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## The Production of Space in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Edith Wharton's *Summer*

### Introduction

At first glance, Edith Wharton's 1917 novella *Summer* and Colson Whitehead's 2009 novel *Sag Harbor* do not have much in common. Not only were they written almost a century apart, but the protagonist of Wharton's text is a young woman, while the protagonist of Whitehead's book is a young man. Additionally, *Summer* is set in a fictional New England countryside village, whereas the setting of *Sag Harbor* is the Long Island coastal town that lends the text its name. However, they both take place during a summer and it is worth remembering that the protagonists of both texts are teenagers and quite close in age: *Summer*'s Charity Royall is eighteen and *Sag Harbor*'s Benji Cooper is fifteen. So what transpires from the unlikely pairing and analysis of these two texts? Wharton's novella has been analyzed in detail from a gender studies perspective and Whitehead's novel has been examined for its racial significance. However, up until now, no objective and detailed geo-critical cartography has been undertaken for either of these texts. Location is of the utmost importance, and two opposite perspectives are presented in the opening chapters of both texts.

*Summer* begins with Charity asking herself: "What, she wondered, did North Dormer look like to people from other parts of the world? She herself had lived there since the age of five, and had long supposed it to be a place of some importance" (Wharton 108). Charity is an insider looking out, wondering how an outsider would look at her little village. North Dormer is a fictional village that has a vacuous existence and the description highlights its desolate setting: "North Dormer is at all times an empty place..." (108). This quality of isolation is alluded to in

its name, as Hermione Lee explains: “The name of the town puns on the French for sleep, implying a ‘dormant’ and ‘dormitory’” (Lee xix). Charity is awakening from her slumbering existence and her sense of location is expanding as she is able to gain some perspective on her own position after a trip to the nearby larger town of Nettleton. Moreover, her queries will soon be answered in the figure of Lucius Harney and her perspective will inevitably change by the end of the novella.

Conversely, Benji is an outsider looking in and his sense of location is becoming more condensed. *Sag Harbor* opens under the sign of these three questions by him: “When did you get out?” (Whitehead 3), “How long are you out for?” and “Who else is out?” (4). These questions will get repeated again and again throughout the novel. In reality, they are meant to be asked within the novel, but they are also one of the ways in which the reader is able to get a better sense of the space wherein the novel unfolds. Sag Harbor is a Long Island coastal town that over the years became a place of vacation for the well-to-do black community of New York City and Westchester. Where is out? What is out? Out from where? New York City and Westchester? Sag Harbor is “out.” However, it is also “in,” that is a self-confined place, as Benji notes: “When did you get out? Was the sound of a trap biting shut; we took the bait year after year, pure pinned joy in the town of Sag Harbor” (4). It is both a real, geographical location, and an imagined one, created by the community that inhabits it and where Benji and his friends embrace a new, imagined black identity.

This paper will draw on theories about the conception of space and establish how they apply to both *Summer* and *Sag Harbor* – thus also delineating their tenuous similarities. Eventually, a better understanding of both texts can be achieved and new critical perspective can be attained. French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s space theory in *The Production of Space* serves as the basic analytical structure for this article. Lefebvre’s theory is that space, namely social space, is made of three elements: the Perceived, the Conceived and the Lived (Lefebvre 39). These terms, borrowed from Noam Chomsky’s theory without being directly related to linguistic theory in any way, equate to the three concepts Lefebvre focuses on: spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. How do these three concepts apply to Charity’s situation and to Benji’s world?

In these two texts, the Perceived, the spatial practice, refers to the imagined geography of North Dormer, to the extent that the reader must

rely entirely on Wharton's descriptions of the place in order to form an idea of the location. Readers, in this sense, are just as clueless as Charity about the world she inhabits. This contrasts with the actual geography of Sag Harbor, and the space Benji's community occupies within the town. As for the Conceived, the representations of space, Wharton draws heavily on nature to portray North Dormer, as if the town exists as a manifestation of nature. In *Sag Harbor* the representation of space goes back to the history, the black history of the town of Sag Harbor that Whitehead so fluidly recounts. Finally, the Lived, that is representational space, is arguably where both texts are most akin to each other. Both Charity and Benji are coming of age and reaching adulthood. Representational space is more of a theatrical space in *Summer*; Charity's life unfolds like a scripted tragedy and the countryside village becomes a place of enclosure and provincialism for a young woman who is being robbed of an idealized respectable future. Representational space is more of an experimental space in *Sag Harbor*, because the coastal town becomes a place of exploration and understanding for the protagonist's black identity, with Benji's coming of age and embracing his black identity.

