

Review

Steampunk Aesthetics, Countercultural Ethics, and Victorian Genres: Subverting Steampunk Ethos in Margaret Killjoy's "A Country of Ghosts" (2014)

Adam Briedik

Department of English and American Studies, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia.
Tel. +47 93965671, E-mail: a.briedik@centrum.sk

Accepted 10 May 2024

This paper explored typological permutations of steampunk ethos in Margaret Killjoy's "A Country of Ghosts" (2014). The novel by a transfeminist authors manifests some common generic elements of the genre such as idiosyncratic aesthetics of the particular chronotope, techno-iconography of industrial revolution, countercultural character of punk, and historical and intertextual referentiality. Whereas the essay mostly focused on previous generic and typological studies of the genre, it simultaneously employed other paradigmatic examples of the genre. The aim of this study was to address how Killjoy's novel not only manifests the generic expectations of steampunk, but radically subverts them.

KEYWORDS: A Country of Ghosts, Margaret Killjoy, steampunk, neo-Victorianism,

Cite This Article As: Briedik, A. (2024). Steampunk Aesthetics, Countercultural Ethics, and Victorian Genres: Subverting Steampunk Ethos in Margaret Killjoy's "A Country of Ghosts". *Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult.* 12(2): 56-64

INTRODUCTION

Taking into consideration the growing body of science fiction—its various "post-genre" and "slipstream" texts that combine various conventions—most people recognize the idiosyncratic aesthetics and techno-iconography of steampunk.¹ While the first stories constituting a precedent for the particular epithet appeared in the early 70s, steampunk has gained popularity only in the recent decades.² While one could possibly consider the genre an ephemeral consumer trend, the fact remains that the peripheral subgenre of literature has transformed into a vibrant and thriving subculture with an artisanal ethos, all-encompassing inclusiveness, and a wider countercultural presence. Recently, the genre has even begun to catch the attention of academia and several steampunk blogging

sites such as *Beyond Victoriana: A Multicultural Perspective on Steampunk* and *Silver Goggles* have put some texts under an explorative scrutiny.

This essay explores a brilliant novel by a transfeminine author and anarchist activist, Margaret Killjoy; *A Country of Ghosts* (2014) is an earnest novel set in a secondary world, and it has been described by Anna Gilarek (2017) as a sort of steampunk narrative belonging to the critical eutopia tradition. This paper argues that Killjoy's novel manifests a peculiar yet subversive violation of the genre as a coherent generic category. Thus, it begins, as is perhaps advisable for any study of a particular text from the perspective of typology, by defining it. The paper takes into account not only the existing studies on the genre, but its genealogy as well; moreover, the analysis considers the generic corpus of texts in a cooperative pursuit to define the novel. Despite the possibility for

opposite assumptions, rather than being an accumulation of steampunk generic expectations, the novel is a peculiar manifestation steampunk, and the presence of its ethos is debatable at best since the narrative does not include the typologically symptomatic hyperbolization of techno-fantasies, and the presence of extra-textual and intertextual referents. On the other hand, her invocations of steampunk incorporate an overt exploration of ideologies with the antithetical positioning on the political spectrum.

STEAMPUNK AESTHETICS

The term steampunk was popularized by Kevin W. Jeter, in a letter sent to *Locus* magazine along a copy of his novel *Morlock Night* (1979) in 1987 while searching for a general term for a “fantasy triumvirate” of works by himself, Tim Power, and James P. Blaylock’s, which all, in “[a] gonzo-historical manner”, imitated the aesthetics of Victorian England as well as its fiction. Jeter (1987) wrote: “Personally, I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term [...] Something based on the appropriate technology of the era; like “steam-punks,” perhaps...”. His understanding of aesthetics is not in a philosophical sense, but as a visual design that merges the Victorian style with retro-futuristic/anachronistic versions of technology.

The discussion on the etymology of the term steampunk is inextricably linked with other portmanteaux; the neologism was introduced as an analogy to the popular science-fiction subgenre known as “cyberpunk”—popularized and established around the same time by William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* (1984). In contrast, Gibson focuses on the hyper-modern technological advancements, in the near future and their entailing effects upon humanity. Cavallaro described cyberpunk as a “combination of technoscientific themes and urban subcultures inspired by a punk sensibility, its focus on invasive technologies and its dystopian depiction of a junk-infested world of losers and loonies” (2000, p.xvii) that visually translates in dystopian futures plagued with cyborgs and hackers clad in black leather, with biotech and high-informatics advancements in a decaying urban setting. Texts that move beyond the historical setting of Victorian age to the decades marked by the global military conflicts are often referred to as “dieselpunk.”³

Ever since its inception it has been under constant re-evaluation and there has been an ongoing debate among scholars, writers, and readers about steampunk’s definition. The bulk of secondary literature concerning the genre emerged almost two decades later. Scholars have not always been unanimous in their efforts to define the genre—for example, while Priest (2008, p.12) attempts to explain steampunk’s interest in what was described in

Weird Tales as a “retro-tech SF via a Victorian sensibility”; Nevins’ (2011) definition of steampunk, as a spectrum of constitutive tropes and motifs rather than a coherent and discrete literary subgenre, is ultimately a more critically profitable approach; and when Perchson (2012) conducted an elaborative analysis on the genre’s tropes, he narrowed down the main characteristics of steampunk to three traits: neo-Victorianism, retro-futurism, and techno-fantasies.

