



Race and Its Repercussions: An Intersectional Analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract

This research explores the politics of racism and its consequences in Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys*. The plot is woven around the actual events that happened in Arthur G Dozier School for Boys where an excavation team disinterred dozens of human bodies who became victims of America's racial politics. The novel revolves around the theme of racial segregation and violence witnessed and understood through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy named Elwood who is sent to a reformatory school after being wrongly accused of theft. His stay at the Nickel makes him realize how blacks are stuck in an inescapable quagmire of violence and lawlessness. Whitehead digs through the previous decades to show how the idea of racism has evolved but is still deeply entrenched in American society. In this regard, the theory of intersectionality as propagated by Kimberle Crenshaw, Critical Race Theory, and Paulo Freire's theory of oppression will be used to analyze how racism, be it covert or overt, wreaks havoc in the lives of American blacks.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, Oppression, Color Blindness, Xenophobia.

1. Introduction

The idea of racism, its existence, and changing patterns have caused a lot of academic debate. On the one hand, it is argued that the present age is significant due to its acceptance of black identity and color blindness. However, facts on the other hand seem to negate this argument showing that the current age is as racist, or even more, in its attitude towards the non-whites as any other previous age. The racial differences that seemingly or statutorily ended after the Thirteenth Amendment or the civil rights movement still prevail in covert or overt forms. One reason for this racial/anti-racial dilemma can be found in Gramsci's assertion that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci, 1992, p.276), which shows that merely discrediting the old system is not enough unless a new and even more powerful system is made, a system that acknowledges and accepts the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of its society. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to excavate the past, explore the changing racial patterns and the impact of this biologicistic and systematic racism on blacks.

The presence of a racial system can be seen in America ever since it freed itself from the British empire and emerged as a self-governing state. Despite declaring 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' to be some of the basic rights that all human beings have been endowed with by their creator, the acceptance and normalization of hereditary slavery and black servitude show the hollowness of the propagated American ideals. It can be observed that ocular and corporeal differences have always been a famous way of defining races. It is

difficult to comprehend that science that speaks of logic and reasoning is itself steeped in prejudice and xenophobia. The Eugenics movement that started in America in the early 1900s is one of the worst examples of human rights violations. It opposed miscegenation and immigration of people deemed racially inferior and aimed to eliminate undesirable human traits by forcing involuntary sterilization. Gamble's article "Under the Shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and Health Care" talks about the medical phobia that the blacks ingrained after realizing that "the state considered them property and denied them the legal right to refuse to participate" (Gamble, 1997, p.1174). These fears manifested themselves in African proverbs and folklores in the form of "night doctors" and this fear was justified keeping in view the outcomes of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and the vicious surgeries done by Dr. James Sims in the name of research. The latter did various experiments on enslaved black women in the late 1800s, treating them as nothing more than guinea pigs. Each woman underwent thirty operations without anesthesia, the agony of which he himself acknowledged. However, it was only after perfecting his skill that he applied it "with anesthesia, on white women volunteers" (1774).

Hence, scientific racism is but one example of that boundless discriminatory network that blacks are a part of. In the late 1800s, the abolitionist movements started emerging, and while talking about the whites with anti-slavery sentiments, the duality and ambivalence with which they spoke of slave emancipation are note-worthy. Whereas many whites supported abolitionist movements and wanted slavery to end, they were not ready to give blacks the same level of equality that the whites had. Lincoln's Peoria speech of 1854 gave voice to the universal American desire that wanted to keep the distinction between these two worlds intact. He vocalized the fear that every white American harbored by asking "free them, [blacks] and make them politically and socially our equals?" (Lincoln, 1854) and concluded his speech by declaring the improbability of such a desire as it was against the views of the white majority.

1.2 The Racial Paradigm and its Contemporary Significance:

The American journey moved from slavery to racial segregation and the imposition of statutory restrictions on the blacks due to their status as "subhuman beings of an inferior order" (Higginbotham, 2013, p.45). The schism that existed between the whites and the blacks due to the apparent physical differences was widened and strengthened by state laws that gave the whites immense power over the blacks. Higginbotham in *Ghosts of Jim Crow* traces the creation and evolution of this racial paradigm that was created with the arrival of blacks in America. The blacks had no right to vote, hold property or get an education. State laws offered harsher punishments for blacks in comparison to whites who had committed the same crime. It was not easy for slaves to get freedom even if their masters intended to because of the lengthy manumission procedure. The fate of those who got freedom did not get any better and they were in constant fear of being sold into slavery once again. Though the Civil War ended slavery, the white/black hierarchy did not end with it. It was difficult for the pro-slavery whites to accept their defeat and witness the transition of slaves from property to people and this obsession with white superiority eventually led to the creation of the Klan. The Klan declared itself to be "an institution of Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy and Patriotism" (67). But the Klan seemed to have its own definition of humanity and the blacks were not a part of it. Those who supported or were a part of the Klan reminisced about the good old days, the era of slavery, and aimed to resist and reverse the changes brought by the war and reconstruction era.

