

Terri Doughty

Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo (Canada)

Assessing Steampunk's Future: The Test Case of *The Gaslight Dogs*

Steampunk is a relatively new genre at the intersection of science fiction and fantasy that has spawned beyond fiction a material culture with a distinct neo-Victorian, do-it-yourself aesthetic. The issue, of course, with the neo-Victorian elements of steampunk is that there can be a very blurry line between mining the nineteenth century for alternate history or technological possibilities and glorifying an imperialist culture rooted in deep inequalities and injustices. Moreover, a narrow definition of steampunk as rooted in Victorian steam technologies centres the genre firmly in exploration of industrialised cultures in Western Europe and North America. When I recently taught Canadian Karin Lowachee's novel *The Gaslight Dogs* (2010)¹ in a course on steampunk literature, my students unanimously rejected it as a form of steampunk; as one student put it, there is no steam in the novel. This novel is more fantasy than science fiction, set in an alternate world that bears close resemblance to North America, even to the historical similarity of a Caucasian people, the Ciracusans, who have come to a new world to escape religious persecution and who simultaneously fight with the Indigenous peoples of this world as they appropriate traditional territories and war with their own country of origin. Lowachee focalises the narrative through two characters: Sjennonirk, a female *ankago* (spiritual leader) of her people, the Aniw of the north, and Captain Jarrett Fawle, soldier and son of a powerful Ciracusan general. The novel provides an excellent opportunity to test the elasticity of the definition of steampunk and whether it is possible for steampunk to be located in a non-European, non-industrialised setting that challenges not only imperial values but Western understanding of technology.

The cover of the book features a woman, who appears to be Inuit, dressed in a fur-trimmed parka, carrying a spear, and tattooed across her face. In the

¹ K. Lowachee, *The Gaslight Dogs*, New York 2010.

foreground is a large wolf. Behind her is a wrought-iron gas street lamp, with very faint indication of city lights and tall buildings or towers even further in the background. At its moment of publication, a year which saw a large number of steampunk adventure novels² hit the market, *The Gaslight Dogs* was clearly packaged to appeal to fans of this increasingly popular genre. Lowachee herself, however, has stated in an interview with Ay-leen the Peacemaker (Diana M. Pho), on the blog *Beyond Victoriana*, which critiques steampunk from a multicultural perspective, that she was “not intimately familiar with the steampunk genre or any of its affiliates” when writing the novel.³ Does the author have the last say on genre, though? In addition to Pho, other steampunk bloggers have identified *The Gaslight Dogs* as steampunk; moreover, Jeff VanderMeer and S.J. Chambers’s authoritative *Steampunk Bible* includes the novel in a subsection titled *A Changing Subgenre*,⁴ Clearly more than the packaging of this book signals steampunk to educated readers of the genre.

Before embarking on an analysis of the steampunk elements in *The Gaslight Dogs*, as well as of the ways the novel stretches the definition of steampunk, it is perhaps useful to consider that definition. The term was coined by author K.W. Jeter in a letter to the editor of the science fiction magazine *Locus* in April 1987 to describe the fictions set in alternate Victorian histories written by himself, James Blaylock, and Tim Powers.⁵ As Bowser and Croxall note, Jeter was likely playing off the term “cyberpunk,” and the letter hardly seems to describe a coherent literary movement. Now, over twenty-five years after Jeter’s letter, there still is not a clear consensus on what steampunk literature is. In a review article, Jess Nevins has productively divided descriptions of steampunk as being either prescriptivist or descriptivist.⁶ The prescriptivists have the narrower definition, insistent on steampunk’s roots in Victorian culture and technology, particularly steam-based. In the introduction to a special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* devoted to steampunk, Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall explain that the label “steampunk” “can mean a narrative set in Victorian London; one set in a futuristic world that retains

² See for instance G. Carriger’s second volume in her “Parasol Protectorate” series, *Changeless*, New York 2010; K. McAlister’s mass-market romance *Steamed!*, New York 2010; M. Hodder’s *The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack*, Amherst 2010; C. Priest’s *Dreadnought*, New York 2010; and S. Westerfield’s *Behemoth*, New York 2010.