Killjoy’s novel is a first person account of a journalist, Dimos Horacki; his assignment by “the Chamber of Expansion” is to report on the colonial appropriation of land and resources (iron and coal) by the Empire of Borolia in the mountain region of Cerr through series of propagandist articles for *Borol Review* titled “The Man Beneath the Top Hat” about an enigmatic Borolian war hero: Dolan Wilder (Killjoy 2021, p.1). However, “His Majesty’s Imperial Army”, he is embedded in, stumbles upon something more than marauding outlaws and rebelling homesteaders, and the narrator quickly discovers the Cerracs are, in fact, a home to a country unlike any other: Hron. According to Killjoy, the narration of her novel is “[...] set roughly 150 years in the past” (Killjoy 2021, p.207); thus, the temporal displacement of the narration corresponds with the particular zeitgeist common for the steampunk’s fantastical reimagining of the historical: Victorian and Edwardian period (1837–1910). Killjoy completely derives the narrative’s visual modelling from the historical pre-text: fashion, mannerism, technology, social divisions, political ideology; every cultural aspect is firmly grounded in the post-1850s England and there is substantial evidence that they all correspond with the specific chronotope. Killjoy foment the aesthetics throughout the entirety of her narration, but she tries to establish the particular allure to the era’s pathos with her reader mainly in the sartorial section since most of the attire includes a variety of military-style garment derivative of the colonial situation such as decorated frocks and waist coats in “lime green and gold” (Killjoy 2021, p.14) combined with military decorations, imperial style bowlers and top hats.

In such subgenres such as steampunk and its derivatives, it is the word punk, which functions as their last common denominator; yet the first one resides in the discourse of technology, which occurs, if not as a central theme, at least as narrative-organizing. Therefore, the underlying background of steampunk narratives can be defined not only as a revival of Victoriana accoutrements and *objects d’art*, but also their stylized marriage with contemporary gadgets and machines with the anachronistic technological forms of steam-power and clockworks (Perschon 2012, p.181). Since the discourse of technology coordinates steampunk and all the derivative genres, it has been considered an outgrowth of science fiction. Contrary to most of the steampunk narratives, *A Country of the Ghosts* neither incorporates retro-futuristic steam-powered minibiles nor dirigibles

very much typologically symptomatic of the genre. Although the industrial and economic developments of both Borolia and Hron correspond with the second phase of the industrial revolution at which point the economically predominant industries became steel and coal rather than textiles, and logically the discourse of technology follows the same pattern, there is no presence of extravagant anachronistic machinery or any advanced or contemporaneous scientific knowledge besides Hron's sustainable horticulture in greenhouses and blacksmiths and glassmakers harnessing geothermal energy; thus, I would argue that the only anachronism of the narrative is how the author conflates the awareness of various ecological issues emerging with the rapid industrialization of the period, which very much erases the difference between ludicrous and plausible. Whereas Killjoy's strategy seems antithetical to steampunk ethos and its anachronistic or retro-futuristic techno-fantasies, a similar strategy can be observed in Killjoy's treatment of the genre's emblematic "punk" label, which is here intricately connected with other problems arising from the whole context of the narration and the forces reflected in the text's configuration of socio-political dynamics.

COUNTERCULTURAL ETHICS

According to Richard Watson (2010), steampunk's relevance steams from the realities of modern life: particularly the ever-increasing realization that the individual's sense of control over technology has been lost. Steampunk therefore provides a counter-trend to the fact that life, especially in developed nations, is atomised, fast-paced, and over-loaded with information, choice and needless innovation. For Rebecca Onion, who defines the genre on the discourse of technology, steampunk is evocative of humanity's desire to reclaim its control over and its connection with the mechanical world and attempts "restore coherence to a perceived 'lost' mechanical world" (2008, p.138). Therefore, in contrast to the post-modern world of the late twenty-first century—characterized by such events as genocides, world wars, international terrorism, possibility of nuclear holocaust and ecological decline of the planet—the faults and missteps of Victorian era seem relatively innocent; here may lie the source of the eras appeal. Despite this critical potential of the genre, if one considers the "punk"-part, most of what passes under steampunk is politically rather sterile, and a histrionic critique of the fact ironically originated among its most prominent representatives. The 2004 "Steampunk Manifesto", later republished in *Steampunk Magazine*, accused the genre of being mostly "apolitical". The author of the manifest, writing under his pseudo-historical persona of Professor Calamity laments: "Too much of what passes as steampunk denies the punk" (2004); Killjoy lamented herself that many people, "including some of the most die-hard steampunk

adherents, seem to believe that steampunk has nothing to offer but designer clothes" (2011); and even the biggest online community *Brass Goggles* has declared a ban on discussion concerning politicization of steampunk.

