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# Hip Hop and the Huxtables: Identity, Hip Hop, and the Cosby Effect in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*

JONATHAN NAUMOWICZ

*Normal kids in their teens want to go and date girls and do mischievous things, your hormones are jumping around, but I stayed in my bedroom in search of something.*

~ Grandmaster Flash

## I. Introduction - Beyond an Authentic Black Experience

Developing an identity in the formative years of adolescence is a complex undertaking, a process made much more complex when you don't fit the mold of any preexisting social group. For an African American in the 1980s, the formulation of identity was a remarkably unique challenge. The rise of hip hop as a major element of American culture gave a far-reaching voice to the challenges faced by many African Americans, but its roots in impoverished urban areas offered a limited perspective on black American life in the 1980s. In *Sag Harbor*, Colson Whitehead delves into this complicated identity problem through Benji, a black prep-school New York high school student "catching up on months" of black culture he has missed out on in his upper-middle class world (Whitehead 37). Benji fits the role of the "black geek" during his school year, playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, obsessing over comic books and *Star Wars*, yet he is drawn

to the cultural world of hip hop in search of a more authentically black experience. Benji is caught in the midst of swirling social identities: too black to fully assimilate into his prep-school world and too white to be part of the hip hop world. Benji experiences classic double-consciousness and, in DuBois's words, "this waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc" with Benji and sends him "wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation. *Sag Harbor* is the place where he tries to negotiate these false gods and reinvent himself.

Writer and professor Gene Jarrett suggests authenticity in African American art is seeking "to control representations of the race as much as possible, to shield them from stereotypes and other types of racist contamination," but this control over representations inherently limits the ways African Americans can be represented (3). These limited representations of what it means to be African American pervade Benji's world and generate real conflict within him as he navigates adolescence. Critic Richard Schur explores this problem for Benji, noting that Benji "feels compelled to meet dominant constructions" in his search for authentic blackness (248). The problem with these dominant constructions, particularly hip hop as authentic black experience, is that Benji's personal experiences fall outside the scope of these constructs. It is this reality, this distance from perceived black authenticity that drives Benji to reinvent himself as someone "blacker." Thus, Benji spends much of *Sag Harbor* performing the rules and rituals of what he sees as a more authentic black identity. As Schur notes, "authenticity of any kind is frequently understood as much as a matter of consumption and performance as it is connecting to history, institutions, traditions, or shared struggle" (238). Benji consumes hip hop and other facets of the authentic identity, then replicates what he consumes via performance. While Schur's reading of *Sag Harbor* thoroughly outlines the difficulty of creating an authentically black identity for Benji, he fails to adequately answer the question of why Benji so desperately needs this authentically black identity. The mere existence of hip hop culture and its standing as authentically black is not cause enough for Benji's identity struggle, it is the tension between the world of hip

hop (as Benji sees it) and the world from where he comes.

Sociologist Mark Naison describes early hip hop as borne of “a world where government was distant and remote, families were under stress, adult authority was weak” (38). While this grim world was a grim reality for many black Americans, not all of them faced the challenges outlined by popular hip hop music. Surely Benji, attending private school and owning a vacation home, cannot relate to the economic decay and crime so prevalent in hip hop music at the time. This certainly does not exclude Benji from feeling the pull of hip hop culture. Charity Clay argues that “participation not be a requirement for understanding the importance of cultural symbols,” an argument that if heeded, allows for Benji to relate to the meaning of hip hop even if it falls outside of his experience (230). Benji never seems invested in generating solidarity with the struggles of black people as outlined in hip hop culture, nor does he wish to exist in the troubled world many hip hop artists built their music around. Is he drawn to hip hop simply because it is black music and, as he describes it, his predominantly white school experience was like being “blindfolded and thrown down a well” in terms of access to “soulful” blackness (Whitehead 37)?

Close reading of Benji’s interactions with contemporary urban music paints a more complex relationship between him and hip hop. On some level, the subtext of hip hop music matters to and appeals to Benji, beyond the content of the lyrics. Grandmaster Flash, Run DMC, and Afrika Bambaataa speak literally about urban decay, injustice, crime, etc., but they also speak figuratively about personal strength and liberation from difficult circumstances. Hip hop gives voice to the tension Benji feels in his life, the struggles between blackness and whiteness, nerdiness and coolness, the representations of family life and the reality of family life. It is not enough to say Benji is in search of an authentic black identity, but rather he is in search of an identity that effectively negotiates these tensions.

