

Tribhuvan University

Making and Remaking of Self in Racial Landscape in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English

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Kirtipur, Kathmandu

September 2025

Letter of Recommendation

This research, entitled “Making and Remaking of Self in Racial Landscape in Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*,” has been completed under my supervision by Awadhesh Kumar Panday as part of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English degree. I recommend that an external examiner review this research.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Making and Remaking of Self in Racial Landscape in Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*,” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, by Awadhesh Kumar Panday, has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Mr. Laxman Bhatta, Assistant Professor of English at the Central Department of English, for making this work possible. His intellectual guidance, critical comments, and genuine suggestions carried me through the entire stages of writing the paper.

I would also like to sincerely thank Prof. Dr. Dhruba Bahadur Karki, Head of the Central Department of English, for approving this thesis in its current form. I am grateful for his valuable suggestions and guidance. I also want to express my sincere gratitude to my teachers and colleagues who motivated and supported me in preparing this thesis.

Finally, I would wholeheartedly thank my parents for letting me through all the difficulties. I appreciated their guidance, continuous support, and understanding throughout the research and writing process for my project. It is your prayer that has sustained me this far.

September 2025

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Abstract

This thesis explores identity while making and remaking the self in the racial landscape in Colson Whitehead's The Nickel Boys from a poststructuralist perspective. The novel encapsulates the story of Elwood Curtis, a black American individual, who stands in the fundamental grammar of 'acting right.' Despite his vehement effort in signifying his existence, he encounters brutality in American society in the beginning and at the Nickel Academy at the end. At last, he becomes the victim of white dominance and institutional brutality. In this connection, this research explores three distinct questions: What does the novel aspire to represent while showing the brutality of the Nickel Academy? Why does the protagonist change his philosophy in understanding his black identity? How does Elwood shape his identity amid such hardship, and how does he get involved in a perpetual process of 'becoming'? To answer these questions, this research employs a post-structural perspective, primarily focusing on Foucault's notion of dispositif (apparatus). It also incorporates Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s understanding of race and racism to scrutinize the racialized discourse. It claims that the identity is involved in a perpetual course of 'becoming,' though the discursive regime persistently universalizes one's identity coercively. The institutional forces impose authority in dictating the fate of the individual based on the prejudices they incorporate. The research concludes that The Nickel Boys depicts the racial discourse as an institutionalized system with coercive force, which problematizes the identity of Black Americans and demands their recognition.

Keywords: Brutality, Discourse, Power, Recognition, and Resistance

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) discloses the possibility of creating and recreating the identity of black people through a constant struggle in racialized discourse. Since the formal and informal institutions are always the supporting elements that perpetuate the regime of white dominance, it is through the performative acts that the colored people create their identity. Until and unless black people realize the institutional coercion, they are incapable of resuming their identity and will remain in the regime of racism created by white discourse. In this context, *The Nickel Boys* urges black people in performativity, creating their identity and challenging the social disposition.

The Nickel Boys, set in the 1960s in Tallahassee, reflects the historical events of American academic and institutional brutality that institutionalized racism. In other words, the novel does not merely embrace a fictional entity that embodies a speculative and imaginative junction of the writer's mind, but also employs real happenstances that dispersed horror in American society. As Aminatta Forna informs, "According to Whitehead's acknowledgments page, *The Nickel Boys* was inspired by the true story of the Arthur G Dozier School for Boys in the small panhandle town of Marianna in Florida" (2). Moreover, she notes that, "After numerous reports and finally an investigation, including the excavation of a number of unmarked graves by a team of archaeology students in 2012, NPR [News agency] reported that some 81 boys had died there. Dozier only closed its doors in 2011, and many of its former inmates are still only in their 60s" (2). In this context, the Nickel Academy in the novel is a replica of the real world that encompasses similar brutality against the students, especially Black students, in which Elwood Curtis, the protagonist of the novel, becomes the victim without committing crimes. Whitehead's attempt in transcribing the history has crucial meaning even in the recent world because as Tim

Adams contends, “Colson Whitehead’s book is not a polemic, but in presenting the unconscionable history of this particular institution, keeping boys in solitary confinement or even burying them “out the back”, he once again builds an allegorical history that resonates in the present” (3). In this sense, *The Nickel Boys* marks a historical presence and works as an apparatus through which the underbelly of American society is ignited.

Similar to historical memory, the novel shifts back and forth in its plot structure. It begins in the present, where archaeology students from the University of South Florida bring forth the disturbing fact: “decades after the first boy was tied up in potato sacks and dumped there” (4), about Nickel Academy as they excavate the school’s cemetery for months. This event prompts the novel to reveal the history of the Academy, which served as a formal junction embodying social discourses formed by both the whites and the blacks victimized by this discursive dissemination. The school was a collage of horrors because “the Nickel you could see going in and then the Nickel you couldn’t see coming out” (4). The students endured brutal treatment, like being caged in a room, left foodless; they were abused, and if they refused to obey or violated the rules of the Academy, they were sentenced to death. In fact, “Nickel Boys were cheaper than a dime-a-dance, and you got more for your money, or so they used to say” (4). As the reality of the school is revealed, the novel shifts back to the present and discusses the boys who were rescued by the government. Dealing with the present situation, the novel exposes, “The boys were old men now, with wives and ex-wives and children they didn’t talk to, with wary grandchildren who were brought around sometimes and those whom they were prevented from seeing. They had managed to scrape up a life after leaving Nickel or had never fit in at all with normal people” (5). The story gradually unravels as the ex-Nickel Boys start

narrating the events.

