Temporal Fracture and Historical Reckoning in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

Lect.Qutaiba Saleh Finjan
Department of Media / University of Dhi Qar

Abstract

This research paper examines Colson Whitehead's 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Nickel Boys by focusing on the concept of "temporal fracture," a narrative strategy that intentionally disrupts linear chronology to reveal historical trauma and encourage engagement with repressed experiences. By carefully examining the text, I illustrate how Whitehead utilizes non-linear narrative techniques to uncover the lasting impacts of institutional racism and state-sanctioned violence on African American youth at the fictional Nickel Academy, which draws inspiration from Florida's real Dozier School for Boys. Through the fragmentation of narrative time, Whitehead demonstrates the enduring effects of historical trauma across generations, so contesting traditional narratives of progress and resolution. This study enhances the understanding of literary representations of historical trauma by offering a framework for studying how contemporary African American literature utilizes temporal disruption to confront America's unresolved racial past. This methodology extends beyond prior studies, which have predominantly focused on thematic aspects rather than formal techniques in Whitehead's fiction.

Keywords: **Temporal Fracture, Historical Trauma, Narrative Disruption, Colson Whitehead, The Nickel Boys, Jim Crow Institutions, Memory Studies**.

تقييم ترجمة الوثائق القانونية التجارية من محكمة الاستئناف في البصرة

المدرس قتيبة صالح فنجان

قسم الاعلام / جامعة ذي قار

المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث رواية كولسون وايتهيد *"أولاد نيكل"* الفائزة بجائزة بوليتزر لعام ٢٠١٩، من خلال التركيز على مفهوم "الكسْر الزمني"، وهي استراتيجية سردية تُعطِّل التسلسل الزمني الخطي عمداً للكشف عن الصدمات التاريخية وتشجيع التفاعل مع التجارب المكبوتة. ومن خلال فحص دقيق للنص، أوضح كيف يستخدم وايتهيد تقنيات السرد غير الخطي لفضح الآثار المستمرة للعنصرية المؤسسية والعنف الممنهج الذي تمارسه الدولة ضد الشباب الأمريكيين من أصول أفريقية في أكاديمية نيكل الخيالية، والتي استُلهمت من مدرسة "دوزير" الحقيقية للبنين في فلوريدا. ومن خلال تفكيك الزمن السردي، يُبيّن وايتهيد كيف تستمر الصدمة التاريخية في التأثير على الأجيال اللاحقة، مما يُعارض السرديات التقليدية التي تتبنى مفهومي التقدّم والحلّ. وتُسهم هذه الدراسة في تعميق فهم تمثيلات الصدمة التاريخية في الأدب من خلال تقديم إطار نقدي لدراسة كيف يوظف الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي المعاصر التشويش الزمني لمواجهة الماضي العنصري غير المُعالَج لأمريكا. كما تتجاوز هذه المنهجية الدراسات السابقة التي ركزت في الغالب على الجوانب الموضوعية في أعمال وايتهيد دون الالتفات إلى التقنيات الشكلية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الكسر الزمني، الصدمة التاريخية، تفكيك السرد، كولسون وايتهيد، *أولاد نيكل*، مؤسسات جيم كرو، دراسات الذاكرة.

1.Introduction

The origin of storytelling frequently stems from discord, yet the passage of time within social existence becomes similarly complicated when patterns and actions descend into chaos. This research explores the complexities of narrative time through an analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), a novel that skillfully manipulates temporality to illuminate historical injustices.   it is argued that Whitehead disrupts the historical narrative by portraying social time as disjointed, a concept I refer to as temporal fracture, through a meticulous analysis of the text. (Source)

Temporal fracture is defined as the intentional disruption of linear chronology in a narrative context, designed to facilitate engagement with marginalized histories and expose historical trauma. Traditional historical narratives often overlook the significance of temporal disjunction in *The Nickel Boys*, where Whitehead reveals how racial violence distorts both individual experiences and collective memory. This narrative choice serves a unique political and ethical purpose. In contrast to standard postmodern non-linear storytelling, Whitehead's use of temporal fracture aligns with what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls "the silencing of the past"—a deliberate erasure or distortion of historical narratives used to maintain power hierarchies. As Roberto Ferreira Junior argues, the novel's palimpsest structure—a layering of neo-slave and prison narratives—embodies resistance to historical erasure by re-inscribing Black suffering into national memory (Junior, 2023). In this sense, temporal fracture becomes an act of historical reclamation.*The Nickel Boys* narrates the tale of Elwood Curtis, a young Black man who, in the early 1960s, is wrongfully condemned to the Nickel Academy, a Jim Crow-era reform institution in Florida modelled after the infamous Dozier School for Boys. This article explores the complexities of narrative time through an analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), a novel that skillfully manipulates temporality to illuminate historical injustices. The research argues that Whitehead disrupts the historical narrative by portraying social time as disjointed, a concept we may refer to as temporal fracture, through a meticulous analysis of the text. (source).

