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Toward a Poetics of Practice: Self-Improvement, *Nancy Drew*,
and the *Chicago Defender*

Introduction

Let us propose an ostensibly bizarre project: to investigate texts that appear far too disparate to justify their analysis within the conceptual borders of one thesis. Let us say one cluster of these texts is a detective series following the adventures of a white, middle-class teenage girl sleuth who enjoys everything consumerism has to offer while solving mystery cases. The other cluster is from one of the most widely circulated African American newspapers, dedicated to condemning racial injustice as well as strengthening the Black community economically and politically. Little seems to warrant an investigation that juxtaposes *Nancy Drew* and the *Chicago Defender* within the confines of the same research project. Except, perhaps, one point of comparison: both clusters are part and parcel of burgeoning and expanding formations of commercial mass culture¹ between the two world wars—formations which seem to us curiously underexplored.

In order to study the exchanges or negotiations between these clusters of texts and American cultural practices at large, it seems reasonable to tap into the time-honored theories and methodologies of New Historicism. Our texts draw from and contribute to what Stephen Greenblatt has aptly called a “poetics of culture” and participate in what Joseph Vogl has recently termed a “poetics of knowledge.” Starting from these theoretical frameworks, which emphasize cultural renegotiations and cultural knowledge, we soon find ourselves compelled to focus on a particular relation more extensively: the relation between commercial mass cultures and “practice,” more precisely the practices of self-improvement. Once we consider the thriving industry of self-help and self-optimization of the 1920s, and 30s, the project begins to look less bizarre. In fact, analyzing *Nancy Drew* and *The Chicago Defender*

¹ Richard Ohmann defines mass culture as follows: “[M]ass culture . . . includes voluntary experiences, produced by a relatively small number of specialists for millions across the nation to share, in similar or identical form, either simultaneously or nearly so; with dependable frequency; mass culture shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or interests, and it is made for profit.” (*Selling Culture* 14)

from this vantage point, we find ourselves exploring what might be called a “poetics of practice.”

A “poetics of practice” would imply relying on a sociological notion of “practice” as well as observing the poetic means with which “practice” seems often undergirded. Commercial mass cultures, fundamentally entangled in forms of “practice,”—more precisely—of poetic practice, not only circumscribe the field of our research objects, but also constitute a vital element of American Studies since its inception. As Berndt Ostendorf (3-10) has stated, popular and mass cultures are indeed defining phenomena within the larger formation of American culture.

In a first step, then, we will contextualize *Nancy Drew* and the *Chicago Defender* in the epoch of their heyday, roughly the decade of the 1930s. Subsequently we look at that special genre within mass circulated literature that experienced a peak in the 1930s: the literature of self-improvement. Here, we will chiefly but not exclusively focus on Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* (1937). After a brief discursive analysis that focuses on the homologies between the discourses employed in *Nancy Drew*, the *Chicago Defender*, and various self-improvement books, we argue that commercial mass cultures turn out to be central carriers of practices of self-improvement—albeit self-improvement of different kinds. As a result, we conclude that the practice-oriented, instructional discourses present in products of commercial mass cultures must find broader attention when it comes to reflecting on theoretical approaches to popular cultures. All the while, we insist on the value of a historicizing, contextualizing methodology that puts high emphasis on the relevance of practical discourse, without elevating it to the status of *the* determining cultural agent.

1. Production, Distribution, Reception: *Nancy Drew* and the *Chicago Defender*

An analysis that invokes New Historicism has to take into account the different conditions of production, distribution, and reception that characterize both clusters of material we are exploring. Edward Stratemeyer and Robert Sengstacke Abbott, the producers of *Nancy Drew* and the *Chicago Defender*, had different motivations and followed different production methods. 1905 marked the beginning of Stratemeyer’s syndicated mass production of adolescent fiction. Stratemeyer relied above all on standardized procedures and wrote the guidelines for the books that were written and published in assembly-line fashion. The guidelines demanded action-driven plot lines with cliff-hangers for suspense and standardized chapter counts, while ruling out references to sexuality and graphic depictions of violence (Kismaric and Heiferman 15). The writing process

was outsourced; editors guaranteed consistency and quality. *Nancy Drew*, started in 1929 and published under the pen name “Carolyn Keene,” was the first detective series for girls (and Stratemeyer’s most successful mass publication).

