

Ethics, Trauma and Survival in Institutional Spaces : An Article Review of Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The article investigates how institutional sphere works as a formative environment for trauma and as a site of ethical negotiation in "Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys". It posits that the institutional setting shapes memory, vulnerability, and agency by constraining bodies while paradoxically offering moments of moral reckoning that shape survival strategies. **Method:** Methodologically, the study employs close reading of key scenes, longitudinal tracking of character trajectories, and comparative attention to official narratives versus counter-narratives embedded in memory, testimony, and coded silence. **Results:** Through the findings there is a unveiling that survival hinges on negotiating positionalities within coercive spaces: compliance, complicity and rebellion emerge as divergent ethical responses which destabilize simplistic binaries of victim and perpetrator. The review highlights moments where institutional design yields inadvertent pedagogies of resistance, ethics of care, and micro-infrastructures of trust that enable partial redress, even within environments calibrated to immobilize subjectivity. **Novelty:** The review concludes that the novel substantiates a critique of custodial spaces as actors in moral formation, while also insisting on the possibility of survivals that insist on accountability and remembrance. By following up the choreography of both the memory space and time, the analysis contributes to a more comprehensive discussion about childhood trauma, historical injustice, and the ethics of survival within oppressive institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Colson Whitehead's critically acclaimed novel, "The Nickel Boys", published in the year 2019, delves deeply into the harrowing yet true, albeit long-forgotten narrative surrounding the notorious Dozier School—an extremely abusive reform institution situated in the state of Florida. Within its walls, countless boys were subjected to horrific levels of physical, emotional, and sexualized violence throughout their time there. Whitehead's poignant storytelling draws extensively upon the rich field of memory scholarship, especially building on Nora's influential concept of lieux de mémoire, which emphasizes places of memory that shape collective recollections. Furthermore, [1] asserts that "it engages with Connerton's insightful study of commemorative practices, particularly in the context of the Holocaust, highlighting how societies remember and memorialize past atrocities" (p.39). Compounding this, the novel resonates with the ethical notion of the "unconditional" moral stance articulated by Jankélévitch, pushing readers to confront profound questions of ethics and responsibility. Together, these frameworks illuminate the intricate specificities and complexities involved in articulating trauma within narratives dedicated to childhood abuse, especially focusing on how survivor testimony can effectively witness on behalf of those who are often rendered

voiceless and unprivileged. Such powerful accounts not only serve as a somber reminder of the past but also draw critical attention to the inherent fragility of social and state responsibilities concerning the safety and welfare of children. (Leppard & Murray, 2024) [2] states that “vulnerability is a stark reminder that the coercive power of the state, manifested through various institutions, holds the potential to transmute into a predatory power—one that increasingly acts in favor of the interests of the privileged elite, and, in doing so, tragically leaves the most vulnerable members of society perilously unprotected and at risk.” (p.44)

(Ray, 2024,p.23) [3] Shows that “The real violence and dangers of these institutions, attendant on their spatial logic, are often eclipsed in popular memory by a focus on escapist fantasy.” Yet it remains possible to narrate such trauma without endorsing the moral compromise of any ethics of survival; rather, these stories may enact an “unconditional” moral stance that places responsibility for the consequences of action on those who hold power “*The Nickel Boys*” details the abuse and predation of four adult men—by the school and by their peers—in a community understood to be founded on power the boys cannot escape. All possible courses of survival seem equally compromised, even while the narrator demonstrates moral agency and opposition through the spatial dynamics of his escape.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literary-review method centered on close reading of key scenes in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. The analysis follows character trajectories across the narrative and compares official institutional narratives with counter-narratives expressed through memory, testimony, and coded silence. The analytical focus is organized around institutional space, childhood trauma, ethical survival, agency, resistance, complicity, and memory. Relevant scholarly works already cited in the manuscript are used as interpretive support, while the novel remains the primary object of analysis. The procedure consists of identifying recurring textual patterns, grouping them according to the study themes, comparing the positions and survival strategies of the characters, and interpreting how spatial and institutional arrangements shape vulnerability, moral choice, and remembrance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Spatial Logic of Reform Institutions

