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Colson Whitehead’s The Nickel Boys

The “voice of color” on the impact of the “ordinariness of racism.”

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Introduction

“By mining the past, novelist Colson Whitehead takes readers into an uneasy present.” (Time magazine, July 8 - 2019)

Labeled America’s Storyteller, Colson Whitehead won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad*, in which he combined history with fantasy. He managed to win the Pulitzer Prize a second time with the novel he released subsequently: his 2019 novel *The Nickel Boys*. For this text, Whitehead kept the history element, but chose brutal realism over fantasy. Inspired by the true events of the investigation of unrecorded deaths and the uncovering of numerous unmarked graves at the Dozier reform School for Boys by the University of Florida in 2012, Whitehead had found the setting for his fictional novel. The author explains that he never visited the Dozier school because the more he learned about it the angrier he got and that he would only want to go if he could “torch it or bring a bulldozer.” (Cowan & Whitehead, 2019) The novel tells the story of two protagonists, Elwood Curtis and Jack Turner, both are sent to the Nickel Academy, the fictional version of Dozier, where they endure emotional and physical abuse. Both boys attempt an escape after Elwood gets caught trying to go public with the atrocities that go on in the school. Elwood gets shot during the attempt and Turner assumes Elwood’s name and identity after successfully escaping. The novel switches between the past, 1963, when the Civil Rights Movement was at its height during the Jim Crow era, and Turner’s post-Nickel life: the 1970s, 1980s, 2000 and 2014. Whitehead explained that when it comes to the racial issue he “was wrestling with [his] own ideas about where we are as a country” and that “Elwood and Turner speak to different parts of [him].” (Brown and Whitehead, 2019)
The Nickel Boys is a novel about hope, friendship and support when facing adversity, oppression and racism. In an interview with CBS Mornings about his novel Whitehead emphasizes the philosophical debate the optimistic Elwood and the cynical Turner have and that it reflects his own personal thoughts on whether or not America is moving forward or backward as a country. (King et al., 2019) In his book Understanding Colson Whitehead, author Derek C. Maus mentions a critique that Whitehead has on the way American history is taught in schools and how it just “skips to the good parts” (Maus 121) such as Brown v. Board of Education, without talking about the horrors of slavery or Jim Crow. (Maus, 2021) Maus seems to agree with Whitehead’s suspicions that America is “unwilling or unable to respond meaningfully to the reality of racialized injustice.” (Maus 145) It is precisely those two things that Whitehead engages with in his novel. He does not avoid the negative aspects of intolerance and shows the brutal realism of institutionalized racism.

The novel has been the subject of research for several credible academic studies relevant to this thesis. However, none of these studies look at the novel specifically from a critical race theory point-of-view. In his essay “‘Indisputable Available’: The Texture – Gendered, Sexual, Violent – of James Baldwin’s Southern Silences,” Ed Pavlič takes a new historicist approach to the novel and tries to locate the historical James Baldwin, an American writer and social activist, and the fictional Elwood, by claiming they must have “met” some way or another throughout their respective histories. (Pavlič, 2021) A reason why this might have been important to Pavlič is because in Whitehead’s novel protagonist Elwood Curtis is given a copy of James Baldwin’s Notes of a Native Son by his teacher Mr. Hill. (Whitehead 35) This may have sparked Pavlič’s interest to further investigate the
elements of history that are mentioned or left out in Whitehead’s novel through a new historicist approach.

Paula Martín-Salván, professor at the University of Cordoba, chose to analyze the novel from the perspective of narrative theory. In her essay “‘A Jail within a Jail’: Concealment and Unveiling as Narrative Structure in Colson Whitehead’s The Nickel Boys,” she concludes that the novel’s prison narrative, as well as the narrative progression through the use of a plot twist, contribute to the discussion of the complicated sociological and ideological themes of the novel. (Martín-Salván, 2022) She writes that the novel follows the dichotomy of inside and outside, referring here to life inside Nickel and life outside of it, and the dichotomy of concealment and unveiling, meaning the gradual release of information which forces the reader to actively construct and adjust the complex realities of the novel. She concludes that individual triumph, the confirmation of racist ideology and the legitimization of idealism in the novel are all the result of “the interactions between the novel’s rhetorical fabric, its narrative structure, and its connections to specific literary genres.” (216) It is therefore clear that Martín-Salván explores the novel’s themes of racism and injustice, not through a critical race theory lens, but rather by looking at its narrative structure.