The present writer defines temporal fracture as the intentional disruption of linear chronology in a narrative context with the objective of facilitating engagement with marginalized histories and exposing historical trauma. Traditional historical narratives frequently disregard the temporal disjunction in Whitehead's work, which reveals how racial violence causes disturbances in individual experiences and collective memory. This serves a unique purpose. This is in stark contrast to traditional non-linear storytelling methods.(rephrase it)

2. Understanding Temporal Fracture
2.1. Definition and Theoretical Framework

The concept of temporal fracture, as explored in this examination, signifies the intentional interruption of linear time within narrative structures to uncover historical trauma and encourage engagement with underrepresented narratives. This concept systematically expands and refines several established theoretical frameworks. The examination starts with Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of "time-lag" in postcolonial narratives, illustrating instances of historical belatedness that uncover discontinuities in national narratives of progress. Bhabha underscores the discrepancies inherent in both colonial and postcolonial contexts; nonetheless, the concept of temporal fracture investigates how African American literature engages with the enduring impacts of racial trauma within its narrative structure. Secondly, it examines Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of "postmemory," investigating how traumatic experiences are passed down through generations. The concept of temporal fracture deepens this idea by exploring how the structure of narrative can embody this transmission through generations.

Temporal fracture sets itself apart from the prevalent non-linear storytelling methods found in modernist and postmodernist literature by its distinctive link to repressed narratives and historical trauma. Whitehead's work intentionally connects with instances of historical suppression and subsequent reclamation, rather than the aesthetic or philosophical objectives usually associated with postmodern fragmentation.

My The methodological approach of the is research is to identifying temporal fracture involves three analytical steps:

1.Mapping the novel's chronological disruptions and their relationship to moments of trauma

2.Analyzing how these disruptions function to reveal suppressed histories

3.Examining how characters experience and negotiate these temporal ruptures

In *The Nickel Boys*, temporal fracture manifests through three primary narrative strategies:

1.Juxtaposition of different time periods (the 1960s and the 2010s)

2.Use of prolepsis (flash-forward) to signal traumatic ruptures

3.Revelation of concealed identities that collapse temporal boundaries

The novel's opening immediately establishes this temporal disruption:

"Even in death the boys were trouble. The secret graveyard lay on the north side of the Nickel campus, in a patchy acre of wild grass between the old work barn and the school dump" (Whitehead 1).

This opening sentence bridges past and present, establishing the lasting consequences of historical violence that frame the entire narrative. By beginning with the excavation of the graveyard before introducing Elwood's story, Whitehead situates the novel's central narrative within a framework of historical recovery, using the unearthed graves as a literal and symbolic call to confront forgotten atrocities of racial violence"(Ferreira Junior 2023).

2.2. Historical Context of Temporal Fracture

The Dozier School for Boys, a reform institution in Florida that operated for 111 years prior to its termination in 2011, serves as the historical backdrop for *The Nickel Boys*. In 2012, forensic anthropologists conducted an excavation of the school premises, which resulted in the discovery of numerous unmarked graves containing the remains of boys who had perished at the institution. The excavation revealed a history that had been systematically concealed from official documentation, including physical abuse, torture, and fatalities (Kimmerle et al., 2012).

The historical context is essential for understanding the novel's relationship to temporal fracture. Dozier's physical excavation of remains serves as a historical fact and a metaphor for Whitehead's narrative exploration. Hartman (2008) contends that historical trauma frequently generates "gaps" in the archives of slavery in her analysis. This situation requires the application of literary imagination to uncover suppressed histories, a method she refers to as "critical fabulation." Similarly, Whitehead's temporal fissures establish a narrative framework that allows for the recovery of experiences often omitted from official histories.

The narrative primarily takes place in the early 1960s, highlighting a crucial period in American race relations—where the potential for integration sharply contrasts with the harsh truths of imposed racial hierarchies. Scholars like Michelle Alexander (2010) argue that this era signified not just a transition from segregation to integration, but also the development of novel methods of racial governance. Through the juxtaposition of this era and the contemporary unearthing of Nickel's hidden burial site, Whitehead articulates what Christina Sharpe (2016) describes as "wake work"—a narrative that outlines the enduring repercussions of historical violence across time.

3. Colson Whitehead's Narrative Techniques
3.1. Use of Non-linear Storytelling

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead employs a non-linear narrative as a key method for creating temporal disjunction. Whitehead's novel functions through a framework of concealment and revelation, diverging from traditional narratives that adhere to a linear trajectory. This system incrementally discloses critical information about characters and events. This non-linear novel contests conventional historical storytelling by employing delayed revelation, urging readers to reevaluate the order of events and their moral implications.

