

Abstract The steam man is a trope of early US science fiction, one inaugurated by the first dime novel Edisonade, Edward Ellis's 1868 story *The Steam Man of the Prairies*. Focusing on early steam man stories as well as the historical origin of the trope—Zadoc Dederick's 1868 invention, dubbed the Newark Steam Man—this essay argues that the course of US science fiction and US technology more generally was shaped by the racial discourses of the Reconstruction. Coming on the heels of the Civil War, the steam man stories, like Dederick's patent, drew on extant black caricatures to explicitly racialize their central invention, vividly illustrating the afterlife of slavery at the birth of America's machine culture.

Keywords Edgar Allan Poe, Edisonade, slavery, machine culture

Late one day in January 1868, a clanging metallic creature stalked the streets of Newark, New Jersey. Dressed in “pantaloon, coat and vest, of the latest styles,” standing “seven feet and nine inches high,” and weighing “five hundred pounds,” this monstrous mechanical man looked out on the gathering crowds with its face “of white enamel” while traveling under its own motive force, fueled by nothing but water, heat, and gumption. The water and heat were contained in a boiler, fashioned like a torso and powering a pair of articulated legs. The gumption resided elsewhere, in the person of Zadoc Dederick, “the inventor, who is at present but twenty-two years of age, [and who, six years ago] conceived the novel idea of constructing a man that should receive its vitality from a perpetual motion machine” (*Chicago Tribune* 1868).¹ If this sounds like the premise of a science fiction story, that's because it would be when, some months

later, fellow Newark resident Edward Ellis published his dime novel *The Steam Man of the Prairies*, featuring a proto-science fiction plot that centers on the career of a young engineering genius and his steam-powered man.²

The steam man stands on an important genealogical node in the development of US science fiction, a moment of emergence clear only in retrospect, whose generic naïveté reflects and projects the racial currents and politics that were to shape what Sheila Jasanoff (2015, 4) calls the “sociotechnical imaginaries” guiding collective visions of desirable scientific and technological advancement. Beyond the Newark connection, the boy engineer, and the steam-powered man, Dederick’s invention and Ellis’s story share one other crucial element: for both men, the steam man is speculatively black.

In his story, Ellis (1870, 12) describes a steam man with a face “made of iron, painted a black color, with a pair of fearful eyes, and a tremendous grinning mouth.” This black countenance—a seemingly redundant detail on an already iron visage—works to embed his imaginative device explicitly in a broader discourse of racialized labor. The race of Dederick’s machine is a bit more complicated: as noted, the device he unveiled for the people of Newark had a white enamel face, a piece of its overall design intended to “give it as nearly as possible a likeness to the rest of humanity” (so as to not frighten the horses), apparently embedding his invention in a discourse that equated whiteness with humanity writ large. But there is a contrasting moment of racialization in the patent Dederick and his partner, Isaac Grass, filed for the device: his “improvement in steam-carriage,” US Patent 75,874 (1868), depicts the lower half of the device—those parts being patented—in conventional schematic form, appropriate for a technical legal document. The upper half, the “man,” is presented as a stereotypical black caricature (see fig. 1).

This essay focuses on the shifting relationship between black bodies and white supremacy suggested by these speculative steam men. Though present-day technoculture projects a rhetoric of color blindness, it is my assertion that in the United States our sociotechnical imaginaries are inseparable from the discourses of race that circulated—and continue to circulate—during their development. These steam men show how US technoculture has drawn explicitly on the cultural authority of white supremacy and suggest how this legacy lives on today.

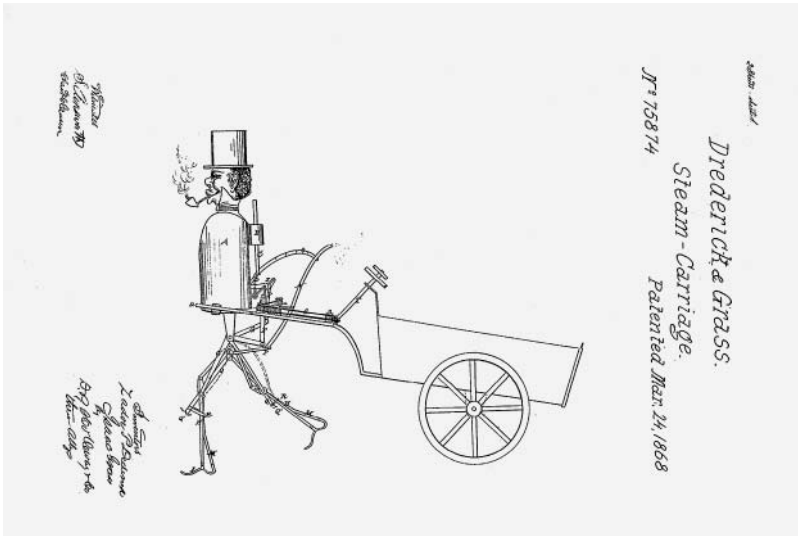


Figure 1 The first page of Dederick’s patent 75,874 (which misspells his name as Drederick), rotated to show the figure more clearly (Dederick and Glass 1868). Source: United States Patent and Trademark Office, www.uspto.gov

Genre and the Edisonade

Ellis’s story inaugurated two traditions: dime-novel science fiction and what John Clute and Peter Nicholls would later term the *Edisonade*. Clute and Nicholls coined *Edisonade* in the 1993 edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* to identify a related group of early proto-science fiction dime novels. These stories were loosely structured around the persona Thomas Edison cultivated for himself as inventor extraordinaire, consummate tinkerer, brilliant machinist, and all-American genius. Edisonade tales feature protagonists who are, in turn, singularly gifted inventors, tinkerers, and machinists.

Edisonades are generally grounded by some powerful invention that is “not, however, simply a Weapon, though it will almost certainly prove to be invincible against the foe, and may also make the hero’s fortune; it is also a means of Transportation—for the Edisonade is not only about saving the country (or planet) through personal spunk and native wit, it is also about lighting out for the Territory” (Clute 2016). These stories were most popular in the late nineteenth century, composing an unnamed subgenre circulating as a piece of “the mass literature of boyhood, adolescence, and the making of men” (Seltzer 1992, 4).

They form an oft-unacknowledged branch of science fiction's genealogy and represent a popular iteration of "disciplinary individualism and machine culture" (5). They are tales of an individual's self-improvement through the careful mastery of machines. This expertise is not simply competent tool use, though that is implied, but a larger process of developing expertise in the design and application of new technologies—Horatio Alger for the engineering set.

By the time Ellis encountered the Newark Steam Man, he had already established himself as a prolific writer of dime novels—a mass medium printed on very disposable paper with equally disposable editorial oversight. Ellis's first story, the dramatic Indian³ captivity narrative *Seth Jones; or, The Captives of the Frontier* (1860), sold extremely well, establishing the dime novel as a commercially viable form in the process (Brown 1997, 165). Ellis was also "a teacher who enjoyed a legendary popularity with his students" (165), a trait that seems to have made him especially attuned to the interests of what would become the dime novel's principal audience: adolescent boys.⁴ While *The Steam Man of the Prairies* was his only known foray into what would become science fiction, his sense for boys' adventure, coupled with his popular fame, helped propel the story's fantastic device into popular consciousness. When the story was reprinted to coincide with the 1876 Chicago World's Fair, it inspired rival publisher Frank Tousey to commission the first Frank Reade story, *Frank Reade and His Steam Man of the Plains*. These stories, along with the subsequent spin-off Frank Reade Jr. series, accounted for more than 183 stories between 1876 and 1898. Both series prominently feature their own versions of the steam man story.

