



Surviving Injustice: Race and Intersectionality in Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys

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Abstract

The paper delves into the politics of racism and its consequences in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. The novel is inspired by real events at the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, where an excavation uncovered mass graves of children who suffered under America's racial injustices. The story follows Elwood, a ten-year-old Black boy wrongly accused of theft and sent to a reformatory school, where he experiences firsthand the brutal realities of segregation and systemic violence. Through his journey, Whitehead exposes how racism has evolved yet remains deeply embedded in American society. The novel highlights how Black individuals are trapped in a relentless cycle of oppression and lawlessness. This study employs Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, and Paulo Freire's theory of oppression to analyze the novel's depiction of racism, both overt and covert. By examining these theoretical perspectives, the research seeks to uncover how racial discrimination continues to shape the lives of Black Americans, reinforcing inequality across generations. Whitehead's narrative serves as both a historical account and a contemporary warning, urging society to confront its past and work toward justice and equality.

Keywords: Racism, Segregation, Oppression, Inequality, Justice.

The Nickel Boys is set in 1962, showing the ten-year-old Elwood who lives with his grandmother Harriet, and loves listening to the records of Martin Luther King, believing that protests and law can change things. Every day Harriet takes him to the restaurant where she works as a cleaner, and Elwood thinks of the time when a black man would sit at this place without having a mop in his hand. He believes that the staff likes him and he usually has dishwashing competitions with the kitchen staff in which he always wins. After one such competition, he wins a set of encyclopedias and excitedly takes it home. It later turns out to be all blank but Elwood is neither able to understand the smirks on the staff's faces, nor the reason

behind this act. His naivety remains intact when even after getting straight A's at school, he is not allowed to visit the Fun Town. He feels like many other people that the Brown v. Board decision has opened up new possibilities for blacks. However, the irony is clear in the sentence that "the morning after the decision, the sun rose and everything looked the same", and it complements Derrick Bell's aforementioned interest convergence principle (22).

School desegregation means nothing if black kids sit with white kids only to be degraded and are constantly reminded of their lower human status. Bell shows that the decision was the moment's necessity, especially for people like Elwood's father who fought alongside the whites in WWII and faced the same racial humiliation once they came back. This shows that the very basis of racial distinction, myths, and religious and biological beliefs became worthless when it came to fighting for the nation; the black became a man, a man fit enough to fight alongside a white man. Elwood is part of a broken family, a family that is trying to come to terms with its own past. His mother was stuck in the trauma of her own childhood after seeing her father being lynched by the Klan because of bumptious contact with a white woman. His father, when he came back from the war, was completely disillusioned because the war had changed nothing, and the nation was still as segregated as before. Elwood's family is but one example of those many families which were mentally and economically destroyed as a result of slavery.

The name Harriet conjures up the image of the famous Harriet Tubman, Elwood's grandmother's views are in stark contrast to hers. Whereas the former believed in stepping up, the latter not only embraced silence, but never allows Elwood to take part in any protest or movement. Despite this policy of subservience, Elwood is wrongly charged with stealing a Plymouth, and the judge sends him to the Nickel. Elwood's situation can be analyzed through Crenshaw's famous traffic metaphor, where a person faces injury due to traffic coming from various directions. It is clear that Elwood would have been declared guilty, with or without trial, because of the policeman's firm belief that only a black can steal a car. In this case, Elwood's age and race both play a role in the court's verdict.

Carastathis, while analyzing Crenshaw's traffic metaphor, states that "intersection functions as the site of an accident... law serves to reproduce deeply entrenched social

hierarchies: by offering remedy for discrimination only where claim are non-intersectional” (78). Perhaps Elwood would have been given a chance to defend himself if he were a white boy or a grown-up black man. Though Elwood is only fourteen, he is taken to the Nickel in handcuffs, as if he is a serious offender of the law. He meets some other young boys who are sent there on the basis of being “recalcitrant,” “truancy,” “mopery” or “malingering”, charges that they do not even understand. This complexity is deliberately created and is part of the broad racial schema that works in society. Since they do not understand these charges, which the authorities undoubtedly know, they are not able to question them.

The school building, to Elwood’s relief, is one of the most beautiful places he has ever seen, having no barbed wires or tall stone walls. Though Whitehead’s description of the school building with vast gardens and lush green trees shows how race works as an invisible factor in society, his choice of vocabulary is emblematic of the violence happening there. The superintendent’s creased dress looks like a sharp blade, and the keys on his belt sounded like spurs. Elwood learns that he can get out of there if he keeps moving up the ranks. He has to start from Grub, moving on to Explorer, Pioneer, and finally Ace. This ranking gives him false hope but he soon learns that there is no moving up the ladder and he will remain a Grub as long as he is black.