Mehvish Bashir, Sahibzada Aurangzeb and Aisha Bibi, in their monograph “Traumatic Elements of Oppressed Black American: Micro-Aggression in Colson Whitehead’s The Nickel Boys,” chose trauma theory to study the way the characters cope with micro-aggression. They adopted the definition of psychologist Derald Wing Sue when defining micro-aggression as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership”
(Bashir et al 712-713) and divide it into the three subcategories of micro-assault, micro-insult and micro-invalidation. They offer examples from the novel for each of these subcategories and also, occasionally, point out the coping strategies used in these particular examples in the novel. An example of a micro-invalidation, that is, negating one’s sense of self respect, is when Elwood receives books in school which were previously used by white students and are full of racial slurs. Turner eating soap powder in order to get ill and get out of a day of work so he could stay with Elwood constitutes a coping strategy according to Bashir, Aurangzeb and Bibi. Where Martín-Salván chose to examine the novel from a narratological perspective, Bashir, Aurangzeb and Bibi examine the novel’s theme of racist aggression through the perspective of trauma theory.

The relevance of this thesis is threefold. Firstly, no previous academic studies have been conducted using critical race theory as the theoretical framework for analyzing the themes in Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*. Secondly, as this study will deal with racism and abuse endured by African Americans during the Jim Crow era as portrayed in Whitehead’s novel, it offers a unique perspective as the story is told by an African American protagonist. One person who stressed the importance of multiple perspectives is Chimamande Ngozi Adichie. At a TEDGlobal conference she spoke of the danger of the single story and how narrowmindedness prevents a full understanding and encourages stereotypes. (Adichie, 2009) A third reason why this approach is relevant is shown by another study undertaken by Jeanne Dyches and Thomas Deani who examined the impact of teaching classic novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with a critical race theory approach. They focused on both the implications this has on the English teacher education and on the successes and challenges the students
experienced while reading the novel through a critical race theory lens. They found that this approach helped both white students and students of color to think about how aspects of critical race theory impact upon their own social realities. The study also noted how certain white students, while using the critical race theory approach, engaged in White Talk Discourse, a discourse strategy to suppress dialogue about race, and even experienced White Rage, “a phenomenon in which whites angrily respond to antiracist attempts to acknowledge and legitimize black experiences.” (Dyches & Deani 44-45)

The three previously mentioned studies each offer unique insights into Whitehead’s novel and they each use their own theoretical framework to reach those insights. Pavlić’s new historicist theory researches real elements of history mentioned in the novel, Martín-Salván’s extensive narratological analysis exposes the complex ideologies of the text and Bashir, Aurangzeb and Bibi’s use of trauma theory points out the coping mechanisms used by the characters. This thesis will therefore look at Whitehead’s novel from another theoretical perspective and examine how this can emphasize the themes of racism, hope and friendship in the novel. More specifically a critical race theory approach will be taken to investigate the impact of racism on the novel’s characters. Furthermore, this approach will highlight how racism manifested itself in the south in the 60s and how it changed over time to continue to manifest itself in the years thereafter. Critical race theory emerged in the 1970s as a response to a realization that the civil rights era of the 1960s had not fully achieved its aims. Nowadays, the critical race theory movement includes “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power.” (Delgado 3) In his book *Critical Race Theory – An Introduction*, Richard Delgado writes that critical race theory
operates along the lines of five tenets. These crucial principles are the ordinariness of racism, interest convergence, social construction, differential racialization and its consequences, and the voice of color. (8-11) It is precisely the first and last tenet that will be used as a lens for this study. The ordinariness of racism means that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational” and that this makes it “difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged.” (8) The principle of the voice of color holds that minorities can speak out “their different histories and experiences with oppression [about] matters that the whites are unlikely to know.” (11) These tenets will be further explained as the theoretical framework for this study is outlined. The fact that the novel switches between the past and the post-Nickel life allows the reader to look for evidence of how racism, in the novel, continued throughout the past and into the present, how this was perceived by and impacted upon Elwood and Turner, and how they each in their unique voice speak of their experiences.