Together, the historical Newark Steam Man and its paraliterary progeny stand as an urtext of the developing relationship among racial, scientific, and technological discourses in the United States following the Civil War. Ellis's tale marks a moment when, in the wake of emancipation and the early promises of Reconstruction, the former economic base built on enslaved labor slowly transformed into what became nominally free forms of wage labor, supplemented by an increasing adoption of mechanical labor. Mark Seltzer (1992, 17–18) sees such juxtaposition between bodies and machines as a piece of "how the uncertain status of the principle of locomotion precipitates the melodramas of uncertain agency and also what amounts to an erotics of uncertain agency"—an especially relevant concern given

the Edisonade inventions' locomotive purposes. For Seltzer, this uncertain agency is a gendered anxiety, but as the Edisonades make clear, the introduction of machine labor in the United States was always also marked by its relationship to racialized labor. The Edisonade stories and related cultural artifacts index a shift happening across the country as old forms of mastery, structured by the institution of chattel slavery, were co-opted by and transformed into new narratives of mastery over machines. In these Edisonades, the relationship between mastery and labor, once embedded in the paired white/black and master/slave dichotomies, is displaced onto machines. Put simply, in these Edisonades, machines have a race.

Racializing Prosthetics

Blackness and technology were already conflated prior to 1868, especially in the realm of popular culture. In part, this is a legacy of racialized slavery, which saw the forcible importation of African bodies to and from "factories" to serve as a source of labor. One of Poe's more neglected stories, "The Man That Was Used Up" (1967; first published in 1839), offers a rough-and-ready schematic for the place of race in US sociotechnical imaginaries prior to the Civil War. Its main character, a famous brigadier general, is initially figured as an ideal man, only to be revealed as an amalgam of prosthetics attached to a wrecked (or "used up") body. These prosthetics are attached by his slave, and the story's satirical tone leaves little question as to how the reader is to take this state of affairs: the ideal man, if built from prosthetics, is no man at all.

Poe does not seem to blame the protocyborg for his condition, at least not exclusively. Rather, Poe's satire targets the entirety of an emerging machine culture enabled by violent Indian wars and racialized slavery. The General is received ambiguously, as everyone praises his valor and laments the viciousness of his Indian enemies but always with an overtone of mockery or, according to the narrator, mystery. The narrator, who does not recognize the General's condition, senses that something is off and goes out in search of the truth, to little avail. His many interlocutors deflect his questioning with some variation on the theme of "this is a wonderfully inventive age!" (Poe 1967, 258).

Poe's racialization of prosthetics becomes clear in the last turn of the story, when the narrator finally goes to the General's house.

There he discovers “a large and exceedingly odd looking bundle of something” (261) that turns out to be the General himself. An “old negro valet” (260; read: slave) named Pompey sets about assembling the General, attaching a leg, an arm, shoulders, bosom, wig, teeth, and an eye: “The manipulations of Pompey had made, I must confess, a very striking difference in the appearance of the personal man” (262). Throughout this transformation, one mystery persists, as the General speaks in a strange voice. It is solved when the General orders Pompey to install his palate: “Hereupon, the negro, grumbling out an apology, went up to his master, opened his mouth with the knowing air of a horse-jockey, and adjusted therein a somewhat singular-looking machine, in a very dexterous manner, that I could not altogether comprehend” (262). These manipulations are played for laughs, but they form a striking allegory of the fraught relationships among man, race, and technology in Poe’s nineteenth-century milieu.

The humor comes from two directions: first, from the narrator’s naïveté, as he is the only man in the whole city (it seems) who has met the General without noticing the prosthetics. Indeed, he heaps vigorous praise on the General’s body upon their first meeting, praise the General repeats at the end, recommending the best manufacturer for each part of his reconstructed body as Pompey attaches them in sequence. Second, the story’s broader satire targets the Jacksonian self-made man trope then circulating in US politics, exposing the Jackson-like general as unmanned by his own violent, slave-owning life, portraying these supposed masters as beholden to their own devices. Pompey’s role in the General’s construction is ambiguous, as on the one hand he is presumably the property of the General and therefore legally—ideologically—a tool put to use by the General; that is, inasmuch as Pompey is nonagential property, he becomes just another part of the General’s prosthetic body, the part that assembles and disassembles the rest. On the other hand, as Poe’s invocation of “a horse-jockey” suggests, it is in fact the General who lacks agency in this scenario, as he is manipulated by his supposed slave.

The story’s repeated invocations of this “wonderfully inventive age”—both in the voice of the General and in the half-serious voices of his faux admirers—gestures to its opposite: the horror of an age of technology. Much like the horror (the horror) in Joseph Conrad’s later *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Poe’s body horror comments less on

the terrible realities of waging genocidal wars against indigenous populations for the sake of colonial expansion than on the costs of such practices for the civilization committed to them. Unlike Conrad, Poe is not engaged in a profound political statement about colonialism—his satire targets the men more than the society.⁵ Nevertheless, the story captures something prescient about the costs of technological innovation: How can someone be a man, sovereign and proud, when totally dependent on something beyond himself? This question is especially relevant when that “something” comes by way of an unruly and potentially treacherous racialized Other. Poe’s story points to a tension that suffuses the US sociotechnical imaginary: are people masters of their machines or slaves to them?

Technological Blackness

Other examples of the conflation between slave bodies and technology abound. Louis Chude-Sokei (2016), for instance, locates an important node in this conflation in the person of one Joice Heth, P. T. Barnum’s first success as a showman. Heth—black, disabled, and enslaved—was purchased, rented, or otherwise secured by Barnum in 1835. Barnum notes her striking appearance in his autobiography, commenting that “she looked as if she might have been far older than her age as advertised” (quoted in Chude-Sokei 2016, 22). He used this striking appearance to his full advantage, promoting her as a human artifact, as George Washington’s mammy. Heth’s enslaved body is broadly understood to be the foundation on which Barnum built his career as a showman. As Chude-Sokei describes it, “She was his introduction into an American public life that he irrevocably changed and a media culture that some argue—including him—he essentially invented” (22), though he pushes Barnum’s true origin moment from Barnum’s first encounter with Heth to four months later, when Barnum placed her alongside another new acquisition, the Mechanical Turk.

The Turk, a curiosity dating back to the late eighteenth century, was billed as a mechanical device that could play a decent game of chess. Almost certainly operated by a diminutive chess prodigy or professional, this device has had a long history of challenging assumptions about the distinction between the mechanical and the human. Chude-Sokei favors this moment as Barnum’s origin because of what followed: Barnum, facing declining attendance, planted a story in a

local newspaper claiming that Heth was not, in fact, human, but rather an automaton cleverly disguised as a human. “The exhibitor is a ventriloquist,” the notice read, “and all conversations apparently held with the ancient lady are purely imaginary, so far as she is concerned, for the answers and incidents purporting to be given and related by her are merely the ventriloquized voice of the exhibitor” (quoted in Chude-Sokei 2016, 24). For Chude-Sokei, this invocation of ventriloquism is crucial, because it links the supposedly mechanical Heth to the tropes of the minstrel stage, recasting her as “merely a black mask for [a] white voice” (24).

Heth and the Turk made for a complex diptych: one a slave purported to be a machine, the other a machine purported not to be human. The interest in both was motivated by the confusion between human and machine. Visitors flooded back to determine whether the slave was human, and whatever their conclusions, it was part and parcel of an overdetermined project stretching back centuries. This example is suggestive of how closely blackness and technology were situated in the US cultural imaginary, and the claims of ventriloquism further suggest the potency of white mastery (in this case, of a particular kind of aural performance) enabled by and routed through the black-mechanical nexus.

Following an argument in Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, we can see how this mode of mastery shifted following emancipation. As Hartman (1997, 132) argues, emancipation precipitated less a rupture in racial politics than a restructuring of the plantation model, as newly freed African Americans were incorporated into systems of “burdened individuality” that shifted the onus of controlling black labor onto the black body: “From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection” (6). Taking Hartman’s insights as a basis and looking more closely at another aspect of the same system, we can ask what happened to the ideologies of mastery that were once defined by white men’s capacity to control, or harness, an enslaved population.

The racialization of the steam man suggests that, much as subjection was transformed (not destroyed) for black populations in the Reconstruction, so, too, were the conditions of white mastery. Just as this transformation did not radically alter the conditions of blackness, neither did it radically restructure the relationship between whiteness

and control. Hartman notes, “When we examine the history of racial formation in the United States, it is evident that liberty, property, and whiteness were inextricably enmeshed” (119). The early Edisonades are one form in which this enmeshed collection of tropes became tied together. Specifically, these Edisonades represent one vector by which white mastery was rearticulated through a technocultural lens as the property of former enslavers was analogically transformed into a proprietorial knowledge of technology. Fictive mastery over the steam man dramatizes a transformation from older master-slave relationships to mastery over machines, all while maintaining the core values of supremacy, control, and sovereignty—concepts that derived much of their semantic weight through comparison with some opposite, enslaved state.