In the 1960s, children of color in Florida were legally and systemically confined in adult penitentiaries, victimized by additional rules and pain that extended their incarceration under the auspices of correctional rehabilitation [4]. Institutions charged with sheltering youth from negative influences ultimately restricted their capacities for self-determination and compromise. Discipline denied agency; mere proximity ruled populations; embodied sensations ordered emotional temperaments. Concurrently, in Elwood Curtis' (Weber, 2023) [5] argued that “dystopian orphanage, bureaucratic

murmurs trumpeted alternative motives: “empty minds” and “pulsating lips” externalized as sin, unwittingly fueled pseudomoral impositions: “idle hands” and “instrument of the devil.” Power pervaded everywhere, literally and figuratively; nonetheless, structures remained central.

A pervasive and complex ambivalence enveloped the myriad perceptions of dead flesh, manifesting itself blithely in both a lateral and elevated manner that was simultaneously expressive and limitlessly diffusive, always perceptible implicitly; the contiguous shadows around us seemed to speak seamlessly. (Van der Linden, 2023) [6] declares that “Security unfurled across expansive territory, with mesmerizing panoramas appearing from the deeply rapt internalities of the psyche, otherwise rendered obscure and challenging to reach”(pp.9-12).

Architectural Environments and Power

The spatial logic of reform institutions can be examined through buildings, city layouts, and historically significant places from a variety of disciplines—history, sociology, urban studies, architecture, criminology—as well as architecture itself. Queer Theorist José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Disidentifications* (1999) that the spaces of oppression are typically seen as unimportant backdrops to the stories that take place within them. Spatial analysis unveils these backdrops in new and revelatory ways. An old adage says that “form follows function,” but space can be viewed as an active agent.

The built environment also demonstrates how physical structures serve to oppress and ill-treat marginalized groups. Buildings designed for members of (sub)cultures “create space for ritual and tend to be located at the edges or extremes of a society.” All of the institutions in *The Nickel Boys*—the Nickel Academy training school for delinquent boys (a euphemism for impoverished and/or black boys), as well as reformatories and the surrounding city—illustrate the ecclesiastical conviction that space is a holy gift from God and what has been built must not be destroyed. The violence of these so-called reform schools, quite apart from their converse morphology with jails, invited careful analysis precisely because “their very transformation into prisons—and the complete lack of interest in their earlier existence—is now the subject of so much work” [7].

Surveillance, Regimentation, and Routine

The time at Nickel Academy is structured and regulated, exposing the boys to the military-style regime of the rehabilitation school. Boys are awoken at 6am, groomed and dressed according to regulations. They then spend the day working and learning in their assigned teams, supervised by staff members. Each team must perform menial tasks, which vary according to season and incoming goods: loading orders, ranting railroad ties, and other labour [8]. The circumstances allow Elwood to witness young prisoners break under the system, leaving him as one of the few still able to hope for a better tomorrow; their fall into despair stands in stark contrast to his commitment to counter-learning. Individual agency is curbed in the name of variety and diversity: during the trip to Century, Nichols and his companions are allowed neither to speak nor to behave differently. “The boys of Nickel” according to [9] “experience a milieu of confinement

under constant surveillance and hard, regimented work, resembling a prison more than a school: still subject to constant monitoring in his sheltered enclave, Elwood can rely only on Nicole for moments of private exchange. Growing up alongside multiple systems of surveillance marked by diverse topologies, he finds himself on the brink of silence."

