

THE JUVENILE TRADITION AND THE FICTION FACTORY, PART 2: AFTERLIFE

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PART ONE of this series surveyed the attitudes of young writers working in the dime-novel industry. It built on recovery work in juvenilia studies by critics such as Daniel Cohen and Sarah Lindey exhuming records of dime writing “still haunted” by young and forgotten writers (D. Cohen, “Winnie” 408). New publication technologies fostered assembly-line writing and mass marketing that fueled the public’s demand for cheap and formulaic stories and built a blood-and-thunder dime industry, which flourished from the 1860s through the beginning of the next century. Its immense popularity meant a need for scores of nameless and dispensable producers of this fiction. This new kind of authorship—that defined authors as anonymous workers in the fiction factory rather than as geniuses or artists—was an opportunity for young writers who read dime novels and rushed to write them. They knew the conventions and would work for practically nothing (or even for free).

Youth was so linked to dime writing that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the industry could seem practically constituted by “kids just in from the prairies with their heavy office typewriters in cardboard boxes unloaded on wooden tables in shabby Manhattan furnished rooms” (Blackbeard 234). They were part of an economic system that took youth as a commercial value—up-to-the-minute youth provided a fantasy that such new modes of publication seemed to advertise—while also making use of young writers glorying in such hype. Part One of these two essays explored this new character of young people’s writing to indicate an evolving understanding of the juvenile tradition. Young writers now asserted themselves as modern hacks, celebrating their proficiency in dime formulas, and in their almost superhuman productivity turning them out—and did so with what one erstwhile teenage dime author, Gilbert Patten (1866-1945), called a “never-say-die pluck that every young writer needs” (qtd. by Anderson 14).

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Yet this “never-say-die” attitude also suggests that a different afterlife might await the return of the juvenile authors haunting the records of cheap print—for what gets recovered as well as the never-buried social tensions underlying dime writing.¹ In surveying the literary nationalism encoded in dime formulas, Part One explored how dime fiction kept alive a sense of perennial youth in part through youth’s recurrent and lasting association with the American character. Young writers working in dime formulas by necessity worked within these attitudes—and the baldness of dime formulas made obvious how these so-called “American” attitudes were ideological, encoding troubling assumptions when it came to race and imperialism, part of the manifest destiny and American exceptionalism that cheap print reflected.

Recent social historians, including Shelley Streeby, argue that dime formulas make patent the hierarchies of power within the nation’s authorizing assumptions. These critics have turned to the dime novel as a clear record of how “class and racial formations and popular and mass culture ... are inextricable” in American (literary) history. Quoting Michael Paul Rogin, Streeby argues that the dime novel shows that “early forms of U.S. popular culture ‘created national identity from the subjugation of its [nonwhite] folk,’” making it “even more necessary to come to terms with the culture of sensation and its effects on U.S. history and culture”—consequences she sees in part as continuing “a legacy of racism that has haunted the house of labor” when it comes to popular writing (*American* 15, 28, 15; insertion hers). Young aspirants to this industry had to negotiate these constraints, working within them to publish. Such negotiations were especially complicated for young writers of colour such as a dime author I discussed in Part One: Luis Senarens (c.1863–1939).

Part Two is about the afterlife of the dime novel—both in terms of how its formulas continued to haunt American letters, but also in terms of how ongoing literary-critical recovery of texts in the archive of the fiction factory have expanded possibilities for how to regard them. It starts again with Senarens, a Cuban American writing during the complex history leading up to the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the US occupation of Cuba until 1902. It outlines an incongruity that critics have noted between his investment in his Cuban heritage and the dime novel formulas he used, which have been understood as providing “a predominantly young white male working-class readership with fantasies of colonial power,” fantasies that perform “the cultural work of preparing U.S. readers for their country’s subsequent forays into imperial conquest” of neighbour nations such as Cuba (Williams, “Frank” 279–80). Senarens’s work in the appalling polemics of dime formulas illustrates the challenges that dime-novel authors of colour faced and some of the strategies available to them. Publication in the fiction factory for him entailed being subjected to an incompatibility: achieving authorial identity through churning out plots that denied or disparaged subjectivities like his own.

Considering Senarens as a Latino writer of popular fiction is part of a larger interest in book history that looks at the demographics of who actually wrote and how they published, an approach that has also fueled work in the field of juvenilia

studies. When it comes to the lost history of popular writing, as Samuel R. Delaney asserts, a whole tradition of minoritised writers remain hidden behind anonymity: “we know dozens upon dozens of early pulp writers only as names: They conducted their careers entirely by mail—in a field and during an era when pen names were the rule rather than the exception We simply have no way of knowing if one, three, or seven of them—or even many more—were blacks, Hispanics, women, Native Americans, Asians, or whatever. Writing is like that” (qtd. in Wythoff 227n2). Yet the recent recovery of popular texts *has* restored the work of young writers of colour—Cuban American writers such as Senarens, African-American writers such as Harry F. Liscomb (1905–?), and Indigenous producers of dime-related popular entertainment, such as poet and performer E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake (1861–1913) of the Mohawk Nation. These producers expand the archive of texts to be considered, and they also offer more multifaceted ways to consider it by uncovering shared traditions overlooked by establishment culture.

Part Two, then, concentrates in part on how ideological prescriptions continued to shape expectations, and to shape young writers’ work, in the early twentieth century—after the dime novel seemed to have waned in popularity.² At the same time, it foregrounds how the critical afterlife that has sifted that archive informs an understanding of how to read this ongoing work. In the first decades of the twentieth century, after the decline of the dime industry, young writers, if anything, became even more noticeable, and continued to publish even more. A 1913 *Times* article stated, “There are now more youths than ever eager to be writers. There are more, indeed, than the public could possibly read” (quoted in Hentea, “Late” 167).³ Demographics kept the category of youth manifest in culture then—the US Census reported that about 52% of the population was under age 24 in 1910 (*1910 Census* 298)—though the dime industry no longer seemed youth’s reigning mode. The 1920s saw a resurgence of a more mainstream juvenile tradition published by firms that leaned toward the literary rather than the sensational; Marius Hentea argues that established “publishers targeted and advertised youth, and they made a whole series of efforts to encourage young writers” (*Henry Green* 168). Yet such later opportunities can only be fully understood by appreciating their debt to the previously burgeoning dime industry. This continued juvenile boom in writing extended the possibilities for young writers to middlebrow venues, but the influence of dime fiction remained, both in calling youth to write and—because of popular fiction’s more obvious ideological burden—troubling what they could say.⁴

The work of critics like Christine Bold, carefully identifying the diversity of writers actually working in that boom, reconsiders the “dime industry’s more general reproduction of sensational caricatures of Indians (as well as black, Mexican, Chinese, Irish and other minoritised figures)” (“Did” 142)—complicating, through newly recovered practitioners, the preconception (not fully supported, she claims) that “while dime fiction has been persuasively analyzed as empowering in class and gender terms, its handling of race is generally considered to be irredeemably repressive”

(“*Vaudeville*” 95). Considering the youth of such writers provides additional nuance in recovering their reception and meaning; Clark Barwick, for instance, in his study of Liscomb’s *The Prince of Washington Square*, turns to children’s literature as the closest model for it, rather than recognize the boom of writing by young people then also operative at the time. Though he recognizes that “what makes *Prince* unique—and particularly valuable to the study of early twentieth century American popular fiction—is that Liscomb was actually a teenager,” he treats him nevertheless as supposedly only “the rare example” of juvenile writing (202).⁵

In the 1920s, widely publicised young male writers negotiated the legacy of racism haunting the fiction factory. While publishers capitalised on Daisy Ashford’s bestselling 1919 *The Young Visitors* by featuring girl poets—Helen Douglas Adams (1909–1993), Nathalia Crane (1913–1998), Hilda Conkling (1910–1986), and Julia Cooley (1893–1972)—they brought out a number of books by boys at that time as well, including those by the white writers David Putnam (1913–1992) and Horace Wade (1908–1993), both of whom published as preteens, as well as by the teenaged Liscomb. All these young male writers were heavily influenced by dime novels. Putnam, the wealthy publisher’s son and Amelia Earhart’s stepson, lived out the dime novel’s “ludic imperialism” (Liefers 33) through travel accounts of actual expeditions his family’s business could afford to float. Wade, a middle-class eleven-year-old, became a new exemplar of what Part One termed “wide-awake” youth. Enterprising, opportunistic, savvy, determined, with an eye to the main chance, he performed modern youthful writing identity. Building on his fame as a young novelist, Wade became a boy reporter, but also a product spokesman and ad man.

Though the formulaic racism of inherited dime plots appears in the margins of Putnam’s story and in the later works Wade went on to publish, Liscomb demonstrates how young writers of colour at this time also confront dime fiction’s afterlife. Richard Wright (1908–1960) remembers his own struggles when young to come to authorship at this time, and those conflicts between a self at odds with the assumptions structuring publication opportunities also shape Liscomb’s writing. The paradox of (writing) identity for these African-American youth meant that its very possibilities and successes had to be wrested from the place of its traumas—a process intensified for Liscomb who, unlike Wright, remained fully committed to being driven by “popular impulses” and working in a “commercial vein” (Barwick 200).

One tactic of negotiating the fiction factory was to unsettle its assumptions from within, to try surreptitiously to call into question what it demanded they say. Such ironic—because double-voiced—inflections are akin to what Michel de Certeau long ago termed “*la perruque*,” a covert strategy that finds ways, when working within a factory system, of also using its machinery for different ends:

the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time ... from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. In the very place where the machine he must serve

reigns supreme, he ... [finds] a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his work and to confirm his solidarity with other workers. ... succeed[ing] in “putting one over” on the established order on its home ground.... *la perruque* reintroduces “popular” techniques. (de Certeau 25–26)

De Certeau terms such practices a kind of “making do” (29); these practices, or “‘ways of operating,’ are similar to ‘instructions for use,’ but they create a certain play in the machine” (de Certeau 30). The recovery of the juvenile tradition in the afterlife of the dime novel, through the recovery of different young writers of colour working within its shadow, reveals such “making do” writ large in texts that find ways to play the machine.

The literary critics who have written on Senarens—Nathaniel Williams—and on Liscomb—Barwick—emphasise the ironic double-voicing of those writers as they say one thing and mean another, undercutting the ideological prescriptions shaping their plots. They stress how these writers kept looking for that “certain play” (to adopt de Certeau’s term) in the system that employed them. They strove for a degree of work that was “free [and] creative” by using “‘popular’ techniques” against the grain. My own essay is concerned with how they signified their “own capacities” as *youth*, in solidarity with others like them, as they negotiated what the fiction factory demanded in return. In order to publish, they could not escape dime formulas, but they could also engage them with a different inflection, meta-discursively, telling the story of navigating their constraints. The story they told was about their own writing—demonstrating that “the market that enabled authors to create a viable profession writing American literature eventually became a subject of that literature” (S. Williams 116).

The young writers I treat here all—from their different vantage points—addressed the afterlife of the dime novel through telling a story about creating a writing identity; importantly, what they told showed that “relating to that market was not always a simple choice between resistance and collusion” (91). These internal conflicts set the terms for the rhetoric of American youth, and for its aesthetics. Senarens shows how dime-fiction formulas provided publication opportunities for writers who had been marginalised; Liscomb shows that the use of such formulas in the dime novels’ afterlife continued to involve marginalised writers in attitudes that had silenced or ignored them.

Looking at the critical afterlife of the dime novel also opens new questions of how to think through and beyond irony itself as a strategy. Critics including Christine Bold or Manina Jones and Neal Ferris consider how Indigenous writers of the dime era deploy but also change popular preconceptions to redefine American identity by restoring the presence of Indigenous culture. They consider non-white artists as not just at the margins of hegemony (and, hence, needing to ironize its meanings) but also centrally placed within cultural traditions and expressions unfamiliar to white

audiences and critics, including long-standing “genealogies of Indigenous performance” (Bold, “Violence” 100). These writers use Indigenous-“centric understandings of self in agential relation to the emergent colonial world” (Jones and Ferris 126). Rather than just an ironic or reactive stance, this kind of doubleness takes on a productive “Two-Spiritness—‘an Indigenous identity category’” that constitutes rather than annuls the self (Bold, “Violence” 103).

