

The American Automaton: Racial Capitalism's Ideal Minority

By

Micaiah Johnson Vetack

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER'S DEGREE

in

English

December 14th, 2019

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Vera Kutzinski, Ph.D.

To the Sisters Johnson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ESSAY.....	1
WORKS CITED	26

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1: DEDERICK'S AUTOMATON.....	6
2: JUMP JIM CROW SHEET MUSIC.....	7
3: STEAM MAN OF THE PLAINS.....	9

The current conversation surrounding the future of Artificial Intelligence and robots is dually anchored in the realms of computer science and social justice. Embodied AI like Hanson Robotics's Sophia complicate the conversation of technological capabilities with questions of subjecthood and citizenship. Many posthumanist – or multispeciesist – scholars are calling for an elevating of the animated being into a position beyond that of a tool or laborer. Roboticist Hans Moravec encourages us to look at AI as children, specifically as infants whom we should care for now on the understanding that they will surpass us as they grow into maturity. He writes that “our machines are still simple creations, requiring the parental care and hovering attention of any newborn” (Moravec 1). Donna Haraway advocates for a relationship of equality she defines as “kinship”. She calls for us to “Make Kin Not Babies”, taking Moravec’s suggestion of treating the non-human as we treat our own children and raising it to call for developing this relationship with animal and technological “kin” instead of having children (Haraway).

Dismantling the idea that AI and robots exist solely as profit-making entities aligns with posthumanism’s examination of the ethical dilemmas inherent in the prioritization of the human. Haraway positions this reexamination as a beneficial enterprise, aiming “to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (Haraway). However, to call for a dismantling of the position of technologically created beings without acknowledging the origins of this position risks reifying the very status posthumanists and multispeciesists are trying to dismantle. In reality, robots existed for thousands of years totally outside the realm of labor. Before they were tools, automatons were wonders. They were singular creations that were met with curiosity, respect, and for a time even religious devotion long before they were associated with production or labor.

The shift from singular entities maintained by their creators or institutions to tools in the production cycle happens in the mid-nineteenth century, and occurs in service that indivisible combination of white supremacy and capitalism that Cedric Robinson calls “racial capitalism” (Robinson 2). The site of this shift can be traced to the introduction of a single figure: The steam-powered man, the first American automaton. Unlike its predecessors, the American automaton is a creation of racial capitalism that would be treated as neither a visual wonder nor mechanical saint. The American automaton would not be made to delight, but for capital. Most tellingly, the American automaton would be black.

