Steampunk and the Performance of Gender and Sexuality

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Abstract:
Do performances of gender in steampunk texts and cosplay destabilise or reinforce contemporary ideologies of masculinity and femininity? While claims have been made that neo-Victorian tropes in steampunk are mobilised to both critique Victorian gender norms and dramatise contemporary understanding of gender identity as fluid, this article argues that such performances are contradictory, not because of the motives of the performer but because of contradictions in the wider culture. The depiction of 'action babes' in steampunk texts and costumes in particular represents both an image of an active autonomous woman and the female body as an eroticised object. Unlike the 'hard' image of masculinity in steampunk, images of women combine 'hard' imagery, especially in the use of weapons, and 'soft' imagery in the sexualisation of the female body, resorting to both/and rather than either/or in representations of women. Ultimately the threat of female violence and sexuality is contained within the narrative 'frame' of heteronormative sexuality steampunk texts, films and cosplay.

Keywords: feminism, femininity, gender, masculinity, performance, sexuality, steampunk cosplay, steampunk fiction, steampunk film, violence.

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While steampunk originated as a literary subgenre, it is now an aesthetic that can be found in multiple contexts, including conventions, the web and online social media. As Beth Palmer has argued, "performance and theatricality have become key terms for scholars working across wide reaches of Victorian culture" (Palmer 2011: 1), and 'performativity' is equally powerful as a heuristic in analysing steampunk.[1] The most obvious location for steampunk performances is at conventions, but images of steampunk costumes and written descriptions of bodies and clothing in novels provide a wider frame within which to situate such displays. Steampunk costumes circulate in a media environment of images and texts that may subvert or reinforce the performance of gender and sexuality by the performer. An interpretation of a steampunk performance therefore requires

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attention to the ways in which such images are consumed to assess its relationship to gender and sexual norms in terms of performativity. In this article I intend therefore to contrast steampunk performances at conventions with images that overtly eroticise female costumes and draw attention to the body of the performer. While adopting steampunk costume at conventions has been interpreted as destabilising accepted regimes of gender identity and thus as a form of performativity (Westerman 2014: n.p., Onion 2008: 153), such performances actually reinforce cisgender norms. Furthermore, the images of steampunk costume for women on the web and in social media emphasise sexuality, adding an erotic element to the heteronormative clothing. Overall, performances and images of men and women in steampunk costume reinforce rather than subvert established definitions of gender identity.

Discussions at conventions with participants in steampunk costume in North America reveal a wide array of sources for their steamsonas and outfits, including general knowledge of the Victorian era, Gothic novels, movies, TV shows, web resources such as Pinterest, and graphic novels such as Joe Benitez' comic book series *Lady Mechanika* (2015–present).[2] Many of these sources, particularly examples such as *Lady Mechanika* and the Facebook group 'Girls of Steampunk', represent steampunk through eroticised images of women in costume. The array of costumes on display at steampunk conventions presents a dramatic contrast to such images that emphasise revealing outfits and sexuality. As a post entitled 'Does Sex Really Sell?' on the 'Cogpunk Steamscribe' blog site noted, such eroticised images do not match the demographic or appearance of steampunk convention participants (Cogpunk Steamscribe 2014: n.p.). In response to this post John Naylor wrote of the Asylum Steampunk Festival in the UK that

> we have one peak in the age group 16-24 and a second peak in the age group 46-54. The intervening intervals are well represented too. A straw poll at the recent Comicon in Birmingham which is very heavily under 25 had lots of young women in tight outfits. (Cogpunk Steamscribe 2014: n.p.)[3]

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His comments underscore the presence of an older cadre of participants at steampunk compared to anime conventions, and the relative absence of "young women in tight outfits" such as those to be found on the web.

The 2015 Grand Canadian Steampunk convention in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, corroborated Naylor's experience. One group of women at the convention, for instance, belonged to the Red Hat Society[4] and wore neo-Victorian purple dresses, while one family was attending because the son had learned about steampunk and wanted to come dressed as a mad scientist. Neither of these groups carried any weaponry, and their costumes contrasted with the militarised and hypersexual images of steampunk that can be found in popular culture generally, which emphasise sexuality and violence in ways that contradict the messages of civility and inclusiveness that many attendees cite as the positive features of the subculture. The costumes also aligned sex and gender in that the women wore recognisably female costumes, and men wore conventionally male attire. In the terms used by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999), these were performances rather than performativity in that they did not subvert accepted gender roles.

1.   Performance and Performativity in Steampunk

Butler has admitted that in her discussion of performativity in *Gender Trouble* "my theory sometimes waffles between an understanding of performance as linguistic and casting it as theatrical" (Butler 1999: xxv. This confusion of bodily action and written descriptions can very readily be used as a way to compare steampunk performances across multiple media. As Butler herself goes on to say this 'waffling' suggests that "a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions" (Butler 1999: xxv). Physical acts and representations in words or images can thus both be analysed through performativity. Furthermore, as Salih argues, the "discursively constructed body cannot be separated from the linguistic acts that name and constitute it" (Salih 2007: 61); costumes at steampunk conventions, images circulating on the web and descriptions in texts all construct the performing body through words and clothing.[5]

Butler's theories are most frequently cited as subverting heteronormative regimes and emphasising the precarious and discursive basis of gender identity. However, she also describes the ways in which repeated gender performances serve to ossify heteronormative identities. As

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Butler puts it, "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance", make gender identities appear 'natural' rather than constructed (Butler 1999: 43). The images that circulate around steampunk in visual images and texts are the "regulatory frame" that serves to reinforce gender norms, which those involved in the subculture may wish to actively combat. While steampunk performances may attempt to subvert unquestioned gender binaries, a wider discursive regime naturalises male and female identities as separate and reaffirms their polarisation.

