



MEDIATED MEMORY AND TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA IN WHITEHEAD'S *THE NICKEL BOYS*

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Abstract

This article explores the intergenerational transmission of trauma in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), employing Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to analyze how inherited legacies shape marginalized identities and cultural consciousness. Postmemory, as conceptualized by Hirsch, describes the relationship of the "generation after" to personal, collective, and cultural trauma—processing experiences they "remember" only through mediated stories, images, and behaviors. This study examines how Whitehead's portrayal of systemic racial violence at the Nickel Academy—a fictional surrogate for the real-life Dozier School for Boys—reveals the enduring psychic scars and historical erasures within African American communities. By contrasting Elwood Curtis's civil-rights-driven idealism with Turner's cynical survivalist pragmatism, the article demonstrates how trauma is inherited not as a static recollection, but as a fragmented, embodied experience that dictates identity. Furthermore, the novel's non-linear narrative structure, temporal disjunctions, and symbolic imagery—such as the excavation of secret campus graves—are analyzed as formal reflections of the cyclical and disruptive nature of postmemorial recall. Ultimately, the article argues that *The Nickel Boys* functions as a vital literary memorial and a cultural critique, challenging the societal and institutional mechanisms that suppress historical violence while calling for a collective reckoning with America's racial injustices.

Keywords: *Collective Memory, Intergenerational Inheritance, Postmemory, Racial Violence, Trauma.*

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1. Introduction

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is a haunting account of state-sanctioned violence and its effects, inspired by Dozier Boys School. Whitehead (2019) chronicles the violent abuse of adolescent boys and the African American protagonist Elwood Curtis in his fictional Nickel Academy, a run-down "reform school." The depiction of Nickel Academy throughout the novel is both a historiographical recuperation of racism and an analysis of how trauma is a trans-temporal phenomenon that affects people and groups who are not directly involved. This article examines the transmission of trauma in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) through Marianne Hirsch's (2012) postmemory as a lens for exploring the narrative form and tropes that foreground mediated memory.

In *The Nickel Boys* (2019), Whitehead demonstrates how the Nickel Academy trauma is carried with people long after it has shut down. For example, the book begins with the discovery of a "secret graveyard on the north side of the Nickel campus" years after it was abandoned (p. 8). This discovery of the buried bodies is an example of repressed memory and an indication of social amnesia. As Hirsch (2012) explains, "I believe that the generational structures of postmemory I am delineating here can apply to the descendants of survivors as well as of perpetrators and of bystanders who witnessed massive traumatic events" (p. 5). Through this opening scene, Whitehead (2019) highlights how remembered and unremembered memories matter in the creation of cultural memory and consciousness.

Whitehead's (2019) use of fragmented narrative reflects the importance of memory and trauma transmission through the disruption of a traditional narrative. This approach parallels the often disjointed and fragmented nature of the experiences of trauma and echoes Hirsch's (2012) remark that postmemory exceeds the bounds of straightforward recollection; it is "a reconstruction and reactivation" of history. Whitehead (2019) creates a sense of temporal disjunction by juxtaposing different times and perspectives, mirroring the unpredictable and discontinuous nature of traumatic memories in the present.

Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, originally proposed in her book *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), has emerged as a vital term in describing how trauma (as it is not directly experienced) can be transmitted to the next generation and affect their emotions and identities. Hirsch (2012) describes postmemory as:

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (p. 5)

This is a means by which the children of trauma survivors can experience a sense of intimate, near-first-person knowledge of a trauma through narrative, image, and material. Regarding *The Nickel Boys* (2019), postmemory offers a way to understand how Elwood Curtis's experiences present a collective memory that is more than individual, and a multifaceted relationship with historical trauma that is explained by Hirsch's (2012) theory.

Hirsch's (2012) theory also highlights the importance of imagery and narrative in postmemory, arguing that "visual representations" can be a vehicle for the traumatic memory, enabling the viewer to vicariously experience the trauma of the past. In *The Nickel Boys* (2019), Whitehead uses symbolic imagery, like the secret graves at Nickel Academy, to invoke the denied histories of racial injustice in the US. These graves, which are buried beneath the school property, represent the erasure of individual identities as well as the suppression of trauma in society. Hirsch's (2012) analysis of mediated memory notes that the inclusion of such imagery in literature "bridges the gap" between the past and present, allowing the reader to remember and acknowledge injustices of the past that might otherwise be forgotten. The excavation of the bodies buried at Nickel Academy prompts Whitehead (2019) to awaken a postmemory that compels characters and the reader to realize the influence of the past on the present.