Theoretical framework

The first tenet used to examine the novel is what is known as the ordinariness of racism. This tenet has critical race theorists divided into two complementary schools of thought. One group is called the idealists who believe that “race is a social construction, not a biological reality.” (Delgado 21) For the idealists the focus is that racism is the result of how people think about race and how they relate to people of other races. The other group, ‘the realists,’ believe that racism is structurally imbedded in a society and that race is a determining factor in what school you go to or what job you can get, for example. (21) It is important to note that these two schools of thought are complementary and not opposites. Both ideas spring from the belief that racism is structurally embedded in a society. They just have different
focal points: the realists look at hierarchical structures in a society pertaining to education, employment, justice, and so on, whereas the idealists look at the hierarchical structures embedded in people’s minds and attitudes. *The Nickel Boys* provides evidence of both these schools of thought as will be shown subsequently.

This tenet is reminiscent of the concept of “The Changing Same” coined by George Lipsitz. In his article that carries the concept’s name he insists that racism and white supremacy over the years simply adapt to the changing circumstances of a society. He offers examples from the justice system, the housing market and urban planning to support his view that 60 years after the great Civil Rights Movement the advantages for whites and disadvantages for blacks are still painfully present in today’s society. (Lipsitz, 2018) Delgado also thought of this when he wrote:

> When we are tackling a structure as deeply embedded as race, radical measures are required. “Everything must change at once,” otherwise the system merely swallows up the small improvement one has made, and everything remains the same. (Delgado 57)

Some critical race theorist advocate for extreme measures to be taken to completely overthrow the system, claiming that any small changes would only lead to the system adapting to those changes. This attitude is mostly seen in the camp of the realists. Delgado leaves room for the idealists to counter this claim:

> For their part, the discourse analysts point out that many of our chains are mental and that we will never be free until we throw off ancient restrictions and demeaning patterns of thought and speech and create the discourse to talk about necessary new concepts. (121)
This shows that the idealists maintain that a new type of discourse is necessary before any actual changes can be made in society, because if the discourse does not change along with society, then this too would swallow up any small changes made, and send society spiraling down familiar racist patterns. It seems that both groups are advocating the same thing – change is necessary – but their focus differs in their starting points. These concepts, the ordinariness of racism along with Lipsitz’ Changing Same, are relevant concepts that will be used to examine *The Nickel Boys*, as the novel clearly switches back and forth between the protagonists lives at the Nickel school during the sixties, and their post-Nickel life.

The second tenet that will be used to study *The Nickel Boys* is that of the voice of color. A first aspect of this principle is that telling stories “[opens] a window onto ignored or alternative realities.” (Delgado 46) Telling stories means the sharing of experiences and perspectives of people of different backgrounds. Not only the binary of black and white should be taken into account here, but, especially in the United States, the Chinese, Japanese, Latino and Native American Indian minorities’ accounts are crucially important in the race question. (47-48) This thesis, however, will mostly focus on the binary of black and white. A second aspect of this principle is that this counter storytelling also has “a valid destructive function.” (49) The stories that these minorities tell and the experiences they share serve the purpose of gradually destroying some of the racist constructs in society. Remembering that the realists focus on structural injustices in society, such as not having equal access to employment, education or legal services, for example, then it is the stories of the minorities who have experienced this that can emphasize these injustices and, by doing so, can help lead society to positive change. By laying bare these structural injustices they are made known to the public, and to politicians who are in power to
make relevant changes in these areas of society. Remembering that the idealists complemented this view by adding that racism is not only structurally embedded in society, but that it also takes shape in the minds, attitudes and language of the people of a society, then counter story telling is necessary to instigate change in these minds, these attitudes and this language. And finally, Lipsitz reminds us that racism has the capacity to adapt to a changing society, and thus the stories and experiences perpetually told by minorities show that their need to endure this changed racism is unchanged and that they still face this racism, even if it has taken on a new form.

The realists and idealists, with their supplementing creeds, and Lipsitz underline the importance of the tenet of the voice of color. A third and final important aspect of this voice of color principle is that it is “a cure for silencing” as “many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicament [while] others pretend that it didn’t happen.” (50) Silence might then be seen as a way to survive. The analysis will show that Whitehead’s novel as a whole exemplifies this tenet.

