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Why Telling Stories about Black Bodies Matters

Physical Pain, Traumatic Body Memories and the Restoration of the Self in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract

The current Master thesis focuses on the concept of traumatic body memories, and departs from the notion that memories of traumatic experiences with pain can become encoded on a physical level, a place that does not adhere to the standard rules of discourse. The impact of pain's inexpressible nature is that victims are left with a traumatic memory that cannot exit their bodies, hereby remaining a haunting presence beneath their skins that affects their daily lives. In addition, because of its inexpressibleness, pain can be appropriated or dismissed. This is particularly visible with African Americans, whose bodies have repeatedly been used in popular culture and in political discourses to promote racial stereotypes. It is for this reason that the actual lived experiences of African Americans must be made available for sharing and claiming, and literary works by authors of color have offered an avenue for this. In recent years, the multifaced qualities of literature have also been recognized in the field of psychotherapy, proponents maintaining that enhanced narrative capabilities will increase people's understanding of themselves and each other. By analyzing Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), which offers a fictional representation of the abuse of Black youths at the former Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, this study investigates the means by which physical pain can and must be made interpretable through narratives, in turn demonstrating that telling one's buried truths to a willing listener is imperative to restoring the self that was lost amidst the traumatic past.

Preface

Before I began with my Master thesis I questioned whether I, as a white woman, had the right to discuss the painful experiences of Black people[1] as represented in African American literature. My enthusiasm for books written by authors of color was sparked after reading Frederick Douglass's autobiography and Toni Morrison's novel titled *The Bluest Eye*. Douglass's steadfastness in the face of blatant hypocrisy, slavery, and institutionalized racism garnered my respect and admiration, while Morrison's novel changed my opinion about the negative impact of cultural products, e.g., movies, advertisements etc., on people's perception of African Americans. Both books made me reconsider my privileged position in life and demonstrated to me the worth of literature, i.e., it offers, among other things, a bridge between people from different backgrounds and circumstances, and provides insight into the struggles *and* strengths of individuals.

As such, even though I am not Black nor can I ever be a spokesperson for African Americans, through the medium of books I have learned about the injustices that have been done to them and about their strengths in the face of racism. With my Master thesis I thus hope to contribute to previous studies that have similarly stressed the importance of African American literature today. In addition, I want to thank my supervisor Tom Hedley for supporting my rather experimental thesis in which I combine a vast array of topics and disciplines. He was enthused about my approach and did not question whether my topics could be combined, encouraging me to see my research through to the end.

[1] I have decided to capitalize the letter -b in 'black' whenever I speak about African Americans because I am writing this thesis from the perspective of a white person. However, when referring to terms used by Debra Walker King, e.g., *blackpain*, I will not capitalize 'black' for King does not do this in her study either.

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1

Introduction

> *When one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth.*
>
> Elaine Scarry (3)

Physical pain is a universal feeling that can be caused by an infinite number of reasons. A person can get a stomachache after eating a spicy dish, someone's toe may begin to bleed after hitting it against a door frame, or an arm is heavily injured during a bicycle accident. In these cases the sensation becomes evident in the verbal expressions of the person in pain or in the scars left behind on their skin. Physical pain, however, is also a very personal and isolating feeling because it is confined to the interior world of an individual's body. Elaine Scarry once described the sensation as a distant cosmology, an uncharted location, unreachable because it cannot be properly communicated to outsiders through language (3-4). Correspondingly, Roberta Culbertson contends that because pain is played out inside of the body and not in words, the sensation is inaccessible to those who have not endured the same (170). The person in pain is thus left with a lingering presence beneath their skin, "which itself seems both absent and entirely too present" (169).

The type of pain that Culbertson and Scarry speak of in their studies has not been caused by accidents like injuring one's toe but rather resulted from violent incidents where people's bodies were purposely subjected to pain, be this in the form of rape or torture (171; 9). Such incidents do not only leave scars but also rupture a victim's ability to recall the past because, as Culbertson explains, when an incident is so distressing that it evades sensible understanding, victims will attempt to dispel the memory from their minds (174). Pain is

therefore closely linked to trauma, a condition that, according to German psychologist Thomas Fuchs, results from experiencing life-threatening situations and is characterized by its distorting effects on memory (17). Yet, Culbertson states that "repressed memories are nevertheless memories; they are not circumstances of what 'never happened'" (175) – the traumatic memories of victims are not simply 'forgotten' but have rather been relocated to the places in the body that were similarly affected by the traumatic incident. As such, the pain continues to live on inside the memory of the traumatized body.

The following thesis focuses on the concept of *traumatic body memories*. Of particular interest to me is the literary representation of a historical scandal that continues to be debated in the United States, namely the physical abuse of juvenile offenders at the former Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida, and the subsequent obscuring of their burial places. In the Pulitzer prize-winning book titled *The Nickel Boys* (2019), Colson Whitehead offers a fictional account of what transpired at the school in the 1960s and in the aftermath of its shutdown. In addition to highlighting the impact of physical abuse on his Black protagonists, he also details their attempts at obtaining recognition by telling their traumatic experiences to outsiders. In contrast to previous assertions about the limitations of language, I propose that with *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead has created a narrative space where physical pain and traumatic body memories become interpretable, in turn demonstrating how the process of telling and listening to stories is imperative to restoring the self that was lost amidst traumatic experiences.

