From slavery to prison: necropolitics and the (neo)slave narrative in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract: In his seventh novel Colson Whitehead fictionalizes the recent outrageous discovery of clandestine mass graves at *Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys*, a reformatory in Marianna, Florida. During its 111 years of existence, *Dozier* became the target of various investigations as rumors about maltreatment of its juvenile detainees were sporadically spread. Whitehead focuses on the mass graves, specifically on the black corpses found there, and writes out a fictional narrative for these black bodies as a form to reject forgetting and unbury a scandalous event that most Americans would prefer not to be informed about. Through Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, I claim that *The Nickel Boys* reveals another scandal: the persistent necropolitical nature of United States' incarceration system. My argument is 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.
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After publishing the critically acclaimed and rewarded *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Colson Whitehead writes another historical novel no less successful than its predecessor. In *The Nickel Boys* (2019) the focus is now on the infamous state reformatory from Marianna, Fl., called *Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys* (1900-2011), renamed Trevor Nickel School for Boys by Whitehead in the book. During the 111 years of its existence, *Dozier* was the target of innumerous investigations resulting

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more recently in the discovery of clandestine mass graves outside *Boot Hill*, the cemetery on the reformatory campus. Most of the bones found in those graves belonged to African American minors listed as "disappeared" in the school records. Forensic excavations on campus are still going on, carried out by archeology students from the University of South Florida and, despite the absurdity of such a discovery, Whitehead himself states in the Acknowledgements that he "first heard of the place in the summer of 2014 and discovered Ben Montgomery's exhaustive reporting in the Tampa Bay Times" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p.167). In an interview to NPR right after the publication of the novel Whitehead underscores his late awareness about the case adding this was exactly what mostly prompted him to write the book: "[it] dawned on me, if there's one place like this, there's dozens and dozens. And where are those places? And what happens to the kids afterward? And immediately, I felt like I wanted to write about it" (SIMON, 2019).

From the onset, readers can perceive that the novel's *topos* rests on what Katherine Verdery (1999, p.27) named "the political lives of dead bodies": a phrase she uses to determine how the Romanian government, under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu, sought to control and exploit dead bodies as a means of asserting its power and ideology. In *The Nickel Boys* Whitehead also explores the political afterlives of dead bodies but this time as a denunciation of necropolitical practices carried out within *Dozier*'s walls. To do that, the author creates fictional narrative(s) from the exhumed bones of African American juveniles incarcerated at the reformatory and later found in the clandestine mass graves. Departing from the use of anachronisms so recurrent in *The Underground Railroad*, in straightforward realistic fashion, Whitehead fictionalizes that event and sets the story between two time periods: the sixties during the civil rights movement, and present-day time when the scandal is made public. More importantly, the novel centers on two African American characters, the

protagonist Elwood Curtis, and his prison mate Frank Turner. During their incarceration at Nickel, the fictional version of *Dozier*, they develop a perennial bond and through their life stories Whitehead recreates all the possible types of horror that took place inside the reformatory and that were only confirmed to public view after forensic excavations.

As such, the disinterment of black bodies is used in *The Nickel Boys* as a metaphor for unburying a violent and racist past which forced the state of Florida "to start a new inquiry, establish the identities of the deceased and the manner of death" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p.8) of each found body and, from the point of view of the state, "there was no telling when the whole damned place could be razed, cleared, and neatly erased from history, which everyone agreed was long overdue" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p.8). Obviously, Whitehead's main attempt is not to erase such tragic historical episode but rather raise public awareness of it by exposing the scandal in the book. Finally, the forensic investigations and their outcomes are explored in the Prologue which sets off with a sentence that encapsulates the novel's *topos*: "Even in death the boys were trouble" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 8).