Under slavery, for instance, mastery was demonstrated through direct acts of violence: “In these instances, the exercise of power was inseparable from its display because domination depended upon demonstrations of the slaveholder’s dominion and the captive’s abasement. The owner’s display of mastery was just as important as the legal title to slave property. In other words, representing power was essential to reproducing domination” (Hartman 1997, 7). With the abolition of slavery rendering such representations of power (nominally) illegal, the persistent violence of state and individual actors continued but operated differently. Think, for instance, of the infamous 1919 notice published by the *Jackson (MS) Daily News*: “John Hartfield Will Be Lynched by Ellisville Mob at 5 O’clock this Afternoon—Governor Bilbo Says He Is Powerless to Prevent It—Thousands of People Are Flocking into Ellisville to Attend the Event—Sheriff and Authorities Are Powerless to Prevent It” (quoted in *Crisis* 1919, 208). Though this is clearly a display of white terrorism against the black community intended to bolster white supremacy, the power and domination it represents are figured as natural, inevitable, and uncontrollable. This notice signifies domination obliquely, as the transparent illegality of the spectacle of a death foretold is masked by a rhetoric of powerlessness, broadcasting (on a lower frequency) the willingness of law enforcement to allow such extrajudicial violence. But while terror is a form of power, it does not lend itself to demonstrations of mastery.

As representations of power shifted after emancipation, a parallel shift in narratives of mastery occurred, one that enabled a new optics of spectacular mastery, now over mechanical bodies. “Although no

longer the extension and instrument of the master's absolute right or dominion, the laboring black body remained a medium of others' power and representation" (Hartman 1997, 120). Ellis's story encodes one such example, where a black (cast-iron) body explicitly functions as a medium for the white inventor boy to project power into places where his unmediated self would otherwise flounder, taking advantage of the representational fungibility of black bodies to help make its fantastical invention palatable to a general audience. Dederick's patent encodes another.

Although news accounts consistently refer to a "steam man," situating the device in terms of its humanlike appearance, Dederick's patent uses more sober terminology, dubbing itself an "improvement in steam-carriage" (Dederick and Grass 1868, 1). As described above, Dederick's patent details the various mechanisms that allow his device to move and includes a detailed schematic for the patentable parts, in contrast to the upper portion, which is drawn as a caricature of a black man. The decision to make the device explicitly racial is curious; even more curious is the decision to code the race as black given the discourse and appearance presented in the newspaper account.

As both the newspaper and accompanying image (attached to the front of the patent application; see fig. 2) show, the actual steam man was designed to "give it as nearly as possible a likeness to the rest of humanity" (*Chicago Tribune* 1868), which in this case does not match the appearance of the schematic. It is not clear whether these schematics were drawn by Dederick, Grass, or some third-party draftsman. What does seem clear is that, insofar as the steam man is a "man like any other," he is "white" (*ibid.*)—the otherwise nonfunctional white enamel doing work to bring the device in line with a certain set of racial codes for its public launch. To the extent that the device represents an essentialized labor—that is, when depicted as a schematic representing the essential (and patentable) features of the device—the steam man is black.

It is worth underlining here that the caricatured features of the black figure in the schematic are neither functional nor are they represented in the aesthetic features of the final device. Rather, they link the mechanical, masterable labor of the steam man back to tropes of black servility and exploitable labor, suggesting a visual concordance between harnessing steam power (and all its explosive potential) and harnessing racialized, enslaved labor. Perhaps merely intended to

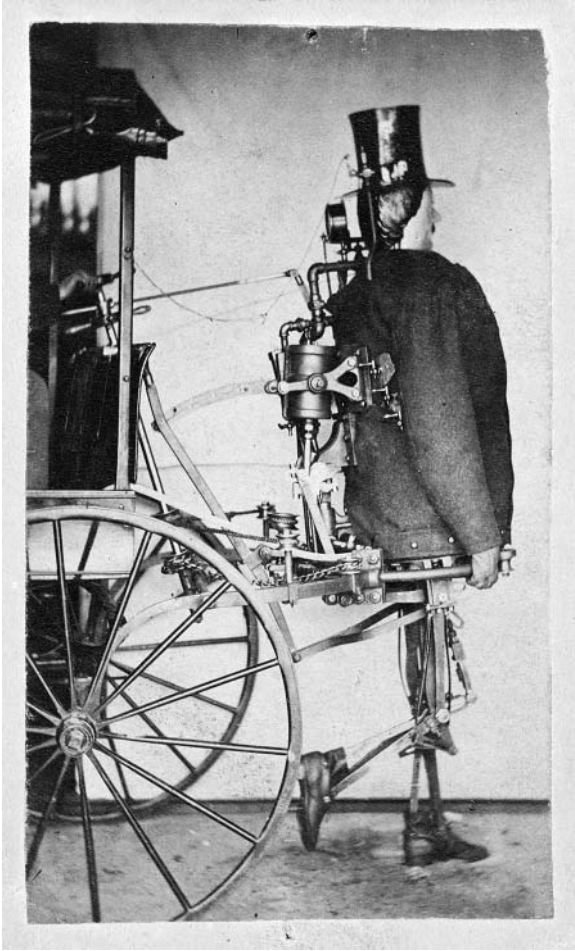


Figure 2 An image of the Newark Steam Man, apparently submitted with the patent. From the New York Public Library

inject a touch of levity into what is, after all, a faintly absurd endeavor, the humor of the patent is nonetheless instructive. It links a speculative laboring technology to tropes of minstrel theater, tropes theorized by Sylvia Wynter in explicit conversation with anxieties of racial mastery. For Wynter (1979, 151–52), mastery is not some intrinsic characteristic endowed to all white folks: “Rather there is a place of the NORM, the *Norm of mastery*, of which the white skin is merely a sign. Thus mastery, the experiencing of the identity of being master[,] can be lost. If one fails by one’s action to act so as to occupy the Place of the Norm, one can be displaced from the Norm, can fall into being the

Non-Norm, in this case, Sambo.” This norm of mastery, then, indexes not only those who owned slaves but also those who were hired as overseers to direct slaves, those who patrolled to police slaves, and even those who passed and enforced legislation in the North that ratified and maintained the property status of slaves—that is to say, everyone implicated in the maintenance and stability of slavery or, basically, everyone white. Indeed, following Cheryl Harris’s (1993, 1715–21) argument in “Whiteness as Property,” the institution of slavery was crucial for the development of whiteness not just as a personal identity but also as a legislative and political category. Emancipation disrupted the usual circulation of the norm of mastery; fanciful images, such as that on patent 75,874, helped to stabilize it.

The norm of mastery reconstituted by the steam man stories remixed different aspects of US slavery and formulations of whiteness to offer a new, forward-looking iteration of white mastery. Two aspects of white mastery in particular found purchase in the trope of the steam man: the first was slavery as a means to economic development, especially evident in Northern political support of the peculiar institution. The second, more prominent in the South, was the trope of slavery as the condition of possibility for Southern gentility. In the former case, a broad reliance on the economics of slavery slipped neatly into imaginative mechanical alternatives. Machines could provide a less volatile and less unruly labor source whose only major drawback, in the world of the mid-nineteenth century, was that the technology did not yet actually exist. This seems to have been Dederick’s thinking, at least. In the case of Southern gentility, the steam man stories forged a less obvious but no less important connection between a former culture of enslavement and a future full of machines. Southern claims to gentility can be understood as an aspect of the economy of honor inherent to slavery: “What was universal in the master-slave relationship was the strong sense of honor the experience of master-ship generated” (Patterson 1982, 11). The creator and operator of the steam man likewise secured his own honorable position in society by means of his exploits. His gentility emerged as a function of his overwhelming technological prowess. By linking the speculative logic of technological advancement with the racial logic of US slavery, the steam man offered a way forward for both of these logics as a newly individualized form of mastery. The black steam man secured the individual fortunes of its Edisonade creators and, through the manifest

superiority of the prosthetically enhanced young man, secured an old form of honor by new means.