Participants in steampunk conventions are free to create their own steamsonas rather than imitate models from anime or movies; this was one of the advantages of steampunk that was emphasised repeatedly by people who have participated in both subcultures.[6] Unlike other fan cultures, steampunk looks to a historical period for its inspiration, making it analogous to Goth or vampire lifestyles rather than sports or TV show fandom.[7] There is in theory much greater latitude involved in creating the costume for a steamsona than for one based on an anime character. However, while it is common in large cosplay venues based on anime to see gender norms subverted in so-called 'crossplay', steampunk costumes tend to hew to a Victorian dimorphism.[8] At the Grand Canadian Steampunk convention, for example, amongst approximately 1,000 attendees,[9] there was one slender young man in a dress, accompanied by his mother, and one young woman dressed as an engineer with trousers and a grease-smeared face. The rest of the attendees were in costumes that accorded to their gender, with women most often wearing elaborate dresses and men appearing in variations of a suit and waistcoat, adhering to gender-based conventions in Victorian clothing (Entwistle 2000: 156-7). A Google search for images from the 2015 Asylum Steampunk Festival produced a similar range of images, with men wearing trousers and jackets and women attired in dresses or skirts, with both genders sporting goggles and hats, but no evidence of crossplay.[10]

A transgender member of the steampunk community has commented on the cisgender emphasis in steampunk cosplay. Ashley Rogers, writing under the steamsona Lucretia Dearfour, notes that "the media has a certain view of what Steampunk is and aren't [sic] interested in questioning that"; moreover, "anything deviating from that perfect Caucasian/Victorian Steampunk would confuse people, would horrify people, or would lose

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ratings" (Rogers 2012: n.p.). Rogers does say that the situation is improving, but asserts that the general image of steampunk is decidedly cisgendered. Also, while Molly Westerman has claimed that steampunk "screws with gender norms" and that participants subvert such categories (Westerman 2014: n.p.), the photo that heads her essay does not really support this argument in that the two depicted women are wearing corsets and skirts with obviously fake beards (one of which seems to be made out of bottle caps), so that their sex is still easily recognised. Established gender categories are played with but not radically subverted in this photograph. My own experience at conventions has been closer to what Amanda Stock terms a "retrosexual nostalgia" for a time "back when 'men were real men' and 'women were ladies'" rather than steampunk costumes upending gender norms (Stock 2010: n.p.).

Joel Gn has argued that cosplay has been spread globally by "the simultaneous exchange of information, images, and commodities within urban spaces across the globe" (Gn 2011: 584), and the same can be said of steampunk as a subgenre of cosplay. Gn is particularly interested in the implications of crossplay, but argues that in such apparent gender-bending the body is still marked by signs that denote a specific sex, even when the costumes reference nonhumans such as elves (Gn 2011: 589). This argument underlines how, whatever the intentions of the performer, the costume will be 'read' in conventional gender terms and be placed within existing narrative structures regardless of the sex of the body underneath the clothing. The body is constructed by the performance and costume according to wider gender regimes whether the performer's sex is visible or not. The way the text or costume is consumed, in other words, may reassert heteronormative identity because of the narrative frame around the performance. Quoting Rosalind Morris, Gn argues that "cosplay should be viewed as a practice that locates the movement of the individual within a 'systemised world of collective schemes and images'", so that the media context of the performance influences how it is received (Gn 2011: 589). Similarly, Alexis Truong has argued that "because playing engaged different frames of experience, playing with the costume sometimes meant very different things, even inside of cosplay" (Truong 2013: 41), with different interpretations of a costume most likely depending on the assumptions of the viewer. There may well be a discrepancy therefore between a steampunk performance and the images with which it is associated in other media.

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Furthermore, in steampunk costumes sex and gender are most often aligned, so that the performance reinforces rather than subverts the gender identity of the performer. Even when fairy wings or elfish ears are included as part of the outfit, as in a steampunk elf costume, the gender of the performer is evident (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Steampunk Elf, courtesy of the photographer SimonaCosplay/ Simona Dahlborg; model: Emelie Åhage, 10 May 2016.

The steampunk elf, despite the nonhuman ears, is still identifiably female, as is the case with steampunk fairy costumes where wings are combined with skirts. Presumably an elf could be any gender, but a Google search for 'steampunk elf' results almost entirely in images of women in recognisably female costumes, including all the usual steampunk signifiers such as

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goggles, corsets, anachronistic machinery, and weapons. Goggles and weapons are the constants that unite male and female steampunk costumes and are the only accessories that seem to subvert conventional Victorian dimorphism in clothing. In this sense, steampunk costumes seem to represent a nostalgia for past gender norms in their adoption of neo-Victorian attire.[11] Far from disrupting either Victorian or contemporary gender norms, steampunk texts and costumes often enact a recuperation of what Butler terms "the public regulation of fantasy though the surface politics of the body" (Butler 1999: 417). However, as Milly Williamson notes in her study of Goths and vampires, nostalgic costumes often have an ambiguous relationship to femininity, enacting a simultaneous rejection of contemporary gender norms and a nostalgia for clothing "which nevertheless continues to embrace notions of femininity by looking to the past for sartorial inspiration" (Williamson 2001: 150). Such costumes therefore give off very mixed messages.

