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ANALYSIS OF THE POWER SPACE IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE NICKLE BOYS*

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ABSTRACT

As an outstanding African American writer, Colson Whitehead always focuses on the issue of racism. His *The Nickel Boys* (2019) wins the Pulitzer Prize, retelling the real situation of the black boys abused in American reform schools in twentieth century. On the basis of the space theory, this paper explores the texts and the real events of the abuse of the black children in the reform schools through analyzing different forms of the power space, the discipline in the power space and the resistance to the power space. It calls for the continuing attention to the racial problem that racial segregation and discrimination have posed a great threat to the survival of the black children, which is also the true portrayal of the living conditions of the entire black community.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*, power space

1. Introduction

As an outstanding African American writer, Colson Whitehead (1969-) always focuses on the issue of racism, especially the history of rebellion and violence. Thus, he is considered to “merge actual historical events with fictional elements through managing to recreate the past by utilizing literary techniques and his imagination” (Pistikoudis 2). Whitehead has published seven more novels and two works of nonfiction till now, among which *The Underground Railroad* (2016) won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2016 and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2017. In 2020, his novel, *The Nickel Boys* (2019) won the Pulitzer Prize again, marking him as one of the most significant and prolific authors of the contemporary era.

Drawing from the real history, *The Nickel Boys* begins with the media's disclosure of a secret burial ground containing the bodies of young boys on the site of a now-defunct reform school, Nickel Academy. After learning about the news, Elwood Curtis, a Nickel Boy who lives in New York now, recalls the past. In Tallahassee, the capital city of the state of Florida in the 1960s, Elwood Curtis always attempts to excel at his school studies and tries to contribute to the gradual uplifting of the black race. One day, though, he is arrested and falsely accused of being an accomplice in a car theft, and later incarcerated in the Nickel Boys Academy. Worse still, enduring severe abuses, Elwood is also forced to work for the school and its corrupt moneymaking schemes. Although he sticks to trying to expose Nickel Academy's abuse, he is brutally beaten and imprisoned in solitary confinement after the failure of disclosure. Then, his friend in the academy, Turner, finds and rescues him and they escape along with many other boys together. As they run, Elwood is shot in the back. Turner, upon getting to safety,

realizes that the only way he can survive is to adopt Elwood's name and identity. After learning more about the investigation into Nickel, Turner, named Elwood now, decides to return to Florida for the first time in decades in order to give Elwood a proper burial and speak for the black boys who were killed or abused at the hands of Nickel Academy.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is a French philosopher, social theorist and literary critic who attaches great importance to the issue of space and applies the theory of space to explain the function of power relations, which provides a new access for people to reflect on the contemporary literary theories.

Firstly, Foucault defines power as a sort of network that weaves into the social fabric. It does not refer to the order given by political power, but the interaction of relations in the society, challenging the traditional concepts of power as the ability of certain people to dominate others in a certain way. In this sense, power is strongly correlated with space because "space is the foundation of any public form and the functioning of power" (Bao 13-14). In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault explores the inseparable relationship between space and power by relating the places of confinement to the functioning of power, such as asylums where "an implicit system of obligation was established" -- "he had the right to be fed, but he must accept the physical and moral constraint of confinement" (48).

Secondly, Foucault concentrates his study on the theories of power, knowledge and body under the frame of space. As Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*, "any growth of power can contribute to possible branches of knowledge in them and the effect of power will expand through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge" (224). Meanwhile, power possesses the function of discipline, which has been defined as "a type of power" and "a modality for its exercise" (215). Then, Foucault elaborates three ways of punishment: public execution, imprisonment and discipline. Though the target of punishment remains to be human body all the time, the implication is entirely different. In ancient times, body was tortured by the ruling class to consolidate their authority. Nevertheless, in the modern society, power intends to create docile body through well-planned techniques and means of discipline. Foucault introduces an architectural concept to describe the disciplinary society: Panopticon, where prisoners are "inserted in a fixed position, in which the slightest movements are supervised and all events are recorded" (197). In this sense, disciplinary institutions like the Panopticon virtually epitomize the management of social relations.

