Reading Race in Dime Novels; or, Pedagogies of Nineteenth-Century American Popular Literature
Melissa Adams-Campbell, Northern Illinois University, and Matthew Short, Northern Illinois University

Abstract: Dime novels are a format of popular American fiction published between 1860 and 1915, and were among the first leisure reading materials available to the masses. At Northern Illinois University, faculty, librarians, and students used recently digitized dime novels to study popular nineteenth-century representations of Native American women, providing students with innovative research and publishing opportunities.

Introduction

In an 1892 article in the *Toronto Sunday Times* entitled "A Strong Race Opinion," Canadian-Mohawk writer and stage performer E. Pauline Johnson (also known as Tekahionwake) critiques the "regulation Indian maiden" depicted in contemporary popular fiction as unrealistic, generic, and cliché. "It is a deplorable fact," Johnson observes, "but there is only one of her" (178). She is always named Winona, the daughter of a chief, and, inevitably, her ill-fated love for a white man drives her to suicide or death; and, in these stories, the Indian maiden always dies (179). As a biracial Mohawk woman herself, Johnson expresses her frustration at the lack of imagination with which Native women characters are portrayed in the literature she reads. Far from realistic, these "book Indians" offer primarily white authors, publishers, and readers a pleasurable (and profitable) fantasy of white military and cultural dominance (180).

Taking Johnson as our starting point, we ask what are the masses of nineteenth-century Americans reading and "learning" about Native women, especially in the inexpensive dime novel format; and, how might we empower literature students to participate in such a large-scale research question? What follows is a rationale for using popular fiction to address complex questions of racial representation in the classroom, as well as a detailed description of our unit on "reading race" in frontier and Western fiction from 1860-1874. Although we focus narrowly on Native women, this model could easily be adapted to concentrate on other groups, such as African Americans, Irish, Jews, Mormons, and Latinx. And, indeed, our students asked thoughtful questions about these other groups during class discussions. Our pedagogical approach was determined by the scale of our research interests, which
demanded that we move beyond the usual classroom model of reading a single representative example. Instead, students were asked to read—collectively—a total of fifty-four unique dime novels using a large, recently digitized collection hosted by Northern Illinois University. The scope of this classroom reading project makes it substantially more feasible to recognize how popular literature expresses commonly-held attitudes about race and gender and what the stakes of such work are in literary studies.

**Rationale**

Undergraduate students are often taught to think of literary works as the products of creative genius or inspiration, intended to be read closely for appreciation and understanding of an author's meaning and style. When historical contexts are broached, students typically investigate these contexts as background information necessary to the central task of interpreting an author's work. For many, this may be the only way that they have been taught to examine literature. In this essay, we argue that an engagement with popular literature aids students in expanding the aims of literary study beyond familiar modes of aesthetic inquiry, instead using it as a medium for examining widely-held assumptions about race in America.

Too often when confronted with now outmoded racial depictions in fiction, students describe such representations as an unfortunate blight in an otherwise engaging piece of literature, or they may also brush off such representations as simply a product of the times. However, the desire to dismiss these representations as "just the way people thought back then" presupposes that all nineteenth-century readers share the same racial prejudices and uniformly agree on them. When students hastily brush off racial stereotyping, they also neglect the possibility of existing critical assessments of literature's role in reproducing hegemonic racial ideologies such as those offered in Pauline Johnson's "A Strong Race Opinion."