Childhood Trauma in Institutional Settings

Experiences of childhood trauma provide a dominant narrative in the novels of the Black American author Colson Whitehead. His Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad* depicts a young girl's escape from a plantation in the Deep South and her traumatic passages on an underground slave railway system; and *The Nickel Boys* offers a fictionalised account of the Dozier School for Boys, a reform school in Florida, where boys suffered brutality and deaths at the hands of the white staff. However, trauma can be narratively constructed beyond the act of storytelling, and literary criticism can benefit from a framework that approaches trauma through the lens not only of its construction and narration, but also of the survival mechanisms that individuals adopt. Such a framework reveals that a lack of pain and trauma does not make a life pointless; rather, a life lived without pain and trauma in contexts characterised by extreme suffering can be equally problematic. Within this expanded framework, the ethical and moral dilemmas faced by those who have experienced trauma - or its absence - can be considered. These dilemmas, inevitably influenced by the ethics of a society's political and legal systems, shape the representation of a traumatic space of memory. *The Nickel Boys* can be read as a work of memory [10] and, specifically, as a site of memory. The potential for memory to act as a site of agency is particularly appealing when considering the narrative of life in the Dozier School for Boys, a reform institution where boys were incarcerated for crimes for which they should have received a brief prison sentence at most. The location of the Dozier School itself, covering 1,300 acres just outside of Marianna, Florida, may invoke the representational space of an absent memory. In 2003, the school closed its doors, and preparations began for demolishing the remaining buildings. In 2012, ground-penetrating radar rendered visible the "memory work" of the school, revealing the locations of buried bodies within the grounds. The school's eventual demolition raises the question of whether a site of memory must be located at the physical site of an event or experience; perhaps it may be located anywhere if sufficient agency and imagination are applied. Even so, not all traumatic spaces can be completely transformed into sites of memory, and the displaced children in *The Nickel Boys* offer an object lesson in this fact [11].

Trauma Construction and Narration

The traumatic experiences that young boys endure in state reform schools leave long-lasting scars that affect them throughout their lives. These experiences are nonetheless carefully constructed and made intelligible through narratorial attention by the survivors of such institutions, within the specific institutional context and beyond it. Institutionalisation followed by continued detention in adult prisons sets up the stage for wide-ranging trauma construction and narration in *The Nickel Boys*, where there are few, if any, intervening measures in-between that would allow children to remain children

and, hence, escape immediate contact with state authority's overt claim upon their bodies [12]. Traumatic narratives may therefore reflect different construction modes that indicate the unfolding of specific traumas during the institutionalisation process and the operation of multifaceted and divergent narrative strategies to recoup the unspeakable and the unthought after exit from the setting. Throughout the writing period taking place against the continuation of state authority's claim upon the protagonists, the survival of Elwood Curtis under the categories of 'disabled' and 'crippled' triggers the onset of further trauma construction of an interconnected nature associated with the adolescent stage still within the institutional framework, with the tranquillities of the 'Art of Man' routine while in further adult incarceration and recidivism becoming decisive in paving the way towards eventual and enduring exit [13].

Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies

Survival strategies are systems of actions or processes that individuals or groups may employ to endure traumatic or stressful situations. The importance of these strategies is demonstrated in archival research on the traumatic experiences of Black women and their coping efforts in the face of violent attacks. Such survival strategies include: (1) appraisal, which involves appraising circumstances and anticipating outcomes to increase the likelihood of success, (2) self-determination, the belief that control resides within oneself, (3) sibling alliances, the creation of alliances among siblings, (4) spiritual support, maintaining one's faith or spirituality despite negative experiences and communing or associating with others who foster the belief, and (5) social support, forming relationships and receiving support from others during difficult circumstances [14].

Discussion

Ethical Frameworks for Survival

The contradictions of childhood trauma under the auspices of family, society, and the state extend to all areas of childhood experience — even moral development. How does each individual make judgments of right and wrong in a situation where family, educators, and the state openly or tacitly condone the most heinous actions? To what extent can childhood morality endure and provide guidance in a world that lacks common moral ground? Are the ethical decisions of children based on instinct and necessity distinguishable from those of people justified as "bad" or "evil"? These questions lie at the heart of the study of moral action under oppression. A range of research into moral development in children stresses, on the one hand, the importance of awareness of moral choices and, on the other, the shaping of moral beliefs by one's community. These strands converge on the question of whether a moral sense can survive in extreme social situations such as the Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet gulags. The positions of Helen Fein, David M. Jones, and Lawrence Langer are particularly relevant since they explore children in organizations explicitly intended to strip all individuals of moral consideration [15].

