

What Nancy Knew, What Carol Knew: Mass Literature and Knowledge (Aleksandra Boss & Martin Klepper)

For this volume, we started with the question: what does mass literature know? The question immediately raises a number of follow-up questions. Does mass literature transport any kind of knowledge beyond its own usefulness as a commodity? Or, put differently, does the knowledge hidden in popular newspapers, magazines, pulps, and syndicated serials go beyond the superficial clichés and stereotypes that gratify the escapist and/or self-asserting desires of the reader? And then, is all mass literature the same? Do we have to differentiate, to historicize, to contextualize? Finally, does mass literature matter?

Last things first: for the (re-)production of the social world it seems sufficiently plausible that mass literature matters. We want to introduce two examples – a token from a girl-detective book series and a late sentimental, serialized mysteries-of-the-city narrative –, two examples that, at least in their circulation, carry a certain significance. Circulation and production will then lead us to the question of content: genre, plot, and the question of knowledge. However, instead of yielding an immediate answer, the discussion of contents will send us on a detour through the history of mass literature and through the context of its participation in a consumer culture, which, epistemologically, appears to be intimately familiar with a deep-seated discourse of self-improvement and a very modern discourse of therapeutic ethos. Finally, we will have to relate our two narratives to these contexts in order to illuminate what Antje Kley in the introduction to this volume has called “irritating forms of connectivity” (note to editor: insert page number).

In our case, the connectivity is established not only by specific communities of readers but also by the American (popular) culture of self-help, which,

spearheaded by Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie, flourished after the turn to the 20th century and especially in the 1920s and 1930s. Both of our narratives are from these two decades. And, yet, discussing them *together* may still be a bit surprising: one is the series of Nancy Drew adventures, which began with *The Secret of the Old Clock* in 1930; the other is the narrative of calamities befalling Carol Marah in Cora Ball Moten's *Hell*, serialized in *The Chicago Defender* commencing on February 16th, 1929 and running for thirteen weeks. Perhaps we may begin by asking: what do Nancy and Carol know?

I. Validity

The Nancy Drew Girl Detective series is one of the longest running and most successful mystery book series for teenagers in the US. Begun in 1930 by Edward Stratemeyer (1862-1930), German-American publisher and writer of juvenile fiction (Stratemeyer set up his first printing press in the basement of his father's tobacco shop), it went through several re-launches and today appears as *Nancy Drew Diaries* under the aegis of Simon & Schuster, who bought the Stratemeyer syndicate (founded in 1906) in 1987. Stratemeyer belongs to the most important protagonists in the making of American mass literature (more about this later). He specialized in in-expensive juvenile fiction ("fifty-centers") and organized the production process in assembly-line style. He provided the outlines for his series (he also wrote the skeleton for *The Secret of the Old Clock*) and then passed them on to professional writers, who wrote the books. For the writing process, there was a detailed guideline; and when the manuscripts came in they were professionally revised to guarantee consistency. When Stratemeyer died in 1930, his daughter Harriet carried on the process. During the 1930s and on into the 40s, 50s and 60s Nancy Drew became a cultural icon. Among the public personae who have admitted an addiction to the girl sleuth, are people as different (politically and in temper) as Laura Bush, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Nancy Pelosi (all politicians), Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor (both Supreme

Court judges), Gayle King, Diane Sawyer (both TV anchorwomen), and Nancy Grace (journalist) (Hoffman).

The fact that the Nancy Drew mysteries swept through the American middle class like an epidemic, may first and foremost attest to their broad entertainment value. They were accessible (easy to read), afforded a modicum of escape from daily worries (especially during the Depression and the war years), and buttressed a belief in the comprehensibility of the world (mysteries are solved) and the fundamental integrity of society (the good win and the bad lose). In addition, one of her readers, Supreme Court judge Sonia Sotomayor, emphasizes Nancy's boldness and intelligence (Hofmann). One of the first things that Nancy knows is that the world is intelligible, that ethical standards prevail, and that girls can play an active and enlightening role in it.

While these convictions are certainly appropriate early intellectual food for later judges, politicians, and journalists, they have, of course, a prehistory. Both Stratemeyer and Mildred Wirt¹, who wrote the first Nancy Drew mysteries under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene (still the name on the current Nancy Drew mysteries), were admirers of Horatio Alger. In fact, Stratemeyer was a ghostwriter for Alger and finished his last books (Kismaric and Heifermann 13). Alger's is indeed a similarly simple world, comprehensible and fundamentally righteous and open to boys (not girls) with energy or "pluck." To a degree, Nancy Drew is a more modern and female version of Alger's heroes, an update for girls and for the Thirties. And again, in terms of knowledge, this is more than a coincidence – but more about this in a moment.