The pull of authentic blackness is strong and with it the pull of hip hop, but if these are pulling him toward a more black experience, what are they pulling him from? Benji is not just avoiding the whiteness of his life, he is facing a personal crisis as well. His

experiences as an upper-middle class son of a podiatrist plants him firmly in the realm of a “Cosby kid.” The cultural effect of *The Cosby Show* is difficult to overstate, and for Benji, this TV version of his life becomes a standard by which he is judged and by which he judges himself. As Benji declares “we were a Cosby family,” he does so with some awareness that this is what his life is “supposed” to be like according to the dominant social construct borne out of the *Cosby Show*, yet he cannot escape the reality that his family life is not like what he sees on TV (Whitehead 192). For Benji, *The Cosby Show* becomes a performance standard, an act that his family tries to replicate without success. The profound impact of this performance standard, or “Cosby Effect,” is a driving force behind Benji’s identity crisis.

## II. The Cosby Effect and Performance

*The Cosby Show* was a tremendous TV success and built overwhelming popularity through the 80s and into the early 90s. Interestingly enough, the success, both critical and commercial, of *The Cosby Show* was driven by white audiences (Innis and Feagin 187). In general, the “whiteness” of the show (the upper-middle class lifestyle, the absence of racial tension, etc.) was highly problematic for black audiences, and responses ranged from highly critical to highly supportive. For many in the black audience, *The Cosby Show* was a vital weapon in the struggle to redefine stereotypes. Black doctors and lawyers do exist, and as one survey respondent noted in an audience study, “there are families like that. It’s not a one in a million thing” (Jhally and Lewis 283). In this sense, the show becomes a symbol of pride, particularly for a family like Benji’s. The Cosbys represent a destruction of stereotype and a mark of success for black families, and the appeal for Benji to relate to the show is strong. In response to white audiences loving the show (even as “science fiction”), Benji asks, “who are these people? We said: People we know. And we watched it” (Whitehead 192-193). Benji wants to be a Cosby family member, even noting that the label is “a term of affection and admiration” (193).

This positive interpretation of the cultural impact of *The Cosby Show* creates a great deal of difficulty for Benji and for black audiences in general. Leslie Innis' and Joe Feagin's audience study of the show indicates several large problems with identifying the Cosby family as a realistic marker of black success. The first problem is rooted in economy and class: if the Cosby family is realistic, then what they have achieved is beyond the means of most black Americans, who at the time lived in or close to poverty (Jhally and Lewis 280). For Benji, this problem is abstracted by his family's financial stability. His access to economic struggle is limited to the consumption of hip hop culture, a consumption that, as we will see, does not readily synthesize into understanding in Benji's mind. The more problematic element of the success of *The Cosby Show* for Benji lies in the representation of family.

Unlike Benji's interactions with other cultural movements, particularly music, he does not engage directly with *The Cosby Show* in the pages of the text. The show exists as a phantom pressure generating tension between Benji's life as it is and the life of the visibly absent Huxtable family. In the summer of 1985, *The Cosby Show* had just completed its first season wherein it notably avoided tackling any issues of race, focusing instead on the minutiae of family life. The content of the show, while invisible on the pages, does shed light on Benji's difficulty characterizing himself in the context of *The Cosby Show's* cultural impact. *The Cosby Show* gave a nod to the burgeoning hip hop and breakdancing culture in Season 1, Episode 16, and "Jitterbug Break." In this episode Dr. Huxtable (Cosby) walks into his living room to find his daughter Denise and her racially diverse friends breakdancing to a synthesized beat, leading to an old versus young dance contest. Both the style of dance and the music are recent products of the urban African American population, yet the show treats the dancing and music as the product of youth. Dr. Huxtable quips about the differences between how the "young people" and "old people" dance, turning the conflict into a generation gap issue without acknowledging either the economic or the racial origins of it ("Jitterbug Break"). Certainly the show was not setting out to tackle these issues, but to Benji such representations of

family life and hip hop music would have been almost unimaginable: a happy father dancing with his children and their racially diverse friends to music that Benji associates with racial identity without any acknowledgement of race.