### The Perceived: Spatial Practice

The Perceived refers to spatial practice, which Lefebvre expounds as follows: "*Spatial practice* [...] embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (33; emphasis in the original). In both texts this refers to the particular location of the settings and the characteristics of the social formation of each place. In the first page of *Summer*, the first description of North Dormer is as if Wharton is painting a landscape worthy of the Hudson River school: "The springlike transparent sky shed a rain of silver sunshine on the roofs of the village, and on the pastures and larchwoods surrounding it" (Wharton 107). However, Wharton deftly deconstructs this idyllic landscape in a single sentence a little later on: "The place lies high and in the open, and lacks the lavish shade of the more protected New England villages" (107). By referring to North Dormer as a "place" rather than a "village," Wharton emphasizes the unprotected nature of the setting and foreshadows what is about to happen to the protagonist.

*Sag Harbor* opens with the Cooper family's 5 a.m. journey from New York City to Sag Harbor, and the protagonist's observation: "We stopped which meant that my father was waiting for an opening to cross Route 114, and then we were rolling down Hempstead, the official start of our hood" (Whitehead 18). Already the language has begun to change, and is not only territorial anymore: Hempstead is not simply a neighborhood, it is "our hood." Invisible borders and spaces are already being delineated.

Lefebvre adds: "Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion" (Lefebvre 33). This manifests as monotony in *Summer*, as is clear from Charity's exclamation towards the end of the text: "Things don't change at North Dormer: people just get used to them" (Wharton 172). In Wharton's text it is not so much a question of continuity and cohesion, as it is of tedium and stagnation. This is not the case in *Sag Harbor*, where continuity is present precisely because the African-American families have been vacationing there year after year, thus creating the cohesion of the black community. To quote Lefebvre again: "In terms of social space, and off each member of society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*" (Lefebvre 33).

This experience of the space is a personal one, and both texts are specific accounts of how the protagonists experience space. In *Summer* the story is told by a third-person narrator and in *Sag Harbor* by Benji Cooper as an adult, which means that both texts recount an individual experience with a certain distance from it. This individual experience of the place creates a collective notion and appropriation of the space, or, in Lefebvre's words: "The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it" (38). Benji belongs to his community, but Charity was brought into hers and never fully accepted it, as her backstory reveals from the very beginning: "She had been 'brought down from the Mountain'; from the scarred cliff that lifted its sullen wall above the lesser slopes of Eagle Range, making a perpetual background of gloom to the lonely valley" (Wharton 109). Charity was brought to North Dormer from the Mountain, an admittedly drearier place. Nevertheless, Charity's backstory and the description of her past serve to add to the sense that North Dormer is an isolated enclosure where she is trapped. The only way to escape is by having a better understanding of it. Coincidentally,

this is what Lefebvre concludes: "From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space" (Lefebvre 38). It is essential to draw up a literary map of both the fictional North Dormer, as well as of the town of Sag Harbor, in order to understand how both places are occupied and what significance emerges from this.

