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Ghosts of Past, Present, and Future

On Political Purpose and Critical Hope in
Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

Adelaide Strickland

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, based on a true story, takes as its inspiration a particularly horrific example of failed reform. The Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, in Marianna, Florida, closed in 2011 but left a shadow of rape and torture—and the deaths of more than 50 boys—in its wake (Chadwick and Vermeulen 96). When news of the bodies made its way to Whitehead's Twitter feed in 2014, "in the very summer Michael Brown and Eric Garner, two African Americans, were murdered by white policemen," he felt like he had to share their stories (Chadwick and Vermeulen 96). He told a reporter that the story stayed with him, that "if there's one place like there, there are many places," and that "if the story hadn't been told, someone needed to tell it" (Davies). Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermulen suggest, however, that "if *The Nickel Boys* manages to amplify the story . . . the novel itself is not so much filling an archival gap as tapping into a prevailing mood" (96). While Whitehead felt

a great conviction to tell the story of the Dozier boys, Chadwick and Vermulen argue that the resulting novel “cannot claim a heroic political posture” because it is “merely one relay station in a saturated media sphere in which stories of African American suffering are never absent and instead possess an almost ambient availability” (96). While I can agree with Chadwick and Vermulen’s analysis of the archive as overflowing with stories of suffering, I take issue with their statement that Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* has no political purpose alongside it. It is the task of journalists and archivists to tell true stories as they are; it is the task of the author to fictionalize those stories, to help them come to life in order to bring them into conversation with the greater social and political landscape, and to trace their roots through history—simultaneously engaging the past, present, and future.

Drawing from the work of journalists and the archives of stories from past Dozier victims, Whitehead’s novel begins in the present with the discovery of the bodies at a fictionalized Dozier, which he calls “Nickel Academy.” The novel then dives into the story of how they got there by following the journey of a conscientious high school senior named Elwood. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will examine how Whitehead uses a fictional Dozier to critique the reform system and bring the story into debate with the greater historical contexts of slavery and the civil rights movement. I will look first at how Whitehead plays with time in regard to his “haunting” of Nickel and the boys who go there. Then, I will turn to how he sets about fictionalizing the school and its students—namely, to Elwood’s character—and what that allows him to do that journalism and the archive cannot. I will conclude with a discussion about how, despite all odds, Whitehead structures the novel in a way that leaves his readers not without hope that Elwood’s seemingly naive reveries will one day be realized. The novel’s interconnection of the past, present, and future in critique of reform schools, alongside its mission to instill hope, lend it the “political purpose” that Chadwick and Vermulen claim is missing.

Though the novel begins in the literary present, Whitehead immediately introduces his readers to the past with the exhumation of bodies from Nickel’s graveyards—marked and unmarked. The novel’s first line, “even in death the boys were trouble,” sets the tone for the rest of the narrative (Whitehead 1). Over the course of the prologue, readers see pieces of that past coming back to haunt the school’s grounds and its survivors, starting with the mere existence of the bodies as they pose trouble for the construction company and the anthropologists exhuming them. This haunting is a thread that Whitehead

carries throughout the novel, haunting the grounds of Nickel, situating the story within the shadow of the civil rights movement, and showing readers, at various instances, a haunted “Elwood,” who we later learn is actually a boy named Turner. Through the carrying out of this thread, Whitehead is tapping into what Kashif Powell refers to as “the story of blackness,” made up “of subjectivities birthed in the liminal depths between life and death . . . a ghost story narrated by muted voices” (254). Luckhurst writes, in a similar regard, that “ghosts are the signals of atrocities” (247); in the novel’s first line, Whitehead introduces his readers to the ghosts of Nickel boys from the past and brings the atrocities that led to their condition into the present.