On the heels of labeling his family as a "Cosby family," Benji diverts the narrative immediately to images of his father's mistreatment of him and his brother. His brother transforms from Reggie into "Shithead" for a year, and Benji's short haircut is derided as belonging to a "corner nigger" (Whitehead 193-194). Benji's father tries to enforce a strict code of blackness onto his children, a code that both distances them from white people and from "nigger" behavior. Hypocritically, Benji's father engages in behaviors drawn from both of these "enemy" groups. While he embraces a racially separatist attitude in his career and his vacation spot, the financial success of being a doctor, owning a beach home, and sending your children to private school are typically "white" landmarks of success. In fact, these are the same elements of "whiteness" criticized by black audiences of *The Cosby Show* (Innis and Feagin 194). Benji sees his father model many of the trappings of *The Cosby Show* while being harshly critical of whiteness and standards of white success: this is the beginning of a significant conflict in how Benji views his family in light of the Cosby social construct.

Benji's father not only embodies some elements of whiteness that he is harshly critical of but also embodies much of the "nigger" behavior that he warns his sons against. The story is littered with these examples: embracing violence as a means to deal with problems and white people (116), hypermasculinity and the notion that his children should act like "men now" (50), and intimidation and abuse as a means of establishing authority (228). Is this the vision of the strong black man that his father preaches about? Benji's family life seems to be constructed out of a paternal hypocrisy: father says "don't be white and don't be a nigger," but father does both. So while Benji sees his family in the success of the Huxtables, there is nothing in *The Cosby Show* that reflects the reality of his home life.

Through the Cosby lens, Benji's sense of self is out-of-focus. Benji notes that the Huxtables were "some version of ourselves on

screen,” but these versions of themselves are as distant from Benji as the show presenting the “practical matters of the black day-to-day” (224-225). Consuming these representations of blackness is an act of verifying that “we didn’t exist,” while Benji’s father “restrained himself from kicking in the set: That’s not how we live” (225). As the summer moves along, Benji shifts from his declaration that “we were a Cosby family” and to recognizing the disconnect from this version of his identity. In reference to the television and the family within, Benji says, “the box contained things of value. Where did that leave us when we looked around our own houses? The reception was terrible” (225). *The Cosby Show* may represent potential successes of a black family, but this leaves Benji to view his own version of life as without value.

Benji’s family cannot be the Huxtables but can only perform the roles publicly. As he lists types of his own fake smiles (214) and types of silences in his house (228), Benji is outlining his role in the performance. He is aware that this performance is meaningless, as “no one cares about what goes on in other people’s houses” (232). *The Cosby Show*, which initially feels like a model for Benji’s identity, is merely a reflection of the artifice of his family life. He cannot find himself in this construct, and his final analysis of his family’s relationship to the Huxtables is wedged into the story of his father’s withering emotional abuse toward his mother. Each family member is expected to perform his or her role, to perform “Cosby-ness,” despite the fact that “The soundstage was empty, the production lot scheduled for demolition. They’d turned off the electricity long ago. We delivered our lines in the darkness” (232). The failure of this critical performance of identity leads Benji to search for his sense of self elsewhere, somewhere he can break free of the “box” of this family performance and find a stronger self: hip hop.

### III. Hip Hop Culture

Whitehead wrote and published *Sag Harbor* in a world where urban music was ubiquitous in popular culture, and many of the boundaries of race and class associated with early hip hop have been breached, yet by the time Benji arrived in Sag Harbor in 1985, hip hop

had taken hold as a significant factor in American pop culture. “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, released in 1982, had risen to the status of cultural icon, and artists such as Run-DMC were gaining popularity nationwide. Born in the deteriorating Bronx of the 1970s, hip hop became the signature music of black Americans throughout the country, yet by 1985, that music began spreading to different races and economic classes (Naison). Hip Hop would evolve into a musical style diverse in both aesthetic and content and able to appeal to a broader audience. In 1985, the predominant style of hip hop music was built around turntable sampling of dance breaks from other songs (Naison 46). However, the content of hip hop was greater in variance, representing both the social strife faced by many black Americans and the party atmosphere in which the music was created (Clay). For Benji, the style of musical production in hip hop was both appealing and understandable, but the content of the music was problematic.