The major character of the novel, Elwood Curtis, becomes more prominent as the story takes a serious turn in foreshadowing his life and bitter experience at the Academy. Elwood, a bright and optimistic African American teenager deeply influenced by Martin Luther King Jr.'s teachings and the Civil Rights Movement, believes that “he can earn enough from his after-school work at the tobacconists to make college. He pores over *Life* in the magazine rack and imagines himself a proper part of it” (Adams 2). His life turns upside down as he is caught by the police for an offensive act, stealing a car, leading him to the Nickel Academy as a punishment. After being unfairly sentenced to a juvenile reformatory institution, he encounters the harsh realities of racism and abuse. The Nickel Academy ostensibly aims to rehabilitate delinquent boys, but in truth, it embodies systemic racism and cruelty. Indeed, the Academy engrosses with brutality that the “splatter on the walls where the fan had whipped up blood in its gusting” (67). Even in such an atmosphere, Elwood advocates for Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech, hoping to improve black people’s position, though, as Aminatta Forna puts it, “Nickel is a microcosm of a corrupt world, in which the rule of law is meaningless and the real laws are unwritten” (3). As Elwood relentlessly voices for black rights and a sense of dignity, he becomes the target of the academy. When he realizes that the school is planning for his death, he, along with his friend Turner, plots to escape. In doing so, Elwood is shot dead, and Turner succeeds in making a run for it. Ultimately, Turner erases his history and takes Elwood’s identity, which he reveals in the present when the academy's brutality is exposed through archaeology students' excavation.

Many critics have read and written about Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* from multiple perspectives. They have shed light on the variegated spectrum, which helps

unfold the hidden layers of meaning. For instance, Amani Moses in her article “An Analysis of *The Nickel Boys*,” mentions the key ideas of the novel in the following ways:

Since the book takes place largely during the 1960s, a central tenet is social activism with Martin Luther King Jr. being quoted several times throughout the text. One element of positive deviance is seen in Elwood’s high school days, before being sent to Nickel, where he attends a protest urging the local theater to open its seats to the Black community in 1963. (1)

Moses observes the novel from the perspective of deviance and distinguishes between positive and negative deviance. For her, the novel articulates historical backdrops that help readers understand the black movement and its aspirations in the text. Indeed, she points out the protagonist’s association with black activists like King; nevertheless, she fails to ignite the movement's impact in forming the protagonist's identity.

Significantly departing from Moses’s argument and foregrounding the theme of trauma of the characters, You Juanzhi mentions, “Colson Whitehead’s novels always run through the theme of trauma, describing the traumatic experience of blacks and guiding the blacks to the path of healing” (70). Juanzhi further emphasizes, “Unlike other African American writers, his novels highlight confronting and deconstructing the distortion of the official history of the persecution of black people” (70). For Juanzhi, Colson’s writing embarks on the psychological domain of character, depicting the black way of experiencing life as the antidote for black people in racialized white discourse. In this sense, the novel is not an exception that holds the aspiration of black people who are healed through the impeachment of blacks. Against these backdrops, she points out:

Whitehead's realistic description of the trauma of American society is not only to call attention to special groups of black people but also to convey the necessity of building a world of racial equality. *The Nickel Boys* reflects his profound reflection on the current situation in the United States and also expresses his political appeal of realizing true ethnic equality. (70)

Juanzhi's observation discloses the thematic portion of the novel and shows how Whitehead deals with contemporary social inequality in the United States. In its essence, Juanzhi states that *The Nickel Boys* is a projection of Americans with traumatic wounds that have created social stratification, leading to an asymmetric division of power between blacks and whites. Undoubtedly, Juanzhi's evaluation is right in pointing out the social visualization of the American world where the dichotomy between blacks and whites prevails. However, the point is that while depicting such a society, what Whitehead aspires to attain, and why he projects such a society, is more significant to realize than just acknowledging the fact. Yet, importantly, her analysis paves the way for the further investigation of blacks' identity.

Close to Juanzhi's examination, in the article "Traumatic Elements of Oppressed of Oppressed Black Americans: Microaggression in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*," Mehvish Bashir et. al. analyze different strategies that black people used to adopt to handle the traumatic practices. In this connection, they explicitly reflect, "Whitehead presents the attitude of white Americans against black Americans by describing that Whitehead delineates the character who is thrown to the nickel academy by the misconception of white people that causes the traumatic situation for the protagonist Elwood Curtis, a black African American teenager" (708). Bashir et. al. point out that the novel explores the traumatic situation of a teenage protagonist in

American society where blacks are penalized by the white dominant system. For them, the novel does not merely show how white dominates black but also ignites the perpetual cycle of implicit torture that distorts reality through traumatic wounds.

In a similar light, Hira Ali explores the politics of racism and its consequences in the article “Race and Its Repercussions: An Intersectional Analysis of Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*.” Observing these faculties, he contends:

Whitehead succeeds in showing how far the idea of race has evolved by showing two different generations of blacks who are trying to make sense of the system that governs them. However, the tragedy lies in the fact that, on the one hand, several bodies are being dug up, which are emblematic of a violent past, and on the other hand, there are people like Floyd and Martin who die every day facing the same fate as that of the Nickel boys. (48)

Ali forecloses the transformed face of racial discourse and the nature of race in itself in the social milieu. Distinguishing the conventional racial system from the evolved system of racism, Ali underscores the inevitable repercussions of racial forms that rupture the present and victimize the innocent.