Both steampunk texts and cosplay create imaginative spaces within which it is theoretically possible to play not only with current identities but also with those from the past.[12] As Jerome de Groot argues, this recycling of history can be placed in performance theory terms insofar as "the postmodern play involved […] might seem to undermine any fixed conception of 'historical' or 'social' identity" (de Groot 2009: 106). The cautious "might seem" in de Groot's formulation points to a tension within steampunk between play and anachronism and the gesture of invoking an established historical category like the Victorian era with its attendant stereotypes. In its playful invocation of the nineteenth century, steampunk could be accused of being an adult form of childlike 'dress ups' rather than part of a social critique, because it does not destabilise Victorian gender categories. Kate Mitchell, by contrast, takes the position that the repurposing of Victorian fashion is in fact a postmodern critique of historical knowledge (Mitchell 2010: 3). However, I would argue that both readings are only partially correct in that re-creating the Victorian era through performance is (at least potentially) an act of resistance to contemporary consumer culture, but one that also signals nostalgia for Victorian gender dimorphism in clothing.

Overall, the role of both gender and sexuality in the performance of steampunk identities is contradictory, not just because of contradictions within steampunk itself but also because of conflicting representations of

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gender roles in the wider culture within which the performance takes place. The gendered choices made in texts and in costumes reflect the evolving and yet still troubled relationship between gender and sexuality in popular culture, especially where women are shown holding weapons. Eroticised images of 'weaponised' women in steampunk costume are particularly contradictory in their performance of gender, because they incorporate signs of both stereotypical femininity and masculinity in an uneasy mix of gender and sexual identities.

2.   Steampunk 'Action Babes' with Guns
Marc O'Day has termed women featured in Hollywood films, who combine the use of weapons with sexuality, as 'action babes'. O'Day describes the process by which women in action movies can "function simultaneously as the action subject of the narrative and the object of eroticised visual spectacle" (O'Day 2004: 203). Such heroines take on "active masculine qualities" that are countered by stressing their "sexuality and availability in conventional feminine terms" (O'Day 2004: 203). Female sexuality is emphasised as a counterweight to the masculine connotations of 'action' and violent aggression in such movies. These conventionally male attributes are conveyed in steampunk performances by a woman carrying a gun, as can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, where the guns connote agency, power and adventure. O'Day's supple analysis does not posit masculine and feminine as binaries but maps the ways in which the 'soft' body of women as spectacle is combined with the 'hard' attributes of masculinity (O'Day 2004: 205). The eroticisation of the woman's body softens the potential subversion of gender roles by the inclusion of such 'hard' objects as weapons and counterbalances the threat of an active violent femininity.

        Furthering O'Day's analysis, I would argue that the revealing clothing in many female steampunk costumes reinforces the identification of women with the eroticised female body. As Fairman Rogers notes, "women (and girls) coming into the scene for the first time see this predominantly sexualised costume aesthetic as the essential steampunk look. They believe that their inclusion in the steampunk scene requires sexualisation" (Rogers 2014: n.p.). The emphasis on sexualisation in some online steampunk imagery draws attention to the unclothed female body and connotes vulnerability and accessibility to the male gaze. This would not be a

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problem if men were eroticised as well, but there are no partially clothed male equivalents in Steampunk, suggesting a distinct gender imbalance.

Figure 2. Steampunk costume by Ecajoe;
photo shoot with SJ Brink by Joe Alfano,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Steampunk_Shoot.jpg.

        The above photo of a gunslinger in a bustier, with its combination of 'hard' and 'soft' imagery, used to be featured on the Wikipedia page for Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* (2009). The image contrasts with the representation of gender in the novel itself, because it portrays an 'action babe', whereas the text has a completely different kind of heroine. *Boneshaker* has been described by one reviewer as featuring a "gun-toting bad-assed heroine" (DasGupta 2014: 1), while another, Cassie Bergman, refers to the protagonist, Briar Wilkes, as a "steampunk New Woman" and "a smart and helpful warrior" (Bergman 2013: 30). Yet the portrayal of Briar is in many ways a refreshing change from the usual steampunk stereotype. Priest's heroine has a working-class job in a water treatment

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factory with a body and clothing to correspond to her place in the social scale:

> Without the coat, her body had a lean look to it − as if she worked too long, and ate too little or too poorly. Her gloves and tall brown boots were caked in filth from the plant, and she was wearing pants like a man [...] she was thirty-five and didn't look a minute younger. (Priest 2009: 22)

Wearing "pants like a man" and dirty, Briar presents a contrast to the glamorous figure on the Wikipedia page, who has bared shoulders and perfectly coiffed hair. In the novel, Briar is even asked, "why do you dress like a man?" (Priest 2009: 211). The question underscores her distance from the 'working girls' with whom she is at first confused, while also highlighting that she is not represented in terms of her sexuality (Priest 2009: 186). Priest's novel features a steampunk woman not as an air ship pirate or adventurer but in a grimy, low status job that contradicts the image on the Wikipedia page devoted to her novel − which may be the reason that the image has since be removed.