Charity is positively shocked when Lucius Harney walks into the village library where she works and asks her about the history of North Dormer. When he says "I'm an architect, you see, and I'm hunting up old houses in these parts," she bluntly replies: "Old Houses? Everything's old in North Dormer, isn't it? The folks are, anyhow" (Wharton 113). Charity's reply also has an interesting dimension, in that the people of North Dormer are dehumanized when they are compared to the buildings, and treated as non-human entities. Charity fails to grasp the importance of history and this is abundantly clear when Harney enquires about a book titled *North Dormer and the Early Townships of Eagle County*: "She remembered, the last time she had picked it up, wondering how anyone could have taken the trouble to write a book about North Dormer and its neighbors: Dormer, Hamblin, Creston and Creston River" (113). Charity's disdain for the history book is nevertheless compensated for by the possession of an actual map in her mind: "She knew them all, mere lost clusters of houses in the folds of the desolate ridges: Dormer, where North Dormer went for its apples; Creston River, where there used to be a paper-mill, and its grey walls stood decaying by the stream; and Hamblin, where the first snow always fell" (113-14). The fact that Charity has her geographical location mapped out in her mind serves to highlight her animal instincts, rather than her rational mind, as Lee explains: "She feels and thinks through her blood, she lies on the ground like an animal..." (Lee xix). This is especially evident when Charity is experiencing and musing on the natural world around her.

In *Sag Harbor*, it is ironic that Benji refers to the book, the "*Guide to Sag Harbor: Landmarks, Homes & History*" that everyone in Sag Harbor possesses, precisely because "we knew where our neighborhood began because that's where the map ended. The black part of town was off in the margins" (Whitehead 18). There is no map of Sag Harbor, therefore it is left to the black community to map out their town, their territory. Sometimes it consists of stating what is within the boundaries, in a matter of fact way,

as is the case when Benji states: “There were three housing developments in our summer world – Azurest, where we stayed, Sag Harbor Hills, and Ninevah” (24). Other times, it consists in describing what is outside the boundaries, such as the woods near Sag Harbor: “The real woods outside of the developments were the true frontier, enigmatic and intimidating” (28). These woods, which may still be harboring the Ku Klux Klan or not, are just as mysterious and terrifying as what lies beyond the space of the black community. For that purpose, symbolic marks and metaphorical borders were drawn up, not only to delineate the space that is and distinguish it from that which it was not. Benji breaks this down for the reader: “The Rock, the Creek, the Point: the increments of our existence” (37). About the Rock he says that it “was a few houses down from ours and a powerful psychological meridian” (36). If these points of reference served to define space, they also served to place the community. Benji adds: “Take my word, friend, the Rock was an anchor to keep you from drifting too far” (36).

These points of reference, while keeping the black community within their space, also serve to keep out all those that do not belong to that community, when presented with possibility of intruders: “everybody in the developments, whether they lived on the beach or not, felt that selfish tug of ownership when they saw strangers – i.e., white people – on our little stretch” (36). Apart from the Rock, there is also the Creek: “The shallow waves of the Creek put an end to the line of beach houses, and on the opposite bank the wetland outskirts of East Hampton, whispered in their eternal huddle” (37). And finally the Point, which like the two preceding spots serves a similar purpose of demarcation: “Watching over a scabble of inhospitable beach, the wetlands curved up to Barcelona Neck, aka the Point, and beyond that maps failed” (37).

Benji is very aware of his space and the space his community occupies, versus the space they do not: “Outside our black enclave and lighting out for the white side of the island” (51). The division is indubitably racial. Even a teenage kid like Benji is fully aware of it, and even within the typically rebellious tendencies of his teenage years, he is curious about the other side, that is not his: “We had formed scouting parties to explore the dirt trails behind Mashashimuet Park, striking out toward Bridgehampton, and made occasional forays up 114 to the twisty, forsaken bends of Swamp Road, in a tentative East Hamptonny salvo” (51). Ultimately, despite

curiosity and rebelliousness, Benji and his friends do not dare cross the black boundaries of Sag Harbor, “but generally we confined our shenanigans to the developments, to obsessive loops up and down Main Street in town” (51).

### The Conceived: Representations of Space

The conceived is so explained by Lefebvre: “*Representations of space* [...] are tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes and to ‘frontal’ relations” (Lefebvre 33). In *Summer*, the order is established by nature and the landscape determines the way the space is conceived. This is not so in *Sag Harbor*, where the presence of the black community, past and present, made the town what it is. Over the years, the black community of Sag Harbor has woven an order, a history.

