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Self-Help and/in Mass Cultures: Performatives of (Self-)Management and Race between 1890 and 1930

Fictions of successful management, dreams of rational efficiency and control, but also skeptical interventions into the managerial discourses were certainly at a high tide during the Progressive Era, especially between the years 1888 and 1913, when Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward* (1888), Frederick Winslow Taylor brought out the *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), and Ford started his moving assembly line in Highland Park (1913).¹ The same time saw the emergence of commercial mass cultures, which not only resulted from new technologies of mass production, ideas of efficiency, and, to a significant extent, progressive sentiments and practices, but also circulated ideas of managerial discourses through its various channels.² Mass production, commercial mass cultures, and managerialism outlived the decline of Progressivism and were fully established by the 1930s. Among

¹ When we use the term “managerial discourses,” we refer to all symbolic and material practices pertaining to increased efficiency, control, output etc., outlined authoritatively in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911).

² Richard Ohmann defines mass cultures as follows: “mass 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” (14). We use the plural to denote differences in media (print, visual, event, etc.) and target groups (e.g. white, middle class adolescents or Black middle class families).

the managerial ideas promoted by the newly established commercial mass cultures were especially concepts of self-management and self-optimization formulated in a rampant self-help discourse that spans the period from 1890 to the 1930s and culminates in books such as Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), and a myriad of advice columns and articles in newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender*, *The Pittsburgh Courier* or *The Baltimore Afro-American*. In fact, we suggest, commercial mass cultures institutionalized discourses of self-help that had flourished in popular practices throughout the nineteenth century.

Self-Help: Preliminaries

When we talk about self-help discourse, we refer to an increasingly standardized and rule-governed knowledge formation (consolidating at the end of the nineteenth century) that is, on the one hand, fed by a long legacy of past practices (such as popular healing practices or the educational Chautauquas) and speeches or books (such as Frederick Douglass's "Self-Made Men" or Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*) and, on the other hand, congeals under the pressure of an increasingly capitalist and managerial economy into a full-fledged ideology of self-optimization. This discourse comprises, on the level of the individual, the "action or faculty of using one's own efforts and resources to achieve something" (OED) and, on the level of media, mass-circulated advice and guidance on how to "adopt new forms of conduct" in order to improve specific "arenas of [one's life]" (Nehring et al. 7). In the latter form, self-help discourse appears as a particular narrative mode. It is found not only in written media, such as guides, novels, autobiographies or newspaper columns, but also in oral practices, including lectures, radio shows or sermons. The figures of the "self-made man" and, less commonly invoked, "self-made woman" are personifications of this discourse. And even though it may seem that the "self-made person" should be self-reliant enough to do without self-help books, self-help books will explain to us that finding and adapting resources, such as advice books, for one's self-actualization can in itself be an act of self-reliance.

What arenas of life require guidance depends on self-help's more specific audiences. Advice can target personal relationships, professional

situations, mental or physical health, and it can be essential to survival, as in the case of instructions provided by interwar African American newspapers on how to navigate the realities of racism. As we argue, self-help does not necessarily have to be explicitly labelled as such. Our principle for inclusion is that, by the time it becomes hegemonic at the end of the nineteenth century, it will be aimed at social mobility, self-optimization, and self-actualization (including, in the case of African Americans, the striving for equal citizenship rights), and it will be part of a national and economic narrative. As such, it also comprises practices that fall under the categories of “uplift,” “character building” or “etiquette.”

As its terminology suggests, self-help is commonly “predicated on the promise of autonomous personal development and individual success” (Nehring et al. 10). In fact, we assume that most self-help is characterized by an inherent tension between individual exceptionalism and universalism. While addressing the individual in its uniqueness, self-help provides guiding devices (e.g. “12 steps to success”) that it sells as universally applicable. In the same vein, much self-help is driven by binaries of in- and exclusion: between those who are considered as able or unable to “improve” their lives; between the “striving” (“energetic”) and “immobile” (“apathetic”) people; and in form of gender-specific advice that seeks to perpetuate divisions between spaces and practices that are either enforced as “male” or “female.” The above-mentioned concept of the “self-made man,” embodied by figures such as Benjamin Franklin or Frederick Douglass, which codifies self-reliance, entrepreneurialism, and independence as “male,” is a case in point. Although successful female entrepreneurs existed in the early twentieth century, such as Madam C. J. Walker who became a self-made millionaire with her line of beauty products for African American women, “self-made woman” did not become a commonly used term.

Despite its apparent focus on the individual, however, self-help is not exclusively self-serving. Not only did many successful entrepreneurs, including Walker, become philanthropists and redistributed their individually gained wealth back to a larger public. But even when exerted on an individual level, self-help practices can be aimed at the social mobility of a larger community. As we intend to show in this article, especially advice that was catered to African American audiences focused on the necessity to achieve better living conditions not just for a few, but for a community at large.

Tracing self-help's history before it began to be commodified, mass-mediated, and institutionalized by the 1890s indicates how advice culture—in content and form—shifts over time in line with the social, political and economic conditions of different societies and eras.³ England saw the publication of Christian guidebooks for the road to salvation as well as etiquette books that provided rules of conduct as early as the seventeenth century.⁴ Both genres are linked to the rise of print culture, the concomitant rise of individualism, the Protestant reformation (which shifted the responsibility of salvation from the authority of the church to the individual believer), and the rise of the middle class, which was part and parcel of all three of the above-mentioned developments.