However, Briar is also defined within the narrative by tropes that locate her specifically as a woman, mother and wife, in contrast to the male characters in the novel, who seem free of any familial attachments. Briar's entry into the walled-off section of Seattle in *Boneshaker* is impelled by her search for her son Zeke and is variously made easier or more difficult by her connection to her deceased father, Maynard Wilkes, and her former husband, Leviticus Blue. Indeed, at the beginning of her journey she dresses in her father's clothes, including a large belt buckle with the initials MW, by which she is recognised as her father's daughter (Priest 2009: 76-77). Priest's description of Briar putting on clothing from her father, which is too large for her, emphasises her donning of a patriarchal legacy that exceeds her own status as an independent woman. Her journey in the end helps to reconcile her to her father and his legacy as well as to affirm her role as a mother. Hence her subversive potential as an active adventurous woman is contained within a narrative that defines her as a mother and daughter. This is analogous to the way in which 'softer' imagery is used to counter images of violence in steampunk costumes.

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Male steampunk costumes, by contrast with the images of women on the web, continue the fashion of 'men in black' (or perhaps 'men in brown') described by John Harvey in his study of why Victorian men wore such dark clothing. Victorian gender binaries were reinforced through clothing at ceremonial occasions with "the men in black, the women mostly in white", while the clothing itself linked men to work and the public sphere and women to the domestic realm (Harvey 1995: 15, 35). The men in steampunk images found on the web wear layers of dark or brown clothing, often in the form of suits, which are a continuing symbol of male power,[13] and display no exposed skin. They also, of course, carry guns. They are defined as inhabiting the public sphere and as being, like Priest's male figures, free to pursue action and adventure. None of them seem to have any child-rearing obligations.[14]

Men in steampunk costume are encased in a figurative, and sometimes literal, armour in contrast to images of women with areas of bare skin. The emphasis on women's bodies in such images conflicts with connotations of action and adventure conveyed by accessories such as guns and goggles. This same contradiction can be seen in the steampunk 'action babe' featured in Joe Benitez's *Lady Mechanika* graphic novel. Lady Mechanika, a hybrid human/machine with mechanical arms, is adept at violence. The plot revolves around her search for her origins and her battles against various evil forces, including the arms merchant Lord Blackpool. In its openness to the fusion of the human and mechanical, *Lady Mechanika* and its protagonist would seem to bear out the description of steampunk as a "cyborg phenomenon" (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 26), following Donna Haraway's 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' in its argument that technology can be empowering for women. While Lady Mechanika battles and vanquishes all her foes thanks to the power of mechanised limbs, her costume and body reinforce her femininity and sexuality. The men depicted in the graphic novel are not anatomically transformed and are shown fully clothed, whereas Lady Mechanika appears in one panel in lingerie, fondling one of the weapons in her arsenal in a striking juxtaposition of sexuality and violence (Benitez 2015: n.p.).

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Figure 3. Joe Benitez, Lady Mechanika, August 2010,
reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Lady Mechanika is eroticised in the same way as the 'action babes' described by O'Day. This is reinforced by the use of the model Kato (Kate Lambert) as the basis for her face and body.[15] The character in the graphic novel is based on a real woman, but her body is a fetishised version of the model, because she is depicted wearing shirts that are a couple of sizes too small to emphasise the size of her breasts, and an extremely tight corset to emphasise an incredibly narrow waist, in an exaggerated version of the model's own neo-Victorian costumes (many of which she designs herself). For the image of Lady Mechanika, Kato's body has been modified and certain parts of her anatomy exaggerated in translation into a graphic image. She is a steampunk version of the Barbie doll, which is equally anatomically improbable. As Kelly David Brownell and Melissa A. Napolitano have shown, both Barbie and Ken dolls distort reality by presenting body images that are impossible for both genders to emulate (Brownell and Napolitano 1994: 295).

Kato herself is a steampunk entrepreneur of the erotic. Her web site 'Steam Girl' provides "titillating content" for "the boudoir connoisseur" of her steampunk outfits in various photo collections (Kato n.d.: n.p.): the

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deliberately archaic use of "boudoir" gives the hyper-sexualised, at times quasi pornographic images a neo-Victorian veneer. Lady Mechanika's real-life counterpart therefore is in the business of steampunk soft porn. The site offers membership for a month or year for access to more sexually explicit images than those available for free in 'teaser' sequences on the web site. Kato dons typical steampunk outfits in a sequence such as 'Victoria Cross', wearing a bustier, goggles and hat in a neo-Victorian setting in front of a piano where the sheet music for a song is visible (see Fig. 4).
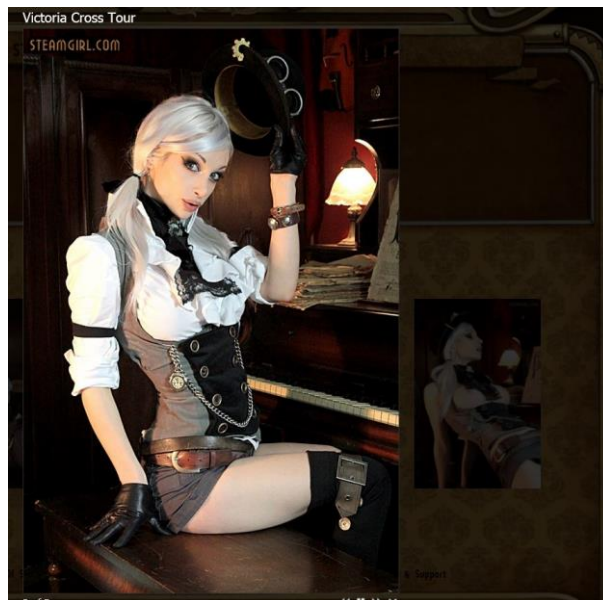