Lefebvre elaborates on the notion of representations of space as “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bend – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived and what is conceived” (38). The first generation of people that came out to Sag Harbor were the “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, social engineers,” and the artists “with a scientific bend.” They claimed the space as their own and they set out the ground rules, so to speak. The following generations are building on that. Benji’s generation is building on that. That is why this is ultimately “the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (38-39). It is dominant because precisely history, the past, bears its weight. The Sag Harbor community is especially proud of their history, and especially when there is a “Famous Black Person” involved – an example of this being the story Benji’s mother tells: “The woman who lived there in the 50s, my mother reminded us from time to time, used to have fish fry on Saturdays, selling lunches, and legend had it that DuBois came out to Sag once and ate there” (Whitehead 13). In reference to W.E.B. Du Bois’s visit to Sag Harbor, Benji quotes his famous essay “Of our Spiritual Strivings” in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (Du Bois 52, also qtd. in Whitehead 13-14)

Sag Harbor is a space, a social space, where this “double-consciousness” Du Bois speaks of can not only exist but be reconciled. Just like the rock, Du Bois's visit is what anchors the black community to Sag Harbor.

This is strikingly different from *Summer*, where the denizens of North Dormer are despairingly described by Charity when she is arguing with Harney: “But anyway we all live in the same place, and when it's a place like North Dormer it's enough to make people hate each other just to have to walk down the same street every day. But you don't live here, and you don't know anything about any of us, so what did you have to meddle for? (Wharton 130). The people of North Dormer are stagnant, just like the place where they live, and this adds to the oppressiveness of the village. The society of North Dormer perfectly exemplifies what Immanuel Kant called “the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society coupled with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up” (Kant 44). They have come together because they live in the same space, the village, but their urge is to break apart and scatter. This desire is especially strong in Charity, who is constantly thinking about what life is like outside of North Dormer.

When describing the Sag Harbor community itself, Benji notes that it is a “tribe”: “Once the season is in full swing, you came across one of the tribe” (Whitehead 20), he also remarks: “You could coexist in this Sag Harbor galaxy in perfectly alienated orbits, always zipping into each other's blind spots, or hidden on the dark side of the moon” (26). It seems to be a contradiction that a community can be a “tribe” and at the same time its members can be completely alienated most of the time. That is simply because what brings the “tribe” together is their color, and that in



itself is not enough to make the community tight-knit. The people of Sag Harbor also exemplify Kant's "unsocial-sociability": they come together because of their color and that in itself is not enough to quell the urge to break apart and scatter. Unlike the people of North Dorset, however, they get to break apart and scatter once the summer is over.

Nature plays a preponderant role in both texts. In *Sag Harbor*, Benji muses about the reasons that made the first generation settle specifically in Sag Harbor: "I'll wager on this: the sunsets closed the deal for that first generation, the ones who came here originally, my grandparents and their crew" (38). Although the idea of sunsets is idyllic, the reality is much more pragmatic, as Benji concludes: "That first generation asked, Can we make it work? Will they allow us to have this? It doesn't matter what the world says, they answered each other. The place is ours" (38). It is worth remembering that the settling of Sag Harbor had racial implications:

Certainly that first generation claimed and settled on Sag Harbor Bay because the south side was off-limits – the white people owned the coastline, South Hampton, Bridgehampton, East Hampton. And the Jersey shore, and every other stretch of vista-full property in the tristate area, the natural places of escape from city life. (51)

The first generation came to Sag Harbor because, due to their color, they were restricted to that one place. History delineated the boundaries of the space of the black community. Again the irony of the book title *Guide to Sag Harbor: Landmarks, Homes & History* is evident, because just as the mapping of the black community is not present in the guide book, neither is their history represented. It is their presence in the space of Sag Harbor over the years that has created an unwritten perhaps, but often spoken of, history of Sag Harbor. On the way to Sag Harbor, Benji says: "With every mention of a landmark, that place came into being after nine months of banishment in the city" (15). An example of this oral history is when Benji speaks of their Sag Harbor neighborhood: "Hempstead was where the houses started to have names, with stories and histories attached" (18). The mainstream history of Sag Harbor may be in the book, but the real black history of Sag Harbor has been constructed by generations of families vacationing in the town.

