3. (Post-Black) *Bildungsroman* or Novel of (Black Bourgeois) Manners? *Sag Harbor*

At first glance, struggle seems to be absent from Whitehead's fourth novel.[1] This has vexed critics such as Stefan Beck, who calls *Sag Harbor* "a remarkably and sometimes soporifically benign book." One reason is that the stakes in this semi-autobiographical tale set in the summer of 1985 seem so much lower than in the earlier novels. On Whitehead's Long Island, there are no perfect elevators ready to redeem urban humanity; nor will the rediscovery of a previously lost episode of black history be an issue for Whitehead's fifteen-year-old alter ego Benji Cooper. For he and his adolescent friends are much more concerned with things such as beer, BB guns, or girls. Beck misses a more meaningful engagement with racial issues, arguing that Benji's position "straddling the black and white worlds" is what is least interesting about the novel.[2] Derek Maus objects, writing that it is precisely the fact of being the "definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses" (57) that provides the novel's

1 An earlier, abridged version of this chapter was published as "(Post-Black) *Bildungsroman* or Novel of (Black Bourgeois) Manners? The Logic of Reproduction in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*," in *Power Relations in Black Lives: Reading African American Literature and Culture with Bourdieu and Elias*, ed. Christa Buschendorf (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

2 Stefan Beck, "Caveat Emptor," review of *How to Sell*, by Clancy Martin, *Lowboy*, by John Wray, *Sag Harbor*, by Colson Whitehead, and *How it Ended*, by Jay McInerney, *The New Criterion*, May 2009, https://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Caveat-emptor-4080.

central problem.[3] In a sense, both critics have a point. Maus's insistence that Benji experiences his social position as paradoxical is a useful reminder that the novel is not just a benign beach read. However, I tend to agree with Beck that the question of "straddling" racialized cultures is not exactly what is most interesting about *Sag Harbor*. Instead, the following reading will show that Whitehead's novel is about cultural difference insofar as the latter is based on class difference. To anticipate my argument, *Sag Harbor* is more interested in telling the story of Benji as a member of a class fraction rather than as an individual. In genre terms, then, I will propose to treat the novel not as a *Bildungsroman* but as if it were a novel of manners, a novel about differences between classes that must be made visible in the realm of culture.

Post-Black, Post-Class?

As in all of Whitehead's novels, the use of pop-cultural references in *Sag Harbor* is telling. Consider the following passage: fifteen-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, no longer the adolescent Benji, who narrates the novel, points out—was considered "a major crime" in 1985. Thus Marcus angrily replies, "Afrika Bambaataa didn't steal anything. This is their song." (61) Today—with the assistance of web sites such as WhoSampled.com, which meticulously records the samples used by hip-hop artists—it is easy to determine that Benji is right, for "Planet Rock," that "polycultural pastiche," does use a

3 All parenthetical citations of the novel refer to Colson Whitehead, *Sag Harbor* (New York: Doubleday, 2009). See Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 100–01.

Kraftwerk sample.[4] But Marcus 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 and acknowledge 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" or "heteroglossia"—related concepts that similarly posit that texts are characterized by the influence of and quotations from earlier texts, which is to say, by a plurality of voices. In fact, the teenage boys' discussion of "Planet Rock" can be read as a metafictional commentary on Whitehead's own literary ambitions[5]; the novelist has pointed out that the range of influences on his work include both "high-brow" literature and popular culture, both white and black authors.[6] 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.[7] If Whitehead is analogizing his position in the literary field with that of Benji among his friends, it is

4 Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Ebury Press, 2007), 172. More precisely, Afrika Bambaataa and his producer Arthur Baker used a synthesizer and a drum machine to recreate the sound of the Kraftwerk record rather than actually sampling it. See Marc Hogan, "Kraftwerk Win Bizarre Sampling Lawsuit in Germany: 'Planet Rock' for All," *Spin*, December 20, 2012, https://www.spin.com/2012/12/kraftwerk-lawsuit-germany-planet-rock/.

5 See Richard Schur, "The Crisis in Authenticity in Contemporary African American Literature," in *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, ed. Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013), 248.

6 See Colson Whitehead, interview by Suzan Sherman, *BOMB Magazine* 76 (2001), https://bombmagazine.org/article/2419/colson-whitehead.

7 For a reading accusing Whitehead of "tiptoe[ing] his literary footprints [sic] around black themes," see Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lexington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 120.

possible to suspect that he feels misunderstood because of others' facile juxtaposition of black and white cultures 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,"[8] 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."[9] Previously, Touré had favorably reviewed *Sag Harbor* in the *New York Times* and praised its "unapologetic" reshaping of the "iconography of blackness." 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," 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."[10] 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 phe-

8 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Free Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 7.

9 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 11.