I argue that the discovery of bones outside *Boot Hill* uncovers another scandal: it exposes the necropolitical nature of incarceration in the United States. I contend that *The Nickel Boys* posits a precise illustration of necropolitics insofar as it represents *Dozier* in terms of what Achille Mbembe defined as a "third place", that is, a place of exclusion and death historically sanctioned by dominant classes since colonial slavery to exercise their racialized forms of terror. Accordingly, Mbembe (2019, p. 34) comments that:

> We have, it is true, always lived in a world deeply marked by diverse forms of terror, that is to say, of squandering human life[…]Historically, one of the strategies of the dominant states has always consisted in spatializing and discharging that terror by confining its most extreme manifestations in some

> racially stigmatized third place—the plantation under slavery, the colony, the camp, the compound under apartheid, the ghetto or, as in the present-day United States, the prison.

Mbembe's argument is that necropolitics belongs to a historical process initiated during colonial slavery but that continues today "in some racially stigmatized third place" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 34). Besides, necropolitics should be understood as the exercise of sovereignty and "the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 66). In terms of the U.S. for example, Mbembe sees a correlation between slavery to today's mass incarceration of African Americans to third places such as prisons and juvenile facilities. Finally, necropolitics is a critique of the use of deathly power by modern democratic countries which, to achieve their farcical mythos of freedom and equality, must however externalize their original violence to "third places, to nonplaces, of which the plantation, the colony, or, today, the camp and the prison, are emblematic figures" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 27).

Mbembe also emphasizes that skin color is the element that justifies necropolitics because in many democratic countries death and racism are intertwined as "racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle" and besides, racism is justified by "a war of eradication, indefinite, absolute, that claims the right to cruelty, torture, and indefinite detention" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 38). Thus, modern necropolitical societies regard deaths of racially marginalized groups as "something to which nobody feels any obligation to respond. Nobody even bears the slightest feelings of responsibility or justice toward this sort of life or, rather, death" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 38). Therefore, the lingering practice of necropolitics that began in colonial slavery about which Mbembe asserts inaugurates necropolitical power as "slave life, in many ways, [was] a form of death-in-life" (MBEMBE, 2019,

p. 75) and the perpetuation of such deathly power to other contemporary third places, such as prisons and, particularly, reformatories, will guide my analysis of *The Nickel Boys*.

Hence, through the lens of necropolitics and the concept of third places I want to explore a peculiar aspect of the novel characterized by its palimpsest narrative structure. On the surface readers will come to read a typical prison novel similar to others of the kind such as Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone* (1972) or James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), however, underlying that structure, readers will also encounter a (neo)slave narrative similar to Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1769) or Whitehead's own *The Underground Railroad*. By juxtaposing these two literary genres Whitehead creates a palimpsest text so compelling that sometimes readers will genuinely believe they are reading a (neo)slave narrative rather than a prison novel. For sure, several motifs in *The Nickel Boys* allude to (neo)slave narratives such as: unjust capture, life in confinement, forced labor, torture, sexual abuse, search for education, desire for liberty, escape from confinement, guards with hounds and, finally, death during escape.

There are also more specific elements which together remind readers of slavery such as a leather belt called "Black Beauty" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 58) used by the guards during torture and, more ominously, a secret place near "the dilapidated horse stables" (WHITEHEAD,2019, p. 85) where "there were two oaks on one side of the stables, with iron rings stabbed into the bark" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 85). African American juveniles were brought there, shackled to the rings, and tortured to death with "a horse whip" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 85); a practice much alike the innumerous accounts in (neo)slave narratives of the ways enslaved people were murdered.

Therefore, Whitehead's project is not only to unbury an outrageous

historical episode, or simply demonstrate the similarities between U.S. incarceration system to slavery, but the writer also aims at exposing the country's necropolitical hidden side by writing a palimpsest narrative that juxtaposes the prison novel with the (neo)slave novel and, in so doing, Whitehead unmasks the perpetuation of long lingering necropolitical practices taking place in the U.S. since slavery. Ultimately, *The Nickel Boys* exposes that the same racist logics that justified slavery is reproduced within the walls of reformatories and prisons. Hence, incarceration should be regarded as Mbembe's third place, that is, a model of state necropolitical control akin to plantation slavery whose purpose is to confine, control, and murder African Americans.

