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## Race and Drama

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Lucy Droege

DWC 202

Midterm Essay

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### Race and Drama

Race is often an important marker of identity in a diverse and multi-faceted democracy like the United States. As members of communities, individuals often partake in various performances of identity in order to fit in with and belong to a specific group. This performative nature of identity is characteristic of the human desire to belong. However typical this practice is, it can often lead to an inflexible and fixed understanding of identity that is unfavorable to eccentricity. *Racecraft*, by Karen and Barbara Fields, critically looks at race as a function of the ideological landscape. The authors illustrate how the repeated practice of racecraft leads to the creation of race as a social construct. I am going to use this work and the coming-of-age novel *Sag Harbor*, by Colson Whitehead, to learn something about the nature of racial identity. The characters and scenes in *Sag Harbor* illustrate, to a large extent, the theatrical rigidity of the Fields' argument on racial ideology.

The Fields' conception of racial ideology is grounded in the ridiculousness of the repeated action of race. Through the Fields' understanding of racial ideology, the repeated rituals of racial ideology in *Sag Harbor* are seen as absurd acts of theater. For the Fields, "When virtually the whole of a society, including supposedly thoughtful, educated, intelligent persons, commits itself to belief in propositions that collapse into absurdity upon the slightest examination, the reason...is ideology" (Fields 119). This understanding of ideology emphasizes the absurdity of a collective belief that is unfounded in any sensible foundation of truth. The only way that

ideology is verified, according to the Fields, is through its continued repetition each day. An important aspect of their understanding of ideology is the way in which even competent individuals can be so easily committed to propositions that are fantastical when evaluated. The narrator in *Sag Harbor*, Benji, a young and self-conscious teenager, illustrates this point describing how, in Sag Harbor, “You didn’t, for example, walk down Main Street with a watermelon under your arm. Even if you had a pretty good reason” (Whitehead 107). Even a simple activity like walking down the street has been collectively avoided by an entire group of people due to the history of a harmful racial stereotype. When further examined, the avoidance of walking down Main Street with a watermelon because of the familiar racist trope is ridiculous in practice but has been legitimated through its repetition among the Sag Harbor community. Even though avoiding this simple action is ridiculous, the individuals in Sag Harbor are boxed in to this expected set of rules. An essential way of fitting in in the community is by conforming to its rules, which is why this particular ritual continues to be performed.

Similarly, Benji is able to recognize the inflexibility of his role in his family, saying, “We were all of us stuck whether we wanted to admit it or not. We were people, not performance artists, all appearances to the contrary” (Whitehead 108). This trapped feeling within assigned roles is not just in Benji’s family, but also expands to a broader context within his community and his race. Benji is expected to “perform” his role within his family and his racial identity despite his comprehension of its absurdity and lack of authenticity to his true nature. In Benji’s family dynamic, there is a focus on the perfect performance over any sort of authentic family relationship, healthy or unhealthy. This example also further emphasizes the rigidity of the structure of the Fields’ understanding of racial ideology.

On the same note, the habitual dramatics connected with the Fields' understanding of racial ideology is demonstrated in *Sag Harbor* through the inflexibility of Benji's family dynamic. As Benji notes, "We were a made-for-TV family and when [me father] called 'Action!' we hit our marks and delivered our lines like pros. The scripts were all the same. We had the formula down" (Whitehead 232). This bizarre ritual performance that Benji and his family take part in is part of their typical way of living. The role-playing that Benji and his family participate in is a way for them to make sense of their status as a black upper-middle class family with a vacation home, which Benji recognizes is paradoxical to the world around them. These habitual roles that each of the family members perform to make sense of their world aligns with the Fields' definition of racial ideology, which they define as "the descriptive vocabulary of day-today existence through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day" (Fields 134). Importantly, for the Fields', this daily process is a continuous creation of a collective being, which in this case is Benji's family. Benji's family make sense of their dynamic among each other and in the broader context of the world by the repeated performance of their defined roles each day. The Fields also argue that "ideology is impossible for anyone to analyze rationally who remains trapped on its terrain" (Fields 119). Essentially, according to the Fields', Benji and his family are unable to fully grasp the ideology that they daily contribute to because they are trapped inside of it. The nature of Benji's character is where the Fields' understanding of ideology is limited. Even though Benji is actively inside the ideology and is a contributor to its creation, he is able to analyze it to a certain extent and recognize its absurd inflexibility. For the Fields, this is impossible.