³ Posted 18 April 2010 at <http://byondvictoriana.com/2010/04/18/beyond-victoriana-23-interview-with-karin-lowachee-author-of-the-gaslight-dogs/>, accessed: 10.11.2011.

⁴ See the bibliography at <http://steampunkscholar.blogspot.ca/p/primary-works.html>; <http://www.steampunk.com/the-gaslight-dogs-by-karin-lowachee/>; <http://www.thesteampunkempire.com/group/theliterarysalon/forum/topics/review-gaslight-dogs-by-Karin>, accessed: 23.08.2013; J. VanderMeer, S.J. Chambers, *The Steampunk Bible*, New York 2011, p. 86.

⁵ The story has been retold numerous times; a good recap is in R.A. Bowser, B. Croxall, ‘Introduction: Industrial Evolution’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, 2010, no. 1, pp. 12–13.

⁶ J. Nevins, ‘Prescriptivists vs. Descriptivists: Defining Steampunk’, *Science Fiction Studies* 38, 2011, no. 3, p. 513.

or reverts to the aesthetic hallmarks of the Victorian period; a piece of speculative historical fiction that deploys Victorian subjects; or a text that incorporates anachronistic versions of nineteenth-century technologies.”⁷ Similarly, Margaret Rose identifies steampunk as comprising “speculative fictions [...] that are set in or engage with the nineteenth century in a variety of ways. They are frequently (but not always) alternate histories where the break from our own history [...] is a matter of technology.”⁸ More recently, the editors of the first print scholarly collection of articles on steampunk emphasize the genre’s focus on Victorian technologies.⁹ These definitions of steampunk are obviously limiting: there is no room in this type of steampunk to move beyond a nineteenth-century Transatlantic world’s technologies and worldview.

The decriptivists, in contrast to the prescriptivists, apply the term “steampunk” much more loosely to a variety of retrofuturistic texts: literary, graphic, and filmic. One decriptivist stance is usefully summed up in Mike Perschon’s definition of steampunk as an aesthetic.¹⁰ Steampunk then becomes knowable by its application of “an array of visual markers which, when combined, constitute the look popularly understood as steampunk.” He adds that alternate history, while a “facet of the applied aesthetic of steampunk,” is “not its defining quality.”¹¹ This is rather vague, and Nevins uses the word “shambolic” to describe the broader classification of steampunk.¹² Certainly, the descriptivist approach includes a wide assortment of texts: Ann VanderMeer’s anthology *Steampunk III: Steampunk Revolution* contains such unusual steampunk stories as Vandana Singh’s *A Handful of Rice*, set in a late nineteenth-century India in which the British struggle to hold territories in the South, with a Mughal king who adapts and improves European technology.¹³ Traditional tropes of steampunk, such as horseless carriages, metal men, and references to a science of human flight, are here but in the background of a story that is more concerned with a duel between practitioners of yogic prana, or life force. In her introduction, VanderMeer argues for a definition of steampunk as an attitude, claiming that the “punk” aspect of steampunk demands that it become “something other than its origins indicate,” that it push generic boundaries.¹⁴ In this regard, the descriptivist understanding of steampunk is important for the genre’s continued vitality. While I understand Nevins’s frustration with the

⁷ R.A. Bowser, B. Croxall, op. cit., p. 1.

⁸ M. Rose, ‘Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation’, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 20, 2009, no. 3, p. 320.

⁹ C.J. Miller, J.A. Taddeo, *Steaming into the Victorian Future*, Lanham 2013, p. xvii.

¹⁰ M. Perschon, ‘Steam Wars’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, 2010, no. 1, p. 128.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² J. Nevins, op. cit., p. 513.

¹³ V. Singh, ‘A Handful of Rice’, [in:] *Steampunk III: Steampunk Revolution*, ed. A. VanderMeer, San Francisco 2012, pp. 161–184.