These complaints, as many others, are aimed at steampunk's nostalgic reminiscence of Victorian Style which remains mostly superficial. Most apparent during "the first wave" of American steampunk demarcated by Jeter's letter to *Locus*, which was rather obscure and its popularity a niche; the "punk"-side in question manifested in form of playful and grotesque mode, hyperbolized aesthetics, and DYE of fan-fiction. For Hilde Heyvaert (2009, p.4), "The Nautilus in particular as a nineteenth century machine of brass and steam and electricity, is a symbol of Verne's vision and very much a symbol of steampunk for as a product of Nemo's defiance it embodies the "punk" of the genre perfectly." The submarine not only manifests the genre's compulsive obsession with retro-futuristic epitomes of the era, but also influenced artists and designers in their own creations; meanwhile it continues to speak to the imagination of all who read about it. However, punk constructs its whole aesthetic reality out of socioeconomic alienation, hegemonic marginalization, and cultural discrimination, and projects it as a hyperbole, an exaggeration of the dominant culture's revulsion, disgust, and abjection, thus constructing its identity as nihilistic and self-desecrating.

The more interesting second wave emerged in the late 2000s, and it took more critical approach at its historical influences whereas its creative dissonance did not happen unnoticed; in the introduction to short story anthology, *Steampunk II*, its editor Jeff VanderMeer addressed the issue: "[...] While parts of this Community might pay too little attention to the dark underpinnings of true Victorian society, in general it is progressive, inquisitive, and inclusive... In another generation, the true energy behind steampunk may have moved away from Anglo settings and perspectives altogether" (Vander Meer 2010, p.11). Detractor may dismiss the genre's continuity as a superficial consumer trend; nevertheless, the new generation of authors more readily evokes, questions, and even subverts the Victorianism by questioning the dynamics of control and power with discourses such as politics, economy, class, sex, and technology. Steampunk's historical and geographical pre-text are firmly grounded in the post-1850s England; however, how does the genre addresses them? Does it have an ideology, politics, or agenda? Does it challenge the West's totalizing narrative of historical progress, or is it a romantic resurrection of imperial ideology? Or Shall we dismiss it merely as a fashionable deviance? Can a genre have a predisposition for certain politics? For example, according to Craig O'Hara (2001, p.71), most members of the eclectic punk community are ideologically primarily anarchists: their anti-establishment and anti-capitalistic beliefs are confluent with their

ideology of individualism and libertarian socialism. Countercultural in character, the opposition to the state and capitalism, domination and subjugation, all are at core of the anti-authoritarian movements generally regards the public and mainstream society as inherently dystopian.

A Country of Ghosts has been recently republished as a part of “Black Dawn” series, which honor anarchist tradition and the work and legacy established by Octavia E. Butler. This fact points not only to series “natural creation of alternate universes and world-building” (Killjoy 2021, p.iii), but most importantly in the direction where the complexities of this paper come into focus.⁴ Moreover, the paratextual references acknowledge the influence of anarchism as that in the tradition of Ursula K. Le Guin, Starhawk, and Graham Purchase (Killjoy 2021, p.vii).

Although Margaret Killjoy claims in the novel’s that she attempted to “avoid falling into easy, lazy world-building by mapping cultures too hard to existing cultures [...], Borol is fairly British ...as one of the arch-typical colonial states” (2021, p. 210) with its absolutist monarch, the imperial centre of Borol, dependant offspring territories, and variety of imported exotic commodities, including: “stuffed red swan from Zandia, rainbow caviar from the Floating Isles, wildfruit cobbler from Ora. Live-fried eel from Vorrionia, sprouted godleaf from Dededeon, the list goes on” (Killjoy, 2021, p. 6). Moreover, Borolia looks to imperialism as a solution to consolidation of its interior as demonstrated by the following quote: “They told me it was for the glory of ‘ King,” I said, “and maybe for coal and for iron. And that’s part of it. But they’re here empire. It s expand or die for them, it’s built into the very economy. Class tensions at home are near to bursting. Peace doesn’t work” (Killjoy, 2021, pp.198-99). Here, Killjoy illustrates, beside the confluence of imperialism and capitalism, perhaps more clearly the linkage in nationalist and imperialist ideology that makes consolidating an interior dependant on exporting its social contradictions. Thus, Borolia’s expansive state policy, economic model, and form of government can be described as imperialist, and all are tightly confluent with the emerging advancements in communication, transportation, and sciences that bound the Victorian world of the 19th century in capitalist economy. In contrast, Hron emerged only few decades ago, after a massive influx of refugees: the diaspora consisted mostly of anarchists, anti-royalists, and republicans who fled from a disastrous revolution in Vorrionia—a country which Borolia eventually conquered during the political turmoil after a false flag and under a pretence of political intervention. When the anarchists fled to the Cerr mountains they were assimilated into the predominantly agrarian indigenous population of the Cerr, the oral consensus known as “the Hron Accords” established “the Country of the Ghosts”(“a ghost” in Cerr). The influx of refugees and their non-colonial assimilation created a