The atrocity that the reform school as an institution represents, in particular, is one target of Whitehead’s fictionalized Dozier, highlighted in his interplaying of the past and present. To fully understand Whitehead’s critique, I will look first to the archive. Reform schools emerged in the United States in the early nineteenth century, influenced in part by what has been deemed “the child-saving movement” (Platt 21). The movement, driven largely by feminist reformers, created new institutions for dealing with young criminals, namely juvenile courts and reformatories geared “to accommodate the needs” of so-called “delinquent” youth (22). The “child-savers” believed that a focus on nurture could retrain youth for “law-abiding careers” and obliterate “nature’s defects,” or, more specifically, “the intractability of human nature and the innate moral defects of the working class” (32, 22). The schools were not, in the beginning, disproportionately populated by Black youth as they have been in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; Black youth were being directed into prisons instead, and it was not until after the civil war that their numbers in reform schools began to rise (Span 109). What sets the reformation of Black youth apart is that it was not only targeted at those convicted of crimes but also at those “presumed to be prime candidates for committing crime” (116). Those presumptions were based on whether a child was deemed to have worthy parents, if they were frequently seen loitering or engaging in unproductive activities, and other vague criteria evidently susceptible to the influence of law enforcement’s or legal officials’ own biases (Platt 32). Given that Black people in the United States are also more than twice as likely than white people to live below the poverty line, the criteria outlined above as “defects” to be reformed affect them disproportionately (“Poverty Facts”). The racial history of reform schools is heavy, and something that many

might not be aware of, but Whitehead is able to use fiction as a means to reach and educate a wider audience.

Whitehead's fictionalization of Dozier and his characterization of Elwood allow readers to consider these injustices in a way that archives can rarely offer, both by making space for empathy and forcing readers to consider the greater historical context—including Saidiya Hartman's "afterlife of slavery"—as it relates to the boy's experience. Whitehead's focus on the haunting of the school's survivors is the strongest example of how he achieves this; for most of the boys we meet, the crimes are minimal—being "recalcitrant," skipping school, breaking a pharmacy window—or, in Elwood's case, non-existent (Whitehead 46–47). Elwood is undeniably a good kid; he dreams of being on the front lines of the civil rights movement, gets good grades, is different "from the neighbourhood boys," and somewhat of a goody-two-shoes—quite the opposite of someone who we might imagine needs reform (19). And yet, despite his stellar character, Elwood is stuck in a system designed for "delinquents," that claims it will make them better members of society. The fact that readers get to know Elwood as well-mannered and law-abiding before he finds himself at Nickel allows them to empathize more with his situation than they might if they came across a similar story in real life. This is something that fiction does well because there is "no expectancy of reciprocation involved in the aesthetic response . . . the very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void" (Keen 212). The more we learn about the character through specific aspects of characterization—"naming, description . . . depicted actions"—Keen suggests, the higher the potential for empathy (213). Learning as much as we do about Elwood's character, alongside the triviality of the "crimes" committed by the other boys, highlights the fact that crime, in reality and in fiction, is not the problem; blackness is.

There were white students at the school as well—both at Dozier and at Nickel—but the way Whitehead frames the novel draws our attention to the plight of its Black students; haunted, again, by the afterlife of slavery. Laying out the horrors of reform school alongside the struggles of the civil rights movement allows Whitehead to further solidify the connections between past and present. The era in which the novel takes place is saturated with social protest, encompassing the rise of the civil rights movement and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. These two storylines—of Nickel and greater social climate—are tied together as readers watch Elwood's own hope for justice begin to subside as his stay at Nickel draws on, and as they witness

his realization that if he wishes to survive, he must suppress his own morality—his conception of right and wrong. The civil rights movement fights for Black people and white people to be seen as equals under the law; and yet, while Black people and allies are fighting for justice, the so-called justice system is treating young Black boys as disposable. The living quarters and schoolhouse for Black students are in worse shape than those for their white counterparts, and the work more challenging; Boot Hill cemetery, where the first bodies are exhumed, is located on the “‘colored’ side” of the school grounds, “‘immediately adjacent to the school’s garbage dump” (Jackson 159). The “secret graveyard,” we can only imagine, harbours similar racist underpinnings (Whitehead 5). Whitehead’s framing of the novel with the exhumation of the bodies, coupled with his focus on the civil rights movement and Elwood’s engagement with it, once again works to intertwine the past and present, emphasizing the horrors of Nickel and the reform school system.

Reform schools in general also placed emphasis on two primary means of rehabilitation: education and work, though at many schools work seemed to take precedence. Historian Robert Pickett said, in regard to a New York reformatory called “The House of Refuge” that opened in 1825, that at no time “did any of the youngsters work less than six hours” per day, leaving little time, it seems, for the education portion of their reform (Span 111). In the aftermath of the real-life Dozier School for Boys, hundreds of Black boys told the press that “they were ‘modern day slaves’” (Harrell). We also see this reflected at Nickel, where Whitehead draws attention to the fact that work did not have the intended effect of teaching students valuable life skills or making them employable. Rather, it “toughened and prepared them—especially its African American and Hispanic American offenders—for a life of continued delinquency and eventual prison” (Span 109). Whitehead tells us that many of the remaining Nickel boys are “dead in prison,” “decomposing in rooms they [rent] by the week,” or have “frozen to death in the woods after drinking turpentine” (7). This observation is very much in line with what Ruth Gilmore argues about prisons, using statistics to prove that the “crime went up; we cracked down; crime came down” narrative is entirely false (17). The juvenile court, instead of achieving the reform goals it set out, “reached into the private lives of youth and disguised basically punitive policies in the rhetoric of ‘rehabilitation’” (Platt 33–34).

