America by First Nations people (and some fleeing Europeans), although none of the books have explored these latter cultures.

The Kraken King is set exclusively in Australia, from the perspective of a woman travelling from European cultural enclaves outside the control of the Mongol Empire, to whom Australia is an exotic interlude. Writer Zenobia Fox falls in with former imperial soldiers, now smugglers, and uncovers a plot

to unleash a machine of unimaginable power. As Zenobia crosses the continent, Brook's Australia unfolds, from the Noongar and Wajarri people near the smugglers' dens in Western Australia, to the Turrbul and Jagera people near the imperial centre, the Red City of the north.³ Far from the 'spear-waving natives' of *Empire of Ruins* or Cornish's monsters, Brook's Indigenous characters are technologised, from walking machines to agricultural technology, including a form of plough. Zenobia's Mongol guide (and later husband) Ariq mentions the tribes' 'rushed technological advancement' (110), but not whether these practices are an addendum to an extant Aboriginal agricultural practice or solely adopted after colonisation.

Despite the removal of European imperial expansion from Brook's steampunk world, this Australia is still a colonial space. Here, it is the Japanese who fled the Mongolian armies and settled on Australian shores. Their meeting with the Indigenous population follows a familiar pattern, recorded in domestic art:

More wall panels showed the empress meeting with the Turrbul and Jagera tribes on Australia's eastern shore. Ariq had seen similar scenes in many Nipponese homes. Most didn't possess paintings of the slaughters and the plagues that followed. The twins did, the panels stretching far down the hall. (178)

The presence of (albeit romanticised) colonial history in these Australian homes marks one of the significant differences in this alternate-history Australia: a treaty is eventually struck here between the Japanese and the Indigenous population. The world through which Zenobia travels is a negotiated, post-treaty space.

As the space is negotiated, so too is the technology. Ariq and the other smugglers, all former soldiers for the Empire, use Mongolian steam-driven technology 'with a few modifications . . . suited to this flat, dry land' (6). Among the steam-driven devices of the Horde, the Noongar and Wajarri build their machines with wood: walking machines in their thousands (225) to cover vast distances; agricultural aids (107); even a 'tall machine shaped like a man' and wielding a bull-roarer, which serves as an early warning system (115) – technology mediated by the needs of the dry landscape and the cultural practices of its users. Many Indigenous groups avoid Mongolian nanotechnology (which enables prostheses), but the Wajarri accept it (104). The Japanese negotiate with the Mongolian Empire for steam-driven technology, while their own city

³The spellings above are taken from Brook's work, and some do not reflect the current preferred spellings as promoted by AIATSIS through their Australian Indigenous Languages Database. Brook also uses the term 'tribes'. For the purposes of this analysis, we are following the alternate-history variants used in Brook's novel.

rises out of the Great Barrier Reef, ‘seamlessly constructed, as if chiseled from a single, enormous piece of coral’ (385). Similarly, Brook, like Liu, shows that ‘cultural techniques are always already multicultural’ (Whiston 82): just as technologies vary across the islands of Liu’s world, Brook’s walking machines vary among groups: those of the Wajarri are shorter and have sturdier frames than those of the Noongar. The driving plot in *The Kraken King* is not technological but romantic, in the developing relationship between Zenobia and Ariq. Yet Brook does not downplay the role that technology plays in both shaping socio-cultural patterns and mores, and in being shaped by them. In *The Kraken King*, the negation of Euro-modernity changes the shape of technology. Wood and copper, steam and coral: struggles for possession over this steampunk world are marked by the negotiation for mediated technologies distinct to the unique landscape.

Modernity as Brutality

If Brook presents technology as mediated, Dave Freer unflinchingly presents it as a colonial construct from which anyone not fitting the established narrative is brutally excluded. Freer’s *Cuttlefish* duology, which takes place in both Europe and Australia, is unusual in its post-Victorian setting: an alternative 1953, in which the British Empire still spans the globe. Freer’s history diverges from our own with Dr Fritz Haber’s synthesis of ammonia (a driving force in German poison-gas warfare in World War I), or, more specifically, with an argument between Haber and Dr Clara Immerwahr before their marriage in 1898. In our timeline, Haber’s work (to which Immerwahr, who held a PhD in chemistry, likely contributed) led to such fierce disagreement over science’s social responsibilities that Immerwahr committed suicide on the brink of the gas’s use in warfare (Creese, 143–145). In Freer’s world, Immerwahr instead broke with Haber before their marriage, and was sent to England in disgrace. Haber never synthesised ammonia, World War I ended in months, and England folded Germany into its own empire through dynastic marriages. Without the war and the Spanish flu epidemic, Europe’s burgeoning population emigrated to Australia and Africa, bringing colonialism to the extant populations of those countries. In Freer’s alternate-history, technology cannot be severed from either the human conditions of its development or the human consequences of its use. This is not to say that Freer privileges the agency and will of human actors, but rather that he foregrounds the complex network of relationships that determine the trajectory of technological, social, and political developments.