In doing so, Ali captures the magnetic pull of the novel, which gravitates to the spectrum of racism regardless of time or any particular timeframe. In the same domain, Adelaide Strickland examines 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. In doing so, Strickland asserts:

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. (72)

For Strickland, the novel is an artifact or a manuscript that transcribes the living history of black people and their days of suffering. In this sense, Whitehead’s work of art is not merely a fictional projection of racial discourse in American society but also a sacred document that preaches the untold history of the brutality of whites over blacks. The novel, in this sense, is a bulk of historical evidence, depicting the cruelty of whites in different forms of black lives. Contrarily, Roberto Ferreira Junior claims that *The Nickel Boys* reveals another scandal: the persistent necropolitical nature of the United States’ incarceration system in the article “From slavery to prison: necropolitics and the (neo)slave narrative in Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*.” Roberto argues that “the palimpsest structure of the novel as it juxtaposes the prison novel with the (neo)slave narrative eventually creates a precise illustration of Mbembe’s critique of modern democracies as postulated in his concept of necropolitics” (294). For Roberto, the novel is not merely the depiction of racial domination but also a political failure of the governmental system, like a democracy that ostracizes people of color. In other words, Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* is a rejection of a political system that not only fails to incorporate colored people but also perpetuates the color dichotomy and domination.

Apart from other researchers, Paula Martín-Salván examines *The Nickel Boys* through the prism of the tension between concealment and unveiling the coherence of the novel, and its impact on the text’s rhetorical, narrative, and ideological structure. In the article, “‘A Jail within a Jail’: Concealment and Unveiling as Narrative Structure in Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*,” Paula argues, “the sort of double vision achieved by Whitehead in *The Nickel Boys* is ethically relevant in itself” (14). Consolidating the argument, Paul emphasizes, “The undecidability of the ethical

standpoint reached at the end matches Derrida's conviction that literature enacts a secret that is at the same time kept and exposed, jealously sealed and open like a purloined letter" (14). Paula's points are relevant to project a double vision of the literary domain, but he fails to assume the protagonist's cautionary act in understanding himself in the regime of racism.

Indeed, the researchers so far have investigated Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* from significant avenues that unearth the colorful meanings of the novel. Yet, the gap that exists between the persisting research and the text is the question of identity formation, essentially the formation of self in the racial discourse. More specifically, the novel forecloses the struggle of the black protagonist who unveils the mystery of identity crisis and the toil to establish self in the legitimate white domination. Against this backdrop, much of the research conducted on *The Nickel Boys* is rooted in trauma studies, with some studies focusing on racism. Most of the researchers have tried to immerse themselves in the traumatic memory of the character and the challenges they confront in recovering the wounds inflicted during their childhood. Some other researchers have strived to deal with racism, particularly focusing on the dominant and oppressed categories of people. In this regard, racism in association with identity is yet to be discussed. Thus, to fill the gap, this research is conducted to explore racial identity and the challenges that colored people confront physically and psychologically in making and remaking their identity.

The study explores the issue of identity formation through Michel Foucault's concept of *dispositif*, Judith Butler's notion of *performativity*, and Henry Louis Gates Jr's comprehension of racism. It uses Foucault's concept to investigate racial discourse and the formal and informal institutions that uphold the regime of racism because as Foucault defines *dispositif* as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble

consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (194). To put it more simply, *dispositif* as a mix of, Matti Peltonen claims, “historically specific totalities of discourses and practices” (206). In this context, Foucault’s notion is significant in this research to excavate the institutional and non-institutional or formal and informal institutions that play a fundamental role in constructing, realizing, and consolidating the protagonist's identity. To put it more subtly, as John Pløger puts it, “the constitution of disciplinary forces through relations of power, knowledge and space, where, to Foucault, space is active” (52). This study employs Foucault’s understanding of the *dispositif* to unearth the surrounding atmosphere of the protagonist, dictated by power, that helps him to establish his Black identity.

In a similar light, while Butler is well-known for her theories on gender identity, her ideas are applied here to examine the potential for establishing racial identity, particularly Black identity, through repetitive actions. To understand how identity is constructed, Butler's notion of performativity explains how the protagonist discovers the capacity for creating and recreating identity within racial discourse: “the coherence and continuity of the person are not the logical and analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (23). In other words, Butler argues, “Sociological discussions have conventionally sought to understand the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning” (22), and countering the sociological assumption of human identity and its ontological reality, Butler proposes identity as fluid and unstatic, established based on the “repetative action of some sort” (152). In this context,

incorporating Foucault's notion of *dispositif* and Butler's notion of performativity, this study argues that the social realm is constituted with power deployment, which disperses the normative definition of identity that universalizes the exegesis of one's recognition but it is through consistent performative of anti discursive action that not only curtail the impact of power but also succeeds in accentuating the marginal status into visible limit. Therefore, this research embodies Foucault and Butler with cautious implications to expose black identity in white dominant discourse. The rationale behind the research is to unearth the potential disruption that not only imbues social division but also perpetuates inequalities.