Figure 4. Kato as 'Victoria Cross' on www.steamgirl.com, 13 August 2015, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Kato emphasises the 'soft' side of steampunk erotic imagery to be found on the web and turns it into neo-Victorian soft porn, where the settings showcase retrosexuality designed to titillate the viewer. However, hers is just a more extreme example of a general eroticisation of female steampunk costumes on the web.

3.   Performing Steampunk Sexuality: The Case of the Corset
The combination of steampunk and eroticism on such sites as Kato's 'Steam Girl' web site or 'Lady Clankington's Cabinet of Carnal Curiosities' (see

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http://www.littledeathray.com) foregrounds the problem of how to evaluate sexuality in steampunk performances and imagery. Steampunk has often objectified women in its adaptation of Victorian texts and costumes, dating back to William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990).[16] Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) serves as a palimpsest for *The Difference Engine*, which adopts the characters of Sybil Gerard and her father Walter and gives them radically different life histories, in keeping with the transformed Victorian era. In Disraeli's novel, Sybil Gerard is a central figure in the political conflict between the Chartist agitators and the factory owners. While Disraeli uses Sybil as a largely mute symbolic resolution for a potentially revolutionary situation and involves her in a conventional romance with the wealthy Charles Egremont, she is still one of the most important figures in the novel and the eponymous heroine. In contrast, *The Difference Engine* turns her into a 'dollymop' and a secondary character who is there largely as a companion to 'Dandy' Mick Radley. Marie Luise Kohlke has termed this aspect of neo-Victorian fiction 'sexsationalism' and has unpacked the prurient motives that can lie behind such depictions in neo-Victorian texts:

> We extract politically incorrect pleasure from what now appears comic, perverse, or ethically unimaginable as a focus of desire. We enjoy neo-Victorian fiction in part to feel debased or outraged, to revel in degradation, *reading for defilement*. By projecting illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress. (Kohlke 2008: 346, original emphasis)

The depictions of women in *The Difference Engine* corroborate Kohlke's assertion that the neo-Victorian novel "replaces the seraglio with nineteenth century backstreets, brothels, and bedrooms" (Kohlke 2008: 353). Kato uses the same technique in her 'boudoir' vocabulary on 'Steam Girl'. In *The Difference Engine* the term 'dollymop' serves a similar function, turning prostitution into a historical and quaint performance that we can view with a condescending and enlightened attitude.

The debate over women's bodies and sexuality in steampunk has played out most overtly in relation to corsets. Authors such as Amy Montz

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assert that "corsets *are* sexy; bustles *are* beautiful" (Montz 2011: 103, original emphasis), and Julie Anne Taddeo argues that "the steampunk corset worn outside rather than underneath the weighty Victorian-styled clothes, rejects any notion of the garment as a 'straitjacket'" (Taddeo 2013: 45). Undoubtedly such clothing allows women to perceive themselves as "more sensual, sexual and confident individuals", which O'Donnel sees as part of a general empowerment and rejection of styles dictated by men (O'Donnel 1999: 185). In her 'Corset Manifesto', Katherine Casey also sees the corset as liberating, hailing "a world of endless potential" as women "no longer trapped by standards that crushed ribs and spirits" are free to reinvent themselves through steampunk in general and corsets in particular (Casey 2009: 62). Such comments posit the corset as a sign of liberation from conventional norms of femininity; however, corsets are also frequently used to eroticise costumes, especially in images on the web.

While Taddeo overtly rejects the notion that wearing corsets implies a kind of Victoria's Secret "sexy little thing" imagery (Taddeo 2013: 45), it emphatically draws attention to the shape of a woman's body and modifies its appearance in a way that comparable men's Victorian-styled clothing does not. Some images of women in corsets available through a Google search under 'steampunk' draw attention to their breasts in ways that complicate claims for wearing one as 'liberation'. Lady Clankington's 'defensive corset' is a case in point because of the way in which it emphasises her cleavage (see Fig. 5 below); in addition to this corset there are images on the internet of her bound and in soft porn bondage scenarios with a man in a Victorian explorer costume, suggesting that she sees such clothing as directly connected with sexuality. Taddeo notes this conjunction, but does not comment on its implications (see Taddeo 2013: 54). While on one hand, Lady Clankington's corset would corroborate assertions of empowerment thanks to its mechanical arms, on the other, the bondage images are associated with domination and men as having power in sexual acts. The presence of the explorer costume also raises troubling associations with imperialism and subjugation raised by Diana M. Pho and Jaymee Goh in their analysis of steampunk costume that includes pith helmets (Pho and Goh 2012: 104)

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Figure 5. Julie Ray Photography, Lady Clankington's Defensive Corset,
25 February 2014. Reproduced with kind permission of Sarah Hunter/Lady Clankington,
littledeathray@gmail.com; wardrobe by Brute Force Studios;
hair and make-up by Debra Weite.