syncretic society that “stands in sharp contrast to the project of colonization, displacement, extraction and genocide” (Killjoy, 2021, p.211). Although there were historical examples of such displacements, unlike Borolia, the fictitious country of Hron has no frame of extra-textual reference: its geography is at times evocative of Carpathian Central Europe, and sometimes reminiscent of Andean Latin America; however, its subsistence practices, social organization, and anti-government ethos, in combination with geographical isolation resembles the Zomia people of the highlands of Southeast Asia. Moreover, contrary to Borolia, Hron (and its capital: Hronople) does not have “really any of the vestiges of power at all. [It is] a country, but [it is] an anarchist country” (Killjoy 2021, p.83). It does not participate in the traditional forms of nation-state building and most of the practices that Hron includes “[Killjoy has experienced internationally] within antiauthoritarian communities during the two decades or so of [her] involvement” (Killjoy, 2021, p.208). As a quasi-political entity reflecting contemporary altermondialists, occupation squatters, and libertarians, it is based on high degree of common ownership, communalism, syndicalism, eco-conservation, decentralization of economy and political structures, and direct democracy. Decentralization is the key principle in Hron’s policy. Very much like the Ursula K. Le Guin’s separatists of Anares, each enclave of Hron is dependent on its own immediate region whereas all communities are connected by communication and transportation networks, and no community is cut off from change or interchange. Moreover, when the whole colonial project is met with guerilla tactics, the colonization is transformed into an ethical spectacle of transgression and resistance with direct militant aspect, the struggle for sovereignty and independence in the face of subjugation becomes an ideological conflict antithetical to imperial ideology. However such ethical approach is not exclusive to more contemporary texts and constituted its relevance quite early on, with the genre’s emergence with Michael Moorcock’s *The Warlord of the Air* (1971).⁵ Hence, the novel explores not only the politics with the same dynamics of control and power as imperialism, but Killjoy’s interrogation of Victorianism involves ideological movement which has extensively advocated the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist agenda since the 1860s: Anarchism.⁶ Killjoy evidently finds her solidarity and inspiration among the radical mad-bombers and anarchist assassins, who were among the first who attempted to dismantle the imperial ideology that attempted to impose its homogenized understanding of the world upon other nations.

Moreover, the “punk” of “steampunk” part is evocative not only of the anti-establishment character, but also other imperatives of social acceptability, conformity and complacency; therefore, some of the narratives confront jarringly unexpected new forms of expression. According

to Killjoy, steampunk is crucial to intersectional understanding of gender, and “as a culture (not just the radical elements) is very welcoming of trans-issues and of gender and sexuality. Homophobia and transphobia won’t get you very far in the steampunk corner of the geek world” (Nally 2019, p.42). A science-fiction editor of *Beyond Victoriana* and author Diana M. Pho similarly argues about the genre’s inclusiveness and “progressive roots” (2012). Through the character of Dimos Horacki, as a man of his particular sexual “persuasion” (Killjoy 2021, p.18), the narration allows the author to reflect, although only peripherally, on the perception of stereotypes during the Victorian period, here of course, I speak not only about issues as varied as social injustice, class tension, or racial discrimination, but also gender disparity, and LGBTQ+ inequality since Victorian period was pivotal in the formation of contemporary language considering gender expression and sexual orientation in Western based cultures. Her steampunk may seem ironic; Killjoy’s protagonist provides not only a much-needed space for the marginalized members of her respective subculture, or expresses the society’s expectations, but interrogates gender performance in the specific context of the narration: war. Whereas he reinforces classic models of genderized binaries in agency and performance, he subverts them eventually since as a skilled combatant.

Hence, the plagues of Victorian society are of great concern to her; yet the discourses she revisits, the specter of them looms over the contemporary one as well. On the other hand, the social inclusiveness of non-normative behavior challenges common premises of contemporary society originating in the specific historical context. Hence, the novel expresses the ethos and aspirations diametrically opposed to those of well-defined era, and it can be readily described as a countercultural narrative.