To clarify the intricate discourse of racism and its domain, John Hope Franklin and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. state, "Racial disparities cause gaps in social and economic well-being. Such disparities exist in education, criminal justice, economic development, and health care" (48). As a source of disparities, "They are created not only through the discriminatory actions of individuals but also through the policies and procedures of organizations and the public sector" (49). Indeed, it is true that a racial discourse has become a common topic or cliché in different ways. In the words of Louis Gates, Jr:

Today, we often tend to think of the nineteenth-century rhetoric of antiblack and proslavery racist discourse as hyperbolic or melodramatic, and that when the Founders argued that "all men were created equal," they, of course, recognized that the sons and daughters of Africa were, indeed, human beings, even if they were systematically deprived of their rights. (xii)

The tendency to observe the racial discourse has taken a turn and has become a sophisticated area of discussion that is merely involved in the extension of fantasy and romanticization. However, this burgeoning tendency is the outcome of a shallow

observation that lacks proper scrutiny. Hence, this research undertakes the responsibility to unravel the literary fabric that still grips a crucial subject in the social dimension. Questioning the institutional consolidation of racialized discourse, it uncovers the dark reality that still shrouds human society, revisiting the darkest nightmare. To underscore the issue, the research incorporates Whitehead's *The Nickel Boy* as a point of reference and the story as an example of ongoing inhumanity.

Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* encompasses a translucent distinction between white and black identity. Translucent here means that the light passes through the distinction of their identity, but it is not quite visible in seeing their apparent dichotomy that dissects them into powerful and powerless. Indeed, as the novel begins in the prologue, it unfolds the mysterious incident—the discovery of dead bodies—that takes place in the Nickel Academy. In such a situation, the novel starts with the line, “even in death the boys were trouble” (1), which indicates that the boys were not supposed to be in a difficult situation, but they are. “The boys” here specifies the black boys who are a part of the Nickel campus. But the trouble is so serious because:

The discovery of the bodies was an expensive complication for the real estate company awaiting the all-clear from the environmental study, and for the state's attorney, who had recently closed an investigation into the abuse stories. Now they had to start a new inquiry, establish the identities of the deceased and the manner of death, and there was no telling when the whole damned place could be razed, cleared, and neatly erased from history, which everyone agreed was long overdue. (1)

The novel describes a tense scenario in which the burdens are increasing because of the overwhelming crimes surrounding the Nickel Academy. Bodies, years after being buried, are being excavated with a terrifying history of the school and the innocent

victim of the brutality. Indeed, Whitehead starts the novel with a dreadful exposition of crimes, but meanwhile, he underscores the vulnerability of black lives in the historical milieu. As Aminatta Forna addresses, “Although Whitehead is clear that Nickel, the characters and their stories are fiction, he has been true to many of the details of the Dozier regime: the brutal night-time beatings, in which boys were snatched from their beds and taken to a place called the White House, and the killings” (2), the events in the novel are captured precisely to uphold the scornful atmosphere which constantly fractured their life. To be more precise, Whitehead opens the novel with a gruesome and shocking discovery to initiate the horrific circumstances of the black characters who were confronting fatal surroundings to consolidate their identity. The monstrosity of the Nickel Academy mirrors Elwood Curtis and Turner's past, and their fragile existence in the school where they fought for their identity and challenged the institutional power.

Against the backdrop of the reality exposed by Nickel Academy, the novel turns its face towards Elwood's life story. He is a collage of experiences and a witness to the white domination that deteriorated the African existence. He saw it all: “Africans persecuted by the white sin of slavery, Negroes humiliated and kept low by segregation, and that luminous image to come, when all those places closed to his race were opened” (9-10). Interestingly, however, he has a sense of dignity and values respect to curtail the humiliation that the Whites impose upon them. In fact, he was influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent action in overcoming hatred. Regarding this, “one speech even made him feel like a member of the King family. Every kid had heard of Fun Town, been there, or envied someone who had. In the third cut on side A, Dr. King spoke of how his daughter longed to visit the amusement park on Stewart Avenue in Atlanta” (10). King's daughter was unaware of color

dichotomy, persistently excluding blacks from the presence of whites. In such condition, King, “explain the misguided thinking of some whites—not all whites, but enough whites—that gave it force and meaning, He counseled his daughter to resist the lure of hatred and bitterness and assured her that ‘Even though you can’t go to Fun Town, I want you to know that you are as good as anybody who goes into Fun Town’” (10). In this exposition, Whitehead shows the incongruent relationship between blacks and whites, who are different, though they share common ground to reside. More importantly, Elwood’s fascination with King’s speech and his satisfaction with truthfulness among white discourses implicitly expose Elwood’s mentality in accepting equality in an unequal American society.

More precisely, Elwood understands that society is biased and that the only way for blacks to achieve recognition is through respect and honesty. The whites dominate social governance and lawfully disregard blacks with authority. As Foucault claims, “It is a power whose model is essentially juridical, centered on nothing more than the statement of the law and the operation of taboos. All the modes of domination, submission, and subjugation are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience” (85). The whites, wielding the coercive force of power, erase blacks without acknowledging that they share the same ground. Nevertheless, Elwood finds himself caught in the nexus of power play and becomes obedient, failing to resist the encroachment that undermines his sense of dignity. In doing so, Elwood owns an identity which is the outcasted being of American society, a black identity—docile, vulnerable, weak, and dethroned by fate. He creates his identity, which has nothing but hatred; he, in fact, plunges himself into the realm of black identity, where he exactly belongs, but fails to realize that the way he involves himself in the collective identity of black negros makes him one of the impurities for the whites. In other

words, his obedience marks him as negro who surrenders in front of white supremacy and dedicates himself to offering his dignity and respect for the perpetuation of the white regime.