Postmemory is often characterized by the fragmented nature of trauma. As Hirsch (2008) observes, traumatic memories "do not belong exclusively to one time or place" but are rather 'sporadic, often without sequence' (p. 112). This idea is present in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) through Whitehead's non-linear narration that reflects the fragmented nature of memory. The flow of time and the sudden shift between Elwood's present and his past are used to represent the fragmented nature of the trauma, underscoring the contribution of postmemory to disrupting the traditional memory story. For Hirsch (2012), this fragmentation is the key element of postmemory, as it stands for the unresolved and fragmentary sign of the trauma. In *The Nickel Boys* (2019), Whitehead employs a fragmented narrative to draw the reader to experience the rhythm of the traumatic element that pervades Elwood in the novel and is also applied to depict the institutional aspect of the inflicted violence of African American culture. Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) employs Marianne Hirsch's postmemory to depict the generational passing on of racial trauma. In this article, we observe how Whitehead critiques the systems that both perpetuate and erase memories of racial abuse and calls for a collective confrontation of America's institutional racism.

2. Review of Literature

Memory and trauma studies have become a prominent interdisciplinary domain in literary and cultural studies, especially about narratives that respond to historical trauma and suffering. Previously published work on trauma theory addresses the psychological,

narrative, and ethical complexities of depicting experiences that defy coherent narrative. Meanwhile, memory studies have shifted the conversation from individual to cultural, collective, and intergenerational memories. In this intellectual milieu, the concept of postmemory offered by Marianne Hirsch provides a vital lens through which to consider how trauma is passed down through the generations via mediated forms like stories, images, silence, and cultural narratives. This review of the literature explores major theoretical works on trauma and postmemory, as well as critical approaches to the topic of African American historical trauma and Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019). This review provides the theoretical basis for understanding how mediated memory and trauma are transmitted across generations in the novel and identifies key areas where this research aims to contribute.

Trauma studies, such as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), underline how trauma is deferred and disjointed, often defying direct narrative representation. Trauma is not told as a narrative but rather in fragmented memories, narrative silences, and gaps. This disjointed view of trauma and historical truth is echoed in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Whitehead's fragmented narrative and the delayed revelation of Elwood Curtis's fate.

Dori Laub (1992) stresses that witnessing is a very important factor in the healing process of the trauma memory in the survivor, and Judith Herman (1992) relates the three stages of the survivor to recover from trauma: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. It can be found in *The Nickel Boys* (2019) by Whitehead where there is a witness of pain and trauma expressed in personal letters, fragmentary reminiscences, and narrative silences. These experiences resonate with Laub's view that trauma is very emotional and not always easy to express. Cathy Caruth (1996) also states that trauma is not always directly expressible; it often returns in fragmented narratives, or in silence, or in fragmented memories. Whitehead also echoes this in the novel's discontinuous timeline and withholding of Elwood's fate, thereby showing how trauma can persist as the tension of silence.

Hirsch (2012) introduces the term postmemory, which refers to the relationship in which the second generation carries the trauma of the first generation through mediated memories internalized via images, stories, and cultural rituals. This is evident in the African American narratives that transmit the history of traumas of slavery, violence, and segregation through stories and imagery. The main character Elwood Curtis symbolizes the trauma and racial violence at Nickel Academy. Elwood had never done the kind of things that got others into trouble. He told himself that he just needed to continue doing what he had always done: be good (p. 51).

His disappointment suggests a postmemory rupture. Hirsch's (2012) description of postmemory holds that it is not only a passive inheritance but also the reworking of the

past in the present. This is because the emotional toll exacted when inherited ideals clash with systemic injustices leads to Elwood's identity crisis (Hirsch, 2012). Turner's character, by contrast, is that of a cynical survivalist who does not hold on to the nostalgic narratives of the past. This too is an example of postmemory, according to Hirsch (2012), that exhibits the psychological legacy of violence. Turner's cynicism and emotional distance function as a defense mechanism that is a consequence of prolonged exposure to violence, and this history is as formative as Elwood's optimism. This contrast between the two main characters suggests that postmemory is not uniform.