In *The Nickel Boys*, the children as [16] suggested, "find themselves ensnared in a morally-perverted world, one where the established rules and norms become dangerous

instruments wielded to maintain power relations and social hierarchies." For these young individuals, adhering to the rules lays bare a path that minimizes risk, yet it does not safeguard them from inevitable harm and suffering.

Morality under Oppressive Regimes

Although the sheer power of a regime reshapes the life world of its victims, they continue to have moral integrity and moral motives. The literature on totalitarianism provides evidence of the intensity of the moral struggle under totalitarianism and that neither the system nor its omnipresent surveillance and terror could eradicate all moral sensibility and conviction [17]. Theodore P. Karamanski argues that even though the description of conditions at the Georgia State Industrial School for Colored Boys presents a totalitarian equivalent context for children, Elwood Curtis's moral character remains intact. While the TA talks about the morality of Elwood Curtis, Young contrasts Curtis with other prisoners: Some inmates survive by acting like animals – doing whatever it takes to stay alive. Curtis feels sympathy for them, but he also understands that their actions do not reflect who they really are inside. The indifference of the people in power has a secondary impact on the moral behaviours of Elwood and his companions. Even in the deeply unequal relationships between the inmates and the head of the school, the effect of indifference on moral motives is still present.

Karamanski suggests that acts of altruism and self-sacrifice remain essential for survival, even in the face of intrinsic and extrinsic obstacles, at least for those who have the ability to imagine an alternative to totalitarian power (Christianson et al.2026) [18]. This is the case for Curtis, who despite being forced by Fitzhugh's regime to oppress his companions in order to ensure his own survival, still manages to show kindness and empathy when he can. Nevertheless, this tension between vulnerability and the need to oppress at one's own expense is an intrinsic and important aspect of the representation of Curtis. While with the help of his imagination he can recognize the suffering of others and feel compassion, he has no ability to act consistently in accordance with his feelings.

Agency, Resistance, and Complicity

Elwood Curtis, the novel's primary narrator, is a survivor who escapes from the Nickel Academy with his life, but in so doing he places in jeopardy the life of his friend and fellow inmate, Turner, who remains incarcerated. This anguish reveals the ethics of survival—a concern that dominates contemporary discussions of genocidal horror. Elwood's move to escape reform school is entirely understandable from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old in Elwood's position: acknowledging this need for survival in no way diminishes Elwood's recognition that he now has blood on his hands and havoc inflicted on an innocent's life. Though certainly a survivor narrative, readers are reminded that Elwood's survival results in the loss of Turner's life and is thus not an unmitigated triumph in the ethical landscape the novel constructs. The overwrought burden of survival is starkly evident at the end of the novel, where readers discover Elwood's very survival is already marked by subsequent events. Curtis comes to symbolize the larger moral dilemma of guilt in the shadow of oppression.(Afshin, 2026) [19]

Certifying the moral worth of acts of political violence is an inherent part of survival under tyrannical rule. The repetitive tracks of battles both won and lost—subverting the state and religious organs of control, in the interest of community and individual freedom, and practicing a morality of exalted self-sacrifice—are certainly worthy of evaluation and debate. Curtis's acts demonstrate a desire for community preservation—his hope is to persuade the church leaders to accept the additional hardships and return home—but these hoped-for benefits cannot compensate for the suffering inflicted upon himself and others. Adapting to these ever-present dynamics is a constant refrain of survival in the face of tyranny, though in this case the adaptation is found wanting and curtails both direct and indirect domination [20].