The narrative commences with the discovery of the secret graveyard at the former Nickel Academy site in the 2010s, subsequently transitioning to depict Elwood in the 1960s. This narrative structure is essential to the novel's essence, because it establishes a connection between historical brutality and modern reckoning. In her analysis of narrative form, Caroline Levine (2015) contends that structural choices

have implications that extend beyond fundamental aesthetics including significant political implications. Whitehead delineates a "form of anticipation" that shapes readers' understanding of later events by placing Elwood's narrative within the framework of the excavation.

In the novel, Whitehead shifts between different timeframes, leading to what literary theorist Gerard Genette (1980) describes as "anarchy"—the inconsistency between the chronological order of events and their representation in the narrative. Nevertheless, Whitehead's temporal shifts are directly analogous to periods of historical suppression and recovery, in contrast to the modernist experimentation with time that frequently serves aesthetic purposes. Salamishah Tillet (2012) contends in her work on contemporary African American literature that these narrative techniques frequently "recover a historical past that has been denied expression in traditional historical accounts" (p. 7). (you should be consistent, sometimes you mentioned the page number and sometimes not!!) (it is better to mention the page number)

Some critics, such as Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale, have argued that non-linear storytelling is a hallmark of postmodern literature, often employed for aesthetic or metafictional purposes rather than political ends. However, scholars like Madhu Dubey contend that for African American writers, non-linear narrative techniques often serve distinct political and historical functions, particularly in recovering silenced or suppressed pasts (Dubey 2002). Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* exemplifies this approach. As Paula Martín-Salván explains, the novel's temporal disjunction and delayed revelations force readers to reconsider the linear progression of events and reconstruct a narrative that has been systematically hidden, thus mirroring the process of historical recovery and justice-seeking it dramatizes (Martín-Salván, 2021).

3.2. Character Development and Temporal Shifts

Whitehead uses temporal shifts not only to structure the narrative but also to develop his characters, particularly Elwood Curtis. Drawing on cognitive narratology frameworks such as the event-indexing model by Zwaan, Langston, and Graesser, scholars have noted how temporal transitions act as narrative cues that help readers track causality and character change. In the case of *The Nickel Boys*, Juanzhi You observes

that Whitehead's shifting timelines allow readers to understand the cumulative psychological toll of racism on Elwood, by juxtaposing his youthful idealism with the aftermath of his trauma in adulthood (You, 2023).

In the sections set in the 1960s, Elwood is presented as an idealistic young man inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s message of nonviolent resistance:

"Martin Luther King at Zion Hill was the only album he owned and it never left the turntable. His grandmother Harriet had a few gospel records, which she only played when the world discovered a new mean way to work on her, and Elwood wasn't allowed to listen to the Motown groups or popular songs like that on account of their licentious nature." (Whitehead 5)

This initial portrayal lays the groundwork for Elwood's ethical beliefs and his aspirations for racial advancement, in light of the harsh realities of Jim Crow segregation. However, the current timeline illustrates a distinct identity—one that has endured Nickel while exhibiting its characteristics. This characterization technique corresponds with Fleetwood's (2016) notion of story as lived, learnt, and generative (p. 175), illustrating how Elwood's experiences at Nickel Academy shape his future identity.

The crucial element of character development is illustrated by the novel's revelation that the character referred to as "Turner" in the contemporary storyline is, in fact, Elwood, who has taken on his friend's identity. This disclosure exemplifies what literary scholar James Phelan (2007) refers to as a "character revelation," encouraging readers to reevaluate their overall comprehension of the character's journey. This analysis of identity illustrates how Whitehead dismantles temporal boundaries, showing that trauma interrupts not only linear time but also the notion of a stable identity.

Throughout the story, readers witness the transformation of Elwood's idealism, shaped by his experiences at Nickel. In this context, he forms a friendship with Turner, a pragmatic realist who asserts that "the only way to survive is to scheme and be tough" (Whitehead 106). The conflict between Elwood's idealism and Turner's pragmatism deeply affects the novel's examination of responses to historical pain.

Whitehead discloses that Turner has assumed the identity of "Elwood Curtis" for a prolonged duration following the actual Elwood's demise, indicating a synthesis of viewpoints—survival necessitates both the idealism to acknowledge injustice and the pragmatism to manage its repercussions.

This characterization technique differs from conventional character development, which assumes a stable identity that progresses over time. Whitehead employs a narrative strategy described by Pauline Melville (1990) as "shape-shifting," which effectively demonstrates the ways in which trauma disrupts conventional identity formation. The observation that Turner has "been telling Elwood's story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right" (Whitehead 210) underscores the notion that identity evolves into a realm of temporal disjunction.

4. Historical Reckoning in Literature
4.1. The Role of Memory in Historical Reckoning

Through its exploration of the psychological aspects of memory, *The Nickel Boys* illustrates how traumatic memory functions as a persistent and disruptive force in the mind. Whitehead's portrayal aligns with trauma theory in depicting these memories as resistant to integration and narrative coherence. According to Swetha et al., the novel exemplifies Cathy Caruth's concept of belated trauma, where traumatic events return involuntarily and resist resolution, thereby shaping both individual and collective memory (Swetha et al., 2024). In this sense, *The Nickel Boys* does not merely recount trauma but structurally enacts it through fragmented narrative and unresolved psychological tension.

