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Separate and Unequal: The Traumatic Consequences of American Hostipitality Based on Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

Abstract: Within its near century-long presence, the Jim Crow era significantly stained American history, politics, and society. Through conditioned freedom and under the false guise of “separate equality” came mistreatment, hostility, and racial oppression of African Americans who, forced to a life in the margins, were neither invited nor accepted as part of the culture. The present paper aims to examine the repercussions of American hostipitality in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, delving into racial segregation and foregrounding its hostile and marginalizing nature. The analysis is conducted through the postcolonial lens of the subaltern social positioning of African Americans, supplemented by trauma theory as the novel, at its core, reflects a traumatic coming of age. African American subalternity is reflected in characters' erasure within the borders of society, which, in turn, is solidified in their internalized racism and, subsequently, racial trauma. Prisoned in their subalternity and treated as “the Other,” less valuable second-class citizens, the novel foregrounds the notion that the Jim Crow stereotype of intellectually inferior, idle, and unhygienic black Americans, led to the minority's oppressive dehumanization, especially visible through institutional racism – its executed expansion of racial disparity and psychological abuse.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, racism, trauma, subaltern, postcolonialism, African American literature

Introduction

The complex history of the United States has been marked by many experiences of power imbalance directed at marginalized groups. White supremacist exclusion of minorities may be traced back to as early as the colonial period. Yet, while the historical treatment of Native Americans easily falls under the category of colonial persecution, the no less harrowing experiences of African Americans have become a borderline case of colonialism and postcolonialism, with critics opting for an ambiguous attitude toward its applicability to the minority, for

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with neither a territorial identity nor the usual element of physical separation from the metropolitan centre, black America cannot strictly be said to fit any standard model of the colonial or postcolonial experience. (Macleod 51)

Nevertheless, as cultural identity is “not an essence” but heavily depends on its positioning within the social structures and power relations, that of African Americans is reminiscent of colonial experiences. Given their treatment and subaltern positioning within society, African American culture may be conceptualized as postcolonial despite its apparent lack of lost territorial identity. Macleod points out that not only is the inclusion of African Americans in the postcolonial discourse epistemologically valid, but more importantly, it is politically necessary (53). Historically, African Americans have faced imperialist struggles analogous to the colonial experiences through exile from their homeland, social marginality, denial of their right to maintain their culture and language, and even their resistance to white supremacy embodied in their emancipatory actions. Furthermore, their experiences are often marked with what Frantz Fanon called “the psychopathology of the colonized,” manifesting itself in feelings of self-hatred, fear, and rage originating from internalized inferiority (55–56). In turn, African American colonial experience started with their enforced relocation and enslavement, and, consequently, their postcolonial experience revealed itself in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, i.e., their struggles for equality during racial segregation.

Following slavery, the Jim Crow era proved to be yet another blemish on America’s history of race relations. The period widely limited African Americans’ right to complete freedom and violently marginalized the minority. Collectively and individually perceived as the other, the less worthy in the eye of the hegemonic and dominant white culture, the Jim Crow laws enforced African Americans’ inferior social standing and, in turn, took a psychologically detrimental toll on their identity, scarring it with trauma and internalized racism.

The *Separate but Equal* doctrine, which essentially legalized the segregation of African Americans on a national level, resonates with the premise of Derrida’s concept of *hostipitality*, wherein, paradoxically, the notions of hospitality and hostility fuse. At its core, as there is an inherent tension and power imbalance within the act of welcome itself, neologism challenges idealized notions of unconditional welcome and reveals the potential for exploitation and violence (Derrida). The premise of the doctrine assumed conditional freedom of African Americans based on the presumption that although the facilities were separate for each race, they remained equal. Yet, essentially, instead of welcoming formerly enslaved people as rightful citizens of the country, white Americans chose to maintain hostility and, under the pretense of “separate equality,” continued to further erase them from society.