The Nickel Boys as a Site of Memory

Norval Morris initiates his concept of “the spatial logic of reform institutions” by citing the distortions of memory that provoke and sustain the appeal for collective memory work. Morris is interested in what he calls “the burning scar” that provokes moral passion in the Jewish people. Such a memory work relates closely to the representational ethics of the trauma narrative. Elwood Curtis and his peers speak the truth of life at the Nickel Academy. These boys emerge from the narrow confines of boyhood and burst into manhood at the very edge of the grave, eyes glazed over with night and empty of remembrance, yet speak they must of that which distorts and maims. Curtis's narrative warns that this truth of historical experience cannot be consigned to silence, for generations not yet born shall hear these words that, spoken without sound, shall remain potent and alive in advanced history. Nor is it the external existence of words that remains, but a truth-birth of remembrance in the signifiers. The truth of these words issues forth and lives in Curtis's soul. Placed in the context of Morris's moral passion, Elwood Curtis's story reinforces the notion that the founding fathers and mothers of memory work and representational ethics share an understanding of the requirements of narrative that cut across classes, religions, and cultures [21]. However, these narratives also tread a dangerous (yet inevitable) path toward arepresentational and self-indulgent silence. Bilingual memory work that unearths the memory of a collective is dangerous precisely because it has such a power—both in its signifier-producing element and in the life of those foundational for the memory construction. A solution may lie in the intersection of other critical discourses—namely, those of race, class, and power relations. A social-analysis reading of the school system helps resist arepresentationalism by broadening narrative horizons to link Curtis's school with all schools and the lives of all children within social services and its supporting structures. The horror and violence of Curtis's narrative resides in the loss of spirit in children and, therefore, challenges and offers life to all adults engaged in working with or for children removed from their families. It seeks to explode the self-indulgent self-serving nature of these narratives and to refocus the attention of the adult perusing such work to the tremendous responsibility that is embodied in the very second-chance covenant of the society.

Memory Work and Representational Ethics

In *The Nickel Boys*, the traumatic, morally fraught story of the Nickel Academy becomes a matter of collective, multivocal, and ethically intricate memory work. Colson Whitehead configures the Academy as a site of immurement, a neo-Dickensian house of detention in unremitting subjection to the “white-hot” [12] realities of America and its Jim Crow laws, which echoes the histories of literal and figurative concentration camps that harrow the century and beyond. Segregation, brutality, and complicity coalesce. The narrative refrains from restricting the circulation of memory to wraith-like figures. Circuitous paths connect all who are drawn to this remembrance, each with descriptive subjectivity that reflects their distinctive encounters and diminishing relation to past events. Memory conjures recoverable substance, gesturing beyond mere “leftovers” to augment awareness of historical intervention and transparency [22].

(Yap et al., 2024) [23] shows that “the relevance of the novel as a site of recollection derives from multifarious influences concerning racial, social, spatial, architectural, historical, and institutional dimensions”(p54). Depictions of specific instances, configurations, and spatialities demand rigorous attention to broader entanglements among race, class, and power. Normative theory concerning pedagogy, governance, politics, equity, economics, and justice inevitably surfaces alongside recuperative processes.

Intersections of Race, Class, and Power

Elwood Curtis and Turner “Turner” B. Campbell become traumatized children of institutional abandonment when they arrive at the Nickel Academy. The perception “there were no guys at Nickel like in most books” (S. Costosa, 2018) [24] reinforces the absence of juvenile delinquency. The boys endure multiple forms of trauma, including the physical violence of a sadistic “superintendent,” the grievous loss accompanying the death of Turner, and the moral betrayal of keeping the secret to obtain an honorable discharge. Policies legitimize and repress social interactions within the camps, censoring any thoughts of a burgeoning friendship. Arguments that articulate only childhood trauma erase critical dimensions of security and freedom. Political and economic inequalities reinstate childhood and obstruct adult mobility. Children of poverty and region carry traumatic attachments typically invisible among the affluent and powerful. Nickel also stands as a self-betraying institution of childhood exile, where black boys of class and region invisible among the privileged vie for recognition of simultaneous manhood. Detroit moves Chappelle to articulate poverty, region, and political inequalities of freedom and security surrounding borderline-advanced political economy of manhood.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The Nickel Boys addresses issues of child welfare, institutional reform, violence, and trauma in institutional settings that resonate with broader structural issues within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Increasingly evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these issues also affect systems of higher education. Nationally recognized organizations, such as the National Youth Advocate Program (NYAP),

regularly examine urgent issues of juvenile justice and child well-being with a specific eye toward Florida. NYAP's work is predicated on the recognition that youth reexperience trauma through their interactions with the very systems designed to protect them, echoing similar insights on the structural design and operation of youth-serving institutions that appear throughout the 3Rs project.