Through his novel, Whitehead examines how personal and social memory functions as a protective mechanism to preserve marginalized historical events that mainstream records tend to ignore. The novel's emphasis on memory as historical proof matches Pierre Nora's (1989) idea of "sites of memory" which represent spaces where collective memory meets official historical accounts. For Elwood, Dr. King's words become such a site of memory, preserved even in his darkest moments at Nickel:

"Elwood tried to keep his focus. As Dr. King put it: 'Throw us in jail, and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you...'" (Whitehead 142)

These memories of King's philosophy function as what literary scholar Astrid Erll (2011) would call "memory in literature"—representations of the process of remembering that reflect how individuals construct meaning from the past. For Elwood, these memories serve as a means of defiance against the dehumanizing regime at Nickel, even as the novel illustrates the constraints of such memories when confronted with pervasive violence.

The novel's present-day timeline delves deeper into the significance of memory in understanding history, particularly through its portrayal of the unearthing of Nickel's hidden graveyard. This physical unearthing acts as a metaphor for what Marianne Hirsch (2012) describes as "postmemory"—the connection of subsequent generations to traumatic experiences they did not directly observe, yet which continue to influence their lives. Former students of Nickel, now elderly men, form support groups and organize reunions, creating what the novel describes as their own "phantom archaeology, digging through decades and restoring to human eyes the shards and artifacts of those days. Each man with his own pieces" (Whitehead 5).

This collective remembering becomes what memory theorist Aleida Assmann (2011) would call "cultural memory work"—the active process through which communities confront and integrate traumatic histories. When the fictional "Elwood Curtis" (actually Turner living under his friend's identity) returns to Tallahassee to attend a press conference about the Nickel investigation, deciding to "speak about Elwood's story, no matter what happened to him" (Whitehead 212), this moment represents the transformation of private memory into public testimony—what memory scholars like Dori Laub (1992) identify as a crucial step in confronting historical trauma.

4.2. Literary Examples of Historical Reckoning

The Nickel Boys carries on a legacy of literary pieces that confront and reflect on America's racial history. Although numerous scholars have examined this tradition via thematic content (Warren, 2011;

Duboin, 2017), there has been less focus on the particular narrative techniques that contemporary African American literature employs to engage with historical trauma. Whitehead's approach offers a compelling comparison to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which also employs a non-linear narrative and the resurgence of repressed historical trauma to address the legacy of slavery.

Nonetheless, significant differences are present in the ways these authors approach temporal fracture. Morrison utilises supernatural elements to illustrate temporal disruption, particularly through Beloved's physical representation of the past in the present, whereas Whitehead adopts a more realistic approach to create comparable effects via narrative structure. Literary scholar Yogita Goyal (2019) contends that contemporary African American literature frequently revises the genres through which "slavery has been remembered" (Whitehead 3). Whitehead's realist approach to temporal fracture exemplifies a significant revision, illustrating how chronological disruption within realist narrative frameworks can effectively unveil historical trauma.

Whitehead's novel engages with the tradition of what Saidiya Hartman (2008) refers to as "critical fabulation"—the application of literary imagination to address the gaps in historical archives that have systematically overlooked Black experiences. In his fictional portrayal of the Dozier School, Whitehead illustrates how literature can act as a "contrapuntal" historical voice, as described by Edward Said (1993)—one that challenges official narratives to uncover overlooked experiences.

As the novel's epilogue suggests, this literary reckoning has real-world implications:

"The state attorney had recently reopened an investigation into the deaths. Sixty-seven years of reform school business and no one thought to search there, behind the old playground. No one noticed all those fractures in the ribs, for decades, not until the University of South Florida anthropology department showed up with their ground-penetrating radar." (Whitehead 204)

This passage illustrates what literary scholar Michael Rothberg (2009) calls "multidirectional memory"—the way in which remembrance of historical traumas can catalyze recognition of other

injustices. The novel suggests that literary representation can contribute to such recognition, creating public pressure for actual historical reckoning.

5. Analysis of *The Nickel Boys*
5.1. Plot Overview and Critical Context

The plot sets against the backdrop of 1960s Tallahassee, Florida, *The Nickel Boys* chronicles the experiences of Elwood Curtis, a young African American man who finds himself unjustly arrested on his way to college and subsequently sentenced to the infamous Nickel Academy, a segregated reform school marred by brutality, exploitation, and systemic racism. Amidst the rigorous environment of the academy, Elwood cultivates a connection with Turner, a resourceful adolescent who has adeptly maneuvered through the complexities of the system with shrewdness and agility. The juxtaposition of Elwood's unwavering belief in the potential for justice against Turner's pragmatic survivalist mindset establishes a fundamental tension that propels the narrative onwards. Elwood's endeavor to unveil the academy's transgressions to state authorities results in significant consequences, marking a pivotal moment in the narrative. Recent academic enquiries have explored numerous themes within *The Nickel Boys*, such as the depiction of vulnerability and historical trauma, the complexities of racial identity, and the intricacies of social conflict and transformation.