Jerrold Packard in *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* considers it “the most catastrophic decision in American judicial history,” given that the promise of equality within the frame of separation was never kept, as the amenities designated for African Americans were incomparably worse than those intended for white Americans (73). Underfunded and overcrowded,

the facilities failed to provide the same resources and opportunities that white Americans had unlimited access to. African Americans were, thus, further marginalized and oppressed, as the dominant part of society refused to acknowledge their right to citizenship, perpetuating the belief that America is a white man's country. To quote Packard, "fundamental to Jim Crow was the principle that any white person was superior to every black person, and conversely, that any black person was inferior to every white person" (87). The laws imposed segregation in every area of African American lives in the South, from entertainment amenities to essential ones, such as hospitals or cemeteries. With separate entrances, staircases, restrooms, and drinking fountains, African Americans were made to feel inferior and subjected to white Americans on the most fundamental level. Nevertheless, beyond the oppressive laws, one of the most insidious manifestations of racial injustice was the widespread abuse - physical, emotional, and psychological - inflicted on black individuals. This abuse, rooted in deep-seated racism, extended from everyday humiliations to brutal acts of violence, often carried out with impunity.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* sheds light on these harsh realities. Inspired by the uncovered horrors that took place at the Dozier School for Boys in Florida, the novel captures the story of two African American boys, Elwood Curtis and Jack Turner, and their time spent at the titular Nickel Academy. Their experiences of trauma, racism, and subalternity reflect the tragic consequences of American hospitality.

Traumatic Coming of Age

Thematically, the novel depicts a traumatic coming of age due to sustained racial abuse and enforced dehumanized inferiority. As Michelle Balaev remarks, "the trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people" as "an 'every-person' figure," thereby both protagonists are employed as an extension of collective racial suffering, foregrounding the minority's psychological torments rooted in permeating idea of black inferiority and its subsequent systemic marginalization (155).

For trauma fiction, the plain narrative devices remain insufficient in depicting the chaos, confusion, and unease the traumatized must tackle; therefore, authors expand their boundaries to accurately portray trauma (A. Whitehead 82). Trauma is described as "anti-narrative," and placing it within the bounds of conventional narration is unethical, as it disregards the severity of experiences (Luckhurst 79–81). Trauma in *The Nickel Boys* is, thus, embedded into the novel's structure, as Colson Whitehead splits the narrative into two timelines, shifting the story between the past and the present to emphasize the traumatic consequences of the sustained abuse.

The first narrative timeline focuses its plot on Elwood Curtis' experiences. Elwood is a bright, idealistic teenager growing up in 1960s Tallahassee, Florida. His life takes a sharp turn when he is wrongfully convicted of a minor crime and sent to Nickel Academy, a corrupt reform school that is anything but rehabilitative. At Nickel, Elwood becomes a witness to and a victim of brutal physical and psychological abuse. As he physically steps into the building, the memories of his

previous life and aspirations lose merit. Becoming not a student, but a convict in the notorious institution involuntarily accelerates his coming of age, traumatizing him, as “[h]e’d started the day in his own life and ended it here” (C. Whitehead 52). The first night he spends at the school already puts him in distress, waking him from his sleep;

Elwood was asleep when a different roar commenced. It came from outside, a rush and a whoosh without variation. Forbidding and mechanical and granting no clue to its origin. He didn’t know which book he’d picked it up from, but the word came to him: *torrential*. (52)

Through the description of Elwood’s abrupt awakening, Colson Whitehead reveals the imminent trauma the boy will endure, employing Luckhurst’s “delayed decoding,” wherein the readers are gradually exposed to an underlying trauma through the tips of seemingly trivial matters (92). Unaware of the sound’s traumatizing origin and defining it as “torrential,” Elwood unknowingly foresees his impending psychological and physical suffering. The “torrential” sound Elwood hears on his first night at Nickel materializes later as an industrial fan, used to muffle the students’ cries of pain as they endure their punishment of being whipped by a leather strap.

The said (un)foreseen trauma is prompted by his strong sense of righteousness and morals as he intervenes to defend a younger colleague from bullying and sexual abuse. Paradoxically, however, his altruism is not recognized nor, for that matter, praised but becomes the cause of the corporal punishment he is forced to endure. Along with the bullies and the victim, he is taken to the White House—a benign-looking shed proving to be a chamber of torture.