Now that the two tenets have been described in detail it is also important to see how other academics have used critical race theory to analyze texts. Stephan Matthias read The Boundary by Nicole Watson, a novel about the investigation of the suspicious death of an Aboriginal girl in the Australian outback, and “[provided] a critique of the assumption that Western epistemologies are universally applicable, and subsequently [opened] a path to understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal epistemologies as equal and valid.” (Matthias 822) This can be interpreted as both an example of the ordinariness of racism and as the voice of color. The fact that Aboriginal epistemologies are still considered less valid than Western ones, shows that the gap has not been closed yet. Giving Aborigines a place, a voice, arguably
counters this racist construct. Matthias also offers excerpts from the novel to show that the legal system is biased to once more underline the ordinariness of racism. One example of this is where he explains how in Watson’s novel the Aboriginal people are subject to Australian law and the notion of *terra nullius* (meaning that a territory could be used if it was considered uninhabited) when it comes to their land (829), deeming their own cultural traditions, habits and laws irrelevant.

Richard L. Schur examined Tony Morrison’s *Paradise* through a critical race theory lens and found that the novel “testifies to the difficulties of building a real home within the racialized soil of the United States.” (Schur 277) Schur uses extracts from Morrison’s novel to examine how they are proof of her interconnection with critical race theory. The novel shows how despite structural changes brought forth by the Civil Rights Movement, the racist culture of the United States could not be completely removed. This is reminiscent of Lipsitz’ Changing Same in the sense that even though important changes were made, racism evolved, adapted and prevailed into the future.

Shirley Moody-Turner argues that Gladys-Marie Fry’s *Night Riders in Black Folk History* serves as an example “of an early critical race approach to folklore studies.” (Moody-Turner 333) She concludes that *Night Riders* “exemplifies a Black folklore practice in her attention to the ways in which African Americans documented, preserved, passed on, and theorized about their own experiences within and beyond the ‘tight spaces’ of systemic oppression.” (Moody-Turner 336) Fry, the folklorist of black history, recognized the importance of storytelling when she interviewed over 70 people for her book *Night Riders in Black Folk History* allowing them to bear witness to the violence they had experienced along with their elders in
the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in doing so provides a valuable first-hand account of this period in American history:

“… [Storytelling is] the only way to preserve the continuity with the past that would sustain them in the future. The Blacks needed to talk to each other; quite simply, they met to tell stories. In so doing, they continued their oral tradition.” (Fry 212)

The term ‘Night Riders’ refers to “white patrollers who policed the boundaries of plantations during and just after slavery” (Moody-Turner 334) and it is a term that was frequently used when Fry interviewed the eyewitnesses and the offspring of eyewitnesses. Fry recognized the importance of preserving these stories and Moody-Turner saw Fry’s work for the critical race theory tenet that it is: the voice of color.

The ordinariness of racism in the past setting of the novel

The scenes in the novel which are situated in the past are full of examples of various kinds of racism. During the sixties the Civil Rights Movement was at its height fighting against the Jim Crow segregation laws. Examples of these segregation laws are found in the novel when it refers to the bus boycotts, which lead to integrated buses in the city (Whitehead 30), to the theater only allowing entrance “if you had seventy-five cents and the right skin color” (33), or to how getting no-interest loans was pointless “when a white bank won’t let you step inside.” (69) Elwood’s optimism is made clear when he thinks about how schools had to desegregate after Brown vs. Board of education and to him “it was only a matter of time before all the invisible walls came down.” (16) His optimism is shattered, however, when he arrives at Nickel. It is made abundantly clear in the novel that Nickel is still
segregated. “The school had more than six hundred students; the white boys went down the hill and the black boys went up the hill.” (38) This example shows that white and black students were kept separated. “The colored schoolhouse was down the hill.” (56) Here the novel shows that teaching was conducted in separate school buildings. “There were the big facilities the black boys and white boys used at different times, like the gymnasium, the chapel, and the woodshop.” (59) All these examples show that society’s segregation is also maintained in the Nickel School. This relates to what the realists refer to as racism being structurally embedded in society. Black people simply did not have the same opportunities or access to services as white people and it was no different for Elwood at Nickel.