Though the fiction factory might seem to reduce all writers of colour to some general otherness that is contained within its workings, the different heritages of young writers who took up identity in that factory suggest different possibilities for refusing “American” hegemony. *Juvenilia studies* recovers work of neglected writers to recognize how the shared category of youth, which has remained largely unnoticed, is shaping. At the same time, however, youth, as a mode, is not single but shaped by other kinds of shared experience, often overlooked. Those differences determine the ways young artists make do within inherited formulas—but they also indicate whether and how particular young writers might discover new models and affiliations in their place.⁶

Haunted

IN TREATING young writers for the blood-and-thunder industry, the literary critic Sara Lindey argues that such writers leave their mark on the form of what they write as much as they are informed by it. Because “late nineteenth-century story papers provided unique spaces and special opportunities for young writers to enter the marketplace” (72), she contends, seizing those opportunities meant that youth helped “direct and produce the print entertainment they consumed” (73). In her reading, taking up the pen allowed for self-determination—so that, when young writers “write themselves into adulthood” (73), they aim not only to shape themselves but to shape the category of youth in general.

Nevertheless, such agency also had to confront the machinery of its possibility. That the formulas of dime writing precede young writers was also part of the young writers’ story. The dime mode provided openings for young writers to publish but also structured what they could say. “Once the conventions were established, *they* [the conventions] seemed to write the book,” historian Carl Smith contends (7; insertion mine). The “trademarked generic formula” almost alone comes to seem “the work’s creator,” Richard Brodhead agrees (“American” 27).⁷ Readers at the time understood the dime novel’s bald assertions to be prescriptive of popular preconceptions: “It is true, and it is unfortunate, that literature, especially light literature, has much to do with the shaping of a people’s views” (Fleming 7).

Young dime novelists also recognised the plots they worked in to be palpable and shaping. Former teenage novelist William Wallace Cook (1867–1933) suggests the eeriness of a sense of reality’s being contingent on what stories get told about it

when he writes of how “by an extraordinary coincidence [he] had invented a story that actually had happened” (Scott 6). The story that Cook thinks invented reality into existence was one of the many standard dime plots that aestheticised the death of Indigenous people underlying the United States’ creation. One of Cook’s tales had employed the stock caricatured formula of a Native American willingly sacrificing his own life to save a “beautiful young white girl”—in this iteration “from a broken dam” ([Cook] 79)—only for Cook to receive a letter from a young man from the Maricopa Nation, convinced that the story described what his own father had actually done.

Such racist and patriarchal formulas are fantasies of the privileged, who imagine their advantage as a gift freely given by those they subjugate. Circular and self-justifying, they explain away the culpability of those in power who sacrifice others, recasting that sacrifice as an act of supposed self-determination, willingly taken (they imagine) by the ones oppressed. This fantasy may indeed shape understandings of history—so that actual young writers, such as this young letter writer, are only recognised when current formulas authorize them to be heard, and produce and guarantee their signatures, according to those laws.

Juvenile writing is by definition tied up with questions of this kind of law. Defined by juvenilia studies as under twenty-one (the representative age of majority), “juvenile” writers are precisely those too young to have any legal right to sign their name. Such young writers may epitomize how all authors borrow authority from the structures of writing that predate them, but *Pierre*, Melville’s Young America satire of juvenile writing, underscores how youth’s legal nonidentity makes such contingency determinative for them. Young writers, even “the greatest lettered celebrities of the time”—if they “had, by the divine power of genius, become full graduates in the University of Fame, while yet as legal minors”—must like Pierre fully accede for their meaning to “the sophomorean insinuation of the Law,” which holds an authority they do not (Melville 341).

This circularity—of law calling up a self that confirms the law by being in thrall to it—in fact remains endemic to retrospective accounts of the dime industry by erstwhile young writers in it—a history that makes up a part of the fiction factory’s afterlife. One-time teenage fiction-factory writer Robert Carlton Brown (1886–1959)—who started writing by penning dime novels at the tail end of their boom—describes how the young authors entered that factory “yet only boys” (Brown, “Swell” 482); these boy writers had always before them the cautionary sign of writers who had given their lives to the work, ones he called “the ancient mariner group” (481), referring to that archetype of a teller possessed by his tale. Such monitory figures had retained their “eternal youth” (482) but only because they were caught in the form’s repetitions: “all of us had the horrible example of the ancient mariners before us and were constantly afraid” of turning into them (481). Patten recounts a dime editor similarly possessed, kept alive only by his endless reprints of old dime issues long after they no longer sold. In denial that his own publication had been canceled, he kept coming to the office, and “regularly every week he got together a new issue of

the paper he loved and in which his very life seemed wrapped up ... by culling material from the early numbers of the same publication.” Those around him would quietly print two copies of what he recycled and put them on his desk to keep him thinking the magazine lived on. When he finally learned that it did not—that the paper hadn’t been sent to the newsstands for years—“the shock was too much for him. He ceased to come to his office and he did not survive long” (Patten, “Dime” 59).⁸

Like the dead men rising up to sail the mariner’s ship because sailing is what they do, this zombification translates self-determination into “degenerescent self-engendering”—Derrida’s term that means both creation and grave at one and the same time (Derrida 74). Or, as Brown characterised this dime-writing experience: “Wherever we went we carried whiffs of Spring, whiskey, and the fresh earth-plot smell of rich loamy fiction ... We were the Word” (482). “The fresh earth-plot smell” may be redolent of the garden when it carries “whiffs of Spring,” but at the same time it conjures up the freshly turned plot of the grave. So does Brown’s invocation of the Christian concept of “the Word”—the Logos which for Derrida always already involves “death or absence” as underlying writing as “the condition of all discourse” (Kates 1025). Social critics of the dime novel—such as Streeby or Alexander Saxon—argue compellingly that the whiff of death arises from the logos of this writing because the dime novel “aestheticizes the genocidal foundation of the nation, turning conquest into a literary enterprise” (Streeby, *American* 216), but remains inexorably haunted by that fatality.

Those writers in groups outside privilege are especially disenfranchised by being caught in this *mise en abyme* reflected between self and ideology. Yet these writers are aware of the machinery they are caught in and strive to use it to different ends. Michael Denning famously locates a dissident force in dime-novel formulas by qualifying their reflection of ideology as not complete and entire but “a contested terrain” (3); similarly, when Bold works to recover dime novels by writers of colour, she argues that such writers may not resolve their incompatibility with the formulas that bestow writing identity; instead, they use that incompatibility to expose and indict the inequity of those formulas. She notes that “some dime novelists managed to invent a new kind of creativity out of their position of limited autonomy” precisely “by making the business of writing to order part of the formulaic action” (“Voice” 30).⁹ Indeed, as Derrida suggests, this kind of degenerescent self-engendering is “about the very subject of those limits” (62). To push the constraints of that autonomy, to write anyway despite their restrictions, I suggest, provides one tactic: what de Certeau describes as working within signification to use it against itself, which makes “a kind of *perruque* of writing itself” (28).

In de Certeau’s description of this kind of making do, such responses become

... operational schemas. Just as in literature one differentiates “styles” or ways of writing, one can distinguish “ways of operating”.... These styles of action intervene in a field which regulates them at a first level

(for example, at the level of the factory system), but they introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage (30)

Employed within the operational aesthetic of the dime industry, I argue, some young writers looked to a kind of juvenile mode—a particular style—for subtle ways to adjust ideology’s law as they operated in it—a pressure all the greater for writers of colour like Senarens or Liscomb. Yet Bold suggests that “as much as they were contained by” the cultural power encoded into popular fantasies, writers of colour in the fiction factory, who found work purveying such fantasies, “also pressed closely” on that entrenched power (*Frontier* 222), not just by making do in it but also by deploying other systems of meaning in it too. What those working in the fiction factory left behind was this double heritage.

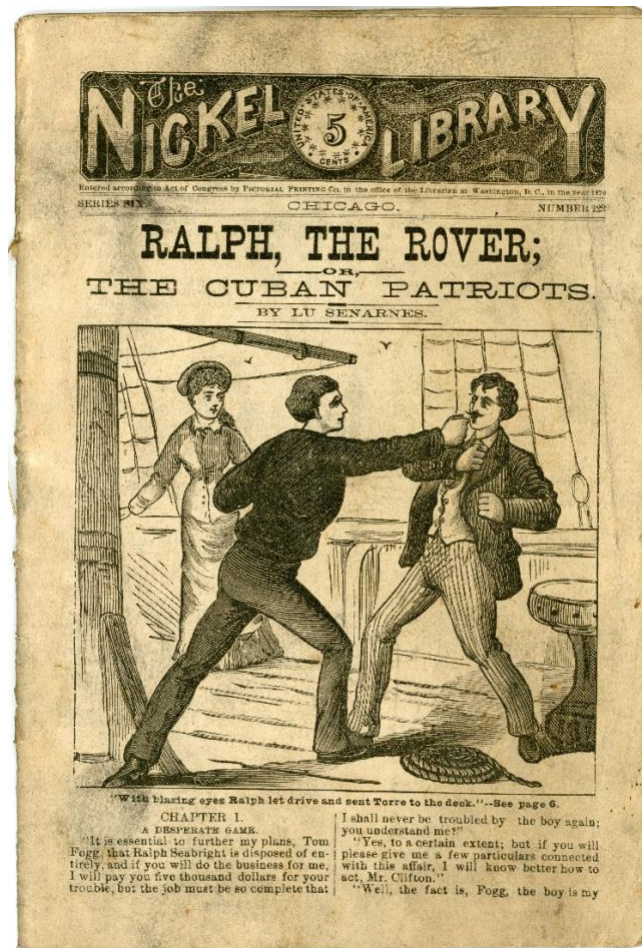


Fig. 1. Cover page of *Ralph, the Rover; or, The Cuban Patriots*, by Lu Senarnes [Luis Senarens]. *Nickel Library*, Series 6, no. 122, 1879 (Courtesy IUP Special Collections and University Archives, Indiana University of Pennsylvania).

Noname

FIRST published at age fourteen (the 1879 *Ralph the Rover, or the Cuban Patriots*, about Cuban independence; see Fig. 1), Senarens is now understood as a pioneering Latino writer, who “clearly had an interest in his Cuban heritage” (N. Williams, *Gears* 61).¹⁰ Williams argues that, by presenting “Cuban patriots in an overwhelmingly favorable manner,” Senarens’s first novel demonstrates that dime novels “do not consistently offer stories that readily conform to imperialist views regarding race or nationalism, and they frequently contain elements that undermine assumptions of Anglo-Protestant authority that enabled empire” (“Frank” 297, 299). Yet, like the Frank Reade, Jr. Edisonades by Noname that Senarens took over writing when also just a youth—the speculative dime novels for which he is famous—his first novel employs “a heroic but heavily caricatured African American who speaks in heavy dialect” (297). This particular distortion is just one of the reasons critics have repeatedly noted that Senarens’s books used ugly dime formulas that blatantly and disturbingly “foregrounded a thoroughgoing racism that ranged from crude ethnic stereotyping” to the mass slaughter of colonised races—“inextricably linking technology with racism” in the Noname series (Brooks Landon, qtd. in Wolfe 198).

The connection between the two is built into these books’ very assumption of how machinery works. As Taylor Evans has pointed out, the actual machines in these stories—the robot prototypes that marked them as speculative fiction—themselves encode racist distortions: they look like popularly circulated caricatures, borrowed from minstrelsy, of Black servitude. Such assumptions, encoded into the very appearance of these robots, parallel the dominance of the young white inventor in Senarens’s stories over his stereotyped Black servant, Pomp. As a result, Senarens’s plots depend on caricatures that assume that only some youth—exceptional young white Americans—could command technological expertise. They exemplify new hierarchies between savvy white technocrats and Black labour subordinated to serve the machine:

Frank Jr.—wealthy, young, strong, a crack shot, and generally unflappable—is as physically exceptional as he is tech savvy ... exerting his power instead through mechanical means [T]he racial hierarchy (Frank Jr. superior, Pomp subservient) is ... validated by their respective abundance or lack of technocompetence, which was shaping up to be a key twentieth-century skill at the time of Senarens’s writing.

In other words, Frank Jr. and Pomp occupy their “natural” place in the new machine culture hierarchy, one that conveniently replicates the old social hierarchy with high fidelity. (Evans 576)

Given how visibly Senarens’s stories replayed such disturbing formulas, the question remains: just how much could he re-inflect their hierarchies meta-discursively?

Though he could make do in what de Certeau terms “the instruction manual,” how far could he make it over?

Part One of this essay discussed the paratext of dime fiction’s eye-grabbing covers, showing active young (white) men engaged in heroic feats. In some of Noname’s covers (including the ones where Reade travels to Africa), on the other hand, the heritage of racism comes out plainly. These pictures go well beyond depicting just the subtler caricature of his racialised Steam Men to celebrate scenes of blatant colonial oppression. On these covers, Noname’s heroes violently subjugate people of colour, who are caricatured as so-called “savages.”¹¹ The sheer visibility of such illustration makes the racism encoded in these stories conspicuous and palpable. The dime mode itself was distinguished by stressing the obvious; it worked through bold relief to “sharply outline, with a few strokes” so that whatever it presented was “instantly recognizable” (Jenks 108). It worked through “simple declarative sentences, one-sentence paragraphs, the ready exclamation point, and bare, undeveloped statements” (Bleiler, “Luis” 663).