10 Touré, "Visible Young Man," review of *Sag Harbor*, by Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times*, May 1, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/books/review/Toure-t.html.

nomenon of post-blackness.[11] However, as I have argued elsewhere,[12] Touré's account is deeply flawed, because it tacitly universalizes the experiences of (upper-) middle-class blacks through its neoliberal focus on "choice" and "identity options" that are allegedly "limitless," as well as its commitment to individual "Black success." While Touré acknowledges that success in the corporate world can be a function of knowing how to behave in a socially expected 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 their 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." An autobiographical chapter sheds light on where Touré learned to "play the game," namely in a Boston private school whose alumni include Robert Kennedy and T. S. Eliot. 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"[13] to successfully move in both "white" and "black" environments.

By arguing that success was a consequence of "[t]he way you walk—the grammar, articulation, and diction you choose to employ,"[14] Touré reveals that he fails to reflect on his privileged class position. His

11 See Bertram D. Ashe and Ilka Saal, eds., *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination* (Seattle: Washington UP, 2020); Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons, eds., *The Trouble With Post-Blackness* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015); Christian Schmidt, *Postblack Aesthetics: The Freedom to Be Black in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016); Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41, no. 4, (2007).

12 See Marlon Lieber, "Being Afraid of Post-Blackness: What's Neoliberalism Got to Do With It?" in *African American Culture and Society After Rodney King: Provocations and Protests, Progression and 'Post-Racialism,'* ed. Josephine Metcalf and Carina Spaulding (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

13 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 68, 12, 11, 200, 77, 88.

14 Ibid., 184.

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," that is, what Bourdieu calls "habitus."[15] Earlier chapters have shown that 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"[16]—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."[17] Thus, the skill Touré calls "Black *multi-linguality*"[18] is also a result of having acquired sufficient cultural capital to be able to speak the appropriate language in various social situations. When Touré envisions "Black success" in "the game"—which is nothing but the labor market—he similarly ignores that, in order to succeed, social agents must first possess a "feel for the game."[19] Touré's paean to "post-Black rugged individualism"[20] knows only habitus-less individuals and remains blind to structural constraints that limit the number of choices actually available to them.[21]

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15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 149.

16 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 32.

17 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 146.

18 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 11, emphasis in original.

19 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 66.

20 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 8.

21 Touré's post-black individuals, who are free to do blackness their way, are, like a Sartrean subject, "condemned to be free." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 553. Bourdieu rejects Sartre's transformation of "each action" into "a sort of unprecedented confrontation between the subject and the world" that ignores "anything resembling durable dispositions." Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 73.

So, what about *Sag Harbor* then? If it really is a post-black novel, would this not imply that it proposes a vision of a neoliberal society, a vision of (rugged) individuals who are not constrained in their actions by an embodied class habitus? Walter Benn Michaels seems to thinks so, writing that it is a hallmark of the "neoliberal novel" to substitute "cultural difference for […] class difference." 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."[22] While I am sympathetic to Michaels's critique of neoliberal culture, I do not think that his brief remarks do *Sag Harbor* justice.[23] The novel, I argue, is fully committed to the (Bourdieusian) idea that individuals possess embodied dispositions that tacitly shape the manner in which they perceive the world and think and act in it. Because the novel is narrated from Benji's perspective, we can reconstruct the influence of his habitus—and this habitus is that of a member of the black upper middle-class. Yet, 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" in the form of dispositions, to draw on Michaels's phrase once more. Ultimately, the difference between the two texts, *Sag Harbor* and *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, is also expressed generically, many critics'

22 Walter Benn Michaels, "Real Toads," in *The Imaginary and Its World: American Studies After the Transnational Turn*, ed. Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldívar, and Johannes Voelz (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 184, 185.

23 Daniel Grausam provides an incisive reading of the novel's critique of neoliberalism. He reads the lack of "parental regulation" in the black families' summer homes as a periodizing reference to 1980s deregulation; moreover, the perils of a deregulated economy are dramatized by a rotting soup pot. "The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead's Presents," in *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, ed. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 130–32.

claims notwithstanding,[24] I argue that Whitehead's novel is best not read as a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story. Rather than focusing on a (black) individual's process of maturation, Whitehead has created a novel about a particular class fraction and their manners.

Putting the Black Bourgeoisie on the Map

The Cooper family keeps the *Guide to Sag Harbor* in their summer home. This book includes "a nice map of the village," a map which is, however, incomplete: "we knew where our neighborhood began because that's where the map ended." If there should remain any doubt as to who this "we" is, the next sentence makes it explicit: "The black part of town was off in the margins" (18). In his classic study of the black bourgeoisie, E. Franklin Frazier pointed out more than half a century ago that there are "summer resorts where the black bourgeoisie gather to display their wealth."[25] But in Whitehead's novel this piece of information regularly comes as a surprise to white people, who to tell Benji that they were unaware that "black people went out there" (109). This is the condition of possibility for the adult narrator—an alter ego of Whitehead himself, who used to spend summers in Sag Harbor[26]—to produce an account of the summer of 1985 in which he can show that black people, contrary to widespread belief among whites, did go "out there."[27] Both narrator and author emphasize their familiarity with the eponymous Long Island community. Ben claims that he has "retraced all [his] old routes to make

24 See Adam Dawson, "'It Was the Last Time We'd Start the Summer that Way': Space, Race, and Coming of Age in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*," *Contemporary American Studies* 17, no. 3–4 (2020), 356; Fain, *Colson Whitehead*, 132; Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 98.