The roar began: an even gale. Elwood’s chair vibrated with energy. He couldn’t figure out what it was—some sort of machine—but it was loud enough to cover Black Mike’s screams and the smack of the strap on his body. ... Then it was Elwood’s time. ... the gigantic industrial fan that was the source of the roaring, the sound that traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed. ... Elwood held on to the top of the bed and bit into the pillow but he passed out before they were done. (C. Whitehead 66–67)

Essentially, Elwood and his peers are forced to endure a physical assault and racial violence of high magnitude, leading them to lose consciousness in a state of utter agony. Additionally, the White House itself is also employed as a form of delayed decoding of trauma, initially having its tormenting, sadistic nature obscured by the innocent-looking exterior. Echoing Luckhurst, the product of Whitehead’s practice is the feeling of unease, as the plot reveals the signs of trauma prematurely, preventing the linear causative deduction of trauma’s roots, which in turn further foregrounds its effect, as the signs are only inferred belatedly.

According to Freud, traumatic memory is hidden as a “tormenting secret” within the unconscious in an intact state, awaiting the implicit ascend to the conscious mind, as one’s traumatic memories tend to be forgotten only to belatedly re-emerge obsessively and repetitively (57).

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead manifests the concept through the employment of imagery and recurring auditory triggers—keys, footsteps, leather slap—as Elwood’s trauma from the event re-emerges from within his subconsciousness and repeats, torturing him at the least expected moments.

One afternoon Elwood was half dozing when the noise paralyzed him—the keys like a wind chime. Spencer was on the ward to see the doctor. Elwood waited for the sound of the leather strap scraping the ceiling before it came down...Then the superintendent was gone and the sound of the radio commanded the room again. He sweat through to his sheets. (C. Whitehead 78)

Whitehead employs the imagery of jingling keys—comparing them to a wind chime—to depict the haunting nature of trauma that reverberates in Elwood’s psyche. The trigger catalyzes Elwood’s startle response, freezing abruptly at the sound of the principal’s arrival. Despite the apparent lack of motion, physically, his body is put into a survival state, as if it were a prey in action, awaiting and preparing for the materialized reiteration of the encounter. Belatedly, the violence he experienced at the hands of Nickel’s staff manifests through insomnia, as he is tormented by nightmares reconstructing the event.

The more routine his days, the more unruly his nights. He woke after midnight, when the dormitory was dead, startling at imagined sounds—footsteps at the threshold, leather slapping the ceiling. He squinted at the darkness—nothing. Then he was up for hours, in a spell, agitated by rickety thoughts and weakened by an ebbing of the spirit. (152–153)

Echoing Caruth, his obsessive search for any indication of forthcoming trauma recurrence manifests the haunting nature of trauma, as Elwood’s mind is “possessed by an image” of the suffering (*Trauma* 5).

Anne Whitehead observes that repetition is another Freudian plot device used to evoke trauma within the narrative (86). Repetition is reflective of trauma, as the traumatic event recurs constantly, disrupting the plot’s linear progression. For Colson Whitehead, the element that repeatedly resurfaces within Elwood’s mind is ‘the leather strap.’

The said strap, however, is not exclusive to Elwood’s and other black students’ torture. Whitehead employs the imagery, repeatedly mentioning it throughout the narrative, to comment on the inter- and trans-generational trauma of slavery, which still haunts African Americans. Upon their punishments in the White House, black students are reminded of the sadistic tool of torture used by white supremacists to maintain control over their slaves—whipping. Caruth understands intergenerational trauma as a contagious pathogen that infects those who were uninvolved with the traumatic event, forcing them to absorb the ancestral psychological suffering (*Unclaimed Experience* 24). Colson Whitehead presents the passing of intergenerational psychological wounds from the perspectival power imbalance, somewhat materializing it through the

eyes of the white school's staff. In turn, the image only further foregrounds the traumatic scars left on the slaves' and their descendants' psyche, forcing them to both physically and mentally reexperience the vicious racial abuse. It becomes poignantly apparent that the sustained abuse is not an individual experience, but a universal one woven into the fabric of American society, making racism an ever-present systemic problem.