De Certeau’s irony may work within to unsettle such blatant figurations, but the necessary understatement of a covert strategy makes it hard for that strategy to *counteract* such blatancy. Other responses counter it instead with their own open representations. Literary critic Michelle Raheja builds on the work of Randolph Lewis to identify a mode of “visual sovereignty—the creative self-representation of Native American visual artists” (9) that “interact with older stereotypes” but at the same time also (as Lewis wrote) “depict themselves with their own ambitions at heart” (19, 30). Such alternatives that involve ownership of image, and code switching for audiences who can recognize narrative conventions unfamiliar to white viewers, rely on an independent machinery of production—such as that used by early Indigenous filmmakers or in Indigenous-owned theatrical troupes.¹² Such alternative venues were unavailable to Senarens—the avant-garde Latino/a-based art magazines that existed in the 1920s had a very different mandate from the fiction-factory mass market (see Montgomery). Though later writers such as Brown launched experimental careers by leaving that market, Senarens never left Tousey.

Nevertheless, Williams does find traces of a tacit struggle by Senarens within his novels’ encoded attitudes, a covert and oblique struggle that is by necessity “both palpable *and* conflicted” (*Gears* 78; emphasis mine).¹³ Though he built a lifelong career at Tousey, Senarens explicitly disclaimed some of the dime industry’s most jingoistic categories: he wrote that he turned out “comic stories and stories of every description, except bandit and Indian stories” (Senarens “Biography” 10)—that is, he did not take on the explicit plots of manifest destiny (Mexican *bandit* stories) or of the frontier (*Indian* stories) that were fully invested in border conquests or the extermination of Indigenous people.¹⁴ Senarens also “used his editorship at Tousey to counter pro-imperialist attitudes towards Cuba” (N. Williams, *Gears* 7).

“Words of action. Words of venom,” one twentieth-century retrospection upon the dime-novel called its insistent and disturbing formulas (Menaugh D1). Senarens’s

reactions, as Williams acknowledges, his attempts to negotiate the obvious “venom” of popular racism, remain much more muted and indirect than the sensational marketing mechanism—such as immediately recognizable formulas and eye-catching covers—of the mode of publication in which he worked, showing the difficult intermediations of young writers of colour caught within assembly-line writing without alternative models for working in popular modes.

“The story of Lu Senarens’s career shows the possibility of doing the impossible,” concluded one contemporary interviewer referring to technologies (“cars without horses, diving boats, winged aircraft”) unthought of at the time until he imagined them into existence (Alden 52). That claim could also apply to his attempt to work within dime-novel formulas while also (however indirectly) questioning them. Confronting the impossible becomes the subject of his writing, understood not so much in terms of the triumphant heroism (one convention of the dime novel, which claims to resolve all dilemmas in the final chapter) but through that paradoxical other aspect of the form: the dime novel’s episodic interminability: the same old story begins all over again in a never-ending struggle for its wide-awake young heroes. Dime-writer Brown calls this ongoing struggle “a kind of endless serial that was linked together in equal lengths and served up steaming hot” (482). Though no “natural” place (as Evans calls it) seems offered to Latino writers (like Senarens) or other writers of colour within techno-hierarchies, this young author claims one anyway by becoming a recognised speculative writer and technological visionary. In the new machine-culture hierarchies emerging at the time, Senarens assumes and commands the “techocompetence” allegedly impossible for those relegated to the margins. He seizes the very (tech)-savvy rhetoric of youth supposedly denied anyone outside white privilege, even while his stories replay the ugly conventions that seek to deny him that place.

Bringing out dime-novel subtexts of such struggles that have up to now operated under the radar has become the work of critics like Williams or Bold. They strive to recover a record of marginalised agents who push at “the framework of ‘AngloSaxon superiority’” that, as they demonstrate, only appears to be unchallenged (Bold, “Popular” 208). In this they advance Denning’s earlier work: in proclaiming the dime novel to be contested terrain, Denning’s study had also stressed a kind of de Certeau-like “free play and undecidability” in what he called its “multiaccentual texts” (262)—but he concluded that, when it came to challenging entrenched racial attitudes, “the dime novel was a failure” (210). He came to this conclusion, however, because (he thought) writers of colour were absent from the ranks, so no one working in the form could supply significant-enough resistance to its formulas. Subsequent scholarship has actually recovered diverse writers: African-American writers such as Philip Schuyler Warne/Howard Macy (1843–c.1892), the male Cherokee writer John Rollin Ridge (1827–1867) along with women working in dime-related popular forms, such as the Seneca playwright and performer Go-won-go Mohawk (1889–1910) as well as Johnson/Tekahionwake.¹⁵

Though Senarens was Cuban American, his pseudonym hid his identity until the 1920s. Yet Senarens's repeated stories about the importance of Cuba, Williams implies, may have spoken to other young Cuban Americans even if they only knew him as Noname. Once this identity was known it was important to others: The Facebook page of Ornamental Publishing devoted to Senarens as "the Cuban-American Jules Verne" cites a full-page Sunday story about him in a 1937 Havana newspaper ("*Lo Que*"). Lindey suggests that Senarens's stress on young inventors probably similarly inspired other young aspirants to authorship. She challenges us not to be dismissive of Senarens's covert and oblique strategies of resistance, pointing out the very utility of operating under the radar to get around racist exclusions. Senarens's anonymity, she suggests, might have inspired "a child whose race marginalized him" to speak up without fearing consequences (83); one boy correspondent seeking to write dime fiction who signed himself "Pomp," she proposes, might have been an aspiring young African-American writer (though she acknowledges the "impossibility" of ever knowing, given "the limits of the archive" [83]). The limits of the anonymous fiction-factory archive mean that the formulas that obscured such writers also make it more difficult to register vantage points subtly at odds with those formulas in the face of the obvious messaging their lurid covers provide. The work of Williams and Bold demonstrates how ongoing recovery work and careful rereading, painstaking and ambiguous, can bring to light more complex histories about those who had to work within the fiction factory and even suggest additional strategies they adopted beyond covert resistance.

To undo the pernicious legacy haunting dime fiction, Denning looks ahead to its afterlife—to later known authors from more diverse backgrounds who were prompted by the dime novel to write, singling out how "Richard Wright recalled [dime novels] as 'part of the dreams of my youth'" (264). Wright published his first story (in the 1920s) at age fifteen. In his memoir *Black Boy*, he explains that he was inspired to write when young because of the fantasies of young people's achievements in dime-novels—he had "read my Horatio Alger stories, my pulp stories" ("Black" 147). Yet even though the "bloody thunder" (136) of these stories "enlarged my knowledge ... more than anything I had encountered so far," so that to Wright "they were revolutionary, my gateway to the world" (113), ultimately a family friend pointed out to him the ugly rhetoric of white egalitarianism, hate, and violent Ku Klux Klan propaganda in the pages of the newspaper that carried them (115). Made aware of the context—and how they had called him to writing within a racist structure at odds with his identity—Wright gave up those papers. This incompatibility of African-American expression within the language of a nation hostile to its meaning, however, shaped Wright's subsequent work and became its story. Bigger's tragedy in *Native Son*, for example, reflects Wright's own struggle as an American author, exposing how the plots at these authors' disposal speak a brutality against Black being that poses an existential threat.

The paradox of speculative fiction—attempting to imagine difference using the formulas of the same—not only grows out of “the excessive violence that created the American nation” but also tries to aestheticize that past, Maia Gil’Adí argues (107, 113). By turning its ugly realities into fictions, such plots hope to cover over reality—yet this “aesthetic remedy” they offer is only an illusion (Gil’Adí 96). In this reading, boy inventors are one instance of how youth is instrumentalised as the symbol of a future solution to current insoluble problems. Nevertheless, I would argue that this impossibility is one that young writers (like Senarens) take on anyway through the act of writing before their time. Though the dime novel’s ideological violence continues to inform the juvenile tradition in the twentieth century—so insidious that, as Evans shows, even Senarens’s imagined automata were shaped by racist caricature—the category of youth can still provide new ways to read if young writers are no longer romanticised as able to escape ideology but understood as working in and against it. The afterlife of the dime novel haunted other young writers—white writers as well as writers of colour—long after its era had passed. The ongoing recovery of work by a range of unanticipated young writers suggests not just how these writers operated within these persistent confines but also their need to find other traditions to complicate and supplant this legacy.

Afterlife

THE LEGACY persisted for young writers attempting to publish because an idea of dime writing seemed indiscernible from youth. In 1878, Bret Harte (1836–1902), an erstwhile young author and a sometime dime novelist, wrote what he called a “Young America” spoof of that form, highlighting the centrality of juvenility to it—starting with its title, *ad absurdum* “The Young America Condensed Novel. By Bret Harte. The Hoodlum Band; Or, the Boy Chief, the Infant Politician, and the Pirate Prodigy, by Jack Whackaway. Author of ‘The Boy Slaver,’ ‘The Immature Incendiary,’ ‘The Precocious Pugilist,’ etc. etc.”¹⁶ In this exaggerated send-up, Harte lampooned the “youth of America, conscious of their power and a literature of their own” (Harte 33)—by which he meant the dime novel form he was parodying, a mode then at its height.

Within his spoof, Harte caricatures a Native American “Chief” precisely because doing so was conventional in frontier dime novels. His stereotyping, however, is also meant meta-discursively to call attention to those conventions. In fact, in Harte’s foregrounding of what Philip Deloria calls “playing Indian,” his Indigenous character confesses that he needs to read the latest dime novels as soon as they come out because, without them, he does not know how to understand his Native American identity; he laments that “without a dime novel or a ‘Young America,’ how am I to keep up” (37).¹⁷ Harte’s winking humour makes clear that contemporary readers were conscious of the ways that dime-novel representations shaped understandings of

America (especially of its Indigenous people) in recognizably conventionalised ways. At the same time, however, Harte denatures this critique by depicting those sacrificed to dime formulas as happily in cahoots with their stereotypical depictions, and supposedly lacking identity unless mimicking those conventions.

That people might be defined by what they read was a general concern of the time. The rise of the popular and commercial periodical press meant that readership itself was changing. This changed subject position promised readers agency, but actually just sold them things, print historian Christopher Wilson argues, positioning them as passive consumers in “a world of illusory power and participation that masked delimited options and prefabricated responses” (“Rhetoric” 44). In his 1907 retrospection upon the dime novel, Charles Harvey captures the impulse in the dime novel’s particular prefabrications—a fantasy of a time-gone-by, but one explicitly recognised as altered by that act of recollection. Such alteration—and its acknowledgement—are vital; they remade history into a “usable past,” Bold argues (borrowing Van Wyck Brooks’s term), a remaking which provides the dime novel’s very appeal and utility (“Review” 206). Using his recollection of youth to epitomize this fantasy of a usable past that promises the future people think they want, Harvey echoes Wordsworth’s treatment of the French Revolution in *The Prelude*, which collapses revolution into nostalgia: “Through Beadle’s hypnotic spell,—Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven” (Harvey 37).

Youth is subject and object of this spell—reciprocally created by, even as it seeks to shape, such historical fantasies. “We have heard too much about boys,” writes in 1906 the unnamed author of the “Slick Parker” detective novels, referring to the myth of boy readers so caught in the dime novel’s spell that they run away or commit crimes in its name (Author 60). He stresses instead how the novice dime-novel *author* also “soon falls under the spell—that mystic influence which sends boys to the Rockies armed to the teeth and gravely cocking their pistols at every turn of the road. Author, publisher, and boy reader—all live in a world that is a distorted creation” (60). The problem for dime writers aware of the form’s limitations—as Harte (and the Slick Parker author) seem to be here—is how both to conjure and puncture its ideological spell.