It seems significant that in North America, just as in England, self-help and advice appeared first and foremost as religious discourse, while religious instruction was inextricably enmeshed with advice on conduct and very practical questions. For North American Protestants (and Calvinists) religion and the enlightenment were never opposites. Self-help was practiced in the lived and practical cooperation of local communities as well as through an increasing number of print products, such as collections of sermons, books of proverbs, and almanacs. Benjamin Franklin's narrative of his entrance into Philadelphia and subsequent way to fame in his autobiography (1791) has become an icon of the American Enlightenment, a prototype of early American conduct and advice literature (especially taken together with his self-published *Poor Richard's Almanack*), and a marker of the extent to which the colonies secularized their Calvinist heritage without ever completely relinquishing it. Franklin stands at a pivotal point in the history of self-help in rationalizing and systematizing virtue to a degree that it can be measured and weighed in charts and tables, and learned in small doses. Franklin's writing also reveals a shift in the function of self-help away from subsistence and salvation: now self-help is designed to pay and advance.

In England, the genre became more and more entangled with the social question that the industrial revolution had put on the agenda in the nineteenth century. The chartist Samuel Smiles advised the working class to

³ For self-help in other nation states, such as China, Mexico and Trinidad, see Nehring et al. (2016).

⁴ Among them are Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* (1650) and Hannah Woolley's *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1673).

rise from poverty through self-education. The title of his book was *Self-Help* (1845). At the same time it gained traction in the United States as it came to epitomize the settler colonialists' ideologies of self-reliance, personal reinvention, progress, and (physical and social) mobility. Emerson celebrated self-reliance as a practical-philosophical principle or a "Lebensform" in league with non-conformity: "Every man in his lifetime needs to thank his faults. . . . Has he a defect of temper that unfits him to live in society? Thereby he is driven to entertain himself alone, and acquire habits of self-help; and thus, like the wounded oyster, he mends his shell with pearl" (68). Catherine Beecher, on the other hand, directed housekeepers in their efforts to conform to the requirements of genteel middle-class domesticity. In *Miss Beecher's Domestic Receipt Book* (1850) she offered practical (and economical) advice for ambitious young housekeepers both in the city and in the country. At the same time, Black self-help practices, which for quite some time had a vitally important function on a lived and practical level in enslaved communities and among freedmen, began to trickle into print culture through abolitionist literature, advocating the imperatives of emancipation, literacy, self-confidence, and comprehensive education. Thus, on its way to becoming a mass-mediated culture distributed on a national scale, self-help developed and differentiated alongside the "formation of new social structures [that required] new social strictures" (Currell 133).

The strictures remained predominantly Victorian during the nineteenth century. Self-help promoted values such as hard work, self-denial, diligence, and Christian living as ethical principles for the conduct of life. Modesty, frugality, and even self-effacement dominate the semantics of the first two thirds of the century. But in the churches, the lyceum events, whether directed at farmers, mechanics, or urban audiences, at the Chautauquas, and soon in print, a new mode of orientation and a gradual transformation of attitudes took place. The New Thought movement in league with Christian Science and theosophy energized self-help cultures with a more spiritual tendency. With roots in Calvinism, Mesmerism, and transcendentalism, New Thought taught practitioners of self-improvement to trust more fervently in individual intuition and mental health. The power of thought, faith, and the development of personal, mental skills turned self-denial progressively towards self-actualization; hard work towards self-development; and frugality towards efficiency. At the end of the century, Victorian virtues were gradually giving way to modern values.

While self-help culture had always been contiguous with forms of consumption—either as a way to “purchase” salvation, as a method to acquire the means of consumption, or as a strategy to control consumption, it only became deeply implicated in commodity capitalism towards the end of the nineteenth century. With capitalist expansion during the nineteenth century, self-help provided more and more instructions on how to adapt to the market place. At the same time, it became a market, an educational market but also a market of/for entertainment in itself. To the extent that it turned towards survival in a capitalist economy, values such as work and diligence were now increasingly linked to the gaining of material wealth (Currell 2006; Illouz 2008; Susman 1973). Self-reliance, progress, and mobility were linked to prosperity and an increasingly fully-fledged consumer society. Discreet instruction and advice had turned into mass demand, lived and practical self-help merged into mass culture, and the promises of spiritual, social, and economic salvation were produced on the assembly line.

As we argue, the emergence of Fordist mass production had an especially large effect on self-help. Eventually, self-help discourse and mass production share many characteristics: both cater their products to a large target group; both rely on standardized patterns of universal applicability; both are infused by the idea of growth, mobility, and change; and both require management—one of workflows, the other of the self. In its use of aphorisms, parables, seemingly scientific formulas, and step-by-step instructions for individual embodiment, self-help produces performative narratives.⁵ This is to say: just as mass production creates its own mass market (or demand/consumer), self-help creates its own self (or self-design/personality). It provides action/body-oriented instructions on how to manage (oneself in) the world. In other words, it inscribes visionary states of being. While self-help is usually discussed as a universal expression without acknowledging its—more or less explicit—processes of distinctions (e.g. Illouz 2008, Furedi 2003, Moskowitz 2001, Lears 2000, Susman 1973, Effing 2009), we argue that a perspective honoring (among other significant categories of social differentiation) the intersections of class, race, and gender is not only warranted by the historical sources, but also sheds a significant light on the object and ideologies of modern self-

⁵ We will define more concisely what we mean with “performative” in the section titled “How to Mobilize the Self.”

help with its more immediate roots in the Progressive Era. This chapter brings self-help discourses by Black and white authors and practitioners into conversation, and investigates the respective contexts, contents, and purposes of their performative narratives.

In order to elucidate the interrelations/complexities between self-help, management, mass cultures, performance, and race, we will proceed through a number of systematic steps (most likely without growing rich in the process). We will start with a few preliminaries on self-help. From there we will proceed to two sections introducing two (mass cultural) advocates of self-help: one African American (Robert S. Abbott, 1870–1940) and one white (Edward Stratemeyer, 1862–1930)—both especially interested in the education of young people. In these two sections we will explore the careers and the products of the two entrepreneurs, illuminating the interrelations between mass cultures and self-help. In the fourth section we will elaborate in more detail on processes of racialization, as they become clear from various tensions within the resources and offers of the two publishers. Subsequently, we will take a more theoretically oriented look at the advocated managerial strategies and methods involved. In the sixth (and final) section of our contribution we will come back to the larger context of self-help as a national discourse.