VICTORIAN GENRES

Here I deem reasonable to distinguish some typological and generic permutations related to steampunk. Here it seems reasonable to distinguish some terminology related to steampunk. Amy J. Elias explains, in contrast to cyberpunk, steampunk is “obsessed not with the future or the present but with the futures of the past” (Elias 2015, p.206), in other words: retrofuturism. Elizabeth Guffey (2006, p.152), understand and explain “retro-futurism” as an oxymoronic “discrepancy between what the future once represented and what it no longer means” whereas steampunk, and similar anachronistic aesthetic movements, represents a different approach”. Rather than operating as an optimistic celebration of the past and its speculations on the ideas of progress, the “futuristic-retro” aesthetics of steampunk imagine the past’s alternative as a pastiche of ideas from the present

and the present’s imagined future fused together with those of the past. Furthermore, the term has been, although mistakenly, associated with a movement known as “neo-Victorianism”. However, neo-Victorianism’s position along these highly blurred lines of subgenres is detached from other retro-nostalgic styles by not predicting and epitomizing highly streamlined technology in combination with the aesthetics of the period, but is understood as cultural obsessions of the Anglophone world with the period (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013). Hence, “steampunk [is best understood] a hybrid genre that resists definition” (Chen, 2012, p.8). In contrast to Perschon (2012), Christine Ferguson (2011, p.67) or Rebecca Onion (2008, p.140) prefer to define steampunk rather as an aesthetic movement that can be used by both fantasy genres as science fiction ones. Thus, they relegate the genre into the realm of science fantasy. Since steampunk fiction offers a fantastical reimagining of historical where “a few key technologies been developed further” or much earlier (Guizzo 2008, p.48), the paradigmatic examples of the first wave are mostly normalized narratives of the past or future, therefore they are perceived as alternate histories, for example, William Gibson’s collaborative effort with Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine* (1990).⁷ As a piece of fiction written “in a secondary world” (Killjoy 2021, p.207), the text does not revisit or revises the various geographical spaces (and historical situations) or the eclectic paradigm of period figures typical of alternate histories. While Killjoys invocations of Victorianism involve every aspect of the culture, her desperate longing for Victorian zeitgeist however lacks the presence of its actual history.⁸ Borrowing the words of James Gunn (2005, p.6), rather than “the world of the here and now” or an alternative of “the there and then”, the Killjoy’s narration is an instance of “fantastic world of unfamiliar events or developments”. Without a point of departure, the text does not involve a futuristic setting retaining or reverting to the historical pre-text nor incorporates anachronistic versions of contemporary machinery, its aesthetic hallmark is deployment of Victorian subjects. Yet at the same time the text constitutes, what Gordon (2011) defines in his understanding of the Alternate History and Alternate Universe/Reality subgenres, a speculative “superhistory” that reconceives, revise, reconsider, and ultimately reconstructs history through a transformative inclusion of the past as Killjoy both repeats the past problematic issues and subverts the history in a meaningful way to address the present. Obviously, *A Country of Ghosts* belongs to the second, more ambitious wave that flouts these generic expectations and displaced their narrations from recognizable historical setting into secondary worlds such as China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000). In both cases, their modelling is influenced by the specific chronotope derivative from “primary world”, but the narrative takes place in a world with no relation to any specific historical era.⁹ However, in Miéville’s novel

pseudo-science and magic coexist; on contrary Killjoys strategy distorts the techno-epithet, therefore largely disqualifies the novel from the label of science fiction; what more it excludes the fantastic elements in the disparate historical context as well. Thus, the opposition to these generic expectations relegates the narrative into broader field of speculative, pseudo-Victorian novel.

Furthermore, according to Smith, “steampunk borrows equally from history and fiction” (Smith 2013, p.29); thus, as a contemporary genre, steampunk is considered inextricably intertextual (Hobbs 2008, p.909); in fact, none of the steampunk enthusiasts will question that among the most prominent influences of the genre and the fashion subculture are the retro-futuristic romances written by Jules Verne (1828–1905), and H. G. Wells (1866–1945) and the respective cinematic adaptations of their work; they represent the most dominant impulse for the genre, but the list of influences is in fact infinitesimal.¹⁰ The genre recursively references or alludes to the colorful cast of fictitious characters which originated in the historical period and has been regularly appearing in various steampunk textual iterations. However, Killjoys displacement of narration logically does not allow her to incorporate any of the many direct intertextual references paradigmatic for steampunk.