Elwood grows up listening to Martin Luther King Jr. telling the story of how his daughter was not allowed admission to Fun Town, an amusement park:

Dr. King had to tell her … about the segregation system that kept colored boys and girls on the other side of the fence. Explain the misguided thinking of some whites – not all whites, but enough whites – that gave it force and meaning. (10)

This quote is proof of structural racism – the Jim Crow segregation laws - that was in place during the sixties since Dr. King’s daughter is not allowed into an amusement park simply because of her skin color. Not only that, it also serves as proof of how the idealists view racism. The quote speaks of misguided thinking. It is the thoughts and attitudes that give existence and meaning to racism. Elwood’s pre-Nickel high school is given books from another, white high school. These white students knew where the textbooks were going and so they “left inscriptions for the next owners: Choke, Nigger! You smell. Eat Shit.” (27) The fact that there are
segregated schools for white and black students and that the white students receive pre-owned textbooks is arguably an example of structurally embedded racism that the realists refer to in critical race theory. Add to this the idealists’ complementary creed that racism also exists in and takes shape through thoughts, attitudes and language, then this example shows how the white students related to the black students. Their hateful attitude towards them is made visible. It is not only the white students who were guilty of this, because when Elwood is arrested for hitching a ride in what he did not know was a stolen car, the deputy who stops them says, “First thing I thought when they said to keep an eye out for a Plymouth. Only a nigger’d steal that.” (40) The deputy’s racist prejudice towards blacks is obvious as he assumes that only blacks would steal such a car. Similar to cases presented by Matthias, there are hints of a legal bias in this example. Though Whitehead’s novel offers no details on how Elwood’s trial went, the story is clear that he had nothing to do with the actual theft of the car, but it is assumed he did because of his skin color, and that is enough to send him to Nickel.

In the novel information is presented about Elwood’s father and his service in the military. Elwood wonders if:

His [father’s] life might have veered elsewhere if the US government had opened up the country to colored advancement like they opened the army. But it was one thing to allow someone to kill for you and another to let him live next door. (69)

This might be interpreted that the whites in the sixties were open to desegregation when it served them, allowing the blacks into the army to fight and die for ‘their’ country, but were opposed when it did not serve them. Additionally, some are
described as a “bunch of white boys jealous that they didn’t have a uniform and afraid of a world that let a nigger wear one in the first place.” (69) This misguided thinking that it is a bad thing to have a black person live next door, and the jealousy and fear of black men in the military are some of the thoughts and attitudes that, according to the idealists, shape and give life to the racism of the sixties.

At Nickel these racist attitudes and perceptions continue. Elwood’s teacher refers to him as “another one of his colored boys [who] came and went.” (58) The fact that the teacher feels it is acceptable to express ownership over another human being, and feels he needs to emphasize that the boy is black shows the racist thinking of some whites during the sixties. The attitude of the superintendent and the others who work there becomes even more clearly hateful when they take the boys to The White House to get beaten and abused: “Hold on to the rail and don’t let go. Make a sound and you’ll get more. Shut your fucking mouth, nigger.” (67) The use of the degrading term ‘nigger’ and the idea of being able to beat and abuse the boys more when they shout out in pain shows the level of hate of the superintendent. Even the school nurse shows her racist attitude when she “distributed ham sandwiches and watery grape juice, white kids first.” (78) If the Nickel system was void of racism, clearly the nurse would have handed out the food in an order regardless of color. However, her attitude and manner are emblematic of the systemic racism at Nickel.

The flaws in Nickel’s racism, whether ideologically or structurally becomes painfully clear when examining the situation of the student Jaimie, who is the son of a Mexican mother: “‘I go back and forth. One day they’ll make up their minds, I suppose,’ Jamie says.” (59) Jamie was first put in with the white students, but after working the fields he tanned and the school had him put with the black students.
There he was too light again so they put him back with the white students. It is interesting that even with the structural segregation of white and black students in place, consensus is lacking in the thoughts and attitudes of the staff to decide what race to assign to Jamie and in which part of the school to put him.

**The ordinariness of racism in the post-Nickel setting of the novel**

The novel gives us glimpses into the life of Turner after his stay at Nickel. In the late sixties we learn that he is working in New York for a moving company. He speaks of “white-flight families splitting for the suburbs.” (Whitehead 136) White families were not staying in certain parts of the city and moving away. There was a garbage strike going on and Turner thinks to himself that “it was good for the rest of the city to see what kind of place they were really living in. Try his perspective for a change. See how they liked it.” (139) This can be linked to Lipsitz’ concept of The Changing Same. The fact that desegregation had started, but that there were still white and black areas in the city, and that one could try on the ‘other’s’ perspective, shows that the racist structures have simply adapted to the changing society.