While Benji is not participating in the socioeconomic struggles that were the prevailing motif of hip hop music, the music and culture are undoubtedly important to the formation of his identity that summer in Sag Harbor. Time and again, Benji longs to belong to a hip hop crowd. Certainly he was searching for a more authentic black identity and, as Richard Schur explains it, “Benji feels compelled to meet dominant constructions” (248). Hip hop was the dominant construction for the black male identity at the time, but this authenticity was not the only attractive element of hip hop for Benji. Benji’s musical interests are broad and variable, and part of his attraction to hip hop is the style of hip hop: sampling from other tracks to create driving new rhythms. Rather than enhancing his participation in hip hop culture, however, this appreciation alienates him from his friends’ perceptions of this culture. When Benji points out that Afrika Bambaataa sampled a song by the German group Kraftwerk, Marcus reacts defensively threatening “you’re lucky Zulu Nation ain’t around...they’d scalp your shit” (77). It does not matter to Marcus and the others that Afrika Bambaataa willfully sampled a track from Kraftwerk to create their sound. Their perception of hip hop as an authentically and exclusively black music form limits

Benji's ability to closely engage with the social construction of hip hop. Benji's knowledge of music and hip hop production mark him as a "fuckin' Siouxsie and the Banshees-listenin' motherfucker," and not as someone who "gets" hip hop the way Marcus does (78).

It becomes clear that integrating into hip hop culture is both problematic for Benji and vital to his self-redefinition. Throughout the novel, Benji struggles to be part of the hip hop crowd in light of his preference for more diverse music. If he tends to prefer "white" music like Depeche Mode and the Buzzcocks, why is he so intent on exploring hip hop music? Social pressure to be "in," and the need for a more authentic black identity can go a long way toward answering that question, but for Benji, there is more to hip hop than social construct. As Benji notes, the rules of acceptable culture changed daily and were governed by the boys' subjective understanding of that culture (Whitehead 79).

Benji's exclusion from his friends' hip hop world reaches a climax of sorts when his brother Reggie exposes his "squareness." As Bobby and Reggie rap through a limited-edition live recording of a Run-DMC performance, Benji muses that he has been listening to "too much Buzzcocks. I thought I knew all of Run-DMC's records... but I was a square" (Whitehead 170). His attraction to other musical styles again serves to isolate him from his friends and their "in" music. This does not mean that Benji only likes "white" music, in fact he discusses knowing almost the entire Run-DMC catalogue. His exclusion here is based on him almost knowing all of it, as opposed to really knowing all of it. Benji is allured by the style of music as well as Reggie's total relationship with it. Here, hip hop is not just the song, but also the performance and the social status: it is a complete social construct. Being on the outside leaves him wanting in: "In my jealousy, I saw Bobby and Reggie performing their bit behind the counter at Burger King, their clubhouse where I was not allowed" (171). While a stylistic and aesthetic appreciation of hip hop seems to be against the rules of the hip hop social construct for Benji, a content-based appreciation proves even more troublesome.

The rebellious party-rock anthems of Run-DMC and Afrika Bambaataa offer their own appeal to Benji and the gang as songs

expressing the liberated desires of a teenager. However, much of the hip hop of the early eighties was built around social consciousness and an effort to unveil the socioeconomic troubles faced by many black Americans. As summer-time vacationers, these boys have little-to-no relationship with the content expressed in much of hip hop music. The violent, dangerous world described in much hip hop at the time was presented as a warning against getting trapped in a too-common world: drugs, guns, oppression, etc. In this way, hip hop of the eighties developed into a black social construct built upon revolt against the social systems holding back many black Americans (Baker). Benji again falls outside this social construction of hip hop as he is neither living in (or creating) a dangerous world.