Again, there is a contrast between male and female costume in images such as those featuring corsets in that only women wear them. While most attention is focused on corsets and tight lacing for women in the Victorian era, there were also corsets for men as advertised for sale (see Valerie Steele 1996: 73). However, I have yet to see a male steampunk costume that included a corset worn as outerwear, even though this would be possible in a playful subversion of Victorian gender norms. Yet even if a man were to wear a corset outside his costume, it would not have the same meaning as a woman wearing one as outerwear. In the Victorian period, as today, men in corsets were controversial, with those who advocated tight lacing for girls finding it "rather a disgusting idea" that men should shape their bodies in the same way as women, a prejudice that continues even in the fetish community where corset-wearing men are in a minority (Steele

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1996: 72, 61-62).[17] The resistance to men wearing corsets is connected to the image of "helpless women with small waists" as erotic objects (Steele 1996: 81), an association also noted by other commentators (see, e.g., Entwistle 2000: 195-196), which would contradict the action-seeking adventurous persona that many men in steampunk costume wish to convey as airship pirates or explorers in pith helmets. By contrast, it is common for women to modify the shape of their bodies by using constricting undergarments so as to play men's roles in cosplay.[18]

The contrast between eroticised imagery in steampunk at conventions and in a wider universe of images on the web is nowhere more stark than in the case of the corset. Many women at steampunk conventions are not wearing tight-laced corsets but looser bustiers that do not constrict them. As Pho and Goh argue, women in steampunk feel that there is wide acceptance of many different body types, not just the slim-waisted fantasy of both Victorian and contemporary tight lacing (Pho and Goh 2012: 193). The women in bustiers at steampunk conventions may be calling attention to their bodies by wearing underwear as outerwear, but it is more to reject commercial imagery that emphasises the thin body types like those of Lady Mechanika or Kato than as eroticisation.

For many women at conventions therefore, wearing steampunk costumes, including corsets as outerwear, is not an eroticisation of the body but a dramatisation of an outsider status and a rejection of more conventional consumer models of dress and beauty. Steampunk thus overlaps with Goth, Lolita and vampire lifestyles. As Frenchy Lunning says, steampunk, like Lolita style which takes its model from nineteenth-century girls' fashion, "allows the performance of an imagined luxury and refinement" and a rejection of mass-produced clothing in that many adherents make their own outfits (Lunning 2013: 129).In her study of the female vampire lifestyle, Maria Mellins cites steampunk as a parallel in its fusion of fantasy, clothing from the nineteenth century, and accessories from the present and links wearing vampire-inspired outfits to the simultaneous desire to stand out and emphasise an outsider status from mainstream culture (Mellins 2010: 144, 140-141). As in steampunk, in vampire lifestyle wearing a corset is a means of empowerment, with one interviewee saying that "I feel very feminine, yet not weak or repressed in any way" (Mellins 2010: 137). The corset, the interviewee explains, "gives a woman power as she becomes the object of attention because wearing a corset is unusual in

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this day and age, or because she develops womanly curves which make her more desirable and enviable" (Mellins 2010: 137). Although Mellins does not comment on this, the corset here is an ambiguous signifier in that it makes this wearer feel more powerful, but also emphasises the shape of her body and her sex, thus reinforcing the male/female binary in clothing. The interviewee does not specify for whom the corset makes her more desirable, but presumably the 'envy' originates from women who do not have similar curves, and the 'desire' from men reading the corset in sexual terms. The corset is thus an ambiguous signifier that hovers on the border between performed empowerment and the eroticisation of women's bodies.

The situation is complicated because sexuality is both a source of power for women and a means of objectification. Sexuality itself is not the problem here but rather how it is perceived in the wider culture and refracted through sexism. A fine line exists between appreciation and objectification, and it is often not clear on which side of the equation attention falls when men look at such costumes. Such performances of sexuality should not be considered within an either/or scenario "as simply *either* good and empowering – *or* as bad and disempowering" as Brown argues in connection with eroticized images (Brown 2011: 9, original emphasis). The same image can be seen in one context as sexploitation, but when co-opted by a female cosplayer can also be read as empowering; this is not an either/or question but depends on how the image is interpreted by the viewer.

4.   Consuming Steampunk Costumes: Sexism and Consent
Wider misogynist and sexist attitudes may well be brought to bear by those viewing a steampunk costume. The central issue here is that "(female) characters are just as likely to be circumscribed within fixed boundaries dictated by male fantasy and fetishism as they are to transcend these boundaries" in cosplay (Kazumi and Yoshida 2011: 25). The 'Costumes are not Consent' campaign reflects the problem that some male viewers interpret cosplay as an invitation to touch, grope or otherwise transgress the normal boundaries of accepted behaviour. As Sarah Corse and Jaime Hartless show, some male viewers assume that costumes or images are constructed for the heterosexual masculine gaze as the 'natural' and unexamined default (Corse and Hartless 2015: 11). These performances can therefore be appropriated in what Sara Salih, after Jacques Derrida, calls

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"citational grafting" (Salih 2007: 63). All signs that can be placed between quotation marks, such as 'sex' or 'gender' for instance, can be appropriated in ways that the author did not intend; in parallel, costumes, like words, can be appropriated in ways that the performer did not envisage and used as a pretext for unwelcome touching. Therefore, while a steampunk performance may not be intended as sexual, it can be 'read' by others as signalling sexuality through citational grafting. This appropriation is a particular problem for women attending conventions where performances intended as displays of imaginative costume are re-inscribed as sexually provocative and as invitations to inappropriate touching by male viewers.