Ellis's story in particular picked up on the norm of mastery, dramatizing its attainment by a physically nonnormative ("deformed") white character. Following Ellis's lead, this technologically enabled norm disseminated into a broader nascent genre as the trope of the steam man was reproduced in a series of dime novels during the later nineteenth century. These stories collectively rehearsed a new mode of adventure in the form of technological domination for boys who had been simultaneously stripped of a racist birthright (that of explicit mastery over black bodies) and endowed with a newly universalized racist history. (After emancipation, the material barriers to explicit mastery—namely, living in a slave state and being able to afford a slave—were no longer relevant, allowing whites of all regions and classes to imagine themselves as dispossessed masters.) Taken together, the early Edisonades functioned as cultural artifacts of and for young white male readers—that is, presumptive hegemonic subjects.

These stories reflected broader, often deleterious efforts to resolve racial issues in order to maintain or reinvent white supremacy. Both Ellis's book and Dederick's patent for the steam man were published in 1868, at the height of Reconstruction. This context is important because it suggests something about the racial, technological, and political landscape out of which both emerged. Neither man was a former slave owner coping with a newly imposed racial and labor landscape. Rather, both were white men living in New Jersey, imagining a future in a country where the role of race (theirs and others') was in flux.

Mastering the Steam Man

Bill Brown (1993) offers a brief reading of *The Steam Man of the Prairies* that frames Ellis's steam man in the context of a newly reformed empire-nation. Brown reads Ellis's story alongside other, later narratives of what he sees as prosthetic enhancement in the form of imperial labor. Brown argues that the most important aspect of Ellis's novel is "the way the novel responds not, for instance, to the loss of slave labor, but to the notorious loss of limbs suffered by Civil War soldiers" (132). In the context of the United States' accelerating settler-colonial policies, the steam man functioned as a prosthetic for the bodies broken by the Civil War, speculatively enabling those damaged by

the war to reclaim what was seen as America's destiny. For Brown, the steam man's blackness indexes some anxieties about racial strife: "in its occasional moments of breakdown, a kind of technological frenzy, the Steam-Man may be said to embody the threat of the slave's (or the recently freed slaves') violent recalcitrance" (131). But in the context of Dederick's patent and later iterations of the steam man trope, the implicit race of this machine takes on greater importance.

Clearly, the steam man functions as a prosthetic enhancement for its creator, but as with Poe's "The Man That Was Used Up," prosthetics and race are not separate issues in US culture. Unlike actual Civil War-era prosthetics and unlike the prosthetics in Poe's story, the steam man represents an idealized prosthetic enhancement for men (or a nation) injured by war; it is not, in other words, merely a corrective. Conflating blackness, invention, and prosthetics, *The Steam Man of the Prairies* re-forms what counts as valid white masculinity, extending the white inventor's powers through a device of his own making. In this sense, the machine does not just represent a recently freed labor force—one that was prone to moments of unruly disobedience and in need of careful white control. Rather, the steam man represents a transitional figure of labor and mastery, a new mode of control that could operate independently of the legal ownership of racial Others, figured in terms that strongly recall what it seemingly tries to push past. In other words, the making of technical mastery as a late nineteenth-century value of white masculinity depended on the racialization of the machine as black.

We can see this in the hero of *The Steam Man of the Prairies*, the young, disabled inventor of the steam man, Johnny Brainerd. Johnny is described as a "deformed boy" (Ellis 1870, 15), "hump-backed, dwarfed, but with an amiable disposition" (18), and only his ability to manage his mechanical "monster with rare skill" (16) opens the prairies to him. Shortly after inventing the steam man, Johnny meets "Baldy" Bicknell (so called because he has been scalped by Indians) who sees in Johnny's steam man an opportunity. Baldy summons up a couple of his ethnically stereotyped friends: a Yankee, blandly drawn, and an Irishman drawn in a deeply prejudicial manner (constantly draining bottles of whiskey, picking fights, and longing for a future back in Ireland with as many children as he can afford). Together, this group ships the steam man to the very edges of civilization (somewhere in Missouri) and, once there, reassembles the device and sets off for an untapped gold reserve deep in Indian Territory.

These characters represent something of the variety of white perspectives that circulated in the United States after the Civil War: the Yankee can stand in for the Union; Johnny, in his semidisabled state, for the defeated Southern Confederates or, given his youth, perhaps as a figure of American futurity, injured through no fault of his own and, as such, potentially held back from his rightful place; the Irishman, a then-extant ethnic Other that would eventually be figured as white; and Baldy, a representation of the danger and romance of westward expansion. In part, this story works through the trauma of the Civil War, especially as it relates to the American project. In a war where brother fought brother, the former racial unity that undergirded white American identity was damaged.

If, as Brown notes, the steam man functions both as a racial figure of almost perfectly exploitable labor and as a prosthetic extension for a boy whose physical body is compromised, then we can read its deployment here not just as correcting a specific physical deformity but also as an attempt to reconcile some cultural or ideological deformities. The diversity of characters is belied by the absence of any black characters (except as displaced onto the nonspeaking object, the steam man) and suggests that, to the extent that it can be said to have a deliberate politics, this quickly produced novel works to reunify disparate white perspectives around westward expansion. This is particularly important given the tension between a relentless westward expansion and the volatile political balance between existing slave and free states. In this way, the disastrous consequences of westward expansion cast a shadow over what had been seen as America's destiny. Texts like *The Steam Man of the Prairies* worked to make this destiny manifest once again.

We learn early in the narrative that Johnny's father was killed by a steam engine explosion some five years prior to the novel's beginning. If the 1868 publication date is also the date of the narrative, then Johnny's father would have died in 1863, suggesting an analogic reworking of the Civil War: the violent death of Johnny's father is not the result of open warfare, as one might expect given the circumstances (and as might be a familiar reality among the boys Ellis taught) but is rather the result of some technical failure. Johnny succeeds where his father failed and does so despite his youth and deformity. His encounter with Baldy fuels his desire to escape peaceful domesticity, conforming to the trend immortalized in Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), though Ellis, like later Edisonade

authors, spends little time worrying about the escape, dwelling instead on the adventures and successes that follow.

Johnny is successful as an adventurer thanks only to his preternatural skill with machines; in all other ways he is a naïf. Although he does operate the steam man, Johnny is more of an observer than a participant, following the lead (or orders) of Baldy. Johnny and his partners successfully emerge from the story's violence thanks to his steam man, and they end up mining a substantial amount of gold despite the resistance of the landscape and its Indian avatars. Johnny's success despite his distinct lack of *savoir faire* seems to be the point of Ellis's narrative: clever young men who strike out into the unknown to seek their fortunes may be faced with all manner of unknowable danger, but with the help of their mechanical inventions they can not only survive but thrive.

The analogic reworking of the story's opening—casting Johnny's father as the victim of a steam-engine explosion—is completed in the final scene. Heading home after their successful mining venture, the characters end up stuck in a “narrow valley,” which ends in a blind alleyway (87); although the steam man is a marvel in any number of ways, it is unable to ascend the steep sides of the valley, and as night falls, the party decides to turn the steam man around and backtrack in the morning. Johnny gets to stand guard for the very first time, and he soon falls asleep. In the night, Indians discover the camp and roll boulders in the way of the party to block their escape. Eventually, inevitably, Johnny concocts an escape, turning his steam man into a walking bomb, replaying the disaster that killed his father but doing so in a way that ensures the safety (and profit) of himself and his compatriots, all of whom manage to escape with the gold they got from the mines.

Put schematically, Ellis offers a rough sketch of one way to deal with the rupture of the Civil War: white solidarity (across ethnic lines) and the expropriation of wealth from Indian Territory (and the rampant but apparently unproblematic destruction of Indians in said territory), all enabled by a silent (black) mechanical partner. Despite its fantastical origins, this structure broadly describes the reality of American westward expansion through the late nineteenth century as white civilization progressively moved into “untamed” spaces, displacing native populations and extracting wealth along the way, all with the aid of an ever-accelerating series of technological advancements.