Elwood's acceptance of society as it demonstrates two significant processes of assimilation that contribute to identity formation. Firstly, sacrificing his freedom to embrace societal tendency represents the exercise of power that makes him surrender in constructing identity beyond societal judgements because, as Foucault argues, "Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability" (86). In this sense, Elwood is a submissive character who accepts his fate and believes in the superiority of the whites. Power does not merely create acceptability but also makes things acceptable in any sense, regardless of deviation and distinction. Elwood, a powerless black character, accepts the play of power and substantiates his vulnerable position in the realm of racial discourse. Secondly, Elwood's naive observation of the brutal world in which he strives to find his own world is purely nurtured by the premises and principles of the whites. In other words, he takes whites not as an enemy but as a saviour of his world where blacks redeem themselves with the grace of the whites. In doing so, he shows his conceptual freedom in accepting the black identity, which is scornfully described by the white comprehension of blacks based on color distinction.

However, the question arises: Is Elwood trapped by the white mindset that defines black people as whites view them? Although Elwood's acceptance of the black identity reveals his inward realization of blacks as vulnerable and fragile, in fact, he is accepting blacks as blacks, not as blacks defined by whites. To be more precise, Elwood knows that the power is concentrated in the whites' superiority, and the blacks have become the victims of the white dominant discourse. Therefore, his

acceptance of black vulnerabilities does not mean his affirmation of black susceptibility as such by nature, but rather blacks' helplessness in racialized discourse created by the whites. He is constantly in a battle against white domination. His acknowledgement of social dichotomy based on color is represented through the words of Dr. King's speech in the following ways:

There are big forces that want to keep the Negro down, like Jim Crow, and there are small forces that want to keep you down, like other people, and in the face of all those things, the big ones and the smaller ones, you have to stand up straight and maintain your sense of who you are. The encyclopedias are empty. There are people who trick you and deliver emptiness with a smile, while others rob you of your self-respect. You need to remember who you are.

(25)

For Elwood, American society is not democratic, nor are the judicial and constitutional promises in favor. Blacks are considered the culprits in any social distinctions. There are no laws that justify their rights, and there are no ways that could lead them to emancipation. Being black itself is taken as a crime, and the color is evidence of their criminality. In such an atmosphere, Elwood's integration with the blacks' sensitivity is not merely his realization of blacks as powerless but also his apprehension of the cause of their powerlessness.

Even in such hardship, his affirmation to be black and instill a sense of respect towards Dr. King resonates with his aspiration of being black. In other words, he has a sense of dignity towards blackness rather than hostility. He accepts black as black, making his own identity instead of being inoculated by whites. The aspiration that he holds is similar to Frantz Fanon's realization of blackness. For instance, Fanon asserts:

I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the

earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos—and the white man, however intelligent he may be, is incapable of understanding Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo. I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth. (27)

For Fanon, being black is not a matter of perversion and a subject to be demeaned. The discursive appropriation of the whites has created a realm of knowledge that observes them from an institutional gaze with a derogatory comprehension. In fact, “the inferiorized black man goes from humiliating insecurity to self-accusation and even despair” (42). However, Fanon believes that black is as pure as white and there is no objective difference between their essence regarding beauty.

In the same light, Elwood too believes in the purity and imperatives of blackness, though they are barely conceived as ornamental to the heterogeneous society where whites tend to define blackness single-handedly. In the words of Fanon, “the withdrawal of ego as a successful defense mechanism is impossible for the black man. He needs white approval” (34). In this context, as a result, Elwood clings to his principles and keeps defining his authenticity through dedication and determination. Hence, “White men were always extending offers of work to Elwood, recognizing his industrious nature and steady character, or at least recognizing that he carried himself differently than other colored boys his age, and taking this for industry” (17). In this sense, Elwood’s willingness reflects the source of his life. He confirms and shapes his identity based on his surroundings and distorted reality through his sense of courage in making his presence known.

Elwood remembers Dr. King’s words to take control over his rages and maintain patience in achieving his recognition in racialized discourse. Although “He

knew Frenchtown's piece of the Negro's struggle where his neighborhood ended and white law took over" (20), his persistent effort in constructing his black identity never becomes a matter of surrender for him. In doing so, Elwood holds his conscience and submerges in his reflexivity of blackness and the prevalent discourse around him. In the words of Butler, "Reflexivity is constituted through this moment of conscience, this turning back upon oneself, one which is simultaneous with a turning toward the law" (13). Butler emphasizes, "This self-restriction is something other than the internalization of an external law: the model of internalization takes for granted the 'internal' and the 'external' as already formed" (13). For Butler, reflexivity is a process of blending internal and external realities formed with the help of conscience, which is precisely similar to Elwood's acts. In other words, Elwood uses his conscience to amalgamate his black identity with the white discourse, ultimately reflecting himself as a black self but not as backs defined by the whites. He succeeds in doing this because, as Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson state, "Collective identities are also affirmed while working toward white supremacist organizational goals" (255). Besides this way of identity formation, "The ultimate expression and celebration of white supremacist beliefs is to shoulder the responsibility imparted by one's racial heritage and become a white supremacist activist" (255). In this sense, Elwood's performativity of reflexivity is a cornerstone in constructing and consolidating the identity that he desires. Certainly, what he presumes to be his identity may not be his identity for the whites, but, at least, for him, in all his meaningful ways, he resembles himself, who is not the replica or the product of identity discourse constructed by the dominant whites.