The narrative is subsequently situated in 1988 and Turner now owns his own moving company. He runs into another former Nickel resident named Chickie Pete, who is clearly ruined by his past:

If things had been different. The boys could have been many things had they not been ruined by that place. Doctors who cure diseases or perform brain surgery, inventing shit that saves lives. Run for president. All those lost geniuses … they had been denied even the
simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal. (164)

Again, this can be interpreted using Lipsitz’ Changing Same concept. Society has changed in some respects, but the blacks characters are at a disadvantage because of their past experiences. One can argue that the blatant racist segregation in 1988, is long over, but in the novel it says that at the bar where Turner and Chickie went for a drink the “bartender served the two blond coeds first.” (163) This suggest a more subtle, but nonetheless very real culture of racism. Also, Turner remembers that at the same bar “this cracker in a Red Sox cap started going nigger this and nigger that and got kicked out in a hot minute.” (160) These examples might seem trivial at first, but when white women get served before black men in a bar and the debasing term ‘nigger’ is still being thrown around, it becomes clear that these men are denied the simple pleasure of being ordinary. They are still being set apart. These accounts of racism exemplify the racial attitudes that are linked to the realists’ point of view of structural inequality in a society. Additionally, though no rules or laws exist that dictate the bartender to serve the white customers first, the idealists would claim this example supports their idea that racism is embedded in the thoughts and attitudes of people and how this affects them in their relationships to minority groups.

In 2000 Turner is now a successful business owner and a paper wants to run a feature on “Enterprising Entrepreneurs.”, since, “He was a natural – a black man who owned his own moving company, employed local people, mentoring.” (186) The idealists again would argue that emphasizing the fact that he is a black man is proof of the fact that this racial division is still relevant. The feature could have simply talked about an enterprising entrepreneur and his own moving company, but
it had to emphasize his skin color, which in turn emphasizes the fact that it is more unlikely for a black man to be able to reach these kinds of goals. Lipsitz might agree that in this instance, even though society has changed since the sixties, white supremacy is still dominant and has simply adapted itself. Black men can be successful entrepreneurs, but it must still be mentioned that they are indeed black.

In 2014 the persistence of racism becomes clear when the novel tells the story of Millie, Turner’s girlfriend:

It was hard to remember sometimes how bad it used to be – bending to a colored fountain when she visited her family in Virginia, the immense exertion white people put into grinding them down - and then it all returned in a rush, set off by tiny things, like standing on a corner trying to hail a cab, a routine humiliation she forgot five minutes later because if she didn’t, she’d go crazy, and set off by the big things, a drive through a blighted neighborhood snuffed out by that same immense exertion, or another boy shot dead by a cop: They treat us like subhumans in our own country. Always have. Maybe always will.” (204)

This example shows, among other things, that The United States has come a long way from having segregated taxis (Bay 3), but that society is still not equal. The realists would explain that this inequality exists structurally in society and the idealists would add that this ingrained itself as a persistent racist attitude embedded in people’s minds. Lipsitz would explain this according to his concept of The Changing Same where, even though taxis have desegregated, the racist undertone has adapted itself to a changed society and now merely manifests itself differently,
that is, by not having the same response as white people in being picked up when hailing a taxi. The example further speaks of the great effort that was once put into dismantling black people, which is still at present being used to dismantle neighborhoods. Lipsitz mentions the injustices of the housing market and the disadvantages of urban planning in his text and these examples are found here in Whitehead’s novel. With regards to being “treated as subhumans,” (204) the last part of the example of Millie’s experiences in the novel, Whitehead offers at least a sparkle of hope when he writes “Maybe always will.” (204) By using the word ‘maybe’ Whitehead remains hopeful that maybe America will stop treating its fellow citizens as subhuman.

All these examples show how difficult it was for the Nickel men, but also for Millie, to create a life for themselves. It was Schur who stated that Morrison’s novel “[testified] to the difficulties of building a real home within the racialized soil of the United States.” (Schur 277) The examples from The Nickel Boys attest to the exact same thing. When the novel clearly refers to white-flight families moving in and out of certain neighborhoods it is hard to read that and not acknowledge that the very soil on which these families build their homes is racialized.