The Spread of Technological Whiteness

Ellis (1870, 12) describes his steam man as “made of iron, painted a black color, with a pair of fearful eyes, and a tremendous grinning mouth.” Certain casts of iron can be black, perhaps suggesting that the cover art is a gesture toward the realistic appearance of a metal man (see fig. 3 for a colorized reprint of the original 1868 cover art and fig. 4 for another cover with similar design elements). However, as noted, the description in Ellis’s text contrasts strikingly with the newspaper accounts and the actual appearance of his apparent inspiration, the Newark Steam Man (fig. 2). Dederick, when putting his device on public display, took pains to code the machine as white. Johnny doesn’t do this; in fact, rather than leaving it the dull, darkish color of untreated iron—which would incidentally serve to link the invention more closely with trains and other “improvements in steam carriage”—Ellis’s inventor deliberately paints his steam man the color of the racial Other. This racial coding brings the operation (and



Figure 3 Cover of an 1870 reprint of *The Steam Man of the Prairies*, showing a colorized version of the original (1868) cover image. From the Northern Illinois University Libraries online archive, Nickels and Dimes

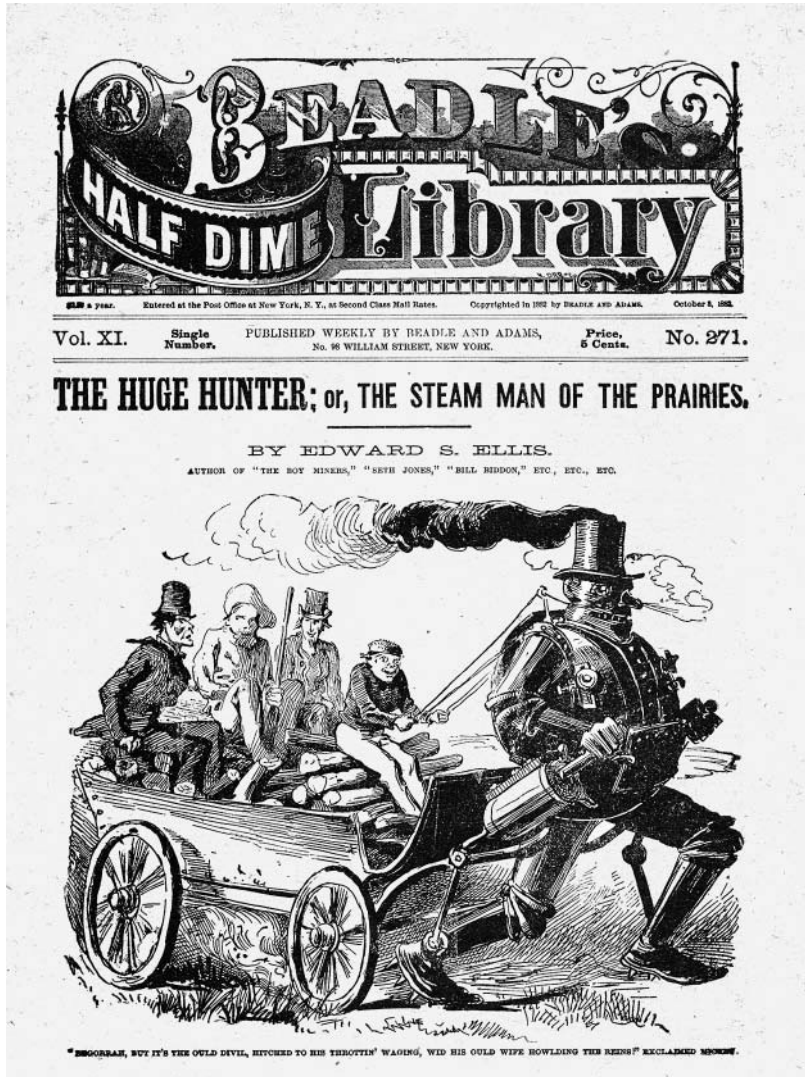


Figure 4 A later cover for the Beadle and Adams 1882 reprint of *The Huge Hunter; or, The Steam Man of the Prairies*. From the holdings of the Eaton Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside

disposal) of the steam man in line with earlier “demonstrations of the slaveholder’s dominion and the captive’s abasement” (Hartman 1997, 7), while suggesting an analogical reworking of racialized mastery post-emancipation. The effectiveness of this trope equating black men with man-shaped machines is evident in the cover art of later steam man stories. The steam man on Ellis’s cover is only broadly racialized—that is, it is black but displays few elements of the iconic morphology typical of minstrel tropes. Later steam man stories, written by different authors and published by different publishing houses, don’t bother with the visual descriptions of the steam man in text, but their covers adopt a more clearly and characteristically racialized set of visual tropes.

The cover art for the 1876 story *The Steam Man of the Plains; or, The Terror of the West*, a rough clone of Ellis’s tale, draws on caricatured depictions of blackness for its steam man (see fig. 5). The black figure, with a dandy top hat and bit in its mouth (literally harnessing its energy and also possibly indexing the iron bits used as punishment for unruly slaves), reads as a contained Zip Coon. This arrogant, ostentatious figure, first played by George Dixon in 1834, typically dressed in high style and spoke in a series of malapropisms and puns that undermined his attempts to appear dignified. This containment of the “coon” archetype also works to enclose something of the ambulatory agency that African Americans exercised following the end of the Civil War, movements that by 1876 had been largely curtailed through various ad hoc local and state rules, many of which would eventually be codified into Jim Crow laws. In 1876 this bridled black figure suggested the same politics on display in Ellis’s story and Dederick’s patent: a fantasy of managing black mobility in the service of white enterprise. The first story in the *Frank Reade Library*, which started publishing in 1892,⁶ copies the cover art from the first Frank Reade novel, adding only a few touches that reflect the different content of the two stories (see fig. 6). The black character in the cart is Pomp, whom I will return to below.

As with the cover art of the Frank Reade and Frank Reade Jr. issues, dime novels’ mass-production schedule demanded certain shortcuts, and copying was commonplace. Under these conditions, working creatives, especially those with tight deadlines and few chances to revise or experiment, pulled from anything they could for inspiration and guidance.⁷ Nathaniel Williams (2011, 293–94) offers one especially compelling account of this practice in his reading of 1896’s

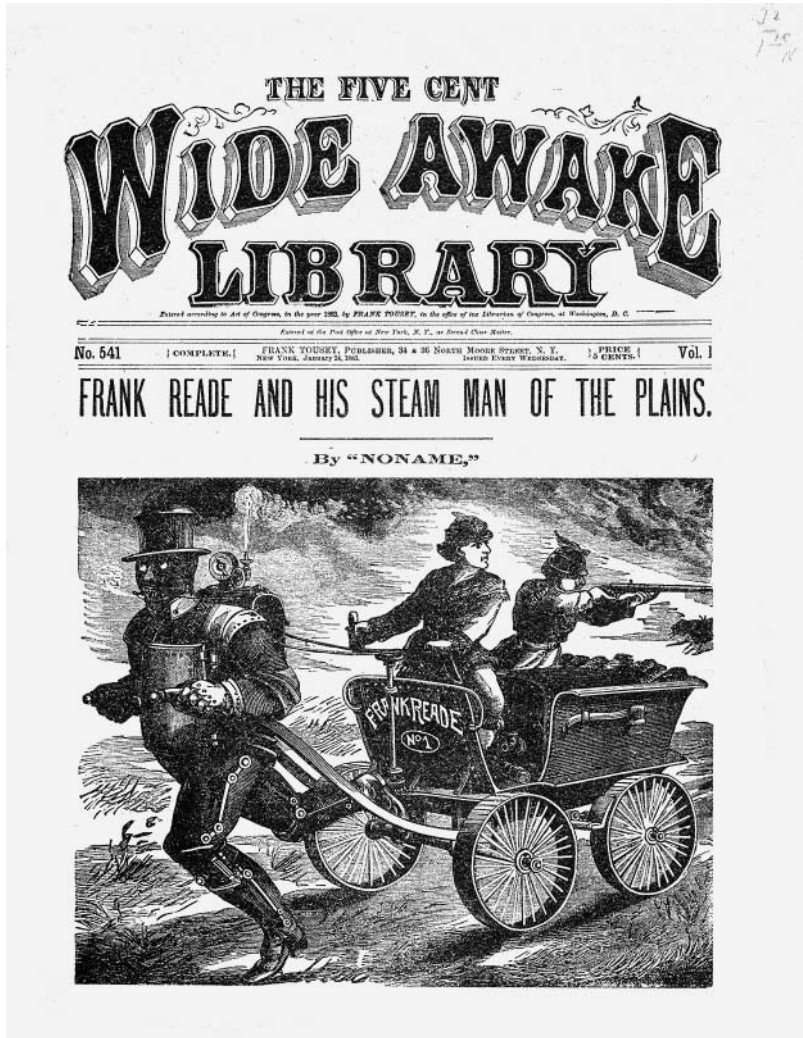


Figure 5 Cover of the first Frank Reade story (originally published in 1876), from a reprint in the January 24, 1883, issue of the *Wide Awake Library*. From the holdings of the Eaton Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside

Frank Reade, Jr., in Cuba. Many of the details motivating the characters of the story “are likely predicated on reports in the New York press immediately prior to the novel’s serialization beginning in June 1896,” especially reports of the measures taken by Spanish general Victoriano Weyler that were “denounced repeatedly in the *New York*

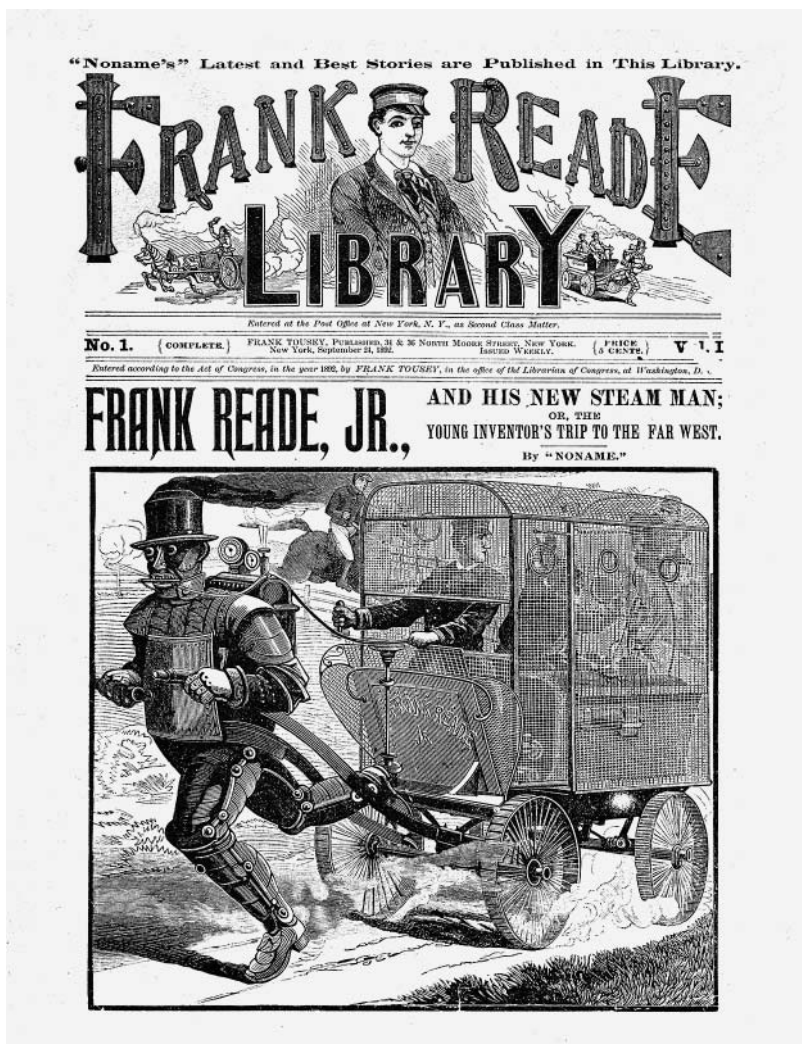


Figure 6 Cover of the first volume of the *Frank Reade Library* (1892). From the holdings of the Eaton Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California, Riverside

Times in early 1896.” These sentiments, evidenced by newspaper editorials and likely circulating broadly at the time, are themselves inflected by the implicit politics of Frank Reade Jr. stories such that this particular tale “plays out the imperial imaginary in its most benign, altruistic sense. The Cuban insurgents embody the same independent

spirit valorized by the Edisonades' master narrative" (295). The turnaround between the *New York Times* editorial and *Frank Reade, Jr., in Cuba's* serialization measures in months, and this rapid pace of production complicates any analysis of the the politics of mass-produced work. Besides being the product of many different people, such work is also often unknowingly beholden to (or at least, susceptible to the structures of) extant cultural tropes and trends—indeed, this may be one of the principal ways that some semi-isolated features become tropes in modern culture, whether the feature is a plot development or a racialized caricature. For this reason, it is worth paying attention to those features that do (or do not) get copied and repeated and to how these repetitions diverge from any original inspiration, both replicating and revising their source.

The Frank Reade and Frank Reade Jr. stories mark an important node in the transformation of Ellis's individual tale into a larger cultural theme. Written by Harry Enton (possibly a pen name of Harold Cohen),⁸ they, too, feature a young man and his steam man invention, and as in Ellis's earlier version, the inventor is a sixteen-year-old boy. Unlike Ellis's Johnny, however, Frank is a whole, healthy young man, and his cousin, Charley, is a Missouri farm boy and budding frontiersman, much like Ellis's Baldy but without the scars of frontier exploration. Like Johnny and Baldy, these two figures are physically differentiated: Frank is slight and not particularly hardy, while Charley is large, an expert marksman and outdoorsman. However, neither boy is depicted as more suited to adventuring (or more able to survive their adventures) than the other: Frank gets into trouble when he is somehow unable to use his inventions and Charley gets into trouble when he is outnumbered or outgunned, but each makes it through unscathed thanks both to help from the other and to his own exceptional abilities. The two boys form a more balanced pair than Ellis's Johnny and Baldy. Frank, the consummate tinkerer, is equal to Charley, the consummate physical specimen, suggesting that they each perform valid modes of hegemonic masculinity. In other words, this masculinity is no longer characterized exclusively by physical prowess; the ability to control technology is offered as an equal and valid alternative. The result of both modes is the same: the domination of racial Others through superior forms of control.

Enton's stories also lack the clean teleology of Ellis's story: While Ellis's heroes go out for wealth and return to their former lives

considerably enriched, in *Frank Reade and His Steam Man of the Plains* Frank decides to go on his adventure with minimal prompting (none of which involves the promise of material reward). Charley offers Frank no clear agenda; he merely suggests they “go out on the plains hunting and roving, dashing around in style, and racing reds half to death” (Enton 1892, 2), and Frank is immediately persuaded. During their adventures, they save some good white people, defeat some evil white bandits, and sociopathically slaughter dozens of Indians who were colluding with said bandits. A slightly different racial schematic emerges in these stories as evil whites direct Indian antagonism in much the same way that Frank directs his black machine, suggesting a universal structural position of whiteness with respect to racialized labor: good or evil, it is the white “brains” that direct the racialized brawn. As the story unfolds, there are noble sacrifices, close shaves, and so on until Frank and Charley decide to return home. Like Johnny and company, Frank and Charley have adventures that translate into considerable wealth, though this is not their initial goal: the treasure they receive is bequeathed by a dying character whom they had saved earlier in the story and is picked up almost as an afterthought.

Like Ellis, Enton includes no black characters in his first story, but he also drops the “painted black” description of the steam man, describing it merely as a “metallic imitation of a man” (Enton 1892, 2). This is not to suggest that the racial connection had lost its currency—as noted, the cover traffics in common racialized tropes in its depiction of the steam man. Rather, this suggests that the connection between blackness and the steam man was becoming implicit; it was understood to be black in a way that did not need to be made explicit in the text. In fact, there is no reason to believe that Enton was particularly aware of or concerned about the steam man’s appearance at all (especially given his scanty description). The cover artist would then be picking up on extant valences linking this proto-robot with race.

