

(Post-Black) *Bildungsroman* or Novel of (Black Bourgeois) Manners?

The Logic of Reproduction in Colson Whitehead's
Sag Harbor

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As in all of Colson Whitehead's novels, the use of pop-cultural references in *Sag Harbor* is telling. Consider the following passage: 15-year-old Benji Cooper and his friends are listening to Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force's 1982 song "Planet Rock." His friend Marcus calls it "a classic joint," which prompts Benji to provide the information that the hip hop pioneers sampled a song by the German electronic music band Kraftwerk. However, Benji is not using these words; what he says is, "You know they bit that off Kraftwerk." Biting – as adult Ben, who narrates the novel, points out – was considered "a major crime" in 1985 when the novel is set. Thus Marcus angrily replies, "Afrika Bambaataa didn't steal anything. This is their song." (61) Today – with the assistance of the website *WhoSampled.com* that meticulously records the samples used by hip hop artists – it is easy to determine that Benji is right, for "Planet Rock," that "polycultural pastiche" (Chang 172), does use a Kraftwerk sample. Marcus however remains scandalized and accuses Benji of betraying black culture: "I forgot you like that white music, you fuckin' Siouxsie and the Banshees-listenin' motherfucker." (62) Ironically it is Marcus who gets hip hop wrong, for adult Ben emphasizes that it has always been a syncretistic art form drawing on heterogeneous sources. "Funk, free jazz, disco, cartoons, German synthesizer music—it didn't matter where it came from, the art was converting it to new

use.” (61) In other words, it is necessary to know “that white music” to experience the full range of hip hop’s creativity.

While not all literary critics might be familiar with the practice of sampling, they will certainly know about ‘intertextuality’ and ‘*heteroglossia*’ – related concepts that similarly posit that texts are characterized by the presence of earlier texts or a plurality of voices. In fact, we can read the passage just quoted from as a metafictional commentary on Whitehead’s own literary ambitions (cf. Schur 248); he has pointed out that the range of influences on his work include both ‘high-brow’ literature and popular culture, both white and black authors (cf. Sherman). The exchange between Benji and Marcus suggests that Whitehead is aware that some of his readers might go so far as to accuse him of betraying his ‘race’ (see, for example, Fain 120). If Whitehead is analogizing his position in the literary field with that of Benji among his friends, we will have to conclude that he feels misunderstood because of others’ facile juxtaposition of ‘black’ and ‘white’ culture as homogeneous and distinct entities.

This is remarkably similar to what writer and TV host Touré diagnosed in his 2011 book *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?* in which he chastises “self-appointed identity cops” (7), who believe that “there is a correct or legitimate way of doing blackness,” and demands “for every Black-American to have the freedom to be Black however he or she chooses” in order to destroy “the bankrupt, fraudulent concept of ‘authentic’ Blackness” (11). Touré also favorably reviewed *Sag Harbor* and praised its “unapologetic” reshaping of the “iconography of blackness” (“Visible Young Man”). He lauded Whitehead’s semi-autobiographical tale of a summer spent in an upper-middle-class black Long Island community for its refusal to give in to normative demands about how Blacks should act. In Touré’s words, “Post-Blackness sees blackness not as a dogmatic code [...] but as an open-source document, a trope with infinite uses.” No longer “stamped inauthentic and bullied into an inferiority complex,” modern Blacks such as those represented by Whitehead are free to “do blackness their way.” Touré ends the review with a call for “more post-black stories,” such as Whitehead’s about “black boys with beach houses.”

Since 2009 – and also with reference to novelists such as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, Mat Johnson, and others that seem to fit the bill – there has been continued scholarly interest in the phenomenon of ‘post-blackness’ (cf. Paul Taylor; Baker and Simmons; Schmidt). However, far

from all authors approve of the concept. As I have shown elsewhere (cf. Lieber), Touré's account is indeed deeply problematic, because it tacitly universalizes the experiences of (upper-)middle-class Blacks through its focus on "choice" (*Who's Afraid* 68) and "identity options" that are allegedly "limitless" (12), as well as its commitment to individual "Black success" (11). While Touré acknowledges that success in the corporate world can be a function of knowing how to behave in a 'proper' manner, he treats this knowledge as a purely intellectual operation as if it was a choice that each and every black person was able to make irrespective of his or her class position. Thus, he reproduces clichés about the 'American Dream,' claiming that Barack Obama's election provided proof "that believing in yourself and in the country can lead to towering rewards [...]. And for those who opt to hate America and refuse to play the game and reject it before it rejects you, there are no rewards." (200) In an autobiographical chapter we find out where Touré learned to "play the game," namely in a Boston private school whose alumni include Robert Kennedy and T. S. Eliot (77). He additionally spent time in a "culturally black and ghetto tennis club," and it was the combination of "preppy school" and "ghetto club" that taught him to do "rapid cultural 180s" (88), in other words, to successfully move in both 'white' and 'black' surroundings.