Interestingly, Elwood is involved in 'making' his black identity since the beginning of the story, but as soon as he is captured in the Nickel Academy for his

minor offense, stealing a car, though he had not, he embroils himself in ‘remaking’ of ‘self’ because of institutional apparatuses. However, the impressions he achieves in the school premises delude him in reacting to his assumptions because the environment befuddles him with great astonishment. For example, initially, as he enters the Academy, “He got a look at the school and thought maybe Franklin [a character who has given an impression of the school to Elwood initially] was right—Nickel wasn’t that bad” (45). Instead of such a peaceful environment, “He expected tall stone walls and barbed wire, but there were no walls at all. The campus was kept up meticulously, a bounty of lush green dotted with two—and three-story buildings of red brick” (45). There was no possibility of external interference, nor was there any internal joy in the school environment.

However, the brutality of the Academy was hidden beneath the silence of the students rather than carved in the walls and infrastructure. As he goes to the dressing room, he does not try to “stare at the marks on the other boys’ bodies as they dressed. Both of them had long lumpy lines of scars and what looked like burn marks” (48). Indeed, the assumption that Elwood assembles is true for institutional reputation, but it haunts as the laws and order of the Academy come into visibility. This reality is more conspicuous when Blakeley, the house father of the dorm, says:

The school had a philosophy that they put boys’ fates in their own hands. ‘You boys are in charge of everything.’ . . . ‘Burn the bricks in all these buildings you see here, lay the concrete, take care of all this grass. Do a good job, too, as you can see.’ . . . ‘Learn how to execute those big orders and take your corner of responsibility, that’s knowledge you can draw on for the rest of your life.’

(49)

The Academy runs with its unbreakable laws, which dictate the existence of the

students. Unprecedented lawfulness of the school and the authority of the institution allow them to decide the fate of the students irresistibly. The school's actions involve the exercise of power in a lawful environment because, as Foucault claims, "ideally and by nature, power must be exercised in accordance with a fundamental lawfulness" (88). In other words, the institution takes control over the fate of the students based on the institutional power, which is imbued with law and order. Indeed, "Elwood had never permitted himself that kind of misbehavior that landed others in trouble. He consoled himself with the notion that he just had to keep doing what he'd always done: act right" (48). Thus, he does not attempt to distort his fundamental principle that made him Elwood.

The more Elwood spends time in Nickel Academy, the better the reality of the school he confronts. While in the conversation with the lawyer, he knew that he had been "off lucky, his lawyer said. Stealing a car was a big-ticket offense for Nickel. He'd learn that most of the kids had been sent here for much lesser—and nebulous and inexplicable—offenses" (51). Being a responsible character, guided by his fundamental principle, he does not hesitate to act right in the Academy, no matter how harsh the conditions. He knows that "Most of the Nickel boys couldn't read. As each boy picked up the morning's story—nonsense about an intriguing hare—Mr. Google didn't bother to correct them or share the proper pronunciation" (59). In such happenstances, "Elwood carved each syllable with such precision that the students around him stirred from their reveries, curious as to what kind of black boy talked like that" (59), which shows his performative actions in acting rightly repeatedly. In other words, he constantly repeats his rightful action that he had always employed upon himself.

However, being good does not necessarily mean being recognized as good

because the atmosphere that constructs and shapes the overall environment must favor the action that recognizes one's acts. Elwood, though he strives to help others and takes responsibility in assisting others, has limitations in his performance because of coercive institutional dominance that provides asymmetric division between people in terms of color. In other words, since racism becomes an operative apparatus of the Academy, Elwood remains a plate of food leftover rather than a piece of butter. This happens because of racism, which, as Camara Phyllis Jones argues, "is a system (consisting of structures, policies, practices, and norms) that structures opportunity and assigns value based on phenotype, or the way people look . . . It unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities" (9). His color is a mark of his identity, which disproves his honesty and reckons him a dirty figure. The institutional practice of racism in the academy is more palatable when the novel discloses that "The white boys bruised differently than the black boys, and called it the Ice Cream Factory because you came out with bruises of every color" (64). Contrary to the whites, "The Black boys called it the White House because that was its official name and it fit and didn't need to be embellished. The White House delivered the law and everybody obeyed" (64). Importantly, the distinction between the students based on color dichotomy is undeniable.

Meanwhile, it is more astonishing that when the distinction does not provide sufficient power to the whites, they come to show what whiteness means. As Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson contend, "Especially as whites become more rather than less likely to have interracial contact, the conditions of whiteness are increasingly explicit" (249). It is reflected as the white racial envy in the novel when Elwood receives the uniform, as "He barely got out — everybody knew white boys were lynching black men in uniform, but he never believed he'd be a target. Not him.

Bunch of white boys jealous that they didn't have a uniform and afraid of a world that let a nigger wear one in the first place" (Whitehead 69). Undoubtedly, Elwood encapsulates honesty and follows righteousness, but he is naive enough to explore the unexpected bombardment of racial discrimination that penalizes his morals.