Carol Marah is a quite different case. Her adventures in the *Chicago Defender* are appropriately titled "Hell." Written by Cora Ball Moten, an African American writer of serial literature for various newspapers such as *The Afro*

¹ Later Mildred Wirt Benson

American, "Hell" appeared in the *Defender* in 1929. At that time, the *Defender* was America's leading Black newspaper, which played more than a modest role in the Great Migration of African Americans to the North after World War I. Robert S. Abbott (1870-1940), the founder and publisher of the paper, was the offspring of former slaves in Georgia and a family with a history in intermarriage. A suggestive co-incidence: Abbott learned Ben Franklin's trade (printing) in Virginia. Afterwards he received a law degree from Kent College in Chicago. In 1905 he founded the *Chicago Defender* with an investment of 25 cents.² In other words, like Stratemeyer he fits well into the Victorian myth of the self-made man. As a result, the *Defender* preached the gospel of self-reliance: "Eventually your efforts will bring the reward they deserve" (*Chicago Defender*, January 19th 1929, Part 2, Page 2). With the same sense of mission, it also preached against race prejudice, disenfranchisement, discrimination and violence against African Americans.

During the 1930s the *Defender* enjoyed great popularity among Black Americans. Distributed along the lines of the railroads by Pullman porters, it was read far beyond Chicago. According to Abbott's biographer Roi Ottley, "with the exception of the Bible, no publication was more influential among the Negro Masses" (quoted in Walker, 11).³ Many African Americans would not have been able to afford books, even those published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate in the 1920s and 30s. They would have to rely on libraries (and libraries were quite reluctant to carry books from the Stratemeyer lowbrow sweatshop in the beginning). Instead, African Americans would read the *Defender*, and they would

² Wikipedia has a very good entry on Robert Sengstacke Abbott: (last accessed: 6.4.2016) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Sengstacke_Abbott

³ In 1930 *The Defender* had a circulation of 110 000 (Walker 40).

read it aloud in the family circle and among friends. We can trust that *Hell* reached quite a portion of those African Americans growing up in the 1920s.

On the one hand, the *Defender* championed highbrow culture very much along the ideas of W.E.B. Du Bois: political citizenship would follow cultural citizenship. Education was very high on its agenda. It featured successful college graduates, fought for government schools, presented educational material in its weekly children's pages (the *Defender Junior*), and supported young African Americans through its Bud Billiken Club and the annual Bud Billiken parade, which afforded scholarships for gifted youngsters. To be sure, Nancy Drew's fictional friends also go to college and Nancy has a superhuman knowledge in all walks of life (from Shakespeare to biology), but in Nancy Drew's world social capital (as we will see) derives much more from other sources than from cultural capital. In the world of the *Defender*, education is the first step to success. On the other hand, Abbott's newspaper catered to a broad community who had not digested Shakespeare with their daily bread. Much of the *Defender's* content is very practical (recipes, health tips, advice) and overtly sensational (tabloid style political coverage). *Hell* belongs more to the sensational side of the business.

II. Content (Genre, Plot, and Knowledge)

According to Jochen Vogl's PhD-Net "Das Wissen in der Literatur" specific genres correlate with specific types of knowledge: In a "poetics of knowledge" these correlations are one gateway to understanding the production of knowledge through literature.⁴ Especially for mass literature, the question of genre obviously plays a key role.⁵ The Nancy Drew series advertises its genre not only through the titles (*The secret of...*, *The Clue to ...*, *The ... mystery* etc.) but also, on

⁴ See the website of the PhD net: Jochen Vogl, Das Wissen der Literatur. Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, March 7th, 2016. <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/wissen-literatur/index.php>.

⁵ Ken Gelder practically defines mass literature as genre-fiction (12, 40-74).

the cover, with the help of a dark blue silhouette featuring Nancy Drew with a magnifying glass in her hand. *Hell* is advertised before the first episode as “thrilling, throbbing,” a story that “takes you to the Hell of America and lets you see life in its most glaring, intimate form” (*Chicago Defender*, 9. Feb. 1929). The motto of the story, continuously displayed together with title and author, reads: “Beneath the Shadows of American Hypocrisy.” Stratemeyer’s series promises straightforward detective fiction, Ball’s narrative a thriller in the tradition of the mysteries-of-the-city novels from the 19th century. The detective genre, on the face of it, promotes an epistemological and semiotic kind of knowledge: a knowledge that promises to counter contingency and afford control. The mysteries-of-the-city, to all appearances, correlates with political knowledge: a knowledge that counters corruption, exploitation and creates resistance. However, the case is more complicated. As Hollywood teaches, most popular narratives have two plots: a quest plot (detection) and a love plot (romantic or tragic). Usually these two plots are skillfully interwoven and propel each other. Our examples are no exceptions. A closer look at “plot” is warranted.