However, these studies have primarily focused on thematic concerns rather than formal strategies. This analysis extends their work by demonstrating how Whitehead's narrative techniques—particularly his disruption of linear time—enable his exploration of these themes.

The Nickel Boys examines the psychological and physical trauma experienced by its protagonists, using trauma theory to investigate the lasting effects of systematic brutality. The protagonists' experiences occur during the Civil Rights Movement, highlighting the enduring impact of historical trauma on both individual and collective memory (Swetha & Uthradevi, 2024). By situating the novel within this critical context, we can better understand how Whitehead's formal innovations contribute to contemporary literary discourse on racial trauma and historical reckoning.

5.2. Character Analysis: Elwood Curtis and Turner

Elwood Curtis and Turner represent contrasting responses to racial oppression that have been identified by scholars like Cornel West (1993) and Kevin Quashie (2012). Elwood's character embodies what West calls the "politics of conversion"—a commitment to moral idealism and nonviolent resistance embodied in Dr. King's philosophy. As the novel states:

"Elwood never ceased to marvel how you could walk around and get used to seeing only a portion of the world. The way the white customers would come in and not notice him sweeping in the corner, or move around him as if he were a display stand of potato chips." (Whitehead 45)

This passage illustrates Elwood's growing awareness of racial inequality even before his unjust incarceration at Nickel. His character development traces what literary scholar Elisabeth Anker (2014) identifies as the "political bildungsroman"—a narrative of political awakening and moral development. Through Elwood's experiences, Whitehead examines how racial violence challenges yet doesn't completely destroy idealistic commitment to social justice.

Turner, by contrast, embodies what Quashie (2012) calls the "sovereignty of quiet"—a form of Black resistance focused on interior life and self-preservation rather than public protest. He tells Elwood:

"You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other. Nickel is Nickel." (Whitehead 111)

This statement encapsulates Turner's understanding that structural racism persists despite legislative changes—a perspective that challenges Elwood's faith in progress through legal reform. Turner consistently advises Elwood to focus on survival rather than resistance: "You got to see how people act, and then you got to figure out how to get around them like an obstacle course. If you want to walk out of here" (Whitehead 89).

The revelation in the novel's epilogue that "Turner" is actually Elwood living under an assumed identity represents what Paul Gilroy (1993) might call "double consciousness" embodied in a single character. By assuming Turner's identity, Elwood incorporates elements of his friend's worldview, suggesting that survival in a racist society may

require a synthesis of idealism and pragmatism—what literary scholar Herman Beavers (2020) identifies as a common theme in contemporary African American literature.

6. The Intersection of Past and Present

6.1. The Impact of Historical Trauma

Whitehead's depiction of historical trauma in *The Nickel Boys* illustrates what literary scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) calls "the wake"—the ongoing repercussions of historical violence that continue to structure the present. This impact is evident in the novel's depiction of how the discovery of Nickel's secret graveyard affects the surrounding community:

"In the old days, if there'd been trouble at the school, if a boy died, Panama City knew, Tallahassee knew. The staff knew, their brothers and sisters who lived in town knew, the police department knew, and the mayor knew." (Whitehead 8)

This passage exemplifies the "haunting" phenomenon, which is the ongoing operation of historical violence as a palpable yet invisible force in contemporary society, as defined by sociologist Avery Gordon (2008). The excavation of the graveyard is a manifestation of what Gordon refers to as "ghostly matter," which was previously present but unacknowledged.

Critics may argue that Whitehead's focus on historical trauma might validate Black suffering instead of commemorating resistance. However, this argument overlooks that the novel's temporal disturbances effectively underscore resilience by demonstrating how the characters maneuver through and endure these interruptions. In her study of disability in Black women's literature, literary researcher Sami Schalk (2018) argues that the depiction of trauma need not reinforce victimhood narratives if it also acknowledges agency within limitations. Whitehead's story demonstrates how individuals like Turner/Elwood construct successful lives despite their tragic histories.

The novel's approach to historical trauma aligns with the concept of "historical trauma response" identified by psychologist Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, which refers to the intergenerational transmission of trauma within communities subjected to systemic violence (Brave Heart 1998). In *The Nickel*

Boys, Whitehead illustrates how personal trauma is embedded within larger historical structures by linking Elwood and Turner's individual suffering to America's legacy of racial oppression. This interconnectedness is further emphasized in scholarly analysis, such as that by Aqeeli, who argues that Whitehead's depiction of Black vulnerability highlights how institutional violence perpetuates generational harm and silencing (Aqeeli, 2024). By situating trauma within a broader cultural memory, the novel enacts a narrative of reckoning that resonates with Brave Heart's framework.