Nature is also crucial in *Summer*, with the protagonist Charity described by Lee as having an “animal-like” attitude, as in this passage: “Charity Royall lay on a ridge above a sunlit hollow, her face pressed to the earth and the warm currents of the grass running through her” (Wharton 134). Charity lacks the words to describe the nature she feels pulsing through her, but the narrator fills this lacuna with an exuberant summer description, an artwork in itself, of what Charity sees: “Directly in her line of vision a blackberry branch laid its frail white flowers and blue-green leaves against the sky. Just beyond, a tuft of sweet-fern uncurled between the beaded shoots of the grass, and a small yellow butterfly vibrated over them like a fleck of sunshine” (134). But Charity’s experience of nature transcends the mere sense of sight, she experiences the natural world with all her senses in a sentimental way: “This was all she saw; but she felt, above her and about her, the strong growth of the beeches clothing the ridge, the rounding of pale green cones on countless spruce-branches, the push of myriads of sweet-fern fronds in the cracks of the stony slope below the wood, and the crowding shoots of meadowsweet and yellow flags in the pasture beyond” (134). The last part of the sentence suggests that Charity is a small detail in a vast, universal natural world.

The narrator’s descriptions are so vivid that they create, more than a set painting, the impression of actually being in that very setting in nature, because the reader is invited to experience its smells: “All this bubbling of sap and slipping of sheaths and bursting of calyxes was carried to her on mingled currents of fragrance” (134). These vivid, dynamic descriptions of nature also add to a sense of anxiety in the reader, of a story that, just like the season it is taking place in, is ephemeral and will eventually cease to be. Now that the reader has inhaled this fragrant description, it must release and exhale it: “Every leaf and bud and blade seemed to contribute its exhalation to the pervading sweetness in which the pungency of pine-sap prevailed over the spice of thyme and the subtle perfume of fern, and all were merged in a moist earth-smell that was like the breath of some huge sun-warmed animal” (134). This quote also involves the reader’s senses, not just the two most obvious ones, sight and smell, but taste, by way of the reference to the aromatic herb thyme. Earlier in the novel, the reader has already been made acutely aware that Charity Royall processes the world through her senses, and of her animal-like nature: “She was blind

and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded" (115).

Charity processes the natural world through empirical means that her own body naturally provides: "She loved the roughness of the dry mountain grass under her palms, the smell of the thyme into which she crushed her face, the fingering of the wind in her hair and through her cotton blouse, and the creak of the larches as they swayed to it" (115). A little later on, the narrator describes Charity's romantic interest, Lucius Harney, using references from the natural world: "His hair was sunburnt-looking too, or rather the colour of bracken after frost; his eyes grey, with the appealing look of the shortsighted, his smile shy yet confident, as if he knew lots of things she had never dreamed of, and yet wouldn't for the world have had her feel his superiority" (116). This description only serves to highlight that Harney belongs to the educated world of ideas, and Charity to the sensory world of nature. Harney's hair is "sunburnt-looking" not because it has been actually out in the sun, but because this is the way that Charity sees his specific shade of hair. It is also curious that Harney's hair is "the colour of bracken after frost," because although the story takes place in summer Wharton resorts to winter imagery to describe Harney. Just another reminder that Charity and Harney are not intended for each other, they belong to two different worlds. Charity is the vibrant eruption of summer and Harney is the cold hibernation of winter.

### The Lived: Representational Space

The Lived is the representational space, that Lefebvre explains as "embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces)" (Lefebvre 33). The reader witnesses Charity's disconnect from nature as the novel progresses, and by the end of *Summer* this is most evident. Not only that, but Charity gets lost in the specific rural setting she occupies, compared to the larger cosmopolitan setting her lover is occupying now. She is becoming aware of her own distance

from civilization: “so wide a country, and the sight of those strange lands reaching away on every side gave her a new sense of Harney’s remoteness” (Wharton 243). Wharton further adds that: “She knew she ust be miles and miles beyond the last range of hills that seemed to be the outmost verge of things, and she wondered how she had ever dreamed of going to New York to find him” (243). As Charity becomes aware of this distance, this remoteness, she withdraws altogether from the natural. Charity comes back from nature as the season of summer draws to a close.