Elwood's projection of his greatness is an individual attempt to rectify the errors in Elwoodian society, but as soon as he is trapped in the realm of institutional power, his virtues are ineffective. It happens because, as Foucault asserts, "Power has its principle not so much in person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surface lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanism produces the relation in which individuals are caught up" (6). For Foucault, power sustains its regime of institutional collaboration; power is a structural mass of body, and it is functional when its components are perfectly aligned. In this context, Elwood is a single mass of body, lacking any supplementary components that help in his journey towards righteousness. He is a perpetrator of racial discourse and has no credibility to establish his space so that he could obtain power. He fails to realize that "Certainly the 'crimes' and 'offences' on which judgement is passed are juridical objects defined by code, but judgement is also passed on the passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effects of environment or heredity" (Foucault 17). In this sense, no matter how right he is, the judgment is opinionated based on his color.

Elwood's society incorporates an intricate nexus of racial discrimination; his actions, no matter how devastatingly implore the Academy and the whites, miss the target frequently. He does not understand the limitations of the Academy and fails to comprehend the reason behind sending the boys to the school, which lacks a moral parameter. Indeed, boys were sent to "Nickel for offenses Elwood had never heard of: malingering, moper, incorrigibility. Words the boys didn't understand either, but

what was the point when their meaning was clear enough: Nickel” (72). In fact, the students are the perpetrators of crimes they had never committed. When Elwood undergoes severe experiences in the Academy, he happens to take a turn in his general assumption of reality and decides to change his philosophy. These happenstances are described in the novel in the following ways:

Now he worked on a new theory: There was no higher system guiding Nickel’s brutality, merely and indiscriminate spite, one that had nothing to do with people. A figment from tenth-grade science struck him: a Perpetual Misery Machine, one that operated by itself without human agency. Also, Archimedes, one of his first encyclopedia finds. Violence is the only lever big enough to move the world. (83)

Elwood’s experience in the school compels him to understand the social divergence of power more critically. He happens to realize the cruelty of the school, which was merely a microcosm of the racial division in American society. He changes his notion and becomes an active participant in redrawing the boundary of the black identity. In other words, Elwood revises his understanding and determines a new way of affirming his identity.

Elwood indulges in remaking himself through the experiences he has collected in the academy. However, as Patrick’s. S. De Walt claims, “Within a racist and oppressive society, identity becomes more complex when the embedded meaning of America as a Eurocentric construct is illuminated as a fundamental component of American identity, whereby people of color’s cultural/ethnic/racial identities are dismembered into socially unequal components” (481). Even more complicated is when the institutional favor operates in a biased perception. In this sense, Elwood’s grappling in constructing an identity, which is beyond the conventionality of society,

is not as easy as he decides to create. The point here is that when he is outside of the Nickel Academy, he defines his identity as a black character defined by himself, but as he enters the school, the institutional dominance no longer allows him to perpetuate his sense of dignity towards his own perception of blackness. Since, as Robert M. Sellers et al. point out, “racial centrality will be associated with more experiences of racial discrimination, which, in turn, will be associated with higher levels of stress and, subsequently, poorer mental health outcomes” (304), the brutality of the Academy not only obliges Elwood comprehend his deficiency in acknowledging racial discourse but also to transform himself to transform others. Thus, his change in philosophy means that he has accepted that the old way of life is no longer effective, and there is a demand for a new alternative that shapes his identity, which could enable him to make his presence in the Academy. In this process, he is involved in the ‘remaking’ of the identity, which is visible, recognizable, and remarkable.

It was quite easy to change the white perceptions of black identity had the institution been in favor of the black vulnerable, but the condition was just opposite, and more importantly, the institutional brutality was perpetual. However, it is not to say that the Nickel academy was a lifelong journey from which the students could never come back. Indeed, there were four ways out of the school that could permit Elwood to continue his journey. The first way: “Serve your time. A typical sentence fell between six months and two years, but the administration had the power to confer a legal discharge before then at its discretion. Good behavior was a trigger for a legal discharge, if a careful boy gathered enough merits for promotion to Ace” (142). The second way: “The court might intervene. That magic event. A long-lost aunt or older cousin materialized to relive the state of your wardship” (143). The third way: “You could die. Of ‘natural causes’ even, if abetted by unhealthy conditions, malnutrition,

and the pitiless constellation of negligence” (143). The fourth: “Finally, you could run. Make a run for it and see what happened” (144). In the hardship, where the fate of an individual is determined in the structure of institutional power, the only thing Elwood could do to retain his freedom was to choose one of the options that the Nickel Academy offers. It is to say that Elwood, including all the Nickel boys, are entrapped in the possession of the school, and the Academy has the authority to dictate their fate based on its assumptions.

Although the four ways to redeem from the authority of the Nickel seem easy, the underlying difficulties are more horrendous and diabolical to rip Nickel boys apart from the grip. One of the examples is “In the summer of 1945, one young boy died of heart failure while locked in a seatbox, a popular corrective at that time, and the medical examiner called it natural causes” (143). Moreover, “The fire of 1921 claimed twenty-three lives. Half the dormitory exits were bolted shut and the two boys in the dark third-floor cells were prevented from escaping” (143). The Academy, in this sense, is not merely dreadful in terms of punishment but also a farmhouse where innocent students are deliberately killed. Thus, the school, a *dispositif*, is a powerhouse with ultimate victory over students’ fate and desire, where consent and consensus have lost their validity. As Foucault claims, “Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures. This also means that power is not a function of consent” (788), the identity of the Nickel boys is determined by the coercive force of the school rather than taking their consent.