6.2. Reflections on Contemporary Society

The Nickel Boys provide a sharp critique of contemporary American society, emphasizing its failure to adequately address the repercussions of racial violence due to its temporal fractures. According to literary scholar Jared Sexton (2010), the current discourse on race often employs what he terms "people-of-color blindness," which is a reluctance to acknowledge the unique characteristics of anti-Black racism in the context of American history. Whitehead's novel interrogates this inclination by emphasizing the specificity of Black historical trauma, while also proposing its wider significance for American society.

The epilogue of the novel indicates that the excavation of Nickel's graveyard in the 2010s serves as a delayed confrontation with the ongoing influence of institutional racism in American society:

"The state attorney had recently reopened an investigation into the deaths. Sixty-seven years of reform school business and no one thought to search there, behind the old playground. No one noticed all those fractures in the ribs, for decades, not until the University of South Florida anthropology department showed up with their ground-penetrating radar." (Whitehead 204)

This passage employs the literal "fractures in the ribs" as a metaphor for the temporal fractures in American historical consciousness—gaps and breaks in our understanding of the past that require deliberate excavation to uncover. The novel thus challenges readers to consider how contemporary society might better confront its traumatic racial history, suggesting what historian Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) calls "freedom dreams"—visions of justice that require confronting historical violence rather than burying it.

These reflections on contemporary society connect to ongoing debates about historical reckoning in America. As scholars like Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) and Saidiya Hartman (2007) have argued, true racial justice requires acknowledging historical wrongs and their contemporary repercussions—what Coates terms "reparations." *The Nickel Boys* reinforces this call by depicting how racial violence is not confined to the past but remains embedded in societal institutions. As Hira Ali notes, Whitehead exposes the persistent legacy of racism through a narrative that connects the horrors of the Dozier School to the broader systemic oppression of African Americans, making a case for historical truth-telling as a path to justice (Ali, 2023). In this way, the novel's fragmented timeline becomes a powerful metaphor for the ongoing and unfinished nature of racial reckoning in the United States.

7. Critique of Institutional Racism

7.1. Historical Context of the Nickel Academy

Whitehead bases the fictional Nickel Academy on the real-life Dozier School for Boys, placing it within the broader historical context of post-Reconstruction institutions that maintained racial hierarchies. The novel provides a fictionalized account of the school's history through a pamphlet that Elwood reads while recovering in the infirmary: "The state opened the school in 1899 as the Florida Industrial School for

> Boys. A reform school where the young offender of law, separated from vicious associates, may receive physical, intellectual, and moral training, be reformed and restored to the community with purpose and character fitting for a good citizen…" (Whitehead 47)

This institutional language of "reform" and "moral training" is juxtaposed with the brutal reality that Elwood experiences, highlighting what sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2009) identifies as the gap between carceral institutions' rehabilitative rhetoric and their actual function in maintaining racial control.

Historians like Michelle Alexander (2010) have documented how institutions like reform schools served as part of what she terms "*the new Jim Crow*"—systems of racial control that emerged following the formal end of legal segregation. *The Nickel Boys* depicts both the overt violence

and the bureaucratic procedures through which such institutions maintained racial hierarchies. Whitehead writes:

"The white boys and colored boys had different trajectories, but they had been cast from the same mold. Nickel sold strong backs and soft minds; two things for which there had always been a market." (Whitehead 92)

This passage illustrates how the reform school system functioned as what education historian James Anderson (1988) calls "education for second-class citizenship"—preparing Black youth for subordinate positions in the racial hierarchy while subjecting them to violence and exploitation.

7.2. Comparative Analysis with Real-life Institutions

Whitehead's fictional Nickel Academy closely parallels the documented abuses at the Dozier School for Boys, where investigations in the 2010s uncovered unmarked graves and evidence of systematic physical and sexual abuse spanning decades. The novel serves as what historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers (2019) might call "reckoning with history"—a narrative that brings attention to unrecorded and unacknowledged violence.

The novel's depiction of state inspections at Nickel that fail to uncover abuse mirrors historical accounts of how institutions like Dozier evaded accountability. Whitehead writes:

"For the first time, Elwood saw how the school was another world that existed beneath the surface of the law. " (Whitehead 98)

This passage illustrates how institutional racism operates through what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) calls "color-blind racism"—systems of racial inequality that persist despite formal legal equality. By depicting this "world beneath the surface of the law," Whitehead reveals how institutions maintain racial hierarchies despite official prohibitions against discrimination.

The novel's engagement with the actual Dozier School investigations connects to broader contemporary movements for historical justice. As scholars like Bryan Stevenson (2014) have argued, confronting historical violence is essential for addressing contemporary racial inequality. Whitehead's novel contributes to what Stevenson calls

"truth and reconciliation"—the process of acknowledging historical wrongs as a prerequisite for healing.