In this essay we suggest that students look closely at depictions of race in a large sample of mass-produced dime novels. This format of popular fiction is written to appeal to the largest possible number of readers and, thus, typically represents acceptable and widely-held views on race in the period.¹ Using a large sample of works also allows meaningful

¹ Even openly abolitionist authors writing for popular dime novel readers seek to palliate accounts of Southern slaveholders as, for instance, in Metta Victor's *Maum Guinea; and her Plantation 'Children'* (1865). See our teaching spotlight for a summary and classroom discussion questions: [https://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu/learn/spotlights/maumguinea](https://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu/learn/spotlights/maumguinea).
patterns of racial depictions, such as repeated racial stereotypes in place of actual characterization, racially-charged language, and formulaic plot lines, to more clearly emerge. That said, while one goal is to describe normative racial attitudes, students should also connect such hegemonic belief systems with contemporary critiques of these limited and limiting representations, especially those authored by people of color.2 Doing so permits students to recognize the real range of thinking about race in the nineteenth-century as well as to connect this diversity of "strong race opinions” to ongoing disagreements on such issues today. Finally, encouraging students to read race in a large sample of nineteenth-century popular literature enables students to gain a finer appreciation for the ways that literature not only reflects the attitudes of the time, but also, produces racialized attitudes and associated behaviors in individual readers.

What are dime novels?

Dime novels are a format of inexpensive fiction that was widely popular in the United States between 1860 and 1915. More than 50,000 novels were published in the format during this period, selling millions of copies through subscriptions, newsstands, train stations, and dry goods stores. The dime novel’s success can largely be attributed to the public education movement, which was producing more readers (Mott 202); industrialization, which provided the means for mass-production and distribution (Lee 114-16); and, most important of all, the format’s extremely low cost. At the time, cloth-bound books were a relative luxury that might cost a dollar or more, equivalent to a laborer’s wages for twelve hours of work ("Statistics" 512). The cost of a dime novel--between 5 and 25 cents--was something that almost anyone could afford. Readers included not just bankers and businessmen, but children, women, immigrants, and an increasingly literate working class.3 Because of this, dime novels are perhaps unique among American fiction of the nineteenth-century because they were read

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2 In addition to reading Johnson’s essay, students might also research Yankton Dakota author and activist Zitkala-Sa’s literary writing and her activism in the Society of American Indians and the National Council of American Indians (which she co-founded). Many students will need to be informed that Native Americans were not granted U.S. citizenship until 1924 and encouraged to consider how this legal status relates to the stereotyped literature they read. It may be opportune to explain that many Native Americans today claim dual citizenship in their Native nation and in the US and to probe how this difference distinguishes Native peoples from other ethnic minorities.

3 For more on dime novels and the working classes, see Michael Denning’s Mechanic Accents.
by such a wide audience, variously referred to by contemporary critics and publishers by epithets like the "Unknown Public," the "great people," and the "million."⁴

Modeled on the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, many of the first dime novels are set on the colonial American frontier, focusing on the interactions of early settlers with Native Americans. Stories later shift to more contemporary, but still rugged, settings such as mining camps in California and the Dakotas, and feature outlaws and gamblers, like Deadwood Dick, or cowboys and plainsmen, like Buffalo Bill. Indeed, the Western is the genre most closely associated with the format. The detective novel was perhaps even more popular, particularly towards the end of the century, and like the Western, is defined by its heroes: Old Sleuth, Old King Brady, Joe Phenix, and Nick Carter. These stories have little in common with the deductive fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, focusing instead on inexplicable discoveries, daring escapes, and nefarious criminals, in many ways foreshadowing the detective heroes that would become so popular in the pulp magazines of the next century. That said, nearly every genre appears in dime novel format, including school and sport stories, romance fiction, sea stories, and even some early science fiction.

For more than half a century, dime novels were a prominent part of American culture, closely intertwined with the everyday lives of most Americans. They occasionally show up in the literary canon, given brief mention by Mark Twain in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and by Louisa May Alcott in Little Women. Alcott herself wrote over 33 dime novels early in her career, either anonymously or under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard (Stern 197). But unlike those authors, who are widely taught and studied today, dime novels are mostly unknown by the majority of teachers and researchers. They are either absent from scholarship on genre fiction or given only a brief mention, often presented as homogenous and interchangeable. Much of this disregard can be attributed to the ongoing debate regarding what does and does not belong in the literary canon--what is worth teaching and studying and what is best forgotten.