In *Hell* the plots materialize around the self-confident heroine’s attempts to become a successful actress in Kansas City. Carol Marah’s efforts are thwarted by the henchmen of the white supremacist establishment of the city. These henchmen incidentally wallow in illegal alcohol and illegitimate sexual relations with (very) young African American women. Their crimes and conspiracies are revealed piecemeal, while Carol negotiates her romantic relationship with Arthur Somers, a successful young jazz musician who owes his success to compromises with the same supremacist ruling class. The revelations about hypocritical Reverend Tinor-Horgotte and corrupt officer Speed Spelton affirm the readers’ suspicions about corruption and exploitation as the result of a structurally racist system. The romance plot illustrates how racism poisons intimate relations and even individual minds: Arthur, whose family allegorizes

the Atlanta Compromise, has sacrificed his aspiration to “serious” music to the entertainment of white patrons, and Carol, whose family stands for W.E.B. Du Bois’s ideas, is destroyed by the impossibility to nourish her talents in a white world.

To come back to *Nancy Drew*, in *The Secret of the Old Clock* the detection plot—very typical of the entire series—revolves around the search for a lost will. Nancy, who knows how “to think for herself and to think logically” (6), demonstrates that difficult situations can be mastered, uncertainty can be controlled, and the invisible can be made transparent. The phenomenon that detection is accompanied by a windfall of money (in virtually every early Nancy Drew book) is significant and we will return to it later. There is no classical romance in Nancy Drew (no touching or kissing was one of Stratemeyer’s rules), after all it was teenage literature. However, Nancy’s cheerful and insistent manner in solving cases is electrifying, and she builds up a trail of grateful friends and beneficiaries, which might help her in a later adventure (for instance the Horner girls in *The Secret of the Old Clock*). Nancy’s form of detection is active networking. In several adventures, the case is solved in a group, and, just as critics have said about Mr. B. in Samuel Richardson’s classic *Pamela* that he had to convert to Pamelism (Folkenflik 215), friends and readers of the teenage sleuth are converting to Nancyism in Stratemeyer’s series.

But what is Nancyism? Let us conjecture: A belief in rationality and transparency; the conviction that “the truth” will be found; the confidence that it will, quite literally, pay off; the insistence in girl power; and the reliance on a group of similarly looking, similarly thinking, and eventually similarly positioned friends, who are friends exactly because of their similarity. And Carol’s knowledge? That the Black community must not be divided; that it must not succumb to cheap compromises that sacrifice education and self-realization to a superficial promise of a modest prosperity and freedom from harassment; that

it must not produce sycophants; and that the weakest, the women and children are the first victims of white supremacy. And yes, in order to understand or explain certain contradictions within Nancyism and Carolism more fully, we will have to historicize and to contextualize.

III. Historicity and Connectivity I (Mass Literature)

We have to differentiate between various formations of mass literature within a field subdivided by publication formats and reading communities. However, once the reading community becomes too small or too local we can hardly speak of mass literature.⁶ As a result, it would be difficult to speak of Chicana/o or Latina/o mass literature for this time. It would probably even be difficult to speak of Jewish mass literature in the 1920s and 1930s because publications targeted at Jewish readers seem to have been mostly local in these decades. (To be sure, because of mainstream discrimination against Jews working in newspaper, magazine and book publishing, Jewish artists had a significant role in moving pictures, comics and pulp magazines. Most of these were, however not targeted at a Jewish audience).

In contrast, there was a relatively well-developed African American press that was partly non-profit (such as the NAACP's *The Crisis*) and partly for profit like Abbott's *Defender*. Abbott mixed capitalist enterprise and political convictions so well that it is difficult to distinguish between his objectives. Children joining the Bud Billiken Club had to promise to read, to honor their parents, to support other Billikens (i.e. black children) and to "interest at least five grown-ups in purchasing the Chicago Defender weekly" (The Chicago

⁶ Richard Ohmann defines mass culture as follows: "[M]ass culture in societies like this one 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) The foursome of voluntary, for-profit, national, with dependable frequency should also be valid for mass literature.