Although Killjoy’s novel reconfigures the steampunk genre through its disengagement with historical or intertextual referentiality, therefore taking into consideration the novel’s narrative patterns and functionality seems as a more plausible approach to address the text. The genre pays a notable homage to what is for the reading community and scholars recognized as the emerging phase and virtual canon of the science fiction genre—Verne’s *Les Voyages Extraordinaires* and Wells’ scientific romances (Booker & Thomas, 2009; Rieder, 2008). Their respective proto-genres represent not only their legacies as the pioneers in the field, but they are also a *fin-de-siècle* paradigm that manifests itself, as the critic Cory Gross (2007) suggests in his article, throughout the steampunk incarnations. According to Gross, steampunk texts abounding with Victorian sentimentalities and nostalgias demonstrate the influence of Verne whereas the text manifesting technological pessimism and criticizing its effects upon society through a more Marxian perspective are inspired by Wells (2007, p. 55). Their respective proto-genres. Nevertheless Killjoy separates her work from the actual history or intertextual referentiality, her strategy engages in typological intertextuality. Dimos Horacki is a Swifitan narrator who as a particular representative of his culture embarks on a marvelous journey during which he encounters a previously undiscovered, isolated race or civilization in an exotic, nearly inaccessible setting. He learns about its cultural practices and social organization through Socratic dialogues with various emissaries that guide his journey, and contrasts the acquired knowledge with his socio-normative expectations. The dislocation of

the narrative subject into foreign lands becomes an impulse behind his cognitive revolutions, and critical reconsideration of his own dystopian culture—a metaphor for his transient transformation. Hence, he novel represents one of the latest in the long tradition of popular genres established by Thomas More more than five hundred years ago: eutopia satire. Killjoy draws her inspiration largely from utopian traditions, where the politically oriented “representation” and “reorientation” are key functions as subordinate of a specific motif: lost race. The narratives incorporating the device as a vehicle for its plot flourished during the Victorian era. While the descriptive and dialogic character as a potential platform for cultural criticism, philosophical comments, and social experiment, Killjoys narration also offers a challenging tale of invasion and adventure since she wrote a story of eutopia besieged. As Killjoy points to and comments on the shortcomings and the elusive aspects of her utopia in face of direct threat, she relegates the novel into the realm of critical eutopias. In summary, Killjoy’s novel obviously pays a notable homage to the narrative patterns of Wells’ scientific romances rather than Verne’s fantastic voyages. Furthermore, Killjoy’s sentiments, and ideological leanings concur with Wells’ since he—as a patron of socialist thought and staunch critic of imperialism—adamantly believed that capitalism and state will be eventually dismantled and anarchist society will ultimately emerge as he stated in *New World for Old* (2009): “Socialism is the preparation for that higher Anarchism; painfully, laboriously we mean to destroy false ideas of property and self, eliminate unjust laws and poisonous and hateful suggestions and prejudices.”

CONCLUSION

Summarizing the paper, it may seem that Killjoy stubbornly refuses to be classified, resisting the fixed definitions of steampunk. Adopting the steampunks definition by Bowser, Rachel A. and Brian Croxall (2010, p.30), Killjoy strategy is “more about instability than any other single characteristic. It resists fixedness by unsettling the categories from which it cribs. ”Her aesthetics are compatible with the sartorial chronotope yet antithetical in their embracement of steampunks techno-triumphalism. Furthermore, Killjoy structures her narrative to tackle the genre’s cultural obsessions with the Anglophone world by presenting a distinctively Western culture as a focal point of the story but also betrays imperial ideology that operates on various level in the background of the narration: the novel interrogates the impositions of imperial governance upon colonized subjects and their response to colonial power-imbances. Thus, Killjoy strategy does not simply represent a romantic resurrection of Victorian period; she *defacto* challenges the West’s totalizing narrative of historical progress while commenting on contemporary

issues. On the other hand, the separation of narration from historical references and absence of intertextual allusions disturbs the generic expectations of steampunk while constituting the text as generically ambiguous on various levels: her invocation of period genre as a viscerally effective instance of ambivalence between imaginative and extrapolative genre matches the polarization inherent in the contradictory nature of critical utopia. As multivalent, Killjoys strategy establishes a complicated, almost ambivalent relationship of resemblance and opposition with the steampunk ethos.

Although her steampunk is self-referential and ahistorical, ignoring the most common typological permutations of the genre, her use of lost-race trope and eutopian narrative patterns inextricably link the novel with scientific romances of Wells. However, as a contemporaneous iteration of the particular literary convention, which was most popular during the most fervid period of historical imperialism Killjoy not only puts several generic tropes on display but radically subverts them. In depth analysis of this matter requires engagement of more nuanced approach of utopian studies. Furthermore, her novel has a lot to do with the racism and colonialism, and even though I address this issue peripherally, how the discourses of colonialism permeate the narration requires the employment of theoretical resources of postcolonial and critical race theories to the narrative and far more subtlety in the process of interpretation.

NOTES

¹ Other terms employed by both authors and scholars, sometimes interchangeably, are retro-futurism and neo-Victorianism.

² Among the later texts precedential to the genre I recognize Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), Michael Moorcock's *The Warlord of the Air* (1971), and Harry Harrison's *Tunnel Through the Deeps* (1972).