A spell that if anything made its distorted creations more diffuse, and harder to escape, after the era of the dime novel seemed passed into history. The dime novel’s “mass techniques left their imprint on novelistic rhetoric and reception” that followed (Bold, “Popular” 307). The very identity of writers in general had been changed by the fiction factory. Even as they vied for more serious attention, young twentieth-century writers still saw their writing “predominantly as the product of technical expertise rather than inspiration” and “viewed the market as the primary arbiter of literary value” (Wilson, qtd. in Hentea, “Late” 179–80). That such fiction-factory values had become so widely disseminated may explain the vehemence against the dime industry long after it might have ceased to matter. In 1914, Frank K. Mathews, the librarian of the Boy Scouts of America, was still at war with a form he knew to be

vanishing: “slot-machine Juveniles,” he called dime novels, “mile-a-minute fiction,” which he felt “are, not written, but manufactured” (652). He called for books about real life that rejected “the cleverness of these hustling boys . . . these up-to-the-minute boy heroes” of dime fiction (652). Yet, even as he inveighed against them, he knew the “the volumes of the dime or the nickel novel are fast disappearing,” estimating that “the circulation of the leading nickel novel has been reduced from 200,000 to 50,000 a week” (652). Other pundits ascribed this decline to the efforts of Boy Scouts themselves, for the Scouts organization had started its own library—“a careful selection of books” envisioned by Mathiews—in hopes that these books of rousing non-fiction would “compete with the dime novel type” and remake history in the image it wanted of young America (Merritt 191).

Putnam’s Boys’ Books by Boys

STARTING in 1925, New York publisher G. P. Putnam brought out a line of juvenile-authored books meant to redefine (and profit from) what American youth was and could do.¹⁸ Putnam tried expressly to transform dime fiction escapades into the real-world stories of travel and exploration that Mathiews described. He commissioned go-ahead writing by young men embarked on genuine adventures, bringing out a series he called “Putnam’s Boys’ Books *by* Boys” (“Advertisement 21” 722). Putnam promised that his “young adventurers wrote accounts of their travels” (Liefers 31) in order to offer genuine experience in the place of fantasy. Putnam’s own son, David Binney Putnam, wrote five travelogues for the series, starting when he was twelve.¹⁹ Though the books proffered real-life adventures by capable youth as their appeal to young audiences, who were meant to identify with the authors’ skill and prowess as explorers, I would argue that they also marketed the capability and accomplishments of their young writers *as* writers. “What is the use of waiting to grow up before producing a ‘best seller?’” one story about David Putnam begins (“David” 124); it profiles him even less as an explorer than as an already expert and professional author: “David not only writes, but has given talks He has something worth while to say and the faculty of saying it in an interesting way” (124–25).

Juvenilia scholar Caroline Liefers points out that Putnam stressed that his series offered “educational content beyond the exploits of Tom Swift and the Hardy Boys” (34). An article in *The Youth’s Companion* shared Mathiews’s and Putnam’s aspiration of literalising old formulas into actual modern life, arguing that dime-novel adventures were bankrupt because merely imaginary; as cheap fantasies, they can only give a reader “his own old ideas in a new dress . . . because it takes so little effort to read them. These Indians and the heroes of these novels are the Indians and heroes of the boy’s imagination; not real Indians and heroes” (Hadley 523). Yet Liefers shows how Putnam’s series grew out of the fictional context he was attempting to displace—out of both “popular frontier nostalgia” and his own personal disappointment that “I had not been in on the making of the ‘real west,’ in those roaring days of Bret Harte

heroes” (Lieffers 40). She points to the “formulaic narratives” (40) that are characteristic of Putnam’s Boys’ books despite their claims to be real. Indeed, *The New York Times Book Review* explicitly saw them as an up-to-date version of old scripts. It calls Putnam’s explorations “really not a bad ambition for an adventurous boy who knows that cowboys and Indian fighters are going out of style” (Duffus X19).

Boys’ stories *by* boys deploy this old and persistent ideology, maintaining long past the closing of the American frontier the violent white fantasy of subjugating Indigenous people. They do so, Lieffers argues, to “exemplif[y] a new, transnational, and territorially flexible frontier mythology for the interwar American imagination” that she defines as a kind of “ludic imperialism” (33). My research suggests that the desire Mathews expressed for such new stories invoked dime modes—fueled by such dime series as Frank Tousey’s 1898 “School-Boy Explorers”—so much that Tousey actually brought out an additional “Boy Explorers” novel in 1923, probably seeking to capitalize on the renewed interest in exploration revealed by the founding of the Boy Guides and Boy Scouts about a decade earlier. Just as Senarens’s hero Frank Reade had done, Putnam’s actual boy explorers went all over the globe and “achieved symbolic conquest through science, technology, and know-how” (33).

The ludic imperialism Lieffers notes was ever-present, and only partly disguised by play; it showed through in the margins: David Putnam’s product endorsements—the Daisy rifle, Western Lubaloy ammunition, and the Zulu blowgun (“Advertisement 9,” “Advertisement 25,” “Advertisement 37”)—encoded the violence and purported racial superiority of boy’s fantasy fiction. The expressly juvenile-authored accounts of these skilled and confident explorers recycled old plots for present social needs, making clear how this dime-novel heritage remained “a tool of legitimacy and a saleable commodity in a larger project of business” and ideology (Lieffers 55). Lieffers does record “at least one moment of ambivalence” that initially unsettled the scripts of the social order—the Scouts initially resisted when told to “let their African guides do the work” of building camp (46, 47) because at least for a moment “Scouting’s emphasis on industry and readiness” (that is, on youth’s capacity to make its own way) came into conflict with imperial hierarchies (47). But in general, the authors of these books continued the myth of Young America as “mentally awake” (55)—and, because their authors were “uniformly white, [and] clean-cut,” in “Boys’ Books by Boys” such wide-awakeness manifestly became “a kind of shoring up of American racial and cultural superiority” (38).

Horace Wade

THIS DIME-inspired fantasy of “clean-cut,” young, and white America remained enormously saleable in the 1920s. Eleven-year-old Horace Wade’s 1920 dime-inspired best seller *In the Shadow of Great Peril* “sold out in three days”; it went “to a fifth edition within three months,” and “publishers predict[ed] a sale of 1,000,000” (“Reilly & Lee Ad” 777; Burroughs 48; “Horace Wade” 4K). Wade’s publishers both parlayed and

disarmed his dime heritage—promoting Wade’s hypnotic spell as “a composite Standish-Alger-Henty memory” (“Reilly & Lee Ad” 777; “Burt Standish” was fiction-factory author Gilbert Patten’s penname; G. A. Henty wrote historical adventure tales for boys about empire and conquest). They asked George Ade to write Wade’s preface—Ade, another tongue-in-cheek humorist like Bret Harte, was simultaneously sincere and ironic about fiction’s dime heritage.²⁰

Despite his publishers’ attempt to play both ends against the middle, the middle-class Wade—who explicitly wrote to get paid, proud to have earned an identity as a professional writer—was much more open, even unabashed, about his dime background than was Putnam (the gentleman-amateur). In accounts of his writing, Wade told how he had “poured [*sic*] over the thrilling adventures of Deadwood Dick” (“W. A. Pinkerton” 28) and in his memoir credited as early influences “the Rover Boys, Tom Swift and the inspiring Horatio Alger books”—the very books with which Putnam’s series took issue (*Boy’s Life* 7). Wade extolled their formulas, in which “boys could work miracles” and “win fame and fortune” in adventures “dripping blood from every page” (10)—he found them successful as well as thrilling. His audience thought so too, lauding his book in the same terms.²¹ “It is a story of action,” the papers wrote, “so much action in fact that at times the pages seem to turn themselves” (“Chicago Boy” 14). “He will enthrall the youth of his generation with just such stories as made the creator of Frank and Dick Merriwell [dime novelist Patten/Standish] immortal” (“Book a Week” 4).

Wade remembered his publisher promoting him as “America’s Youngest Author” and “the World’s Only Boy Novelist” (Wade, *Boy’s Life* 10). His fame and success were repeated in numerous newspaper stories, meant to figure young writers like Wade as no-nonsense wide-awake heroes themselves, equal to anything. Yet Wade satirizes such cultural expectations of juvenile writers in a critique of prodigy he wrote in his mid-twenties when he was past his juvenile fame: in that book, *Great Scott* (1932), he expressly fictionalizes his own career. At one and the same time the innocent victim of adult ambition and an unlikeable little schemer, this character’s deflation from boy wonder is in part effected when he is kidnapped by gangsters, who give him a dime novel to read (the only kind of book they know).²²

Wade was in fact a serious professional writer; *Great Scott’s* version of youth exploited by adult need was not the comedy of its well-known predecessor, O. Henry’s 1907 “The Ransom of Red Chief” (in which the hapless criminals are defeated by the irrepressibility of the boy they kidnap, tellingly symbolised through his play impersonating an Indigenous “Chief”). Wade himself had been targeted for an actual mob kidnapping after he wrote some articles about the Leopold and Loeb trial when he worked as a newspaper reporter between ages eleven and fifteen (see Wade, *Boy’s Life* 101–04).²³ Despite a wise-guy tone, Wade’s pictures of being a young writer openly sketched the youthful trauma of working within the system. His memoir, recounting how adult managers swindled the child-star Jackie Coogan out of his fortune (23–24), was aware of the harm caused by adult power: “My boyhood

had been stolen from me like Peter Pan's shadow," he wrote, looking back; "I was doomed to be capitalized, commercialized, limited, insured, and all rights reserved" (11). At age eleven, he was sent to report on serial killers such as Charles Newton Harvey (see Wade, "Boy Novelist" 1).²⁴ He was passed off as a patient in a pediatric psychiatric institution, spending a week in it completely on his own to try to expose its abuses (*Boy's Life* 48–60).²⁵ He was sent undercover as a Bowery newsboy. At age fourteen, he was assigned to write about the drug trade (Wade, "Boy Journalist" 12). "My disillusion was complete," he wrote about those experiences. "So much for dreams" (*Boy's Life* 42). But, as a professional writer, he did not believe in such dreams anyway: when a dime-novels character "known as the Rocky Mountain kid and a dead ringer for Buffalo Bill" showed him "the very room in which O. Henry, John Howard Payne, and Nathaniel Hawthorne composed many of their immortal works" (43), Wade already knew that the dismal garret would not be bathed in romantic light; "the light it offered ... cast a dull gray tinge over the scene" instead: "Crust of bread and an attic. Beware! Beware! Such is the destiny of writers everywhere" (43–44).

In his memoir, Wade explains that he did all that was asked of him as a young author because he considered writing his job, and he was good at it. "Horace takes his authorship seriously," newspaper stories about him reported ("Horace A. Wade" 13).²⁶ Wade's allusions in the newspaper accounts and interviews he produced demonstrated that he had read widely. "The boy spoke like a veritable young Scott or Dickens or Balzac," a newspaper interviewer wrote (Hale 4). The *New York World* pundit Irvin S. Cobb recommended Wade's first book not for its novelty but because he thought the boy was already a craftsman with "a natural aptitude for words, for plot, and for sequence, which most writers lack" (qtd. in Denton SM4). "If Horace's style is juvenile I freely confess my stories are baby prattle," wrote the Chicago society columnist Patricia Dougherty (5). Serious about his fiction, Wade corresponded with George Bernard Shaw, Theodore Dreiser, and F. Scott Fitzgerald—the latter gave Wade sound advice about writing, and shopped the sequel to *In the Shadow of Great Peril* (entitled *The Heavy Hand of Justice*) to Scribner's for him.²⁷

Proud of his status as young author, Wade refused any understanding of juvenile writing that diminished it. He passed all the usual tests to prove his prodigy, including extempore examination and the display of his boyish and unformed handwriting, so that readers could feel that Wade "was all that he boyishly claimed to be" ("Boy Author Makes" 14).²⁸ He thought Daisy Ashford a fraud because her *The Young Visitors* was written in 1890 (when she was nine) but not published until 1919, and he thought no young writer would wait "twenty years before publishing." He was sure J. M. Barrie must have written *The Young Visitors* instead—a subterfuge that he considered not "fair to children who write" because built on the premise that they were incapable of doing it well ("Chicago Produces" 537).²⁹ On the speaking circuit, he urged advertisers to hire boys and girls to write their ad copy ("Hire Kids" 5), out of the assumption that kids speak best to other kids. "You can't imagine how great is

the inspiration I get from meeting boys and girls. I am writing for them,” he stated. “I am writing for the boys and girls of America” (“Junior” 2).³⁰

After his heroes break into an old shack, they quip: “One thing about this place is that they don't use much style” (*In the Shadow* 62). As a writer, Wade was well aware of using what the papers at the time, mimicking his understatement, called “not a little style” (P. Cook 12). “Book reviewers in America and England confessed their amazement at the command of literary ‘technique’” (Robinson 29). One repeated talking point of his lectures was that adults could not reach youth because they simply could *not* write as young people could—adults did not understand nor could they reproduce youth’s up-to-the minute language (“Hire ‘Kids’” 5). “To write you must have words,” he deadpanned, and spoke of his interest in language at almost every interview (“Boy Author Is Peeved” 5). Wade was “a veritable worshipper of his own youth” (Hale 4), and his youthful aesthetics retroactively underscored the understanding that dime literature is indissoluble from youth: “One is not so much amazed by the fact that this novel of adventure was written by a boy of eleven, as seized by the suspicion that all popular novels of this thrilling character might be written by children of eleven” (“Chicago Produces” 535).