The Nickel is not only a symbol of modern racial violence but represents the fact that renaming the institution does not change its meaning. Apparently, the school seems to be an accomplishment on the part of the government that provides shelter to both black and white children, irrespective of their color. However, the seemingly perfect building is a symbol of the state’s “false generosity” that Freire talks about (51). Rather than taking actual redemptive measures, the state creates an aura of philanthropy to hide the inequalities of the system. In return, the oppressed are expected to show a certain level of humility and gratitude as they are the ones being taken care of. The place acts no different than a plantation where the students are forced to work in the fields and are even hired as private servants for the school officials. The novel shows that previously the idea of the white man’s burden justified this subordination; now it is legalized in the name of reformation. It can be seen that the Nickel boys are the ones who are working to make the school self-sufficient, and yet they have to be thankful for the scraps

that the school throws at them.

Elwood is shattered to see that despite being a reformatory school, none of the black students know how to read and the teacher makes no effort to change the situation. The students, on the contrary, are advised to work hard in the fields so that they can get freedom which again resonates with the idea that slavery did not end with the end of the plantation era. With the closing of each plantation, the state opened hundreds of places like the Nickel which worked on the same oppressor-oppressed formula. Elwood learns the rules quickly which include work, comportment, demonstration of compliance, and docility, the gist of which is silence and servitude. However, his journey toward reality begins when he intervenes, trying to save a little boy from being bullied. As a result, he is taken at night to a place called the white house and is beaten more brutally than the bullies.

The beating makes Elwood learn one of the fundamental rules that salvation lies in silence. He also learns why the campus has no barbed wires or fences around it: because fear itself is sufficient. Here Freire's definition of freedom is crucial, as for him, "Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor it is an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (47). Hence, by showing the campus as an Edenic place where the kids' mobility is not restricted, Whitehead deromanticizes the idea of freedom. It shows that freedom is not in removing the shackles but in dislodging the system that enchains them. Moreover, the inside of the campus seems to be the bottom of the iceberg, the part that is hidden beneath the various layers of progress, change, desegregation and generosity.

During his visit to the white house, Elwood witnesses blood stains on the mattress and on the walls which shows that this sort of violence is an everyday norm at the Nickel. Elwood has to spend few days at the hospital as the and there he meets Turner, another black boy, who has eaten soap to take a few days off the Nickel. Turner's discussion with Elwood shows the difference through which the two view the world. For Turner, there is no difference between the Nickel and the world outside. Whereas outside, racial prejudice is hidden under niceties and kind words, inside the campus no one has to fake it anymore. The Nickel thus becomes a representation of how the world would have been if racism had not been disguised. Turner has a more strategic approach to survival and he tells Elwood that escaping Nickel is not easy, but

Elwood believes that it's not like the old day and they can stand up for themselves. Freire believes that oppression is a system of violence and dehumanization. This dehumanization is on both sides: the oppressor and the oppressed. The problem lies in the fact that the oppressed is a product of the same system that he is trying to overthrow. His actions and ideas are shaped by the same system, a system that revolves around violence.

The fact that the oppressed become as dehumanized as the oppressor can be seen in the episode when some campus boys including Elwood and Turner find horse medicine and want to add to the superintendent, Spencer's food. They discuss the plan every day, graphically describing and enjoying every single detail of it. For Turner, it is nice to picture one of their tormentors puking all over their yummy spread, face gone strawberry-red from pain, heaving until what came out wasn't food but his own dark blood. At this point, the boys exhibit the same oppressor consciousness that they themselves are a victim.

Elwood's vulnerability can be further analyzed through the lens of intersectionality according to Hill which "race, class, gender, sexuality, race... constitute interlocking, mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power" (33). It further shows that intersectionality is not only limited to the problems faced by women of color, but it talks about other disenfranchised groups as well. It states that "the young experience social inequalities that are associated with age as a system of power" (138). Students like Griff, though himself a black, mercilessly beat other black boys of younger age because their age further pushes them towards the margin. Though the white students in *The Nickel Boys* are also victims of school oppression, the position of black students is worse in terms of lodging, food, violence and education. Whenever the inspection committee visits the school, it hears and tries to ease the problems of the white campus only. This situation complements Crenshaw's basement metaphor through which she highlights the hierarchy that exists within the subordinate group. The white boys, though suppressed, are standing on the shoulders of the black boys who are standing below them.