25 Franklin E. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 110.

26 See Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 2.

27 For a Lefebvrian account of the representation of space in *Sag Harbor*, see Margarida São Bento Cadima, "The Production of Space in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Edit Wharton's *Summer*," *RSA Journal* 30 (2019): 163–78.

sure what [he] know[s] is plausible" (81); Whitehead has supplemented the novel itself, at least in its original edition, with a map detailing the streets of Sag Harbor—including the "black part." Moreover, he also produced an additional map of the community for the *Wall Street Journal*.[28] Thus, readers get the sense that the real subject of *Sag Harbor* is less an individual than a place; a place that is situated in both physical and social space.

For Benji and his younger brother Reggie, this place represents a certain amount of protection from the racism they encounter during "the rest of the time," when they live in Manhattan (4). This is something that does not happen in Sag Harbor, or, as Benji explains, "[w]e fit in there" (5). Yet the place where they "fit in" is sharply delineated, and a "frontier" separates "black" and "white" spaces (28). However, there are some places in Sag Harbor that Benji and his friends have learned to avoid, such as the "shabby green house where the pickup truck with the Confederate-flag bumper sticker parked, forcing us to say 'Fuckin' rednecks' whenever we passed it" (82). Moreover, the community is surrounded by woods which "were the domain of good old boys and their good-old-boy inclinations," where the black teenagers discover signs of "older kid/redneck presence" such as "shotgun shells" (128). There, they imagine the Ku Klux Klan to be "lurking in the shadows"—even though Benji acknowledges that "it was unlikely that they were patrolling on horseback, in full getup, complete cracker regalia" (28). But this also shows that Benji has not yet figured out how to tell "bona-fide persecution from perceived persecution, the this-is-actually-happening from the mere paranoid manifestation" (7). The Klan never shows up, but fantasizing about the "Hooded Menace" allows the teenagers to boast "how they were going to outrun the KKK," thereby asserting both their masculinity and their recklessness. It is easier, then, for them to beat the Klan in the medium of fantasy than to transgress the border separating these racialized spaces. At the same time, this shows that they disavow the truth of what they perceive as a frontier. They stay within the boundaries of "their" space, because they

28 See Lauren Mechling, "Mapping Out a Novel," *Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 2009, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123085382009947537.

fear physical violence that never occurs; thus, what affects them is symbolic violence.

Another way to put this is to say that, rather than physical—or "true" (28)—frontiers, what is significant in *Sag Harbor* is what Bourdieu calls a "magical frontier." Instead of treating the way members of dominated groups perceive the world as a form of false consciousness, the sociologist argues that "the work of repression and the more or less fantastical constructions that it produces are part of the truth, with the same status as what they seek to disguise."[29] The fact that Benji and his friends tacitly recognize different parts of the town as belonging to either whites or blacks is expressed by the narrator's recurrent use of terms indicating property relations. Hence the possibility for "mini race wars" to be fought "over loitering rights" between black and white kids (16); hence also the possibility for Benji's friend NP to scream "[t]hat's trespassing," when he sees a white couple walking along the beach (34). The black-owned part of the beach, however, ends at "Barcelona Neck, aka the Point, and beyond that maps failed" (37). The ignorance of spaces ascribed to another race is thus symmetrical. The map the Coopers keep in their house, which reproduces the dominant classificatory schema, fails because it excludes the black part of Sag Harbor. But we now learn that Benji and his friends are similarly ignorant about what lies outside of their part of town. For that is where "maps failed."

The continuation of this passage reveals that the space beyond "the Point" is provided with content in Benji's imagination:

> Even the animals changed, so extreme the border between Sag Harbor and East Hampton. Who knew what kind of fauna lurked around the bend of Barcelona Neck? Pterodactyls wearing ascots and sipping gin and tonics, trust-fund duck-billed platypuses complaining about "the help." It was all hoity-toity over there. (37)

As in *John Henry Days*, where J. Sutter encounters the US South through the prism of an imaginative geography, Benji treats the space beyond "the Point" as a "mythic space," that is to say, a "space defined less by maps

29 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 169, 190.

and surveys than by myths and illusions, projected fantasies, wild anticipations, extravagant expectations."[30] The space where Benji's "maps failed" is, indeed, populated by fantastical creatures. In fact, his unfamiliarity with this space goes so far as to make him imagine it to be the home of an extinct species. To be sure, the novel—which remains committed to a realist mode throughout—does not want us to believe that there are actual Pterodactyls "lurking" (the same term the narrator uses to refer to the imaginary Klansmen in the forest) beyond Barcelona Neck. Rather, Benji's fantasy of a natural boundary actually conceals another sort of boundary, which is to say, a social boundary. In other words, Benji naturalizes and thus misrecognizes the social frontier by recognizing it as a biological one. Benji, a "Sag Harbor baby" who has "been coming out here since birth" (81), has been familiarized with a (physical) world (symbolically) structured according to the division between blacks and whites for all of his life.[31] Accordingly, he treats the spatial divisions as entirely self-evident and natural.