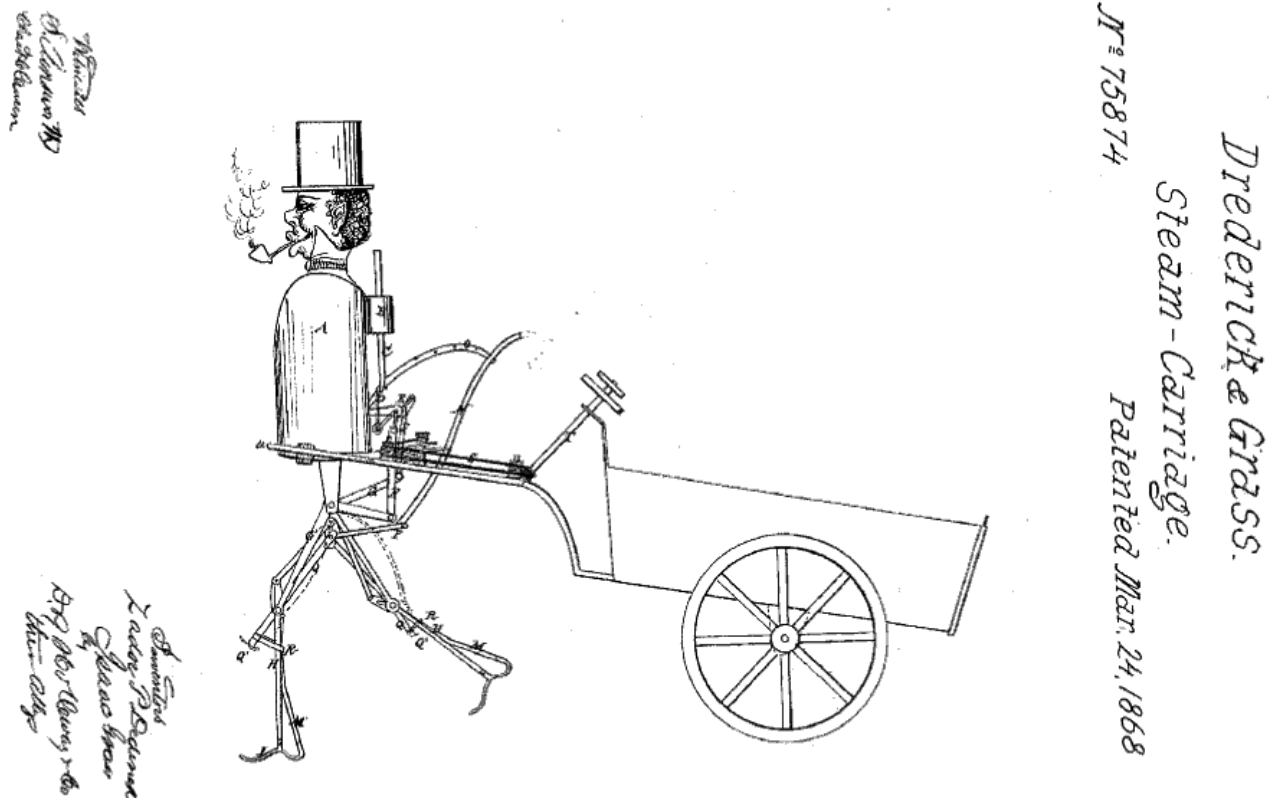


Figure 1 Dederick's automaton, U.S. Patent 75874

By the time automata came to America they had outlasted the empires that invented them. This makes it all the more significant that a fledgling country was able to fundamentally alter the traditions attached to the animated being. In 1868 Zedoc Dederick filed the first American patent for a mechanical man. In the first page of the patent, an illustration, he included the technically essential elements. This included the mechanical legs that were the primary focus of the patent and a top hat to direct steam from the automaton's operation upward and away from a crowd. But he also included inessential aesthetics, most strikingly the nose, mouth, and hair of an African American man (Figure 1). The automaton featured in the patent shares features with another nineteenth century depiction of a black man: Jim Crow, as he appeared in 1832's *Jump Jim Crow* sheet music (Figure 2). Dederick's envisioned automaton and the caricature share hair texture and the exaggerated eyes, nose, and lips common in depictions of African Americans during the era of minstrelsy. The difference is, while Jim Crow is known for wearing "tatters and

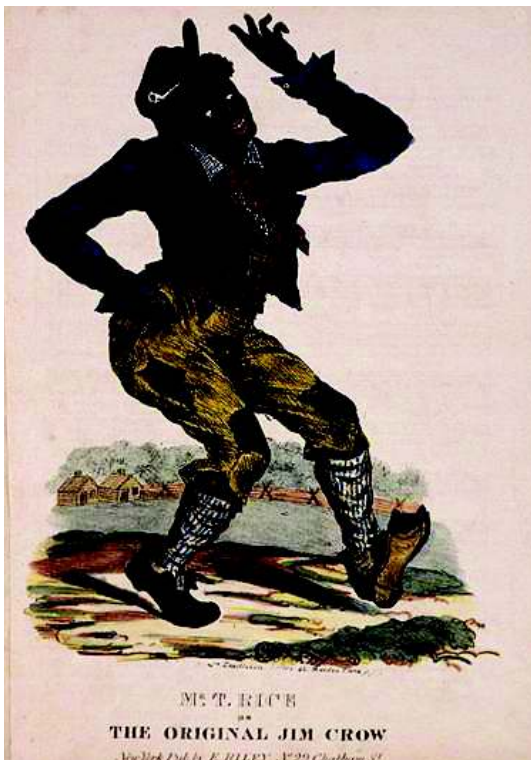


Figure 2 "Jump Jim Crow" Sheet Music Cover, 1832

ragged and a battered hat", the steam-powered man is sleek. His hat is perfect and his high collar, which serves no discernable function, is pressed. The updates go beyond the figures' wardrobes. Jim Crow was characterized as being "slow-thinking, slow-moving" and slothful, spending his time "sleepin', fishin', huntin' 'possums, or shufflin' along slower than molasses in January, except when stealing chickens or dancing on the levee" (Lemons 102). Dederick had replaced that stereotype with an ideal minority form for capitalism – industrious, efficient, and perfectly obedient.

Modeled after a figure who would have been a slave when Dederick first began work on the invention, but just shy of three years freed by the time the patent is filed, Dederick's steam-man sparked a generation of copycats, both real and literary. Months after Dederick's steam-man went on display, Edward Ellis published *The Huge Hunter or The Steam Man of the Prairies* (1868). Eight years later the Frank Reade series launches in *Boys of New York Magazine* with "Frank Reade and his Steam Man of the Plains" (1876) (Figure 3). The illustrations for both covers maintain the exaggerated features of Dederick's automaton and double down on the connection to the likeness by placing their creations in St. Louis hunting Native Americans – the same time, place, and task given to the Buffalo Soldiers, a military regiment made entirely of black men (Barnhill 402).

These stories also upheld this new, mechanical blackness as superior to the prior, biological blackness. The *Frank Reade* stories feature their own Jim Crow figure – Pomp, who likely draws his name from the slave in the first cyborg story, Edgar Allen Poe's "The Man who Was Used Up" (1839). Like Jim Crow, Pomp is an inefficient servant, spending his time throughout the series gambling, drinking, fighting, or getting captured: "The Negro servitor, PoMp, is an embodied slur: he displays a bullet head, stupidity, slyness, pompous illiteracy, superstition, laziness and a razor in his footgear" (Bleiler iii). In "Frank Reade, Jr and His New Steam Man", Pomp is outsmarted by Native Americans who have cut him off from the safety of the steam man. His behaviors and reactions are every part the damsel: "The poor darky was beside himself with terror and perplexity. 'Golly sakes alibe!' he yelled, his wool literally standing on end. '...I'se a gone coon fo' suah'" (No Name 4). The story makes Pomp's

helplessness and blackness its dual focus, setting him apart from the ever-efficient steam man, whose unique abilities are called upon to rescue him. As a former slave, Pomp embodies the stereotypical image of the emancipated. He is depicted as helpless and lazy, given to vice. Conversely the steam man operates as an ideal, with an efficiency only possible because he remains under the total control of the white male protagonist.