But Touré seems to have forgotten his privileged class position, arguing that success was a consequence of "[t]he way you walk—the grammar, articulation, and diction you *choose to employ*" (184, my emphasis). His emphasis on deliberately choosing how to act and speak reveals that he cannot grasp that social agents "have not chosen the principle of their choice," i.e., what Pierre Bourdieu calls "habitus" (*Pascalian Meditations* 149). Habitus is acquired in childhood and primarily a product of a social agent's position in a society's class structure. Speech – or the capacity to produce "an infinite number of sentences really appropriate to an infinite number of situations" (*Logic* 32) – is an important part of a habitus, and what Touré cannot see is that "access to legitimate language is quite unequal, and the theoretical competence liberally granted to all by linguists is in reality monopolized by some" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 146). Thus, the skill Touré calls "Black *multi-linguality*" (*Who's Afraid* 11, original emphasis) is also a result of having acquired sufficient cultural capital to be able to speak the language appropriate in various social situations. When Touré envisions "Black success" in "the game" – which is nothing but the labor market (cf. Lieber

277-78) – he similarly ignores that to succeed social agents must first possess a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, *Logic* 66). Touré’s paean to “post-Black rugged individualism” (*Who’s Afraid* 8) knows only history- and thus habitus-less individuals and remains blind to structural constraints that limit the number of choices actually available to them. Lack of success can thus only appear to be the result of false choices, and this commitment to individual responsibility amounts to a central tenet of neoliberal ideology (cf. Wacquant 307).

So what about *Sag Harbor* then? If it really was a ‘post-black’ novel, would this not imply that it proposes a vision of a neoliberal society, a vision of individuals who are not constrained in their actions by an embodied class habitus? Walter Benn Michaels thinks so, writing that it is a hallmark of the “neoliberal novel” to substitute “cultural difference for [...] class difference” (184). Quoting Touré’s words of praise for *Sag Harbor* he polemically asks “if the crucial thing about rich black people is that they offer new ways of performing race rather than the old ways of embodying class” (185). While I am sympathetic to Michaels’s critique of neoliberal culture, I do not think that his brief remarks do *Sag Harbor* justice. The novel, I claim, is fully committed to the (Bourdieuian) idea that individuals possess embodied dispositions that tacitly shape the manner in which they perceive the world, think, and act. Through the novel’s focus on Benji we can reconstruct the influence of his habitus – and this habitus is that of a member of the (black) bourgeoisie. Unlike Touré he struggles with making “cultural 180s” and proves inept when it comes to “performing race” – and this is precisely because he has “embod[ied] class,” to use Michaels’s phrase once more. Ultimately, the difference between the two texts, *Sag Harbor* and *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, is also expressed formally; for, many critics’ claims notwithstanding (cf. Maus 99, Fain 132), I argue that Whitehead’s novel is not a *Bildungsroman*. Rather than focusing on one (black) individual’s process of maturation – which is what Touré does – Whitehead has created a novel about a particular class fraction and their manners, and it is Bourdieu’s relational sociology – which is essentially a theory of the reproduction of class differences – that allows us to properly grasp this.

ENOUGH OF THAT “IF-ONE-OF-US-GETS-IN CRAP,” OR, DELINKING FATE

“Black success” in Touré means having “a shot at becoming the CEO or a vice president of the company” or at least “a powerful entrepreneur” (*Who’s Afraid* 184). By definition this is limited to the few – for there can hardly be many CEOs. And as long as their income drastically exceeds that of regular workers – on average, top CEOs make a staggering 300 times more (cf. Mishel and Davis) – it is hard to understand how this could count as meaningful progress for a majority of American Blacks – unless one accepts the logic of “linked fate” (Warren, *What Was* 138) according to which “the welfare of the race” (139) depends on the success of individual Blacks.¹ Kenneth Warren holds that the same structure of thought has historically underpinned African American literature, arguing that “the idea that sustains the possibility of an African American literature is a belief that the welfare of the race as a whole depends on the success of black writers and those who are depicted in their texts.” (139) While he acknowledges that this made sense in the era of Jim Crow segregation (cf. Warren, “On” 742), he believes that it no longer does. If black authors continue to follow this model, it is because they “need to distinguish the personal odysseys they undertake to reach personal success from similar endeavors by their white class peers” (*What Was* 139). For *Sag Harbor* to have the kind of significance that Touré imagines it possesses it would need to represent Benji’s experience as having some sort of positive effect on “the welfare of the race.”