Although it appears that Elwood survives the Nickel's horrors and reaches cynical adulthood, throughout the dichotomous narrative, readers unveil another protagonist—Elwood's best friend, Jack Turner.

He stumbled forward two steps and fell into the grass. Turner kept running. He asked himself later if he heard Elwood cry out or make any kind of sound but never did figure it out. He was running and there was only the rush and roil of blood in his head. (C. Whitehead 199)

In the absolute fight or flight to sustained psychological distress of seeing the death of his friend, Turner flees from the scene in an attempt to preserve his own life. In order to live, Turner is somewhat dehumanized and becomes prey to white hunters, forcing him to shut off his humanity. His trauma-induced survival mode reemerges in the threat of forthcoming death, making him rely on his primal instincts rather than emotions.

As Balaev explains, “silence is a rhetorical strategy” constructed through ellipses in order to not only mirror the unspeakable nature of trauma but also reveal the subsequent shift in the character's understanding of the world (162). Whitehead obscures Turner's survival within the narrative to manifest the emotional wound in response to the event. The following gaps in character expression center the narrative on the psychological impact of trauma and its consequences.

The said consequences of his flight leave the most tragic effect on Turner's psyche, ascending to his personality. Surviving the escape reflects on his still forging character, as, psychologically scarred, he decides to assume Elwood's identity “to honor his friend. To live for him” (200). Yet, the life he never had a chance to experience, the goals he never had an opportunity to achieve, and the unnecessary death he had to suffer all contribute to Turner's self-condemnation. As trauma renders him overwhelmed with guilt and depression, Turner cannot stop blaming himself for his friend's death, chastising himself for surviving in his stead. He does not see himself as Nickel's victim, but the sustained trauma forces him to perceive himself as the perpetrator, believing he is the cause of Elwood's demise. As Caruth remarks, “it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis,” Turner's trauma is laced with survivor's guilt (*Trauma* 9). The psychological anguish and guilt obsessively haunt his spirit, forcing him to impose a plethora of expectations on himself, trying to become “a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of” to atone for his death (C. Whitehead 202).

Hostipitality

Elwood and Turner's traumatic coming of age is prompted by a chain reaction of singular events, or punishments, executed through Nickel's racist practices. Upon the ever-present psychological abuse, the racist attitude the Nickel Academy enforces is that of the African Americans' worthlessness. According to Stokely and Hamilton, there are two forms of racism – individual and institutional,

[t]he first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. This type can be recorded by television cameras; it can frequently be observed in the process of commission. The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type. (4)

Within the narrative, Whitehead traces institutional racism's effects on African American minds, which reinforce the idea of their social insignificance and subservience to white Americans. The systemic discrimination materializes within the depicted academic institutions' attitude towards African Americans, complicit in fortifying their inferior social standing. Within the walls of the institution, black students are constantly reminded of their inferior position within the social hierarchy. The academy conditions them to dehumanize themselves, trivializing their worth, perceived as one of the least valuable coins, the titular nickel, essentially valueless to American society.

Derridean concept of hostipitality, which turns into hostility, also emerges within the practice of institutional racism in the novel. Although the school is supposed to reform both its white and black students, the institution employs double standards when it comes to assessing their performance and treatment, not only focusing more attention on black students' misconduct, but also, consequently, punishing them more severely. The institution—a supposed sanctuary for troubled boys— in reality, functions as a site of brutal discipline, racialized violence, and systemic abuse. This duality is central to Derrida's notion of hostipitality—the Nickel academy “remains master ... who defines the conditions of hospitality” and, essentially, welcomes in order to control, punishes in the name of care, and offers protection while enacting destruction (Derrida 4). Whitehead essentially comments on the paradoxical promise of equal reform of all juvenile offenders, which, in reality, amounted to race-conditioned brutality and erasure of black students' dignity. Additionally, by retaining the historically accurate name of the aforementioned torturous hut, ‘the White House,’ the author makes the extensivity of racial segregation taking place not only at the school but nationwide more apparent. Whitehead employs the imagery of the presidential residence, the pillar of American democracy and freedom, and contrasts it with racial violence and power abuse. Not only does the chamber of black students' torture represent the physical iteration of their sustained trauma, but its name also echoes the system's and, consequently, society's mockery of the lawfully promised ‘separate equality.’