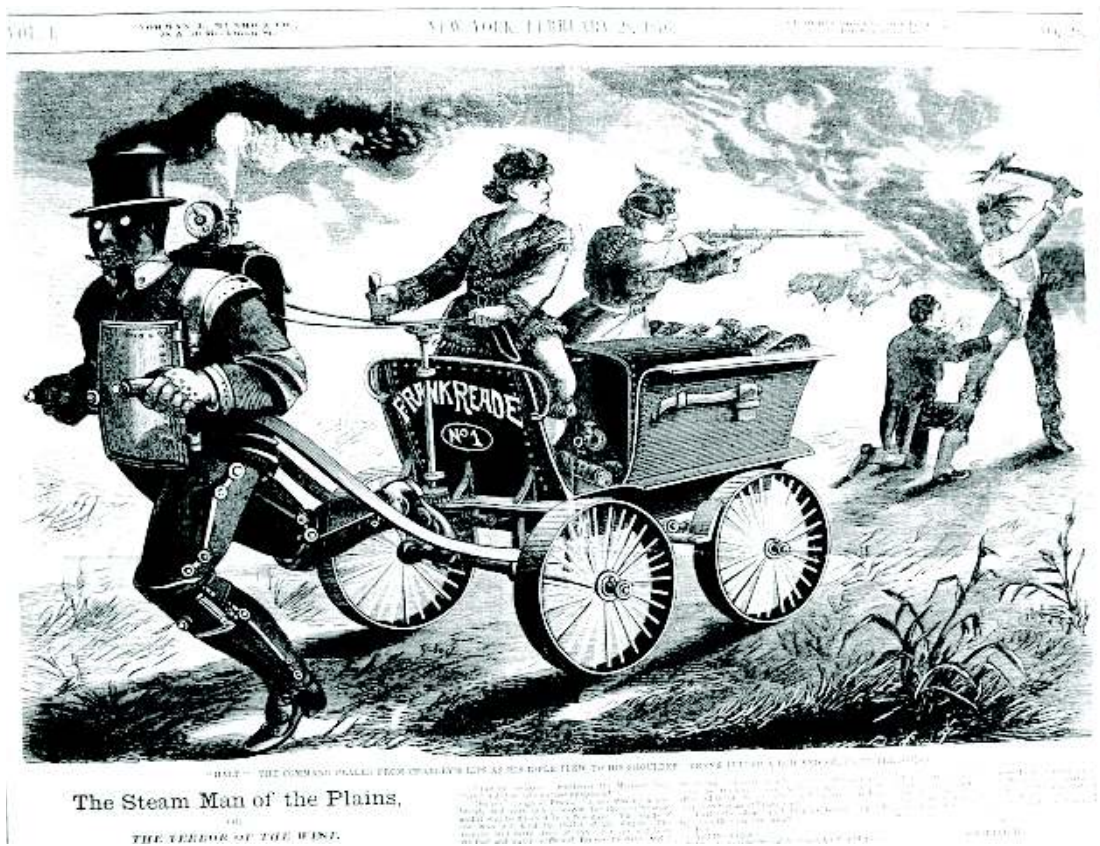


Figure 3 Noname (1876). *The Steam Man of the Plains or The Terror of the West*. Wide Awake Library, 1(28).

The American automaton was a capitalist ideal. It coopted the form most closely associated with hard labor in the nineteenth century, the black male body, but kept only the parts that served its purpose: the conspicuous appearance, the workability. By converting it into a mechanical man, the design leaves out the human elements for which capitalism has no use. This includes the ability to disobey, speak, read, and procreate autonomously. This last is perhaps the

most policed aspect of the black male body. During slavery, “condition of the mother” laws ensured that a child born of a black mother was a profit for the plantation, regardless of the race of the father. Because a child born to a slave mother was automatically a slave, there was no improper way for a black woman to reproduce. The same was not true for black men. In *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs, writing as Linda Brent, describes in detail the constant assaults on the bodies of black women by plantation owners and their sons for the purpose of reproduction. However, when a male slave is assaulted similarly by the plantation owner’s daughter – usually “the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure” – the resulting child is not welcomed as new inventory, rather “in such cases the infant is smothered...” (Jacobs 67).

In automatons, the materials necessary for procreation are removed from the beings themselves. The means of reproduction is the territory of those in power, and the decision of when and how much to reproduce is entirely in the hands of the owners. The foundation of this was already present in the biopolitically controlled reproduction present on plantations. Slave owners attempted to exercise total control over how and when the enslaved reproduced. However, as shown in the account recorded by Harriet Jacobs and countless other slave narratives, that control was not perfect. In dealing with automatons, it would be.

Another realm in which the automaton would benefit capitalism is in its cyclical “crisis” of surplus population and surplus. Labor saving technologies have caused capitalism to hemorrhage jobs since the nineteenth century. As new industries emerge, they swell – taking on people to account for the new industry’s demand – and then deflate – laying off employees as technology catches up. In between periods of booms, large portions of the population remain in excess of capital’s needs – the surplus population: “Any question of the absorption of this

surplus humanity has been put to rest. It exists now only to be managed: segregated into prisons, marginalised in ghettos and camps, disciplined by the police, and annihilated by war” (Benanav and Clegg). However, once these excess populations have been imprisoned, starved, or annihilated, they cannot be retrieved during the next “boom”. Not so, the undying automaton. No amount of confinement can render it unfit for work, no period of unemployment is long enough to starve it. It is the perfect labor source for the booms and bust of capital’s constant crises.