Thirdly, according to Foucault, the network of power permeates into every corner of the society and manipulates people's behavior with disciplinary techniques, which deeply restricts the liberation of and development of individuals. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault focuses on the living conditions of people in power space and proposes two noticeable strategies: partial struggle and aesthetics of existence. On the one hand, he considers that there is no single locus of "Great Refusal", "soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary" (95-96). Hence, a plurality of resistances is required to diminish the force of disciplinary power on each individual. On the other hand, Foucault points out that we should concentrate on the practice of the self rather than attempt to dissolve power relations in a utopia full of transparent communications.

## 3. Power Space in *The Nickle boys*

The forms of power space, the discipline in it and the resistance to it would be discussed based on the texts of *The Nickle Boys* which retells the real situation of the black boys abused in reform schools in America in the twentieth century.

According to the official documents, the Supreme Court declared that it was illegal to segregate public schools based on race in 1954 and President Johnson made all institutional forms of racial segregation and discrimination illegal by signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964. However, schools like the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, remained segregated until 1968. In the early 2000s, a group of former Dozier students, now known as The White House Boys, came forward to share their stories of abuse. Later in 2009, the Dozier School failed to pass an inspection and was subsequently investigated by the Florida government. In the intervening years, an

anthropological team studied the land and unearthed 55 graves, in addition to determining that there had been at least 100 deaths on the campus, while only 14 bodies have been identified. Hence, by combining the factual story of the Dozier School for Boys along with fictitious elements, Whitehead “bring(s) them into conversation with the greater social and political landscape” and “trace(s) their roots through history -- simultaneously engaging the past, present, and future in critique of reform schools, alongside its mission to instill hope, lend it the political purpose” (Strickland 70).

### 3.1 The Forms of the Power Space

As what Foucault has illustrated in *Madness and Civilization*, Arthur G. Dozier School, nicknamed The Nickle Academy in the novel, “is rather a sort of semi judicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes” with “a quasi-absolute sovereignty, jurisdiction without appeal, a writ of execution against which nothing can prevail” (40). Power operates in different spatial forms in Nickel Academy, governing the boys’ survival.

Firstly, similar to the pyramid, the hierarchical space is characterized by strict hierarchy. In the Nickel Boys Academy, they have “four ranks of behavior here -- start as a Grub, work your way up to Explorer, then Pioneer, and finally, Ace. Earn merits for acting right, and you move on up the ladder. You work on achieving the highest rank of Ace and then you graduate and go home to your families” (Whitehead 47). Meanwhile, An Ace should listen to “the housemen and his house father, does his work without shirking and malingering, and applies himself to his studies. An Ace does not roughhouse, he does not cuss, he does not blaspheme or carry on” (ibid). Obviously, the adults holds the absolute power over the boys, while the boys need to get merits from the hard labor “with scythes and rakes” (Whitehead 59). What’s more, it is worth noting that not only the separation between the different levels is deep, the atmosphere in the same class is also unfriendly. During the eating time, “big kids aren’t allowed to sit at a little-kids table” (Whitehead 54). When Elwood intervenes in the fight in the bathroom to help a bullied boy, Corey, he was both beaten by Black Mike and the white houseman. Thus, violence remains the main theme in the reform school and the authority of the provost symbolizing the Academy cannot be exceeded.

Secondly, the squeezed private space in the Nickel Academy gives a strong sense of overwhelming. In Room 2 of the dormitory, Cleveland, “three rows of bunks stretched over the blue linoleum, each row with ten beds, each bed with a trunk at the foot for the boy’s things” (Whitehead 51). The loss of private space infringes human’s dignity with the roar of the punishment machine and the shouts of the boys being heard easily among themselves. Besides, the share of the government’s grants to Nickel boys was secretly sold by the Nickel principals to local restaurants and other institutions. Worse still, black students who violated discipline were sent to the “White House” to be flogged, and even to be raped in the basement and mutilated in the backyard. The graves of black teenagers who were executed in secret, were so random that they even lacked a cross or a name. The unique field of the Nickle Academy severely squeezes the living space of the Nickle boys, projecting the power discipline.