What Nickel practices, essentially, is convict-leasing by another name—yet another remnant of the past that Whitehead brings forward into his narrative present. Some academics and activists have deemed prisons’ practices of

convict-leasing as evidence of “new slavery” (Gilmore 21). The problem with this conception, Gilmore writes, “is that very few prisoners work for anybody while they’re locked up” (21). This logic, however, may not apply to reform schools and their focus on work as rehabilitation since work is built into the institution itself. Perhaps, if education had been promoted with equal importance, the element of work would be less problematic; however, contrasted with Elwood’s struggle to find material he has not already learned, and the fact that he takes to teaching himself the British classics he finds while cleaning out the basement, Whitehead urges readers to question whether Nickel truly deserves to be called an educational institution. He also highlights, once again, the traces of the past that cling to the boys’ present day. The view Whitehead gives us of their future (in relation to the boy’s experience at the school), that “no one believed them until someone else said it,” only serves to solidify the broader afterlife in which the boys and the school exist(ed) and its lasting effects (Whitehead 5). The disregard for Black lives, on all fronts, is part of “memory’s cruelty,” which finds “that the affective ecologies of death erected during the Transatlantic Slave Trade continue to have authority over ontological imaginings of blackness” (Powell 254). Black lives in the time of slavery were viewed as disposable, as are the lives of the boys at Nickel. In pushing readers to make these connections—in pulling through the historical underpinnings that lead the novel’s characters to Nickel and that inform the greater context of the time—Whitehead infuses *The Nickel Boys* with a political purpose beyond what non-fiction materials, whether the products of journalism or the archive, are apt to produce.

Where *The Nickel Boys* holds the most political purpose, however, may be in allowing its readers room for hope. Fiction has long been seen as a means of imparting emotions, including hope; the genre of utopia is perhaps the most potent example of the power fiction holds in that regard. Darren Webb writes that when “confronted with contemporary suffering and injustice, utopianism is widely heralded as a means of recapturing the category of hope” (Webb 197). Though Whitehead certainly does not go so far as to promise utopia, the glimpse of a better future, even if only marginally so, is a similar response to injustice, and holds a great deal of political purpose in that it affords readers the hope necessary to keep fighting. That hope itself holds a great deal of political purpose is undeniable, in large part for this very reason; Barack Obama ran an entire election campaign based on that fact. In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead engages with hope in two key ways: first, in a very subtle manner, building on the relationships he draws between past, present, and future that have been

discussed so far in this essay. Then, in the motif of escape that leads us to the novel's ending.

The Nickel Boys' subject matter is arguably quite discouraging; as explored earlier, Whitehead is successful in illustrating a piece of Hartman's "afterlife of slavery" through his portrayal of the horrors of reform schools, and the struggles of the civil rights movement. The depiction of this afterlife—the lingering injustice affecting Black lives in America—in the archive, may not leave much room for hope. The way Whitehead structures the novel, however, allows his readers the hope that Elwood's seemingly naive reveries will one day be realized—allowing them to glimpse a future that is further from slavery and injustice in more than just time. Whitehead's efforts in this regard begin in the prologue, when readers are introduced to "a Nickel Boy who went by the name of Elwood Curtis" (7). Instead of revealing Elwood's death outright, he presents an opportunity for readers to maintain hope. A perceptive reader could assume, based on the line above, that Elwood might be dead—we know in the back of our minds that *something* is not right—but how the information is presented allows us to believe that we may still find a happy ending. Whitehead hides further clues throughout the rest of the novel as well. When the man introduced as Elwood in the prologue runs into an old Nickel acquaintance, Chickie Pete, he decides he had better not pass along his business card (167); later, he refuses to give an interview (188). Another scene finds his partner, Denise, massaging his back, with no mention of the scars readers know to expect from Elwood's time in the White House (139). The truth, here, is hidden in plain sight—just as Turner Jack hides behind Elwood's name—but the fact that it is not clearly stated allows readers the opportunity to hold onto hope and avoid believing that Elwood dies until it is stated explicitly at the end; it allows readers to believe that he will overcome the hardships of reform that Whitehead illustrates so vividly. The archive is far less likely to offer readers the chance for hope in the face of discouraging subject matter.