¹⁴ *Steampunk III: Steampunk Revolution*, p. 11. Bowser and Croxall, quoting Jay Clayton, also identify “an irreverent attitude towards boundaries” as an important aspect of steampunk, though

descriptivists' lack of specificity, I would suggest that a genre definition needs to be broad enough to allow for experimentation; if there is no room for such generic play, the genre may be reduced to a formula.¹⁵

Indeed, one of the key themes in a 2010 roundtable interview on future directions in steampunk is the need for it to keep pushing boundaries. Steampunk bloggers and scholars Jaymee Goh, Mike Perschon, and Diana M. Pho assert the need for steampunk to move beyond prescriptivist strictures, with Pho making a powerful demand "to see steampunk's cultural range broaden in order to decenter its current Western, Eurocentric framework."¹⁶ It is not that steampunk until this point has not been critical of Western imperialism: from Michael Moorcock's *The Warlord of the Air*, first in his "Nomad of the Time Streams" trilogy, to Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, there have been many steampunk texts that reveal the negative aspects of empire.¹⁷ These mostly, however, critique empire from the perspective of those who are nonetheless part of the imperial project, even if at times reluctantly so, and their narratives are set either in the heart of the imperial urban-industrial complex or, if on the frontiers of empire, in settings where the place and Indigenous peoples are exoticised and treated as Other.¹⁸

Unlike most steampunk literature, Lowachee's *The Gaslight Dogs* opens beyond the imperial frontier, with a chapter titled *The Land*, focalised through the character of an Indigenous woman, Sjennonirk. In her eyes, the Kabliw of the South, the men of the boats, her people's names for the Ciracusans, the representatives of empire, do not respect traditional territorial boundaries. In the typical pattern of early contact, a priest and traders are the first representatives of empire encountered by the Aniw (Indigenous people of the north). At the beginning of the novel, these are followed by men with guns and large stores of armaments, alarming the Aniw; as Sjennonirk thinks, "some Southern deeds weren't wanted on the land."¹⁹ These Ciracusan men do not bring any benefit to Sjennonirk's people, quite the contrary. When one of the men, drunk, enters her family's home and tries to assault her, she is forced to kill him.

they are not speaking specifically about generic boundaries; see A. Bowser, B. Croxall, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁵ I am much influenced here by B. Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington 1992, ch. 1. He suggests that we view genre as a fuzzy set; that is, a genre comprises not only texts that make use of a set of prescriptive elements (at their most prescriptive following a formula), but also texts that push at the boundaries of those prescriptive elements.

¹⁶ A. VanderMeer, J. VanderMeer, 'The Future of Steampunk: A Roundtable Interview', [in:] *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*, San Francisco 2010, pp. 408–409.

¹⁷ M. Moorcock, *The Warlord of the Air*, New York 1971; A. Moore, K. O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, vol. 1, La Jolla 2000.

¹⁸ See, for instance, C.J. Miller and A.B. Van Riper, 'Blending Genres, Bending Time: Steampunk on the Western Frontier', *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 39, 2011, no. 2, pp. 84–92. The shows and movies they discuss do not address the Indigenous perspective on American expansion westward or the clash of technologies, Indigenous and Western.

¹⁹ K. Lowachee, op. cit., p. 3.

The second chapter reveals the book's narrative structure. Titled *Ciracusa*, it is focalized through Capt. Jarrett Fawle, a soldier on patrol further south, grimly reflecting on Ciracusan settlements attacked by Indigenous warbands. His and his men's attitude toward the Indigenous peoples is clear: they are "abo[s]," "bastard[s]," "devil[s]," and "savage[s]."²⁰ By structuring the novel in a series of alternating points of view, Sjennonirk's and Jarrett's, Lowachee not only creates tension but sets up, if not a dialogue between cultures, a disruption of the binary that privileges the imperial culture over those subjected. Indeed, in this second chapter, Jarrett is troubled by dreams that foreshadow a reversal of the dominant culture's assimilation of subjected peoples. Whereas contact and settlement historically led in North America to the decimation of most of the Indigenous population and either quarantining (on reservations) or forced assimilation of the survivors, in Lowachee's novel it is the privileged son of the imperial forces who is assimilated, albeit unwillingly, into Indigenous culture. Both subtly, by positioning the Indigenous narrative first, and more overtly, by revealing the imperial culture's use of Western technology to gain and hold power, displaying its racist values, and suggesting the power of Indigenous culture, Lowachee does exactly what Pho asks in the roundtable on steampunk's future: she decentres steampunk's Western, Eurocentric framework.