Mobilizing the Self for the Twentieth Century I: Robert S. Abbott

On May 5, 1905 Robert Sengstacke Abbott sold the first edition of his weekly newspaper *The Defender* in the streets of Chicago. Abbott, lawyer, businessman, and printer (like Benjamin Franklin) famously started out with a folding table and a borrowed kitchen chair as well as notebooks and pencils, and a claimed start-up capital of 25 cents (at the time an equivalent to \$6.50). His first target group was the Methodist Church Choir in which he sang tenor (Ottley 87–88). Within twenty years, the *Defender*, which was a short form for “Defender of the Race,” grew into the most important African American newspaper of the age. With a print run of over 230,000 copies per week and an estimated readership of 4–5 individuals per copy, it reached an unprecedented mass audience (Walker 35). Notably, one of the reasons for the success of the *Defender* was its campaign for the mobilization of Southern African Americans to migrate to Chicago and the North. The Great Migration was (to say the least) actively

supported by the newspaper (Michaeli 61–79). The *Chicago Defender* was sold deep into the South by Pullman porters, who, as a major target group, received their own column (“In the Railroad Center”) in 1910 (Michaeli 31).

At its most successful times, the 1920 and 1930s, Robert Abbott sprinkled the paper with aphorisms taken from the discourse of self-help. “Eventually your efforts will bring the reward they deserve,” was an epigram in the first section of the edition (Jan. 19, 1929, 2). “To quit before the finish is to admit defeat,” read another (Jan. 25, 1930, 14). “Waste time today means extra work tomorrow” (Jan. 11, 1930, 15), was directed at the teenage readers of the *Defender Junior*, making discourses of self-improvement and self-management a formative element in the *Defender’s* idea of coming-of-age processes.⁶ The newspaper’s advice columns presented another prominent genre that conveyed instructions on how to manage oneself as well as relationships with others. Columns were often initiated at the readers’ request and ran over long stretches of time, such as “Advice to the Wise and Otherwise” (1921–30). Once a week, it provided readers of all genders and ages with instructions on how to navigate relationships, addressing issues as diverse as marriage, affairs, domestic abuse, child rearing, and the generation of family income.

Questions about specific situations that were mailed by readers were published alongside the answers of the columnist who went by the name of “Princess Mysteria,” an African American mentalist who was also famous for her telepathic shows that she toured internationally together with her husband (Russell 16). The columnist offered directives on practices, manners, and values. Often imperative in style, they endorsed marriage (“You claim you want to live respectably, then why not try to?” [Jan. 27, 1923, 5]), condemned laziness while promoting frugality and male providership (“every man should base his happiness in marriage on his ability to labor and save so that his family can be happy” [Nov. 28, 1925, 10]), and dismissed crossing the color line (it “would be no credit to either race. . . . Color is not everything. . . . She will learn it, too, if she lives long

⁶ Advertisement was equally dispersed throughout the paper. In fact, advertising is a central element of mass culture and is inextricably connected to self-help. Modern advertising—which had shifted from the mere presentation of product facts to ads that create desires and play on the customers’ subconscious yearnings—promotes products and their consumption as tools to achieve self-optimization (Lears 2000).

enough” [Feb. 18, 1922, 5])—all while shifting between a female-empowering stance (“There are many men, who feel their inferiority . . . and are afraid that their wives will become so independent through their [own] honest labor” [Feb. 24, 1923, 5]) and the endorsement of patriarchal norms (“I am a staunch [sic] believer in a man being the king in his own home and I do not censure him for asserting his manhood by crushing anyone who tries to dethrone him” [Oct. 24, 1925, 5]). These examples illustrate that Valeda Hill-Strodder (Princess Mysteria) parceled out her advice negotiating the tensions of modern gender roles. They also make visible that self-help is always—explicitly or implicitly—gendered.

Clear formulas gave the impression of making every possible situation manageable. Few questions of “Advice to the Wise” addressed interracial relationships, the column’s primary purpose was to provide a Black support system that was interactive in a variety of ways. Readers followed and commented on other readers’ situations; the columnist connected them with various Black organizations, including churches or girl clubs; and even initiated contact amongst like-minded audiences (usually with romantic intent). While “Advice to the Wise” was directed at questions of mental concern, “Dr. A Wilberforce Williams: The Way to Health. Talk on the Preventive Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygienics and Sanitation” (1913–37) provided instructions on how to adjust one’s physical apparatus to the age of automatization. Revolving around the “hardening . . . of . . . the human machine” (Nov. 6, 1915, 8), the column addressed issues of nutrition, dental care, ventilation, seasonal diseases, and cleanliness of self and one’s dwelling place, among many others. Prescribing clear-cut dos and don’ts for the management of one’s body and environment, the column also sets medical standards by endorsing scientific medicine over alternative approaches, which reflected the Taylorist streamlining of bodies and workflows through scientific management.

Both Williams’s advice columns and Taylorism undergirded the optimization of the human body. This optimization finds its most blatant expression in Williams’s endorsement of eugenic ideologies that were circulated widely at the time. While often similar in content to ideas of white eugenicists, they served a different agenda when advocated by Black reformers. In several columns throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Williams commands that only couples free of conditions such as “epilepsy,” “tuberculosis,” “venereal disease,” “feble-mindedness,” “mental deficiencies,” “and many neurotic states” should have children, and he

endorses marriage laws that require medical records showing that the contracting parties are free from those conditions (April 11, 1925; Feb. 2, 1935). For Williams, the strengthening of the black body is linked to achieving full citizenship rights. As he states: “If America hopes for a successful future for her democracy, she must see to it that she has a strong people. Weak women and men, anemic children, cannot make a strong or powerful nation” (Sept 22, 1923). Without making explicit mention of “race,” his statement evokes a “we” of able-bodied citizens across racial divides. Consciously selected eugenic perspectives were among many strategies used within the “racial uplift” discourse (Chresfield 2013; English 2004; Sherman 2016).⁷ The idea that hygienic and healthy living was necessary for a strong and resilient body was also shared by the two key figures of an uplifting self-help discourse, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Despite their otherwise opposing views, both believed that poor health was a major impediment for African Americans to achieve full societal participation (Du Bois 1899; Washington 1901).