It is important to consider that detention in the U.S. has become widely known as a reflection of the rampant structural racism in the country so much so that a recent report published by the website *The Sentencing Project* reveals that "[s]till, America maintains its distinction as the world leader in its use of incarceration, with more than 1.2 million people held in state prisons around the country" and that "[t]he latest available data regarding people sentenced to state prison reveal that Black Americans are imprisoned at a rate that is roughly five times the rate of white Americans" (NELLIS, 2021). Furthermore, according to Devika Sharma (2014, p. 663), the U.S. prison system has been quite successful in maintaining an "old American association of blackness with criminality" consequently creating an "institutional nexus" that works both on the material and symbolic level by making criminal offenders look "not merely as some sort of monster, but more specifically as a black monster".

In what follows I will begin by providing a brief introduction to (neo)slave narratives and by explaining why *The Nickel Boys* might be read as a palimpsest text which eventually expands our understanding of both (neo)slave and prison narratives. Next, I will discuss how the novel illustrates necropolitics through three examples from it that represent

Mbembe's concept of third places, namely: The White House, the oak trees, and the dark cell. Finally, I expect this analysis not only to contribute to the interpretation of *The Nickel Boys* but also to underscore the importance of recuperating the past to understand the present, especially if such historical revisionism aims at exposing the necropolitical side of modern democratic countries such as contemporary U.S. Ultimately, *The Nickel Boys* juxtaposes slavery with present-day juvenile detention as a refusal to forget a necropolitical history which, albeit ignored by a large part of the population, remains consistently active within the walls of prisons and reformatories.

The Nickel Boys as a palimpsest text

Elwood Curtis gets unjustly arrested and taken to Nickel where he becomes friends with another African American youth called Frank Turner. Both represent two distinct attitudes towards the civil rights movement: Elwood is idealistic and hopeful that segregation will end, whereas Frank is just the opposite having a very suspicious and disheartened attitude towards desegregation. Through a literary twist, the two characters will eventually become one as Frank will assume Elwood's identity after escaping Nickel. Unfortunately, during the escape, Elwood will be murdered by the guards and his bones will only be exhumed decades later during forensic excavations. This twist also shows how the skeptical Frank Turner will change his personality and become more like his idealistic dead friend Elwood Curtis who, in a way, survives Nickel by not only having his own name used by Frank while living in New York but also as a sort of memorial of the horrors experienced at the reformatory that Frank eventually decides to face and divulge.

Elwood is described as an exceptionally good kid: studious, responsible, a fan of Martin Luther King's speeches, and an activist. At high

school, during the annual Emancipation Day Play, he performs the part of Thomas Jackson, "the man who informs the Tallahassee slaves that they are free" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 28) and he "invested the character with the same earnestness he brought to all his responsibilities" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 28). Elwood is supposed to say one brief line that goes "[it] is my pleasure to inform you fine gentlemen and ladies that the time has come to throw off the yoke of slavery and take our places as true Americans—at long last!" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 28). Ironically, the boy who had been so exceptional and marched on the Florida Theater for everyone's rights, "even those who shouted him down" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 33), gets a ride on the wrong car during his first day of commuting to college. He had waited for a colored driver to pass by, as Tallahassee was undergoing a bus strike, but then decides to embark on Rodney's "brilliant-green '61 Plymouth Fury" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 35) that Rodney had just stolen. The two are arrested: Rodney goes to state prison and Elwood goes to Nickel School for Boys.

This episode is emblematic because it converges on three elements. First, it connects Elwood's arrest with the slave capture insofar as Africans were unjustly seized, sold to slave traders, and later taken to plantations in the colonies. Second, the arrest and later imprisonment represent a sad reminder of the necropolitical nature of freedom in the U.S. insofar as incarceration at Nickel can be regarded as a microcosm of plantation slavery. There, Elwood will undergo torture, forced labor, racism, and eventually death. Third, the arrest also reveals the palimpsest structure of the text as it juxtaposes the (neo)slave with the prison narrative creating eventually a blend which highlights the similarities between slave life with prison life. Besides, such a blend bears upon the theme of identity theft represented by Frank turning into Elwood and then eventually Frank again, a renewed African American man. Ultimately, Whitehead emphasizes the vital palimpsest character of the novel by representing it thematically,

as two literary genres are juxtaposed, and structurally, as two characters become one.