Lowachee herself is not Indigenous to North America: according to the author biography at the back of the novel, she was born in Guyana and raised in Canada. The Orbit edition of the book includes an author interview at the back, in which Lowachee reveals that she also has spent time living with and doing research among the Inuit in Nunavut, in Canada's North. She is very careful to avoid charges of cultural appropriation, noting "I'm conscious of the fact that I'm not Inuit so if I incorporate a specific culture like that into my writing I have to be equally conscious of what changes I make and why."²¹ Similarly, she dedicates the book to the Inuit but states that she's taken creative license, suggesting that she is not trying to write specifically about Inuit cultural practices and beliefs. This is a somewhat controversial practice in fantasy as written about elsewhere regarding Canadian fantasist Charles de Lint's use of Indigenous beliefs;²² generally, the mode of the fantastic, as well as the avoidance of using culturally specific practices and stories, allows writers who are respectful of Indigenous cultures and careful not to trespass on material that is not theirs to share to make use of broad concepts that may be seen as loosely related to Indigenous beliefs or ways of being. *The Gaslight Dogs* is, then, not an Indigenous steampunk novel, but it is fair to read it as a form of postcolonial steampunk, in that it critiques the workings of empire, and particularly of the way the possession

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 9, 10, 11. "Abo" is an abusive term used by settlers and some of their descendants for the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

²¹ Ibid., p. 349.

²² T. Doughty, 'Dreaming into Being: Liminal Space in Charles de Lint's Young Adult Mythic Fiction', [in:] *Knowing Their Place? Identity and Space in Children's Literature*, ed. T. Doughty, D. Thompson, Newcastle upon Tyne 2011, pp. 155–170.

of certain types of technology is equated with power, while representing the experiences and views of those subjected parallel (if not subtly privileged) to the formerly dominant narrative of the colonising culture.

Typical steampunk technology is not readily apparent in *The Gaslight Dogs*. There are no goggles, flying ships, or automata. The Aniw do not possess Western technology; it is not relevant to their lives. We do not see such technology, save for the Kabliw's guns and ships, until the narratives meet in Nev Anyan, Ciracusa's major city, where Jarrett is recalled from the frontier by his father and Sjennonirk is brought under arrest after she killed in self defense the Kabliw man in her village. In Jarrett's narrative, any Ciracusan technology is taken for granted, so it is referenced only as part of the setting, very much in the background. It is Sjennonirk's encounter with the new that draws attention to Ciracusan technology: gas lamps in the streets, cobbled streets that hurt her feet, and iron everywhere, as well as guns. Yet, in the world of steampunk, all of this is unremarkable: it simply reflects the actual Western technology of the nineteenth century, the historical moment of settlement by colonisers of Indigenous territories on which Lowachee's world is based.

This lack of fantastical mechanised technology is the main reason why some reject the notion that *The Gaslight Dogs* should be classified as steampunk. Such technology is at the heart of most definitions of steampunk, as referenced above in Bowser and Croxall or Rose. Similarly, Steffen Hantke calls technology "the crucial factor in [steampunk's] understanding and portrayal of Victorianism."²³ Specifically, steampunk technology is rooted in nineteenth-century steam-powered mechanisation. Some who value narrow definitions have even coined terms such as "clockpunk," and "dieselpunk" to reference fictions rooted in differently-powered machinery.²⁴ Steampunk fiction abounds with various forms of mechanized transport, flying machines, mechanized weaponry, and automata. Steampunk visual culture fetishises cogs, goggles, and exposed mechanical workings. Yet, what is very apparent about most steampunk fictional technology is that its workings are not often explained in very much scientific detail, and as Perschon observes, much of it would likely not work if transported to our reality.²⁵ He points to John Clute and Roz Kaveney's use of the term "technofantasy" in Clute and John Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* to describe the anachronistic technology of steampunk.²⁶ If the technology in steampunk is essentially fantastic, this then begs the question why the technology must be mechanical and rooted in Western nineteenth-century industrialised technology.