As Charity returns from North Dormer, after her marriage to Lawyer Royall, the landscape is altogether different even though only two days have passed: “In the train, during the short run from Creston to Nettleton, the warmth aroused her, and the consciousness of being under strange eyes gave her a momentary energy. She sat upright, facing Mr. Royall, and stared out of the window at the denuded country” (259). Wharton continues explaining it: “Forty-eight hours earlier, when she had last traversed it, many of the trees still held their leaves; but the high wind of the last two nights had stripped them, and the lines of the landscape’ were as finely pencilled as in December” (259). Just as Charity’s life has gone from a vibrant summer to an endless winter, so the landscape has changed in her eyes to reflect this drastic shift. The natural world in which she had loved Harney no longer exists, it has changed, it has faded and been broken down: “A few days of autumn cold had wiped out all trace of the rich fields and languid groves through which she had passed on the Fourth of July; and with the fading of the landscape those fervid hours had faded, too” (259). At this stage the reader witnesses Charity’s depersonalization, if she is denied her nature she too denies nature and withdraws: “She could no longer believe that she was the being who had lived them; she was someone to whom something irreparable and overwhelming had happened, but the traces of the steps leading up to it had almost vanished” (259). This contrasts sharply with the earlier descriptions of the landscape in the novel, at the beginning of summer: “There had never been such a June in Eagle County. Usually it was a month of moods, with abrupt alternations of belated frost and mid-summer heat; this year, day followed day in a sequence of temperate beauty” (134). Already the reader has being warned that this season is unusually alluring, suggesting that it could never again

be repeated: “Every morning a breeze blew steadily from the hills. Toward noon it built up great canopies of white cloud that threw a cool shadow over fields and woods; then before sunset the clouds dissolved again, and the western light rained its unobstructed brightness on the valley” (134). By the end of the novel this “unobstructed brightness” has come to pass and can never be repeated.

Sag Harbor is a representational space replete with the symbols and codes the black community has inscribed in it over the years. In his remarks on representational spaces Lefebvre refers to “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of the ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users,’ but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe” (Lefebvre 33). This is what the narrator, Benji, does in taking on the role of artist and philosopher, in describing Sag Harbor, and the images and symbols associated with the representational space of the town. Thus, Sag Harbor is indubitably a representational space, for the black community in general, but more specifically for the protagonist and narrator.

It is worth remembering that in New York City Benji’s identity is always misrepresented, it is always being mistaken: “I remember one day in the seventh grade when an old white man stopped us on a corner and asked us if we were the sons of a diplomat. Little princes of an African country” (Whitehead 4). His African-American identity is not only mistaken, but most importantly called into question: “Because – why else would black people dress like that?” (4) Given the fact that the Cooper brothers are “modeling gear from the Brooks Brothers Young Men Department” (4), this cannot be conciliated with their black, African-American identity. However, as Benji notes regarding the old man’s question in New York City – “What did we look like? I don’t know, but his question wasn’t something we’d ever be asked in Sag Harbor. We fit in there” (5). Furthermore, as Benji remarks, “Sag Harbor was outside the rules” (24).

But more than being outside the rules, it is more appropriate to say that Sag Harbor has its own set of rules, that differ from the rules the boys live by the rest of the year. This new set of rules makes Sag Harbor the perfect place for Benji and his friends to explore their own identity and what it means for them to be black. This involves putting on a performance,

as Benji himself remarks: “We were people, not performance artists, all appearances to the contrary” (88). Putting on a performance, so to speak, of black identity involves experimenting with language, gestures and clothing. Language is the first to be explored. When Benji reunites with his Sag Harbor friends, that is his peers, they have some catching up to do, language-wise: “Hanging out with NP was to start catching up on nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts I’d missed out on in my ‘predominantly white’ private school” (29). As their identity changes, morphing into what the boys perceive to be a black identity, so does the language. This continues throughout the book. In fact a conscious effort is made on the narrator’s part to test out his own lexicon of words: “I said, ‘Shut up, bitch.’ I’d been experimenting with ‘bitch,’ trying it out every couple of days. Going well so far, from the response” (93). So now that the language is more appropriate to the black identity Benji aspires to, it is time to perfect the gestures.