The police are another institution which systematically fortifies the ‘conditioned welcome’ and embeds the idea of inferiority into African American sense of self.

The officer ... was a white man with a pistol so despite his dishevelment he sent a vibration. Along the street men watched from porches and smoked and gripped the railings as if afraid of falling overboard. The neighbors peeked through their windows for a view, connecting the scene to events from years before, when a boy or a man was taken away and he was not someone who lived across the street but kin. Brother, son. ... He handcuffed Elwood to a metal bar that ran behind the front seat and didn’t speak for two hundred and seventy-five miles. ... The officer told the white boys that they were sitting with a car thief and Billy laughed. (C. Whitehead 43–45)

Upon the arrest, the officer somewhat boasts his dominant social standing, intimidating everyone by showing that he is the one who has the upper hand and holds power, reminding the boy of his inferiority by refusing to acknowledge his presence and dehumanizes him by assuming his culpability—executing the role of a master who “must be assured of his sovereignty over the space and goods” and oversees the conditioned welcome enacting hostility (Derrida 14). Compared to the other detained teenagers, Elwood is forced to sustain mockery for the crime he is believed to have committed. Whitehead essentially unravels the fact that the ‘separate but equal’ treatment of African Americans is not the only notion granted under condition, but so is the entire premise of black freedom. Elwood here serves as an everyman character, and his detention is seen as a rather universal experience, as when his neighbors watch him step into the car, the image becomes all too familiar, proving the individual tragedies behind the mass incarceration of African Americans.

Across the nation, connivance becomes apparent as the systemic abuse by both Nickel and the police proves widely allowed, unsupervised by the government or external organizations. Furthermore, “the way Turner saw it ... it was people” who complicitly agreed to pretend not to see the school’s racial barbarity (C. Whitehead 103). Yet, institutional racism is not the sole lens through which Whitehead reflects on hostipitality; through his protagonists, the author depicts two vastly different views on the imposed hostility disguised as supposed welcomeness.

Initially, while Elwood and his attitude serve as a comment on playing the role of a guest, Turner, a foil to Elwood’s character, is an extension of the role of an intruder. Prior to his detention, Elwood gives into the societal ‘invitation’ following the rules set out by the host—the white majority. “The serious young lad heaving his freight of the world’s knowledge,” thoroughly aware of education’s significance in amelioration of black living standards, from an early age, he starts to dedicate his time and efforts to his scholarly duties, ambitiously dreaming of becoming a university graduate in the hopes of not only improving his future, but his entire community’s living prospects—which manifests a firm belief in constructing meritocratic black prosperity and, thus, society’s hospitality (14). Although he is aware of black Americans’ struggles, idealizes Martin Luther King Jr, and partakes in civil rights protests, his actions never exceed the rules of the

conditioned societal welcome; that is, until he is wrongfully detained for alleged carjacking and sent to Nickel. Once at Nickel, he becomes an intruder, or an enemy, undermining the host's—school's—authority by stepping out to defend a colleague or trying to uncover the institution's embezzlement practices instead of staying a subservient and quiet guest, which, ultimately, leads to his demise—"Anyone who encroaches ... on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 53–55).

Turner, on the other hand, starts off as an intruder within the system, who is unable to adhere to the rules and, essentially, due to a teenaged emotional outburst, ends up at Nickel Academy. There, however—again, a foil to Elwood's idealism—Turner's coping mechanism to sustain Nickel's trauma is a cynical lack of attachment and numbness to the reality he is forced to face. In turn, he begins to play the role of a guest, conscious of the fact that he will not "be treated with hostility so long as he behaves in a peaceable manner in the place he happens to be" (Derrida 5). Unlike Elwood, Turner does not pay attention to a righteous code of ethics nor the belief in black meritocracy but instead pragmatically conforms to Nickel's unsaid conditions—"Another one of these dummies ... You're getting along. Ain't had trouble since that one time. They going to take you out back, bury your ass, then they take me out back, too. The fuck is wrong with you?" (C. Whitehead 172). Turner is the realist—he understands from the outset that hospitality is invariably laced with hostility and that institutions exist to control, rather than protect, which explains his skepticism and pragmatism. Ultimately, it is he who survives precisely because he recognizes from the start that hospitality inherently carries a threat.