Thirdly, the enclosure space in the Nickle Academy is both imagined and real. At the first sight, what Elwood has seen is that “tall stone walls and barbed wire, but there were no walls at all... It was the nicest-looking property Elwood had ever seen -- a real school, a good one, not the forbidding reformatory he’d conjured the last few weeks” (Whitehead 45). There are no walls, no fences, boys can even go out of the school to work or do community service, and they could be picked up home after being an Ace. The space seems to be open, however, the boys’ suffering, remained buried in Nickel Academy for many years, being a secret waiting to be discovered, which is apparently a characteristic of the enclosed space. Even worse, racial segregation and discrimination are illegal, but the blacks out of the Academy still face the same predicament as the Nickle boys. As what Turner has said, “I used to think out there is out there and then once you’re in here, you’re in here... But now that I been out and I been brought back, I know there’s nothing in here that changes people. In here and out there are the same, but in here no one has to act fake anymore” (Whitehead 79).

Therefore, the living space of the Nickel boys is inhuman as well as against the law -- “state law, but also Elwood’s. If everyone looked the other way, then everybody was in on it. If he looked the other way, he was as

implicated as the rest" (Whitehead 79). Such belief encourages Elwood and his fellow friends to run away to revolt the discipline for freedom then.

### 3.2 The Discipline in the Power Space

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses the issue of power through the history of punishment. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witness a huge shift in the punishment system, namely, the shift from public executions to judicial examination and imprisonment. From his perspective, both systems reflect a certain mode in which power operates with the human body as the medium and aims to create docile bodies. In other words, the human body suffers strict regimentation of power in every society. With the emergence of new techniques, people are able to "implement meticulous control of the operations of the body", which constantly subjugates its forces and imposes on them "a relation of docility-utility" (137). Gradually, the general formula of domination called discipline draws wide public concern with disciplinary power permeating the whole society through various institutions such as schools, hospitals, armies and factories.

The Nickel Academy provides such a field of imprisonment where the Nickel boys are totally under the surveillance. Each dormitory is equipped with the official quarters; the dining room set up the special area for the officials to observe all the students during eating time; and the boys' every move, including the daily behaviors and compulsory tasks, has been recorded and archived by the instructors. In the sense of hierarchical surveillance, the Nickel School fully fits the definition of an institution of observation, recording and training, forming a Panopticon, where all the qualifications for privacy have been removed.

Besides, Foucault defines discipline as a kind of political anatomy or mechanics of power. Through a whole set of techniques that one chooses, discipline stipulates how one can have control over others' bodies so that they will not only do what one wishes but also do as one wishes. As a modest and suspicious power which generates a calculated and permanent operating mechanism, discipline "makes" individuals (170). The guarantee of the discipline relies on the mechanism of the punishment -- "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. 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" (Whitehead 64). Desmond told Elwood that once the punishment started, "it was best not to move. The strap had a notch cut into it, and it'd snag on you and slice if you were not still" (Whitehead 65). After experiencing the physical torture, "it took two hours for the doctor to remove the fibers" owing to the fact that "the beating had embedded bits of the first into his skin" (Whitehead 70). Under these circumstances, the boys could only obey the order, or they may be killed and buried in Boot Hill.

In addition, in *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood lost both parents and was raised by his grandmother. Despite his intense intellectual curiosity, he only had basic children's books. The absence of guardians directly leads to the material deprivation, and such poverty reduces the education rate of the blacks. That is the reason why Elwood and Pete competed fiercely for the encyclopedia in a match of washing dishes. Thus, Elwood's desire for the encyclopedia, his all-out efforts in the game and his frustration at being duped all illustrate the intellectual dilemma of black teenagers. The lack of educational resources in a disguised way increases the crime rate of the blacks, which is also one of the reasons for the long-term existence of such Nickel Academies. Furthermore, without knowledge, one who cannot pass the examination outside the Academy would not obtain the power, either, thus facing the reality of discrimination and being marginalized.