**The voice of color throughout the novel**

First of all, it is important to recognize that the entire novel reads as a testimony of the voice of color. Written by an African American author, telling the story of two African American protagonists, the novel focuses on the protagonists’ unique experiences of the racism they have endured and how it shaped their lives.
Much of the evidence found concerning voice at first seems disheartening: “Plenty of boys had talked of the secret graveyard before, but as it had ever been with Nickel, no one believed them until someone else said it.” (Whitehead 3) This reads as though the voices of the boys did not matter at first and is reminiscent of the findings of Matthias. He concluded that Watson’s novel “[opened] a path to understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal epistemologies as equal and valid” (Matthias 822) and similarly it can be said that truths of the boys of Nickel, and in comparison the boys of the Dozier school, are validated through Whitehead’s novel. Much as the Aboriginal beliefs are not deemed credible at first, the Nickel Boys’ stories are not deemed credible, and they each derive their credibility by virtue of their respective authors.

Another example that might contradict the importance of the voice of color tenet is the disappointment Turner experiences when he finds out that the story of his escape from Nickel is not remembered, and is not being passed around (Whitehead163-164) But silence could also be seen as a way to survive and this becomes clear at the end of the novel:

The state of Florida closed the school three years ago and now it was all coming out, as if everyone, all the boys, had to wait for it to be dead before they told the tale. It couldn’t hurt them now, snatch them up at midnight and brutalize them. (206-207)

Disheartening as the silence may seem at first, it is understandable when thinking of what the boys at Nickel had to endure and still feared they would endure if they were to speak out.
Jack Turner is presented as the street-wise orphan who has a dark view on
the world and the people in it: “The way Turner saw it, wickedness went deeper than
skin color. … It was people.” (103) Unaware of his own kindness he helps protect
Elwood from some bullies in school, but maintains that “[he] didn’t do shit.” (56)
After Elwood is killed during their escape from Nickel, Turner uses Elwood’s name
and assumes his friend’s identity: “It felt right. He used the name from then on when
anybody asked. To honor his friend. To live for him.” (200) It might be argued that
Turner does this in part to keep himself safe, to keep him from being caught by the
police. But taking on Elwood’s name can also be interpreted as Turner telling
Elwood’s story:

In some ways Turner had been telling Elwood’s story ever since his
friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right, as
he stopped being the desperate alley cat of his youth and turned into a
man he thought Elwood would have been proud of. (202)

This quote exemplifies the importance of the theme of friendship in the novel.
Turner loved his friend so much that he was inspired by him to live a better life.
Elwood lived by strong moral principles and Turner wanted to become a man who
also did the right thing in life.

An example from the novel that shows Elwood’s good influence on Turner
is when Turner decides to help Elwood deliver a letter to an inspection committee.
This letter contained a detailed account of all the atrocities that went on in the school.
Turner’s agreement to helping Elwood deliver the letter to the committee perhaps
initiates the change in his character. That action, however, haunts him:
And he had betrayed Elwood by handing over that letter. He should have burned it and talked him out of that fool plan instead of giving him silence. Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, “I’m going to take a stand,” and the world remains silent. (205)

As the adult Turner learns about the investigations being performed into the now closed Nickel school and he becomes determined to use his voice:

He’ll find Elwood’s grave and tell his friend of his life after he was cut down in that pasture. How that moment grew in Turner and changed his life’s course. Tell the sheriff who he was, share Elwood’s story and what they did to him when he tried to put a stop to their crimes. Tell the White House boys that he was one of them, and he survived, like them. Tell anyone who cared that he used to live there. (207)

Turner’s post-Nickel life, having assumed Elwood’s identity, is a manifestation of the principle of the voice of color. After having tried to live his post-Nickel life in a manner that would have made his friend proud, he is also compelled to not let his friend be forgotten in silence. When the adult Turner finds a website documenting the stories of the victims of Nickel, The Changing Same again becomes painfully obvious as “all the men on the website were white.” (207) The novel is hopeful, however, and so the voice of color prevails: “Who spoke for the black boys? It was time someone did” (207) which prompts Turner to travel back to Nickel and tell his story, and Elwood’s story.

Elwood grows up listening to Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches, firmly believing in the struggle and in the power of change. And just as Martin Luther King
Jr. wrote his letter from Birmingham Jail, Elwood writes his letters from Nickel:

“He wrote *The Chicago Defender* twice, but hadn’t heard back, even when he mentioned the editorial he’d written under another name.” (Whitehead 172) When this failed to get him attention he tries writing down everything he has seen and experienced at Nickel in a letter to give to an inspection committee sent to visit the school: “All in his finest penmanship. He didn’t put his name down, to kid himself that they wouldn’t know the author’s identity. They’d know he was the snitch, of course, but they’d be in jail.” (176) This effort also backfires and lands Elwood in solitary confinement. Not even this stops him in his attempts to have his voice heard. As he and Turner are escaping Elwood thinks: “he’d go wherever Turner instructed and when it was safe, put it all down on paper again. Try the *Defender* again, and *The New York Times*.” (197) Elwood is presented as a naïve character who insists on doing the right thing. Using his voice to speak out against injustice had always been in his nature, whether it was speaking out against other boys stealing from his employer (25), or intervening in a bathroom fight to help a younger boy. (62)