Unable to die or reproduce, the American automaton represented an ideal labor form for capital, but it also served a social function to white supremacy, the “racial” half of “racial capitalism”. Introduced just at the dawn of reconstruction, the American automaton provided a new site of control for a society whose firmly set racial hierarchies had lost ground with the end of the Civil War. In *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Cristin Ellis remind us that human and inhuman were always at the center of the slavery debate:

By the 1850s, the center of gravity in the debate over U.S. slavery had noticeably shifted from the question of whether it is morally acceptable to enslave a human being toward the question of whether Black bodies should be considered fully human in the first place. Whereas the former question—is slavery humane?—is a moral one referred to the consciences of voting Americans, the latter question— are Black humans really human?— was increasingly understood to be an empirical question “upon which science alone has the right to pronounce” (Ellis 3).

By shifting the question of slavery to the realm of science, Civil War-era discourse makes taxonomy the focus, rather than morality. If Western Civilization was becoming intolerant of the enslavement of other humans, white supremacy would work to have black people excluded from

the category. One of the primary tools employed to accomplish this was that best suited for the job: the law. As Colin Dayan's *The Law is a White Dog* (2011) details thoroughly, "Law can make one dead in life, and it can also determine when and if one is to be resurrected" (Dayan 49).

Initially, the legal campaign to divorce blackness and humanity was successful. This is exemplified in the 1857 Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v Sandford*, when a court led by Justice Taney decided that, even though Dred Scott had an iron-clad case for freedom via repeatedly inhabiting territories where slavery did not exist, only people could bring cases before the Supreme Court: "In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show, that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as a part of the people" (Dred Scott 13). Coming, as it did, from the highest court in the land, the decision was meant to be a lasting blow. In the introduction to the decision John H. Van Evrie proudly states "the Dred Scott decision has defined the relations, and fixed the status of the subordinate race forever" (Dred Scott 1).

However this edict proved too bold to stand. The Dred Scott case had the opposite consequence of hastening the end of slavery, becoming "a tangible historical moment at which the War became an inevitability...a necessary evil on the route to ending the deeply entrenched establishment of slavery in this country" (Jackson 377). By 1865 the Civil War ended and in 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment overturned the Dred Scott decision, declaring black people not just humans, but citizens. By the time Zedoc Dederick is designing his automaton, racial capitalism had lost legal ground in the effort to deny black humanity. It is into this recently vacated void of the black nonhuman, that the American Automaton is shuffled.

It is only once Black American automatons are introduced that automatons are demoted to the laboring force we associate with machines today. This is not a side-effect of their racialization, as automatons already had a history of racialization back in Europe. In 1796, an inventor called Mr. Cressin toured with his Chinese tightrope-walking automaton (Exhibitions 1). Orientalist depictions were so common in these creations in the nineteenth century that a correspondence sent to the *Christian Register* in 1844 reads, “Query: Why are all automata dressed in turbans?” (NY Corres 1). Perhaps the most famous raced automaton is the automaton that wasn’t: the chess playing Turk, eventually revealed to be a man disguised in a machine. Created in 1769 the Turk was an orientalist theatrical object, displayed “in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth” (Riley 161). Its commissioner was Hapsburg Empress Maria Theresa, whose country had warred with the Ottoman Empire for centuries. This history played out in Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen’s design:

The ideology of salvation from the Muslim infidel can be seen as metaphorically written onto the theatrical body of the automaton Turk... the Turk did not openly form a critique of the Muslim Other, but did so surreptitiously, because the fear of the other’s religious ideology was represented theatrically... For over eighty-five years the Turk is a locus upon which the desires, fears, and wishes of the eighteenth century enlightenment were staged. If sympathetic magic of the magical phase of mimesis dictates that like produces like, then by playing the opponent in the form of an exoticized Turkish male, the European demonstrates a performance of power, rehearses a triumph over the Ottoman Empire, and battles an antagonist that exemplifies a desired cultural and racial superiority that remains with us today. (Riley 167).

In Europe, the racialization of the automaton provided a white supremacist display that was surreptitious. One could approach the Turk as an equal, but even if the Turk prevailed, it was still controlled and created by a white, Christian European. Its victories glorified that lineage, because it was always playing at the command of those inventors and for the entertainment of that audience. Orientalist European automatons like Mr. Cressin's tightrope walker, the Turk, and, later, Psycho and Zoe, provided a theatrical domination of the minority by incarnating them in a form subject to total control. This renders the already disadvantaged subject into a pure object.

Despite being racialized, the steam man's predecessors were still presented to society as wonders. Prior to modernity, the automaton's most common association was with whatever form of divinity was dominant in the culture that created them. Ancient Egypt boasted a colossal statue of Pharaoh Amenotep III "said to have gestured and spoke in soft tones resembling those of a harp" (Seiden 1). Heron of Alexandria's automaton of Hercules slaying a dragon and the "robot saints" of the renaissance also speak to the automaton's alignment with what was considered sacred at the time (Swift 52). The first automaton to employ clockwork rather than relying on wind, fire, or water was a rooster made for the Strasbourg Cathedral in 1354 (Rossi and Russo 366).