²³ S. Hantke, 'Difference Engines and Other Infernal Devices: History According to Steampunk', *Extrapolation* 40, 1999, no. 3, p. 247.

²⁴ See the semi-facetious 'A Young Steampunk's Guide to Subgenres', [in:] J. VanderMeer, S.J. Chambers, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

²⁵ M.D. Perschon, *The Steampunk Aesthetic: Technofantasies in a Neo-Victorian Retrofuture*, Ph.D. diss, University of Alberta, Edmonton 2012, p. 151.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

This is the position taken by those who challenge steampunk's Eurocentrism. In a 2009 post titled *First Nation Sci-Fi & Technology Resources* on the blog *Beyond Victoriana*, Ay-leen the Peacemaker writes, "One of the interesting challenges non-European steampunk faces is how technology can be re-imagined for peoples that did not develop industrialized technology during the nineteenth-century."²⁷ This challenge has been taken up by a number of people working in the field of science fiction. In an essay on the blog *Expanded Horizons: Speculative Fiction for the Rest of Us*, Carter Meland suggests that the key word is "speculative."²⁸ Much as one might see technofantasy as creating space to imagine alternate technologies, so Meland argues that speculation should offer the opportunity to move beyond racist boundaries of imagined sciences. Recently, Grace L. Dillon has edited an anthology of Indigenous science fiction. In her introduction, she addresses the problem of science, "whether Indigenous peoples can lay claim to the term." One section of the anthology addresses this by "juxtapos[ing] western science with what can be thought of as 'Indigenous Scientific Literacies'."²⁹ These literacies tend to be related to natural resources. This is a point made succinctly by Monique Poirier, member of the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe and Steampunk, in a 2011 blog post titled *Musing about Native Steampunk*: "Native Science [sic!] understands that nature is technology."³⁰ In other words, technology does not have to be industrialised to be considered technology. Essentially, technology comprises the knowledge, making, and using of tools. Certainly Indigenous cultures historically have had knowledge of, made, and used tools for a variety of purposes: travel, hunting, gathering and preserving foods and medicines, building, making clothing, making art, and so on. Poirier and Dillon point in particular to Indigenous applications of biotechnology. In the retrofuturist spirit of steampunk, there should be space for Indigenous technofantasies that force a re-examination of the nature of technology.

When reconsidered in this light, *The Gaslight Dogs* has more technology than it appears to at first glance. Not only is there the industrial technology of the Ciracusans/Kabliw, but there are a variety of technologies used by the Indigenous peoples. The Aniw have a range of material tools, such as the stone lamp in Sjennonirk's mother's house, the needle her mother uses to sew with sinew thread, the kayaks for travel and hunting, and Sjennonirk's knife. The most controversial form of technology in the novel, however, is the "Dogs" of the title. As *ankago* of her tribe, Sjen-

²⁷ Posted 20.12.2009 at <http://beyondvictoriana.com/2009/12/20/beyond-victoriana-9-first-nation-sci-fi-technology-resources/>, accessed: 25.09.2013.

²⁸ *American Indians at the Final Frontiers of Imperial Sf*, http://www.expandedhorizons.net/magazine/?page_id=150, accessed: 25.09.2013.

²⁹ G.L. Dillon, 'Imagining Indigenous Futurisms', [in:] *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Tucson 2012, p. 7.

³⁰ Posted 18.12.2011 at <http://moniquill.tumblr.com/post/14393053317/musing-about-native-steampunkT>, accessed: 25.09.2013.