A second look at the passage, however, shows that the racialized division of space is not the only relevant distinction which informs Benji's speculations. For what characterizes the imaginary world beyond Barcelona Neck is not whiteness, but a kind of affluence that exceeds the capacities of Benji's imagination. That is, he does not only naturalize racial difference, but also class difference. The Coopers might be relatively wealthy, but their white Hampton neighbors are even better off. Other passages reveal that it is specifically the seemingly excessive amount of wealth and Benji's unfamiliarity with the lifestyles of the super-rich that fuels his fantasies. At the beach on the "white side of the island" (51), Benji discovers that the houses are not "bunched up all over one another" as they are in Sag Harbor, and that the properties are bigger in size. He wonders: "who knew what was between these houses, Olympic pools and tennis courts. Croquet arenas where the players swatted human skulls across the grass" (65). Again, as in Benji's

30 Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985), 11.

31 See Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 168.

ruminations about the "fauna" beyond Barcelona Neck, the words "who knew" initiate a passage in which the narrator reproduces the fifteen-year-old's fantasies about an unfamiliar space.

Finally, when Benji is describing the customers of the ice cream parlor where he has landed a summer job, his naturalization of class difference culminates in a fantasy of

> creatures of such affluence that I cannot even speculate about their day-to-day, outside of the fact of their sweet tooths. […]. I imagine steaming mud and hairless reptilian creatures swooping down low from between fanlike prehistoric leaves. Beings emerge from the gray muck, raising their great eye-domes above the silt, flicking tongues. The exact shape of their bodies, the number of gills in their neck and suckers on their mottled digits, I cannot say, because in order to mingle with Earth people they needed to wear human-flesh costumes, for only then could they walk among us. (113)

In all three instances, the level of affluence that Benji is unfamiliar with is articulated in the form a fantasy of monstrous difference. He repeatedly admits ignorance—by opening his accounts with the words "who knew" and "I cannot even speculate," respectively—and subsequently goes on to let his imagination run wild. He lacks the schemes of perception to imagine what the lives of the super-rich might be like, and thus he must transform them into a different species.

To conclude in a more precise way, however, it is possible to discern different imaginaries at work for different class fractions. "Inhabited space," Bourdieu argues, is a "materialized system of classification" and thus "reinforces the principles of the classification which constitutes the arbitrariness of a culture."[32] By reproducing Benji's experiences of different spaces, *Sag Harbor* allows its readers to see how the categories he employs to make sense of social reality turn several arbitrary—which is to say, socio-historically constituted—differences into seemingly necessary divisions. On the one hand, there are rednecks, good old boys, and crackers "lurking" in the forest or in run-down houses. These white,

32 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 76.

working-class men appear, first and foremost, as the embodiment of a physical threat. On the other hand, there are the super-rich. Their lives seem so alien from Benji's perspective that he imagines them not just as having more money but as a different species altogether.

This latter "magical frontier" is not exactly a function of race, however. After all, if affluence is the determining factor, the black residents of Sag Harbor could acquire similar luxuries once in possession of sufficient economic capital. Indeed, there is one "real Hampton-style modern house" in the black part of town belonging to the owner of R&B radio stations who is "pretty loaded." Again Benji wonders what this place might look like, thinking about handymen performing "who knew what upgrades and installations inside" (79). Once more, the words "who knew" signify the limits of Benji's imagination when it comes to extreme wealth, although his flights of fancy do not take a turn for the monstrous this time. By attending to the representation of Benji's lifeworld in *Sag Harbor*, it becomes clear that Whitehead is engaged in a careful mapping of both physical and socio-symbolic distribution of spaces in the eponymous community. The latter is shot through with borders both material and magical on which one cannot simply superimpose the racialized distinction between black and white, however. Instead, the way race is experienced in Whitehead's novel—the paradoxical experience of being "black boys with beach houses"—is a function of class.

Delinking Fate

"Black success" for Touré means having "a shot at becoming the CEO or a vice president of the company" or at least "a powerful entrepreneur."[33] By definition, this is limited to the few—for there can only be so many CEOs. Given the exorbitant difference between CEOs' salaries and workers' wages, it is hard to see how this could count as a desirable ambition—unless one accepts the logic of "linked fate" according to which

33 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 184.