In contrast, the *Chicago Defender*, America’s most influential black newspaper in the 1930s, was first and foremost committed to rebuking discrimination in the strongest possible terms. The newspaper displayed a motto that both indicated the political and production-related circumstances under which it operated and formulated its goal: “American Race Prejudice Must Be Destroyed.” Accordingly, the newspaper regularly stated its political demands and also played a vital role in the Great Migration. To facilitate the escape from race violence in the South, “Abbott even encouraged migration by arranging group excursions to Chicago and securing group fare rates on the railroad . . .” (Walker 27, see also Wallace 55-58). In this manner, the newspaper contributed to Chicago’s and Harlem’s significance as centers of African American life in the interwar years and beyond. In addition to covering political conditions, the *Chicago Defender* also featured reports on the economic situation of African Americans during the Great Depression. “Southern Pacific to Employ White Girls on Diners” (March 29, 1930, 4) and “Race Citizens Continue Fight for City Jobs” (October 8, 1932, 4) were some of the headlines that indicated the depression’s weighty impact on African Americans in the North. Over and above its outspoken political positions, the *Chicago Defender* published relevant content for the every-day life of the African American community. This included society pages, sections for women, health and food advice, coverage of music, movies, and the theater, serialized novels and stories as well as a page tailored to children, called *Defender Junior*. One of the tasks of the juniors, organized in the Bud Billiken club, was to recruit new readers for the paper. In this regard, the *Chicago Defender* did serve as a broad conduit of popular culture, partly akin in function to Stratemeyer’s fifty-centers—which leads us to the points of connection between the two publications.

What seems to connect both research objects on the most superficial level is their wide reception during the years of the Great Depression. With a circulation of 110 000 in 1930 (Walker 40), and, as Abbott’s biographer Roi Ottley reports, a sway with the African American readership second only to the Bible (Walker 11), the *Chicago Defender* is an instance of Great Depression mass culture. What is more, both publications targeted a teenage audience, *Nancy Drew* by definition and the *Chicago Defender* by means of its *Defender Junior* pages and its Bud Billiken Club. An analysis of exchanges with circumambient discourses, as a poetics of culture would undertake it, unveils a further similarity between the girl detective series and the *Chicago Defender*—namely their connections to a culture and literature

of self-improvement, which was gaining momentum during the years of the Great Depression.

2. Negotiation/Circulation: Self-Improvement in *Nancy Drew* and the *Chicago Defender*

In the context of our investigation, self-improvement can be defined as a set of practices and mental attitudes that will facilitate upward social mobility. Nicole Woolsey Biggart calls it a “uniquely North American expression of a belief in self-reliance, the value of education, and hard work in achieving mobility” (299). It is important to keep in mind that the literature of self-improvement had always been part and parcel of popular and mass cultures. The circulation of self-improvement books attests to this; so does the history of self-improvement as the continuation of several grassroots spiritual, religious, but also necessity-driven movements (Weiss 130, 131; Prothero 198). We argue that American self-help practices as well as the self-improvement books of the 1920s and 30s unfold a discursive continuum to which both *Nancy Drew* and the *Chicago Defender* (and, by extension, many of the commercial mass cultures of the 1930s) contributed.

Let us come back to the term “practice.” While this concept is contested in the social sciences—the disciplines which have most actively sought to operationalize it—we largely apply the definition initially offered by John Postill, who postulates that “[p]ractices are the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair” (Postill 1). Andreas Reckwitz supplements this definition with a distinction between the singular and the plural based on the German binary of “Praxis” vs. “Praktik”:

‘Practice’ (Praxis) in the singular represents merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to ‘theory’ and mere thinking). ‘Practices’ in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A ‘practice’ (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice—a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc.—forms so to speak a ‘block’ whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (Reckwitz 249, 250)

The essence of self-improvement literature is to provide readers with suggestions for precisely the “routinized type of behaviour” that is supposed to influence various aspects of life and actions carried out by the individual, producing indeed the very “block” of linkages in the lives of the readers. Postill further points out that Bourdieu’s conception of “habitus” as well as

Foucault's notion of "discipline" (or knowledge) are vital factors engendering "practice" and "practices" (Postill 8-9). The cultivation of both a specific habitus and of internalized discipline seem to be evident goals of self-improvement literature. In this sense, self-improvement can be conceived of as a unified practice.