African American Subalternity

Not recognized as an integral part of the society but merely as guests, African Americans' experiences are reminiscent of the colonial power imbalance, placing them on the subaltern social standing, oppressed due to the color of their skin. According to Antonio Gramsci, the term 'subaltern' as such refers to lower social classes that "are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class," socially and politically inferior to the power-holding majority (21). The postcolonial understanding of the concept additionally focuses on the experiences of the previously colonized groups, which are rendered marginalized, socio-economically outside of the hegemonic power structures and discourses, as "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* 287). The subaltern 'cannot speak' because their perspectives are silenced and unacknowledged by the oppressing majority.

Connected to the concept of subaltern is the postcolonial interpretation of 'the Other,' which analyzes how the colonizing groups constructed the prevalent identities of the colonized, perceiving them through pervasive stereotypes as different and consequentially inferior to white men (Thomas-Olalade and Velho 33). The subaltern and their struggles are, thus, invisible to the dominant white eye, only existing within the frames of immortalized stereotypes, heavily dependent on their social positioning, and unable to claim neither their history nor identity. Hence, when it comes to African Americans, their collective suffering is rooted in the insidious trauma

of racism, which, as Craps foregrounds, is historically specific but does not refer to a particular traumatic experience, but rather the structural trauma of minority's oppression (32)².

As Anne Whitehead observes, postcolonial and trauma fiction overlap, for both delve into the processes of memory recovery and acknowledge the repressed experiences (82). Therefore, Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* may be classified on the border of both genres, as the novel depicts the postcolonial perspective of racial segregation while simultaneously discussing its trauma and public remembering.

The essential thing Whitehead does to reveal the polyphony of silenced subaltern voices, is simply engage and pay respect to the real story and its victims—the uncovered burial ground of the Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida from 2014. In a 2019 interview he admitted that the injustices surrounding the institution made him morally compelled to articulate the suppressed perspectives—“the fact that no one's ever held accountable, no one ever goes to jail ... made me feel very raw, and I think that allowed the story of Dozier to sort of ... settle in me. It was another example of just people who are powerless, people who have no defenses being abused by an institution. And the guilty go free, and the innocent suffer” (C. Whitehead in Davies). The tone of uncovering repressed narratives is set on the very first page of the book through the metaphor of a ‘secret graveyard,’ which in reality was a place of slaughter ground and mass execution of the students;

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. ... All the boys knew about that rotten spot. It took a student from the University of South Florida to bring it to the rest of the world, decades after the first boy was tied up in a potato sack and dumped there. (C. Whitehead 1)

Whitehead deliberately starts his narrative with the burial site—it is as if the story itself remained buried with its victims. The loaded silence is not only the result of suppressing the subaltern, but it is also caused by the collective trauma of racial abuse and the pervasive death at the hands of school staff, exemplifying what Felman and Laub believe is a crisis of witnessing, as the experience of enforced racial inferiority at Nickel was the type of “event that produced no witnesses” (80). Over the years, the physical and psychological suffering remained disguised, as neither the murdered victims nor the living survivors could convey the institution's cruelty. Additionally, the trauma endured by the students was a medium of Nickel's prevention of truth emergence. Finally, “by virtue of the fact that the subaltern's inability to speak is predicated

2 Maria Root, who coined the term insidious trauma in *Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality*, characterizes it as an experience of oppression not through overt physical abuse, but psychological one, affecting one's identity. Although her definition initially referred to female experiences of existing in patriarchy and rape culture, its premise is reflective of any type of oppression, including racial persecution.

upon an attempt to speak, to which no appropriate response is proffered”—for decades, no one was willing to listen and ‘dig’ for the truth (Spivak, *Responsibility* 62).