The *Chicago Defender* brought home the discourse of self-help to an extent that approximates religious fervor and cannot be explained with an idiosyncratic love for aphorisms and moral advice. Its founder, Robert Abbott, was steeped in a way of thinking that had deep roots in popular practices and religious and philosophical ideas. Robert’s stepfather, his role model, immigrated from Germany with a good dose of protestant work ethic. John Sengstacke was the child of the German merchant Hermann Sengstacke and his wife Tama, a formerly enslaved woman from Savannah. John, who grew up near Bremen, had a very light complexion, but was exposed to massive racism once he returned to Georgia, married Robert’s mother, and was, to his complete bewilderment and outrage, treated with scorn and condescension. He lost his work when his employers found out that he and his wife were Black according to white Americans’ definition. Eventually, he found work as a minister and teacher for the American Missionary Association of the Congregational

⁷ As a term, “up-lift” is tied to African American politics before the protest movements following the Great Migration. It assumes a responsibility of the black elite for the entire “race” and implicitly denies the responsibility of white America for the consequences of slavery. This is why we use the term exclusively in its contemporaneous context without propagating what Kevin Gaines has called “uplift ideology.”

Church. For twenty-five years, in serious poverty, his mission, in the words of Abbott's biographer, was "uplifting his race" (Ottley 28–41).

Abbott grew up within a conflicting situation. Taught to be self-dependent and self-reliant by his Calvinist parents (as a boy at home he had to pay ten cents for room, board, and laundry in order to become a responsible person; he earned the money by running errands [Ottley 44]), he experienced a racist world, which actively thwarted his self-reliance. Robert's father was a member of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle of Plainfield, one of the grassroots educational institutions in the US, and took correspondence courses in literature (Ottley 48). His congregation consisted of poor laborers, whom he initially taught basic self-help-management practices, such as how to use a toothbrush. Sengstacke often read the newspaper to the congregation at prayer meetings in order to disseminate basic education about the world. Over time, he founded his own newspaper, the *Woodville Times*. While he explicitly practiced and preached complete self-reliance to his son and flock, he could not bring himself to follow Frederick Douglass's condemnation of white philanthropism (including the Congregationalist missionaries) and sided with Booker T. Washington in accepting white support for the work of "uplift" (Ottley 58). Abbott in turn propagated the ideas of self-reliance of Frederick Douglass, whom he met in 1893, the teachings of etiquette of Booker T. Washington, who was the most famous student of Abbott's alma mater, the Hampton School (Michaeli xx, 9), and the educational program of W.E.B. Du Bois. The avid reader of the *Defender* was well-versed in the various, often conflicting, versions of the gospel of African American self-improvement.

To construct a genealogy from the missionary and educational engagement of John Sengstacke through Sengstacke's newspaper (in which Abbott was involved as an adolescent) and the young entrepreneur's encounters with the ideas of Washington and Douglass to his later, successful media company, establishes one, strong possible line of argumentation for the continuity of African American self-help practices in the emerging mass cultural venues. In a comprehensive study of Chicago's South Side at the time of the Great Migration, Davarian Baldwin assembles additional evidence for the entanglement of Black discourses and practices of "up-lift" and venues of commerce, mass culture, and mass entertainment in what was to be known as Bronzeville (Baldwin 2007, 1–19). As Baldwin argues, there was no contradiction

between the desire for affective gratification, (sometimes crude) entertainment, and moral and rational discourse (“up-lift”) (see for instance Baldwin 2007, 141). There is no question that the new, burgeoning urban life with mouthpieces such as Abbott’s *Defender* had an immense influence especially on young people, those targeted by the *Defender Junior* and the *Defender*-organized Bud Billiken parade—to this day one of the largest mass cultural parades for young people in the US. With the *Defender*, Abbott carried the self-help discourse to the masses.

Mobilizing the Self for the Twentieth Century II: Edward Stratemeyer

In approximately the same year that Abbott started his successful mouthpiece in Chicago, namely 1905, the white entrepreneur Edward Stratemeyer began to build another mass cultural empire in New York, which would flourish in the 1920s and 1930s: the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Edward was an inveterate popular writer if there ever was one. He started writing (and publishing) with the help of a toy printing press when he was a boy (Keeline). In 1877, when he was 15 years old, he brought out his first two chap-books, and in 1883 he embarked on a fully-fledged writing career, which eventually comprised 275 stories and 690 outlines for books for young boys and girls under 83 pen names (Johnson ix).

In a slightly ironic way, it fits that Edward’s father, Heinrich Julius Stratemeyer, having immigrated from Hannover in 1837, was one of the Forty-Niners digging for gold in California (Lange 17); it also fits that Stratemeyer’s hero was Horatio Alger, Jr., whose tales of luck and pluck Stratemeyer imitated from the beginning. Stratemeyer’s books for young adults unite both: discovery and methodological reasoning. The mixture of adventure, daring belief, instrumental rationality, drive for self-reliance, and belief in folk psychology is exactly what made the self-help discourse hegemonic and Stratemeyer’s young adult literature successful. Stratemeyer’s first genre were career and success stories, which he published in the magazines *Golden Days* and *Argosy*. From 1893 to 1894, he edited the magazine *Good News*, in which he published stories such as “Camera Bob” or “Joe, the Surveyor.” The plots are formulaic: “A boy deprived of his rightful inheritance faces numerous trials as he attempts to regain it” (Johnson 36). Excitement, escape, and wish fulfillment frame

scant references to practical work situations. Nonetheless, “[b]oys wrote from all across the country to ask for advice about jobs. Correspondents ranged in age from 13 to 21, with the majority aged 16. They wanted information on wages and qualifications for various occupations . . .” (Johnson 35). Apparently, many young people were desperate (and optimistic) enough to read the books as advice literature and were in need of instructions on how to navigate new economic realities brought about by mass production.