1.1 When Bodies Are Appropriated — Stories about Black Bodies in Pain

The term *narrative* can be broadly defined as a *story* or an *account* of a sequence of real or imagined events, and *narration* is the act of *telling* a story (Payne 19). Here, language plays a mediating role for it is through our choice of words that we are able to order as well as

relay our thoughts to others (21). Narratives, however, are more than just stories: as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur contends, stories sit at the heart of human awareness for they enable us to define and redefine our relationship with the world (19). When it comes to traumatic experiences with physical pain, Culbertson expresses a similar view to Ricoeur, stating that to reestablish a connection with the world, the survivor of violence must tell what happened to them in the form of a story (179). However, pain not only ruptures the survivor's ability to recall the past, it also locks the memory of violence beneath their skin, a place that confounds the constructions of every-day language. Scarry maintains that pain's inaccessibility is due to its *unsharability*, i.e., because pain has no outside referent it cannot be properly communicated to outsiders (5). It is for this reason that Scarry believes language, and written narratives more generally, are incapable of turning pain into a sharable phenomenon for the person in pain exists in a separate realm from the person who is not: to the one, the sensation is effortlessly grasped, while to the other, what is effortlessly grasped is the denial of its existence (4).

This does not mean that there have been no attempts at expressing pain through narratives. In her book titled *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, Debra Walker King probes how the experiences of African Americans have been represented in newspapers as well as in visual and literary works from the twentieth century. She states that Black Americans are often associated with pain in that they tend to solely appear as bodies in pain in portrayals of, for instance, American slavery (6). While such depictions do serve to raise awareness about the atrocities Black people have been subjected to in history, King maintains that they fail to capture the magnitude of what African Americans have endured and appropriate Black people's pain for entertainment and sociopolitical reasons (16). In her research, King uses the term *blackpain* to denote the rhetorical use of Black bodies in pain, maintaining that blackpain causes African Americans to become conflated in a stereotypical

image that denies their actual lived experiences (16). As Scarry points out, because pain is difficult to capture in language, it can fall prey to misrepresentations and misgivings (14). When it comes to African Americans, Jennifer L. Griffiths asserts that the misrepresentation of Black bodies is not a recent phenomenon: during American slavery, the testimonies of former slaves arrived in a public space where "the dominant cultural voice perform[ed] a kind of dubbing over the scene of violence" (9), i.e., rather than listening to their testimonies on racial violence, an official story was created that fit the Black body into a cultural script that marked them as 'Other,' consequently "reinscribing oppression through the dislocation of [their] body and voice" (9). According to King, the re-inscription of oppression continues in modern-day representations of experiences related to African Americans, where the Black body is used as a rhetorical device to promote racial stereotypes (1). Indeed, even though slavery was abolished well over a century ago, African Americans continue to face its damaging heritage today, albeit in movies or other popular cultural portrayals that "drama[tize] slavery and its sequels under other names (whether Jim Crow or mass incarceration or 'I can't breathe')" (Rich).

1.2 The Phenomenon of Traumatic Body Memories and the Value of Narratives

However, as Fuchs notes in his study, bodies are more than just limbs and organs, or in the case of African Americans, more than just metaphors for pain: bodies are also historically shaped by people's past experiences, the traumatic *and* the positive ones (20). In his definition of the term, *body memory* refers to the totality of bodily habits and capacities a person has developed throughout their life (10). According to Fuchs, the phenomenon of body memory can be subdivided into different categories, of which *traumatic memory* and *pain memory* are two examples. He states that memories of painful experiences can become encoded on a physical level, reappearing at a later moment in time due to a trigger (17), e.g., a

person's memory of being injured during a traffic incident may resurface when they face conditions that mirror the preceding incident, the feeling of distress or even the sound of sirens triggering the memory that lay within their body (Gentsch and Kuehn 4; Fuchs 18). Fuchs's findings are corroborated by Antje Gentsch and Esther Kuehn, two neuroscientists from Germany who similarly acknowledge that traumatic events involving bodily threats leave lasting impressions on people's body memory, causing the past to resurface in physical symptoms (4).

Yet, in contrast to the research that has been done by professionals in the medical field, trauma theorists within the humanities have not yet extensively discussed the phenomenon of body memory in relation to trauma. Aside from the studies by Griffiths and King on traumatized Black bodies, trauma theorists have tended to prioritize the psychological impact of trauma over its physical impact (Gentsch and Kuehn 2; Schönfelder 46). What is more, Christa Schönfelder argues that leading trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth have treated the condition as a cultural metaphor, hereby generalizing its impact on an individual level and bypassing its historical specificity (37). She observes, however, that narrative accounts of traumatic incidents, be these autobiographical or fictional, *have* brought individual experiences to the forefront, hereby offering a valuable space where trauma's impact on people can be analyzed from multiple perspectives, and where time and place are taken into consideration (29).