Like Touré and Whitehead himself (cf. Maus 2), Benji and his brother attend a private school, where Benji is “the only black kid in the room” (7). Some people, notably white upper-middle-class liberals, see a benefit in the presence of a black student at this school, and adult Ben is able to explicate

1 Political scientist Adolph Reed has powerfully criticized the idea of a “black community” as “a racial population that is organically integrated and that operates as a collective subject in pursuit of unitary interests” (134). He thus inadvertently produced an *avant la lettre* rebuttal of Touré, pointing out that one consequence of the denial of “intra-racial stratification” is to reduce differences between blacks to “idiosyncratic attitudes and personal styles” which obscures “structured social relations” (135).

their motivations: The father of one of his classmates, a Mr. Finkelstein, is glad to see Benji around because for him and his wife (both Civil Rights lawyers),

[s]ending their daughter to a fancy private school was a betrayal of core values, paying tuition when you were supposed to support local public schools being in traitorous equivalence with eating grapes [harvested by non-unionized workers] [...]. / The fact that Mr. Finkelstein's daughter had a bona-fide black friend mitigated the situation a bit. Hey, wasn't that why they'd marched on Washington in the first place? (8)

Benji's presence makes it possible for white liberals to ignore the fact that they actively participate in the reproduction of an unjust education system in which success is a function of parental wealth: It produces the appearance that the system is essentially fair since it does not discriminate on racial grounds.

But it is not just white liberals who can appreciate individual black success; the parents of Benji and his friends – Blacks who would have experienced the U.S. before the end of legalized segregation – are committed to the idea of “linked fate.” On Labor Day the Sag Harbor community is listening to what Ben calls “the black national anthem,” i.e., the song “Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now” by R&B duo McFadden and Whitehead (259). The narrator appropriates two lines from the song's first verse: “There've been so many things that held us down—check. But now it looks like things are finally coming around—check” (259-60), and reflects on the song's significance: “Whether the association was civil rights triumph, busting through glass ceilings in corporate towers, or merely the silly joy of gliding around a roller rink [...], the song addressed the generations.” (260) Thereby collective achievements (Civil Rights legislation) are conflated with individual ones (success in corporate America). In the minds of the Sag Harbor bourgeoisie, the progress made by some Blacks – like themselves – is thus represented as signifying progress for all.

But this, we learn in the course of the novel, is the belief of the older generation. By way of focalizing through 15-year-old Benji's perspective, *Sag Harbor* suggests that his post-Civil Rights generation is in the process of *delinking* its fate from that of “the race as a whole.” In the novel “linked fate” is expressed in the form of the phrase, “If they got in, it was like all of us getting in.” (196) Only Benji does not refer to the corporate world but to

Bayside, a local music venue. *Sag Harbor* provides an allegory for the unsustainability of “linked fate” by way of detailing the plans made by Benji and his friends Bobby and NP to attend a concert. When only Benji and NP end up getting in this no longer figures as a collective triumph, but rather triggers the “resentment” (216) of those left outside. Similarly, once inside, Benji no longer feels solidarity with his friends who were turned down at the door but instead feels a new sense of comradeship with the other dancers at Bayside, among whom are “older white people” (218). At this point he has already given up on the idea that individual success in making it past the bouncer “was like all of us getting in” because NP and Bobby, in their attempts to secure places on the guest list, made it clear that they did not care about him. Benji concludes, “Now that the day [of the concert] had arrived, I wasn’t going in for that if-one-of-us-gets-in crap. I was pissed at the thought of them inside and me standing outside the club like a fucking jerk.” (212-13) By assuming what Benji – who is used to not “getting in” – elsewhere calls his “outsider’s perspective” (80), the novel shows that that notion of “linked fate” is only attractive for those already on the inside.

The black upper middle class then is shown to be a class fraction whose members compete for desirable positions. But the novel also addresses its relation to the black proletariat, for the flipside of the “if-one-of-us-gets-in” rhetoric is expressed by Benji as follows: “When they failed [to get into Bayside], we accepted our portion of shame.” (196) Again there is a structural homology to “linked fate” ideology. For if the success of individual Blacks reflects positively on “the race as a whole,” individual failure serves as a source of collective “shame” – this “*pars pro toto* distortion” (Elias 5) cuts both ways. Thus the inhabitants of Sag Harbor sharply distinguish themselves from what they euphemistically call “those of our race who possessed a certain temperament and circumstance”; or, phrased more explicitly: “There were no street niggers in Sag Harbor.” (31) In fact, both statements are made by the narrator, which serves to show that Benji has incorporated the principles of the Sag Harbor “classification system” (204), i.e., the principles of its habitus and “schemes of perception, thought and action” (Bourdieu, *Logic* 54). The language he uses is that of his father, who displays a dismissive attitude toward what he also calls “corner niggers” (162). The use of the ‘n-word’ in itself does not necessarily express class hostility, for the Sag Harbor adults also use it “in its familiar comradely sense” (31). When it is used to denigrate lower-class Blacks, it is always