I am using the term (neo)slave narratives with brackets to refer to two literary genres, namely: the slave narratives and the neo-slave narratives. The former consists of autobiographies written by enslaved African Americans who were able to publish accounts of their lives under slavery and the latter comprises all sorts of contemporary fictional accounts of slavery. Thus, one obvious difference between the two genres is that whereas the slave narratives were written by those who experienced slavery, neo-slave narratives are written predominantly by African American writers who had not lived under that necropolitical institution. However, both genres are intrinsically related because slavery is their common *topos* and whereas the former was written to assist a specific political and abolitionist context, the latter uses slavery to address issues related to structural racism in contemporary U.S. Such is the case with *The Nickel Boys* that uses slavery as a subtext to highlight the similarities between incarceration with plantation slavery.

Slave narratives first emerged during the 1770s and 1780s according to Philip Gould (2007, p. 11) within a complex cultural context characterized by "the rise of antislavery movements", "the rise of secular social philosophy", "the rise of sentimentalism" and, finally, "the proliferation of more radical and revolutionary ideas about natural rights vis-a-vis state and social forms of authority". Toni Morrison (1995, p. 85) emphasizes the significance of slave narratives for Black literature in the U.S. because "well over a hundred were published [and] are familiar texts to historians and students of black history" making them "the print origins of black literature". Morrison (1995, p. 86) explains that:

> Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: "This is my historical life - my singular,

> special example that is personal, but that also represents the race." Two: "I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God's grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery." With these two missions in mind, the narratives were clearly pointed.

Both Gould and Morrison highlight the extraordinary number of slave narratives published in the English language as well as their significant political role for the abolitionist movement. Accordingly, they discuss texts that are already canonical such as Olaudah Equiano's autobiography mentioned earlier but also Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) amongst many other texts.

On the other hand, neo-slave narratives first appeared in the U.S. in the sixties and seventies later attracting the attention of scholars such as Bernard W. Bell (1987) and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), who debated over the use of the term neo-slave narrative to denominate what appeared to them as a new literary genre. Bell was the first scholar to study these texts and to be responsible for coining the term which for him would not have the hyphen. The scholar characterized neo-slave narratives as postmodern (re)readings of former slave narratives that dialogued with and against Western literary tradition as a large number of African American writers embraced postmodernism but due to the legacy left by institutional racism, sexism, and lack of social justice, which fostered ambivalence towards their own society, "most modern and postmodern Afro-American novelists, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, [were] not inclined to neglect moral and social issues in their narratives" (BELL, 1987, p. 284).

Reviewing Bell's theory Rushdy published what has been so far the major work on neo-slave narratives and recognized the importance of

Bell's definition, from whom he borrowed the term but added a hyphen to it. For Rushdy neo-slave narratives should be understood not solely within a postmodern context but also within a specific sociopolitical milieu of the sixties of which issues about race, identity, representation, and so forth, were central in the political debate of the country hence providing a venue for a revisionism on the history of slavery by African American writers. Thus, neo-slave writers adopted what the scholar identified as "political intertextuality" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 4), that is, an ideological text grounded in the political debate of the sixties which used the traditional format of nineteenth-century slave narratives to address contemporary issues. For Rushdy the sixties represented "the social logic" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3) of the genre because the decade represented its birth and evolvement in the public sphere. Finally, neo-slave narratives were contemporary texts "that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3).