The multifaceted qualities of narratives have also been recognized by experts in the medical field, leading to the establishment of two movements in the preceding century that put narrative competency at the heart of psychotherapeutic practices, i.e., *narrative therapy*, developed by Michael White and David Epston (Hutto et al. 311), and *narrative medicine*, established by Rita Charon (303). Though the movements differ in their goals – for the first focusses on improving the storytelling abilities of patients, while the second centers on

enhancing therapists' narrative competencies – their cornerstones rest on the basis that enhanced narrative abilities will not only improve healthcare but will also transform the ways in which people perceive themselves and the world (301). As Daniel D. Hutto et al. state, "being a competent narrator matters" (300), because, "how we narrate can shape who we are and what we do" (314). When it comes to representations of African Americans, even though stories can cause a stereotypical image of Black bodies to dominate the discourse of a given society, Griffiths and King also acknowledge that narratives offer a space where cultural inscriptions can be challenged (Griffiths 10), and where the lived experiences of African Americans can be made available for claiming and sharing, hereby weakening "pain's power to control or determine the fate of those it threatens" (King 20).

1.3 Abused Bodies, Testimonies, and the Dozier School Scandal

At times, however, stories are also left unheard, as was the case with the testimonies of the White House Boys, a group of men who, back in 2009, joined together to testify about their traumatic experiences with physical abuse at the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, a former reformatory located in Marianna, Florida. In their teenage years, the boys had been sent to Dozier for disciplinary action, their 'crimes' ranging from theft to simply running away from broken homes (Kimmerle et al. 15). What is more, even though the reformatory presented itself as a favorable alternative to a prison sentence, the boys exited the school more damaged than when they first arrived (Montgomery and Moore 5). According to Ben Montgomery, a journalist who in the past two decades has reported extensively about the Dozier scandal, "the former wards learned how to bury their shame … to sleep through nightmares … [and to find] relief for their pain at the bottom of a bottle" (Montgomery). Most vivid of all are the men's memories of the White House, the notorious building in which they were beaten or raped by Dozier's staff members and whose nickname they now wear (Allen).

Over the years the former students had reached out to each other for emotional support, eventually deciding to make their stories available on a website dedicated to those students who had not survived their sentence at Dozier.[2] The men wanted one thing, recognition, but an official apology only came after Dr. Erin H. Kimmerle and her team of forensic anthropologists published a report detailing their archeological discoveries at Dozier: over the course of three years, the researchers had excavated the school grounds and unearthed dozens of unmarked graves (Kimmerle et al. 44). The researchers' findings were no surprise to the White House Boys, but the report motivated the state of Florida to issue a public apology in 2017 (Montgomery), six years after the school had been shut down, and a century after it had first opened its doors.

Colson Whitehead learned about the history of the reformatory and the testimonies of the White House Boys through Kimmerle et al.'s research and Montgomery's extensive reporting in *The Tampa Bays Times*. Whitehead is known for being a versatile author for in the past twenty years he has written books and essays across a vast array of genres, ranging from postapocalyptic fiction to detective novels (Manshel 22). However, even though Whitehead's oeuvre is difficult to describe because of its vastness, Alexander Manshel states that his work "chronicles nearly two hundred years of American history" (23). History thus plays a central role in Whitehead's novels and in *The Nickel Boys* the author once more focusses on a dark page from America's history books, one that connects the past sufferings of African Americans to the present. When it comes to the history of Dozier, Kimmerle et al. note in their report that even though the school was intended for both white and Black juvenile offenders, African American children were primarily sent to the reformatory and were at times sentenced for non-punishable deeds (15). Furthermore, the deceased Black students "were three times as likely to be unnamed in historical records and buried in

[2] The official website of the White House Boys can be accessed by following this link.

unmarked locations" (Wagner). Yet, as Whitehead's narrator states towards the end of the book, it are the testimonies of the former *white* students, not the Black students, that were made available online. Who, then, "spoke for the black boys?" (207). Whitehead offers an answer to this question in his portrayal of the Dozier school scandal.

The Nickel Boys starts and ends in 2014 when a group of forensic anthropologists discover bodily remains while excavating the grounds of a recently closed reform school named the Nickel Academy. Like with the real-life scandal, prior to the discoveries, the school's former students had spoken up about the physical abuse they had suffered at Nickel, but their voices were left unheard. In the book, the state of Florida had grand plans for the school's vast amount of land and the stories of abuse were handled off by the state's attorney. As such, when the first remains are unearthed, the state could not wait for the place to be "razed, cleared and neatly erased from history, which everyone agreed was long overdue" (Whitehead 1). With his prologue, Whitehead sets the stage for a tragic story that moves between four different points in time and centers on the experiences of Elwood Curtis, a fourteen-year-old boy whose parents abandoned him at a young age and who grew up under the watchful eyes of his grandmother Harriet. Despite his family's tragic history, for both his grandfather and great-grandfather were killed amidst racial violence, the boy believes himself to be "as good as anyone" (10). Elwood's moral code was shaped by the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose words filled him with a sense of self-worth. As such, rather than going along with the expectations of the (white) people around him, he sought to dedicate himself to the Civil Rights movement because "to do nothing was to undermine his own dignity" (25).