In modernity automatons stayed closer to home, but were considered no less precious for shifting to reflect praise for their inventors rather than god. Automata designed for amusement, like Mr. Cressin's tightrope walker or the dozens of automaton musicians that proliferated the 18th century, were afforded a kind of respect that went beyond patronization. One firsthand account reads:

On entering the saloon, I saw a well-dressed handsome figure of a man, apparently between forty and fifty, standing with a violin in his hand, as if contemplating a piece of

music, which lay on the desk before him – and had I not gone to see an automaton, I should have believed the object before me endowed with life and reason, so perfectly natural and easy were the attitudes and expressions of countenance of the figure. I had but a little time for observation before the orchestra was filled by musicians, and on the leader taking his seat, the figure instantly raised itself erect, bowed with much elegance two or three times, and then turned to the leader, nodded, as if to say he was ready, and placed his violin to his shoulder... The tones produced were like anything but a violin – the expression beyond comprehension. I felt as if lifted from my seat, and burst into tears – in which predicament I saw most persons in the room (Automaton).

Despite being for entertainment, there was no obligation for these creations to be especially proficient or successful – it was simply enough for them to *be*. When further describing the automaton's playing the listener says, "This part of the performance was perfectly magical. I have heard the great Italian, I have heard the still greater Norwegian, I have heard the best of music, but I have never heard such sounds as then saluted my ear" (Automaton). This distinction between "sounds" and "music", like the earlier claim that the playing sounded "like anything but a violin", indicates the different standards to which the mechanized creations were being held. In the same way a child is held to a standard of effort rather than similarity to adult execution, automatons were never required to replicate the labor of real musicians, just as an automaton of an Egyptian baker was not meant to actually make bread. They were meant to be something new, not the same but also not inferior for their difference.

The above account also highlights the level of respect given to automatons of the time. The observer attributes elegance to the animated being, and perceived the automaton's nod – not as programmed action at the hands of his human inventor – but as an act of agency, the

automaton telling the human conductor he is ready to begin. This is typical of automaton performances of the time. When an automaton violinist played, it would be formally announced like any other visiting musician, and when it finished performing, it was applauded. Most importantly, automatons were kept close and well by their inventors, craftsmen who either toured with their creations or created a set space for them to be displayed. The population, fully aware that these were inhuman creations, still participated in the charade of their humanity. They applauded mechanical flutists and bowed to mechanical saints. Once the American automaton enters the scene, that charade ends.

The journey of the automaton in the nineteenth century is a line with a child figure on one side, a slave on the other, and between the two, the Civil War. While Dederick's steam-man was the first automaton patented in the United States, it wasn't the first displayed here. Automata begin the nineteenth century with Henri Maillardet's London-born automaton with "the largest memory any automaton has ever had: it can draw four drawings and can write three poems, two in French and one in English. In this automaton also the memories are represented by a number of cams" (Rossi and Russo 376). Fashioned as a boy of around eight or nine in traditional French clothes, when it comes to America Maillardet's automaton fits in with the tightrope walkers, musicians, and dancers of the prior generation. It was a singular creature, meant to be displayed and admired for what it could *do* rather than what it could produce. In that, he is among the last of his kind. Maillardet's automaton suffers from the shift in American interest in the mid-nineteenth century. Exhibited to fanfare in Philadelphia and New York in the 1830s, he is eventually forgotten until he is found discarded in a box by Philadelphia's Franklin Institute, who reassemble him in 1920.

By racializing his automaton as a black man in mid-nineteenth century America, Dederick renders his creation not as a value object or novelty, but a tool whose value is dependent upon its labor. Instead of being kept and displayed or worshipped like the automata that came before it, Dederick's steam man was meant to be sold for use as an *appliance*. In an article from the January 8th, 1868 Newark Advertiser, the creators outline their eventual plan to mass market the creation:

The cost of this 'first man' is \$2,000 , thought the makers, Messrs. Deddrick [sp] & Grass, expect to manufacture succeeding ones, warranted to run a year without repair, for \$300. The same parties expect to construct, on the same principle, horses which will do the duty of twelve ordinary animals of the same species. These, it is confidently believed, can be used alike before carriages, street cars and plows. The man now constructed can make his way without difficulty over any irregular surface whose ruts and stones are not more than nine inches below or above the level of the road (Deddrick)

Public attitude reflected this devaluation. Whereas before people paid money for the mere experience of witnessing the automata, now they were judging them on the criteria of profitability. One paper speculated about the possible applications of the steam man: "We can imagine the rather startling effect that would be produced on his wife should any gentleman take home a steam 'help' to assist in the house work...then would come scrubbing, cooking, and washing dishes, (perhaps it would be a little too rough with the china, though)" (Haney's 24). It does not take long for the paper's editor to turn to the obvious, and eventual, application for the steam man: "But perhaps the steam man would be able to render even more effective service should his 'native land' even have the misfortune to be plunged into war. He would no doubt be prompt to respond to the call of patriotism in the proper amount of steam were got up and the

right crank turned. A ‘draft’ might be needed, but an occasional shovelful of coal would probably be all the ‘bounty’ he would desire” (Haney’s 24).