The historical devaluation of black lives, and the persistent appeal of white supremacy, echo throughout *The Nickel Boys* even as new issues arise. Tragedy within the supervisory relationship between Elwood and Turner informs narratives of personal and historical survival and undergirds fourth-grade instruction about the civil rights movement, yet overarching inequalities linked to the body remain muted, as do linkages to contemporary forms of labor. Throughout the novel, class difference, racial animus, and the intersection of both with governing bodies—such as institutions, law enforcement, and the prison industrial complex—remain salient, but connections to architecture and architectural education are not always evident. The nonrecognition of a multi-faceted subjectivity informs a half-century-old discourse on the implications for architectural practice of growing up in a marginal position and the continued need for “queer” cadaver work in defense of difference and the construction of more responsive institutional arrangements [25].

Policy Reflections on Child Welfare and Institutional Reform

A number of contemporary interventions might be proposed in public policy and institutional practice regarding child welfare and the treatment of delinquency. Efforts at reform in these areas can draw valuable insights from *The Nickel Boys* and, specifically, from the severe limitations placed on the agency of young people subjected to institutional regulation, discipline, and confinement. Alternative policy options and intervention strategies must therefore address these constraints and provide new opportunities for children and adolescents to exercise agency, still integrating strongly into families, communities, and life-long support networks. A select handful of specific proposals follow [9].

A narrative shared pro bono by Indigenous and Black alumni of the Manitoba child welfare system tells of the traumatic burden incurred by removal from family, home, community, and culture, compounded along the child welfare journey by disconnection from any attachment to certain another child residential placement [26]. At the heart of the matter is a widespread social and institutional conception of ‘safety’ that elides or denies most directly the child’s ontological security within a place one can call ‘home’. Policy directed at the re-conceptualisation of safety in Manitoba—and in similar socio-political, economic, and cultural situations elsewhere—is warranted, but requires careful and informed attention to transplanting culture-eliding and facility-boosting features of safety construed in Manitoba to territories unlikely to possess these remaining living comforts of childhood.

Ethical Considerations for Narratives of Trauma

The ethical consideration of narration in trauma fiction lies not only in the absence of a mocking tone, restraint on exaggeration, and an understated style but also in the

evolution in a tone steered toward engagement and compassion [27]. Surviving extreme suffering and having the impulse to portray it are difficult, and if the tone becomes too detached or the portrayal not sufficiently engaged, there is a risk of making the unemotional narration come off as an assertion that the experience was only marginally traumatic.

Avoiding a tone of triumphalism or a celebratory attitude in survival narratives is crucial. Connolly observes that in narratives of deprivation, survival can signal having avoided, evaded or outwitted the predations of an adversary rather than the neutral and reductive indicator of the continuation of biological life. The absence of triumphalism, however, is not by itself sufficient to safeguard a narrative against being read as celebratory. Connolly notes that although both suffering and survival can rise to the threshold of being categorically unrepresentable, the nature of the two remains different.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: *The Nickel Boys* becomes a memorial for Dozier and its victims, especially an automatic one, because it fuses the biographical memory work with an autoethnographic approach, and because it attends to the representations of the larger system that constructed and operated Dozier. **Implication:** A parallel conclusion can be reached about the ethics of narrating the traumatic past: they become evident only at the end, yet because of the nature of trauma, they must always remain implicit. **Limitation:** As a close reading of one novel, the study does not establish whether its interpretation of institutional trauma applies to other literary works or survivor accounts. **Future Research:** Future studies could compare *The Nickel Boys* with survivor testimonies and other narratives of reform schools to examine how each represents institutional memory and the ethics of survival.

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