Defender, Jan. 25th, 1930, 15). As we shall see later, some of these promises have a legacy in Booker T. Washington. The Billikens did it so well that the *Defender* (together with other African American newspapers) has to be recognized as a specific formation within mass literature. The *Defender's* clear political leanings (the newspaper had its own platform of political demands) do not make it a lesser part of mass literature. After all, white newspapers were not less political, neither was Stratemeyer's syndicate. Mass literature is not politically disinterested. In fact, the emergence of mass literature was itself class-bound and entangled in political conflicts.

Many commentators connect this emergence to serial publications such as the penny press, the story papers, and the mysteries in the city novels between the 1840s and 1870s. Penny press writers like George Lippard were immensely political (Lippard had a slightly nostalgic, anti-modern but leftist labor orientation, paired with a good deal of jingoism). So were many of the dime novels of the 1860s to 1890s. However, most of these publications were still tied to individual persons and, as Richard Ohmann writes, book publishing in the 19th century "failed to consolidate ... into a stable and controlled enterprise with enduring relations to a mass public" (*Selling Culture*, 23). Adolescent book series such as Alger's from-rags-to-riches stories (starting with *Ragged Dick* in 1867 and finishing with the Stratemeyer-written *Young Captain Jack* in 1901) celebrated a very specific white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ideology that propagated a capitalist mindset carefully blended with Christian morality. Although Alger was popular in the 1870s and 80s, he never really earned much money with his books and was all but forgotten in the 1930s and 40s.

As Richard Ohmann asserts, the advent of an organized mass market for print products is owed to newspapers and magazines rather than to books. Since the 1860s newspapers such as the *Herald* and the *Tribune* "were reprinted around the country" (*Selling Culture* 21). From the 1880s on certain features in

newspapers were syndicated (comics, in this context, emerged in the 1890s), and spaces in the papers were sold by advertising agencies. With the inclusion of photographs (1890s) and the rise of yellow journalism circulation was on the rise: “Americans had, (for the first time), available in the format of a newspaper a homogeneous national experience of *the news*, of opinion, of household advice, and of entertainment.” (Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 21). In 1905 Robert Sengstacke Abbott founded the *Chicago Defender* as a weekly newspaper—the newspaper that was co-instrumental in driving the Great Migration between 1910 and 1930. Apart from newspaper publishing, magazines became mass products in the 1890s. Magazines such as *Harpers* or the *Atlantic* had been significant cultural products since the 1850s. However, Frank Munsey (1854-1925) is credited with introducing magazine culture to middle brow and low brow audiences. In 1893 McClure’s Magazine was founded—it sold for just 15 cents (as against 25 or 35 cents for the before mentioned magazines). In the same year, Munsey lowered the prize for his *Munsey’s Magazine* to just 10 cents. With this step Munsey actually sold the magazine under prize, making his profit through advertising fueled by the unheard-off circulation numbers (in 1895 it hit 600 000). What Munsey knew was that you can change the publishing business by not selling something to your customers, but, instead, selling your customers to the advertising industry. In 1896, Munsey re-issued his second magazine, *Argosy Magazine*, as the first pulp magazine.

Argosy had existed before as *Golden Argosy*, a magazine with boys’ adventures. But it was Stratemeyer who, after the turn of the century, re-created the market for adolescent fiction as a gold mine. Stratemeyer’s stratagem was seriality: with the *Rover Boys* (since 1899), he wrote the first serial adventures himself. With the foundation of the Stratemeyer Syndicate in 1906, he concentrated on the story lines and employed writers, editors and proof-readers to complete the books. His series included *The Bobbsey Twins*, *The Hardy Boys*,

Tom Swift and Baseball Joe. With the help of his assembly line production he was also able to lower the prices for the books—they were called fifty-centers (even though the prices actually varied). His rules for the writers included: twenty-five chapters per book, connected by cliff-hangers, intense action, no touching or kissing, no excessive violence (Kismaric and Heiferman 15). The *Nancy Drew* series follows these rules.

The creation of an audience takes more than low prices and a snappy formula. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, writing about the rise of consumer culture, suggest: “Perhaps the key development was the rapid expansion of the professional-managerial stratum, which included (among others) both the technicians who staffed the new corporate bureaucracies and the corps of reformers who consciously undertook to ‘harmonize’ the relations between labor and capital” (xi). The argument is that not simply urbanization and the expansion of a professional middle class (together with affordable products for consumption) led to the emergence of a public for middle and lowbrow products, but also a reform orientation, which forever transformed the Victorian ideals of self-denial, self-control, Protestant values, and autonomous selfhood (Lears 4-10). In other words: consumer or mass culture emerged with and through a particular mindset, which the products themselves (including newspapers, magazines, and middle and low brow books) helped to create. It is this mindset, which informs what Nancy knows and what Carol knows, that we have to turn to now.