In Whitehead’s novel the building in which the boys are beaten is called the White House. “The black boys called it the White House because that was its official name and it fit and didn’t need to be embellished. The White House delivered the law and everybody obeyed.” (Whitehead 64) The men that came to pick up Elwood for his first beating in the White House are referred to as the “night visitors.” (64) The whip with which the boys were beaten was called “Black Beauty” (67) As mentioned earlier, Fry highlighted the importance of preserving the stories about the atrocities that went on during the slavery and post-slavery era. The men who terrorized the African Americans then were called Night Riders. It is striking that Whitehead chose to refer to Elwood’s source of abuse as his night visitors. There is
also a certain sad, dark and symbolic irony in the name of the White House and
Whitehead does not miss that when he writes that it “delivered the law and
everybody obeyed.” (64) It is after all The White House that rules the United States
and a White House that rules Nickel. This same symbolic irony can be detected in
naming a tool that brings so much pain to the black children of Nickel a “Black
Beauty.” These names are now part of the stories, part of the oral tradition. They are
manifestations of the voice of color.

Conclusion

This essay set out to examine racism in Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Nickel Boys*.
Two tenets from critical race theory were used to analyze the novel. First, the
ordinariness of racism was used to examine how racism was manifested in society
in the past setting of the novel. Secondly, how this racism perpetuated and persisted
throughout the post-Nickel life of protagonist Jack Turner was studied. This
persistence of racism was also linked to George Lipsitz’ concept of The Changing
Same. Lastly, the creed of the voice of color was examined throughout the novel.

*The Nickel Boys* shows that during the sixties the Jim Crow segregation laws
were firmly in place as, for instance, just as amusement parks were off limits to
black people, the Nickel school had separate facilities for white and black students.
The racist attitudes of white people were also visible during that era. For example,
the deputy who arrested Elwood assumed that only a black man would try to steal
such a car. Even though there are many explicit examples of segregation and racism
in this part of the novel Elwood’s hopeful and positive attitude is substantiated since
he believes that after Brown vs. Board of education schools would have to
desegregate.
The novel continues to provide evidence of racism in the post-Nickel setting and speaks of white families moving out of certain areas, black people starting life at a disadvantage, and black people experiencing difficulties in something as simple as hailing a taxi. With his novel Whitehead wanted to reflect on the state the country was in and through it he shows that some things are still painfully wrong.

Many of the examples from *The Nickel Boys* could also be linked to academic works that used critical race theory to examine other novels. Stephan Mattias spoke of the validity of other epistemologies in a novel by Nicole Watson, Richard L. Schur found how Toni Morrison spoke of racialized soil in the United States, and Shirley Moody-Turner saw Gladys-Marie Fry’s work as an epitome of the voice of color.

In addition, the effects of the ordinariness of racism and the persistence of it on the two protagonists was always closely looked at. Elwood stayed naïve and hopeful all the way to his death, never losing faith in the power of his voice. Turner changed from being a street-wise, mistrusting, cynical boy to a loyal, conscientious and hopeful man in honor of his friend. In the end he refuses to let his friend disappear in silence and uses his voice to keep his memory, his story alive.

By reading Whitehead’s novel through the lens of critical race theory and seeing the links with the other academic studies the reader of this essay is invited to a different, and possibly uneasy, perspective when it comes to racism. Not only this, but the reader is perhaps also allowed to be confronted to see the racialized soil in the United Stated, the validity of the stories of these protagonists and the importance that these voices are heard.
Whitehead wrote a story of a persevering friendship and hope in the face of adversity and racism. He describes a brutal past and guides his readers through history towards a delicate present. Whitehead said that through this novel he was arguing the condition in which his country was in and that the optimistic Elwood and cynical Turner speak to both parts of himself in that discussion. Whitehead leaves the answer to that discussion open in his novel, but he also leaves the reader with one important thing. The hope that through the story of Elwood and Turner righteousness will prevail over racism.


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