³ Closely related, the neologism was popularized by game designer, Lewis Pollak. As an evolutionary outgrowth of steampunk, it collects its technological and aesthetic ethos, and its nostalgic hindsight to the Roaring Twenties and the 1930s-a period "overcast with economic turmoil, lawlessness on the streets and in politics and the ever-present dystopian sentiment towards a near-hopeful future with the potential of war hanging in the balance" (Piecrafft, 2009, 16). Other derivatives can be futuristic: Solarpunk, Biopunk, Nanopunk ...; retro-futuristic: Stonepunk, Clockpunk, Atompunk ...; and fantastic: Elfpunk, Mythpunk

⁴ *Black Dawn* explores themes connected with "dependency on oppressive forces (the state, police, capitalism, elected officials) and will generally express the values of antiracism, feminism, anticolonialism, and anticapitalism" (Killjoy 2014, iii).

⁵ The narrative revolves around an imminent battle between the union of 19th century imperial powers and anti-coalition of Dawn City in Chinese countryside.

⁶ The anarchist movement's involvement with the anti-colonial struggle often was apparent in various national-independence movements yet their egalitarianism and anti-authoritarianism challenged the status quo of their nationalistic tendencies, for more information see *The Palegrave Handbook of Anarchism* (2019) edited by Carl Levy and Matthew Adams.

⁷ This paradigmatic example of the genre is set in an alternative 1855 London where industrial revolution is not only in full swing but produced first steam-powered computer.

⁸ Namely: Europe (emergence of ideological radicalism: the late 18th century – the end of 20th century), the American Frontier (Westward Expansion: 1801-1861; American Civil War: 1861-1865; Transcontinental Railroad Project: 1863-1869; American Gold Rush in California/Alaska: 1848-1855/ 1896-1899, American Old West: 1803-1912), "the Orient" (Anglo-Afghan Wars: 1839-1842, 1878-1880, 1919; Boxer Revolution: 1899-1901; Opium Wars: 1839-1842, 1856-1860; Meiji Restoration period: 1868-1912, Sepoy Mutiny: 1857-1858), the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea (decline of privateering, buccaneering and piracy 1726-1856), and the African colonies (Scramble of Africa: 1881-1914, African Big Game Hunting: 1870s-1914), and more (emergence of anthropology, ethnography, and archeology). Thus, a single steampunk text can contain a British noblewoman, a Victorian scientist, an anarchist bomber, a Confederate/Unionist soldier, an Afro-American slave, a frontiersman, a gold prospector, a Wild-West gunslinger, a Chinese immigrant, a disgraced samurai assassin, an Afghan opium trader, a master of martial arts, an imperial infantryman, an elderly French privateer, or an English explorer and adventurer while remaining historically plausible.

⁹ The concepts were discussed by J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Monster and the Critic's and Other Essays* (1983): a fictional, alternative or "secondary world" is internally consistent and while familiar it bears no relation to the real "primary world". Secondary world narratives are often referred to as High Fantasy; however, such term is usually conflated with pseudo-medieval aesthetic and feudal socio-politics.

¹⁰ The Nick Gevers (2008, 9) adds Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and her "the mad scientist" trope, Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), R. L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and Arthur Conan Doyle, with their Gothic and supernatural traits, approach to Victorian sensibilities, character archetypes, adventure and psychological themes as important inputs; John Clute (1997) includes Charles Dickens; and Hobbs (2008): Jane Austen and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889); I would include Oscar Wilde's dandyism,

Edward S. Ellis's *The Steam Man of the Prairies* (1868), H.G.Wells' fascination with aircraft warfare in *The War in the Air* (1908), and the tales of adventure by Henry Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