IV. History and Connectivity II (Therapeutic Ethos and Self-Improvement Discourses)

Lears describes the new orientation as a “therapeutic ethos,” or, with William James, as “The Gospel of Relaxation” (6, 10). Victorian virtues such as self-denial, frugality, humbleness, and piety subtly turned into values like “harmony, vitality,

and the hope of self-realization” (11). At the same time, the Victorian idea of self-made manhood began to change:

In a society increasingly dominated by bureaucratic corporations, one dealt with people rather than things; ‘personal magnetism’ began to replace character as a key to advancement. In advice literature after 1900, as Walter Susman has observed, success seemed less often a matter of mastering one’s physical environment or plodding diligently at one’s trade, more often a matter of displaying one’s poise among a crowd. (Lears 8)⁷

While Lears, in his essay, focuses on advertising and especially the ideas of advertisement pioneer Bruce Barton (1886-1967), we want to suggest that mass culture and mass literature (as part of consumer culture) also tap into and transform the resources and knowledge from the tradition of advice literature and the time-honored self-improvement discourse within American culture. This idea is not wholly original: Bernd Ostendorf has pointed out in 2000 that one of the long-standing resources of popular culture in the United States has been the tradition of “American rituals of self-improvement” (19). These rituals have always advanced a certain therapeutic or psychological impetus (albeit not always a “gospel of relaxation”), a nascent idea of self-realization, a catalogue of necessary attitudes, and a strong sense of (mental and/or social) mobility.

Benjamin Franklin, whose entrance into Philadelphia symbolizes the American dream of mobility and self-making, stands in almost emblematic relation to an early attitude of white self-improvement, namely the practice of common sense in the form of “industry” (3), “frugality” (4, 5), and “prudence” (7), as famously proposed by Father Abraham in *The Way to Wealth*. A few decades later, Ralph Waldo Emerson highlights the attitude of self-reliance as

⁷ Lears is referring to Walter Susman’s seminal essay “‘Personality’ And the Making of Twentieth Century Culture”

patent in the various practices of self-culture. His presence in what might be called the canon of self-help literature illustrates the importance of inward and outward mobility to self-help attitudes and practices, indicated not simply by the attainment of money but also by cultural capital. The antebellum Lyceum movement (in itself a mobile sort of education), with which Emerson's persona as America's first "democratic intellectual" has been strongly associated (Field 469), presented a space for working adults to pursue the very practice of self-culture, attending lectures on variegated popular scientific and scholarly topics (the Chautauquas carried on this tradition into the 1920s). Emerson's influence on the literature and culture of self-improvement indicates the difficulty of locating it clearly along the highbrow vs. lowbrow divide before the turn of the century. He can be credited with introducing the kind of idealism to the American public which was about to be taken to the extreme, or to extreme simplification, by later self-help authors associated with the popular New Thought movement of the latter part of the 19th century (see Allen's early and favorable investigation into New Thought).

Horatio Alger (1832-1899), Stratemeyer's *spiritus rector*, translated the ideas of popular self-improvement movements into the classical rags-to-riches narrative, in which the idea of autonomous self-making seems already undermined by the superior importance of luck over pluck. It is true that resourcefulness, hard work, and practical optimism characterize Alger's young protagonists. Yet coincidence in the form of the protagonists' providential meetings with rich benefactors has often been lamented to mark Alger's plots far too dominantly to render any lesson enforcing Franklin's common sense practices effective (cf. Weiss 53). Reliance on social capital to effectuate personal progress is therefore the most obviously championed self-help attitude in Alger.

The New Thought movement, which gained momentum simultaneously with Alger's self-improvement narratives, proposed a worldview informed by the

conviction in an unconditionally benevolent higher power's existence. This higher power vests the individual, and especially the individual imagination, with immediate, material creativity, whether or not translated into action. New Thought pioneers like Phineas Quimby (1802-1866) looked back to Transcendentalism, Mesmerism, and Swedenborg and forward to various forms of therapy, but, as Lears study makes clear: also advertising. Here, clear mental focus on desired outcomes is imperative to improvement. New Thought authors such as Ralph Waldo Trine, Wallace D. Wattles, and Mary Baker Eddy (whose Christian Science is a religious codification of the principles underlying New Thought) all emphasize the importance of visualization and affirmation to help the individual attain that very focus (cf. Trine 126; Wattles 46; Baker Eddy 368). These practices of mental focus are deeply informed by an attitude of optimism, derived from the de-facto elevation of the individual to divine status (the ultimate victory of mental mobility).