Unfortunately, Elwood's future plans are abruptly brought to an end when he unwillingly becomes involved in a car robbery and is sent to the Nickel Academy for disciplinary action. Even though the teenager was somewhat familiar with the racist treatment

of his fellow Black Americans, the school's regulations and punishments are for him a rude awakening to the true horrors of the world. And while Elwood adjusts to his new reality at Nickel, he meets Turner, a cynical boy who does not hold the same beliefs as him; Turner considers the people inside and outside of the reformatory to be the same, the only difference is that "'in [Nickel] no one has to act fake anymore'" (79). Yet, despite having different opinions, Elwood and Turner form a brotherly bond that carries itself into the future and influences the life's trajectory of one of them.

The story that unfolds in *The Nickel Boys* is wrought with violence and pain, and ends with a twist that will catch first-time readers off-guard. Rather than using the first-person narrative form, Whitehead has written his novel in third-person, a narrative style that has enabled him to incorporate different perspectives in his story. Towards the end of *The Nickel Boys*, the narrative even jumps forward in time, transporting the reader to 1968, 1988 and later to 2014, the year in which the unmarked graves are discovered at Nickel. In addition, a degree of deception is at work in the book: by telling the story in third-person, Whitehead has been able to obscure the character whose perspective orientates the story world in the present; by starting the prologue with an introduction to a former student named 'Elwood,' the reader is made to believe that the boy managed to escape from Nickel. In reality, however, the Elwood in the present is none other than Turner, who assumed his friend's identity when he escaped from Nickel. At the end of the book the story goes full circle and a type of resurrection occurs, one where Turner returns to the self he lost when Elwood died amidst their escape attempt.

In the end, one can ask whether speaking up about the injustices at the Dozier school really mattered; why go through the effort of telling if no one is willing to listen? Yet, had the White House Boys remained silent, the news reports and the research that inspired *The Nickel Boys* might never have been written, and Whitehead's portrayal of the scandal may never

have reached the reader. The testimonies of the former students connected the past to the present and put a chain reaction into motion, hereby enabling Whitehead to provide a voice for those Black students whose stories were never told. What is more, Dori Laub states that "none find peace in silence," for "the 'not telling' of the story serves as a perpetuation of [trauma's] tyranny" (78). Though people may attempt to suppress their traumatic memories of violence, their bodies remember, causing the past to "pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life" (78). Telling is thus an important component of healing for it loosens the grip that traumatic bodily experiences have on survivors and enables them to create a new story about their lives, one that is no longer overshadowed by the traumatic past.

1.4 Aims, Questions, and Methods

By analyzing Whitehead's literary representation of the physical abuse of Black students at the Dozier School for Boys, I seek to contribute to existing debates about the correlation between traumatic memory and the body, and elaborate on the potential of narratives to make physical pain interpretable, hereby enabling victims of violence to restore the self they had lost. As a point of departure into the analysis of these subjects, the following central research question is posed: how do memories of traumatic painful incidents become encoded on a physical level, and what narrative techniques does Colson Whitehead use in *The Nickel Boys* to make his Black protagonists' pain and traumatic body memories interpretable, in turn demonstrating that telling and listening to stories is imperative to restoring the self that was lost amidst the book's traumatic events?

The term *interpretable* is derived from Culbertson's research, in which she states that for body memories to become tellable, they must be arranged in the form of a story (179). In a similar manner, Charon, King and Scarry maintain that for physical pain to be understood by outsiders, the formless experience must be given a form that can be interpreted (Charon 266;

King 125; Scarry 6). As such, by combining the terms *tellable* and *interpretation*, I arrive at the word *interpretable*, which I use to refer to the narrative techniques Whitehead employs, e.g., metaphors and images, to give his characters' pain a form that can be interpreted by the reader.

The case study has been chosen for its historical resonance and for its focus on an incident where Black people's bodies were deliberately subjected to pain. The book not only offers points of departure into analyzing traumatic memory in relation to Black bodies, Whitehead's style of narration also extends an invitation to the reader: at times, the narrator leaves out information pertaining his protagonists' experiences with pain, which requires the reader to pay close attention to the details that are revealed, to interpret them, in order to assemble the complete picture. They thus take part in the process of making physical pain interpretable.

The two psychotherapeutic approaches, i.e., narrative therapy and narrative medicine, will be used in my analysis of Elwood's and Turner's attempts to restore the self they eventually lose amidst the traumatic events in the book. Here, the word *self* means the person the boys were before violence and trauma reduced them to what Culbertson calls, "pure body" (171), i.e., voiceless and incapable of communicating what happened to them due to the continued circulation of traumatic memories in their bodies (173). Yet, as Laub maintains in his research, within each survivor there exists "an imperative need to *tell* and thus come to *know* one's own story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past" (77). Narrative therapy's concept of *reauthoring* offers an avenue for exploring the restoration of the self for its proponents maintain that by constructing a story, patients will be able to retrace those experiences that impacted their lives negatively and create a new story that is no longer defined by said negative experiences (Hutto et al. 311; Panhofer et al. 308).

Telling, however, also depends on the availability of a listener, an *addressable other* as Laub calls it, who confirms the story that lay within the teller. He explains that the listener is an integral part of telling for "'the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story'" (Griffiths 2). In her research on narrative medicine, Charon states that in order for the listener to become a receptive vessel of the teller's story, they must enhance their empathic abilities and momentarily suspend their own skin for that of another (263). The arguments that Charon and Laub present will be applied to my analysis of Turner, who, after escaping from Nickel, forgoes his own identity and becomes Elwood. Nevertheless, after remaining silent for nearly fifty years, he eventually decides to open up about his true identity to his wife Millie, an addressable other who enables him to reconnect with the self he lost when Elwood died.