The gestures being played out in the novel are handshakes. Benji describes Marcus and Bobby’s handshake in this way: “He extended his hand to Bobby and I witnessed a blur of choreography” (43). This is more than a handshake, it is an art, a performance that requires a choreography with which the Sag Harbor boys are unfamiliar, because in reality it is not part of their culture: “Yes, the new handshakes were out, shaming me with their permutations and slippery routines” (43). In fact, Benji is not very skilled at this acquired art: “Slam, grip, flutter, snap. Or was it slam, flutter, grip, snap? I was all thumbs when it came to shakes” (43). Nevertheless, the boys associate handshaking with black culture and make every effort to assimilate the habit into their everyday life in Sag Harbor: “Devised in the underground soul laboratories of Harlem, pounded out in the blacker-than-thou sweatshops of the South Bronx, the new handshakes always had me faltering in embarrassment” (43). Handshakes are a learned, second nature to the boys, but they insist in performing this ritual, so as to proclaim their black culture.

Lastly, it is time to adapt the wardrobe to Sag Harbor and to the black identity the boys wish to demonstrate. This is mainly noticeable through jewelry, the gold chains, that some of the boys in Sag Harbor wear. When Benji takes on a summer job at the ice-cream parlor Jonni

Waffle, he notices Nick's gold chain: "I saw he had a new gold chain" (87). Benji then describes Nick's old chain: "His old one said NICK in two-inch letters, and was studded with tiny white rhinestones"; by comparing the old chain to the new one, he deduces that "[h]is new chains said BIG NICK in two-inch letters, and was studded with tiny white rhinestones that glittered more exuberantly than those of its predecessor, the ersatz diamond industry having made admirable strides in the last few months" (87). Benji himself, however, does not adopt a drastic change of clothing. He does not wear gold chains, probably because his father disapproves of them. Thus, his assimilation of what he perceives to be a black identity remains on a linguistic and gestural level only.

Ultimately, what the teenagers of Sag Harbor perceive as black identity, the black identity of the streets, of the predominantly black neighborhood they do not inhabit, is not well-regarded, not even accepted by the Sag Harbor community. Early on in the novel, Benji states that, "[t]here were no street niggers in Sag Harbor" (31). This distaste for street culture is further supported by Benji's father's view on the subject: "The Street in my father's mind was a vast, abstract plane of black pathology" (87). This view is more than understandable given that Mr. Cooper's upbringing differs greatly from that of his sons: "He'd grown up poor, fighting his way home every day off Lenox Avenue, and any hint that he hadn't escaped, that all his suffering had been for naught, kindled his temper and his deep fear that aspiration was an illusion and the Street a labyrinth without exit, a mess of connecting alleys and avenues always leading back into itself" (87). To Benji's father, black street culture is an undoing of sorts of all his hard work to come up, and bring his family up, in the world, and not only does he not share in it, but he creates an alternate black identity for himself and his family.

## Conclusion

Overall, the "production of space" manifests itself differently in the two texts. However, this unifying critical theory also serves to bring them together as well as to highlight their similarities. A better understanding

of both texts has been achieved through an analysis of their setting from a spatial theory perspective. Regarding social space, Lefebvre states: “From the point of view of knowing (*connaissance*), social space works (along with its concept) as a tool for the analysis of society” (Lefebvre 34). However, the prism of social space is only one of the many ways in which texts can be understood. Marlon Lieber suggests the link between Colson Whitehead’s text and Edith Wharton’s literary production: “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” (Lieber 118). This link extends beyond just the novel of manners, and it deserves to be explored in a rigorous and thorough manner. Henri Lefebvre was not the only one to write about social space and spatialization in general; therefore it would be interesting to consider other theories and how Colson Whitehead’s ongoing literary production is inspired by and woven together with Edith Wharton’s established literary corpus.

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