Stratemeyer’s books, like Abbott’s columns and aphorisms, are no proper self-help books by title or marketing. They are adventures and mysteries. But like Abbott’s, they are deeply involved in the self-help discourses of the time not only in content but also in rhetoric and diction. Both Stratemeyer and Abbott knew that their readers demanded more than pure entertainment: they also longed for inspiration and orientation. At least in these two cases, self-help transported mass culture, just as mass culture transported self-help discourses. Stratemeyer’s stories were clearly directed at the youngsters of an emerging professional managerial white middle class, which Richard Ohmann has identified as one of the origins of later mass audiences (118). While Stratemeyer transformed Alger’s meritocratic heroes from poor street urchins into white middle-class boys—respectively girls—(implicitly admitting that the discourse of self-help is exactly that: a middle-class discourse), his most successful and influential mass produced book series such as the *Radio Boys*, the *Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, and the *Bobbsey Twins* still make ample, even though more mediated, use of his role-model’s success formula. In Alger’s *Ragged Dick* (1868), for instance, young (middle-class) Frank Whitney serves as “helper” to nudge (lower-class) Dick onto his road to success and reputation. But the “protagonist” of the story is still Dick, who advances to modest fortune through self-denial and discipline. In the *Hardy Boys* or *Nancy Drew* adventures, in contrast, the eponymous protagonists are (quite literally) fortunate from the beginning and they function as “helpers” for others.

There are several reasons for this. Commercial mass cultures are part and parcel of consumption-driven economies. Alger’s was still a Victorian world with a strong production ethos. Self-denial, modesty, frugality, Sunday school manners (postponed gratification), and mechanic skills are the core curriculum of Dick’s education. The popular imaginary of the Gilded Age was staffed with ambitious, hard-working, energetic, albeit

often ascetic, stingy, and penny-turning champions, who had lost their attraction by the turn of the century (Lears 23, 32). Stratemeyer was shrewd enough to shift the emphasis to the likes of Frank and Joe Hardy and Nancy Drew. Plainly, he sensed that the necessary skills and proficiencies of the white self-made man (and increasingly woman) had changed towards the twentieth century. Qualities such as self-actualization (instead of self-denial), assertiveness (instead of modesty), productive consumption (instead of frugality), personality (instead of character), and psychological intelligence (instead of dexterity) took the helm (Susman 271–85). Like Abbott, Stratemeyer did not mind time-honored aphorisms to lend his books an additional educational touch (examples from the first volume of the *Hardy Boys*-series include: “The smarter they are, the harder they fall” (Dixon 93), “Don’t rest on your oars . . .” (93), “Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched” (145), “There is many a slip between the cup and the lip” (146), and so on.⁸ But the more serious lessons in self-help are far more subtle, as the example of the first book in the Nancy Drew series demonstrates.

In *The Secret of the Old Clock* (1930), Nancy searches for a lost will in order to reinstall a small fortune to their proper owners (all of the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* adventures are eventually about money). In the course of the adventure, Nancy proves herself to be superior to her peers through a number of modern qualities (lessons which the readers would certainly learn): first and foremost, her mobility seems without limits, both physically (her “shining new blue roadster” almost functions as an extension of Nancy’s body [Keene, *Secret* 13]) and mentally (Nancy keeps coming up with new theories and new strategies to solve her cases). Secondly, she is efficient, accomplishing “the entire management of the [Drew] establishment” (12) with ease and “is capable of accomplishing a great many things in a comparatively short length of time” (12). Furthermore, Nancy knows how “to think for herself and to think logically” (Keene, *Secret* 6). Fourth, Nancy is determined to reach her goal: “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she puns (23)—and anticipates Napoleon

⁸ Comparable to the factories’ assembly lines that sequenced production into separate steps, Stratemeyer outsourced the writing process. He did not write the book himself. It was written by ghostwriter Leslie McFarlane, but outlined by Edna Stratemeyer (his daughter) and himself. Overseeing the production process, Stratemeyer did the final edits on all the (early) books in the series.

Hill's first two steps on the way to success: motivation and determination. Equally important, Nancy does not shy away from playing the leader. In a later book, *The Clue in the Diary* (1932; here: revised edition from 1962) the reader learns that "Nancy's abilities of leadership were welcome and depended upon in any group" (2). These abilities are coincidental with Hill's "Major Attributes of Leadership" (120–21). A sixth quality which Nancy possesses derives from the fact that she "had studied psychology in school and was familiar with the power of suggestion and association" (Keene, *Secret* 88). Not only will Napoleon Hill, following impulses from the New Thought movement, later emphasize the power of suggestion and association, but Dale Carnegie will make the empathetic connection to other people the very center of his book. Nancy's psychological skills help her in active networking, which proves an essential asset in her efforts at detection. Seventh, a point stressed by Carnegie and Wattles in their self-help guides: Nancy knows with whom to associate and with whom to avoid contact. She learns to avoid the newly rich (and guilty) Topham girls (who disrupt consumption twice in a department store) and to team up with the poor, but resourceful (and respectful) Horner girls. Finally, in league with the new philosophy of leisure and "therapeutic ethos" (Lears 6), also at the core of many self-help bestsellers of the 1930s, Nancy knows how to relax: "'Give your mind a rest and perhaps you'll have an inspiration,' Mr. Drew encouraged her kindly."⁹ Immediately, Nancy goes shopping (Keene, *Secret* 51–2).