However, we have to keep in mind that self-improvement is in itself a variegated discourse and therefore needs to be thoroughly contextualized in its different instances in order to be adequately understood. For example, the self-improvement discourse relevant for African American communities that unfolds between Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois is not congruent with the discursive continuum that emerges among white authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ralph Waldo Trine, Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie, in spite of noticeable similarities. In contrast to the rather individualistic white self-improvement tradition, African American discourses of self-help are rooted in the collective conditions and effects of slavery and Jim Crow. The debate about the most appropriate kind of education for African Americans, in manual labour or in arts and sciences, owes much to this predicament and is often referenced in histories of African American self-improvement.² Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois have come to represent the two poles in this debate. Washington admonishes his students to be efficient and hard-working (213), detail-oriented (221), persistent (187), responsible (203, 204), and community-minded (201). With this, Washington links to production and accumulation, core elements of self-improvement inherited from Benjamin Franklin. In contrast, Du Bois champions an idea of self-help that links to an Emersonian understanding of self-cultivation and creativity. In this, he is closer to Hill and Carnegie than Washington.

Nevertheless, Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie's self-improvement books are surprisingly similar to Washington's practical attitude when it comes to optimism and auto-suggestion. While in his 1902 collection of motivational speeches, Washington encourages the Tuskegee community to pay attention to life's negative aspects, the general tone of his talks encourages optimism and confidence. Washington says,

I think I am right in saying that the persons who accomplish most in this world, those to whom on account of their helpfulness the world looks most for service—those who are most useful in every way—are those who are constantly seeing and appreciating the bright side as well as the dark side of life. (3)

Hill and Carnegie, writing in the 1930s, share this balanced outlook. However, they do not encourage the appreciation of negatives and prefer to

² For an explanation of the philosophical underpinnings of African American self-help, see McKeen (412). Sehat and Norell both offer discussions of Washington's complicated interactions with Jim Crow society.

focus on the shortcomings of the individual in order to suggest solutions. In this mode, Hill presents lists such as “The 10 Major Causes of Failure in Leadership” (122) and “How to Outwit the Six Ghosts of Fear” (261), enumerating the weaknesses that hold the reader back and inhibit improvement.

As the title of his best-known guide book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), reveals, Carnegie sees the management—one might also say the manipulation--of relationships as the key to material success. The interpersonal sphere is of considerable importance for Washington, as well. Carnegie, however, encourages the savvy use of social capital for individual gain more than he does community building. Motivating peers and employees (164-175) as well as cultivating the quintessential smile (66-74) form part of the canon of practices—all within a specific managerial habitus—that Carnegie bestows on the reader. Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) is equally aware of the importance of social capital and suggests that every reader seek a group of like-minded individuals with comparable improvement goals (193-203). Harmony of minds and objectives, however, proves ineffectual if the individual does not develop a strong desire for improvement (19-43) and of an equally strong willpower (178).

Hill’s title, his insistence on the power of thought and a strong will, as well as his para-scientific elaborations on the function of the human brain as a type of radio device capable of emitting and receiving signals (239-246), point to his connection to late nineteenth century New Thought and spiritualism. Basing their teachings on Emerson’s transcendentalist brand of idealism, authors such as Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, Ralph Waldo Trine, and Wallace D. Wattles asserted the direct impact of thought on matter. This conviction gave rise to the imperative of avoiding negative emotions and unpleasant thoughts, one of the sources of the later emphasis on optimism. In contrast to Washington, neither the proponents of New Thought nor Carnegie and Hill pay much attention to hard work. Willpower, drive, and optimism are presented as more significant tools for improvement.