The structures of the dime formulas that gave rise to Wade’s writing fashioned his sense of what young people could do and say—and particular dime beliefs inform Wade’s characters: “They seek the strenuous days and ha-ha at danger—calm in the presence of their persecutors; modest in victory,” Ade observes. Moreover, “They are fond of food and fighting—quite Anglo-Saxon, one might say. Regular fellows!” ([ii]). Though its characters are fond of fighting, *In the Shadow of Great Peril* does not blatantly intrude the (usually violent) “Anglo-Saxon” sense of superiority held by its “regular” fellows—what one popular account (Josiah Strong’s 1885 text of Christian nationalism) called the “competition among races for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled” (qtd. in Saxon, *Rise and Fall* 343). In *To Hell with Hollywood* (1931), however, written when Wade was in his mid-twenties, the use of racist and ethnic epithets for all groups is widespread and “particularly offensive” (Carr 149). This book is explicitly anti-Semitic; more, as Steven Carr argues, it assumes that “the inclusion of any minority ethnic group” is “at odds with Anglo-Saxonism” (150). Such outspoken prejudice can be traced back to inherited notions of American exceptionalism, of Young America’s ideas of “Manifest Destiny and other traces of supposed Anglo-Saxon superiority” (Carr 150). Later in life, Wade seemed to backtrack from such intolerance (however partially or belatedly): in his memoir, he celebrated Will Roger’s Cherokee heritage (*Boy’s Life* 30) and recounted how becoming “an honorary member of the Winnebago tribe” (149) supplanted his earlier unenlightened ideas of “playing ‘Indians and Cowboys,’” which had involved “wiping out whole tribes of” the former “with gory delight” (149)—seeming, by that time, to some degree to question rather than just repeat received racist fictional formulas.

Harry F. Liscomb

NINETEEN-year-old African-American writer Harry F. Liscomb was another *phenom* of the 1920s directly inspired by dime novels, but one who did not need to wait till middle age in order to try to undermine their racist formulas. As Clark Barwick, who has dedicated a full-length study to the work of Liscomb, emphasizes, this young Black writer had to navigate “the stereotypes and oft-racist expectations of the readership that he was attempting to court” in order to publish at all (200). Just as Williams’s reading of Senarens highlights his subtle subversion of the tropes he uses, Barwick’s reading of Liscomb’s 1925 *The Prince of Washington Square*, subtitled “*an Up-to-the-Minute Story*,” emphasises his use of the double voice of irony to negotiate these paradoxes. One doubleness of his book lies in the incongruity between what made it up-to-the-minute—its stylistically innovative account by a writer of colour of jazz-age youth culture in Greenwich Village—and the persistent and troubling influence of dime conventions in it. In fact, Liscomb’s book opens with its hero “vainly essaying to peruse the opening chapters of the current dime novel thriller by Nicholas Carter” (21). Reviewers of the time almost universally understood the dime novel as the shaping inspiration for Liscomb’s book, “inspired by the combined styles of Horatio Alger, and the masterly creation of that superman, Nicholas Carter” (Carter 281); “a combination of Diamond Dick and Ethel M. Dell” (“*Bookman’s*” 217); but they were less sure what to think of his pronounced stylistic inventiveness, and some reviewers mocked him for combining both.³¹

One summarised the novel’s Algeresque formula: “The plot is the conventional tale of the courageous newsboy, who is without a peer among his companions; who, presented with the opportunity, rescues a young heiress from a perilous situation or two; and, in consequence, is taken from his surroundings by her father” (Carter 281). The *New York Times Book Review* found it “the first effort of a jejeune mind fed by the poison weeklies of the bookstall, the less honestly comic of the comic strips and the meaner section of the press” (“Master Ashford” BR8). *The New Yorker* considered it “just the story that would be written by a clever kid with the kind of head big words stick wrongside-up in, after consuming bales of magazine and newspaper trash and acres of movie captions. Our difficulty is that what’s supposed to make you laugh is his largely unintentional burlesque of all that trash—and we found the burlesque too close to the originals” (“Books” 26).³²

Yet Liscomb told a reporter that he used familiar dime formulas with a double purpose—deliberately to capture “the ear of a larger group” in advance of a body of novels about African-American experience that he planned to be “significant and enduring” (Moon 9). For Barwick, the notoriously tricky instability of irony (as it says one thing and means another) meant that Liscomb’s irony about the conventions he had to use escaped many cultural gatekeepers, tone deaf to his ironising and oblivious to the contradictions of the lived experience he depicted. Unlike Senarens, Liscomb published under his own name, and photographs of him circulated in the newspapers from the book’s first publication so that his identity as an African-American writer

was known from the start. How far Liscomb's race influenced the reviewers of the polite press to pan his book remained unspoken—explicitly, at any rate, they condemned the book instead for the youth of its writer and the influence of popular fiction on it. Unable to see this young Black writer as intentional or ironic, at best these reviews acknowledged that they didn't know what to make of the book—though they were usually happy enough to decry its “air of a mystification” or pronounce it as “mirthless and nasty” (“Master Ashford” BR8). Even Liscomb's publishers were unable to give Liscomb any credit for intending or controlling a send-up of dime novel conventions. They promoted his book not for its conscious wit but as “a gem of unconscious humor” (“Advertisement—Frederick” viii).

“That a collection of white critics in the 1920s would deny the legitimacy of an African American author and his text was nothing new,” Barwick observes (53). He directly connects these critics' misprision of Liscomb to a cultural turf war over who gets to represent *Young America*, arguing that the “suspicion about *Prince* particularly recalls the language used to describe the life and work of Phillis Wheatley” (who published as a teenager in the 1790s) (53n170). He also links Liscomb to the young Langston Hughes and to Countee Cullen, Liscomb's friend and classmate (56), sketching out a Black juvenile tradition during the Harlem Renaissance that is still overlooked today. Sympathetic reviewers at the time, however, instead directly ascribed Liscomb's expertise to his early achievement as a writer: the *Afro American* called him “a veteran in the writing game ... contributing short stories and articles to the newspapers and magazines ever since he was fourteen years old” (“Youthful” 10). Calling “Liscomb's style ... a remarkable mixture of ... the yellow journals, and the *Bronx Home News*,” the *Daily Eagle* reminded readers that Liscomb had published his first story when an early teen by winning a contest for youth in that newspaper (“Negro Customs” 3).³³

Liscomb's example garnered enough interest from other youth—and African-American youth in particular—that the poet Melvin B. Tolson (then on leave from a teaching job at the HBCU Wiley College) wrote an article on Liscomb—“The Lone Wolf of Harlem”—for Wiley's college-age readers.³⁴ Most reviewers, whether or not they approved, regarded *The Prince of Washington Square* as depicting its up-to-the-minute modern scene as the province of youth—or, as Barwick puts it, “here we encounter America's 1920s youth culture as actually presented by a young person” (205). The *Negro World*, in fact, in an article entitled “The Young Negro Is Doing Things,” feels Liscomb captures youth's modern mode. His is such a distinctly cutting-edge world that “if some of our forefathers could come back for a few minutes, they would declare it is not the same world they had left” (“Young Negro” 4).³⁵ “He keeps his head and points to the future,” Tolson claimed (1), stressing how Liscomb performed youth's up-to-the-minute style.

Despite the nay-saying by the stuffer journals insensible to his wit and double meaning, Liscomb's book was enormously popular—a blockbuster proclaimed as “one of those spontaneous combustions of youthful genius” that had definitely

caught on (Paterson D13). It “created a sensation in literary circles ... and sold about 10,000 copies” (“Young Liscomb” A2).³⁶ Liscomb became an example of modern youthful professionalism and skill, who, in a “methodical” way, “applies himself with diligence to the business of writing and turns out his quota of three thousand words a day” (Moon 9). But even given his wideawake, workaday approach, his modern style stood out. “YOUTH’S NEW STYLE NOVEL BIG SUCCESS,” one headline screamed—that style led to its “amazing success and record-breaking sales” (“Youth’s” A1).³⁷ The very incongruity between its retrograde dime-novel residue and its newfangled and unprecedented language—“the disjunction between the book’s dime-novel plot and its polysyllabic rendering” (Barwick 50)—struck readers. Barwick calls its new style “a modern mash-up of genres and influences” (200), bringing a dime heritage together with newer American innovations in popular form. Even as they panned it, the *New York Times* had recognised the influence of comic strip on it; the *New Yorker* of moving-picture intertitles.³⁸ See Figure 2 for an example.

When the purple portières had safely shrouded their retreating shadows from the critical observation of the bachelors, Jack, who had been vainly essaying to peruse the opening chapters of the current dime novel thriller by Nicholas Carter, momentarily repositioned it on his chair and executed a complicated handspring on the soft sinking rug, which was well applauded by the audience for his unscheduled performance. After his acrobatic feat had been successfully performed, Jack hustled himself into his seat and again started to imbibe the hair-raising contents of his book in peace for the first time since his access into the rest-room.

Fig. 2. From The Prince of Washington Square; an Up-to-the-Minute Story, by Harry F. Liscomb, pp. 20-21.

Liscomb’s style—poetic, obtrusive, original—was not just distinctly modern but implicitly Modernist—at least in the sense that Gertrude Stein may have been a direct influence on the sheer verbal play that defamiliarised and foregrounded its language.³⁹ Stein also directly influenced Richard Wright, who characterised her mode as an “experiment in words” (Miller 108). Given the experimentation and play of sound in Liscomb’s writing, it’s not surprising that he was a favourite author of the celebrated improvisationist jazz singer Florence Mills (Egan 124). The white humorist Lawton MacKall, known for his intricate word play, described Liscomb’s style as “genteel yet jazzy,” acknowledging “a felicity of diction which is all his own” (MacKall D5).⁴⁰ “His diction has the merit of, let us say, complete uniqueness,” the activist, writer, and (later) jurist Eunice Carter wrote of Liscomb. “His dictum is something marvelous to

contemplate.” Though not yet a famous prosecutor, Carter was using “dictum” in its legal sense of something said, language itself as a fact and inescapable presence: “The full force of one of his most complete and involved sentences is positively overwhelming There are words, torrents of words; great and small, and strung into sentences that captivate by their sheer naivete and puerile self-confidence” (Carter 282). What such reviews demonstrate is that some readers understood Liscomb’s dazzling wordplay to be as spectacular and noticeable as the bald dime-novel formulas he also deploys. The style through which he recycles old formulas, so at odds with expectations, makes those expectations visible by adding unexpected virtuosic wordplay to them, thus to some degree destabilizing the transparency of his plots. Refusing the incongruity between his avant-garde style and mass-market formulas makes his book about the making (and unmaking) of meaning. Yet, as Barwick carefully details, *The Prince of Washington Square* disappeared from literary history—despite Liscomb’s arty style. It is left off of the list of notable African-American books kept by Liscomb’s own 135th Street Library and remains absent in subsequent academic bibliographies—“discounted,” Barwick argues, “for its mass-audience design” (200).

While the white-owned slicks and his own stodgy publisher could not accept a juvenile writer of colour as a wide-awake and self-confident young professional—or as a representative Young American at all—some reviewers (largely, but not solely, in African-American newspapers) appreciated his achievement: “He’s a hero here,” one African-American newspaper claimed about Liscomb (“Prince” A6). They did so in part because they appreciated Liscomb’s double voice. “At the office of Stokes they believe him to be a second ‘Merton of the Movies,’” wrote the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, referring to a 1922 novel about a gullible character who represents the very opposite of astute and savvy (so naïve he unwittingly becomes a comic sensation by delivering lines he believes wholly serious).⁴¹ “They think he doesn’t know how funny he is,” the article goes on. “But Harry declares he knows he’s funny and intends to remain so for two more books, after which he is going in for serious stuff” (“Negro Customs” 3).⁴² As Williams and Barwick have done recently, such critics at the time emphasised irony’s strategic use. Eunice Carter—herself, as Lorraine Roses argues, “by no means averse to the use of subverted literary conventions to undermine white social conventions”—regarded *The Prince of Washington Square* as engaged in such deliberate subversion, considering the book “Harry Liscomb’s singularly absurd parody of Horatio Alger tales” (Roses 48–49).