Thus, I consider here the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative as one literary genre due to their intrinsic similarities, and therefore, by juxtaposing the (neo)slave narrative with the prison novel, Whitehead not only expands the understanding of the former by broadening its thematic scope to more contemporary third places such as reformatories, rather than limiting it to slavery, but the author also highlights its similarities with the latter as *The Nickel Boys* is a prison novel only on the surface. In so doing, Whitehead strategically highlights concealed necropolitical practices by re-creating *Dozier* as a type of modern plantation, sanctioned by both the state and the population at large, because after all, the real or the fictional reformatories should not only imprison juvenile delinquents but also guarantee their correction.

Third places within Nickel reformatory

Trevor Nickel reformatory illustrates Mbembe's concept of third places particularly because the juvenile detention center represents a microcosm of plantation slavery. Besides, there are other more ominous third places within Nickel's walls represented by The White House, the infamous oak trees, and the dark cell. These are internal recesses of segregation, torture, and death that are strategically kept away from public view. The White House amounts to an ordinary building that had been a work shed and if you passed "by the road out front, you'd never look twice" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 57). Its ordinary features are in direct opposition to the torture imposed on black boys once inside it because although integrated, that is, both white and black kids could end up in The White House, "[t]he white boys bruised differently than the black boys and called it the Ice Cream Factory" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 56) suggesting the guards' violence was segregated: black kids would suffer more. Thus, "[t]he 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" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 56). As Eve Dunbar (2022, p. 16) comments: "It seems less than ironic that the site of rogue justice would carry the same name as the residence housing the president of the United States and the metonymic seat of power for the nation".

The White House exemplifies Mbembe's critique of modern democratic countries and their persistent necropolitical methods insofar modern democracies possess "two faces, and even two bodies—the solar body, on the one hand, and the nocturnal body, on the other" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 33) and moreover, "[t]he major emblems of this nocturnal body are the colonial empire and the pro-slavery state—and more precisely the plantation and the penal colony" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 33). As the ordinary and concealed White House at Nickel, modern democracies rely on their unseen nocturnal bodies to construct and legitimize their mythos of freedom and equality. Yet, it is a forgery like the idea of civil reformation

which Nickel dissimulates. Mbembe explains that to understand the violence of modern democracies one should look at its original matrix which maintained relations of twinship with slavery and colonialism. Thus, today's mass incarceration of African Americans is proof of such a matrix because "the colonial penal colony prefigures the mass imprisonment typical of the contemporary era" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 34).

Considering The White House as an example of a secreted third place within Nickel, or as modern democracies' nocturnal body, bears upon its nightmarish representation as the guards would come late at night to dormitories to seize boys who had done anything wrong during the day and then take them to The White House. Elwood experiences such a nightmare a few days after his incarceration as he is caught by Phil "one of the white housemen" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 54) during an altercation in the bathroom with three other black boys: Corey, Lonnie, and Black Mike. Elwood perceives during the day that some punishment is just around the corner because no one talked to him during dinner:

> as if what was coming was catching. Some boys whispered when he passed—What a dummy—and the bullies gave him angry looks, but mostly there was a heavy pressure of menace and unease in the dormitory that didn't end until they took the boys away. The rest of the boys relaxed then, and some were even able to dream. (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 56).

The White House represents then the terror that every kid would not wish to undergo, and in gothic descriptions, Whitehead depicts their removal from the dormitories:

> They came at one a.m. but woke few, because it was hard to sleep when you knew they were coming, even if they weren't coming for you. The boys heard the cars

> grind gravel outside, the doors open, the thumping up the stairs. The hearing was seeing, too, in bright strokes across the mind's canvas. The men's flashlights danced. They knew where their beds were— the bunks were only two feet apart. (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 56)

The boys were taken to the back door of the building or "the beating entrance" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 57) as the boys called it and, once inside the ordinary building, "[t]he stench was fierce—urine and other things that had soaked into the concrete" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 57).