In the 1930s, self-help champions Napoleon Hill and Dale Carnegie reformulated these attitudes and blended them with therapeutic practices from popular psychology, first and foremost (auto)suggestion. The authors uphold the importance of, and impart, practical knowledge regarding matters as diverse as persuasive communication techniques, body language, and CV-writing (cf. Hill, 128-31), at the same time exhorting readers to assume responsibility for their improvement. Especially Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* reads like a text-book for the acquisition of social capital (How to be as popular as Nancy Drew, or, in Lear's words: how to develop "personal magnetism"), aimed at eliminating the very need for the providential coincidence that Alger's Ragged Dick had to rely on to acquire. Both Carnegie and Hill, continued in New Thought's vein of highlighting the importance of mental focus, advocating the same practices of visualization and affirmation (auto-suggestion, see Hill 69-77) and, in the case of Hill, expanding on para-scientific notions of thought vibrations

as powerful attractors of the thought's material referents (see Hill 239-246). Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* can well be regarded as the most comprehensive codifications of self-improvement knowledge in the days of Nancy and Carol. Although both Hill and Carnegie's books operate on the promise of social mobility, they completely render invisible questions of class, let alone gender or race.

A structural similarity between the literature of self-improvement and mass literature is the reliance on repetitive formulae. Indeed, self-help literature often stylizes its content as a secret formula,⁸ which, if followed exactly, does not fail to bring about the desired goal. Self-help books encourage the reader to adopt this formula in the form of very particular and easy to follow habits of thought and practical rituals, presented as disciplines of mind and body. In fact, this message can be identified as a major item of younger self-help knowledge, the knowledge that success necessitates a formula, one that includes and plays on the abovementioned attitudes. Mass literature as a product incorporates and exemplifies this reliance on formula and indeed constitutes and identifies itself on the basis of the structural feature of the formula (see the titles of the *Nancy Drew* series or the subtitle of *Hell*). The "secret" is repeated and slightly varied in a manner as to advertise and, at the same time, disguise its own investment in the discipline of mind (formulaic story) and material body (production process of assembly-line writing).

Appraisals of American cultures of self-improvement coincide in stating that the main difference between a white and an African American self-improvement culture unfolds along the dichotomy of individual vs. community. Booker T. Washington's *Character Building*, a collection of speeches held to the

⁸ Note that Hill in the preface to *Think and Grow Rich*, immediately speaks of "secret" and "formula"—obviously his unique selling proposition.

student body of Tuskegee Institute, is a case in point. Optimism, though understandably not as unbridled as New Thought's, practical skills, and focused discipline of mind and body are first and foremost a means to establish a successful community at the Institute and to present a favorable image of the African American community as a whole. The knowledge patent in this attitude of community-mindedness is more pessimistic, for it states that individuality and, as Gayle McKeen states, the all-important self-help principle of Lockean "self-possession" (411), is not granted to black people. Washington's often criticized implicit "affirmation" of racist prejudice can be viewed as a means of transporting the knowledge that racist oppression will always figure forcefully in African American self-improvement.

Another point of divergence from other black intellectuals regards what might be termed the knowledge about knowledge, or in other words, what kind of knowledge best to acquire. This refers to the old polemic question of whether an industrial or an academic education would best facilitate "uplift."⁹ Again, Washington has been criticized for privileging the former. In his speech "Blessings of Liberty and Education," Frederick Douglass summarizes the reasons for changing his stance on this issue. Stating clearly his appreciation for manual labor, Douglass goes on to say

My philosophy of work is, that a man is worked upon by that upon which he works. Some work requires more muscle than it does mind. That work which requires the most thought, skill and ingenuity, will receive the highest commendation, and will otherwise do most for the worker. Things which can be done simply with the exertion of muscle, and with little or no exertion of the intellect, will develop the muscle, but dwarf the mind.

⁹ We are aware that the term "uplift" is highly problematic. The reason we cite it here in quotation marks is because the debate was led under this heading.

This passage, which in many regards seems to correspond with the spiritual vocabulary of white self-improvement authors favoring self-culture, is nonetheless just a more cordial formulation for another problem regarding manual labor that Douglass states. Douglass knew that manual labor, “for which but the smallest wages are paid or received,” will, in the long run, not succeed in furthering material advance, let alone in freeing black people of the equation with service personnel. For W.E.B. DuBois, self-improvement and especially an intellectual education in culture, as Keene points out, represented a possibility to point the way to “the highest human possibilities” (427), but also implied a responsibility to demand and institute full political equality as the condition under which that full potential can be achieved (425).