Like Robert Carlton Brown, dime novelist turned experimental modernist, Liscomb saw no disjunction between serious literary aspirations and dime novel standards of productivity, proficiency, and profits. The young Henry Lee Moon—writer, scholar, later public relations officer for the NAACP—recognised in Liscomb’s “swift-moving” plots his ambition as a professional writer to achieve both best-seller status and serious literary fame—“He expects the fruition of his efforts to land him on the top notch of American writers ... to make his pile from books which

he believes are adaptable for Hollywood productions ‘I am writing now for the general public,’” Liscomb told him (Moon 9).⁴³ Barwick argues that Liscomb’s “desire to write bestsellers” (48)—and “by the age of 21” (87)—led to his neglect as a writer: “he harbored a passion for genre fiction, and he unabashedly sought literary and commercial fame” (62). Though conventional wisdom considered high literary ambition and popular forms incompatible, their conflation distinguishes the modern mode in which youth barreled over outdated axioms. “Mr. Liscomb resembles a dynamo in action. He keeps going at top speed. He writes in a bold, fearless style” (“Missing” 6). “His tale rushes along with the fury of a runaway milk wagon. He overturns . . . applecarts” (MacKall D5).

Liscomb traded on the conventional formulas of a dime mode familiar to readers, while also seeking to upset apple-carts, to subvert literary conventions, to undermine “white social conventions” (Roses 48). The structural irony of his writing assumed that the parody of dime formulas could defuse the invocation and recycling of their attitudes—but the question remained: whether the collapse of citation and use involved in irony made it by necessity still “too close to the originals” (“Books” 26). Mary White Ovington, white activist and children’s writer, one of the founders of the NAACP, like Carter understood *The Prince of Washington Square* as a send-up—an “absurd, highly entertaining tale” and “a delightful departure” for a Black writer. Nevertheless, she wondered where Liscomb’s writing could go after he “drops his burlesque,” for, without it, “he cannot again throw Chinese and Negro, millionaire and bootblack, Italian tough and flapper, into the same drawing room” (Ovington 2).

In 1925, Ovington implied it was some suggested mockery of the dime heritage behind *The Prince of Washington Square*, its parody of dime stereotypes, that allowed Liscomb latitude when it came to the dime novel’s baggage of intolerance—a tenacious burden of prejudice (she suggests) that might prove difficult in future works to shed. More recently, Barwick also reads those traces of bigotry as part of a covert critique. He does note the book’s most visible legacy of racism: the “strange, racist explosion” within Liscomb’s book, which offers his own explicit and disturbing use of anti-Asian slurs and caricature. Yet these ugly depictions, as Barwick argues, mark Liscomb’s attempt to identify and refuse the racism in *white* culture (102). Barwick identifies one salient scene, in which a character named Lee Fung, whom Liscomb depicts as a Chinese mobster, assaults a white flapper named Pauline. He locates the scene as “directly inspired by a villain of the same name who appeared in ‘The Bradys and the Opium King’ [1907], a popular detective story published in *Secret Service*” (105–06), a Tousey nickel weekly (1899–1925) that traded on anti-Asian storylines. Barwick contends, however, that—because Liscomb has the white character Pauline recount the assault—Liscomb’s treatment of this scene becomes a subtle burlesque that does not endorse dime stereotypes but indirectly refutes them (123). In Barwick’s view, what seems racism inherited from dime formulas is actually the opposite, meant to highlight the white narrator Pauline’s racism, not share it. In this reading, Liscomb presents without comment this scene of “modern, cross-ethnic encounter in all of its

ugliness” (Barwick102) as a considered and “subversive, cutting critique of whiteness” (104). Yet it seems to me that painful moments like this one demonstrate the limits of irony—because of its notorious instability, it can only take critique so far, unable ultimately fully to recuperate or to counter such pernicious attitudes precisely because, even if it tries to refuse them (always difficult to determine), it recycles them in doing so.

Barwick would like to turn these uncomfortable moments fully into a critique by Liscomb “to illustrate the backwardness of white racial anxieties” (106). The young author subtly “challenges and undermines” that ideology, Barwick argues, through presenting “a corrective or redemptive counter-act” to the formulaic action (107n361) that must fly under the radar in order to get published at the time (just as Senarens did, as we have seen). For instance, though Liscomb seems to caricature his hero’s friend by giving that character a minstrel-show name, Barwick contends that he reveals that figure to be “an intelligent, perceptive African-American character who in many ways facilitates the novel” (128)—a father figure to the hero, a member of the Harlem Hellfighter battalion (heroes of the Great War)—and concludes that this character actually “emerges as a forceful symbol for full Negro citizenship in America” from behind a stereotype that slips to show this subtext (131). In a book that subjects all groups—Chinese American, Irish American, Jewish American—to clear ethnic stereotyping and identifies them by bald racial epithets throughout, however, such correctives show the limits of how muted ironic inflections still remain.

For, *pace* Williams and Barwick, irony is so not easily parsed or stabilised, but remains messy, complicated, and unpredictable. The complex afterlife of the dime novel exemplifies the difficulty, absent control of or choice between mainstream means of production, of recalling the fiction factory’s formulas without also putting them into play. Jonathan Culler long ago considered how “repeating a formula in different circumstances” calls to mind and never fully annuls its prior (or future) meanings—any one separate iteration cannot “arrest the play of meaning” along the line of such repetitions, making it impossible fully to discern when that formula is strictly meant and when it is merely cited (Culler 123, 125). In connection with an “unsettling instance of domestic abuse” in this novel (184n634), Barwick concedes that, just because a book “stages these tensions (rather than imagining that they do not exist), does not mean that the novel’s representations are above scrutiny or critique” (187n640). No matter how deliberate Liscomb’s irony, given irony’s difficult doubleness, it also risks “reinforcing racist attitudes and stereotypes” even as it critiques them (Barwick 103).

While the intense stylistic play of this book asks readers to identify a different system of aesthetics and a different mode of representation than dime predecessors alone provide, the legacy of dime attitudes in it remains starkly present. The book foregrounds those tensions without yet being able to follow any alternative model to take it beyond them. Though Liscomb had little but mainstream dime precedents as models for his popular writing ambitions, however, his example offered an alternative

model for the genre writing that followed: as Barwick argues, “Liscomb deserves credit as a pioneer, especially for later African American writers such as Frank Yerby and Willard Motley, both of whom achieved massive popular success in the 1940s” (206–07).

In part, Liscomb also offered a model of future possibilities for other young writers to achieve because he had tried to do so when young. In 1934, in hopes of providing a new outlet precisely for young Black writers, Dorothy West (who herself began publishing as a teenager) founded the *Challenge: A Literary Quarterly*. Liscomb’s cohort Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen would publish in it; Richard Wright became associate editor for the one issue of the rebranded *New Challenge* that followed in its wake. By that time, however, Liscomb had vanished entirely from the literary scene. Yet Yerby, coming after Liscomb, *did* publish in *Challenge* as a young writer (a teenager).⁴⁴ Initially regarded as “a pulpster peddling stereotypical images to a predominantly white audience” (Teutsch) because of his “decision to write financially rewarding, commercially successful fiction, as opposed to literature with more overt social and political resonance” (Massé), Yerby became “the first black novelist to become a millionaire from writing” (Barwick 207n691). But he is also now enjoying recovery in academic circles by critics such as Teutsch and Massé. “In many ways,” as Barwick concludes, this writer who came after “realized the caree[r] that Liscomb had hoped for” (207).

THE QUANDARY of the popular lies in these complications. William Charvat contends that “nothing better demonstrates the dilemma of literary history than its uncertainty about what to do with popular writers in general” (290). One strategy, Bold suggests, is to go beyond the either/or thinking (capitulation or rejection) that ultimately over-simplifies formulaic writing by ignoring its material publication context. “Reducing this publishing contest to a binary opposition marginalizes a range of other interests,” she writes (317). She encourages readings that move “away from dualism and dichotomy towards complicity, resistance, hybridity, mutuality and exchange”—a negotiation of their publication context that she finds in Indigenous writers when they insert their own cultural narratives into the midst of mainstream popular ones (“Did” 136).⁴⁵ Barwick emphasizes that Liscomb too—“one of only a few known African Americans actually working in this mode”—was “charting unfamiliar territory in popular literature” by actually writing in it (203n683). In the same way, Williams suggests Senarens wrote speculative fiction even when it could not yet imagine any techno-savvy agency beyond white privilege.

Bold highlights the “reIndigenising” of dime culture to contest the oversimplification in which “the dime-novel industry is routinely considered as white cultural production” alone (Bold, “Did” 151). She cites the way that, in her stage play *Weep-ton-no-mah, The Indian Mail Carrier* (in which she played the male lead), “Go-won-

go Mohawk's intervention constitutes more than slotting herself into a fixed paradigm" because of "her multiple capacity as playwright, actor, and costume and scene designer" ("*Vaudeville*" 83). In part Mohawk ironised the formulas she inherited: "although the script deploys stock caricatures galore" in its Irish, Mexican, and Black characters, Bold claims "they are most often used to parody, and potentially unfix ... race-based relations" so that what are usually understood as "'others' come riotously together on the staging ground of the frontier" (ibid. 88, 89). More than that, however, reviews at the time understood that "this play is entirely different from any other so-called Indian plays" because it was "the creation of an Indian woman" portraying "Scenes of actual life of the American Indian" (ibid. 97). Such stagings were inherited from, but also revised, the fiction factory's conventions in a complicated but reciprocal dialogue. Mohawk re-appropriated her title if not her storyline from an earlier 1871 Beadle and Adams' dime novel (ibid. 96), and her own play—including her part in it as cross-dressing hero—provided the subject for another three 1891 Beadle dime novels (written by Prentiss Ingraham).⁴⁶

Though it seems that neither Mohawk nor Ingraham wrote until their mid-twenties, E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake was already composing poetry in her teens. She used that "double signature" to represent in her later poetic performances how she came out of both Anglo and Haudenosaunee traditions (Tekahionwake, her family Mohawk name, itself meant "double life"), but such doubleness for these Indigenous writers suggests more than ironising the racist "prerequisite conventions of the period" (Bold, "*Vaudeville*" 103). Mohawk and Johnson/Tekahionwake also import self-defining Indigenous modes into their works, and such negotiations of popular culture "reveal more about survival, flexibility, and agency than about declination and oblivion" (Jones and Ferris 143).⁴⁷

The humour magazine *Judge*, when, in 1920, it looked back on America's dime past, wanted to preserve its intolerant prerequisites alone, the familiar ideological territory that had for so long connected the dime industry and Young America: "If you have kept the Dime Novel Emotion intact, you are still young" (de Casseres 15).⁴⁸ This author sees the meaning of dime novels as a kind of unconscious embodied sensation, the "blood curdle and goose flesh" that tell him when "the Dime Novel Emotion surged into my nerves" (15). Such youthful ideology depends on nostalgia about the good old days with all its intolerance still unbroken. De Casseres similarly explains how the plot of a dime novel recently called up the feelings of his youth through this *frisson*, in this case by explicitly indulging a fantasy of exotic otherness—"it all happened in the Orient, where things still happen" (15). He turns to youth as symbol to prop up this legacy of racism "intact"—to keep it seeming essential and natural, rather than constructed and open to question. This version of the dime industry's hypnotic spell reveals its ideological character—constructed attitudes taken by white audiences to be natural, preconceptions that are taken just to *feel* right, so that the supposed exoticness of "the Orient" (where things still happen) supposedly strikes right in the nerves, confirmed by the payout of one's own usable past rushing

back—“you are still young.” This palpable confirmation of the perceived possibilities of what people can do or could have done in this world, as literary critics Melissa Adams-Campbell and Matthew Short describe these inherited conventions, “not only *reflects* the attitudes of the time, but also, *produces* racialized attitudes”—disseminated through the form’s “repeated racial stereotypes in place of actual characterization, racially charged language, and formulaic plot lines” (25).

If mode identifies the terms by which things can happen—what subjects “can do or could have done”—then separating the operational aesthetics of youth from the dime novel aesthetic will depend on whether the hurtle of so-called American progress continues to assume the (supposedly willing) sacrifice of others through their objectification and stereotyping. The usable past that the dime novel has provided, the appeal of its spell, rests on this utility of youth as supposedly innocent symbol of what came before and what is to come—as guarantor of (the fantasy of) an American literary history that keeps things moving ahead without ever needing to change. In this way, youth is meant both to justify and to hide the preconceptions underlying racism, inequity, injustice. As Martin Woodside suggests, casting such stories as childhood ones was meant to turn these ugly American realities into “a child’s game adults used to smooth over the messy contradictions of the past and imagine a brighter future” untroubled by them (188).⁴⁹

The fantasy of Young America that tried to keep it white depended on consolidating racial differences under a constructed category of generalised otherness. Young writers of colour trying to work in the mainstream came from different backgrounds, which allowed for their non-hegemonic depictions of Cuba, Harlem, and the Western frontier—though Senarens’s Edisonades also traded on Black stereotypes to promote sympathy with Cuba, Liscomb inherited anti-Asian caricatures from dime-novel detective stories in his depiction of Harlem’s youth culture, and Go-won-go Mohawk and Johnson/Tekahionwake negotiated Wild West fantasies of Indigenous assimilation. De Certeau’s notion of playing the system presupposes there is only one system, which makes irony just one way that scholars can understand how to recover popular writing as it opened up publication for young writers. The more recent afterlife of critical attention to the fiction factory offers alternative strategies, as critics such as Bold, Barwick, Jones and Ferris, and Williams recover the real variety of young people addressing its forms. So too the definition of what it means to be double-voiced—to mean both working within but also adding to—continues to develop through critics such as Deloria, Evans, Gil’Adí, and Reheja.