We argue that the dime novel has a long overdue place in the teaching of American literature, belonging alongside Twain, Alcott, and other mainstays of the nineteenth-century American literary canon. In advocating this approach, we follow Jane Tompkins's

⁴"Unknown Public" is a phrase first coined by Charles Dickens to refer to readers of penny dreadfuls, which was later adopted by Edward Everett and George Woodberry for readers of story papers and dime novels. The phrase "great people" comes from Frederick Whittaker’s 1884 “Reply” in the New York Tribune and the “million” was used in advertisements for Beadle and Adams’ new dime novel series in the New-York Daily Tribune.
pathbreaking call over thirty years ago to "move the study of American literature away from the small group of master texts that have dominated critical discussion. . . and into a more varied and fruitful area of investigation" (Sensational Designs 10). In Tompkins's view, "novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (Sensational Designs 10). Dime novels provide twenty-first-century readers with many unique opportunities to explore a wide range of popular (and profitable) nineteenth-century attitudes on topics such as race, class, politics, and gender.

Digitization and Teaching

Libraries did not begin collecting and preserving dime novels until the 1930s, led by the heroic efforts of V. Valta Parma at the Library of Congress, who rescued thousands of rat-nibbled volumes from the basement of the U.S. Copyright Office (Clark-Evans 23). Unfortunately, there are only a handful of these collections scattered across the United States and many of them have incomplete holdings (i.e. partial runs of series). If a researcher or teacher is not located near a university with a large dime novel collection, they must either travel, rely on one of the few available dime novel reprints, or repeat claims made in existing studies, which in many ways have overdetermined scholarship on the subject. By providing dime novels online, digitization has the potential to democratize teaching and scholarship in much the same way that dime novels themselves democratized reading. In the last 5 years, large-scale dime novel digitization projects have been undertaken by Northern Illinois University (NIU), Villanova University, Bowling Green State University, and the University of South Florida, among others, making several thousands novels available for the first time anywhere in over a century.

Our teaching collaboration was a direct result of NIU's large-scale digitization of the Albert Johannsen and Edward T. LeBlanc collections, two of the largest dime novel collections in the United States. In 2017, NIU partnered with Villanova University to digitize the entirety of the Johannsen Collection through a Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources. More than 6,000 dime novels and story papers can currently be viewed or downloaded as PDFs, which are freely available online through the site Nickels and Dimes. The unit on race and dime novels described in this essay grew out of conversations between Matthew Short, the principal
investigator in Northern Illinois's dime novel digitization grant, and Dr. Melissa Adams-Campbell, a member of the digitization grant's Advisory Committee, a group that was formed to advise on the creation of teaching guides, lesson plans, and contextual essays as well as other strategies for dissemination and contextualization. Together we developed a unit to engage students in dime novel research and the production of online contextual materials, specifically focusing on categorizing literary stereotypes of Native women. The unit was taught simultaneously in two courses in the Spring semester of 2018, a graduate course on Native American women writers (Engl 693), and an undergraduate course on early American writing (Engl 330).

Reading Race with Students

Our pedagogical goals for this unit included introducing students to non-traditional literary materials and methods of study; widening the scope of discussions on popular American literature and representations of gender, race, and class; and producing student publications that could be incorporated in writing or teaching portfolios for the job market. To accomplish this latter goal, we planned to publish student writing online at dimenovels.org, an online dime novel bibliography incorporated into Nickels and Dimes, in order to contextualize some of the thousands of dime novels that have already been digitized. Over the course of two weeks, students would be asked to read and discuss one novel as a class and read two additional assigned dime novels independently. Students would then submit a reading log and write 250 word abstracts for their two novels, as well as present their findings to the class. (The full instructions for this assignment are included in the appendix below.)