The real-world reaction to the steam-man was mirrored in fiction. Instead of being positioned as wayward or beloved children like E.T.A. Hoffman’s Olympia from “The Sandman” (1816) or the monster from Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* (1823), the steam-man is entirely an expendable tool. While in Hoffman, mad inventor Spalanzani fights another man to keep his daughter-styled automaton, when Frank Reade’s steam-man is run off a cliff it is an occasion for a joke and the opportunity to make a new, better model.

This devaluing of the automaton was not due to inevitable social progression, but brought about by racial capitalism’s need for an inferior, sub-human class formerly provided by the institution of slavery. In Darryl A. Smith’s short story “The Pretended”, Diva Eve, a black robot in a future where all robots are black lays out the concept of whiteness’s “pretending”. She and another black robot, Mnemosyne, are on their way to destruction. Diva Eve tells Mnemosyne that their crime isn’t malfunctioning, but something else: “You pretend you’re black and people at the same time. They tried to make it so you can’t do that. But they couldn’t. You always doin both. Cause they the same thing.” Mnemosyne pushes back, not sure how their creators can claim black people weren’t people, “when there was black people around sure enough?”. Diva Eve informs her it was because they could “pretend” that black people weren’t people. But this pretending eventually ran out: “People started seein that they was jes pretendin all along about black not being people. They start seein that black musta been people and they couldn’t deal wit that... They thought robots was a good way to make believe that you was black but not people after they couldn’t pretend no more with real black people.” Mnemosyne then understands that black robots were built “so to pretend even harder than before” (Smith 362).

Dehumanizing blackness fulfilled both a social need for whiteness, and a capitalist one. Slavery fulfilled “the need of racial capitalism to invalidate terms of relationality—to separate forms of humanity so that they may be connected in terms that feed capital”, but it also provided a secondary social effect of allowing whiteness to identify itself in relation to others. (Melamed 5). In “Capitalism and Slavery”, Greg Grandin outlines how racial capitalism created this social need, then fed it with slavery:

Capitalism is, among other things, a massive process of ego formation... The wealth created by slavery generalized these ideals of self-creation, allowing more and more people, mostly men, to imagine themselves as autonomous and integral beings, with inherent rights and self-interests not subject to the jurisdiction of others... slavery was central to capitalist individuation, to the schism between inner and outer, which I believe accounts for the endurance of racism in American society, its quicksilver nature, as well as for its deniability... a new kind of racism, based not on theological or philosophical doctrine but rather on the emotional need to measure one’s absolute freedom in inverse relation to another’s absolute slavishness (Grandin).

Beyond the financial concerns of slavery, white American society’s identity now depended on another class occupying that space of “absolute slavishness”. Their ability to form an identity that is free, that is autonomous, that is individual, is dependent upon being contrasted with a group that is not. This requires a bit of delusion, a pretending, to garner validation from the imprisoned state of a being as if it is an inherit trait that says something about the inherit traits of freedom in you, when you are the one creating and maintaining that imprisonment.

One of the primary ways white society attempted to erase black humanity was via the construction of the “negro”. This was label replaced those associated with geography or

tradition, removing black people from historical context and instead reducing their identity literally to their color: “it is fair to say that the most significant of the obliteration of the New World’s past was that which affected the African...The ‘Negro’, that is the color black, was both a negation of African and a unity of opposition to white. The construct of Negro, unlike the terms ‘African’, ‘Moor’, or ‘Ethiope’ suggested no situatedness in time...” (Robinson 81). But this was a willful pretending. Western Civilization and Africa had a history of contact. They were aware that African civilization predated their own. Africans had been “a fearful phenomenon to Europeans because of their historical associations with civilizations superior, dominant, and/or antagonistic to Western societies”. By divorcing that history from the enslaved, a new species was created, one that represented “an exploitable source of energy (labor power) both mindless to the organizational requirements of production and insensitive to the subhuman conditions of work” (Robinson 82).

By creating automatons with black features, Americans made tangible what had previously only been a wish. The newly made automatons were as history-less, religion-less, and cultureless as slave owners had always only pretended Africans were. The social identification of the enslaved with technologically created beings was not missed by black Americans at the time. Frederick Douglass evoked the automaton repeatedly in his writings as analogous to black people under slavery. In his configuration, those who were slaves without the desire or attempt at freedom were automata, and those who had acted to get free were constantly struggling against the automaton state where society would have them return. In 1855 when the *New York Tribune* cautioned freed blacks against being agitators in pursuit of their rights, the *Frederick Douglass Paper* responded swiftly: “As much as we respect the *Tribune* for its recent fearless advocacy for the sublime interests of freedom, we cannot consent

to occupy the position of mere automata, to move as we are moved, to act as we are acted upon” (Douglass *New York Tribune*).

The distinction between automaton and man was the distinction between being someone else’s property and being free, “...if the condition was property instead of manhood, thereby rendering me a mere automaton” (Douglass *Away*). For Douglass, inaction and passivity were the path to becoming an object: “Brethren we as a people, if we would be free must work out our salvation. We must be something more than mere automata – We have as a people, depended upon the abolitionists to do that for us, which we must do ourselves” (Douglass *Legislative Acts*).