The absurdity of rituals in *Sag Harbor* dramatizes the Fields' argument that racial ideology is nurtured by the repetition of everyday actions, as opposed to being a product of nature. This

point is highlighted through Benji's limited understanding of black history and its notable figures. As Benji remarks, "I was old enough, by some secret measure, that it was a disgrace that I didn't know who they were, these people who had struggled and suffered for every last comfort I enjoyed" (Whitehead 17). The older generation of adults in Benji's life see black history as being a part of the intrinsic nature of black individuals. They do not take the time to instruct Benji and other members of the younger generation about notable figures in black history and their significance. Instead, they understand this knowledge to be somehow inherited due to Benji's race. From Benji's perspective, it is clear that racial ideology is not a product of nature, but a product of daily nurture. This is further emphasized by the Fields's position that "The ritual repetition of the appropriate social behavior makes for the continuity of ideology, not the 'handing down' of the appropriate 'attitudes'" (Fields 139). For the Fields, race and racial ideology cannot be handed down or inherited through each generation. Instead, the habitual repetition of the appropriate social behaviors is how ideology is continuously furthered. Ideology and racecraft is not a product of nature, but rather a consequence of the continuous repetition of social behaviors that serve to make sense of a collective social reality. Even though these behaviors may be absurd to an outsider, an insider views these behaviors as typical because they do not have a well-rounded perspective.

Despite his internal awareness of the predestined roles in Sag Harbor, Benji continues to perform his role because he is too self-conscious to outwardly end its creation and thus chart his own path. The Fields argue that "If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have inherited it from our forebears of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today" (Fields 146). This is another example where the Fields' insight on race falls short in fully explaining Benji's situation in *Sag Harbor*. In some ways Benji

continues to create race and racial ideology by performing his role within his family and community, but on an internal level, Benji recognizes the ridiculous nature of racial ideology and desires freedom from the harsh boundaries it presents. For example, Benji is constantly forced to play a part to fit into the different communities that he is a part of. He has a different role at his private school than he does in the summer in Sag Harbor. The script is constantly changing, and he is repeatedly frustrated by the ever-evolving rules that are created each day. When Benji revisits his old home in Sag Harbor, he thinks to himself, "I could be the real me because this was where I lived, free from what happened and who I came to be" (Whitehead 301). In the privacy of the domestic sphere, Benji is able to act off script from his assigned role with all of its rules and stipulations and connect to the interior factors that bring him joy and contribute to his internal sense of self.

Looking at both *Racecraft* and *Sag Harbor* through the lens of theatricality illuminates the ridiculous nature of the roles defined by racial ideology, but also highlights the lack of authenticity that is born out of contributing to the creation of racial ideology. Instead of remaining true to the music, clothes, books, and activities he loves, Benji often finds himself more focused on performing his race well in the context of the moment and the people around him. Although a large factor, race is not the only contribution to Benji's lack of authenticity in his family and among his peers. He is also a teenage boy who requires belonging in order to feel a sense of security in a season of life with major physical, emotional, and mental changes. Benji is self-conscious because he is forced to navigate teenage hood through the minefield that is racecraft. The Fields' understanding of racecraft and racial ideology cannot fully explain the relationship between navigating adolescence and racial ideology; however, it provides important insight that can be used to analyze Benji's situation, choices, and behavior in *Sag Harbor*.

Towards the end of the novel, Benji reflects that “We were all there. It was where we mingled with who we had been and who we would be. Sharing space with our echoes out in the sun...The generations replacing and replenishing each other” (Whitehead 315). Despite his resistance to his predetermined role in the beginning of the novel, towards the end, Benji is resigned and somewhat at peace with the cyclical nature of identities in Sag Harbor and his role within that cycle. Benji is unique in the sense that he is able to understand to an extent the absurdity of the performance of parts in Sag Harbor, which according to the Fields is impossible because of his position within the ideology. With *Sag Harbor*, Whitehead sheds light on the mystical nature of racecraft in the ways that the characters interact with each other and, for the most part, dutifully carry out the roles assigned to them. The theatricality of race is intertwined within the creation of race and the designation of roles that created the arbitrary categorization system that race continues to be today. By recognizing the theatrical nature of race, individuals are better equipped to redefine their given roles and break the rigid cycle of racial ideology.

Works Cited

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