The 'Costumes are not Consent' campaign reflects the way in which the costume and the body are confused when women wear outfits that can be perceived as sexual. This was shown recently by an exchange on the 'Girls of Steampunk' Facebook site when Mike Syrfitt, a vendor, tried to sell a costume that he had created for a reduced price of $400, using a woman to model the outfit. The post prompted responses such as "Does she come 'with it? If so I will take her", "Didn't think selling women was legal any more but hell 400 sounds like a deal", and "I'll take her! Or were you talking about the costume?" (Syrfitt 2015). The seller responded that he appreciated the banter, but that he was trying to sell a custom-made steampunk outfit. By contrast the images of a men in steampunk fashion for sale on the corresponding 'Men of Steampunk' Facebook site only elicit praise for the costumes, with no reference to the male body. The banter on 'Girls of Steampunk' shows how the woman's costume and her body are seen as one and the same, with both being open to sexually suggestive commentary. At conventions the commentary can also include inappropriate touching as the same identification of the body of the performer and the costume occurs.

This issue has been explored in terms of 'geek culture' by Courtney Stoker in addressing the question "does displaying the sexiness of fangirls benefit or demean them? […] are they liberating themselves or pandering to men?" in a panel discussion at a meeting of the Popular Culture Association in 2012 (Stoker 2012: n.p.). As she points out, the panel in which she participated framed the question in terms of individual choices and thus failed to take into account "the complexities of women's positions in geek culture, the politics of cosplay, or how cultural ideals of beauty influence women's fashion decisions and choices" (Stoker 2012: n.p.). Women in

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geek culture are usually regarded as 'decorations' in a heavily male dominated environment, "which means that most of the women 'celebrated' in geek cultures are conventionally beautiful, thin, white, abled cis women who position themselves as sexy objects for male geek consumption' (Stoker 2012: n.p.). This kind of sexism is not limited to 'geek culture' or cosplay alone, but is symptomatic of wider cultural attitudes, illustrating why Stoker's presentation of the problems of 'self-objectification' can be seen in steampunk steamsonas as well. Similarly, Corse and Hartless discuss the "social structural context within which fe/male nudity and sexuality are constructed and evaluated" and determined by wider codes that reinforce heteronormative values (Corse and Hartless 2015: 11). The 'Costumes are not Consent' campaign underscores how, even if a performance in steampunk costume was meant to subvert gender norms, it can be re-inscribed within heteronormative values and interpreted as signalling sexual availability rather than empowerment by the male gaze.

Steampunk for many women enacts a resistance to wider consumer culture through the adoption of deliberately retro Victorian clothes and the DIY objects that accessorise them. However, steampunk is also implicated in that same wider consumer culture in which, for instance, Walmart has for sale a range of 'Adult Steamgirl Sexy Costumes' that commodify the aesthetic and link it to sexuality. As Matt Hills has argued in the context of fan culture, what he terms the 'cult body' is "neither a product of an entirely volitional subject, nor is it the product of such a subject trapped in a total consumer code" but rather the site of convergence of these forces (Hills 2002: 168). In steampunk the performer may intend to enact a rejection of normative gender roles and consumer culture, but once the performance is appropriated by other regimes of signification it will come to represent heteronormative or pro-consumer messages that are read in totally different ways due to citational grafting.

Steampunk performances, whether they take place at conventions, in films or in fiction, are ultimately fantasies. As Nicolle Lamerichs has argued, a cosplay convention is a "space of imagination in which affect for fiction is played out and also emotionally channelled", thereby "becom[ing] a strong platform for expressing and constructing one's sexuality and gender" (Lamerichs 2015: 272). For those attending a steampunk convention their costume, as well as being a way of performing identity and sexuality, is a way to create intimate bonds with others in their subculture

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and to perform their distance from mainstream images of the body and clothing from which they dissent. Their performances create a provisional community and define an 'inside' and an 'outside' for their group, even though it may at times be difficult to define these boundaries, as shown by controversies over what qualifies as an 'authentic' steampunk costume. Steampunk performances at a convention signify belonging and a shared fantasy, but once removed from this context the costume can be exploited for very different ends. This leads to the disparity between the demographic and costumes at steampunk conventions and the wider universe of images noted in the discussion of 'Does Sex Really Sell?' on the 'Cogpunk Steamscribe' blog site.