"the welfare of the race" depends on the success of individual blacks.[34] In chapter one, I discussed Kenneth Warren's argument that African American literature has historically relied on this model of representation. If black authors continue to follow this model after the end of Jim Crow segregation, it is because they "need to distinguish the personal odysseys they undertake to reach personal success from similar endeavors by their white class peers."[35] 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."

The black adults who summer in Sag Harbor, black men and women who experienced the U.S. before the end of de jure 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," that is, the song "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" by R&B duo McFadden and Whitehead (259). The narrator focuses on 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" 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." (259–60) Thereby, the narrator conflates collective achievements (civil rights legislation) with individual ones (success in corporate America). In the minds of the Sag Harbor bourgeoisie, the progress made by some blacks—like themselves—thus signifies progress for all.

However, as readers learn in the course of the novel, the younger generation of blacks does not share this commitment. By telling the story through fifteen-year-old Benji's perspective, *Sag Harbor* suggests that his post-Civil Rights Movement generation is in the process of delinking its fate from that of "the race as a whole."[36] The novel expresses the confla-

34 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2011), 138–39.

35 Ibid., 139.

36 Whitehead's handling of the generational split, then, does not mirror the shift from "soul" to "post-soul" discussed by Mark Anthony Neal, who treats the wel-

tion of individual and collective success articulated by "linked fate" ideology in the form of the phrase, "If they got in, it was like all of us getting in" (196). Benji is not referring to the corporate world here, but to Bayside, a local music venue. *Sag Harbor* dramatizes the unsustainability of "linked fate" in narrative form by recounting the plans Benji and his friends Bobby and NP make 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 belonging with crowd of dancers at the club, 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 on the inside.[37]

The black upper-middle class, in other words, is shown to be a class fraction whose members compete for desirable positions, whether it is a

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fare of the black community as being contingent on a "post-soul intelligentsia." *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 104.

37 Cameron Leader-Picone, too, relies on Warren's discussion of the "linked fate" thesis and similarly argues that the generational difference in the community articulates a transition away from a sense of collective fate "toward an emphasis on racial individualism." "Post-Black Stories: Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Racial Individualism," *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 3 (2015): 432. His attention is, however, focused on the teenagers' individualist and performative relationship to blackness, while I argue that *Sag Harbor* does more than represent the transition. It also contains a critique of the notion of "linked fate" in the nightclub episode.

spot in a nightclub or a particularly attractive street sign (258). *Sag Harbor* spends much more time, however, in clarifying this class's relationship to the black proletariat. 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). While 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" cuts both ways.[38] 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 shows how the principles of the Sag Harbor "classification system" (204) serve as generative schemes that inform Benji's word choice. 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." Those places serve as a shorthand for "a vast, abstract plane of black pathology" (87) in the eyes of Benji's father. "[A]ll the divisions and distinctions of social space," writes Bourdieu, "are really and symbolically expressed in physical space appropriated as reified social space."[39] The terms used by Benji's father are thus precisely a way of turning physical space into an index of a position in social space. That Benji tacitly applies the same principles of vision and division as his father becomes clear when he sees his friend Nick wearing a large gold chain and imagines hearing his father—who is not actually present—exclaim: "Where does he think he comes from, the Street?" (ibid.). As a child of the black

38 See Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, "Towards a Theory of Established-Outsider Relations," in *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, vol. 4, ed. Cas Wouters (Dublin: U College Dublin P, 2008), 5.

39 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 134.

bourgeoisie, it is not surprising that Benji has acquired its habitus and attendant classificatory schemes.

Through the character of Benji's father and his ideas about black "pathology," the novel makes explicit the class condescension hidden under the surface in Touré.[40] As the German sociologist Norbert Elias explains, the self-image of "established" groups—such as that of the Sag Harbor black 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."[41] In *Sag Harbor* the former is embodied by the community's "founding fathers" and "their ideas of how proper black people should act" (221). Benji's father sees the "worst section"—that is, 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 elites that live in the adjoining Long Island communities. Consequently, they must fear being judged by the same standards as the black proletariat by whites. Benji's father, and everyone else committed to the Sag Harbor "classification system," understands that "systems of classification constitute a *stake in the struggles* that oppose individuals and groups."[42] This is why they so desperately try to distinguish themselves from the black proletariat (all the while holding on to the belief 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. The latter is actually told by his father to never "set foot in my house ever again" (221). Whoever threatens the black bourgeoisie's self-image must be banished from the community.

40 See, for instance, the discussion of a black working-class man's misunderstanding of a performance staged in Tompkins Square Park by the artist William Pope.L in Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* 26–28.

41 Elias and Scotson, "Towards a Theory of Established-Outsider Relations," 5.

42 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 14, emphasis in original.