In the following chapter I expand on the concepts I briefly touched upon in my introduction, hereby creating a theoretical framework that I will use in my analysis of *The Nickel Boys*. The various theories will be put into a conversation with each other in order to synthesize their findings. Starting with the concept of traumatic body memory, by investigating medical studies on body memory and trauma theories from the humanities I seek to establish how traumatic memories can become encoded on a physical level. Once this connection has been made I move on to discuss the portrayals of Black bodies in popular culture and in books written by authors of color. Through my discussion of King's and Griffiths's research I will determine how narratives offer an avenue where cultural inscriptions can be contested and where African Americans are represented as fully human. The possibilities that narratives offer to victims of violence will then be further explored in my discussion of the two narrative approaches in psychotherapy. These approaches offer points of departure into establishing how pain's formlessness can be given a form through the

process of telling and listening to the stories of survivors of violence, hereby enabling them to reconnect with the self.

In my final chapter I will delve further into the Dozier school scandal and Whitehead's portrayal of it in *The Nickel Boys*. I begin my chapter by providing an overview of the school's historical context, after which I connect it to the racial treatment of Black bodies throughout American history. Said racial treatment will then be related to Elwood, who is not only accused of a crime he did not commit but is also subjected to a violent beating. In my analysis of *The Nickel Boys* I apply a two-prone approach: I will start with a close reading of the book's textual qualities to establish the narrative techniques that Whitehead uses to provide Elwood's physical pain with interpretable forms. I then move on to analyze the story in light of concepts from my theoretical background, these being traumatic body memories, reauthoring, and the addressable other. The chapter ends with an analysis of Turner who, after taking on Elwood's identity and remaining silent for nearly fifty years, eventually finds the courage to speak up about his traumatic past and his true identity, hereby restoring his self.

2

Between Traumatic Memories, Narratives, and Black Bodies

To establish a relationship again with the world, the survivor must tell what happened. This is the function of narrative. The task then is to render body memories tellable, which means to order and arrange them in the form of a story.

Roberta Culbertson (179)

2.1 Traumatic (Body) Memories in Medicine and in the Humanities

In the last three decades, the concepts of trauma and memory have become prominent concerns in academic disciplines extending beyond the field of medicine. As Schönfelder notes, historical events such as the Holocaust and the Vietnam War played a pivotal role in integrating trauma and memory into the discourse of the humanities (28, 43). According to Ann Rigney, the incidents that occurred during these events heavily affected survivors' ability to not only *tell* their experiences but also to *recall* them (*Routledge Handbook* 72). As was stated in the introduction, forgetfulness is a key trait of trauma and to illustrate what this looks like in practice, Griffiths refers in her study to a video-testimony from Laub's research[3] on Holocaust survivors (1). The video in question records a Jewish woman's attempt to recollect a rebellion that occurred at Auschwitz, a recollection that ended up deviating from the event's historical records (1). Yet, despite the testimony's historical inaccuracy, Laub relays that it offers invaluable insights into the psychological effects of traumatic incidents on the memories of individuals (1). Schönfelder corroborates Laub's findings, stating that in both the humanities and in medical studies the distorting effects of trauma are recognized (75). Amongst academics, it is generally accepted that survivors of traumatic incidents experience two types of memory phenomena: *flashbacks*, i.e., intrusive memories that involuntarily

[3] Griffiths refers in her introduction to Dori Laub's research in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1).

appear in the minds of victims, and *blanks*, i.e., a loss of memory caused by the effects of stress (75). In addition, Culbertson maintains that traumatic memories can manifest themselves inside of the victim's body (176). Similarly, Griffiths contends that, because trauma confounds conscious understanding, memories of traumatic experiences can become "encoded on a bodily level" (1).

Interestingly, compared to the research that has been done in various medical fields, in the humanities the relationship between the body and traumatic memory has not been studied as extensively.[4] Gentsch and Kuehn explain that, historically speaking, "memories of stressful, painful or traumatic bodily experiences have been associated with various mental health conditions" (2). Particularly the psychoanalytical studies of Sigmund Freud played a pivotal role in making the psychological effects of trauma a dominant focus within modern-day trauma theory (2). Nevertheless, Fuchs asserts that bodies have not necessarily been absent from academic research: throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries various French philosophers "recognized and studied the habitual capacities of the body as an independent kind of memory" (10). As was previously explained, the concept of *body memory* refers to the totality of bodily habits and capacities a person has developed throughout their life. According to Fuchs, body memory can manifest itself in various forms, of which *pain memory* and *traumatic memory* are two examples (12). He explains that when a person receives, for example, a slap to the face, the painful experience becomes embedded in the memory of their body, reemerging at a later moment due to a trigger, i.e., the feeling of humiliation may cause the memory of being slapped to resurface (17). It is for this reason that pain memory is closely linked to traumatic memory: trauma, which Fuchs contends results from experiencing (life)threatening situations like rape or torture, causes a person to install

[4] While writing this thesis, the University of Utrecht launched a new master program geared towards the medical humanities. This interdisciplinary field of study has expanded the ways in which traumatic memory is approached within the humanities, but due to lack of space, the current study will not focus on this field.

mechanisms of denial and forgetfulness – the victim's active repression of trauma is intended to expel the painful experiences from their memory (17). Yet, even though this person may not consciously recall the trauma, it remains inside the memory of their body: like with the memory of pain, the repressed trauma may resurface at a later moment in time due to a physical trigger, i.e., "bodily sensations, the senses of taste, smell, or hearing, even certain weather conditions may suffice to suddenly revive the past" (18). As such, Fuchs asserts that bodies are not just limbs and organs for they are also historically shaped by a person's (traumatic) past since the body always carries its past self into new situations (20).