Hence, the racial disparity was maintained over the decades and various strategies were used to widen and strengthen it. Black oppression was not only done through state laws but it was justified by normalizing it through education and entertainment programs. The stage shows showed characters including "the happy plantation slave and the inept, corrupt, and foolish northern urban free black" (Higginbotham, 2013, p.86). The portrayal of such stereotyped

characters paved the way and justified the segregationist laws later introduced, such as the Jim Crow. These laws affirmed black separation from the white and were applied in all spheres of life including transport, housing, schools, and jobs. The application of the “separate but equal” theory by the state widened the racial gulf and added to the existing chaos. Daniel T. Lichter’s research published in 2015 shows the persistence of black ghettoization even at present. Lichter tries to debunk the belief of racial integration by showing that the suburbs where the blacks have moved have a black majority, while other suburbs have a white majority. Also, there is a return of “younger whites to the city and the exodus of minority groups to poorer and more racially diverse neighborhoods” (Lichter, 2015, p.846). Suburbs are desegregated to the extent that they are either “majority black, majority Hispanic or majority Asian” (846). Lichter observes that the presence of blacks in the suburban neighborhood forced the whites to move even farther away “hunkering down in all white neighborhoods, affluent gated communities, or unincorporated housing developments at the exurban fringe” (846).

Another reason for the presence of a racial paradigm in the 21st century is the constant propagation of racial stereotypes, the same prejudices that have been believed for centuries. Obama’s presidency has given birth to the idea of post-racism but the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement started during Obama’s tenure is not only ironic but shows how post-racial the present is. Though the current judicial system is not as racist as it was in the Jim Crow era, the idea that blacks are more prone to criminal activities as compared to whites strongly persists. In 2005, William Bennett, an ex-secretary of education, stated that in order to lower the crime rate “abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down” (Bennett 2011). This intertwining of crime and race explains the drastically high ratio of black incarceration in comparison to that of whites, thus showing that racism is a reality, deeply embedded in the very social fabric of the American society.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory gained momentum in the 1970s with the aim of exploring and analyzing the covert forms of racism that exist in society. The theorists associated with this movement believe that racism is “not aberrational” but an everyday experience. Contrary to the idea of race as biologically or religiously justified, critical race theory believes that “races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado, 2012, p.7). Closely related to this belief is the idea of “differential racialization” which shows that society at times deliberately marginalizes a race in order to serve its own needs and it discards those barriers whenever required. Since race is socially constructed, the meanings given to different races keep on changing over time for the advantage of the dominant groups.

CRT scholar Derrick Bell believes that the black civil rights movement was allowed to gain momentum because the rights demanded by the people of color during that movement coincided with the interest of the whites. He questions the famous decision of *Brown V. Board of Education* that permitted school desegregation, an act that was censured by most whites. The rationale that Bell deduces from this abrupt decision was America’s desire to gain credibility and make its image better in the eyes of emerging third-world nations by reasserting equality as the nation’s basic principle. Besides this, many black Americans fought in World War II alongside the whites, and by pushing the black Americans into the same segregated system, there were chances of mass revolt. Hence, Bell states that racial progress is made on the principle of “interest convergence” which means that blacks will achieve racial equality only if “the interest of blacks... converges with the interest of whites.” (Bell, 2008, p.22)

Story-telling is another basic tenet of CRT as story-telling not only helps in preserving culture, myths and history but occupies a significant place in human discourse. Stories are usually told from the perspective of the majority and this majoritarian perspective privileges

the dominant group, silencing the voices of people at the margins. Stories need to be neutral and objective in order to confront the dominant discourse. CRT emphasizes the importance of counter-storytelling as a technique to express the suppressed voices and deconstruct the majoritarian narratives that seem too real to question. Richard Delgado believes that narrative and stories play a major role in constructing social reality. Both groups, dominant and suppressed, have their own version of the same event but it is the “master narrative” that is accepted unquestionably by the majority. Alternative reality is usually overlooked but it has the power of questioning the accepted narrative. Stressing the importance of counter-narratives, he says that the “oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation... as means of psychic self-preservation and second as means of lessening their own subordination.” (Delgado, 1989, p.2436) These counter-stories not only shatter the biased reality but liberate the oppressed group from the self-condemning image that they have internalized. As discussed earlier, racial suppression is rationalized through religious and scientific justifications. Racial stereotypes have been disseminated to the extent that the corporeal and cognitive differences between the two races seem evident and hence acceptable. Even the seemingly objective stories are racially tinged and believing in such lopsided perspectives can lead to, as Delgado says, “intellectual apartheid.” (2440)