8. The Role of Hope and Resilience

8.1. Hope as a Driving Force

Throughout *The Nickel Boys*, hope functions as what philosopher Joseph Godfrey (1987) calls a "network virtue"—a quality that enables other virtues to flourish even in adverse circumstances. For Elwood, hope is initially grounded in Dr. King's philosophy and a belief in American progress. The novel explores this tension through Elwood's struggle to reconcile King's teachings about agape—divine, selfless love—with his experiences at Nickel:

"The capacity to suffer. Elwood—all the Nickel boys—existed in the capacity. Breathed in it, ate in it, dreamed in it. That was their lives now. Otherwise they would have perished. The beatings, the rapes, the unrelenting winnowing of themselves." (Whitehead 143)

This passage illustrates what theologian James Cone (1999) identifies as the paradox of Black Christianity—the challenge of maintaining hope for justice while confronting overwhelming violence. The novel suggests that hope requires what philosopher Jonathan Lear (2006) calls "radical hope"—the capacity to envision possibilities beyond current frameworks even when concrete possibilities seem exhausted.

However, the novel also examines the limitations of hope in the face of overwhelming violence and injustice. Turner's skepticism serves as a counterpoint to Elwood's idealism, suggesting what critical race theorist Derrick Bell (1992) calls "racial realism"—the recognition that racism is a permanent feature of American society rather than a temporary aberration. The novel's temporal structure—moving between past trauma and present reckoning—suggests that hope must be grounded in what historian Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) calls "freedom dreams"—visions of justice that acknowledge rather than erase historical violence.

8.2. Resilience in the Face of Adversity

The Nickel Boys depicts various forms of resilience among the boys at Nickel Academy, from Turner's strategic compliance to Elwood's

principled resistance. This resilience aligns with what psychologist Shelly Taylor (1983) identifies as "positive illusions"—adaptive beliefs that enable survival in traumatic circumstances. The novel suggests that resilience requires both memory and adaptation—remembering injustice while developing strategies to survive it.

The novel's epilogue, revealing that Turner has lived as Elwood for decades, represents what literary scholar Salamishah Tillet (2012) calls "civic estrangement"—the experience of being simultaneously part of and alienated from American society. By assuming Elwood's identity, Turner finds a way to carry forward both his own resilience and the memory of his friend.

As the adult "Elwood" (actually Turner) reflects on his experiences:

"It was not just that they had been denied even the fundamental markers and milestones of human existence. The boys of Nickel were denied even the simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal." (Whitehead 162)

This passage illustrates what sociologist Orlando Patterson (1982) calls "social death"—the way in which racism denies full personhood to its victims. Yet the novel also suggests what literary scholar Kevin Quashie (2012) calls "the sovereignty of quiet"—the inner resources that enable resilience even in oppressive circumstances. The character's survival and eventual decision to testify about Nickel's abuses represents what anthropologist James C. Scott (1990) identifies as the transition from "hidden transcript" to public resistance—the moment when private knowledge of injustice becomes public testimony.

9. Conclusion

In *The Nickel Boys*, temporal fracture serves as a powerful formal strategy for historical reckoning with America's legacy of racial violence. By disrupting linear chronology, Whitehead reveals how the trauma of institutional racism persists across generations, challenging conventional narratives of progress and closure. This approach extends beyond mere stylistic experimentation to serve a specific political and ethical purpose: recovering suppressed histories and confronting their ongoing impact.

The novel's juxtaposition of different timeframes—Elwood's experiences at Nickel in the 1960s and the excavation of the school's secret graveyard in the 2010s—creates what literary scholar Michael Rothberg (2009) calls "multidirectional memory," connecting different historical moments to reveal patterns of violence and resistance. This temporal structure mimics the process of historical recovery itself—fragmentary, incomplete, and resisting narrative closure.

Through its depiction of Elwood Curtis's idealism in tension with Turner's pragmatism, the novel examines different responses to racial oppression without privileging either approach. The revelation that Turner has assumed Elwood's identity suggests that survival may require a synthesis of these perspectives—a recognition of injustice coupled with strategic adaptation. This narrative twist represents the most profound temporal fracture in the novel, collapsing distinctions between characters and timeframes in a way that challenges conventional understandings of identity and temporality.

Whitehead's approach to temporal fracture differs from similar techniques in postmodern literature by maintaining a clear ethical orientation toward historical recovery and justice. While postmodern fragmentation often serves primarily aesthetic purposes, Whitehead's temporal disruptions correspond directly to moments of historical silencing and recovery. This approach aligns with what literary scholar Yogita Goyal (2019) identifies as a broader trend in contemporary African American literature: using formal innovation to address historical trauma while avoiding both sentimentality and cynicism.