The novel shows that postmemory is not only psychological but also cultural. The old school serves as a metaphor for the transmission of trauma, where racial violence is repeated. Therefore, the trauma of the two characters is not individual but represents the continuation of the trauma of African Americans. Hirsch (2012) argues that postmemory is collective and familial. Moreover, the latter half of the novel, which describes the events after Elwood is killed and Turner survives, reaffirms the endurance of postmemory as the aftermath of trauma, even in the absence of further violence. Thus, Whitehead (2019) confirms that trauma is not only historical but also cultural, and it affects the psyches of future generations.

Although the literature on trauma studies has made significant contributions to understanding how trauma is presented, inherited, and transmitted, there is a gap in the application of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to contemporary African American literature, such as Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019). While a broad range of attention has been given to trauma representation in African American literature, there has been no comprehensive and thorough textual analysis that applies the aspect of postmemory as Hirsch suggests, to show how African American characters can inherit and internalize trauma. The gap in postmemory-focused studies on Whitehead's (2019) novel presents an opportunity to explore the potential for using postmemory to understand the continuing impact of racial violence and oppression in African American lives.

This research gap underscores the need for a holistic transdisciplinary analysis that goes beyond trauma theory, postmemory, and African American literary criticism. This call for an expanded, transdisciplinary approach aligns with broader developments in contemporary historical fiction analysis, where scholars have increasingly utilized multi-layered frameworks—such as intersectionality—to explore how structural forces shape marginalized identities. For instance, recent critical work has demonstrated how overlapping systems of power, class, and patriarchy converge to dictate the autonomy of figures within rigid institutional settings (Rashid & Akram, 2025). Incorporating similar multidimensional viewpoints helps bridge the analytical space between individual trauma and the macro-level political structures that reinforce it.

3. Theoretical Framework

Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, as presented in her book *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), has become an important framework in discussions of the transmission of trauma and its research using mediated forms of memory. Though originally applied to Holocaust memory, Hirsch's framework has since extended to other historical traumas including racial violence and institutional trauma.

This is complemented by Belsey (2002) who stresses that cultural texts (written, visual, or oral) do not just represent historical trauma but also create meanings of the trauma. Texts, images, and narratives both reflect and transform trauma as it is remembered across generations, according to Belsey (2002). In her work on poststructuralism, she highlights that the meaning of trauma is always mediated by interpreting these cultural representations — for example, literature, photographs, and films. This is in line with Hirsch's (2012) claim that postmemory is not fixed but relational, affective, and generational, in the sense that those who have no direct memory of the trauma interpret the emotional and psychological effects of trauma.

The theory of postmemory is part of, and intermingles with, trauma theory, influenced by figures like Cathy Caruth, and Dori Laub. Trauma theory explores the ways in which people and cultures represent and respond to traumatic events, particularly those relating to violence, loss, and injustice. One of the central features of trauma theory is that trauma cannot be fully represented because it is too shattering, fragmented, and haunting to be known or explained by its survivors (Caruth, 1996). Trauma therefore exists in a space of disjunction where the effects of an event are felt but not captured within the usual narratives that might explain it.

In her book *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch (2012) considers how trauma is transmitted through generations. She states that postmemory does not mean simply passing on the past, but it is a generative process of reconstruction and refashioning of memory. The transmission of trauma occurs through mediated forms — photographs, narratives, and cultural texts — as a bridge of the past trauma to the present. The “generation after” is, through these mediators, made witness to these events; they engage in what Hirsch describes as “vicarious witnessing” (Hirsch, 2012). This is a thoroughly relational process, encompassing both individual and collective memory.

3.1. Core Concepts of Postmemory

The core of Hirsch's (2012) idea of postmemory is based on the concept of vicarious witnessing. It describes the creative work of enabling those who did not suffer the trauma of history to experience that trauma vicariously through the stories, images, and silences transmitted by those who did. Vicarious witnessing is a significant means of developing postmemory, through which descendants can engage in an ethical and emotional relationship with the past. Hirsch (2012) describes vicarious witnessing as both an identification and a separation. For example, children of trauma survivors are raised in

an environment in which memories are always present but are piecemeal. These fragments, often passed down through family narratives, pictures, and cultural representations, demand to be pieced together by the “generation after.”