brought up in connection with spatial referents such as “corner” or “street” (cf. Maus 106). Those places serve as a shorthand for “a vast, abstract plane of black pathology” (87) in the eyes of Benji’s father. That Benji tacitly applies the same principles of vision and division becomes clear when he sees his friend Nick wearing a big gold chain and imagines hearing his father exclaim: “Where does he think he comes from, the Street?” (87) As a child of the black bourgeoisie, it is not surprising that Benji has acquired its *habitus* and the attendant “classification system.”

By way of introducing Benji’s father and his ideas about black “pathology” the novel makes explicit the class condescension hidden under the surface in *Touré*. As Norbert Elias explains in “Towards a Theory of Established-Outsider Relations,” the self-image of “established” groups – such as the Sag Harbor bourgeoisie – is “modelled [...] on the minority of its ‘best’ members,” whereas their perception of “outsider” groups – such as the black proletariat – is based on “the ‘bad’ characteristics of that group’s ‘worst’ section” (5). In *Sag Harbor* the former is embodied by the community’s “founding fathers” and “their ideas of how proper black people should act” (221), whereas Benji’s father can see the latter – i.e., stereotypical representations of the black proletariat that were popular in the 1980s such as “Welfare Moms” (180) – on the news daily. At the same time the inhabitants of Sag Harbor are outsiders *vis-à-vis* the white elite that lives in the adjoining Long Island communities – and whose riches fuel Benji’s wildest dreams (cf. 37, 113).² Consequently, they must fear to be judged by the same standards as the black proletariat by whites. Benji’s father and everyone else committed to the Sag Harbor “classification system” tacitly understand that “systems of classification constitute a *stake in the struggles* that oppose individuals and groups” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 14, original emphasis), which is why they so desperately try to distinguish themselves

2 John Clegg writes: “Two important and somewhat contrary facts must be kept in mind when discussing this new black elite. Firstly, they constitute an elite only relative to the extreme and concentrated poverty of the black inner city. They tend to do significantly worse than their white neighbors, especially with respect to wealth, and like all black people they experience racism. Secondly, and despite this, they are in a relative sense more of an elite than the white equivalent, since black wealth in America is far more concentrated than white, and the income gap between top and bottom far greater.” (cf. Taylor 2016: 7)

from the black proletariat (all the while believing that their own success constitutes progress for “the race as a whole”) or from those of their own who “fell in with the wrong crowd” (256), such as Benji’s uncle Nelson.

In short, Benji’s father, the head of what his son terms a “Cosby family” (160), represents the same class resentment as comedian Bill Cosby himself, who (in)famously went on a rant about the black proletariat in a 2004 speech, in which he blamed what he called the “lower economic people” among American Blacks (qtd. in Dyson xi) for their allegedly “self-destructive behavior” in typical neoliberal fashion (xiii). Mr. Cooper is similarly committed to individual responsibility, claiming that the black poor “need to get off their asses” (180). While we have seen that 15-year-old Benji often unwittingly applies the same “classification system” as his father, the fact that the novel is narrated by adult Ben introduces a certain distance to the class condescension. After performing a sort of class ventriloquism by saying that “There were no street niggers in Sag Harbor,” the narrator adds “No, no, no” (31). The threefold repetition of the word suggests that Benji has repeatedly heard his father underscore that all kinds of behavior associated with “the Street” are contradicting the norms of respectability laid down by the “founding fathers”; but it also suggests that he – just like his friends – is tired of hearing this. While the manners of black bourgeois life have been inculcated in their minds for all their lives, this younger generation finds much that is desirable in “the Street.”