A further iteration, written by Luis Philip Senarens under the house pseudonym “NoName” and titled *Frank Reade, Jr., and His New Steam Man; or, The Young Inventor’s Trip to the Far West* (1892), retains the scanty description of the steam man while the cover artist copies the racialized form from the earlier story. Senarens includes in this mix the painfully written Pomp (short for “Pompey,” gesturing to the

“coon” stereotype’s pretensions while also echoing the name of the “old negro valet” in Poe, discussed above), a character who will stick around long after the black steam man has faded from the narrative fore. This thinly drawn caricature is a happy servant of the Reade family and often accompanies young Frank Reade Jr. on his adventures. In contrast to the ambiguous status of Poe’s Pompey, whose jockey-like manhandling of his master casts doubt on whether he can be understood as merely a component in the General’s larger prosthetic system, Senarens’s Pomp is superfluous to Frank Jr.’s ability to extend himself technologically. Although Pomp is a capable servant at times, he doesn’t function as an explicit extension of Frank Jr.’s will in the way a slave presumably would; rather, he’s mostly good for getting himself into trouble (thus providing the plot an excuse to move forward) or for helping reunite Frank Jr. with his various machines (thus allowing Frank Jr. to win the day). There is no suggestion that Pomp could ever equal Frank Jr.’s competence with his tools.

Pomp’s deployment in these stories suggests that the relationship between blackness and labor has completed its transformation from a master-slave form. Frank Jr.—wealthy, young, strong, a crack shot, and generally unflappable—is as physically exceptional as he is tech savvy. He no longer needs to dominate Pomp (or some black slave stand-in) in any spectacular manner, exerting his power instead through mechanical means. Pomp has some individuality, but it is circumscribed by his status as a grateful servant, burdened by his obligations to the Reade family in general and to Frank Jr. specifically, who saves Pomp with some regularity. Pomp is there mostly to ratify the correctness of this way of being, showing that mechanical mastery is not just coherent with white supremacy but also a means of securing the racial hierarchy. The correctness of the racial hierarchy (Frank Jr. superior, Pomp subservient) is likewise validated by their respective abundance or lack of technocompetence, which was shaping up to be a key twentieth-century skill at the time of Senarens’s writing.

In other words, Frank Jr. and Pomp occupy their “natural” place in the new machine culture hierarchy, one that conveniently replicates the old social hierarchy with high fidelity. This mode continued long after the early Frank Reade Jr. stories that depicted a variety of steam men. As the series grew, the steam man was gradually replaced by less anthropomorphic but no less fantastic forms of transport (featured in such colorful titles as *Frank Reade, Jr.’s Magnetic Gun-Carriage* [1903]

and *Frank Reade, Jr.'s Electric Air Canoe* [1902]). Steam faded in favor of electricity and eventually (as this mode played out through later science fiction) nuclear power. What remained was the relationship between whiteness and technological mastery.

In terms of refiguring slavery, this iteration of the steam man story downplays the economic advantages of Edisonade identity (though Frank Jr. is clearly well off), instead focusing almost exclusively on the honorable exploits enabled by technocompetence. The potential utility of machines as a replacement for human labor (slave or waged) was, by the late nineteenth century, obvious to all involved. These stories, then, offered a way to secure the honor of young men whose agency might otherwise have been compromised by the body-machine complex, showing how hegemonic white masculinity could thrive under new conditions. This suggested that machines could, in fact, serve as the basis for a new sort of gentility, one that could be embraced by white men of any class and in any region of the reunited states.

By the early twentieth century, there was no longer much of a market for steam men, but the Edisonade mode persisted. Projecting out from this brief genealogy, the Edisonade takes on the general characteristics of Ellis's work but without the specific, Reconstructionist aspect. Generally, Edisonades feature young protagonists who tend to be independent (often because they are orphaned or, like Frank Jr., because they are independently wealthy) and who leverage their God-given hypercompetence to get into and out of all sorts of trouble. They exhibit, in other words, a fantastic freedom of movement that secures their status as sovereign, self-possessed individuals.

Like Johnny, Edisonade heroes resist any attempts to militarize or otherwise mass-produce their inventions; the inventions remain a personal extension of their engineering prowess, a sign of their own improvement rather than a piece of commercial technology that they just happen to use. While the hero rarely destroys his machine at the end of the story, sequels tend to suggest that even after the hero finishes his quest, he keeps his inventions for himself—even Frank Jr., who has access to his father's devices, opts to build his own, besting his father in the process.⁹ More than any social good in and of itself, technological mastery is figured as a path to personal financial independence and a way of marking one's own sovereignty, a new means to an old end. That Edisonade heroes often use their devices to rescue menaced pioneers serves only to reinforce the message of personal

autonomy: it is not the technology that is good but the operator who extends himself with technology who is good.¹⁰

Teaching Technosupremacy

As books generally marketed to young men, these works operate as a way of both defining and projecting hegemonic culture from generation to generation. Roy Rockwood's early twentieth-century Great Marvel series, for example, was explicitly aimed at a juvenile male audience. It featured two young orphans, their eccentric genius foster parent, and a black servant named Washington who collectively did all the things that might be expected of adventuring Edisonade heroes (traveling under the ocean to the South Pole, getting lost on the moon, and so on). These books were produced as handsome, hardbound gifts and marketed as especially appropriate for growing boys.

The first Roy Rockwood book (published in 1906 and baroquely titled, in the Edisonade way, *Through the Air to the North Pole; or, The Wonderful Cruise of the Electric Monarch*) introduces two rugged and resourceful orphans, riding the rails until an accident brings them to the home of genius professor Amos Henderson, who has just invented an airship and decides to take the two young men under his wing. In many ways the story (and its sequels) unfolds much like the countless Horatio Alger stories of the preceding century, with the added wrinkle of a high-tech framing device that propels the narrative and a professor's determination to train the orphans to be not just respectable middle-class citizens but also hypercompetent engineering types, with the scientific knowledge and technological know-how to thrive in a rich, dangerous, fantastical world.

This wrinkle is relevant not only because it connects the Rockwood stories back to nineteenth-century Edisonades and forward to science fiction proper but also because it suggests something about the market for science fiction at the turn of the twentieth century, when these stories were first published. "If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (Rose 1984, 2). Literature for children, in other words, is a matter of an adult construction of the child, whose existence is less a matter of reality than a function of what adults (writers, reviewers, publishers, purchasers, and bedtime-story readers) want the child to be.

The Rockwood books contained many of the trappings and tropes of earlier dime novels, but instead of thirty to forty-five thousand words printed in tiny columns on the cheapest folio-size paper available, these stories were printed in large, sparse lettering, often filling more than two hundred pages of a handsomely bound volume, complete with illustrations and advertisements for other equally salubrious fare for growing boys. The durable paper, swanky covers, and explicitly pedagogical impulses of the stories served to distance them from the lower-class dime novels they nevertheless resembled.

The Rockwood books represent a moment in which the tropes of earlier science fiction stories were distilled into an ideal, child-appropriate, child-shaping form. One element of these stories in particular stands out: the black character Washington. He works as the professor's servant and is both docile and physically gifted. He is routinely, almost ritualistically depicted as intellectually inferior, indexing, once again, the minstrel "coon" caricature. These scenes uniformly involve some crude malapropism, with the professor or orphan boys correcting Washington, but only after finding some way to make fun of his mistake. As the series unfolds, these scenes more and more commonly involve just Washington and the boys and often come with admonitions that Washington should stop trying to use words that are beyond his ken. Such scenes channel comedic tropes of the blackface minstrel stage and rehearse white supremacy in a crude but effective manner. They are often entirely beside the point, interrupting the occasional long, technical expository passage to instruct the putatively white reader in the proper way to integrate racial politics into narratives of high technology.