While there has been considerable attention to the Western as a popular genre in American literature and cinema, little research focuses on the broader patterns of representing Native women in popular literature or the implications of such representation for actual Native women. Researching such broad patterns of representation requires first, identifying which of the thousands of extant novels are likely to contain Native women characters, however minor, and, then, extensive reading of these materials and systematic data collection. We focused specifically on dime novel representations of Native American

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5 The Albert Johannsen Project Advisory Council includes teaching faculty at both NIU and Villanova, as well as librarians and high school educators with an interest in popular fiction and education.

6 Recommended studies of the Western and frontier literature include works by Richard Slotkin, Joshua David Bell, Daryl Jones, and Jane Tompkins’s West of Everything. On representations of Native women, see especially Rayna Green and Beth Piatote.
women in both courses, which allowed Melissa to bring this current research focus directly into her classroom as she shared with students the general goals and methods of advanced literary research used to fill a gap in the available scholarship.

To give NIU students an introduction to this work, one of our goals was to have students read as many dime novels as possible, enabling them to more easily identify the repetitions and patterns found in overdetermined and overly complicated plot and character details. Such observations would have been difficult to make if everyone in class read one or two representative examples. Although we could not assign students to read fifty-four novels in a single semester, we collectively read this number by breaking the task into manageable pieces and sharing our individual discoveries to form a larger picture. This activity, loosely adapted from "jigsaw" teaching strategies (McKeachie 35), required students to independently read two novels, record their findings, and report back. Asking students to share and compare their findings was an essential strategy in solving the larger "puzzle" of characterizing patterns in dime novels' representations of Native women. As students began to read independently, we asked them to attend to stereotypical characters, sensational or "canned" plot devices, and clichéd expressions for our target group, Native women.

Asking students to collectively read, synthesize, and discuss fifty-four novels in a single semester (not including the additional course materials we read together) is a tremendous undertaking; however, it was the most direct way for students to see the larger "puzzle" in which their piece of the project fit. The first challenge was assembling a list of novels for students to read, especially because this meant that students would be reading texts we had not read ourselves. Because of the prominence of the series and the frequency with which Native characters appear in it, we focused narrowly on the seminal Beadle's Dime Novels, the first dime novel series ever published. There are 209 issues in this series available on Nickels and Dimes, each of which is approximately 100 pages long. While the subject terms available for searching these novels contain relevant topical access points such as "Indians of North America," novels specifically about Native women are not always easily identifiable. So instead of relying on subject headings, we searched the collection using keywords that commonly appear in dime novel representations of Native women, such as "princess", "squaw", "queen", and "prophetess." This allowed us to assemble a list of fifty-four novels, only a handful of which had actually been read previously by either of us.

Because most students were unfamiliar with dime novels and the study of popular literature prior to this assignment, we created several pre-reading activities to build student
familiarity with the materials and this method of inquiry. Both courses began with a visit to NIU's Rare Books and Special Collections for a lecture on the history of the dime novel format and the digitization project, followed by hands-on examination of more than a dozen specimens. In preparation, students also read and discussed foundational scholarship on nineteenth-century American popular fiction (Tompkins) and dime novel Westerns (Brown) along with recent digital humanities scholarship on the aims and methods of "distant reading" (Moretti).

This approach is a new kind of literary study for most undergraduate (and many graduate) literature students. Readers must be trained not only about what to look for in their assigned texts, but most importantly, in the value of this work. Taking our Tompkins reading as a kind of playbook, we asked students to see stereotypical characters and sensational plots not as defects or detractions, but as powerful "moves" authors could make:

As I began to see the power of the copy as opposed to the original, I searched not for the individual but for the type. I saw that the presence of stereotyped characters, rather than constituting a defect in these novels, was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition. Stereotypes are the instantly recognizable representations of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories; they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form" (Sensational Designs 15).