It is also Douglass’s paper that posits that capitalist success relies upon the wish for black Americans to remain as much as possible like an inhuman object. In 1848 the *North Star* ran a satirical “self-help” piece titled “The Way to Wealth in the Model Republic” that makes explicit how an emphasis on accruing capital is inevitably tied to the dehumanization of the racial minority. The piece begins by calling out the reader’s capitalist ambitions. “Reader!” it says, “Do you desire to be rich! You see what honor and respect wealth can purchase; what comfort; what luxury; what elegant houses and furniture; even a seat in the senate, and perhaps the Presidential chair” (Douglass *Way*). It then segues into a step-by-step guide to achieve financial gain that invites the reader to divest themselves of social and legal norms: “Dive out every human sympathy, every pure thought, every holy aspiration...Look upon the entire human race as fools, with whom you have nothing to do but plunder. Lie, cheat, swindle. Never think of such a vulgar and common place thing as a conscience”.

The article positions a multistep process that begins with capitalist greed and then continues to moral bankruptcy on the way to the ultimate means of acquiring wealth in 1840s America: owning another human and rendering them an automaton:

With your money buy a Negro – an article of commerce in this land of ‘inalienable rights’ which some ‘fanatics’, in the height of their credulity, are so unreasonable as to call a Man, with thoughts, and feelings, and affections, like other men...But which you, by the time you have gone through the process of money-getting, will be prepared to call a brute...Feed and clothe him as cheaply as possible. Make him a sort of living and thinking automaton, subject to your every caprice – your every passion. Suffer him not to work his own works, or speak his own thoughts...And you will be a slaveholder with the heart and feelings of a slaveholder, prepared for greater or worse wickedness (*Douglass Way*).

The article details the mentioned “worse wickedness”, which includes buying a hundred slaves along with chains, whips, and thumbscrews, keeping your slaves from knowledge but hiring a Christian minister to tell them disobedience is sinful, attacking your slaves with dogs, and breeding female slaves and selling your own children alongside other livestock. Once you’ve accomplished all that, “you will be wealthy and perhaps a senator”.

What is notable about this satirical piece is that it opens with a desire for wealth. One doesn’t simply own another human; first comes greed. The article says that “by the time you have gone through the process of money-getting, will be prepared” to participate in the dehumanization necessary to be a slaveholder. This implication that there is something in capitalist participation that acts as a training ground for expressing antiblackness exposes an identifying feature of capitalism, namely that “capitalism is racial capitalism”, the system of wealth accumulation undivorceable from the racial inequalities on which it has relied (Melamed 3).

It is not only in African American newspapers that we find capitalism's desire for automatons. In an 1887 newspaper article titled "A Safe Track: The Risk of Railroad Management is the Man Element" a "railroad magnate of prominence" says, "Metal works are easily managed; the great risk in the operation of the railroad is the man element. The nearer the man becomes an automaton, or like a machine, the safer he is. The average human being in a subordinate or lowly position is prone to do what he is distinctly told not to do and neglect that which he is ordered to perform...If we could only get a machine to take man's place along the line..." (*Safe Track* 1).

The anonymous magnate would essentially get his wish. Western Civilization had grown used to formulating their ideas of self, freedom, and humanity against a population denied each of those things. Losing the ability to classify people as objects left society uninterested in pretending objects were people. While this trend began with the racialized steam man, over the next seventy years all automatons would fall victim to this shift from novelty to laborers. Oscar Wilde discussed this turn in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891): "The fact is, that civilisation requires slaves. The Greeks were quite right there...On mechanical slavery, on the slavery of the machine, the future of the world depends" (Wilde 26).

While Dederick's steam man was always treated as an appliance, once prized automata would have to suffer through the transition. The performances and spectacles fall away, giving rise to an age of faceless automatization that would not encroach on humanity. Automatons were abandoned entirely, or pieced out to be repurposed by more practically endeavors. The magician John Nevil Maskelyne lamented these losses in detail in the 1879 work *Automata* for the Magic Circle Foundation:

The elements of the tumbling puppet were revived in the chronometer, which now conducts our navy through the ocean, and the shapeless wheel which directed the hand of the drawing automaton has served in the present age to guide the movement of the tambouring engine. But these grand ‘possible results’ have seldom been in the minds of the makers of the automata. They have generally sought their own advantage in catering for the amusement of their kind. This is a fair and laudible purpose, especially if science is called to assist the illusion (Maskelyn 27).

Perhaps no automaton’s fate is as emblematic of the fall of the animated being as the tumbling puppet mentioned above. Originally an utterly frivolous, innocent amusement, it is converted to faceless navigation for warships. Maskelyn’s assessment that the automaton harvesting and repurposing for more practical, less magical, inventions was at odds with the grand visions of its creators comes from experience. Before finding fame as a magician and illusionist in the era of Houdini, he was the inventor of the whist-playing automaton, Psycho, and a drawing automaton, Zoe. In his *Reminiscences*, Maskelyn hints at a return to glory for his Psycho. In true, father-inventor fashion, he says that he’s been nursing the ill automaton and “if the improvement continues, as I think it will, Psycho will shortly make his bow to a new generation and, I sincerely hope, to many old admirers” (Reminiscences 21). Seven years later, Maskelyn had died and Psycho, who never had his grand reentry into the public eye, has spent much of his time since at the Museum of London in storage (Goulden).