This structure of purposeful deception favours a reader's hopeful tendencies and encourages them to finish the novel rather than give in to discouragement early on. Admitting a death in the first few pages has the potential to deter someone from reading on, which, in the case of this novel, would deprive them of another opportunity for hope. The novel's last few chapters, while they reveal the tragic death of the real Elwood Curtis, also provide a motif of escape. Turner, in his life post-Nickel, is haunted by his escape—so much so that it affects

how he lives his life. In his day-to-day, before we realize his true identity, we witness Turner's hobby of attending the New York Marathon, where he cheers for the last-place finishers, "for the runners bringing up the rear of the pack . . . who summoned him from his uptown apartment by a force he could only call kinship" (Whitehead 160); we see him watching *The Defiant Ones* with Denise; in his interaction with Chickie Pete, he is disappointed that tales of his "Great Escape" from Nickel haven't caused the stir he imagined they would (168). Escape is a hopeful idea in and of itself; yet, at the same time, we see a Nickel boy who, despite having physically escaped the grasp of Nickel, is haunted by his experience and by the death of his friend. It is through this haunting, however, that Whitehead leaves readers with one final glimpse of the future when we see Turner seated in the restaurant in which Elwood's grandmother, and later Elwood himself, worked. As a kid, Elwood played a game: "whenever the dining room door swung open, he bet on whether there were Negro patrons out there" (18). Elwood never did see a Black face in the restaurant; but, as readers, we watch Turner realize Elwood's dream. Elwood's haunting of Turner leads Turner to this moment, driving his return to Nickel and to Elwood's hometown. In bookending the novel in this way, Whitehead gives us the past, illustrates the horrors of reform, the struggles of the civil rights movement, and shows us where it all started. And yet, through the story he has crafted on top of those very real histories, he allows us to remain hopeful. Despite the horrors, despite—and perhaps because of—the struggle, there *has* been change.

This is not an overly romanticized kind of hope, but rather what Webb and others have deemed "critical hope." Critical hope recognizes tragedy and long histories of injustice but positions those things as moments "that can catalyze change," finding a middle ground between cynicism and idealism (Grain and Lund 51). It is often driven by the objective of combating oppression, but recognizes that "critique is not enough," though "the collective response to human suffering cannot afford to get lost" in romantic ideas about solutions (Webb 199–200). Whitehead's weaving together of the past, present, and future allows for critical hope to happen because it lets his readers see what change—even the most miniscule—has happened along the way from there to here, while also highlighting what still needs to change. Throughout the novel, readers are led to hope, through the clues Whitehead provides and through the motif of escape, that Elwood may survive his experience at reform school—but at the same time, we see that the boy who goes by the name of Elwood is haunted by his experiences there. We get another glimpse of hope

for the future when Turner, still haunted by the death of his friend, realizes a piece of Elwood's childhood dream—a somewhat marginal act in and of itself, but perhaps, we might hope, representative of something more to come. Haunting, in the words of Powell, “is not the initiation of the story of blackness, but thrusts us toward an end that has yet to be written” (259). That future which has yet to be written holds a great deal of political power in that it fuels the fight of right now; if there was no hope for a better future, what would there be for which to fight?

While the archive, the true stories of the Dozier survivors, is important in its own right—in presenting facts and recording history—*The Nickel Boys*, as a fictional representation, allows readers to make connections, to empathize, and to have hope. The archive presents examples of slavery's afterlife; fiction allows us to trace the afterlife from past, to present, to future. Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* simultaneously engages the past, present, and future to bring the true story of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys into conversation with the greater social and political landscape of the civil rights movement and with the fight for Black lives that has spanned centuries. Whitehead's fictionalization of the archive he draws from allows his readers to empathize with the characters in a way that they might not be afforded by reading the news or other non-fiction work; it allows him to haunt his readers with the history of racial injustice and the horrors experienced by reform school survivors. And finally, it allows Whitehead to show his readers glimpses of a more just future. To say that *The Nickel Boys* holds no political purpose is to overlook the political power of history, empathy, and hope.

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