By demonstrating how temporal fracture operates in *The Nickel Boys*, this study contributes to our understanding of how contemporary literature engages with historical trauma. Whitehead's narrative strategies show how form can embody historical content—how the structure of storytelling can reflect the disruptions of trauma and the process of recovery. This approach suggests new possibilities for analyzing how literature participates in what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls "the production of history"—not merely representing the past but actively intervening in how it is remembered and understood.

Finally, *The Nickel Boys* demonstrates literature's capacity to contribute to historical reckoning by excavating suppressed histories and giving voice to those silenced by official narratives. As Whitehead writes in the novel's closing pages, "Even in death the boys were trouble" (2019, p. 213)—their remains continue to demand acknowledgment and justice. Through its temporal fractures, the novel ensures that these demands cannot be buried or forgotten.

الخلاصة

في رواية "أولاد النيكل"، يُمثل الانكسار الزمني استراتيجيةً شكليةً فعّالة للمحاسبة التاريخية لإرث أمريكا من العنف العنصري. فمن خلال تعطيل التسلسل الزمني الخطي، يكشف وايتهيد كيف تستمر صدمة العنصرية المؤسساتية عبر الأجيال، متحديةً بذلك السرديات التقليدية للتقدم والانغلاق. يتجاوز هذا النهج التجريبي الأسلوبي المحض ليخدم غرضًا سياسيًا وأخلاقيًا محددًا: استعادة التواريخ المكبوتة ومواجهة تأثيرها المستمر.

إن تجاور الرواية بين أطر زمنية مختلفة - تجارب إلوود في نيكل في ستينيات القرن الماضي وحفر مقبرة المدرسة السرية في العقد الثاني من القرن الحادي والعشرين - يخلق ما يُطلق عليه الباحث الأدبي مايكل روثبرغ (٢٠٠٩) "ذاكرة متعددة الاتجاهات"، تربط لحظات تاريخية مختلفة للكشف عن أنماط العنف والمقاومة. يُحاكي هذا الهيكل الزمني عملية الاستعادة التاريخية نفسها - انغلاق سردي مُجزأ وغير مكتمل ومقاوم. من خلال تصويرها لمثالية إلوود كورتيس في تناقض صارخ مع براغماتية تيرنر، تدرس الرواية استجابات مختلفة للقمع العنصري دون تفضيل أيٍّ من النهجين. يشير الكشف عن تبني تيرنر لهوية إلوود إلى أن البقاء قد يتطلب توليفة من هذه المنظورات - اعتراف بالظلم مقرونًا بتكيف استراتيجي. يمثل هذا التحول السردي أعمق شرخ زمني في الرواية، حيث ينهار التمييز بين الشخصيات والأطر الزمنية بطريقة تتحدى الفهم التقليدي للهوية والزمانية. يختلف نهج وايتهيد للشرخ الزمني عن التقنيات المماثلة في أدب ما بعد الحداثة من خلال الحفاظ على توجه أخلاقي واضح نحو التعافي التاريخي والعدالة، في حين أن التشرذم ما بعد الحداثي غالبًا ما يخدم أغراضًا جمالية في المقام الأول، فإن الاضطرابات الزمنية لوايتهيد تتوافق مباشرة مع لحظات الصمت والتعافي التاريخي.

يتماشى هذا النهج مع ما حددته الباحثة الأدبية يوغيتا غويال (٢٠١٩) باعتباره اتجاهًا أوسع في الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي المعاصر: استخدام الابتكار الشكلي لمعالجة الصدمات التاريخية مع تجنب كل من العاطفية والسخرية من خلال توضيح كيفية عمل الكسر الزمني في "فتيان النيكل"، تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهمنا لكيفية تفاعل الأدب المعاصر مع الصدمات التاريخية.

تُظهر استراتيجيات وايتهيد السردية كيف يمكن للشكل أن يجسد المحتوى التاريخي - كيف يمكن لبنية السرد أن تعكس اضطرابات الصدمة وعملية التعافي. يقترح هذا النهج إمكانيات جديدة لتحليل كيفية مشاركة الأدب فيما يسميه المؤرخ ميشيل رولف تروبو (١٩٩٥) "إنتاج التاريخ" - ليس مجرد تمثيل الماضي ولكن التدخل بنشاط في كيفية تذكره وفهمه من خلال توضيح كيفية عمل الكسر الزمني في "فتيان النيكل"، تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهمنا لكيفية تفاعل الأدب المعاصر مع الصدمات.

وأخيرًا، تُظهر "فتيان النيكل" قدرة الأدب على المساهمة في الحساب التاريخي من خلال التنقيب عن التواريخ المكبوتة وإعطاء صوت لأولئك الذين أسكتتهم الروايات الرسمية. كما كتب وايتهيد في الصفحات الختامية من الرواية: "حتى في الموت، كان الأولاد مصدر متاعب" (٢٠١٩، ص ٢١٣) - لا تزال رفاتهم تطالب بالاعتراف والعدالة. ومن خلال انكساراتها الزمنية، تضمن الرواية عدم دفن هذه المطالب أو نسيانها.

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