Like Tompkins, we urged students to interrogate the "cultural work" that stereotypes perform in popular literature. As she explains, stereotypes are the "telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value" essential to the text's success (Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 15). Rather than gliding over such "defects," readers should take care to note such moments and record the emotional associations created by these stereotypes. "Their familiarity and typicality," Tompkins notes, "rather than making them bankrupt or stale, are the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation" (Sensational Designs 15). As we sent students out to read independently, we asked: are Native women treated as buffoons; hags; menacing threats; attractive sexual partners and/or marriageable; utterly alien; or akin to sentimental depictions of white women in the US at this time? More fundamentally, are they even present?

In the undergraduate early American literature course, dime novels were described as the mass-produced fictional culmination of themes, characters, and plots initiated in previous eras of American writing. The course routinely includes a unit on captivity narratives by Mary Rowlandson, Briton Hammon, and excerpts from Cooper's Last of the Mohicans, among
others; prior to the dime novel unit, students had read excerpts from Cooper, so they were primed to consider dime novels' often violent and tense fictional encounters with Native peoples within the frame of nonfiction and fictional captivity stories. Together the class read and discussed Edward Ellis's *Seth Jones; or, The Captives of the Frontier* (1860), one of two Beadle dime novels to sell over 300,000 copies and regarded by the series' editor, Orville J. Victor, as the "perfect dime novel" (Smith 93). Following on their reading of Rayna Green's "Pocahontas Perplex," in a subsequent class session, students addressed the problem of locating Native women in early American primary sources and the many stereotypes these sources contain.

As there are no known dime novels written by Native women, in the graduate class on Native women writers, the unit was framed as an inquiry into Johnson's critique of "book Indians." In order to better understand the restrictions on nineteenth-century Native women writers such as Johnson, a quick immersion into the stereotyped world of dime novels would prove useful. Together we read and discussed Ann S. Stephens's *Malaeska, The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, alongside essays by Yu-Fang Cho and Rebecca Wingo, before students completed the assignments described above.

**Reflections on the Unit**

For many undergraduate students, it was not until our discussion at the unit's end that they fully grasped the work they had completed. Here we had time to reflect not only on the stereotyped representations of Native women, but stereotyped African American, Irish, and Mormon characters. (In fact, several students were surprised to learn that Irish immigrants were once the object of scorn and vilification in American culture.) Students also compared notes on the frequent trope of "forest monsters" that turn out to be dogs, bears, or trappers. Gauging by the quantity of laughter during this discussion, they seemed to enjoy the shift in disciplinary thinking demanded by popular literature as well as the pleasure in its repetitions. Indeed, they were, collectively, knowledgeable experts on the workings of the frontier fiction genre, recognizing repetitions, but also identifying more and less interesting anomalies within these formulaic fictions. As Tompkins reminds us, these overused characters and storylines "teach readers what kinds of behavior to emulate or shun; . . . they do not attempt to transcribe in detail a parabola of events as they 'actually happen' in society; rather, they provide a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events take place" (*Sensational Designs* 16). Rather than looking for distinctive products of literary "genius," students observed clichéd
story elements such as powerful Native prophetesses, always beautiful "Indian maidens," sacrificial mothers and wives, and several "Native" women who turn out to be white. Like the packaging of bodice-ripper romances or Harry Potter novels today, students reflected on the reproducibility of these stories: for authors, recycling character types, plot devices, and emotionally intense episodes; for readers, seeking familiar, cheap thrills; and for publishers, who designed seemingly interchangeable products facilitating repeat consumption. While their cultural concerns and stories vary from our own, dime novels felt familiar in their mass-production.

Student feedback on the unit was solicited directly and via end of semester evaluations. Undergraduate Tracy Osimowicz felt that this assignment "allowed students to feel empowered in their literary opinions and act as social critic in their observations" (Email). Several others expressed a similar sense of liberation at our investigation of popular texts, because doing so enabled them to reflect on the objectives of close reading, canons of literary "taste" and how they evolve, and why certain texts are excluding. Graduate student and secondary school teacher Wanjugu Bukusi remarked, "My experiences with dime novels highlighted the problem that current students and teachers in the American school system may be limited in exposure [to less canonical texts]. Unfortunately teachers are often guilty of targeting the same few authors again and again... [Students] are less likely to be exposed to other voices" (Email). Dime novels are one method of defamiliarizing students' experiences of literature, allowing them to reflect on what they have been taught in other courses. Overall, in their final evaluations undergraduate students expressed enthusiasm for the inclusion of dime novels and "less commonly read" texts; for varied writing projects in the course; and for conversations about "what being American meant to different populations."