In this vein, Gentsch and Kuehn also acknowledge the relationship between the body and memory, and analyze how traumatic bodily experiences are retrieved and stored in the memories of psychiatric patients, hypothesizing that mental health problems can be derived from "corporeal experiences stored in memory" (1). In their definition of the term, body memory entails "the sum of all past bodily experiences that are stored in memory and influence behavior" (1). Like Fuchs, Gentsch and Kuehn differentiate between *implicit* and *explicit* body memories, which Fuchs explains have a different degree of accessibility. Whereas explicit memories can be traced back to a single moment in the past, i.e., a person can actively recall and describe when they learned something, implicit memories involve "situations or actions … [that] have become superimposed on each other and can no longer be retrieved as single past events" (Fuchs 11). In other words, a person who knows how to, for example, waltz may be unable to recall the exact moment when they learned the dance steps because the learning process happened over time; their body simply reenacts the past through its present performance (11).

When it comes to traumatic bodily experiences, the memories of said experiences are implicit because, in order to protect themselves, victims will attempt to dissociate themselves from the memories, hereby making them less accessible. However, as Gentsch and Kuehn

explain, disassociation[5] has serious implications for a person's mental health: not only can it cause them to feel a sense of self-fragmentation, in some cases disassociation can even lead to the development of a dissociative disorder, consequently causing sensory loss and/or emotional numbing (9). Moreover, even if a victim attempts to repress their memory of a traumatic physical experience, it is not forgotten: the experience may reappear in bodily symptoms (5). Indeed, according to Fuchs, someone who survived a car accident may experience a panic attack whenever they face a situation that resembles the preceding incident (18). The traumatic past is then not explicitly remembered but rather implicitly through the panic attack, which is a physical reenactment of the past. Fuchs thus maintains that reenactments "open a door to explicit memory and resuscitate the past as if it were present" (19). In other words, physical reenactments offer an access point to a victim's traumatic experiences with pain. The element of reenactment has provided artists and authors with an avenue to explore pain, and many have taken on the challenge of expressing physical pain through theatrical performances, art, dance, and poetry.[6]

However, in contrast to the research that has been done by medical professionals, trauma studies within the humanities have commonly treated the physical and psychological effects of trauma as two separate subjects, hereby creating a dichotomy between the two (Gentsch and Kuehn 2; Griffiths 3; Schönfelder 64). Whereas the study of trauma within the medical field has long since departed from Freud's approach, cultural theories and literary criticism continue to be influenced by his prioritization of the condition's psychological effects (Schönfelder 46). This does not mean that there have been no valuable contributions by trauma theorists: scholars such as Caruth and her works *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

[5] According to Schönfelder, *disassociation* is a term used by medical professionals to describe experiences of depersonalization, i.e., a split between body and consciousness, causing people to perceive themselves and their environment in abnormal ways (73).

[6] In *Constellations,* Sinéad Gleeson offers examples of artists who attempted to express physical pain through the medium of art and literature. She herself uses the McGill pain index to structure her poems about motherhood and illness.

(1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) have played an important role in making trauma a more developed subject of study within the humanities (28). Yet, Schönfelder also criticizes Caruth, stating that because she has approached trauma in an expansive manner, the condition has been turned into a "cultural metaphor that encompasses all of human history and culture" (37). Schönfelder maintains that such a generalizing approach has serious implications because not only does it dismiss trauma's life-shattering effects on an individual level, it also erases trauma's historical specificity, effectively diminishing "its power to call for individual and political responsibility and action regarding various wrongs" (37). On the other hand, Schönfelder notes that the focus on individual experiences with trauma is a quality of trauma narratives and contends that literature offers a valuable space where the life-shattering effects of trauma can be analyzed and explored from multiple perspectives (29). However, before I discuss the concept of traumatic body memory in relation to narratives in more detail, I will first turn to the central concern of this thesis, namely the bodies of African Americans.