As a result, the African American culture of self-improvement seems to suggest less of a clear formula and has not been codified in the form of a specific genre of non-fiction popular literature, meant to inspire and also to entertain. Instead, African American self-improvement has always been immensely practical (African Americans have always had to practice self-help), part of an actual political struggle of liberation, and a discourse of contesting views on how this struggle could be advanced (Du Bois vs. Washington). Its complexities have therefore reflected the tensions of a restrained optimism in the possibility of achieving material security (of life and limb as well of property), political equality, and self-determination, but also of the awareness of the overwhelming racist hostility aimed at their community.

V. Privilege, Commodity, and Knowledge (Discussion)

Carol’s predicament may seem much closer to these contexts than Nancy’s adventure. With *Hell*, the *Chicago Defender* prints a racy story (one is almost tempted to call it blaxploitation literature) to which the audience can relate because their aspirations would often have been greater than their opportunities – and more often than not because of Jim Crow and the color line.

The story allegorizes the angry contentions arising from the debates about the Atlanta Compromise. Carol knows (with Du Bois) that in the 20th century a purely material orientation (the analog to Douglass's manual labor) will not do:

'Money!' again she lashed him with the word. ... "I'll prove to you and to this American world that color is no bar sinister to realization of the highest and best in life and in art. One doesn't have to compromise with life where there is real merit. Only mediocrity must needs lower his art, degrade it to the amusement of the ignorant horde." (*Chicago Defender* 16 Feb. 1929, part 2, 7).

Her suitor, Arthur, knows (with Washington) that money is a more malleable equalizer than cultural capital:

... dad makes 'em pay through the nose for all they get out of him. He play 'monkey,' as you say, for white folks, but he gets the dough, and dough is what counts in this little old world ... you don't think the guy at the head of the biggest dramatic school in the USA is going to risk his living and his success by changing the complexion of his school, do you? (*Chicago Defender* 16 Feb. 1929, part 2, 7))

The story ends in a cataclysm, which violently eliminates the debauched and corrupt leadership of fictional Kansas City (the reverend, his officer, and his henchman die from their own illegal, poisoned booze). But Carol's energy and happiness have also been destroyed. Her aspiration (to play theater) and self-improvement have been thwarted (in the end she is forced to dance for Arthur's Jazz-Company), and she is bound to hate her lover and husband for surrendering their lives to the cheap, racist commodity fetishism of a hateful, white audience. *Hell* is a cautionary tale about the simultaneous impossibility of following Du Bois's ideas of racial improvement (because of racism and discrimination) and the unfeasibility of following Washington's ideas of improvement (because they end in self-hatred).

As a result, the serial novel leaves the reader with a fundamental sense of ambivalence, expressed in the contradiction of Arthur's success/redemption (he was right, after all) and Arthur's dishonor (he makes business with those who destroyed his wife's life). This ambivalence is even heightened if we take into account the newspaper in which it was published: *The Chicago Defender* relentlessly pushed a discourse of self-improvement. Abbott iterated the ideas of self-reliance and self-culture (usually in framed boxes) in the typical formulaic style of the movement. Here are only a few examples: "The reward for a good deed lies in the performance of that deed," "Waste time today means extra work tomorrow," "Every time you postpone a duty you weaken the habit of decision and make it harder to do the duty" (Jan 11, 1930, 14-15); "Eventually your efforts will bring the reward they deserve" (Jan 19, 1929, 2,2); "To quit before the finish is to admit defeat," "By conquering our fear we conquer ourselves and thus may advance well armed" (Jan 25, 1930, 14); "Curiosity killed a cat – but you are no cat – be curious" (Feb 8, 1930, 14).

Abbott militantly endorsed individual curiosity, learning, education, ambition, effort; he also featured high culture (theater, concerts, lectures) in the pages of his newspaper. And, yet, his very product speaks to the futility of any individual effort in the light of race prejudice. Time and again, he summons the forces of solidarity and class action against white privilege and race or class discrimination. It is as if self-improvement, self-culture, harmony is feasible in a future in which racial discrimination has been eliminated. Until then, Carol knows, vitality and self-realization may lead to *Hell*.

The discourse of self-improvement and mental mobility is so strong in the products of consumer culture and mass circulation because these products were on demand by virtue of this very discourse. Picking up the *Defender* might improve your life and that of your little Billikens. So might Nancy Drew if you are undeterred by what Andrew Levy has called American culture's "admixture of

unresolved aristocratic and democratic values” (quoted in Geyh 546). And because America has partly supplanted race differences for class differences, Stratemeyer’s heroine is securely on the white side of life and will have nothing to do with its nemesis. The early series (before its cleansing in the 1960s)¹⁰ is blatantly racist – whenever a black (or other non-white, for that matter) character appears, it directly leads to a crime without further detour. The question is, whether this fact will not tell the reader something about mobility and self-improvement which s/he is not supposed to know.