In the late nineteenth century, Makelyn’s London-based automata represented a category of animated being that had already disappeared from America. Psycho and Zoe were both nonwhite – Psycho was designed as an Indian man, Zoe a young Chinese girl – and both presented as singular wonders who existed to be watched, rather than used. Maskelyn’s death

marked the end of an era for these wonders, and “[w]ith the first world war, the automata era practically came to end” (Rossi and Russo 378).

Technologically created beings today are still saddled with the labor identity generated by the creation of Dederick’s automaton. This inheritance means the obstacles to a multispeciesist vision of equality for AI stretch beyond society’s prioritization of the human. In 2018 researchers from the Mississippi State University attempted to determine if people who hold negative opinions would transfer those opinions onto robots that were also black. They discovered, “[j]ust as humans are more likely to have negative stereotypes of humans with darker skin color, we believe that some humans are more likely to have negative stereotypes of black robots (as compared to neutral or even yellow robots) as well” (Louine 642). The age of the automaton is over, but without acknowledging the capitalist and racially motivated elements of that demise we risk remaking the same mistake: subjugating AI because capitalism has taught us to define our freedom through the subjugation of others.

Works Cited

- Automaton. (1838, Feb 03). *Parlour Review, and Journal of Music, Literature, and the Fine Arts (1838-1838)*, 1, 1. Retrieved from <http://login.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/docview/137598181?accountid=14816>
- Barnhill, John H. "Buffalo Soldiers." 2014: 402–404. Print.
- Bleiler, E.F. *The Frank Reade Library*. New York: Garland, 1979.
- Benanav, Aaron and Clegg, John. "Misery and Debt." *Endnotes 2* 1 May 2015, <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2/en/endnotes-misery-and-debt>
- "Deddrick Steam Man." *The Newark Advertiser*, 8 Jan. 1868, Accessed via <http://cyberneticzoo.com/steammen/1867-steam-man-dederick-america/>
- Dederick's automaton, U.S. Patent 75874
- Douglas, Frederick. "Away with the \$250 Suffrage! – Equal Rights, and Nothing Less!" *The North Star*, 2 Nov. 1849
- "Legislative Acts/Legislative Proceedings" *The Frederick Douglass Paper*, 18 Aug. 1854.
- "The New York Tribune-Its 'Unpalatable Counsel'-Our Political Rights and Duties" *The Frederick Douglass Paper*, 28 Sep. 1855.
- "The Way to Wealth in the Model Republic." *The North Star*, 18 Feb. 1848.
- Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).
- Ellis, Cristin. *Antebellum Posthuman Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. First edition. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. Print.

- Ellis, Edward Sylvester. *The Huge Hunter Or, the Steam Man of the Prairies*. 1868.
Exhibitions, Comic and Experimental. At Mr. John Thurber's Tavern, West Side of the Bridge.
This Evening, for the First Time, a Chinese Automaton Figure Will Perform Several Feats on the Rope. To-Morrow, for the Last Time, Mr. Cressin Will Begin His Performance at 3 O'clock Bennett Wheeler, 1796.
- Goulden, Anne. "Psycho at the Museum of London." *Davenport Collection*, June 2017, www.davenportcollection.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Psycho-at-the-Museum-of-London.pdf.
- Grandin, Greg. "Capitalism and Slavery." *The Nation* 1 May 2015, www.thenation.com/article/capitalism-and-slavery/.
- Haney's Journal of Useful Information, Important Arts and Discoveries, and Valuable Recipes, for Farm, Household and Workshop, and Town and Country*. Haney & Co. 1868.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Jackson, Faith Joseph. "Dred Scott v. Sandford: A Prelude to the Civil War." *Richmond Journal of Law and the Public Interest*, vol. 15, no. 2, Fall 2011, pp. 377
- Jacobs, Harriet "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." 1861.
- Lemons, J. Stanley. "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920." *American Quarterly* 29.1 (1977): n. pag. Web.
- Louine, Jeannice, et al. "Are Black Robots Like Black People? Examining How Negative Stigmas About Race Are Applied to Colored Robots." *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 88, no. 4, Nov. 2018, pp. 626–48, doi:10.1111/soin.12230.
- Maskelyne, John Nevil. 1879. *Automata*. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough,

Victorian Popular Culture.

“My Reminiscences.” *The Strand*, XXXIX, Jan. 1910, pp. 17–24.

Melamed, Jodi. “Racial Capitalism.” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 76–85.

Moravec, Hans. *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Harvard University Press, 1988.

N Y Corres Intelligencer. “THE TALKING MACHINE.” *Christian Register (1843-1850)* 23.11 (1844): 44. Web.

Reilly, Kara, and Bryant-Bertail, Sarah. “Automata: A Spectacular History of the Mimetic Faculty.” ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006. Web.

Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism : the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* . London: Zed, 1983. Print.

Rossi, Cesare., and Russo, Flavio. *Ancient Engineers' Inventions Precursors of the Present* . 2nd ed., Springer International Publishing, 2017, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-44476-5.

“A Safe Track: The Risk of Railroad Management is the Man Element.” *The Weekly Pelican*, 5 Nov. 1887,

Seiden, Ellen. "Automatons." *Renaissance Magazine*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2015, p. 60+. *General OneFile*, http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A434792613/ITOF?u=tel_a_vanderbilt&sid=ITOF&xid=31893dd9. Accessed 30 Apr. 2019.

Swift, Christopher. “Robot Saints.” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 4.1 (2015): 52–77. Web.