nonirk has within her a being that she calls her Dog; this does not mean that she is some form of shapechanger or werewolf, although she can at times be taken over by her Dog, leaving her body to inhabit that which appears to the Ciracusans as a wolf. The captain of the ship on which Sjennonirk is imprisoned on her way to Nev Anyan asks her if she has “witch magic.”³¹ Similarly, Jarrett tries to define Sjennonirk’s Dog as a manifestation of either magic or, in a rare attempt to be respectful, religion. She rejects both, explaining, “It’s just the truth of my people. It’s the power of our Land. My ancestors were great spirits, and long ago they mingled with the Aniw. They loved us and we loved them. And from their spirits come the ankago.” When Jarrett interjects that the spirits are dogs, she again corrects him, stating that “[t]hey appear as dogs. [...] But they are not dogs. That’s just their form, like your form is this [gesturing to his body].”³² Most of the Ciracusans in the novel see the Dog as, at worst, a manifestation of demonic arts or, at best, of an alien religion. Neither magic nor belief usually has a place in Western technology, which is rooted in empiricism. Yet, the Aniw are not part of the West, and just as Western technology may seem fantastical to one who does not understand its workings, so might Indigenous biotechnology seem magical to one similarly viewing it from outside the culture. A key problem in providing explanations is the linguistic barrier between Sjennonirk and Jarrett: their different languages make it impossible to reproduce exactly the meaning of a concept, as they do not have the words in common to translate culture. This is similarly a problem for the reader of Western heritage seeking to translate the concept of Dogs, who might argue that the *ankagos* and their Dogs cannot be a technology because they are not humanly-created tools. The Dogs are certainly fantastic, but they do not seem to meet the “techno” element of steampunk technofantasy. Yet, to return to Poirier’s observation that for Indigenous peoples nature is technology, we must open out the definition of steampunk technology to incorporate more forms of science beyond the Western mechanical sciences. For the Aniw, the Dogs are in a sense a tool, as they offer guidance to the *ankagos*, as well as a way to manifest the spiritual connection between the people and the land, to serve the Land and maintain their people’s wellbeing, with the land and people existing symbiotically.

In the novel, at least one Ciracusan views the Dogs as a form of technology. Jarrett’s father, General Fawle, has concluded that the only way to win Ciracusa’s wars against the Indigenous peoples and the Sairlanders (the inhabitants of the Ciracusans’ original home) is to harness the technology of the enemy. His thinking is summarised thus: “The man thought this Dog a weapon of some sort, an abo weapon more elusive and deadly than a poisoned arrow. And if the abos had it, so should General Fawle’s army.”³³ Sjennonirk’s people are not the only Indigenous peoples to have Dogs: Qoyotariz, leader of the Soreganee, a Southern tribe, has a Dog that appears to be a coyote, and Keeley, a Whishishian tracker who was

³¹ K. Lowachee, op. cit., p. 26.

³² Ibid., pp. 155–156.

³³ Ibid., p. 189.

taken from his people and raised in a Ciracusan school, states that his people too have individuals with Dogs. Sjennonirk learns from Keeley that General Fawle has been kidnapping Indigenous elders, forcing them to teach their knowledge and “arts” to Ciracusans. As Keeley notes, this is a “vile and unnatural thing.”³⁴ There is also the strong suggestion that the general has been experimenting with breeding: his own son, Jarrett, possesses a Dog, and the general offers Sjennonirk freedom from jail in exchange for teaching his son to control his Dog. Jarrett is horrified and resistant. When Sjennonirk asks if his people have historically had *ankago* powers, he replies “[i]n faerie stories.” She responds that in her culture, “stories spring from truth.”³⁵ Here is the essence of the tension between Ciracusan rationalism and Aniw belief, or perhaps between Western technology and Indigenous technology. In order to release Jarrett’s Dog, or little spirit, his father orders that he be tattooed on the face in the Aniw way. Jarrett then becomes an unwilling hybrid: Ciracusan and, on some level, Aniw; he has also been marked by Koyotariz, further complicating where he might belong. *The Gaslight Dogs* is the first in a series, so it is unclear how the treatment of the Dogs as technology will unfold, but it seems quite clear that this novel is about, among other things, the intersection of Western and Indigenous technologies.