It turns out that our clusters of texts reflect these different self-improvement discourses rather precisely. Nancy Drew’s character, for example, is well in line with Hill and Carnegie’s self-improvement provisions. She masters her cases with the power of her mind; she uses motivational techniques to spur on her friends and acquaintances; she exemplifies Hill’s “Major Attributes of Leadership” (120-121) so accurately that the statement “Nancy’s abilities of leadership were welcome and depended upon in any group” (Keene, *The Clue in the Diary*, 1962 edition, 2) comes as no surprise. Nancy is even suggested to be familiar with auto-suggestion, so highly recommended by Hill (69-77), as she “had studied psychology in school and was familiar with the power of suggestion and

association” (Keene, *Secret* 88). Statements like “I may discover a real clue to-day, and if I do, I’m going to trail it down!” (Keene, *Secret* 65) exhibit her optimism, her drive, and her commitment to mental mobility.

While it is conspicuous that Nancy’s cases tend to end in establishing or restoring her clients’ prosperity, this usually has not much to do with work. Nancy retrieves stolen or lost objects of great value or locates hidden wills. *The Secret of the Old Clock*, for instance, semantically emphasizes the equation of willpower and upward mobility suggested in self-improvement literature: Retrieving a lost will, Nancy makes sure that her friends inherit a fortune. Her pun “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” (Keene, *Secret* 23) confirms the equivalence of willpower, money, and mobility—a mobility represented by Nancy’s “shining blue roadster” (13). Stripped of the mystery, Nancy is able to gain large amounts of money through the very power of her mind and a habitus with the appropriate attitudes described by Hill and Carnegie.

On a more sinister note: the connection between the knowledge and practices of white self-improvement discourses and *Nancy Drew* also tells us something about the logics of the representation (and reproduction) of social categories in the 1930s. Bigotry and racism, as often featured in the original *Nancy Drew* books, are not merely reproduced in plots that depict minority members (*The Clue of the Tapping Heals*) or labor activists (*The Hidden Staircase*) as villains located outside the accepted norms and virtues of capitalism. These stereotypes are not only employed in order to perpetuate the discrimination that already exists. The perpetuation of discrimination is also the effect of a particular set of instructions. These instructions suggest that if one strives to maintain one’s social position or to advance, one must not socialize with groups that have always been denied the benefits of capitalism and the American Dream, let alone are devoted to questioning capitalism’s legitimacy. If improvement is to be achieved, the worst thing to do is to fraternize with African Americans, socialists or labor activists.

As the coverage in the *Chicago Defender* shows, a sense of increased competition was definitely present between black and white laborers during the Great Migration and in the Depression years. At the same time, the increasing visibility of the popular front during the decades that marked the heyday of *Nancy Drew* threatened the legitimacy of American capitalism. In terms of social justice the American Dream appeared less desirable, and a socialist utopia of whatever form would have little to do with the rugged individualism of a rags-to-riches plot, even if this alternative would potentially leave citizens better off.

The instructions in the *Chicago Defender* are no less pertinent. The immense concentration of aphorisms glorifying hard work and optimism points to a related—albeit differently conceptualized—affinity with capitalism. Following Booker T. Washington, this affinity facilitates the achievement of respectability through upward mobility. Robert Sengstacke

Abbott reserved columns for “Wise sayings” and Georgia Johnson’s “Homely Philosophy.” He also gave speeches, as we learn on January 11, 1930, to admonish members of the YMCA that “several families of other races have made fortunes of small beginnings” (2). Special sections in the form of highlighted boxes quote easy-to-memorize sayings that concentrate on the practices of attaining improvement. Some of the most striking are: “Eventually your efforts will bring the reward they deserve” (January 19, 1930, Part 2, 2); “To quit before the finish is to admit defeat” (January 25, 1930, 14); “By conquering fear we conquer ourselves and thus may advance well armed” (January 25, 1930, 14); “Do the job as best as you can and you’ll be satisfied” (February 1, 1930, 14). Advertisements (here: for a training course) complement the discursive continuum of self-improvement: “Look the World in the Face—Solve all problems—Get what you want and fear no Man or Circumstance . . .” (February 1, 1930, 9).