Structurally, Whitehead depicts the silence by splitting the narrative into two timelines—the early 1960s at Nickel and contemporary times of ‘Elwood’s adulthood.’ As stated before, within the dichotomy, Whitehead obscures another protagonist—the voice which survives to tell the story, Turner’s.

Assuming Elwood’s identity, the psychologically wounding nature of Turner’s experiences is silenced between the narrative timelines. His traumatic silence, for decades, renders him unable to express the pain, as he disguises himself in an attempt to shield his soul from the borne psychological distress. The catalyst to break Turner’s concealment (and, in consequence, involuntary reticence) is the discovery of unmarked graves on Nickel’s grounds and their subsequent exhumation, “he knew he’d have to return. The clutch of cedars over the TV reporter’s shoulder brought back the heat on his skin ... It wasn’t far off at all. Never will be” (C. Whitehead 6). It is as if, on the one hand, he was given a chance to ‘speak’—as if someone was willing to ‘respond’ to his accounts of Nickel atrocities; and on the other, as if someone ‘unburied’ his own secret, willing to recover the erased perspective, for, as he describes, “Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, ‘I’m going to take a stand,’ and the world remains silent” (205).

The thought of Elwood’s body being buried in the secret graveyard prompts him to reveal his side of the story and real name.

“I used to live there,” Turner said. His tone. “Elwood?” Like testing the ice to see if it’d bear her weight. “I was at Nickel. That’s the place. I told you I was in juvie, but I never said the name.” “Elwood. Come here,” she said. He sat on the couch. He hadn’t served his time, as he told her years ago, but ran. Then he told her the rest, including the story of his friend. “His name was Elwood,” Turner said. ... She took his head into her lap as he wept, running her thumb over that stray-cat notch in his ear. The scar she never noticed but was right in front of her. (202–203)

Recounting his experience and finding the voice to speak out on the endured atrocities, Turner undergoes a process of trauma’s ‘double wounding.’ Caruth marks double wounding as the psychological wound’s severity intensifying within its belated reemergence, for “an event ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). As Turner braves himself to tell his story, he relives the trauma surrounding the event, somewhat retraumatizing himself, as the experience revives not only within the frames of his consciousness but also rematerializes through his words, uttered for the first time. Nevertheless, catharsis came not only through tears but also the presence of someone who was willing to listen, offering him solace and braving him to embrace his true identity.

Identity-wise, crucial to the understanding of the African Americans’ subaltern positioning is W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness, in which;

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 8–9)

Essentially, African Americans must manage a dual and contradictory identity, being a part of the country that continuously detests them, and, due to the dominance of white culture, are forced to assume the racial expectations white America imposes. Black identities are, thus, involuntarily affected by white perceptions of the racial minority. Supplemental to Du Bois' idea is Frantz Fanon's concept of internalized racism, which asserts that under the white gaze, African Americans' sense of self is compressed to the existent racist conceptualization of the minority, as "the black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth" (65). Internalized racism is, thus, a consequence and a detrimentally harmful coping mechanism to the insidious trauma of racism and dehumanizing nature of subalternity.

Within the novel, Whitehead symbolically disguises the phenomenon in the two protagonists, illustrating the tension between internal identity and external perception. At its core, while Elwood manifests the idealistic notions of blackness and firmly believes in racial meritocracy—representing the black perspective; Turner and his cynicism serve as a reflection of the way white Americans perceive the racial minority—inferior, untrustworthy, dangerous—and throughout the narrative both protagonists are forced to learn of how this perception constrains black identities.

Elwood becomes aware of it while awaiting his execution—in the loss of hope, he comes to understand that he, echoing Du Bois, was "born with a veil," and thus, despite his efforts, he could never exist outside the fixed presumption of his race (8). His belief in meritocracy and higher imperatives was paradoxically a form of denial of the racist reality imposed and instilled in black Americans. Sardonicly, he parallels his confinement to Martin Luther King Jr.'s imprisonment, remarking on the empty platitudes of King's call for love and righteousness in the eye of immortalized black Americans' inferiority. He admits he cannot "make that leap of love," losing faith in King's preaching, crashing his ideals with the cynical reality of African American struggles, and ultimately understanding his own subservience (C. Whitehead 194).