It can be seen that while talking about racial discrimination or minority issues, only the broader groups are prioritized and the subgroups that exist within the minority are usually overlooked. The difficulty lies in classifying people into neatly carved categories as identities usually overlap; an individual can fit into various molds of oppression, the category of black, female, and gay, all at the same time. It is only at the intersection of the aforementioned categories that subordination can be understood. Hence, Critical Race Theory tries to address the problems faced by “double minorities” and voices the concerns of people who face oppression on multiple levels. Kimberle Crenshaw talks about “intragroup differences” (Crenshaw, 1995, p.358) to accentuate the problems faced by such intersectional identities. Crenshaw believes that this multi-layered subordination is the “consequence of the imposition of one burden interacting with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.” (359)

Crenshaw uses the basement metaphor to show how anti-discriminatory systems strengthen the pre-existing hierarchies rather than uprooting them. She shows a group of people burdened by varying forms of oppression standing feet on shoulders, with the top row touching the ceiling. A hatch is made to alleviate their burden but it allows only the top row to pass through it, whereas the multiply burdened people stay at the bottom. Anna Carastathis analyzes this analogy stating that the “unprotected margin of the basement is the intersection.” (Carastathis, 2016, p.79) Pulling a few people who are already standing on the shoulders of others cannot be called progress. Crenshaw believes that rather than having a “top-down approach” where the groups at the bottom retain their subordinate position, these marginalized groups should be shifted to the center, and the liberation movements have to consider the presence of these intersectional identities and their experiences. Besides this, oppression leads to a peripheral existence, but the periphery is a site of resistance as well. Hankivsky regards resilience and resistance as the core element of intersectionality because they “disrupt(s) power and oppression [and] resistance from subordinated groups has been to use collective actions to destabilize dominant ideologies.” (Hankivsky, 2014, p.11)

Vivian M. May discusses various facets of intersectionality and defines it as an “epistemological practice that contests dominant imaginaries” (May, 2015, p.34). It questions the accepted doctrines and knowledge that claim to be neutral but are, in fact, biased. Though intersectionality propagates identity politics and group solidarity, it acknowledges “multiplicity” both in terms of identity and experiences. As intersectionality questions the conventional beliefs, it also acts as a kind of “resistant imaginary” and talks about alternate

historical realities that exist other than the dominant historical narratives and this revision of the past cannot be seen as a mere recollection of events but “a form of counter-memory.” (54)

As stated earlier, intersectionality shows that the world cannot be viewed through a monistic lens, hence, these “intersectional interventions in historical memory” show that “history cannot be told in the singular voice or via the lone, iconic figure” (54). Listening to these multiple voices helps in redefining the archive by excavating those events that have been buried under the dominant narratives and the figures that have been placed on the periphery despite their activism. Intersectionality states that “memory is politicized,” hence, if memory has a political nature, it becomes necessary to look at the wider trajectory which, in effect, results in a “rupture in collective and individual consciousness [and] opens up possibilities, past and present, by denaturalizing oppression and presenting it as an ongoing process, not an accomplished fact.” (56)

Even at present, racial discrimination is seen and understood in conventional terms, i.e., an individual committing racial acts explicitly against other people of color, but CRT and intersectionality show that there are multiple ways of subjection and reveal the “disjuncture between racial neutrality declared by law and the material realities of white supremacy.” (Spade, 2013, p.1034) Spade says that racial disparity still exists in various aspects of everyday life including housing, jobs, criminal punishment laws, and colorblind policies are merely a way to mask these disparities. He further states that antidiscrimination law falls short of addressing the problems of people who face “multiple vectors of exclusion.” (1034) Laws define the canon of racial discrimination in a very limited way and refrain from acknowledging the presence of covert racial policies due to, what CRT theorists call, “preservation through transformation” which means that antidiscrimination laws are made and implemented keeping in view the prioritization of white supremacy and preservation of status quo.