THEORIZING THE LOGIC OF PRACTICE, OR, BENJI AS GRAMMARIAN

The question remains whether their upper-middle-class habitus does not create an unsurpassable distance between their own lives and those of the black proletariat, however attractive they may find “the Street.” Benji sums up the teenagers’ predicament as follows:

According to the world, we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses [...]. / It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were some typical and well-known remedies. You could embrace the beach part—revel in the luxury, the perception of status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in

America with money [...]. You could embrace the black part—take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theater of it, your 24-7 one-man show. Folks of this type could pick Bootstrapping Striver or Proud Pillar, but the most popular brands were Militant or Street, Militant being the opposite of bourgeois capitulation to The Man, and Street being the antidote to Upper Middle Class emasculation. Street, ghetto. Act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish [...], knowing there was someone to post bail if one of your grubby schemes fell apart. (57-58)

While this passage implies choice, it also makes clear that the ability to choose is a result of certain material preconditions – in short, of being born “with money.” At the same time, the designation of possible choices as “popular brands” suggests that they are certainly not expressions of “real blackness” but rather the commodified expressions of 1980s urban culture. The teenagers attempt to buy into this lifestyle through sneakers and gold chains popularized by rap artists. But as a matter of fact we have already seen how the idea of hip hop’s “real blackness” has been deconstructed by way of Benji’s insistence on Afrika Bambaataa’s use of a Kraftwerk sample.

It is adult Ben who can verbalize this more precisely when he relates that his 15-year-old self “didn’t understand [...] why Marcus was hassling” him (61) because he thought “that it was okay to like both Afrika Bambaataa and Kraftwerk” (62) – which brings us back to the issue of ‘post-blackness’. Yet far from Touré’s “unapologetic” commitment to ‘post-blackness,’ Benji seems less self-assured. While he points out that “you could embrace the contradiction,” for instance by saying, “what you call paradox [of being “black boys with beach houses”], I call *myself*,” he continues that this worked only “[i]n theory,” for “[t]hose inclined to this remedy didn’t have many obvious models” (58, original emphasis).³ If “embrace[ing] the contradiction” is what ‘post-blackness’ requires, this does not come easy for Benji. And this is again a matter of habitus because unlike Touré, who learned to do “rapid cultural 180s” by spending time in a predominantly white private school and a “black and ghetto tennis club,” Benji is unable to connect with the “black and ghetto” lifestyle that his friends

3 The black “nerd,” a possible role model for Benji, only became a popular figure in 1986 with the release of Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (cf. George 135).

engage in (or try to, at any rate) due to what he calls his “strong dork constitution” (43). In other words, we again encounter the issue of an individual’s “practical sense” or the embodied dispositions that make up a habitus.

Bourdieu employs this concept to mediate between structure and practice. In a classic formulation he defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (*Logic* 53). These dispositions are themselves structured by the objective conditions under which they were acquired, and here “[e]arly experiences have particular weight” (60). But the habitus also acts as a “structuring structure,” insofar as all subsequent “thoughts, perceptions and actions,” in a word, all forms of “practice” (55), are structured by the habitus’ “schemes.” The latter enable social agents “to adapt endlessly to partially modified contexts” (*Pascalian Meditations* 139), that is, they serve as the basis for the practical rationality of their practices in new situations – but only within “limits” (138) since the range of possible practices always remains constrained by the conditions under which the habitus was acquired. In short, individuals incorporate the objective structures of the social world that they experience early in their lives, and these structures are embodied as subjective dispositions that guide – though not mechanically determine – all their later practices. While this suggests that they will be able to act ‘properly’ in situations that resemble those in which they acquired their habitus without having to consciously adhere to explicit rules (cf. 143), it also suggests that this will not be easily possible under changed conditions: Due to what Bourdieu calls “hysteresis” (*Outline* 83), the habitus is slow to adapt to a radically changed context. There individuals might feel embarrassed due to their lack of access to the means of producing the correct practice – and this is often expressed in “the form of *bodily emotions*” such as “shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt” (*Masculine Domination* 38, original emphasis).

Benji the “dork” thus falters when it comes to his encounters with “black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts [he]’d missed out on in [his] ‘predominantly white’ private school” (29). This refers primarily to complex handshake routines and the “grammatical acrobatics” (41) of the ritualized strategies of insult that his friends – some of whom do not attend private schools – introduce to Sag Harbor. Benji cannot transcend his “outsider’s perspective” which only allows him to provide detached descriptions of

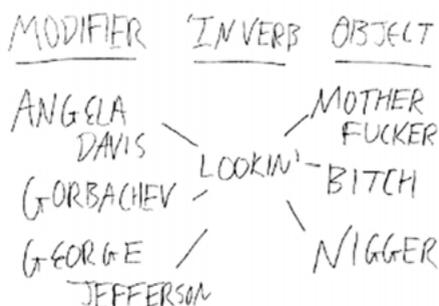
their actions without being able to acquire a “practical mastery” (*Outline* 19) of the logic of their practice. In other words, the habitus shaped by a “predominantly white” Manhattan environment and the manners of the older black generation hostile to ‘street’ culture makes it hard, almost impossible, for him to do “rapid cultural 180s” à la Touré.