2.2 Reauthoring the Self in Narratives

According to King, in today's creative interpretations of experiences related to American slavery and the history of Jim Crow, African Americans disappear "while their bodies are constantly renewed as memorials of suffering and as tools for lessons benefitting systems of American acculturation" (9). The association between Black bodies and pain is not a recent phenomenon for, as Griffiths explains, it is deeply tied to America's slave history: an enslaved man or woman only needed to appear naked during an Abolitionist rally for the violence of slavery to become visible; they did not need to explain their pain because the whip marks on their exposed bodies spoke for them (7). According to Griffiths, the consequence of such a display is that the image of the damaged Black body "enters the public consciousness without a voice, a silent object … [that fits] seamlessly within a cultural script that already

marks her [or him] as 'Other'" (7). King maintains that Black people today continue to be depicted as silent bodies in pain, effectively turning their bodies into rhetorical devices that assist in building "the mythology of who and who is not 'American'" (15). In other words, because popular culture has persistently portrayed Black bodies as pained bodies, African Americans have become conflated in a stereotypical image that has deprived them from an identity that moves beyond said pain. Thus, King contends that it is *blackpain*, i.e., the rhetorical use of Black bodies in pain (16), and not *black pain*, i.e., the actual pain of African Americans (16), that is foregrounded in popular narratives. Consequently, African Americans are prevented from accessing the pain-free American identity for "black people cannot be both Americans and pained" (17), thus remaining in the position of 'Other,' as Griffiths puts it. Nevertheless, like Schönfelder, King also recognizes the value of narratives and contends that, unlike in popular culture, authors of color have opened up a space in which *Black Being*, i.e., "human presence" (17), can be celebrated: Black authors have granted their "characters (and by extension, their readers) the courage to expose personal or communal crises of truth and, thereby, weaken pain's power to control or determine the fate of those it threatens" (20). As such, King contends that through literary works by authors like Toni Morrison and Octavia E. Butler, African Americans have entered the public space as individual human beings whose lives stretch beyond the pain they have endured, hereby breaking the stereotypical representations of Black bodies as solely being defined by pain (21).

In *Traumatic Possessions*, Griffiths follows a similar line of thought as King and she investigates various creative works in which Black female characters testify about their experiences during American slavery (5). Of particular interest to Griffiths are the landscapes of memory, i.e., the cultural contexts in which the testimonies emerge and are processed by both the survivors and by outsiders (5). She states that whereas historically "people of color have entered the public space in body only" (7) – voiceless and marked as 'Other' – literary

and performative works have enabled Black characters to restore the severed connection between their body and voice: by using their bodies as a source of information, the female protagonists of literary works like *Dessa Rose* are able to testify about their past traumatic experiences and, in result, reconnect with the self they had lost amidst the violence of slavery (10). What is more, instead of being a site of inscription, i.e., a canvas on which cultural values can be projected, Griffiths maintains that creative efforts show how the Black female body is also an invaluable source for producing testimonies that "challenge the 'historic-racial schema' or the cultural inscription that silences the voices of survivors" (10).

In sum, both King and Griffiths maintain that narratives, be these in visual, performative or written form, can lead to two things: they can cause a stereotypical image of Black bodies to dominate the discourse of a given society, hereby influencing the treatment of African Americans in public and private spheres, but they can also lead to healing, to a restoration of the severed connection between the body and voice. Indeed, as Ricoeur maintains, narratives are not *just* stories but sit at the heart of human awareness because they can help people to (re)establish their relationship with the world (Payne 19). This is one of the reasons that in recent years a narrative outlook has become increasingly popular in the field of psychotherapy, leading to the establishment of, as was previously explained, a new psychotherapeutic approach in the 1990s called *narrative therapy* (Panhofer et al. 307). The therapy's developers, Michael White and David Epston, believed that by becoming competent storytellers people would be able to discover new forms of action that were otherwise unavailable to them (Hutto et al. 311). As Hutto et al. note, people's life stories have all too often been written by outsiders or have been influenced by societal norms (311). This is particularly evident in the popular representations of African Americans, whose bodies, as was previously explained, have become part of a public discourse that not only appropriates their pain for entertainment reasons but also prevents them from accessing the pain-free

American identity, thus putting them in the position of 'Other.' According to Hutto et al., narrative therapy's primary goal then is to improve people's narrative skills in order for them to take back their "story-telling rights" and "break from thin conclusions about their lives, about their identities, and about their relationships" (311).

However, the meaning of *narrative* in narrative therapy differs from its meaning in literary studies. As was stated, in its basic definition, narrative entails a *story* or an *account* of a sequence of events (Payne 19). One of the things that literary critics concern themselves with is the interpretation of stories from different angles: they attempt to discover what deeper meanings lie beneath a storyteller's choice of words, or analyze narratives in light of other disciplines (Rigney *The Life of Texts* 35). In contrast, narrative therapy is solely interested in the stories told by patients and defines narratives as "real or imagined events that involve the client or others outside of therapy" (Panhofer et al. 308). Nevertheless, the methods employed by narrative therapists can be traced back to literary theory: like literary scholars, narrative therapists encourage their patients to look at what is affecting their lives from different angles (308). As Martin Payne explains, people tend to define and communicate their lives through *self-stories*, which are narratives that are based on their experiences, e.g., their memories, established relationships etc. (19). These self-stories are often projected into the future and depending on their contents, they can limit the possibilities a person sees for themselves (19), e.g., 'I failed today, so I will fail tomorrow.' Yet, a general belief amongst narrative therapists is that,

> people interpret (make sense of) the experiences they bring to therapy … through cultural and social lenses, rather than via inherited biological or psychological factors. These socio-cultural factors are frequently invisible, since they are the taken-for-granted assumptions and values of the groups we belong to and the wider society in which we live (21).