Elwood notices a loud roar which made the chairs vibrate and covered the screams and the lashings on the bodies of the black boys who were tortured ahead of him. The loud roar was caused by a gigantic industrial fan whose sound "traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 58). The text tells us that the noisy fan's original place was the laundry where it would make an inferno during the summer but due to the periodic investigations that Nickel had undergone over the years new rules about corporal punishment were stablished and then "someone had the bright idea to bring it in here" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 58). The whole description of the place makes it resemble a torture chamber with "[s]platter on the walls where the fan had whipped up blood in its gusting" and "a bloody mattress and a naked pillow that was covered instead by the overlapping stains from all the mouths that had bit into it" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p.58).

Although the sound of the fan was loud enough to cover the screams, Elwood could perfectly count the number of whippings delivered to each boy and the orders uttered by the guards such as "[h]old on to the rail and don't let go. Make a sound and you'll get more. Shut your fucking mouth, nigger" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 58). Moreover, during the lashings the guards used a three feet long strap with a wooden handle called Black Beauty which had been in use long before this night and thus "had to be repaired or replaced every so often" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 58). Elwood

counts the whippings, and he is astounded at how the number increases. During his moment of torture, he holds on to the top of the bed, bites the pillow and passes out before the suffering starts. According to Salvan (2021, p. 10) "[t]he white house is revealed, then, as the esoteric temple of white supremacism in the novel, a place where the violence against black boys can continue" insofar as the people outside the school remain unaware about the lashings and lynchings inside.

After recovering from the gashes at the school medical center, Elwood is introduced by Frank to a far deadlier place at Nickel: the infamous oak trees. This is an area of torture and death for black boys as no one would come back after being taken to the trees. Frank highlights that whereas The White House was integrated "[t]his place is separate. They take you out back, they don't bring you to the hospital. They put you down as escaped and that's that, boy" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 86). Again, in gothic description, the oak trees are depicted beside an abandoned horse stable whose ceiling had been destroyed, and "nature had crept inside, with skeletal bushes and limp grasses rising in the stalls. You could get up to some wickedness in there if you didn't believe in ghosts" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 85). There were two rings in each tree and according to Frank "[t]hey say once in a while they take a black boy here and shackle him up to those. Arms spread out. Then they get a horse whip and tear him up" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 85). The rumors in the reformatory reveal that a black kid named Griff had been brought there and killed after disobeying the director's order to lose a boxing match with Big Chet, a white kid. Fifty years later when his body had been finally exhumed evidencing that the rumors were true "the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 93). The oak trees thus represent a direct allusion to the form enslaved African Americans were murdered on the plantations as many of them would be

tied to a pole and lashed to death: a recurrent scene in (neo)slave narratives. As Salvan (2021, p. 5) comments "[i]n the light of the events depicted in the novel, and the historical connections between slavery and imprisonment" I would add that it is inevitable not to read the novel as a (neo)slave narrative because "the continuities between slavery and the prison can be observed in the imagery used by the author to depict the artifacts and scenarios of such violence."

Such continuities are present in the description of another third place: the dark cell. This last representative of Nickel's nocturnal body is a small room with no bathroom on the third floor in one of the reformatory's buildings. Elwood is sent to the dark cell after his second visit to The White House and left there for more than three weeks; much longer than the previous boys who had received the same punishment. Once again, the narrative alludes to slavery as the dark cell is described as part of a long history of racism and white supremacism which started during colonialism:

> Their 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. A term in an iron sweatbox, cooking his brains in the sun, had a way of bringing a buck around, and so did a dark cell, a room aloft in darkness, outside time. (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 151)

Providing some background information, Whitehead tells readers that "the dark cells remained in use even after two locked-up boys died in the fire of '21" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 151). After World War II the state outlawed these types of solitary confinements such as dark cells and sweatboxes in juvenile facilities and even Nickel underwent a period of progressive reform however "the rooms waited, blank and still and airless. They waited for wayward boys in need of an attitude adjustment. They wait still, as long as the sons— and the sons of those sons—remember"

(WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 151).