### 3.3 The Resistance to the Power Space

In fact, the spatial relationship between the boys and the Managers in the Nickel Academy implies a sense of opposites. The relaxation of management will lead to the stretched living space of the teenagers. Well aware of this spatial relationship, the boys launched different resistance practices.

Because of the great profits of gambling, the student boxing tournament is a major event of the year in the Nickel Academy, attracting a large number of local officials and school board members to bet on and attend it. The Nickel administrators asked Griff, a black player who entered the final before the game, to deliberately

lose to a white opponent, while Griff did his best to win in the arena. The competition between Griff and the white student in the same space, reflects not only the physical power for the control of the arena space, but also the revolt of the space concept of White Supremacy (Wang and Yu 31). As a result, although Griff's ending remains unknown in the boys' minds, his dispute announces the new ownership of the honor, shaking the inherent pattern of the power space in the Nickle Academy, thus encouraging the further resistance of the boys.

Griff's resistance tries to disintegrate the inherent hierarchy from within, but Elwood chooses a different approach. There were four ways out of Nickel:

One: 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...; Two: The court might intervene... Still, the law was corrupt and capricious in various measure...; Three: You could die. Of "natural causes" even, if abetted by unhealthy conditions, malnutrition, and the pitiless constellation of negligence...; Fourth: Finally, you could run. Make a run for it and see what happened. (Whitehead 142-144)

However, "Elwood decided there was a fifth way. Get rid of Nickel" (Whitehead 156). Elwood reported the school administrators directly to government inspectors in order to destroy the confinement space in the Nickle Academy and return to freedom in the outside world. As he says, the revolt is not "an obstacle course... You can't go around it -- you have to go through it" (Whitehead 172). Unfortunately, Elwood's failure conveys the infeasibility of seeking help from others who gained power as identities of the whites, thus pointing out the only active way for Turner - just run.

Turner's spatial practice is more pragmatic. Faced with the community service assigned by the Nickle Academy, Turner focuses on the escape routes and any tools that could help. Turner's resistance was not to compete for the survival space with the whites in the Academy, nor to destroy the Academy for free space, but to get rid of Nickle's oppression and compete with the white people in the social space outside Nickle. Outside the Nickle Academy, though, there are still difficulties to live and Turner chooses to live with Elwood's name. When the right time comes, "he had to go back. To speak about Elwood's story, no matter what happened to him... Tell the sheriff who he was, share Elwood's story and what they did to him when he tried to put a stop to their crimes. Tell the White House boys that he was one of them, and he survived, like them. Tell anyone who cared that he used to live there" (Whitehead 207). Under these circumstances, the new space free from a threatening social environment, institutional violence and injustice has been gradually forming.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to Foucault's theory of power space, this paper analyzes Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, exploring a new perspective for studying this novel. The numerous forms of violence and oppression that have been experienced by the blacks, especially the black children in the American society, become the focus of the novel and the paper.

To begin with, the hierarchical space shows the insurmountable authority of the Academy; the squeezed private space damages the dignity of boys; the enclosed space not only exists factually in the Academy, but also is a social reality imagined by both black and white people. Besides, the Nickle Academy constructs a Panopticon where the boys' behaviour are under surveillance and their bodies are tamed by the disciplines. Also, their lack of knowledge to gain power has been neglected. In addition, the Nickle boys tried different ways to revolt against the unreasonable and illegal power space of the academy, and they successfully waited for the solution in the end.

To conclude, the novel calls for the continuing attention to the racial problem that racial segregation and discrimination have posed a great threat to the survival of the black children, which is also the true portrayal of the living conditions of the entire black community in American society.

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