A top-down problem-solving approach only alleviates the problems of the white students. Moreover, the school atrocities are not only limited to physical abuse but the students are victims of molestation as well. Elwood learns from Turner that not only the school psychologist is involved in this molestation but the school director, Trevor Nickel, himself had a

part in it. Hence, the school's brutality is an open secret because it is not only a matter of one or two people. The whole system, from top to bottom, is steeped in corruption. The previous stance that black kids are doubly oppressed can be seen from the boxing tournament that the school organizes between both campuses. The superintendent tells Griff, the black opponent, that he has to step down in the second round, but Griff does not do that. Consequently, he is taken out back and is never seen again. However, the narrator says that his body is dug after fifty years and its fractured wrists tell a story and attest to the violence that happened there. When Turner tells Elwood about "out back," a place from where nobody returns, the latter does not believe in that. However, he soon learns that he can change the law but you can not change people and how they treat each other wickedness went deeper than skin color.

Patricia Hill, in her book *Intersectionality*, talks about the duality of law. It is both "a site of repression and a site of social justice" (89). Elwood does not understand the repercussions of living in a white man's world and still believes in the supremacy of the law. He wants the world to know about the abuse happening at the school and, therefore, writes everything in a notebook with the aim of giving it to the inspection committee once it arrives. During the day of inspection, everything is made the way it is actually supposed to be. Elwood succeeds in giving the notebook to the inspection committee but, to his surprise, he is taken to the white house, locked in a dark chamber, and gets beaten every day. The second beating turns out to be an epiphanic moment for him and he understands how the system works. After a few days, Turner comes to his rescue because he has learned that they are going to take Elwood "out back" after which he will simply disappear like many other students before, and they both decide to run away that night. The plot sways between the past and the present, and shows the condition of Elwood in various timelines.

After coming out of Nickel, he tries not only to avoid the memories of that place but its people as well. He once meets a former student named Chickie Pete who went to army and got married many times but he still feels he is stuck somewhere in the past. Pete's broken state makes him realize that the school bend you in all kind of ways until you were unfit for straight life, good and twisted by the time you left. Even though Elwood has a successful moving business, he does not want to help Pete as he reminds him of the torture that he has faced there.

The novel then shows Elwood's life in the early 2000s and throws light on the lingering issue of racism. He lives in an area from where many whites have migrated and their racism, and fear and disappointment paid for his new life. In 2014, Elwood learns that the state has dug the campus and found the bodies of those who died of "natural causes". Here Whitehead blurs the line between fiction and facts, and the narrative interweaves with the actual investigation that took place once the bodies were found. Spencer, whose character seems to be based on Troy Tidwell, the superintendent, denies that he ever hit any boy. Upon this, Elwood realizes that he has to confront the past he has been running from. The last chapter has a climactic moment when we learn that Elwood never succeeds in escaping the campus and he is shot dead by the school officials. It is revealed that Elwood is actually Turner, who, after Elwood's death, takes on his identity because he believes that Elwood's story has to be told. In fact, the book cover, showing two boys presumably Elwood and Turner, casting a single shadow, forbodes the tragic ending of the novel. The single shadow implies that the fate of these two boys will be tragically intertwined. It also shows that it does not matter who tells it, Elwood or Turner, but it is the story that has to be revealed. A 'counter-narrative' has to be presented so that the world knows the story behind the broken bones that were found in the Boot Hill cemetery.

The repercussions of slavery are both tangible and intangible. The vicious cycle in which the blacks are stuck becomes an impediment to their progress: blacks cannot get high-level jobs because they are unintelligent and the proof of their unintelligence is the fact that they do not have any high-post jobs. It can be seen that slavery not only destroyed the blacks psychologically and physically but brutally damaged their family system. In Elwood's case, his parents leave him in the middle of the night and Whitehead never reveals their fate. Her grandmother, Harriet, has never had any proper goodbyes, neither to her father, who died during the slave trade nor to her husband who was lynched by the Klan. This is how slavery jeopardized the family system of blacks and many people died waiting for their loved ones to return. Hence, Whitehead succeeds in showing how far the idea of race has evolved by showing two different generations of blacks who are trying to make sense of the system that governs them. However, the tragedy lies in the fact that, on the one hand, several bodies are being dug



up, which are emblematic of a violent past, and on the other hand, there are people like Floyd and Martin who die every day facing the same fate as that of the Nickel boys.

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