Alternatively, affiliative postmemory can be described as the way individuals and groups not related to trauma survivors tend to engage with and inherit their memories through culture and mediation (Hirsch, 2012). In this regard, collective narratives play a vital role in establishing collective memory. Affiliative postmemory is supported by cultural products such as literature, images, and video recordings that work together to reach out to the audience and to invite them to participate in remembering together.

Hirsch’s (2012) emphasis is on the mediation of postmemory. Postmemory is not based on individual recollections as memory is, but rather on cultural artefacts and representations of the past that mediate the past. This mediation not only facilitates the transmission of the past but also informs how the past is remembered, interpreted, and understood (Hirsch, 2012). Drawing on Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1981), she talks about the relationship between photographs and the past and the imaginative space they create. Hirsch (2012) suggests that photographs are both indexical objects (with a record of a prior occurrence) and they require the viewer to imaginatively enter that space with their emotions and interpretations.

3.2. Ethical Considerations & Interdisciplinary Synthesis

LaCapra’s work on trauma focuses on his remarks on empathy in the transmission of memory. He critiques over-identification with the past and the potentially perilous identification with a trauma experienced by others in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). This parallels the concept of postmemory proposed by Hirsch (2012), as she points out the imaginative construction of inherited trauma from an ethical point of view. Both Hirsch (2012) and LaCapra (2001) show that postmemory does not aim to reproduce the experience of the survivors but is about preserving and re-framing it in an ethical manner. The fact that the parts of their focus converge in the sense of being ethical in representation illustrates the precariousness of the balance in representing trauma.

In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), Rothberg extends Hirsch’s (2012) affiliative postmemory by suggesting that memories of various historical traumas can co-exist and interconnect. This expands Hirsch’s (2012) familial postmemory to a global level and demonstrates how mediated memory enhances solidarity among different memory communities. Rothberg’s work affirms Hirsch’s (2012) view of postmemory as a connection between unrelated historical events, like the Holocaust and colonialism (Rothberg, 2009, p. 15). In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth explores the irrepresentability of trauma. Her focus on narrative fragmentation relates to Hirsch’s

concept of mediated postmemory because both underline that trauma can only be expressed indirectly and imaginatively (Caruth, 1996, p. 9; Hirsch, 2012, p. 42).

Michel Foucault claims that memory and history are defined in terms of power relations, where dominant discourses determine which memories are remembered and which are repressed (Foucault, 1977). Foucault's work also resonates with the postmemory that Hirsch forwards because it highlights the question of state power in terms of collective memory, particularly in post-dictatorial societies where survivors and their children strive to remember hidden histories. For both Foucault and Hirsch, memory is political and can be influenced by political and social tensions.

Dori Laub believes that narration is necessary in allowing survivors to process their trauma and to heal (Laub, 1992). Stories help them to revise their understanding of their trauma and their past. The postmemory theory proposed by Hirsch is akin to Laub's view because it is not merely referring to the transmission of trauma but also a narrative process by which the parents' stories would be redefined by their children.

In conclusion, existing literature shows that although trauma theory has dealt with the psychological and narrative implications of trauma, and postmemory theory provides insight into the transmission of trauma, there is a gap in incorporating these approaches into the analysis of African American texts. Current analyses of *The Nickel Boys* tend to concentrate on the issues of institutional racism, historical violence, and social injustice, but less on postmemory and mediated remembrance. Further, the significance of silence, narrative disjunction, and symbolic imagery as the vehicles of trauma have not been adequately examined. This suggests a need for a study that integrates trauma theory, postmemory, and textual analysis, to examine the ethical and memory-based role of Whitehead's novel. This research addresses this gap by bringing Hirsch's concept of postmemory to African American literature and adding a new dimension to trauma studies and contemporary American literary studies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Erasure and Reconstruction at Nickel Academy

Using the theories of vicarious witnessing and mediation, Whitehead uses the physical location of the Nickel Academy as a textual reclamation of repressed history. The Nickel Academy, as the focus of the novel, becomes an allegory of actual and figurative spaces saturated with suppressed history. Hirsch's (2012) theory is helpful to understand how *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is a textual reclamation of absent trauma.