One of the ways the novel thematizes this is by having the narrator call his family "a Cosby family, good on paper." He goes on to explain what this means: "Father a doctor, mother a lawyer. Three kids, prep-schooled, with clean fingernails and nice manners" (160). That is, Benji's parents pursue the same occupations as Cliff and Claire Huxtable on NBC's highly successful *The Cosby Show*. The comedian Bill Cosby was at the height of his fame in 1985, playing the lead role in a show that has been described as both "colorless"[43] and "proudly bourgeois."[44] Nelson George claims that Cosby was—along with President Ronald Reagan—a "surrogate father" for the American nation at the time.[45] While this may have expressed the "affection and admiration" the public felt for Cosby in 1985 (161), today the comedian is no longer a desirable father figure. Taking *Sag Harbor*'s narrative structure into account, it is clear that adult Ben, who narrates the novel, must be aware of the scandals Cosby was involved in later in his life. The narrated events take place in the summer of 1985. However, the narration itself must be situated in 1997 or later, for the narrator refers to alterations made to the 1997 rerelease of George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy (157)—as a matter of fact, this appears only three pages before the term "Cosby family" is used, as if to remind the reader of the significance of evaluating the Cosby reference with the benefit of hindsight. *A New Hope*, the first part of the trilogy, was released in U.S. movie theaters on January 31, 1997, less than two weeks after Cosby was publicly accused of having fathered a daughter in an extramarital affair[46]; hence, readers can assume that Ben knows about the troubles that

43 Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy From Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 505.

44 Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before That Negroes)* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 98.

45 Ibid., 99.

46 See David W. Chen, "Bill Cosby Was Target of Extortion," *The New York Times*, January 21, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/21/nyregion/bill-cosby-was-target-of-extortion.html.

the real Cosby family experienced[47] when he uses the term "Cosby family"—all the more so, since he elsewhere admits that his perception of the 1980s is informed by his later experiences (236). In short, the point of Benji's use of the term might precisely be to show that his family is good exclusively "on paper."

Most importantly, however, Benji's father embodies the same class condescension as Cosby himself, who went on an infamous rant about the black proletariat in a 2004 speech, in which he blamed what he called the "lower economic people" among American blacks for their allegedly "self-destructive behavior" in typical neoliberal fashion.[48] Mr. Cooper is similarly committed to individual responsibility, claiming that the black poor "need to get off their asses" (180). While fifteen-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 distancing effect. Thus, the class perspective is reproduced and mediated by Ben's narration. After performing a class-based ventriloquism by using his father's idiom when stating that "[t|here 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" contradicts the norms of respectability laid down by the "founding fathers"; but it also suggests that he—just like his friends—is tired of hearing it, thus mocking his father's repeated attempts to transmit and embody the values of the black bourgeoisie. While the manners of black bourgeois life have been inculcated in their minds for all their lives, this younger generation, in fact, finds much that is desirable in "the Street."

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47 This includes the murder of Cosby's son Ennis two days before his illegitimate daughter was arrested for extortion. See Chen, "Bill Cosby Was Target." Cosby has since been accused of and convicted for sexual assault, though the conviction was later overturned by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. See Charlie Savage, "Bill Cosby's Release From Prison, Explained," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/01/arts/television/bill-cosby-conviction-overturned-why.html.

48 Quoted in Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), xi, xiii.

Cursed Grammar

The question remains whether the upper-middle-class habitus depicted in *Sag Harbor* does not create an unsurpassable distance between the characters' 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 […]. 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 bourgie 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 is also made clear that the ability to choose is contingent on material preconditions—on being born "with money." At the same time, the designation of possible choices as "popular brands" suggests that they are 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. However, Benji had already deconstructed the idea of hip-hop's "real blackness" through his insistence that "Planet Rock" was based on a Kraftwerk sample.[49] It is adult Ben

49 Richard Schur discusses *Sag Harbor* as an articulation of the "authenticity crisis in African American literature." "The Crisis in Authenticity," 251. My own reading is not interested, however, in whether or not Whitehead "redefin[es] the terms

who can verbalize this more precisely, when he relates that his fifteen-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). Yet far from embodying the "unapologetic" commitment to post-black freedom perceived by Touré, Benji seems less self-assured. If "embrac[ing] the contradiction" is what post-blackness requires, this does not come easy for him. 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 engage in (or try to, at any rate) due to what he calls his "strong dork constitution" (43). In other words, once more the issue of an individual's practical sense or the embodied dispositions that make up a habitus arises.

Habitus, according to Bourdieu, are "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations." These dispositions are themselves structured by the objective conditions under which they were acquired, and "[e]arly experiences have particular weight." At the same time, the habitus also acts as a "structuring structure" insofar as all subsequent "thoughts, perceptions and actions," in a word, all forms of "practice", are structured by the its schemes.[50] The latter enable social agents "to adapt endlessly to partially modified contexts," that is, they serve as the basis for the practical rationality of their actions in new situations.[51] In short, individuals incorporate the objective structures of the social world they experience early in their lives, and these structures are embodied in the

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of racial identity" (ibid.)—not necessarily because I object to the specifics of Schur's account, but rather because this framework might, despite Schur's claim that the "ways […] to perform a black identity" and "socio-economic status" are related (246), reinforce the idea that what is at stake in *Sag Harbor* is primarily "black identity" rather than a specific conjuncture of racial blackness and upper-middle-class status.