This distance from the content of hip hop is a problem not unique to Benji and his friends. Black audience responses to hip hop indicate a tension inherent in the consumption of the often violent and dangerous imagery of hip hop. There is a rejection of these images as negative and destructive, but an embracing of these images as indicative of "real" life for many black people (Sun et al. 123). Even when alienated from the content of hip hop, black audiences respect the presence of a black voice in music. As Benji searches for a more authentic black identity, he is drawn to hip hop, not just for its style, but also for this content. The forefather of socially conscious hip hop, Grandmaster Flash, becomes a presence and a refrain in *Sag Harbor*. Grandmaster Flash, along with Melle Mel and the Furious Five are natural points of recurrence for Benji in his relationship with hip hop considering the status of "The Message" as the preeminent content-driven hip hop song. Benji's interaction with this song becomes emblematic of his attraction to and alienation from hip hop as an identity-forming social construction.

In "The Message," Melle Mel raps about the deterioration of the Bronx and the abandonment of black neighborhoods to decay. The result, as Melle Mel sees it, is a dangerous trap that many black people can fight against but can never escape. The song's hook expresses this: "It's like a jungle sometimes/ It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under" (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five). This harsh content—marked by "people pissin' on the stairs"

and “junkies in the alley with a baseball bat”—is a far cry from *Sag Harbor*, but the content-based success of the song established the narrative of “The Message” as a crucial black narrative and thus, it becomes vital to Benji and the boys. It is Benji’s misinterpretation of the song’s content that demonstrates the difficulty Benji has in meeting the dominant social expectations of content-driven hip hop.

The third verse of “The Message” raps,

*“Got a bum education, double-digit inflation*

*Can’t take the train to the job, there’s a strike at the station*

*Neon King Kong standin’ on my back*

*Can’t stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac*

*A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane.”* (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five)

The content of this rap is centered around the depressing socioeconomic conditions observed by Melle Mel in the Bronx. His broken “sacroiliac” is a reference to the back-breaking challenge of struggling against this decaying world. Sometime in Benji’s life, he morphed “sacroiliac” into “sacadiac, substituting an anatomical reference to the lower back and pelvis with “getting socked in the nuts” (Whitehead 260). Where Melle Mel blames society for the ruination of black Americans living in areas of urban decay, Benji blames society for his own isolation from a clear identity and social constructions.

Mishearing song lyrics and interpreting them in such a way as to bring meaning closer to the listener is, as Benji puts it, “the right of every human being” (260). The pain of injuring a scrotum is relatable to Benji, even if the actual content of the lyrics are not. That Benji reveals his misreading of the song in front of the rap group, UTFO, highlights his distance from the content of hip hop music. Benji is labeling himself as an outsider in the world of hip hop culture yet again, relegated to the sidelines as his friend NP handles the rest of the interaction with UTFO. This does not diminish the importance of hip hop to Benji. Though Melle Mel intentionally avoids language of the type Benji “hears,” Benji’s contention that “getting kicked in the balls was on par with transit strikes and getting his car repoed” is a reasonable interpretation of the song lyric: living like that is painful,

as is living in Benji’s world of social limbo (260). In a world where hip hop is vital to Benji, he does not fit the dominant social construction of hip hop culture, and given that he is simultaneously a “Cosby kid” yet sees nothing of the Cosbys in his daily life, where can Benji turn for a sense of self?

#### IV. Synthesis and Identity

With so much of *Sag Harbor* dedicated to finding Benji’s “black” identity, there is little surprise that finding a way to sneak into a hip hop concert is a main event of the novel. What is particularly interesting about this sequence is how “white” the entire experience is. If Benji’s central identity crisis is centered around the tension between the Cosby construct and the hip hop construct, then the UTFO concert becomes a moment of synthesis between the two. A great deal of time in the novel is spent building up to the UTFO concert, including meeting the band, but the climactic scene inside the concert has very little to do with the music. Whitehead’s choice to end this storyline before UTFO’s performance is critically important given what he shows us leading up to the concert. Access to this concert involves Benji presenting himself in the identity that he has tried to escape all summer and mingling with “older white people, the middle-aged East End denizens” (262). Ultimately, Benji must “Cosby-up” in order to access hip hop.