Consider the description of a handshake routine performed by Benji’s friends Marcus and Bobby: “Slam, grip, flutter, snap. Or was it slam, flutter, grip, snap? I was all thumbs when it came to shakes.” Benji, who only perceives “a blur of choreography” reasons: “I had all summer to get it right, unless someone went back to the city and returned with some new variation that spread like a virus, and which my strong dork constitution produced countless antibodies against.” In short, Benji admits that his efforts to learn the new handshakes remain mere “fumbles” (43). Because Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is not determinist it does not exclude the possibility of adapting to new practices; but we see here that this requires an extended period of time (“all summer”) and remains imperfect (“fumbles”). Benji imagines the handshakes to be “[d]evised in the underground soul laboratories of Harlem, pounded out in the blacker-than-thou sweatshops of the South Bronx” (43), but this should not be misunderstood as suggesting that they express “real blackness.” For elsewhere we read that whatever Benji thinks about Queens and Brooklyn – boroughs that are structurally homologous to Harlem and the Bronx *vis-à-vis* Manhattan – is distorted by the “standard projections of the repressed” (239); “repressed” because he feels excluded from ‘black’ culture. That is, the content of his projection (say, “blacker-than-thou sweatshops”) is no more adequate to reality than the content of his fantasies about the “affluence” (113) that exists in the white neighborhoods surrounding Sag Harbor.⁴ In both cases spatial difference mystifies class difference. And this class difference is expressed in class habitus, if only negatively, because Benji fails to master the handshakes – which produces the sensation of “sham[e]” (43; cf. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* 38).

4 Benji’s exclusion from both black ‘urban’ culture and from white elites is further analogized when he imagines the latter as “secret-handshake groups” (110) as well.

When it comes to the “grammatical acrobatics” of the insults Benji’s “outsider’s perspective” on the logic of practice stands out even more clearly. He explains (41):

The trend this summer, insult-wise, was toward grammatical acrobatics, the unlikely collage. One smashed a colorful and evocative noun or proper noun into a pejorative, gluing them together with an -in’-verb [...]. Like so:



Benji points out that the addition of a “‘You fuckin’,’ as in ‘You fuckin’ Cha-Ka from *Land of the Lost*-lookin’ motherfucker,’” could serve “as a rhetorical pause, allowing the speaker a few extra seconds to pluck some splendid modifier out of the invective ether” (41-42). And he finishes thus:

True masters of the style sometimes attached the nonsensical ‘with your monkey ass’ as a kicker, to convey sincerity and depth of feeling. Hence, ‘You fuckin’ Kunta Kinte-lookin’ motherfucker ... with your monkey ass.’ You may have noticed that the -in’ verbs were generally visual. The heart of the critique concerned what you were putting out into the world, the vibes you gave off. Which is what made them so devastating when executed well—this ordnance detonated in that area between you and the mirror, between you and what you thought everyone else was seeing. (42)

Despite the ironic tone of this passage – which comes with giving vernacular language a quasi-academic treatment – the attention to detail suggests that Benji is intimately familiar with this practice. But in fact these observations are entirely a product of a “theoretical view of practice” that Bourdieu distinguishes from a “practical relation to practice” (*Logic* 81). For throughout the whole novel Benji not once utters a phrase of this sort. In

Bourdieu's terms, adult Ben can produce an account of the theoretical logic of the insult in the manner of a "grammarian," but teenage Benji cannot produce actual insults in practice as an "orator" would (31). The former speaks from the standpoint of "an 'impartial spectator' who seeks to understand for the sake of understanding" and possesses "mastery of the code"; the latter possesses "mastery of [its] appropriate usages" (32). "Orators" are thus the "[t]rue masters of the style" – but Benji is not one of them because he lacks the appropriate "practical mastery."

In *The Logic of Practice* Bourdieu discusses the need to complete two "epistemological break[s]" (26) in order to transcend the false opposition between "subjectivism" and "objectivism" (25). The first is a "methodical break with primary experience" (14) and the commonsense perceptions of social agents. By having adult Ben narrate the novel Whitehead introduces a potential first break, the break with the "primary experience" of teenage Benji. While sometimes this break fails to materialize, insofar as the novel remains focalized through the eyes of Benji, often adult Ben acts as narrator-focalizer – as in the passage quoted above. Whitehead himself states as much:

I knew that it had to be an adult looking back on his childhood because I would get bored out of my skull if I had to have a fifteen-year-old's voice for three hundred pages. [...] My narrators generally have a certain kind of critical faculty. They're analyzing what the characters are doing in larger social structures. So I wanted to have an adult voice looking back upon teenage years with that kind of critical distance. You know, being able to break down their cursing grammar. (qtd. in Chamberlin)

This "critical distance" equals Bourdieu's first "break." But the second one is missing. This would entail a critical distance to his own position which could enable Ben "to objectify the objectifying distance and the social conditions that make it possible" (*Logic* 14). Not having performed this second "break" he cannot reflect on the fact that he can "break down" his friends' "cursing grammar" but remains unable to employ it in practice himself. In other words, he does not grasp why he can assume the "objectifying distance" of the "grammarian" but lacks the practical understanding of the "orator."