Looking back on this experience, there are certainly things we would like to change and improve. While reporting findings is an integral piece of the "jigsaw" model on which this lesson was loosely based, oral reports were not successful. Students were too intent on rehearsing complicated plot summaries and, even after giving them more specific guidelines, many struggled to produce concise, interesting analyses. Graduate students were better able to offer interesting observations and claims, but, overall, time would have been better spent having one or two open-ended discussions about student findings, which we actually did after oral reports were completed.

Students had also generally never been asked to collect data in a literature class and needed frequent reassurance about how their grade might be affected should they find few
or no instances of Native women characters in their assigned novels. A number of the novels, for example, feature Native women characters who are later revealed to be white women. This required explaining that such findings, and even no findings of Native women, were valid and helpful contributions to our knowledge of nineteenth-century attitudes toward Native women, characters often considered unnecessary to stories of US settlement. Talking through when and how Native women characters appear in a large sampling of dime novels illuminated how limited and marginalizing these depictions were; and, focusing on a single ethnic group allowed students to return to discussion with a depth of observations that they carried over into thinking about other stereotyped groups they encountered.

Toward the end of the unit, we began to reassess the goals and limitations in this reporting stage. In their individual oral reports, it was difficult for students to see the larger "puzzle" coming together because we were picking up each individual "piece" one at a time. Midstream in the reporting stage, we created a padlet.com page to visualize student data with columns for the common stereotypes that we expected students to encounter. Students were then asked to create entries under each stereotype they observed using the novel's title and any necessary explanatory commentary. Not only did students generate a wealth of interesting data about these stereotypes, they also suggested quite a few "types" not initially on the list, significantly contributing to the project's depth. In the future, it would be more productive to ask students to record their findings on the padlet page in lieu of an oral report and prior to our full class discussion of their individual readings. Gathering data is a useful step in all literary research whether it is within a single poem or across a dime novel series; students can meaningfully contribute to data collection projects given appropriate resources for processing their findings. In future courses, students might expand this initial data set (restricted as it was to the original Beadle and Adams series) by replicating this activity in other series or by considering representations of other ethnic groups.

We also learned valuable lessons about the necessity of requiring revisions to student writing that we overlooked in the initial unit design. As described above, each student wrote two 250 word abstracts for their assigned novels to be published online with the goal of contextualizing the digital collection. Results were mixed. While some of the submissions could be published with little editing, others required significant intervention. Much of this could be attributed to the fact that students approached the assignment very differently: many provided a brief summary with interpretation, while others tackled the summary as if they were writing advertising copy for the publisher, sometimes even incorporating racist language.
and descriptions. One student, for example, compared the blackness of an African American character's heart to the blackness of their skin, while others used terms like "squaw" without unpacking that word's racist connotations. This reinforced the importance of introducing students to guidelines for online writing, providing models, and creating successive rounds of revision before submissions are made for publication. Emphasizing online writing skills could also enable additional collaborations across writing and literature classes.