The performance of steampunk in film or fiction therefore has a radically different meaning because of citational grafting and the context of consumption of the image. In fiction a steampunk plot implicitly cites history, previous narratives and the conventions of science fiction. Given science fiction's masculinist tendencies, shown most graphically in novels like the *The Difference Engine*, this imports misogynist attitudes into portrayals of women that writers such as Priest are trying to counter. Online and in movies, the portrayal of women in steampunk is heavily influenced by the 'action babe' trope in Hollywood films in which violence and weaponry are combined with skimpy outfits, most notably in examples such as *Sucker Punch* (2011). Finally, there are the expectations of the audience that may or may not match the intentions of the performer or writer, and certainly don't always do so as evident from the 'Costumes are not Consent' campaign.

Ultimately the performance of gender in steampunk currently reinforces neo-Victorian dimorphism through the body and clothing. While its status as fantasy would suggest that any combination of body and clothing might be possible, including dresses or corsets for men, at steampunk conventions men are easily recognisable as neo-Victorian gentlemen and women as ladies, reinforcing heteronormative assumptions and gender binaries. This contradicts Rebecca Onion's claim that in steampunk "the ability to manipulate machinery allows [women] to step outside of Victorian gender roles" (Onion 2008: 153); conventional definitions of women's roles are reasserted in steampunk costumes despite machinery and the ever-present weaponry.

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Figure 6. Belly dancers performing at the Grand Canadian Steampunk convention
(photograph by the author).

The gender imbalance in steampunk is further signalled by the ubiquitous presence of belly dancers; every steampunk convention that I have attended featured belly dancers, including two separate troupes at the 2015 Grand Canadian Steampunk convention (see Fig. 6). There is nothing wrong with belly dancing *per se*, apart perhaps from its rather dubious connection with Victorian Orientalism,[19] but there is a definite bias in terms of performing bodies. Belly dancing itself is the subject of a debate comparable to that surrounding corsets as to whether the performance represents "the body as a site of pleasure and discovery" or "the sexualised use of the female body and sexual commodification" (Maira 2005: 323). While it is considered unexceptional that women should perform belly dancing at steampunk conventions, there is no masculine equivalent that draws attention to male performing bodies. The belly dancer costume emphasises the woman's body in performance, especially her hips, whereas the men watching (like the man in the top hat in the audience) are usually fully covered by their costumes, which connote male power rather than sexuality. Perhaps one day there will be greater gender equivalence if steampunk conventions start to include male pole dancing, with men in skimpy outfits proving their prowess and desirability on stage before an admiring audience. Such performances would eroticise men's bodies in the

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same way that women's are currently exhibited in belly dancing. Until that day, however, there remains a distinct disparity in steampunk performances of gender and sexuality.

Notes

1. 'Performativity' encompasses gender roles enacted in everyday contexts as well as performances that are deliberately staged and implies a subversion of gender norms, whereas 'performance' carries with it no necessary implication of gender critique.
2. My experience is restricted to Canada and the United States, and the same references may or may not be invoked in other countries. However, given the global reach of the internet and of the Hollywood movie industry it seems likely that steampunk performances in other countries draw upon the same universe of images.
3. Naylor declined to reveal specific demographic information when asked via the blog site.
4. For information on the Red Hat Society, see https://www.redhatsociety.com/.
5. In a parallel argument Tracy Morison and Catriona Macleod use the concept of 'narrative performance' as a way of analysing both identity produced discursively and the way in which a wider social context is invoked in the performance (Morison and Macleod 2013: 570).
6. My information is drawn from personal interviews with Jennifer Dawn James (12 November 2015), Jessica Dixon (16 November 2015), and Solitaire Cline (23 November 2015) in response to the question 'What are the differences between cosplay and steampunk?'.
7. For a discussion of whether 'fandom' itself is a coherent category, see Jenkins 1992: 286 and Duffett 2013: 3.
8. See, for instance, the Brolita version of the Lolita cosplay style for a male version of a female-identified costume, or Bronies, the male fans of the *My Little Pony* TV series.
9. The attendance figure was provided by the convention organisers via private message. No further demographic information was available.
10. The Google search was conducted on 13 November 2015, employing the search terms 'Asylum steampunk UK 2015'.
11. A similar nostalgic trend regarding gender representations in fiction has been remarked by Christian Gutleben in one of the earliest critical works devoted to

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neo-Victorianism, *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001).

12. The theatre is also a (somewhat neglected) space in which the Victorian period is being re-imagined to critique contemporary society through performance, as Benjamin Poore argues (Poore 2012: 2-6).

13. See Kuchta 2002 on the history of the three-piece suit and its link to gender, capital and class.

14. See, for example, http://fashionablygeek.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Steampunk-Group.jpg?f187b0.

15. Joe Benitez cited Kato as his inspiration in an interview on the 'Ether Emporium' web site, but unfortunately the site no longer exists. However, he cited the same connection (in French) in an interview on *Planete DB* 28 January 2014 (see http://www.planetebd.com/interview/joe-benitez/617.html).

16. Herbert Sussman and Patrick Jagoda have analysed *The Difference Engine* in terms of surveillance, history and agency, but have not addressed gender in the novel (see Sussman 1994; Jagoda 2010).

17. The same prejudice against men in women's costumes can be found in Japanese Lolita cosplay, as Galbraith has noted (Galbraith 2013: 12).

18. Jessica Dixon pointed out as much in a personal interview on 16 November 2015.

19. Belly dancing today is also implicated in 'Neo-Orientalism' (Maira 2005: 319).

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