50 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53, 60, 55.

51 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 139.

form of subjective dispositions that guide—but do not mechanically determine—subsequent practice. Yet the adaptability of dispositions is limited, since the range of possible practices always remains constrained by the conditions under which the habitus has initially been acquired. Due to what Bourdieu calls its "hysteresis," the habitus is slow to adapt to a radically changed context.[52] This causes individuals to potentially feel embarrassed because of 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."[53] Thus, Benji the "dork" 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, which shows that the Sag Harbor set is itself internally stratified—introduce to the community. 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"[54] of the logic of their practice. His habitus has been decisively shaped by his upbringing in "predominantly white" Manhattan. Thus, he struggles with and ultimately fails to perform "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). Bourdieu's theory does not deny that individuals can deliberately

52 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 83.

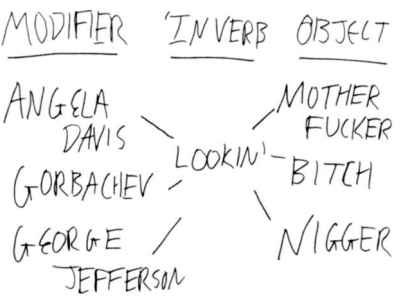
53 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 38, emphasis in original.

54 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 19.

adopt new forms of practice; Benji tries to learn but realizes that this takes time ("all summer") and still remains imperfect ("fumbles"). Benji's class habitus indexes his class difference from the working-class boroughs of New York City where he imagines the latest 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). His failure to thus perform a version of blackness—a commodified version, to be sure—is experienced as shameful.[55]

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:



55 Benji's uncomfortable position between the (white) super-rich and the (black) proletariat, neither of which he has access to except in the medium of the imagination, is reiterated when he refers to the former as "secret-handshake groups" (110). From Benji's "outsider perspective" it seems as if all groups that embody a desirable position in social space (desirable for various reasons, though) possess their rituals that he is excluded from.

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. (42)

Despite the passage's ironic tone, the attention to detail creates the appearance that Benji is intimately familiar with this practice. However, he is in fact speaking from the position of an observer, not a practitioner. His observations are entirely a product of a "theoretical view of practice" that Bourdieu distinguishes from a "practical relation to practice." Significantly, not once in the novel does Benji utter a phrase of this sort himself. 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.[56] 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). To be a "[t]rue master of the style," as Benji puts it, one would have to be an "orator." He is not one of them and observes his friends from the position of a "grammarian," because he does not master the insults in practice.

By having adult Ben narrate the novel Whitehead introduces a break with the "primary experience" of teenage Benji which is similar to the first of the two "epistemological break[s]" Bourdieu insists on.[57] The

56 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 81, 31.

57 Ibid., 26, 14.

novel's protagonist, fifteen-year-old Benji, remains excluded the logic of practice of the "grammatical acrobatics." Ben, its narrator can describe their logic from the distance of adulthood. 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.[58]

This "critical distance" effects a first break. But a second one is missing. This would entail a critical reflection on his own position which would enable Ben "to objectify the objectifying distance and the social conditions that make it possible."[59] Thus, he does not critically interrogate his own (class) position, which is the ultimate reason why he can "break down" his friends' "cursing grammar" but remains unable to employ it in practice himself.

Through justifying his inability to master the rituals that signify blackness to fifteen-year-old Benji on account of his "strong dork constitution," Ben naturalizes his class-based detachment from practical mastery. The diagram form, used in *Sag Harbor* to visualize the grammar of the curse, represents an objectivist "break with primary experience" as practiced in Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology. Bourdieu points out that it produces a "synchronization effect" that is alien to the actual logic of the practices the diagram purportedly represents.[60] This is because practice by definition occurs in time and because social agents,

58 Quoted in Jeremiah Chamberlin, "Who We Are Now: A Conversation with Colson Whitehead," *Fiction Writers Review*, May 30, 2009, https://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/who-we-are-now-a-conversation-with-colson-whitehead-interview/.

59 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 14.

60 Ibid., 10.

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.[61] 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"—which implies that it does not suffice to produce just any combination of "modifier," "'in-verb," and "object." He also 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. However, he cannot explain his own ineptitude to execute a successful insult except by self-deprecatingly calling himself a "dork."

This is because Ben fails to objectify his class position, which keeps him at a distance from the "grammatical acrobatics" of black vernacular. His class privilege means that he is relatively "free from necessity," which is what allows him to assume the "detached, distant disposition" of the observer who treats the world as "an object of contemplation, a representation, a spectacle"[62] that can in turn be represented in a diagram. However, while Benji 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' ways of acting in the social world are not a matter of choice alone but are decisively determined by the (embodied) dispositions of (class) habitus.