Collins shows that intersectional oppressions are ideologically justified by disseminating stereotypical images such as mammies and jezebels, and criminals thereby affirming black people’s status as the society’s ‘Other.’ This othering creates a binaristic difference, the difference through which the other groups highlight their normality. This difference is “defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its other.” (Collins, 2000, p.70) This ‘other’ needs to be dehumanized in order to be fully dominated, which is then accomplished by “objectify[ing] the subordinate group.” (71)

The struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, the self and the other, has been a perennial chapter in human history. Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, shows the binaristic oppressor-oppressed relationship that exists in society, and because this relationship is based on inequality, it leads to injustice and violence. For Freire, this system of oppression dehumanizes not only the oppressed but the oppressor as well. The oppressor shows “false generosity” by taking tiny progressive steps while keeping the overall system of inequality intact. Freire believes that “oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it.” (Freire, 2005, p.51) Since the system has been created by and works for the oppressor, it is the oppressed who has to overthrow this brutal regime in order to achieve his lost humanity. However, the problem lies in the fact that the oppressed himself 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. Hence, during the struggle, the oppressed, rather than having “an attitude of adhesion to the oppressor,” has to break the cycle of becoming the “oppressors of the oppressors.” (44)

4. Discussion and Analysis

The Nickel Boys is set in the mid-1900s in Jim Crow Florida and is narrated through the eyes of a ten-year-old protagonist named Elwood who believes in the power of law, struggle and the

change that an individual can bring. By using the event of Arthur G. Dozier massacre as the stimulus for *The Nickel Boys*, he shows how slavery and racism have been modernized but are as destructive and oppressive as ever. The prologue shows the details of the excavation that happened on the school ground in the early 2000s. The inspection team finds “fractures and cratered skulls, the rib cages riddled with buckshot... no white crosses, no names. Just bones waiting for someone to find them” (Whitehead, 2019). The exhumation of each buried body is a question mark on the American imperative and a rereading of American history that is filled with massacres and unsaid apologies.

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 dish-washing 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” (Whitehead, 2019), and it complements Derrick Bell's aforementioned interest convergence principle (Bell, 2008, p.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.” (Whitehead, 2019) 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. Since trauma escapes “the bounds of intelligibility, it is nevertheless transmissible through society... it is capable of being passed on not only between people but also across generations and culture.” (Bell, 2008, p. 7) It justifies Elwood's mother's “dark, tired eyes [that] never moved to quiet her child,” (Whitehead, 2019) his father's restlessness, and Harriet's habit of keeping a sugarcane machete under her pillow.

Though 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 claims are nonintersectional.” (Carastathis, 2016, p.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” (Whitehead, 2019), 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 (Freire, 2005, p.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” (Whitehead, 2019), 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. This 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” (Freire, 2005, p.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

a few days at the hospital as the “beating has embedded bits of the first into his skin” (Whitehead, 2019) 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 days” (Whitehead, 2019) 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. Hence, during the struggle, rather than destroying the circle of oppression, the oppressed develop “an attitude of adhesion to the oppressor” (Freire, 2005, p.45). 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. A pleasant vision” to envisage (Whitehead, 2019). These lines show how the victimized relish the idea of having the same level of power over their tormentors; the power that is both destructive and dehumanizing. At this point, the boys exhibit the same oppressor consciousness that they themselves are a victim of.

Elwood’s vulnerability can be further analyzed through the lens of intersectionality according to which “race, class, gender, sexuality, race... constitute interlocking, mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power.” (Hill, 2016, p.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 and people like Jaimie keep waiting in “the unprotected margin until they can be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.152). Jaimie, owing to his Mexican-African background, is tossed from the black campus to the white campus and vice versa because he is too white to be among the blacks and too black to stay among the whites. The description of Jaimie moving back and forth from one campus to another is not only humorous but also shows how corporeal differences are preferred over one’s identity and talents. People like Jaimie stand at the intersection of various overlapping categories and the solution to their problems “require(s) the dismantling of the entire interstructure of oppression.” (Carastathis, 2016, p. 66)

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” (Whitehead, 2019) 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,” (Whitehead, 2019) a place from where nobody returns, the latter does not believe in that. However, he soon learns that “you can change the law but you can’t change people and how they treat each other... wickedness went deeper than skin color.” (Whitehead, 2019)

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” (Whitehead, 2019) 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[s] you in all kind of ways until you were unfit for straight life, good and twisted by the time you left” (Whitehead, 2019). 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.” (Whitehead, 2019) Even though there is no law at present that legalizes racial segregation, Elwood knows that no law is required to state these things and that is how the world has always been.

In 2014, Elwood learns that the state has dug the campus and found the bodies of those who died of “natural causes” (Whitehead, 2019). 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 succeeded in escaping the campus and he was 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.

5. Conclusion

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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Bio-note

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