Clearly, the transition from an almost exclusively production-oriented economy to a more consumption-oriented type, which brought forth commercialized mass culture in the first place, also helped transform gender roles. Women, of course, even middle-class women, did not simply participate in this economy by going shopping. Increasingly, women were needed in service-related jobs. To be sure, these jobs differed depending on race. However, during the Depression the relative number of jobs for all women actually increased because the economic slump hit traditionally male occupations hardest (McElvaine 182–83). But even before the thirties, during the Progressive Era, gender roles had transformed, especially in the middle and upper middle classes. The New Woman, the New

⁹ Among self-help bestsellers emphasizing the importance of leisure are Edmund Jacobson's *You Must Relax* (1934), Walter B. Pitkin's *Life Begins at Forty* (1932) and Lin Yutang's *The Importance of Living* (1937).

Negro Woman, the flapper, and even the more conservative Gibson Girl had advanced more assertive and versatile images of women. Mildred Wirt Benson, the (ghost-)writer of the first *Nancy Drew* mysteries, who had obtained a degree in journalism from the University of Iowa in 1927, was one of the women who contributed to a lasting transformation in women's self-conception.

Wirt Benson, herself an adventuress and (like Stratemeyer) an admirer of Horatio Alger (Kismaric and Heiferman 20), joined the Stratemeyer Syndicate in 1926 and wrote for the *Ruth Fielding* series before she was assigned the first *Nancy Drew* book. Wirt changed the classical, timid and meek female character of adolescent literature into a personality "a lot like Wirt herself—confident, competent, and totally independent" (24). Thus, she "created a contemporary character" (24), who was not only immensely successful at the time (by 1938, the *Nancy Drew* series sold twice as many books as the *Hardy Boys*, see Kismaric and Heiferman 27), but even became a role model for several generations of women.¹⁰

In other words: the *Nancy Drew* series is a case in point in which mass culture, fueled by discourses of self-management and self-reliance can, in the words of Ilana Nash, create "cracks in the armor of patriarchy" and allow "girl readers to find a space in which to establish their own right to talk back" (70). Nancy Drew manages (pun intended) to appropriate a largely male self-help discourse for herself and female readers. However, while Nancy thus earns her praise "as a proto-feminist role model whose independence, authority, and intelligence offered an empowering vision of adolescent girlhood, . . . the series contains many contradictions and paradoxes," reinforcing "patriarchal privilege and oppressive social politics" (Nash 29). Not only does Nancy consistently uphold the validity of class boundaries (The Topham girls in *The Secret of the Old Clock* will be effectively reminded of their "true" station in life at the end) and race boundaries (the only Black character in *Secret* which the reader encounters is of no help because he is drunk), but the heteronormativity of her world remains fundamentally uncontested as well. However independent and self-sufficient Nancy acts (significantly Nancy grows up without a

¹⁰ These include 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) (see Hoffman).

mother), the bulwark of peace and justice, which she is out to restore time and again, is exactly the traditional and conservative family with ingrained hierarchies, which she herself escapes (see Nash 53–70). And while, as Nash explains, *Nancy Drew's*

messages about gender are hopelessly mixed, . . . those regarding class and race are more consistently negative. Characters in the Nancy Drew series fall into one of four categories: Nancy and her inner circle, crime victims whom Nancy helps, villains whom she conquers, and incidental characters. Without fail, minorities and the working class never appear in Nancy's inner circle, nor do they usually rank even as the virtuous victims. When they appear at all, it is either as villains or as incidental characters, usually menial laborers. (53)

Self-Help: Racialization of Management/Management of Race

Stratemeyer's young adult literature is a good starting point to address the different conditions out of which "Black and white self-help discourses" emerged and what ideas about the management of race they conveyed as a result of that.¹¹ The aforementioned plots of white protagonists who *regain* the rightful assets they consider themselves to be deprived of speak to entitlement: to receive what is considered their property by right of birth (see Fisher 66–67). Owning and claiming the right to manage oneself and others are unquestioned prerequisites for these white characters and a self-evident element of their US-American citizenship. White self-help thus includes the privilege to omit questions of structural injustice in various forms, while at the same time relying on structural injustice for its own demand. It leaves out racial discrimination because it constructs the emerging professional-managerial class as white—in other words it pursues homogenous group formation in the name of whiteness. People of Color are simply not envisioned as self-reliant because the logic of

¹¹ The discourses of self-help are placed in inverted commas to stress that they are neither essentialized forms of expression, nor naturalized or embodied practices. We understand the terminologies "Black" and "white self-help" as constructions and use them to explore differences and commonalities between discourses that are circulated and practiced by African American and white actors respectively.

white-dominated capitalism demands a class of dependent laborers. Inclusion (of aspiring white urbanites) and exclusion (of the no less aspiring “othered”) go hand in hand. Besides, it leaves out class inequalities because self-help embodies the promise of social mobility. Therefore, it has to omit class as an obstacle that cannot be overcome. White-authored self-help can thus exclusively focus on *self*-improvement without having to necessarily embed that *self* in a larger communal context.

Citizenship rights could not be taken for granted by Robert Abbott, however. On the contrary, his self-help discourse is explicitly embedded in a call for racial justice. The official slogan of the *Chicago Defender* was: “American race prejudice must be destroyed.” While many of the aphorisms found in the *Defender* appear to send a universalist message at first glance, statements such as “Eventually your efforts will bring the reward they deserve” gain an additional meaning when read against the status quo of racial injustices. The management of the self and one’s surrounding carries a very different meaning to readers for whom the right to self-ownership, let alone the extension of full citizenship rights could not be taken for granted. Self-help here turns into an instrument for *claiming* (self-)management through the abolishment of institutionalized injustices. In their call for equality, self-help discourses as they were mediated in the *Chicago Defender* also go far beyond the individual and place the self in a communal setting. (Self-)management and self-help can also coalesce with self-defense, as Ida B. Wells’s chapter “Self-Help” in her book *Southern Horrors* (1892) illustrates. Citing a case in which “[t]he only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away [from a lynching] has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense” (70), she contends “that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give” (70).