The graves in Nickel Academy offer a literal metaphor of what Hirsch calls "absent presences" in the gaps of cultural memories. These graves are not just graves but also an attempt to literally bury the trauma of marginalized people. As Whitehead (2019) writes: "Even in death the boys were in trouble" (p. 8). This discovery illustrates Hirsch's point. According to Hirsch (2012):

On the one hand, they are imperfect documents, as Seiffert shows, already deeply problematic when they are taken; on the other hand, as points of memory, they embody an alternate discourse, create an opening in the present to something in the past that goes beyond their indexicality or the information they record. As Andrea Liss writes, they have the “potential to provoke historical memory and to confront the viewer’s subjectivities.” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 73)

The unmarked gravestones at the Nickel Academy represent the erasures that Hirsch (2012) notes as a feature of postmemory. These graves are not only literal graves but also a metaphorical site of the institutional denial of violence against marginalized communities. The state’s failure to preserve the memories of these boys is an example of the processes that lead to historical forgetting. Whitehead (2019) describes, “No one cared to remember the boys. They had no plaques, no memorials — just unmarked ground, forgotten twice over” (p. 24). This is in line with Hirsch’s claim that mediated memory often starts with the recovery of hidden or suppressed histories (Hirsch, 2008, p. 109).

4.2. Character Study: Idealism vs. Survival

This article examines how historical trauma shapes the characters and their views on the world, through a study of Elwood Curtis and Turner’s responses to it. Elwood, inspired by his grandmother and the civil rights movement, holds an optimistic view of life in terms of justice and equality. His idealistic views of nonviolence and progress are a result of the story of triumph and survival. However, his stay at Nickel Academy forces him to confront institutional violence and disenchantment. Whitehead (2019) describes, “Elwood believed that justice was as close as a handshake, but here it was another word for punishment” (p. 131). This conflict illustrates the psychological toll of living in a world of inherited hope, against the backdrop of violence.

Turner, on the contrary, is a realist in his fight for survival and does not subscribe to the idealism that Elwood lived by. His skeptical attitude toward the narratives of justice reveals a defensive response to trauma, when survival takes precedence. Yet the fact that Turner, even after Elwood’s death, chose to keep the memory of Elwood alive is evidence of affiliative postmemory. By preserving Elwood’s memory, Turner represents Hirsch’s (2012) concept of ethical witnessing as memory resisting erasure.

4.3. Narrative Structure and Symbolic Imagery

Whitehead’s (2019) narrative style, including fragmented narration and time jumps from the past to the present, is an example of Hirsch’s view that postmemory cannot be presented in a linear fashion. In *The Nickel Boys* (2019), this produces a feeling of temporal disorientation that reflects the fragmented nature of inherited trauma. Whitehead (2019) approaches the novel in a way that the reader encounters the memories of the Nickel Academy not in a linear narrative but as mediated memories. The oscillation between the past and the present leads Whitehead (2019) to use the fragmented narrative to depict

postmemory. This structure is in line with Hirsch's (2012) argument that postmemory is not a chronological narration of events but rather a fragmented, mediated recollection. Such photographs in the context of trauma constitute a kind of "spectral evidence," revealing "the striking gap between what we can see and what we can know" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 61). As Hirsch (2012) further observes on this visual disjunction, these fragments function because "the contrast between the present of the viewing and the past of the image is at its most acute" (p. 63). The discovery of the Nickel Academy graves is both literal and figurative testimony. Whitehead (2019) raises the physical evidence of the boys who endured and died in the academy, reclaiming the erasures of the history of these boys. This is in line with Hirsch's (2012) argument that mediated memory needs to resist historical erasure, to promote accountability and justice.

Whitehead (2019) not only represents trauma but also calls for the reader to ethically participate in the act of witnessing it. This demand on the reader is made apparent early in the novel when the narrative shifts to the modern excavation, noting that "the data was structural... but the student archaeologists ground it into human terms" (p. 4). Through the restrained, yet moving, portrayal of injustice, he evokes narrative empathy, inviting readers to identify with characters from the past and across cultures. This echoes Hirsch's claim that postmemory is an ethical rather than purely theoretical construct. For her, the passing on of trauma should be met with a responsibility for representation and reception.