At the same time, the strong focus on group identity and support in the *Defender* as well as the coverage of racist violence and discrimination qualify the extent to which hard work can guarantee material advance. These factors, as well as the publication of serialized novels with a pessimistic perspective on upward mobility (such as Cora Ball Moten’s *Hell* in the beginning of 1929) can be read as a call to strive for improvement in full awareness of present limitations and the necessity to combine one’s efforts with political and community activism.

To sum up, popular books for young adult readers such as *Nancy Drew* and newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender* conveyed the routines and proverbs that self-help guides from Ben Franklin to Napoleon Hill advocated. They paved the ground for the broad reception of self-improvement practices, albeit in characteristically differentiated ways along lines of race.

3. The ‘Culture Industry’ Thesis Revisited

In the light of these findings, commercial mass cultures (of the 1930s) show themselves as cultures of self-improvement, which enact rituals of self-improvement even when they are not explicitly advertised as books of popular psychology. In fact, the connecting element between different mass cultures or formations of mass culture (white and black) appears to be the negotiation of the concept of self-improvement. This encompasses detailed self-improvement practices as well as their broader sociopolitical implications within a given system. A strong version of our suggestions would be: commercial mass cultures function as practice-oriented discourses that provide their consumers/recipients with nearly literal instructions. These instructions—in spite of their affinities with capitalism—exceed by far the ideological imperatives Adorno and Horkheimer accused the products of

popular culture to carry. More precisely, these instructions convey elements of practical knowledge that are deemed necessary to social survival and social reproduction in a specific socioeconomic and racial context.

On the basis of this conclusion, one particular aspect in which our analysis qualifies the views expressed in “The Culture Industry” pertains to the alleged vacuous nature of the products of popular and mass culture. Adorno and Horkheimer write:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. In front of the appetite stimulated by all those brilliant names and images there is finally set no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape. (38)

Here, Adorno and Horkheimer identify “the promise” as the main function of mass cultural products, which awaken desire for images shown, but at the same time inevitably frustrate this desire. From a point of view that analyzes consumerism, this contention provides little controversy, since the images cultivated in popular and mass cultural products have undoubtedly been shaping desires and consumption patterns. However, awarding the central position to this function rests on a reductive view of what mass cultures entail. The reduction is also evident in the insistence on the singular of “culture industry” as well as in the focus on radio and film. Neither self-improvement literature, nor *Nancy Drew* detective serials, nor the *Chicago Defender*, which all would seem to belong to commercial mass cultures, content themselves with the provision of images that arouse desire. Of course, Nancy’s blue roadster and shopping sprees, the fashionable society pages in the *Chicago Defender*, and the compilation of short biographies illustrating success in self-improvement literature are all “promises” in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s sense. The importance of desire for improvement, explained in *Think and Grow Rich*, as a token of mass culture has to face the critique formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer. However, these artefacts of mass culture contain, as our comparative readings show, implicit evaluations of capitalism’s possibilities and concomitant practical suggestions. Just like self-help guides, products of mass culture give advice and instructions on how to navigate capitalism.

It makes sense that different formations of mass culture, catering to different demographics, present different advice and instructions. In order to understand these differences better, the formations have to be thoroughly contextualized with regard to their economic, social, political, and racial positioning. This implies that if commercial mass culture is pervaded by cultures of self-improvement, then the representations of practices, of consumption patterns, of social categories, and social groups are not solely

employed for the purpose of perpetuating certain images of the social in order to uphold the status quo, but to serve practical interests engendered in those contexts.