The *Chicago Defender* was a political mouthpiece that openly encouraged the migration of Black Southerners to the urban centers of the North and Midwest. Linked to the Great Migration, self-help provided supportive guidance to those who had just arrived in the cities, instructing them on how to navigate life in the new environment (Baldwin 29). In fact, the call for migration was not only an act of defiance against the Southern states, but was itself understood as a form of active self-help, for instance by Ida B. Wells (72). When tied to the experience of racialized oppression, the scope of practices that are framed as self-help widens because so

many more moments in daily life require careful navigation. As a tool of survival, self-help shifts from a privilege to a necessity. Before Abbott, Frederick Douglass had openly addressed oppressing forces as well. In one of his most popular speeches, “Self-Made Men” from 1872, he calls for a leveling of the playing field from which self-help could then evolve on equal terms.¹² He explicitly points out the privilege that remains completely naturalized in Stratemeyer’s young adult literature when stating that “it is not fair play to start [Black subjects] out in life from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them” (16).

By contrast, self-help narratives by white authors commonly portray the existing conditions as something that can be molded at the subject’s will. *In Tune with the Infinite* from 1899 by Waldo Trine, a member of the New Thought movement, illustrates that vividly. As he suggests,

[t]he whole of human life is cause and effect. . . . We invite and attract the influences and conditions we desire. We invite whatever comes, and did we not invite it, . . . it could not and it would not come . . . You must . . . rule the world from within. He who does not himself condition circumstances allows the process to be reversed, and becomes a conditioned circumstance. (65–66)

The quote is informative in how it naturalizes a white middle-class point of view and sets whiteness as a standard without marking it as such. While the suggested advice may be instructive to those who do not need to question an equal playing field, it gains an absurd if not offensive connotation when read against the contemporaneous realities of Jim Crow, lynching, peonage, voter disenfranchisement, and de facto segregation in the Northern states. The imperative of blindness towards structural problems of race and/or class persists in Wallace Wattles’s *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910). Wattles was a Christian Socialist, also very much influenced by the New Thought movement, but obviously also by the Gospel of Wealth. He believed in the power of thought and the possibility to transform thought into action and reality through visualization. With his decreed willing suspension of disbelief (you must not doubt the power of

¹² Douglass delivered this speech at schools and in theaters over a period of several decades for audiences of Color as well as white listeners. We have no information on the purpose for which the speech was originally written.

thought!), it also behooves the reader to “guard your thoughts” (Wattles 42). Because negative images prevent the transformation of formless substance into form, “you must not make a study of poverty:” “Do not talk about poverty; do not investigate it, or concern yourself with it. Never mind what its causes are; you have nothing to do with them” (Wattles 42). Here, privilege becomes a state of mind. While Trine and Wattles locate the conditions *within* the individual, Abbott’s and Douglass’s audiences cannot afford to omit the social contexts and are required to strive *despite* them. Douglass was fully aware of the hidden and not-so-hidden contradictions within self-help discourse: “Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. That term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist” (5).

In Edward Stratemeyer’s fictions, upward mobility and self-improvement take place in a context that affirms existing racial and social hierarchies. His book series are enmeshed in the age of imperialism. The *Hardy Boys*, just as the *Radio Boys* before them, often intervene outside the US to “serve justice” (a good example is *The Mark on the Door* [1934] featuring a trip to Mexico). Nancy Drew usually stays in the US, but whenever a character of Color appears, their appearance is associated with trouble. Characters that are racialized as non-white are managed through criminalization or orientalism (see for instance *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm* [1936]), a narrative strategy that reproduces existing racial hierarchies. *The Clue in the Old Album* (1947), for example, which constitutes an especially blatant example of racism with eugenic overtones, creates exactly this impression, even though a character is explicitly criticized for claiming that “all . . . are thieves” (75).¹³ Nancy has to save a mixed-race girl, Rose, from her own community. Although Rose is not aware of her “. . . blood” (17), Nancy attributes her unruly behavior, which is depicted as “un-feminine,” to this “heritage.” The leader of Rose’s community (who extorts money from his own people) has gone stark mad and wants to take over America. The members of his community are portrayed as helpless—incapable of self-help. For this reason, Nancy leaves the management of one poor family, who has yet to learn to properly air out their apartment (103), to her friend Alice, the white social worker (see also Fisher 2008).

¹³ We are omitting problematic language in order not to perpetuate racial stereotypes.

In a similar vein, the narratives criminalize and other those living in poverty and of lower-class status. “Upstarts” or persons who have failed to move up usually bode danger or disruption. Downward mobility, to be sure, is always derelict. Class and color lines are preserved because upward mobility in *Nancy Drew* is only granted to whites who are already somehow part of genteel society. While in the original series white self-aggrandizement takes place at the expense of People of Color, with the novels’ revision from the 1950s to the 1970s, ethnic and racial stereotypes are edited out with the result that all People of Color are removed from the series, making self-improvement and self-management an exclusively white endeavor.

How to Mobilize the Self: Self-Help as Managerial Theory and Method

As illustrated in the previous sections, narratives informed by self-help have to be understood in relation to the conditions of their emergence. Depending on the author and intended readership, every manifestation of self-help discourse communicates and translates into particular positionalities. Nevertheless, there are certain elements that can be considered characteristic to the self-help discourse of the time, which had materialized into a virtual business with pamphlets, books, professional lectures, and classes by the early twentieth century—as we argue, *coinciding* with the beginning of automated mass production.