**Future Directions**

The data students helped to gather will not only prove useful in Melissa's research, but suggests another potential avenue for collaboration. Currently, the metadata used to describe dime novels on *Nickels and Dimes* lacks much information about race and ethnicity, which is one of the subjects that draws the most interest in the collection. Although subject headings like "Indians of North America" enable us to describe groups of people, they do not permit labeling of texts as racist, which is intended to avoid a library cataloger biasing patrons against a particular work. But this also means that if a researcher wants to examine particular racial stereotypes in the collection (e.g. "princess," "squaw," "half-breed"), they must browse through hundreds or thousands of novels featuring the group of people they are interested in. We have discussed the possibility of developing a taxonomy of racial stereotypes, working together with faculty doing research in that domain, while using student data to establish headings, definitions, and scope notes. If the origin of these terms was made known to the user, and the taxonomy was carefully and publicly documented, this could be a way to avoid cataloger bias, while addressing a major shortcoming in current library descriptions of these materials.

We are also exploring additional partnerships to produce classroom materials for a wider, nonspecialist audience interested in dime novels and American popular literature. One such strategy is to partner with advanced English education students and practicing educators in preparing accessible lesson plans and other relevant materials. For example, we have drafted several "spotlight" lessons that feature dime novels that are either significant to existing scholarship, such as *Malaeska* and *Maum Guinea*, or that are significantly understudied, such as *Captain Volcano*. These are modelled on the spotlights developed by the National Portrait Gallery, and are intended to be concise and easily accessible for teachers and students. Spotlights contain a brief discussion of the novel's importance to scholarship, a biography of the author, several discussion questions, and resources for further
study. We hope to develop many more of these spotlights over the next year for the Johannsen Project.

Conclusion

Students' generally positive response to this unit demonstrates how a departure from traditional disciplinary methods produces valuable research experience, encounters with new kinds of texts, and new modes of thinking about literary studies and its relation to questions of identity. Most students had never been asked to read popular fiction in a literature class, much less fifty-four different novels; similarly, they had not been asked to think of character and plot as data. We are not suggesting, of course, that dime novels should only be taught or studied on such a large scale. While many of these texts are somewhat homogenous, there is value, too, in close reading individual novels. Indeed, rather than teaching students "distant reading" skills (Moretti), we did something more akin to reading race closely and concurrently across a large number of novels. This simultaneous reading was successful in part because our assignment built on close readings of a shared dime novel before students began their own work. These discussions and other close readings of canonical captivity narratives and thematically-related materials provided a necessary frame for students to explore their individually assigned selections. While fifty-four novels hardly constitutes the scale required for "distant reading," it is a different kind of reading than we typically encourage in literature classes. We believe that such reading activities promote thought provoking discussions about the commodification of race, class, and culture in the nineteenth-century as well as the present.
Works Cited


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Appendix with (slightly revised) writing prompts

_Dime Novel Activity Directions:_

You will be assigned two dime novels to read on your own. You can find .pdf files of your books by searching for the title using quote marks (ex: "The Red Rider") in the search box at [http://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu/](http://dimenovels.lib.niu.edu/) If you need assistance locating your novels, please ask soon!

As you read, please keep a reading log. I have a sample one using Excel attached here, but you can make up your own using paper or a word document if you prefer. List the book's title and author (if known), and page numbers (original book page numbers, not the .pdf pages) where Native American women appear in the text. For each page number you record, please also list the words/phrases used to describe Native women characters ("maiden", "hag", "squaw", "girl", "woman", "witch", "prophetess", etc.), and a very brief description (a sentence or so) of what is happening. You may find there are no Native women characters; that is okay. Please just record what you find. We are simply gathering data. Although it may be difficult, try not to add evaluative commentary here. Do this for each of your assigned books. Submit your reading logs here or in class on 2/7/18. Reading logs are worth 25 points each.

As you finish each novel, write a **250 word abstract (summary)** for each of your assigned books. Who are the characters? What happens to them? Where is the book set? What else would a reader want to know when deciding if they might like to read this book? Please do not write a book review (whether or not you liked it); we are aiming for simple description. Keep your sentences clear and concise. Do not get mired in the details. Your goal is to accurately describe the book, but also to entice a reader. You don't want to ruin the story, so try not to include spoilers. Try to avoid using racially-charged language in your abstracts, even if that language is a part of your book. Ask questions if you aren't sure how to do that! Bring your best possible, well-crafted draft to class for peer review. A second final draft will be grammatically correct, easily and quickly read by online readers, and engagingly written. First drafts are worth 15 points each; final drafts are worth 25 points each.