Writing about steampunk as a subculture, Christine Ferguson addresses the anxiety expressed within the steampunk community that steampunk, in its increasing mass popularity, has either lost or risks losing its “punk” qualities, or its political significance, which was most evident in its first wave of fiction (she follows Nevins in locating this from the early 1970s to around 1990).³⁶ If steampunk fiction becomes focused simply on recycling plots and characters from nineteenth-century scientific romances and adventure stories, if it iterates the clichéd motifs of steampunk (the goggles, the airships, the automata), it does indeed run the risk of becoming nothing more than cheap entertainment, or even a fad that will pass as the formula loses favour. A way for literary steampunk to retain cultural significance, and even “punk” attitude, is for the genre to continue to evolve. Karin Lowachee, who may not have known much about steampunk when writing *The Gaslight Dogs*, expresses this: “I want ‘Steampunk: The Sequel’. And not the crappy sequel that nobody wants to see, but the sequel that brings new life to an established and well-loved idea.”³⁷ One much needed sequel is multicultural steampunk, moving beyond the genre’s Eurocentric roots. A work like *The Gaslight Dogs*, with the concept of the Dog as a form of Indigenous technology, models a way in which steampunk can challenge Western definitions of technology, and by doing so expand the definition of what steampunk can be.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 324.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 269.

³⁶ C. Ferguson, ‘Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture, and the Ideology of Style’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4, 2011, no. 2, pp. 73–75.

³⁷ As cited in: J. VanderMeer, S.J. Chambers, op. cit., p. 88.

Assessing Steampunk's Future: The Test Case of *The Gaslight Dogs*

Summary

Steampunk as a literary genre is at a key point in its evolution. There is disagreement on the definition of the genre, with prescriptivists insisting that the genre must remain true to its roots in neo-Victorian technological retrofuturism, thereby locating it primarily in the Transatlantic industrial world dominated by imperial Britain, and descriptivists wanting to open up the definition to create space for steampunk to move beyond the boundaries of the nineteenth-century, Europe, and the Industrial Revolution. This paper explores how Canadian author Karin Lowachee's *The Gaslight Dogs* (2010), a novel that appears not to contain many of the tropes of steampunk, can be classified as such if the understanding of steampunk technology as technofantasy is permitted to be more fantastic than technical in a Western, scientific sense. This redefinition has significant implications in terms of creating space within the genre for fictions to be set among and articulate the worldview of Indigenous cultures that have developed their own technologies, not industrialised technologies. If steampunk is to continue to be a vital genre rather than becoming stale and formulaic, development of more multicultural steampunk books, like *The Gaslight Dogs*, is necessary to continue pushing the boundaries of the genre. Multicultural steampunk fiction also continues the genre's interrogation of imperial power relations by decentring Western imperial powers with their industrialised technologies.

Przyszłość steampunku? *Casus The Gaslight Dogs*

Streszczenie

Steampunk jako gatunek literacki wszedł obecnie w kluczową fazę swego rozwoju. Nie ma jednakże zgody co do definicji gatunku. Podczas gdy normatywiści upierają się, że gatunek powinien dochować wierności swoim korzeniom — neowiktoriańskiemu technologicznemu retrofuturyzmowi — umiejscawiając go przede wszystkim w transatlantyckim, industrialnym świecie, zdominowanym przez imperium brytyjskie, deskryptywiści z kolei są skłonni rozszerzyć definicję steampunku poza XIX w., Europę i rewolucję industrialną. Niniejszy artykuł bada, w jaki sposób powieść *The Gaslight Dogs* (2010) kanadyjskiej autorki Karin Lowachee, która pozornie nie zawiera w sobie zbyt wiele steampunkowych tropów, może być jednak zaliczona do gatunku, jeśli tylko zgodzimy się przyjąć bardziej fantastyczne niżli *stricte* techniczne, w zachodnim, naukowym sensie, rozumienie technologii steampunkowej. Ta redefinicja niesie z sobą istotne implikacje co do stworzenia w obrębie gatunku przestrzeni dla utworów fabularnych wyrażających punkt widzenia rdzennych kultur, które rozwinęły swoje własne technologie, nieoparte na industrializacji. Jeśli steampunk ma pozostać gatunkiem żywotnym, zamiast zasklepić się w obrębie wytartych formuł, konieczne jest pojawienie się bardziej wielokulturowych tekstów steampunkowych, takich właśnie jak *The Gaslight Dogs*. Wielokulturowe utwory steampunkowe kontynuują także dzieło kwestionowania imperialistycznego układu sił przez decentralizację zachodniego imperializmu oraz jego zindustrializowanych technologii.

Tłumaczenie Grzegorz Trębicki