In Book Two, *The Steam Mole*, the submarine *Cuttlefish*, carrying protagonists Tim and Clara, reaches the Republic of Westralia, a former British colony abandoned due to environmental devastation. This rebel state, occupied by

former British citizens, is in conflict with its former rulers. But it remains a colonial state, where advanced steam technology exists in tension with both the landscape and tradition. The steam moles create transport tunnels that counteract the climate, ‘so hot in the summer, you can’t sweat fast enough to cool down’ (16). Yet the villain’s brother notes, ‘This “railroad” business seems unnecessary. Don’t our troops have feet? Horses?’ (27). Furthermore, the technology is heavily coded as colonial technology, operated by and for white men. When Tim – who is British and black – joins a steam-mole crew, he realises ‘they hated him for the colour of his skin’ (16).

Tim, a rebel from drowned London, is conversant with much more modern European technologies than his new Westralian employers. But they deny his technological aptitude even as they see it displayed, including such ‘invisible’ technology as literacy. Early in the novel, Tim, writing a letter during a leisure period, is confronted by the foreman with a flurry of racist invective: ‘What are you writing, Blackfeller? I didn’t know you blacks could write. I thought it was too much for your brains’ (42). What is apparent to both Tim and the reader is that both foreman and shift captain believe London-born Tim to be Indigenous Australian, repeatedly referring to him, both directly and in conversation with others, as ‘boong’ (42–44) or ‘boong-boy’ (17). After Tim is forced off the steam mole into the poisonous tunnels, an act the crew believe will be fatal, the only sympathetic crew member says apologetically to Clara, ‘We didn’t know he wasn’t a blackfeller from hereabouts’ (77). Access to the technologies of industrial modernity is a tightly enforced barrier, entrenched along colonial lines that demarcate who can be the beneficiaries and who must be the dominated Other.

In the crew’s eyes, Tim’s facility with colonial technologies carries less influence than his skin. Here, black men are both interchangeable and subject to a complex ranking system: Tim is not ‘a blackfeller from hereabouts’, but he is a ‘blackfeller’. And while not privy to the workings of the hierarchy against which they are judged, black men live in constant awareness of its existence; when Tim is rescued from desert wanderings by an Indigenous Australian group, what he finds most comforting is that ‘none of them seemed the least surprised that someone on the railway should try to kill him. “Some of them whitefellers are mad. Kill a blackfeller just for fun”’ (159). *The Steam Mole* is unusual among Australian steampunk not for addressing colonial brutalities (which Cornish does, obliquely) or for including Indigenous characters (which Brook does, to an extent) but in exposing the problem-spaces of Euro-modernity and coloniality through an intersection of black experiences. Tim’s presence as Black British, not inherently disruptive in itself but disrupted by responses to him, exposes assumptions regarding possession and control of technologies that are

otherwise sublimated in steampunk's Euro-modern underpinnings.

Where to for Australian Steampunk?

In *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Grossberg writes, 'I know that the conversations I am calling for are already taking place in various regions of the world. I have tried to acknowledge and even enter into conversation with some of them, but I realize it remains gestural' (5). Similarly, the concerns we raise here are not ours alone, but are paralleled by an increasing concern in the steampunk community about the entangled issues of class, gender and coloniality in their fiction, and a growing interest in steampunk that challenges Eurocentric conventions, addresses racial and gender disparities, and deals intelligently with the complex socio-economic relations of empire and modernity. A glance at our bibliography, for example, shows that most texts we have discussed (both fiction and criticism) have been published in the last few years.

Genres such as steampunk play an important role in speaking to the varied concerns about what modernity is and what it can be. Within its limits, steampunk can offer a narrative schema and aesthetic with which to address the complex conjunctures and problem-spaces of modernity. In drawing so heavily on the colonial imaginary of Euro-modernity, steampunk is open to the danger of recapitulating colonial ideas and may, as we have argued, be unable to avoid this tendency entirely. But this also positions the genre as a site from which modernity can be critiqued and re-imagined, both in light of and beyond its historical and present problems.

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