In this way, the afterlife of these past forms lives on in a “continually recursive and revising process”—one Jones and Ferris identify as being of endless becoming for “the multiplicity of identities people negotiate and differentially reinforce, remember, and forget.” Meaning is constantly being revised in dialogue with the past: “Becoming thus informs and logically connects past events that help shape identities, even as those categories of identity are continually revised in the living of them” (150–51n4). Recovering the work of skilled and capable young writers brings into relief the

incommensurable demands on them as they try to change the meaning of childhood stories to be the ones that young people *tell*. I have turned to juvenile writers in this essay because they declined to see themselves as mere symbols or simply to wait for the future. Within the dime novel's "contest of resistant, assumed, and dominant voices," as Bold terms it ("Voice" 305), their very doing was the tactic by which writers such as Senarens and Liscomb tried to negotiate the entrenched structural prejudice of dime formulas. In trying to imagine their way outside of, even when they redeployed, the racism within those formulas, at the very least they punctured the sensational essentialism of the form's fantasy and brought deep-seated discords into view. That matters for literary history because—by coming to epitomize popular, hack writing—the juvenile tradition brought to the fore paradoxes in American letters, and American history. This is the story that Indigenous inheritors of dime formulas pushed past simple ironies. It reveals the faultline over which American literature itself has been formed.

NOTES

- ¹ An early twentieth-century retrospective article asserts that the dime fiction plays on "the frustrations of a large stratum of the American people" in order to "proffer immediate, if somewhat phantasmal, wish-fulfillment in their stead" (A. Jones 38–39).
- ² For an early recognition of the afterlife of the dime novel, see the 1907 *Literary Digest*—which feels that, "if we do it justice, this class of fiction, now so much reprobated, must be given an important place in the literature of this country" ("Dime Novel" 94). It goes on to argue (from R. L. Stevenson's expressed debt to them) that other artists have "worked upon the lines of the dime novel until to-day America has a school which may very properly be designated as an artistic development of the dime-novel idea" (95).
- ³ Hentea quotes Evelyn Waugh from 1920: "The very young have gained an almost complete monopoly of book, press and picture gallery. Youth is coming into its own" (*Henry Green* 32). "Nothing cleverer than America, or more characteristically youthful," wrote a 1917 editorial, arguing that "Europe says of us that in literature our tastes are juvenile. Perhaps they are. Juvenilia, after all, is the sort of thing our reading public pays for" ("Editorial" 4). Louis Untermeyer, a twentieth-century impresario of youth (touting pre-teen Hilda Conkling and teen-aged Nathalia Crane), declared the twenties "the era of the child"—an era in which youth "suddenly stops being a creature and becomes a creator" (Untermeyer 186). Hentea sees such texts as Modernist, and argues about such serious literature (as I do about pulp fiction) that "because publishers in the 1920s consciously targeted young writers, the norms of the publishing world were instilled in them at an early age" (*Henry Green* 17).
- ⁴ They published with firms more established than dime presses: Putnam in his father's press, Putnam & Son; Liscomb with Frederick A. Stokes, "a major New York imprint with a reputation for publishing literary 'greats'" (Barwick 82). Stokes had an interest in advancing juvenile writing—it published Hilda Conkling's *Poems by a Little Girl* in 1921 and went on to publish the travel books of the preteen Abbe siblings in 1936. Wade's press Reilly & Lee did face some pushback from librarians who saw it as too popular:

- they thought its Oz series became a cheap syndicate series when it continued after Baum's death in 1919.
- ⁵ Though Barwick recognises that the success of *The Young Visitors* created a market for young writers, he remains suspicious of the authenticity of juvenile writing, asserting as if to counter that "Harry F. Liscomb and his novel *were* real" (52).
- ⁶ When "youth" as a category is left general and uninterrogated, it provides its own prescriptive scripts. "The rhetoric of youth is not restricted to liberalism," Edward Widmer cautions (Widmer 211). Lara Cohen argues that when privileged young writers understand themselves as oppressed simply because they are young, such "oppositional postures may actually work in tandem with ... conservatism, as much as in tension with it" ("Emancipation" para 14). Comfortable white boy writers, playing at being marginalised, strip marginalisation's injustice "of its politics" to "make it available as a style" (last para).
- ⁷ Yet Streeby also qualifies this view, writing that the dime novel mode "mediated the conflicts of its era in diverse ways rather than ignoring them" ("Dime" 586). Brodhead similarly suggests that "no culturally enforced model of authorship can wholly dictate the experience an author can attach to it" ("American" 27) so that its authors can find ways "to produce highly individualized imaginative content within highly standardized forms" (28).
- ⁸ The dime industry actually worked through this practice of the zombification of old material: "After a certain number of years," the author of "Slick Parker" writes, "youth having outgrown itself—and a new reading generation arisen—the old novels are picked up, rehashed, and reproduced with new illustrations. It would be utterly impossible" otherwise (Author 60).
- ⁹ Streeby and Bold both discuss Ned Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson)—who published his first story at age sixteen ("My Log Book" in the 1838 *Knickerbocker*) and later became a leader of the staunch anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant Know-Nothing movement—as example of the way that even politically conservative young writers nevertheless also registered internal formal conflicts. See Bold's discussion of Buntline's ambivalent meta-discursiveness, "Voice" 34.
- ¹⁰ Senarens cited his "Cuban father and American mother" to explain his heritage ("Biography" 10). Moskowitz seems to have directly interviewed Senarens's children in the 1960s; he states that Senarens visited Cuba (123).
- ¹¹ For examples of such racializing covers, see the 2021 exhibition at the West Virginia University Library: "American Dime Novel: Racialization / Erasure," curated by Nancy Caronia, <https://omekas.lib.wvu.edu/home/s/dime-novels/page/introduction>.
- ¹² For instance, Raheja points to the importance of Edwin Carewa of the Chickasaw Nation and James Young Deer of the Nanticoke people as "prominent filmmakers of the silent era" (17) in the 1910s and 1920s. Mining the records of another popular form, Bold has also "produced a list of three hundred (and counting) Indigenous and Indigenous-identifying performers on vaudeville stages between the 1880s and 1930s.... Cumulatively Indigenous performers shaped vaudeville into a transitional space important in the making of public Indigenous voice and presence within a climate intent on their erasure" ("Vaudeville"). See also Deloria, discussing the relation between "the dime novel; and a small but important tradition of travelling Indian performers" in the 1850s (57).
- ¹³ Though "as a genre writer" Senarens's work had to "inherently fit a given paradigm" that was often intolerant, demeaning, and dehumanizing (Wythoff 227n2), Williams argues that Senarens provided a handling of "categories of race and nationalism" that was

- “more fluid” than what was found in other dime fiction (“Frank” 281)—for instance, he provided his African-American character Pomp with some degree of interiority, even heroism; he imagined Frank trying less violent means in battles with other races, and even had him speak out for tolerance of others (71–79).
- ¹⁴ “Bandit stories” could be double-voiced in the sense of ironic too. They included popular outlaw-heroes such as Deadwood Dick and the James brothers but also the legendary Joaquin Murrieta (the Cherokee writer John Rollin Ridge wrote a dime novel about him). Streeby traces the “contradictions of ideologies of U.S. empire-building” in Murrieta bandit stories as reflecting border tensions (*American* 57). Bleiler suggests that, for Senarens, “Mexico was a somewhat hostile power that needed to be shown” US dominance—unlike Cuba, which the young writer saw as “a little different,” “because of Senarens’s Cuban ancestry” (“Introduction” XI). Williams argues that Senarens’ works set in Cuba “ultimately undermine the very notions of race and nationalism that enable imperialism” (N. Williams “Frank” 282).
- ¹⁵ For Warne/Macy see Bremseth and Streeby, “Dime.” For John Rollin Ridge, see Streeby, *American*. Ridge was another writer first published as a teenager. The Boston abolitionist publisher James Redpath also issued William Wells Brown’s *Clotelle: A Story of the Southern States* in 1864 “in a series of dime novels he called Books for the Camp Fires” (Greenspan 403). The American Antiquarian Society website states that the African-American amateur boy journalist Herbert A. Clark “contributed to the professional periodicals *Boys of New York*, *Boys’ Own*, and *Wide Awake*”—though his contributions seem to have been puzzles rather than stories (“Cincinnati’s *Le Bijou*”). Bold also mentions that “Indigenous authors such as Luther Standing Bear (Lakota) and Mourning Dove (Okanogan) knew and took on dime-novel formulas; later, Maliseet author Chief Henry Red Eagle/Henry Perley was a successful author of pulp magazine stories” (*Vaudeville* 95). She argues that actual dime-industry texts by writers of colour unsettled the populist preconceptions of race at the time and that scholars’ careful recovery of these writers now points out blindspots in “our scholarly knowledge of the genre, its histories, and its uses,” which she specifically identifies as blindness to non-hegemonic modes of performance and storytelling (“Violence” 112).
- ¹⁶ Harte published his first poem in the *Sunday Atlas* at age eleven, but was so ridiculed by his family for doing so that “‘sometimes,’ he has said, ‘I wonder that I ever wrote another line of verse’” (Pemberton 6)—yet he went on to edit a book by the time he was twenty and was publishing verse again before the next year was up.
- ¹⁷ Harte writes that his character thinks this has become even harder since the postal service stopped delivering dime novels so that he now has to buy them from “a book peddler” (a change to dime-novel delivery that did happen in the 1870s) (37).
- ¹⁸ Similarly, in Britain “Chatto & Windus succeeded in branding itself as the house for young authors in the 1920s” (Hentea, “Late” 173), offering its cultural imprimatur to capitalize on youth’s presence. Putnam’s was decidedly American, following that sense of the American wide-awake spirit I explored in Part One of my essays. George Palmer Putnam, editor at the time, was named for his grandfather, who had started the firm and, in an 1836 essay, had already expressed his belief in the new machinery of production: “In this age of ballooning and railroading—printing by steam—where the machinery of book-making is such . . . there is no telling what human invention will accomplish next. We like this go-ahead of spirit” (qtd. in S. Smith 181). Though they disparaged the dime novel, such cultural gatekeepers worked to appropriate its mile-a-minute mode anyway, conceding that “the red-blooded boy, the boy in his early teens,

- must have his thrill; he craves excitement, has a passion for action, ‘something must be doing’ all the time; and in nothing is this more true than in his reading” (Mathews 653).
- ¹⁹ Two of Putnam’s books were excerpted—in the Boy Scout magazine *Boy’s Life* and in *Youth’s Companion*. Putnam’s firm also held a contest to select actual Boy Scouts, sent them on a bona fide expedition, and published the account in *Three Boy Scouts in Africa* (1928). Other young authors writing boys’ books for boys included Halsey Oakley Fuller, Robert Carver North, Deric Nusbaum, and Deric Washburn, Jr.
- ²⁰ Ade also got a boost from this connection. In 1928, after his preface for Wade reacquainted audiences with his 1890s dime-humor columns, he collected them as *Bang Bang! A Collection of Stories Intended to Recall Memories of the Nickel Library When Boys Were Supermen and Murder a Fine Art*.
- ²¹ “No creator of yellow backs and penny dreadfuls can surpass” his style, one article writes (“Another” 131); another lauds his evocation of the dime novel’s spell, understood as the sheer nostalgia of lost youth: “one is irresistibly reminded of Penrod’s literary efforts in the piano box” (“Infant” E2), referring to the dime novel attempted by the boy hero in Booth Tarkington’s 1914 book of that name. Robert Gottlieb remarks that the Penrod stories are unreadable now because of their use of racialised dialect (“Rise and Fall”).
- ²² *Great Scott’s* hero, for instance, is born on Wade’s own birthday and writes a book entitled *In the Shadow of Great Peril*. It was foretold before his birth the hero would write the Great American Novel, a prediction to which he must painfully try to live up. The same was predicted about Wade (“Another” 131).