The novel is a memorial to the forgotten and unheard victims of institutional violence — that is, the real-life Dozier School for Boys, the basis of the Nickel Academy. Whitehead (2019) grants voice to the unheard, memory to the unremembered, and dignity to the disenfranchised. This memorial function resonates with the idea that literature can memorialize traumatic events when institutions cannot (Hirsch, 2012). Whitehead also condemns the racist systems that facilitated the abuse. By showing how institutions that were ostensibly set up to "reform" the boys became sites of oppression, Whitehead (2019) critiques not only the history of racism, but its impact in education, law, and social systems.

The narrative unmasks this false benevolence by revealing how the school functioned, noting that "the school's financial ledger was a masterpiece of creative accounting, masking the profit made off the boys' free labor" (p. 114). The fact that this abuse was masked by the rhetoric of bureaucratism and Christian morality makes systems that claim to save even more sinister and spurious. The analysis of *The Nickel Boys* (2019) reveals that Whitehead has cleverly embedded postmemory in each of the components of the novel's form: character, imagery, and subtext. In these aspects, the novel is turned into a memorial of suppressed trauma and a critique of all the social conditions that continue to make this trauma possible. This formal synthesis exemplifies what Hirsch (2012) terms a transformative aesthetic, an effort to create "creative ways of honoring and transmitting the stories of others without deleting their difference" (p. 84).

5. Conclusion

Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is not simply a haunting literary work, but also a profound exploration of generational trauma. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's (2012) postmemory concept, this article examined how trauma is not confined to the experiences of the victims, but echoes through the generations. This conclusion offers a reflection on the key insights of the article; a summary of the significance of postmemory in African American literature; and a consideration of the significance of the novel for cultural remembrance, ethical witnessing, and literary criticism of institutional racism.

As the article has shown, *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is a story of trauma mediated by memory, silence, and imagery. The novel does not just recount events, but its fragmented and non-linear narrative echoes the disjuncture of memory. Using multiple timelines and the delayed disclosure of key events, Whitehead (2019) mirrors the trauma effect — an experience that cannot be framed in a logical, chronological manner. This narrative technique has parallels to the notion of mediated memory by Hirsch, which illustrates the way trauma is remembered, repressed, and revisited to ultimately shape individual identity and collective understanding.

It is worth noting the portrayal of Elwood Curtis and Turner as two extremes of postmemory. Elwood's character is shaped by the idealism and moralism of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly that of Martin Luther King Jr. His optimism in justice, equality, and nonviolent resistance is a cultural inheritance of hope. However, his experiences of violence at Nickel Academy and, ultimately, his death reveal how misaligned inherited values and realities can be. His postmemory, which is characterized by promise and hope, is violated by institutional violence, demonstrating that inherited memory is often disillusioned in the presence of systems of oppression.

Turner, on the contrary, exemplifies another response to postmemory — cynicism, emotional coldness, and survivalism. Unlike Elwood, Turner does not follow family values but is cynical about the world due to his experience of systemic injustice. His decision to assume Elwood's identity after his death can be described as a complex response to trauma: a survival strategy to cope with his loss, guilt, and trauma. Turner's experience confirms Hirsch's (2012) argument that postmemory is not a single experience; it is differentiated and even contradictory in terms of emotional and psychological responses according to the individual's proximity to the trauma and their relationship with it.

Crucially, *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is not just about trauma but also about the societal structures that condone, create, and repeat trauma. Whitehead challenges the reader to confront the uncomfortable truth of how deeply entrenched racism and violence can become in systems of power by presenting a government-approved institution that operates on the façade of rehabilitation and reform but is responsible for acts of violence. The novel challenges readers to recognize not only the continuity of racial injustice in the

past but also to acknowledge that this trauma is not past — it is present and distorts the future it anticipates. In this sense, the novel becomes a cultural object of resistance to which the collective must acknowledge its complicity and take up the burden of the memory and legacy of the victims.

In conclusion, *The Nickel Boys* (2019) is a call to historical awareness — an appeal to remember that the past is not past and that it must be remembered to promote justice and accountability. The novel can, therefore, be seen as both a cultural critique and a literary memorial, and as such a significant piece of trauma literature and postmemory scholarship. This article adds to the burgeoning literature on memory, trauma, and racial justice in asserting the value of literature as a means not only for telling stories but also for creating memories, meanings, and pathways to action on behalf of the pasts of suffering.

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