As a matter of fact, Nancy as a detective perfectly personifies the ethos of the new professional-managerial class – perhaps so perfectly because the new orientation demands certain skills which were formerly thought to be rather feminine: intuition, empathy, communication etc. Here are some of Dale Carnegie’s rules for leadership: “smile, be a good listener, encourage others to talk about themselves, make the other person feel important” (112); “let the other person do a great deal of the talking, let the other person feel that the idea is his or hers, try honestly to see things from the other person’s point of view, appeal to nobler motives” (200-01); “call attention to people’s mistakes indirectly, let the other person save face, use encouragement” (248-49). Nancy’s techniques of interrogation in *The Secret of the Old Clock* work in exactly this way: Nancy would never have learned about the old clock (from Abigail Rowen) or about the whereabouts of the clock (from Mrs. Topham), had she not learned these lessons.

Nancy is extremely strong on soft skills, she “had studied psychology in school and was familiar with the power of suggestion and association” (Keene 88). Her father, a well-known lawyer, “had taught her to think for herself and to

¹⁰ Volumes 1-34 of the series were extensively revised between 1959 and 1975. The language was modernized, racism and classism was abetted and, sometimes, the plots were modified.

think logically” (Keene 6). Mr. Drew has a psychological bent himself: “Of course I don’t need to warn you not to appear too eager for information” (Keene 12) The father also knows about the therapeutic value of relaxation: “‘Give your mind a rest and perhaps you’ll have an inspiration,’ Mr. Drew encouraged her kindly” (Immediately, Nancy goes shopping! Keene 51-2). And, of course, Nancy has the unquenchable desire and the faith to solve her cases (which are, incidentally, Napoleon Hill’s first and second steps to riches): “‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way’ she quoted whimsically. ‘That old proverb is doubly true in the Crowley case’” (Keene 23).

All of these aspects of self-realization (to find the will and the soft skills to succeed) are programmatic and explicit not only in *The Secret of the Old Clock*. Even the fact that Nancy’s mysteries are always about money, that she usually finds a will, a lost treasure, or stolen jewelry are no big surprises in a period which reflected its own materialism as excessively as the 1920s and 1930s. What makes one think, however, and probably not in the direction Napoleon Hill or Carson Drew intended, is the massive discourse of privilege that continuously runs along the more benign discourse of leadership.

In *The Secret of the Old Clock* this discourse of privilege mainly unfolds between Nancy Drew and the Topham family (and it has been much alleviated in the revised edition). “Richard Topham,” Nancy says, “is an old skinflint who made his money by gambling on the stock exchange. And Cora, his wife, is nothing but a vapid social climber” (Keene 3). The Tophams cannot hide their low origins: the daughter has “acquired an artificial manner of speaking which was both irritating and amusing” (15) and the mother, in order to imitate “society” has “‘landscaped’ [the lawn] with a vengeance. In an effort to ‘do it in proper style,’ Mrs. Topham had crowded the yard with sundials, benches, bird houses and statues. ‘Such lack of taste!’ Nancy thought” (95). In contrast,

“Carson Drew and his daughter were cordially welcomed in River Heights homes which merely tolerated the Tophams or, in a few cases, barred them” (97).

The worst that can be said about the Tophams is that they are not even able to consume properly. The Topham girls disrupt consumption twice in the local department store (14-17, 52-56). Needless to say, these social climbers are sorely punished at the end of the book. One could say that Nancy, in the end, redistributes their money to people who would never step over the bounds of modesty and talk back at their social betters. It is clear that Nancy, for all her democratic soft skills, is a disguised aristocrat. While one secret formula of her books (the one the reader is meant to find) is about how to win friends and be a leader, the subtext seems to remind the reader subliminally that not everybody is born to be a leader or should aspire to be one. In other words, while Nancy transgresses certain boundaries (the proper activities of girls, the boundaries between work and consumption, the limits to unravelling mysteries) she holds up others (race and class). There is a deep ambivalence in the Nancy Drew novels to which extent poverty is self-inflicted, to which extent social capital can really be acquired, and there is a manifest contradiction between the (intended) mass appeal of the series and the residual classism and racism.

Have we solved the secret of mass literature’s knowledge, then? Have we glimpsed beneath the shadows of consumer culture’s indifference? Only to the degree that we have shown how ambivalent Nancy’s and Carol’s knowledge is. How riddled it is by the contradictions and silences of the discourses sustaining it. How much it is limited by the violence and prejudices of its times. And how much it can tell us about these limitations – once we look at it with hindsight.

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