Finally, please prepare a **5-7 minute oral report** for your classmates covering: titles, authors (if known) and very brief summaries of your books (geographical and historical setting; kind of plot such as romance, mystery, action, some kind of combination of these, etc.; protagonist and antagonist; point of view), an overview of the kinds of Native women characters you found (if any), and what you thought about the books (I don't want this to turn
into "why I hated/loved this book--I really don't care about that--so be thoughtful about the comments you share with your classmates. You might offer statements such as "I was surprised by..." or "After reading this book, I wanted to know more about..." or "This book might have appealed to...". As with any oral report, you should be organized, prepared, well-spoken, make eye contact, and be ready to answer questions. You are the expert on these books! You are not required to use PowerPoint or other visuals, though you may choose to do so if you wish. No written documents are required for this portion of the assignment. Your oral report is worth 20 points total. I will award up to 10 points for quality of content, up to 5 points for organization and clarity, and up to 5 points for presentation style (confidence, eye contact, articulation). Please practice. As always, please ask me if you have questions.

[*As described in the article, we recommend replacing the oral report with a data visualization tool such as a padlet.com page and one or two class sessions devoted to debriefing student findings.]

Later in the semester undergraduate students were required to write a 4-5 page essay. Among their other prompt options, were opportunities for continuing to reflect on and learn more about dime novels.

1. Using the dime novels you read for this class or others you choose on your own, analyze how these popular novels incorporate traditional elements of the captivity narrative and whether and how they innovate on these traditional models. Who is made captive? Who does the capturing? Who saves the day (if anyone)? What ideas about captivity, freedom, survival, land and territory rights, progress, etc. are being celebrated here? What ideas about gender, race, class, nation, etc. organize this text's representations of character, motivations, plot, theme, etc.? You need not address all these questions, but you should think about them before you begin writing. Be sure to answer: So what? Why is this significant?

2. Research a dime novel author or authors (no more than two) using scholarly peer-reviewed sources and reputable reference materials. (This will take time; don't wait to the last minute. If you aren't sure about how to find peer-reviewed or reputable sources, please contact our English subject librarian. Write a clear, detailed, and accessible biographical profile of your author(s) worthy of adding to the Nickels and Dimes web page. It should not rehash Wikipedia (although the references at the bottom of a Wikipedia entry can be a useful place to start your research). In your own prose, include any known information on family background and upbringing, education, career trajectory and highlights, list of known dime novels...
novel titles and other relevant literary productions, brief summary (couple of sentences) of any existing scholarship on the author and his/her works, and a selected bibliography. Length of author profiles will differ depending on information available about your chosen author. As part of your total page count, please also include a 2-page reflection describing your research process (what did you do? Where did you look? What, if any, difficulties did you have locating information? How did you decide to organize your material, etc.?) and the decisions you made when crafting a document intended for an online, semi-scholarly audience. If you chose this option you must get permission from me first (this way I don't receive 8 profiles of the same author).

MELISSA ADAMS-CAMPBELL is Associate Professor of English at Northern Illinois University where she teaches early American and ethnic literatures. She is the author of *New World Courtships: Transatlantic Alternatives to Companionate Marriage* (Dartmouth 2015) and co-editor of a special feature on "Indigeneity and Settler Colonial Archives" in *Settler Colonial Studies* among others. Her current research has been partially funded by the Horatio Alger society fellowship for the study of American popular culture.

MATTHEW SHORT is the Digital Collections & Metadata Librarian at Northern Illinois University, where he is the Co-Principal Investigator on the Albert Johannsen Digitization Project. He has published several articles in the *Dime Novel Round-Up* and has a forthcoming chapter on story papers in volume five of the *Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*. 