Bildung vs. Manners

What kind of novel is *Sag Harbor* then? As indicated at the outset of this chapter it is commonly classified as a *Bildungsroman*. Whitehead himself has used the related term "coming of age novel" to describe his fourth work of fiction.[63] Adam Dawson elaborates that this genre convention-

61 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 9, emphases removed.

62 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 17, 51.

63 Colson Whitehead, "Each Book an Antidote," interview by Nikesh Suhkla, *Guernica*, April 24, 2013, https://www.guernicamag.com/colson-whitehead-each-book-an-antidote/.

ally narrates "a teleological journey from an unstable adolescent self to a stable adult self."[64] As indicated before, I do not think that this characterizes Whitehead's novel very well, as the author himself qualifies his 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.[65] Indeed, a look at the minimal plot reveals that there is neither a process of *Bildung* nor a coming of age. Adolescent Benji's journey toward maturation is deferred, and *Sag Harbor* remains silent on how the insecure fifteen-year-old becomes the adult narrator.

In fact, the novel first raises and then frustrates the desire to narrate the story of a meaningful step toward adulthood. 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." Although no doubt "some stuff happened," it is hard to argue that "some stuff" is the stuff a successful *Bildungsroman* is made of. In the end, 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. Instead of revolving around a linear journey along the path of maturation, the plot of *Sag Harbor* is circular: at the end of the novel Benji remains in the same place as he was at the beginning.

The plot of a *Bildungsroman* can be discovered, however, in Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, which contains an autobiographical chapter that revolves around just the kind of "stuff" readers would expect from a *Bildungsroman*. Walter Benn Michaels argues that the popularity of this cultural form in the current neoliberal period is a consequence of its insistence that "that there are only individuals." He accordingly treats

64 Dawson, "It Was the Last Time," 356.

65 Whitehead, "Each Book an Antidote."

the difference between fictional memoir and autobiography as secondary, because they both celebrate individuals overcoming obstacles through "the right choices, individual determination, and hard work."[66] To be sure, this precisely the lesson of Touré's journey toward "post-Black rugged individualism." His autobiography sees him defy anyone, whether white or black, who attempts to constrict the free expression of his post-black individuality. Touré's sense of personal triumph over adverse circumstances is reinforced by the chapter preceding his autobiography, in which the "fall" of black comedian Dave Chappelle who was allegedly "scared [...] to death" by the "freedom of the post-Black era" is recounted as a cautionary tale that individuals who are not determined enough will fail. In contrast, Touré's suppression of his "inner Sharpton"[67] signifies that success comes to those individuals who work hard enough and never give up, social structures be damned.[68]

Sag Harbor, on the other hand, remains an endlessly forestalled *Bildungsroman*. Instead of following Benji as he truly comes of age, the reader watches him stay in place. He does not undergo what the narrator calls a "[c]ommon rite of passage" among the Sag Harbor youth, namely leaving behind the world of his parents. 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 bourgie shit*" (234, emphasis in original). She even exhorts her brother to "get out when you can" (237). A story about getting out both literally (no longer spending summers in Sag Harbor) and figuratively (breaking with the black "bourgie" class) could be the stuff of a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel; but *Sag Harbor* is not interested in telling such a story. Instead, it is a novel about a particular space, again both literally (a physical location) and figuratively (a position in social space). Moreover, it is a novel committed to

66 Michaels, "Real Toads," 183, 179.

67 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 74, 113.

68 On the *Bildungsroman*'s reliance on "hope" and "disillusion" as the poles between which individual journeys play out, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 1987), 248, n. 5.

a circular rather than linear temporality. 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 of friends. What is important is not Benji's individual trajectory but the fact that he embodies a position in social space which can and will be 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 if it were a novel of manners, a genre interested in making class differences visible in cultural differences.[69] Manners, according to Lionel Trilling, are part of

> 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.[70]

As my reading of *Sag Harbor* has shown, the novel is committed to revealing the ways by which members of classes distinguish themselves from others—willingly or unwillingly, explicitly or implicitly. And few theorists have a better sense for such distinctions than Bourdieu with his insistence on the processes by which "[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."[71] The novel's interest in the way social distinctions are

69 See Richard Godden, *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); and Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 150–51.

70 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 206–07.

71 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 6.

culturally negotiated goes so far as to reproduce fifteen-year-old Benji's fantasy that the super-rich belong to a different species: "reptilian creatures" wearing "human-flesh costumes" or "[p]terodactyls." Their lives—and manners—seem so radically different from what he knows that he cannot imagine their essential human sameness any longer. This recalls, for exampke, Undine Spragg's perception of Peter Van Degen as possessing a "grotesque saurian head" in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*.[72] Monstrously, the irreconcilably antagonist structure of class society lurks underneath the surface show of manners. Unlike Touré's account of post-blackness, however, Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* remains aware of the monstrous nature of class society and the logic of its reproduction.

72 Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, in *Three Novels of New York* (London: Penguin, 2012), 285.