In fact, according to Bourdieu, the “scientific break is inseparable from a social break” (5). It is significant that Ben resorts to producing a diagram of the logic of the insult. The diagram form represents the objectivist “break with primary experience” as practiced in Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology. Bourdieu points out that it produces a “synchronization effect” (10) that is alien to the actual logic of the practices the diagram purportedly represents. This is because practice by definition occurs in time and because social agents, rather than mechanically following a “rule” suggested by a diagram, engage in a “strategy” that allows for symbolic profits to be reaped based on the use of time (*Outline 9*, original emphases). Ben is tacitly aware that the diagram cannot represent the full truth of the insult, for otherwise he could not speak of insults that are “executed well” – for this implies that it does not suffice to produce some combination of “modifier,” “-in’ verb,” and “object.” And he explicitly evokes the role of time by pointing out that “You fuckin’” can provide a “rhetorical pause” that makes it possible to come up with a better insult, as it is the “interval” that allows for “strategy” in the first place (Bourdieu, *Logic* 106). But he cannot explain his own ineptitude, and this is precisely because he fails to objectify his class position that keeps him at a distance from the “grammatical acrobatics” of black vernacular. For his class privilege means that he is relatively “free from necessity” (*Pascalian Meditations* 17) which allows him to assume the “detached, distant disposition” of the observer who treats the world as “an object of contemplation, a representation, a spectacle” (51) that can in turn be represented by means of a diagram. But while Benji/Ben as an individual struggles with understanding how his class position shapes his actions and thought, the novel itself insists on the fact that social agents’ way of acting in the social world is not a matter of ‘choice’ alone (or of ‘performance’), but is decisively determined by the (‘embodied’) durable dispositions of (class) habitus.

BILDUNG VS. MANNERS

What kind of novel is *Sag Harbor* then? As indicated above it is somewhat common to classify it as a *Bildungsroman*; Whitehead himself has used the related term “coming of age novel” to describe his fourth work of fiction. As I have argued above, I do not believe that those are accurate

designations. And indeed in the same interview Whitehead himself qualifies this statement by saying that he was “avoiding certain expectations of plot and a certain kind of narrative satisfaction” in order to produce his “own kind of version” of a coming of age novel (qtd. in Shukla). Accordingly a closer look at the novel’s minimal plot reveals that there is neither a process of *Bildung* nor a coming of age in any meaningful sense. Quite the opposite. Benji starts the summer by planning to establish a “New Me,” basking in the “early-summer dream of reinvention” that should result in a “refurbished self” (23). But on the second-to-last page of the novel, just before returning to Manhattan, he must conclude that “[i]t didn’t work out the way I had envisioned.” Though no doubt “some stuff happened,” this is not exactly the stuff a successful *Bildungsroman* is made of. In fact, the desired “reinvention” is deferred: Benji resolves to sketch a “new plan” (272), now “sure” that “it is going to be a great year.” However, the novel’s two very last sentences – “Isn’t it funny? The way the mind works?” (273) – imply that the near future will not go according to Benji’s “new plan” either. *Sag Harbor* thus raises but ultimately frustrates the expectation that we are reading a *Bildungsroman*.

For this we should rather turn to Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, which is not strictly speaking a novel, but includes an autobiographical chapter that details precisely the process of maturation that we expect from a *Bildungsroman*. As Michaels argues, the meaning of this narrative form in the current (neoliberal) socio-political climate is to emphasize “that there are only individuals,” which is why the question of “whether memoirs really count as literature” (183) is secondary; what counts is the trajectory of an individual overcoming obstacles. And this is the very lesson of Touré’s “post-Black rugged individualism.” Reading his book we can reconstruct his struggle to free himself from oppressive definitions of “Blackness” and deal with the everyday racism he encounters as a journalist. In short, we see him triumph over those, both black and white, who want to constrict the free expression of his “post-Black” individuality. The logic of this type of narrative is essentially “optimistic” because, while it acknowledges “lingering racism” as a problem that continues to exist, it at the same time proposes that this can be overcome through the right choices and individual determination (Michaels 179). As Franco Moretti has demonstrated in his classic account of the *Bildungsroman*, “‘in the middle’ anything can happen – each individual can ‘make it’ or ‘be broken,’”

which is why this genre needs both “hope” and “disillusion” (248n5). The latter is provided by Touré in the chapter immediately preceding his autobiographical sketch in which he discusses the “fall” of black comedian Dave Chappelle, who was “scared [...] to death” by the “freedom of the post-Black era” in Touré’s telling (*Who’s Afraid* 74). The “hope” of course is provided by his own example.⁵

