

More Punk than Steam

Getting into steampunk was both expected and unexpected of me. On one hand, I was a cosplayer who mainly thrifted items and enjoyed coming up with original characters. On the other hand, I hated history and fashion rules. Victorian fashion, in particular, had distinct characteristics, but being a sci-fi genre gave steampunk the ability to rewrite fashion rules, as well as history. However, I would learn that the colonial influence of Victoriana in both aesthetics and attitudes would be very difficult to shake.

When steampunk became a popular sight in sci-fi and anime conventions, enthusiasts would gather together to form airships. These were collectives of creatives who dressed as their neo-Victorian alter-egos (some disliked the word “cosplay” because they were lifestyle Goths and this became an extension of that). When a convention buddy invited me to join his airship, I immediately began writing biographies for my character and my partner’s, Mina Mori and Joshua F. Edward. We had started dating a couple months prior to the creation of Airship Nocturne, and steampunk meet-ups gave us an excuse to go out. In entwining our stories, Mina became a way I could try to embody the role of “girlfriend” as well as bold adventurer and dancer I had initially imagined her to be.

I never liked restrictive clothing, which was what I associated formalwear and most feminine clothing with. I was a tomboy who borrowed dresses for awards ceremonies and family portraits and got yelled at for sitting “improperly”. Gothic fashion, however, intrigued me, and the romantic goth and gothic lolita aesthetics provided a way for me to explore the subculture

while appeasing those who wished I could be “better dressed” for formal occasions. I would be okay with wearing a dress or even a corset if I could be goth.

If formalwear reminded me of the restrictions I felt in my assigned gender, belly dance for me was the liberation of femininity. I had long been fascinated by how freely belly dancers moved and the control they had over their entire body. The steampunk band Abney Park had a dancer, and she became my inspiration to get into the community without having to wearing an unsuitable amount of layers for the Texas summer. After doing a little research into the Chicago World’s Fair, I made Mina a student of the famed belly dancer “Little Egypt” and tried to incorporate belly dance costumes, baring my midriff and tying scarves around my hips in lieu of wearing a bustle skirt. However, as I attended more events, I felt an unspoken pressure to conform to either the Victorian or Wild West aesthetics that dominated the local scene. As my partner tightened the laces of my corset while I buttoned up my frilly blouse, I told myself that I achieving my fancy goth aspirations and that Mina didn’t walk around in belly dance costume all the time.

Mina became a justification to force myself to stay feminine. My partner had the classic men’s look down with his dress shirt, vest, slacks, and top hat combo, plus accessories to add to the neo-Victorian aesthetic. Because he was my ride to events, our steampunk community saw us as inseparable, which fueled a desire to complement his look. We normally never matched as he wore dress shirts and vests and I was a wannabe skater punk with cute animal T-shirts. Josh and Jen clashed, but Joshua and Mina were one unit. This character who was supposed to be my aspiration for greater independence wound up partly defined by her relationship. I felt so boxed in that I wrote into Mina’s bio her own alter-ego, a male disguise, in order to give myself an excuse to wear more masculine steampunk fashion.

I started to see what steampunk could have been when I connected with BIPOC writers and makers who used the genre to decolonize their history. My previous attempts at incorporating my Chinese and Taiwanese heritage (as well as a idealized obsession with Japanese culture) were aimless attempts at diversity while remaining under the thumb of Victoriana. Then there was the issue of perpetuating Orientalism through using belly dance in my costuming. Although my local scene never made me feel unwelcome, I grew frustrated with the insistence on a retrofuturistic utopia in lieu of conversations on cultural appropriation and imperialism. Moreover, any tips I received on costuming placed me into a mold of a feminine individual who had assimilated into Western culture. I no longer wanted to be Mina.

My last steampunk outfit rejected these unspoken fashion rules and the need to present myself an ideal woman. Gone was the natural historian-belly dancer who was almost always with her artist-detective boyfriend. I created a nameless, Chinese, reformed assassin who wanted to be so non-threatening that she wore chimes to alert people she was around—my rationale in keeping the wind chime shimmy belt that my partner spent hours making. Josh never cared for the roleplay aspect of steampunk so he didn't mind being someone who happened to be with my character instead of tied to her story. Although I would need a couple more years before coming out as nonbinary, I knew that I didn't want to be a "girlfriend" (or wife). This new character was not going to fulfill a designated role or dress in a way that society said I should.

Our steampunk scene fizzled out before I got to wear this outfit again, and my interests shifted cosplaying again and learning burlesque. The latter was yet another attempt to be more feminine, but it led to a vibrant queer performance community that helped me assert my nonbinary identity. Josh always said I was more of the "punk" part of steampunk with my

defiance of the status quo, and I realized I was better off doing it in the present rather than an alternate history. Plus I didn't need an alter-ego to wear suspenders and goggles.