REFERENCES

- Booker, M. K., & Thomas, A.-M. (2009). Science Fiction in Western Culture. In *The Science Fiction Handbook* (pp. 3-12). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bowser, R. A., & Croxall, B. (2010). Introduction: Industrial Evolution. *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3(1), 1-45.
- Cavallaro, D. (2000). *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*. London: Athlone.
- Chen, J.-A. (2012). *Airship, Automaton, and Alchemy: A Steampunk Exploration of Young Adult Science Fiction* [Doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury (Canterbury)].
- Clute, J. (1997). Steampunk. In J. Clute & J. Grant (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (pp. 895-896). St. Martin's.
- Elias, A. J. (2015). Cyberpunk, Steampunk, Teslapunk, Dieselpunk, Salvagepunk: Metahistorical Romance and/vs the Technological Sublime. In G. Episcopo (Ed.), *Metahistorical Narratives and Scientific Metafiction: A Critical Insight into the Twentieth-Century Poetics* (pp. 201-220). Edizioni Cronopio.
- Ferguson, C. (2011). Surface tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style. *Neo Victorian Studies*, 4(2), 66-90.
- Gevers, N. (2008). *Extraordinary Engines: The Definitive Steampunk Anthology*. Solaris.
- Gibson, W., & Sterling, B. (1991). *The Difference Engine*. Bantam Books. (Original work published 1990)
- Gibson, W. (1984). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books.
- Gilarek, A. (2017). The Challenge of Solidarity in an anarchist utopia: Margaret Killjoy's *A country of Ghosts* as a utopia of process. *Beyond Philology: An International Journal of Linguistics, Literary Studies and English Language Teaching*, 14(4), 81-96.
- Gordon, A. M. (2011). Alternate history. In L. Grossman (Ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction*. Wildside Press. [13]
- Gross, C. (2007). A history of misapplied technology: The history and development of the steampunk genre. *Steampunk Magazine*, 2(Summer), 54-61.
- Guffey, E. E. (2006). The lure of yesterday's tomorrows. In *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (pp. 133-159). Reaktion.
- Gunn, J. E. (2005). Toward a definition of science fiction. In J. Gunn & M. Candelaria (Eds.), *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction* (pp. 5-12). Scarecrow.
- Guizzo, E. (2008). The steampunk contraptors. *Spectrum*, 45(10), 48-55.
- Harrison, H. (1972). *Tunnel through the Deeps*. Putnam.
- Heyvaert, H. (2009). Jules Verne: The grandfather of steampunk. *Gatehouse Gazette*, 4(January), 3-4.
- Hobbs, B. L. (2008). Steampunk. In L. Grossman (Ed.), *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction* (pp. 909-911). Wildside Press.
- Jeter, K. W. (1979). *Morlock Night*. Donald A. Wollheim.
- Jeter, K. W. (1987, April). Jeter, Kevin Wayne to Locus. *Locus*, 57(2). Retrieved from <http://www.jessesword.com/sf/view/327>
- Killjoy, M. (2011, October 3). Steampunk will never be afraid of politics. *Tor.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.tor.com/2011/10/03/steampunk-will-never-be-afraid-of-politics/>
- Killjoy, M. (2021). *A Country of Ghosts*. AK Press.
- Levy, C., & Adams, M. (Eds.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Llewellyn, M., & Heilmann, A. (2013). The Victorians now: Global reflections on neo-Victorianism. *Critical Quarterly*, 55(1), 24-42. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/criq.12035/pf>
- Mieville, C. (2000). *Perdido Street Station*. Macmillan.
- Moorcock, M. (1982). *The Warlord of the Air*. Nelson Doubleday. (Original work published 1971)
- Moore, W. (1953). *Bring the Jubilee*. Ballantine Books.
- Nally, C. (2019). *Steampunk: Gender, Subculture and the Neo-Victorian*. Bloomsbury.
- Nevins, J. (2011). Prescriptivists vs. descriptivists: Defining steampunk. *ScienceFiction Studies*, 38(3), 513-518.
- O'Hara, C. (2001). *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise*. AK Press.
- Onion, R. (2008). Reclaiming the machine: An introductory look at steampunk in everyday practice. *Neo Victorian Studies*, 1(1), 138-163.
- Perschon, M. D. (2012). *The Steampunk Aesthetic: Technofantasies in a Neo-Victorian Retrofuture* [Doctoral thesis, University of Alberta (Alberta)].
- Person, L. (1999, October 9). *Notes towards a postcyberpunk manifesto*. Retrieved from <http://slashdot.org/story/99/10/08/2123255/notes-toward-a-postcyberpunk-manifesto>
- Pho, D. M. (2012). Leftist constructs. *Overland*, (207). Retrieved from <https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-207/feature-diana-m-pho/>
- Piecraft. (2009). Diesel classics article: The history of dieselpunk, part 2. *Gatehouse Gazette*, 4(January), 16-22.
- Priest, C. (2008). A Cthulhu-steampunk mash up, with amulets. *WeirdTales*, 63(2.349), 12-13.
- Professor Calamity. (2004, November 27). Steampunk manifesto. *Live Journal*. Retrieved from <https://prof-calamity.livejournal/277>
- Rieder, J. (2008). *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP.
- Smith, G. (2013). *Steampunk: The Inner Workings* [Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato (Waikato)]
- Tolkien, J. R. (1983). *The Monsters and the Critics, and*

- Other Essays*. George Allen and Unwin.
- Vandermeer, A., & Vandermeer, J. (2010). *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*. Tachyon. [44]
- Watson, R. (2010). Why steampunk is an important trend. *What's Next: Top Trends The Diary of a Supposed Futurist—Observations on Current and Future Trends*. Retrieved from <http://toptrends.nowandnext.com/?p=1289>
- Wells, H. G. (2009). *New Worlds For Old: A Plain Account of Modern Socialism*. *Project Gutenberg*. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30538/30538-h/30538-h.htm> (Original work published 1912)