Individually, these scenes function as moments of racist comedic relief; collectively, they operate more along the lines of "a scriptive thing" that, "like a playscript, broadly structures a performance while allowing for agency and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable" (Bernstein 2012, 12). These repeated moments are geared toward inculcating a particular structure in the white boy's performance of white masculinity, scripting a dismissive attitude toward the very notion of black technological modernity, and securing white supremacy in a context of high technology and its fantastic uses: a new norm of mastery. It also, through contrast, structures the white reader as inherently competent with and around

technology, indeed elevating technological competence as the professor's greatest gift to the orphans.

This scriptive element of the Rockwood stories seems geared toward making a certain kind of boy, but it is not an invention of this explicitly juvenile book series; rather, it is one of the elements that the Rockwood publishers drew from the larger Edisonade tradition. In the Frank Reade Jr. stories, Pomp is also written with heavy dialect and is similarly incompetent around machinery. His function in the stories, however, is more narratively focused than Washington's ritual incompetence. Like Washington, Pomp serves as an icon of the antitechnological nature of blackness; unlike Washington, Pomp's incompetence mostly manifests passively—he simply *is* incompetent, while Washington is repeatedly *shown to be* incapable of technological competence. What in earlier Edisonades is taken for granted is, when yoked to the pedagogical impulses of children's literature, selected as an appropriate moment for instructing children in the proper attitude toward race and technology. The ideology developed by Edisonades, from the steam man stories to their latter-day inheritors, is one of a highly structured universe, of the primacy of control, both of the self and of others. These stories turn on white men's (or, later, boys') ability to use their intelligence to direct the forces of the world to their own ends. This scripting is distinct from black forms of improvisation in that it always resolves crises into some sort of system that can then be controlled; it is a totalizing move. In this way, Edisonades work out an aesthetic of whiteness as hypercompetent, controlled, and technologically adept.

In its mass-market forms, the Edisonade can be seen as a sort of enactment of the myth of progress, a way for young US men who have perhaps been touched by the unpleasant realities of life in *laissez-faire* capitalist society, and whose lives are shaped by rapidly developing technological regimes, to make sense of their place in the world. These juvenile science fiction pieces work as a sort of algorithm of white supremacy, projecting the forms of white mastery into an uncertain but technologically saturated future. They script a particular mode of engagement with technology grounded in a racialized ethic that allows them to perform a sort of inverse of Darko Suvin's (1979, 2) famous "cognitive estrangement": taking strange, uncanny developments and recasting them as masterable opportunities for the right kind of man.

Taylor Evans is a PhD candidate in English at the University of California, Riverside. His dissertation, “The Race of Machines: A Prehistory of the Posthuman,” focuses on the intersection of race and technology in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature.

Notes

- 1 These quotes are from the January 14, 1868, issue of the *Chicago Tribune*, in a notice with the headline “An Extraordinary Invention,” itself a reprint of a notice from the *Newark (NJ) Daily Advertiser* that circulated widely in the first few months of 1868. Many thanks to Buckley (2007), who was my original source for this information; indeed, digital archives have greatly facilitated all aspects of this research on these fragile, ephemeral texts, especially Northern Illinois University’s Nickels and Dimes collection and the University of South Florida’s Frank Reade Dime Novels collection.
- 2 This title underwent a couple of variations. It was originally published in Beadle’s American Novel series with the title used here. The title of the widely read, reprinted, and anthologized 1876 reissue, as well as most of the subsequent reissues, was expanded to *The Huge Hunter; or, The Steam Man of the Prairies*.
- 3 I use *Indian* advisedly, here and throughout, in part because it is how these stories and novels generally describe their indigenous antagonists but also to index the way these stories engage with Native American culture more generally. It will come as little surprise that these stories have no interest in Native Americans as such. To reference such characters as *native* or *indigenous* would suggest at least some sense of their claim to original ownership or settlement of the lands, something these stories rarely gesture toward—indeed, the Indians in most Edisonades (and other dime-novel westerns) function less as people in a territory than as a violent feature of the land itself, relegated to the same category as brushfires, blizzards, and bears.
- 4 As J. Randolph Cox (2000, xxi) notes, “There have been few studies of the readership of dime novels,” though he does extract some meaningful inferences from “the advertising and contemporary press reception” (xx) of the earliest Beadle books, as well as from the “advertising for other titles and series on the publications themselves.” Based on these inferences, he notes that while dime books initially appealed to “literate adults . . . in time the general level of readership shifted to boys ages eight to 16 years old” (xx–xxi). He also infers from the technologies that enabled the dime book boom that these stories would have been available across the country wherever there was a railway nearby: “Railways which linked the farthest regions of the continent made an effective distribution system possible and helped create companies whose purpose was to get as many publications to as many stores in as many cities as possible” (xx–xxi).

- 5 Beuka 2002 gives a good summary of possible targets; see especially pp. 30–35.
- 6 Though this series started in 1892, many of its early stories were reprints, including Luis Philip Senarens's *Frank Reade, Jr., and His New Steam Man; or, The Young Inventor's Trip to the Far West* (1892). It is not clear when this particular story was first printed, though the first Frank Reade Jr. story (*Frank Reade, Jr., and His Steam Wonder*) was originally published in 1882. Textual clues are difficult to parse as these stories exhibit only limited continuity, but the first steam man story for the series seems to have been published soon after *Steam Wonder*, perhaps as a nostalgic gesture. In any event, it was selected as the first entry of the *Frank Reade Library* and so functions, much like the first Frank Reade story, as an introduction to these characters through the lens of the steam man.
- 7 A talk given recently by Robb Shoberg (2014) illustrates some realities of commercial art production. Shoberg is a video game producer who spoke at length about his work. One anecdote stood out, in which Shoberg recalled how a senior designer asked him to add a “Boba Fett thing” to an almost completed helmet design. This reference to a well-established (and beloved) bit of *Star Wars* character design offers a clue into how easily memorable features can be thoughtlessly replicated—not quite accidentally but neither as the result of careful consideration. Nalo Hopkinson offers a related anecdote at various talks, recalling a time she wrote a story featuring predominantly black characters only to realize (after the fact) that she had accidentally written a book full of “magical negro” figures (Cruz et al. 2016). She did a significant rewrite of the novel before it was published but has kept the anecdote to emphasize how easily one can fall into broadly circulating negative representations and the importance of being vigilant during revisions. This strikes me as relevant to the current discussion of dime novels, especially in light of the rapid output expected from the authors whose work made these monthly (sometimes weekly) publications possible. Given their production schedule, they were unlikely to have much time for revision, much less reflection. Such collaborative, institutionalized stories were the result of many rapid decisions by many different people and as such offer insight into the collective id of both their producers and culture.
- 8 There is some debate on this point, as Paul Green (2016, 100) notes. E. F. Bleiler's indispensable and authoritative compendium, *Science Fiction, the Early Years* (1990), seems to be the origin of the Cohen claim (see Bleiler 1990, 548).
- 9 Frank Reade Sr. offers an assessment to this effect, perhaps something of a metacommentary on the new series and its new young writer as well as a taste of the series's decided lack of subtlety: “Well, young blood is the best after all. I must say, Frank, that I am beat. There is no doubt but that you have improved upon my Steam Man. I congratulate you” (Senarens 1892, 3).

- 10 Echoes of this form persist even today. Martin Kevorkian (2006) has examined numerous ways that technologically adept black characters in films like *Die Hard* (1988) and *Mission: Impossible* (1996) functionally amount to input/output devices for the white male leads, a trend going back at least to Barney Collier (played by Greg Morris) in the original *Mission: Impossible* television series (1966–73). Edisonade analogs persist to this day as a more general model for popular cultural vehicles, most obviously in Tony Stark and his various Iron Man suits. Indeed, in the recent film series, the *Iron Man* franchise is almost a prototypical Edisonade: it features a singularly brilliant inventor whose device is principally a form of personal transportation and protection but also has tremendous martial potential and enables its inventor to secure his sovereignty against the impersonal forces of capitalism; he even refuses to sell his invention at the end of each film, a common trope in Edisonade stories. The only real deviation is his age (most Edisonade heroes are teenagers or very young adults), but Stark's alcoholism (more prominent in the comics) and irreverent playboy affect (more prominent in the films) lend him an arrested development that lines up well with the typical Edisonade age group.

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