Eleven-year-old Wade had other novels underway, “with stirring titles” (“Young Boy Author” 3): *The Heavy Hand of Justice* (the sequel) or *Tracking Whiskey Wolves*, and *Daggers in Boots*—that last “a stirring adventure of the Mexican border” (“Boy-Author” 2), as well as *The Gray Man of Montana* (“Boy Author Makes” 14). “It will take four more books to get my characters placed,’ he says, ‘and I don’t want to leave them as they are” (Denton SM4). The *Herald* quotes a paragraph from the sequel (“Horace A. Wade” 13)—the only part of any of these subsequent manuscripts to see print, despite newspaper claims to the contrary. Wade also planned his “reminiscences” (“Boy Author Makes” 14) plus “a book for ‘little tots’ entitled, ‘The Land of the Teddy Bears,’” because he famously had a Teddy bear himself (“Regular” 1).

In the early thirties, Wade brought out two novels with Dial Press. *To Hell with Hollywood* was reported to have reached a third printing (“Former” 4). Though his juvenile novel had received some praise in its *New York Times* review—which commended its “entirely earnest and youthful passion for bloodshed,” and found it “funny, often very funny” (“Young Visitor’s” X2)—the *Times* panned *Great Scott* (see “Dark Dawn”) and was silent about *To Hell*. Wade did not bring out his next book—a collection of horse-racing stories—until 1956; he also published several collections about gambling.

Liscomb also projected writing many more novels—he “expects to write at least three books annually, plots for some seventy-five of which he already has plans” (Moon 9). “Expects to Write 100 Novels” was the headline of another story about him (A1)—later he upped that goal to 300 (“Missing” 6). He supposedly had a three-book contract with Stokes (“Missing” 1925); Moon, among others, reported that Liscomb had submitted at least one more manuscript (of “100,000 words,” supposedly due to be published in the summer; see “Missing,” “Young,” and also “Youthful”). Yet there is no record of any more publications from him.

- ²³ Before he was arrested, Loeb told Wade that he had marked him as another young victim (Wade, *Boy's Life* 100). Wade supposedly lived under bodyguard until Al Capone told the underworld to leave him alone. As an adult, Wade used this story for his own publicity (see Haight).
- ²⁴ He also reported on the serial murderer Louise Peete, getting an exclusive interview with her (Wade, *Boy's Life* 21). He gave his views on the love-triangle murder trial of Arthur Burch (Wade, "Boy Author" 13).
- ²⁵ He found instead overworked staff doing the best they could for powerless youth who had been cast aside. Wade took the vantage point of powerless youth consistently, considering the experience of the young daughter of a woman tried for murder (Wade, *Boy's Life* 18), or adopting the point of view of the murdered boy in the Leopold and Loeb case (qtd. in Higdon 51). He also reported on Cyrus McCormack's attempt to maintain his youth with a gland transplant ("Wade, 'McCormick'" 3), or on a boy who had supposedly willed himself never to grow up past the age of ten (Wade, *Boy's Life*, 91–97).
- ²⁶ Reports at the time also agreed that "Horace is a good business man" (Forbes 8), who "skims the best sellers with an eye to business" ("In the Shadow," *Office Economist* 42). An ad in *Publisher's Weekly* pointed out that Wade was his own best "press agent genius"—scoring notices in all the major papers ("Reilly & Lee Ad" 777). At least in newspaper accounts, Wade's popularity translated into real money. The "Boy Author Makes \$40,000 from Books; His Income \$15,000" screamed one headline ("Boy Author Makes" 14). *Publisher's Weekly* ran a photograph of Wade alongside his publisher Frank K. Reilly, signing his contract and getting his royalty check ("Good Book" 386).
- ²⁷ Fitzgerald was the symbol of juvenile authorship at the time; he published his own first stories in the *Nassau Literary Magazine* in 1915, at age 18. For Wade's exchanges with Fitzgerald, see Bruccoli 261–66. His exchange with Shaw was generally reported. His correspondence with Dreiser is at the University of Pennsylvania, Theodore Dreiser Papers, ca. 1890–1965. Folder 6450, though I have not consulted them.
- ²⁸ For the extempore examination, see Keeler: "when reporting for the *World*, he wrote such excellent copy that skeptics insisted on having disinterested persons watch him write it, before they could believe that this youngster was the real reporter" (2). His handwriting was reproduced in the dedication to his novel; see also Bunker, and see MacKall's article on Henry Liscomb, which also includes a specimen of his handwriting (D5).
- ²⁹ It is hard to separate Wade's actual resistance to adult definition from the publicity made of it. Reilly & Lee announced in *Publisher's Weekly* that his story of "the Shaw episode ... is authentic" ("Chicago's Daisy" 129). When the eminent author refused to endorse Wade's book (accusing him of being an adult), Wade replied: "Some day, if you live long enough, my autograph will be worth more than yours" (*Boy's Life* 11) and used the story to gain notice and sympathy. In his news articles and his later memoir, Wade claims he made his own decisions, but how much agency he had remains open. Assertion of his agency was part of the public relations campaign to leverage his youth before it vanished. The satirical Chicago *Step Ladder* saw it as exploitation for profit: "Infant prodigies have held up well under the stimulus of modern commercial methods. Horace Wade, the boy wonder, has been on exhibition at the store in person, autographing books and doing simple tricks, and this has drawn enormous crowds who have bought liberally under the influence of Horace's childish prattle" ("Books We Have" 9). "Unless he is spoiled beyond repair by his friends," writes another account, "he may outlive the effects of their foolishness" ("Infant" E2).

- ³⁰ It is this attitude that makes George Ade, in his preface to his novel, call Wade himself “the most recent model of Young America” (i). At one point, the movie in which Wade featured was entitled *Young America* (Kingsley III4). Similar understandings of him were rife throughout his press—“He is a thoroughly red-blooded American boy” (“People” 6); his is “a career that will shed unusual glory on American letters” (Robinson 32). Sometimes they were openly jingoistic: “Americans interested in juvenile literary genius ... should read American first, for America has its own Daisy Ashford” (“Horace A. Wade” 13). Asked about whether “he’s going to write THE great American novel,” Wade answers: “That’s my Idea ... and I suppose that’s the idea of every ambitious writer in this country. I’m going to make patriotism the big theme of that novel. I’m going to show how it is felt by different classes of Americans” (“Boy Achieves” 3). Thomas Alva Edison said that “Horace Wade ‘belongs to America,’” and reviewers suspected he just might “change the current of national life” by injecting himself “into the literary consciousness of the nation” (Robinson 29). In looking back on his own youthful capabilities, Wade characterizes himself as someone who “might *do* all, *dare* all, *be* all” (*Boy’s Life* 2)—a comment that recalls Northrop Frye’s definition of mode: what those in the world that is imagined “can do or could have done” (Frye 33), a definition that underlies my own discussion of youth as a mode outlined in Part One. This assertion of youth’s go-ahead style shapes the attitude of the characters in Wade’s novel too: “Master Wade’s lads,” as Ade writes, “are young persons devoted to action rather than moody self-analysis” (ii). In the novel, Wade himself calls them “fine, brave American boys” (*In the Shadow* 171).
- ³¹ Nick Carter was Street and Smith’s most successful and long-running detective hero. George Jenks was one of the writers of the Street and Smith dime hero Diamond Dick. Ethel Dell was another popular writer who started writing early, known for her pulp romances.
- ³² Fanny Butcher, a *Chicago Tribune* book reviewer who had written approvingly of Wade (see Butcher, “Books” E19), was also baffled—to her, Liscomb’s book was “very modern and full of sheiks and shebas and whatever. It is written badly—as it would be of course—but I can’t seem to see that it is naively funny” (“Frank” 13).
- ³³ “When a lad of twelve, his first article had appeared in the ‘Bronx News,’ and he had received the commendation of Robert W. Chambers for winning a short story contest” (Tolson 11).
- ³⁴ For information about Tolson’s articles for the *Wiley Reporter*, see “Sketches.”
- ³⁵ It promises a futurism worthy of the most exaggerated dime novel speculative fantasy: “it would not be surprising to see in 1950 young men commuting in aeroplanes to and from school” or finishing their schoolwork using information technology that would be a cross between the radio and the dictaphone (“Young Negro” 4).
- ³⁶ Though six years later Moon writes: “he has of yet reaped little return in terms of money for his first novel” (9).
- ³⁷ The “work of a young novelist with a penchant for long words and amazing situations” (“Books on” 46), what mattered was “the way these happenings are told,” which “has made this little book run rapidly through its large first edition” (Ovington 2). Told in a “most ‘hifaulting’ style, it depicts the dime novel adventures of a real ‘sheik’ and its pages are inhabited by cake-eaters, flappers, shebas and the whole modern tribe. Slang abounds and the fun rises largely out of the style of writing” (“Realist” 13).
- ³⁸ As did others: “Let us not hastily relegate this young moralist to Ashfordism. He is the Boy Scout who would be Balzac, with the help of what he has seen in the movies” (MacKall D5).

- ³⁹ One of his circle, Carl van Vechten, was corresponding with her at the time and later became her executor. Like van Vechten, Stein was critiqued for appropriating Black culture. For the vexed relation between Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, see Baker.
- ⁴⁰ MacKall had been a young writer himself for the *Yale Record* humour magazine. He may have been asked to review Liscomb's book expressly because of his association with wordplay; he was part of the notorious "Three Hours Club," which indulged in exaggerated punning, written about often by his fellow member, Christopher Morley.
- ⁴¹ *The Saturday Review of Literature* made the comparison to Merton in its blistering review ("Prince" 780). Gertrude Stein thought *Merton* "the best description of America" and "the best book about twentieth century American youth that has yet been done" (287, 288).
- ⁴² The *Boston Evening Transcript* did not think his book was funny precisely because its burlesque was "too deliberate" ("Prince" 4).
- ⁴³ Moon himself had been successful as a young writer at Howard University (when even younger than Liscomb) and was on his way to fame as a reporter.
- ⁴⁴ In his 1934 Foreword to the first issue of *Challenge*, James Weldon Johnson discusses new possibilities for writing in terms of young writers, and regrets the difficulty for Black youth to chart new paths even during the 1920s at the height of the Harlem Renaissance: "The term 'younger Negro writers' connotes a degree of disillusionment and disappointment for those who a decade ago hailed with loud huzzas We expected much; perhaps, too much. I now judge that we ought to be thankful for the half-dozen younger writers who did emerge" (qtd. in Baker 89). Johnson's 1929 essay "Negro Authors and White Publishers" points directly to how young writers felt limited by restrictive publication opportunities—caught in a dilemma between the literary and the popular, trapped in their doubts about whether work could be "*too good*" to publish, their fears of the inescapable contradictions of "superior work—sordid publishers—low-brow public" that kept them from coming to print (Johnson 229). Johnson insists this is a false dilemma and—trying to assuage young writers' worries that popular work, the work that "leading white publishers" wanted, entailed a "standard which Negro writers must conform to or go unpublished," a standard that recycled racist attitudes (229)—he offers Liscomb's *The Prince of Washington Square* as an example of a good work successfully avoiding this Hobson's choice (229). The tensions in Liscomb's work depicting race, and his own disappearance from the literary scene, speak to the actual difficulties of his position.
- ⁴⁵ For Bold, this more complex array of simultaneous and conflicting responses is in keeping with the dime novel as itself a complicated "mixture of commercial rhetoric, fictionalized history, and democratized sensationalism," which "created stories that could be appropriated and accented by quite opposite groups" ("Voice" 304).
- ⁴⁶ Bold argues that Mohawk's cross-dressing on stage put these dime novels on "the queer end" of "the spectrum of popular western formulas" in a way that "played on class, race, gender, and sexuality crossings with a slipperiness that" calls hegemony into question ("Violence" 109). Bold argues that in a meaningful way Go-won-go Mohawk did co-author this "dime series in that she created the central figure and much of the plot around which it revolved"; hers is the "originating authorship" ("Did" 148).
- ⁴⁷ They argue "it is vital to see Johnson's recitals as emerging from a deeper tradition of performance in the drawing rooms and longhouses of Mohawk people themselves" and not just as a negotiation of "colonial commercial culture" (149).

- ⁴⁸ The author of this article, Benjamin de Casseres was himself once a young writer, publishing editorials in newspapers by the time he was seventeen.
- ⁴⁹ Woodside has looked at dime novels to explore how “the rhetorics of boyhood and the frontier worked together in complex ways to inform as well as enforce burgeoning notions of American adolescence and national progress”—in part by considering “how children engaged with and responded” to that connection (though he does not consider young authors) (16, 15).

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