At the same time, our view of commercial mass culture as a means of instruction qualifies its potential as interactive ground for the negotiation of meaning, as proposed by Henry Jenkins under the heading of “participatory culture”. A critical stance toward the optimistic evaluation of consumer agency proposed by Jenkins seems equally justified as the critical stance toward the Frankfurt School. One case in point here concerns the supposed impact of consumer feedback on the marketed mass cultural products. Carnegie and Hill seem to fit into this paradigm of producers who offer a product that emerges out of close contact with its prospective consumers. Both authors gave classes on motivation and communication skills before writing their books. Especially Carnegie intersperses his text with references to those classroom interactions, making clear that his product is specifically tailored to consumers’ needs. However, we are dealing with a sympathetic consumer in this instance. In fact, it seems highly unlikely that a group employing potentially oppositional codes, to use Stuart Hall’s terminology, would seek out contact with the producers of a product whose code and the political, social, and cultural implications thereof they oppose; nor would their criticism be allowed to impact the product in question. If the products in question are molded in stronger interaction with a group of consumers who are, broadly speaking, in favor of the larger capitalist system out of which these products emerge, it seems reasonable that they will thematize, in one way or another, the very concerns of their consumers. Providing direct or indirect, well-founded, or para-scientific instructions for social reproduction and the achievement of upward social mobility can be seen as one such way of dealing with the concerns of a very particular readership.

We thus need to open perspectives on mass cultures that allow us to investigate the relation between needs (such as mobility, social capital, work opportunities etc.) engendered by a specific political, social, and cultural context and the corresponding knowledges and practices, as mediated through mass cultural products. In order to describe the emergence of practice-oriented texts tailored to such needs, we believe it is necessary to imagine a specific mass cultural poetics of knowledge and a poetics of commercial culture.

4. Conclusion: The Importance of Context and Practice in American Studies

Above all, our explorations have convinced us of one point: Without a thorough contextualization, the differentiation of self-improvement discourses and their potential practical usefulness in their respective

constituencies does not become clear. Hence, our analysis also insists on the continued importance of viewing totalizing theories with a grain of salt, keeping in mind that theorizing and generalizing can be uncomfortably close neighbors—especially when it comes to the manifold formations within mass culture.

With a more expansive concept of commercial mass culture and its functions, explorations of specific formations therein can help to tie American Studies more strongly to the project of showing the interconnectedness of different cultural spheres. When Nancy quotes Shakespeare (*Nancy's Mysterious Letter*), when New Thought and self-improvement authors cite the biographies of important historical figures, and when the *Chicago Defender* reports about events related to classical music and literature, the oscillation of influences between mass culture on the one hand and elite cultures on the other comes to the fore. Thinking of the emphasis placed on social capital in the self-improvement instructions cited above, the reasons for this permeability of cultural spheres appear evident by analogy. Mass culture also seems to encourage its recipients to consume products of elite culture, as the acquisition of cultural capital is an implicit linchpin of self-improvement. At the same time, these different mass cultural formations are keenly aware of their audiences' sociopolitical contexts and the concomitant limitations in carrying out the practices suggested.

This permeability of American “high-brow” and “low-brow” cultures is not a new point (see Levine). Berndt Ostendorf goes as far as stating that “[e]quality before the law and equality of chances favor a common rather than elite denominator, and the common man ideology of populism denies any cultural privilege to the elite” (30). While this statement refers to a rather “mythogenic” (2) narrative of American culture, our definition of mass culture as means of instruction confirms this American lack of reverence for elite cultures to some extent. The study and knowledge of highbrow culture may be encouraged by Nancy Drew, *The Chicago Defender*, Hill and Carnegie, but at the same time its alleged intrinsic value or superior quality finds no affirmation. Instead, products of elite cultures are treated as further elements of improvement practice. In a sense, popular and mass culture as well as the literature of self-improvement unmask elite cultural products as symbols irrationally invested with prestige and power, and encourage their wider use for the purpose of achieving improvement through their incorporation into one's habitus. In this incisive, if implicit, exposure of power relations and emphasis on context the abovementioned theories of American Studies and the instructional, practice-oriented aspect of mass cultures coincide. Taking our project's results into account, we suggest that refocusing some attention in American Studies on the context-based analysis of the “poetics of practice” across the elite and mass culture divide benefits the discipline on the level of self-reflexivity and theory.

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