Nevertheless, the most profound example of double consciousness is written into the cause for Turner's detention. Working for white men, he somewhat subconsciously adheres to the white majority's idea of African Americans, serving and appeasing them, until another black employee points out his enacted pretense.

This one night I was on my break and I go out for a cigarette behind the grill. ... He says to me, 'I see you out there, nigger, putting on a show. Why you always shucking and jiving for these white people? Ain't nobody ever teach you self-respect?' ... and he knows I'm not going to do anything. Because he's right in what he said. Next time I was on a shift, I don't know, I started doing it differently. Instead of joking with them, I was mean. ... End of the night, I'd been taunting this fucking peckerwood the whole game ... Next week I saw that guy's car in the parking lot and I threw a cinder block through the window and the cops picked me up. (92–93)

Upon the cast aspersions, Turner is made aware of his affiliation to white men, disrespectfully betraying his black community. Additionally, as he perceives himself “through the eyes of others,” the attack on his pride somewhat uncovers his suppressed idea of black submission to the dominant white majority, which, unknowingly at the time, reinforced the stereotype of intellectual inferiority (DuBois 8–9). Paradoxically, however, upon his fit of rage and subsequently inflicted self-hatred, Turner internalizes the other racist perception of black Americans as aggressive and savage threats to the dominant society.

Conclusions

The term “Jim Crow” originated from one of the first blackface minstrel shows performed by Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, who capitalized off the caricatured presentation of African American struggles of enslavement. The ill-famed character surreptitiously wove itself into the fabric of American society, catalyzing racial segregation—a period of continuous race-conditioned violence and marginalization. Although African Americans were promised “separate equality,” wherein they would be provided with the same amenities and opportunities as white Americans, the state of said “equality” was marked by profound disparities, which only further excluded them from society.

As Derrida denotes, the word ‘hospitality’ “carries its contradiction incorporated into it”—hostility (1). An essential paradox is inscribed into its notion wherein the host must assert their dominance over their guests to maintain control and remain “master in [their] own home” (7). Fundamentally, therefore, the host/guest relationship is marked by a power imbalance, and the inherent trait to a position of a guest is inferiority, if not submissiveness, to established rules and masters. American history-wise, within “separate but equal” doctrine, black Americans were, thus, not recognized as an inherent part of the society, but rather solely invited into it as its guests and oftentimes perceived as intruders—‘an open welcome to the Other, but a limited and regulated welcome designed to protect myself and what is mine and welcome the Other only to the extent that these things are not threatened’ (Fagan in Kakoliris 34).

Prisoned in their subaltern social positioning and treated as “the Other,” the less valuable second-class citizens, the stereotypes of intellectually inferior, idle, and unhygienic, or aggressive and savage black Americans led to the minority’s oppressive dehumanization, especially visible through institutional racism – its executed expansion of racial disparity and psychological abuse.

To quote Balaev, trauma “inform[s] the new perceptions of the self and the world,” tragically and irreversibly scarring one’s identity (150). In *The Nickel Boys*, through both protagonists’ racially caused psychological suffering, Whitehead offers a poignant insight into the dehumanized psyche, succumbing to the psychologically detrimental feelings of invisibility within societal frameworks, self-inadequacy to the dominant culture, and internalized racist self-hatred weighing in on their identities.

As Sharp remarks, “In many subtle yet important ways, the traumatic experiences of segregation continue to inform the way race is discussed and experienced in the twenty-first century” (5). Indirect in its nature, contemporary racism takes the form of microaggressions by which African Americans are degraded, yet again, to an inferior standing in the social hierarchy. Similar to their invisibility in the previous century, a significant number of African Americans are still forced to live within the margins of society, continuing the vicious cycle of poverty and incrimination.

While it’s been decades since the civil rights movement dismantled racial segregation, African American presence in society still hinders on condition—as exemplified by imprisonment rates, police brutality, or, most recently, scaling back equality programs. Perhaps slightly in platitudes, but the only remedy to America’s racist colorblindness would be, in turn, a shift to equal and vibrant color visibility.

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