In Michel Foucault’s terms, self-help would be a technology of the self, in which the relation between members of society and the rules and regulations of that society are newly implemented within the individual. As such, self-help is very much akin to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s ideas of *Scientific Management* from 1911. In his book, Taylor envisioned a “benign” regime of professional leadership, in which the worker “receives the most friendly help from those who are over him” (26). If efficient, workers obtain higher wages and increased equality with regard to decisions and responsibility. The objective of this “friendly treatment” is, of course, the internalization of rules of efficiency and high performance on the part of the worker.¹⁴ As a result, worker and management are united

¹⁴ Taylor explains that these measures will eliminate loafing and “soldiering” and replace the efforts of labor unions to curtail output.

in a “close, intimate, personal cooperation” (26). Both management and workers are expected to adapt their inner lives to the necessities of the industrial process.

Self-help functions similarly—with the additional value that both management and worker are organs of one and the same person. In order to effect this, self-help appropriates a number of trajectories. It implies, first of all, a philosophy: self-help postulates the power of thought to impact action, which in turn is able to impact reality. Self-help draws, secondly, upon psychology: it is aimed at the modification of behavior and mind, conscious and unconscious, experiences and thoughts. In content and form, self-help historically develops alongside the major schools of psychotherapy. As a consequence, it is, thirdly, a form of self-therapy or pedagogy: it embraces cognitive-behavioral reshaping and, just like humanistic psychology, suggests that positive human potential can be activated through resources from within. As Booker T. Washington (anticipating Dale Carnegie) reminds his listeners in *Character Building* (1902), self-help means to “look upon the bright side of life” (3) and to avoid “get[ting] into the atmosphere of the people who” tell tales of “misery and woe” (9). Fourth, self-help narratives draw upon a specific rhetoric or methodology, including step-by-step instructions, formulas, proverbs, parables, and—borrowing, again, from psychology—Socratic dialogues and exemplary case studies. And finally, self-help manuals, narratives, advice columns, and classes tend toward seriality—they iterate and familiarize what they propose and thereby also generate a certain ritualistic pleasure.

Taken together, these devices make self-help a practice-oriented discourse. All explicit self-help genres emphasize the utilitarian aspect—from Trine through Booker T. Washington and George S. Clason to Napoleon Hill. Frederick Douglass in “Self-Made Men” explains about his role models: “They are in a peculiar sense indebted to themselves for themselves. If they have travelled far, they have made the road on which they have travelled” (7). Subsequently, he reiterates the staples of what goes into making this road: first and foremost, work and industry. Secondly, will and self-dependence. Thirdly, exertion and perseverance. Fourth, a regular, orderly, systematic effort (a method). Fifth, motivation or a sense of importance. Following the road-map will lead to the desired result—in Black as well as white self-help.

Self-help discourse is essentially performative. It performs what it declares, which is a transformation (by invocation) of thoughts,¹⁵ a transformation (by assignment) of responsibilities and efforts,¹⁶ a transformation (by collective action) of underlying conditions,¹⁷ a transformation (by iteration) of attitudes and identities.¹⁸ Performatives, according to J. L. Austin and John Searle, invoke a particular script and cite it. They bring something into being by imitation or play. To be sure (although self-help would never admit this), the success of the performative depends on the degree to which specific enabling conditions are met: the degree of privilege/power/self-ownership of the performer in order to perform the specific act at hand; the sincerity/purpose of the performer in order to mean what they declare; and the adequacy/appropriateness of the act to be performed. Self-help holds the subject responsible for the success of the performative act. Self-help declares: let me be manager of myself and constantly optimize my performance and let me receive a gratification for this.

Conclusion: Mass-Mediated Self-help as a Nationalizing Managerial Discourse

By the interwar years, increasingly mass-produced and mass-marketed, self-help had become a vehicle for the creation and dissemination of a national discourse. To a certain degree, this discourse with its promise of mobility contributed to alleviating the anxieties and difficulties attached with modernization, the Progressive Era and Jim Crow. On the one hand this seems ironic: after all, in relegating the responsibility for success to the individual, self-help discourse contributed to feelings of personal inadequacy. With its contribution to a liberal, capitalist frame of mind, it itself enhanced modernization. On the other hand, self-help not only

¹⁵ Trine says “thought forces” (2); “thinking stuff,” Wattles calls it (20, 25, 49).

¹⁶ Wattles calls it “purpose” and “faith” (73); “spirit of self-help” Du Bois says (389). Wattles even declares: “If you neglect this study, you are derelict in your duty to yourself, to God and humanity” (7).

¹⁷ Ida B. Wells calls for boycotts, self-defense, and migration. Abbott organized tours for Southerners to the North and endorsed specific candidates for election.

¹⁸ Booker T. Washington calls it character (91–92).

seems to work as a consolation in hard times, it also affords a sense of pride or privilege (by way of belonging to the group of those who have the opportunity to ‘improve’)—whether the privilege of whiteness or the pride of “up-lift.” By this time, basic assumptions, strategic methods, and slogans developed for self-optimization and self-management had become ubiquitous.

The latter carry normative power. This normativity includes a joyous acceptance of liberal capitalism. It includes an embrace of a consumer personality, which even survived the Great Depression. It includes a belief in social mobility. It includes an acceptance of gendered division of space and practices, which only gradually became porous. It also includes an assumption of white superiority, which African American advocates of self-help bitterly opposed. Like the conveyor belt, self-help has a forward thrust: there is always room for improvement. It is the promise of further growth that makes self-help a serial product, because renewal defies closure. Self-help keeps the (striving) middle class moving: it holds up the promise of a better life.

We have argued that many of the assumptions, many of the rhetorical formulations and even techniques, and many of the implications of self-help were highly problematic. And yet, in league with mass media and mass culture, the magazines, pulps, papers, the book market, radio, movies, fairs and parks, and the developing sphere of parades and events, the mindset, which self-help discourse endorsed, had a vastly homogenizing influence in the United States. As the *Defender Junior* taught its young acolytes: “Go to bed . . . with a Biliken smile!” (15 January 1930, 15).

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