Aside from the shenanigans and logistics associated with getting into the show (NP “knows someone”, they meet the band, etc.), attending the UTFO concert seem to hinge on upper middle-class presentation. As Benji prepares to head to the show, his choice of clothing is telling as he is dressed in “Ralph Lauren polos” and “pleated khaki shorts” (256). This is classic 80s prep-school summer wear and Benji’s choice poses the question: is he simply unable to avoid his Cosby identity, or does he have some understanding of what the show’s audience will be? Instead, it seems as though this is a version of himself with which Benji is actually comfortable.

Benji is nonplussed as he experiences the white, upper middle-class audience while waiting to enter the concert. He soaks it all in, even taking the time to notice and critique the pre-concert DJ

music. The white crowd and white music actually seem to facilitate a confidence and relaxation rarely seen in Benji. As Debbie Harry blasts through Bayside, Benji notes, “I’m not dancing that badly at all. I thought, this is Good. No qualifier, chaotic or otherwise. Simply: Good” (263). That Benji chooses the *Dungeons and Dragons* lingo to describe this moment also feels important. Benji is embracing a part of himself that he has spent most of the summer denying. His simple confidence and contentment in this moment indicate a success for Benji in formulating an identity. Here, he does not need to be all the way “in” the Cosby or the hip hop construction: being a bit of both is enough. Benji has, for a moment, moved a step away from “two unreconciled strivings” as he hopes “to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (DuBois).

Whitehead leaves this storyline right at the moment UTFO is set to perform. As a narrator, Benji takes himself out of the dramatic present and into the narrative present to end the section: “Now you’ll have to excuse me. Can you feel it? It’s about to start” (267). The immediacy of the memory gives the experience weight. Hip hop does matter greatly to Benji, even if it is hard to remember why he ever liked UTFO, and even if their lyrics were “fucking corny” (261). This moment seems to be capturing the essence of Benji’s complex identity. He is still the Cosby kid: however, he is also the hip hop fanatic, fully committed to becoming part of that culture. The UTFO concert shows the reader what Benji struggles to see himself. His identity is not this-or-that: rather, he is many disparate things and only when embracing all parts of himself does he experience contentment.

Whitehead does not grant Benji this contentment for long. As the summer (and the story) ends, Benji is again thrust into an identity limbo. Benji tries to convince himself that he “had to be a bit smarter. Just a little” and that he had grown and become a better version of himself (328). His language is full of doubt and a desperation to be right: that he “had to be a bit smarter. Just a little” instead of simply “I was smarter” indicates an uncertainty and a desperate hope. This hope is never addressed or fulfilled in the pages of the novel, and the reader’s insight into adult Benji,

the narrator, is limited. Whitehead does not seem to be validating Benji’s desperate hope at the end of the novel. As young Benji tries to convince himself that the coming year would be a “great year,” the adult narrator negates this hope, gently mocking his fifteen year-old self with the closing lines of the novel: “isn’t it funny? The way the mind works” (329). Ultimately, Benji is not able to resolve his identity through the social constructions available to him, at least not at age fifteen. Yet, as the UTFO concert illustrates, both the Cosby kid and the hip hop fan coexist in Benji, and both are vital parts of his identity, even if Benji is unable to recognize this.

Whitehead does not resolve Benji’s identity at the end of the novel. Readers do not see Benji come to any epiphanic conclusions about himself, nor do they see him as an adult—Benji the adult narrator remains distant and opaque for almost the entire narrative. Whitehead is not offering any prescriptive solutions to identity formation in response to authentic representations of blackness. Doing so would be a contribution on his part to “control representations of race” and would undermine the work he does to expose the complexities of identity and race. The lack of resolution and prescription leaves room for the novel to explore cultural authenticity without suggesting that there is a “right” way to identify as African American. “The Cosby Effect” is a useful tool for exploring African American identity without reducing black culture and experience down to the racially “authentic” elements of hip hop. Benji’s experiences with authenticity and his struggle to develop a clear sense of self allows African American identity formation to be a complex, fluid process that incorporates elements of race, class, culture, and experience.

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Jonathan Naumowicz is currently pursuing his MA in English under the mentorship of Dr. Kim Davis. This seminar paper was completed in the spring of 2014 for Dr. Davis. He plans on using his BSU degree to further his career in education.