Sag Harbor remains a *Bildungsroman* deferred. Instead of following Benji as he truly ‘comes of age,’ we watch him stay in place. He does not undergo what the narrator calls a “[c]ommon rite of passage” among the Sag Harbor youth, namely getting out. This option is represented by Benji’s older sister Elena who no longer comes to Sag Harbor because she has had “[e]nough of this bourgeois shit” (234, original emphasis), and she even exhorts her brother: “[D]o me a favor, Benji, and get out when you can” (237). This process of getting out in a both literal (no longer spending summers in Sag Harbor) and figurative sense (breaking with the manners of the black “bourgeois” class) is precisely what would be the stuff of a *Bildungsroman* – but this is not what *Sag Harbor* is about. Instead it is a novel about a particular space, again both in a literal (a physical location) and a figurative sense (a position in social space). In fact, Whitehead’s spatial commitment goes so far that he produced a map of Sag Harbor included in the original edition of the novel and a further annotated map for the *Wall Street Journal* (cf. Mechling). Furthermore, it is a novel whose temporality is not linear, but circular. When summer ends Benji thinks, “[w]e plotted and planned and next year came around and we were in the same place” (259), and observes younger children that will be the “replacements” (261) of his circle. What is important here is not Benji’s individual trajectory, but the fact that there is a physical and social space that can and will be

5 Interestingly the very same logic pervades Ta-Nehisi Coates’s celebrated *Between the World and Me* (2015), a book that at first glance looks diametrically opposed to Touré’s. However, for all of Coates’s pessimism, we find the same dualism: the “disillusion” is represented by the police murder of his friend Prince Jones, but the “hope” is provided by Coates’s own career. As in Touré the relevance of class is denied, and we end up with a story of individual (‘post-black’) achievement. While in Touré class disappears behind acts of individual choice, in Coates it is the “social equalizer” of the “black body” (Kuhl) that serves this purpose (cf. also Clegg).

occupied again. In other words, the logic of *Sag Harbor* is one of reproduction not of change.

This is why it makes more sense to treat *Sag Harbor* as a novel of manners and start looking for its predecessors among works by authors such as Edith Wharton or Bret Easton Ellis rather than (exclusively) in the tradition of the (black) *Bildungsroman* or autobiography (as Fain does, see 127-36).⁶ In a classic account Lionel Trilling described “manners” as belonging to

that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning. They are the things that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and that separate them from the people of another culture. (206-07)

By “people of a culture” we are of course to understand members of a social class. As my reading of *Sag Harbor* has shown, the novel is committed to showing the myriad ways by which members of classes distinguish themselves from others – willingly or unwillingly, explicitly or implicitly. And no theorist was better suited to grasp these processes than Bourdieu with his keen sense for the way “[s]ocial subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make [...], in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (*Distinction* 6). The sense of difference goes so far that 15-year-old Benji imagines the super-rich whites who live in the neighborhoods nearby as belonging to a different species, as “reptilian creatures” wearing “human-flesh costumes” (113) or “[p]terodactyls” (37). Their lives – and manners – seem so radically different from what he knows that he cannot imagine their essential sameness any longer; and this recalls, say, Undine Spragg’s perception of Peter Van Degen as possessing a “grotesque saurian head” in Wharton (285) or Patrick Bateman’s literal turning of a homeless

6 To be sure, Wharton’s New Yorkers (and Ellis’s rich kids, too, if for other reasons) would disapprove of the ‘manners’ of Benji and his friends. But it is worth remembering that, “as economic structures change, so manners change.” The essential fact is that, whatever form they assume, manners express class differences; their “foundation” is “economic” (Godden 12).

man's face, with whom he claims he has nothing "in common," into a grotesque pulp (Ellis 131). In all these cases, behind the façade of manners, the "structural antagonism" of class society lurks as a monstrosity (Michaels 181). Unlike Touré's account of 'post-blackness' then Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* remains aware of the monstrous nature of class society and the logic of its reproduction.

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