Seeing the brutality of the Academy over the Nickel boys, especially to the blacks, he fails to resist the temptation to expose the gruesome reality of the institution. He dares to bring it into the public by breaking the rule of the school, but

sadly his attempts go in vain because “He was alone in this protest. He wrote *The Chicago Defender* twice, but hadn’t heard back, even when he mentioned the editorial he’d written under another name. It had been two weeks” (172). In addition, “More distressing than the notion that the newspaper didn’t care about what was going on at Nickel was that they received so many letters like it, so many appeals, that they couldn’t address them all” (172-73). Undoubtedly, “They were the paper of record, which meant they were in the business of protecting the system” (198), and the institutional brutality persists robustly because of them. Nevertheless, Elwood does not weaken his strength but plays a resistive role for the renunciation of liberty with the assumption: “We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthful, and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness” (179). Despite hardships and an indefeatable enemy, Elwood constructs his identity as a rebellious black individual who holds a sense of dignity for blacks’ existence.

Elwood truly knows that “[T]heir [Whites] daddies taught them how to keep a slave in line, passed down this brutal heirloom, Take him away from his family, whip him until all he remembers is the whip, chain him up so all he knows is chains” (189). Moreover, he also acknowledges the fact that whites have institutional power that formally legalizes their brutality as a rightful act. However, Elwood’s act in resisting the white hegemonic discourse is a process of performativity in constructing his wilful blackness that resonates with the possibility of changing the dominant spectrum. In the words of Butler, “There are social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all. The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions”

(525). In this sense, Elwood's position is a remarkable landmark which encompasses not only strength and his individual choice but also a representative figure who bears hope for the black rights movement and a way to an autonomous black identity.

When Elwood realizes the need for black rights, he learns that the institution is conspiring for his death, and decides to escape from the Academy and expose the reality to the world. As Foucault suggests, "We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of a modern power structure" (785), Elwood sincerely considers institutional violence and runs away from the Academy with his friend Turner. However, while they make a run off, "Turner zagged and put his head down as if he could duck buckshot . . . He looked back again as Harper pulled the trigger" (199). Both of them struggle a lot to escape the deadly hours, but "Elwood's arm went wide, hands out, as if testing the solidity of the walls of a long corridor, one he had travelled through for a long time and which possessed no visible terminus" (199). At last, "He stumbled forward two steps and fell into the grass. Turner kept running. He asked himself later if he had heard Elwood cry out or make any kind of sound, but he never did figure it out. He was running and there was only the rush and roil of blood in his head" (199). A rebellious man who offers his life for the sake of black people dies with a gunshot and becomes a victim of white dominance.

Elwood knew that "In itself it is not a renunciation of freedom, a transference of rights, the power of each and all delegated to a few . . . the relationship of power can be the result of a prior or permanent consent, but it is not by nature the manifestation of a consensus" (Foucault 788). Therefore, he dared to go against the power, reversing the rule of consensus. Indeed, although Elwood dies, his retaliation and journey to the black movement never fade away. More precisely, his continuous

protest against the whites is entrapped in the process of ‘becoming’ with his death. In the words of Butler, “If we try to understand in concrete terms what it means to commit ourselves to preserving the life of the other, we are invariably confronted with the bodily conditions of life and so, a commitment not only to the other’s corporeal persistence but to all those environmental conditions that make life livable” (147). Thus, Elwood proffers his life for the black people and becomes a selfless self in constructing his black identity.

In conclusion, Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* portrays a racial institution prevalent in American society where people like Elwood Curtis in the novel offer their lives to construct their identity. The system has the power to dictate the fate of the vulnerable blacks and has the authority to confiscate their right, despite being an external force to the social spectrum. The novel is not merely a fictional story but also a microcosm of racial discourse that has indoctrinated American society for ages. The novel exposes the bitter reality of a society in which the privileged and the non-privileged categories of people are classified based on color.

The novel projects a vivid picture of institutional power that dictates the identity of the people through the depiction of Nickel Academy and compels the reader to imagine and experience the brutality that the vulnerable blacks confront. While presenting the institutional domination, the novel foregrounds the asymmetric division of power that stratifies the social structure, providing more power to the whites and less power to the blacks. The representation does not merely show the hierarchy among the people based on color, but also reflects upon the cruel nature of human beings that shatters the essence of humility and humanity.

The novel employs the notion of making and remaking of self, which is a process of becoming, and projects the difficulty in marking the presence of an

individual in institutional dominance. In the process of constructing his identity, the protagonist first accepts his black identity, defined by the whites, but later on, he accepts himself as black as he believes. The change of perception in the novel is a satire of American society, which is not only categorized but also in need of serious sedimentation. In fact, Elwood represents nonwhite Americans who are still struggling to construct an identity, and his change in philosophy shows the process of becoming a black American over time. The novel also advocates for black consciousness, that they need to understand black identity from a black perspective, but not from the discursive or institutional gaze dispersed by whites. As blacks start internalizing their identity with their perspective, they happen to find alternative ways of understanding their circumstance. Right and authority are granted; it demands perpetual action in acquiring; therefore, the novel urges blacks to relentlessly demand their autonomy even though the discursive regime infringes on their fundamental rights.

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