It is in this solitary confinement outside time that Elwood experiences a change in his character, becoming much less idealistic about desegregation and particularly Dr. Martin Luther King's words of advice. He thinks about Dr. King's famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* which he knew almost by heart and realizes that "he could not make that leap to love. He understood neither the impulse of the proposition nor the will to execute it" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 154). Finally, Elwood concludes that:

> The world had whispered its rules to him for his whole life and he refused to listen, hearing instead a higher order. The world continued to instruct: Do not love for they will disappear, do not trust for you will be betrayed, do not stand up for you will be swatted down.

Thus, locked inside the dark cell Elwood becomes ideologically closer to his down-to-earth friend Frank Turner as now he finally comprehends no one is going to save him. He realizes that the torture he has been undertaking at Nickel amounts to necropolitical practices that African Americans have been subjected to since slavery; the same practices that white people are "doing at this moment somewhere in Montgomery and Baton Rouge, in broad daylight on a city street outside Woolworths. Or some anonymous country road with no one to tell the tale" (WHITEHEAD, 2019, p. 142). Eventually, Frank appears to rescue Elwood from the dark cell as he knows that the guards have already decided to take Elwood to the oak trees. During their escape which resembles closely (neo)slave narratives, particularly the descriptions of slaves being chased by guards with hounds, Elwood is murdered but lives on in Frank Turner's decision to adopt his name during his free life in New York.

The Nickel Boys as an illustration of Mbembe's necropolitics

Mbembe explains that modern democratic countries construct their mythos of freedom and equality by hiding their most nefarious practices of violence exemplified by mass incarceration of minorities. Such necropolitical practices have direct ties with colonial slavery because "[d]emocracy, the plantation, and the colonial empire are objectively all part of the same historical matrix" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 34) and, besides, this original and structuring fact determines how we understand the violence of the contemporary global order. In his view, today's carceral system mixes two rationales: one of neutralization marked by torture and one of exile marked by indefinite confinement. Thus, incarceration reproduces the same logics of plantation slavery due to its uses of necropolitical methods in terms of an "inversion between life and death, as if life was merely death's medium" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 49) and possessed no importance. Moreover, "racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle" because it functions on one hand as "a generalized cheapening of the price of life and, on the other, a habituation to loss" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 49).

I have argued that Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* can be interpreted through the lens of Mbembe's concept of third places insofar as readers will be constantly reminded of slavery and its haunting presence in juvenile facilities today as they explore the narrative. For one, it is practically impossible not to interpret at The White House, the oak trees, and the dark cell as persistent necropolitical practices which link carceral life to slavery. Besides, these third places within Nickel reformatory are responsible for concealing the violence necessary to sustain the illusory nature of freedom in the U.S. Eventually, Whitehead writes a narrative that raises the dead to reveal a history that refuses to stay buried and rejects forgetting. In so doing, the novel expands our understanding of both the prison novel and

the (neo)slave narrative as long lingering necropolitical practices are made visible for public scrutiny.

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Da escravidão para prisão: necropolítica e a narrativa (neo)escrava em O reformatório Nickel, de Colson Whitehead
Resumo: Em seu sétimo romance, Colson Whitehead ficcionaliza a recente descoberta escandalosa de valas comuns clandestinas encontradas na Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, um reformatório em Marianna, Flórida. Durante

os seus 111 anos de existência, Dozier foi alvo de várias investigações, uma vez que rumores sobre maus-tratos aos seus detidos juvenis eram esporadicamente divulgados. Whitehead se concentra nas valas comuns, especificamente nos cadáveres negros e produz uma narrativa ficcional a partir desses corpos negros como forma de rejeitar o esquecimento e desenterrar um episódio escandaloso que a maioria dos americanos preferiria não ser informado. Através do conceito de necropolítica de Mbembe, afirmo que O Reformatório Nickel revela outro escândalo: a persistente natureza necropolítica do sistema carcerário americano. Meu argumento é que a estrutura palimpsesta do romance, ao justapor o romance de prisão com a narrativa (neo)escrava, produz uma ilustração precisa da crítica de Mbembe às democracias modernas, conforme postulado em seu conceito de necropolítica.
Palavras-chave: Prisão. Escravidão. Racismo. Necropolítica. Narrativa (neo) escrava.