According to Heidrun Panhofer et al., narrative therapists seek to understand patients' self-stories and help them *reauthor* the experiences that are affecting their lives in a negative way, i.e., to "trace their history, name and situate the problem in a [broader] context" (308). They thus refuse to locate the problem inside of people and instead focus on encouraging their patients to find "new, richer stories to tell about [their lives], and thus augment [their] recourses" (Hutto et al. 311). As Hutto et al. contend, since stories function as people's means of making sense of their lives, improving one's narrative skills "could alter the opportunities perceived in one's field of affordances" and "make a difference to the quality of our engagements with and our understanding of others" (314).

In their study, Panhofer et al. extend the narrative approach to trauma therapy, stating that previous studies have suggested that successful therapies are indeed related to the construction of trauma narratives (312). They maintain that, in order to overcome trauma, people's traumatic memories, which are characterized for being repressed and fragmented, need to be defragmented and put into a coherent order (312). Narrative therapy's practice of reauthoring can aid the process of defragmentation because narratives offer a space for experimentation: achieving past accuracy is not the goal of reauthoring – the focus lies rather with retracing those experiences that have negatively affected a person's life in order to construct a future trajectory (Hutto et al. 312). Culbertson makes a similar assertion and states that to reestablish a relationship with the world, people's memories of violence must be ordered and arranged in the form of a story (179). Here, storytelling entails linking emotions with events which will make it possible for people "to return the self to its legitimate social status as something separate, something that tells, that recounts its own biography," in turn enabling them to restore "the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violence" (179). In other words, survivors of violence must reauthor their self-story that was lost amidst the

traumatic experience in order to open a future trajectory that is no longer overshadowed by said experience.

2.3 The Destructive Nature of Pain and Violence

Yet, despite the positive reception towards narratives in both literary and medical studies, some scholars doubt whether the act of constructing stories can truly help survivors of violence to communicate their traumatic experiences with pain to outsiders. The primary reason for this skepticism is due to the destructive nature of pain: as Scarry explains, the sensation actively destroys language and makes the victim's body revert back to a state that precedes the constructions of everyday-discourse, namely to "the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). Similarly, Arthur W. Frank states in his book *The Wounded Storyteller* that where stories attempt to make the wounded body suitable for interpretation, the body itself eludes the language needed for this (2). According to Scarry, this elusion is caused by pain's lack of referentiality: whereas people can have, e.g., a hatred or a hunger *for* or *like* something, the same cannot be said of pain; there is no object, no outside referent, that can be tied to the sensation (5). The inexpressibility or 'unsharability' of pain, as Scarry terms it, thus complicates the act of witnessing, of communicating one's painful experiences to someone else for what language could possibly do justice to the extremity of the sensation?

What is more, Culbertson points out that pain also destroys another component that is essential to narratives, namely the narrator who tells the story (191). She asserts that wounding simultaneously initiates the survivor's traumatic memory of violence as well as launches them into the realm of recognition and explanation (173), i.e., in order for them to lay their past to rest, the survivor of violence must tell. However, the act of explaining one's pain to another person has various limitations because not only does the sensation resist

every-day language, the violence that caused the pain also destroys the self that is able to tell. The question then is not 'what is there to say?' but rather, '*who* can say it?' (191). In her research Culbertson uses the word *violation*, and not violence, to refer to the act of inflicting pain for the term encompasses the hierarchy that exists within the act: she states that violence in and of itself does not have a locus of action, while violation involves the person who is wounded, i.e., the *violated*, and the person who inflicts the pain, i.e., the *violator* (171). According to Culbertson, the word violation makes the destructive nature of violence apparent for the victim finds themselves in a position where they are overpowered from the outset and are unable to escape the onslaught, effectively destroying the self that is able to tell (171). Consequently, because the experience cannot be properly communicated with words, the physical distress becomes encoded on a bodily level, a primal place that does not, as Scarry also notes, adhere to the standard rules of discourse (178). The discourse of pain is instead a language that exists solely within the sufferer's body and is unintelligible to those who have not had a similar experience. As such, not only is pain 'unsharable,' it is also an extremely alienating experience that separates the sufferer from those who are not in pain and turns them into something that is unknowable and incomprehensible (King 125; Scarry 4).

Nevertheless, even though every-day language may never fully capture the depths of a person's traumatic experience with pain, Schönfelder believes that the rejection of narration has serious implications: by focusing too narrowly on trauma's disruptive nature, people risk overlooking how the condition also encourages narration due to the victim's desire for recovery (33). Moreover, though skeptic towards language, Scarry also acknowledges that the failure to express pain will "allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power" (14), i.e., if it serves a purpose and is not contested, the act of inflicting pain may be presented as a just course of action. A tolerant attitude towards pain is particularly evident in the history of American slavery. As Griffiths explains, the racial code in those days

influenced the ways in which white people perceived the violence committed towards people of color: since slaves had been relegated to a sub-human position, the whip marks on their exposed backs were not seen as signs of violence but rather as signs of insubordination (18). The code of racial difference dictated that Black people were different from 'every-day' Americans, in turn enabling slave masters to do whatever they saw fit with their 'property' – they could appropriate Black people's pain for their own benefit without facing repercussions. Consequently, whipping slaves did not equate violence for not only were the masters executing their rights as owners, the act also served the purpose of curbing the behavior of a people who were seen as less than human. Unfortunately, as was previously explained, the pain of African Americans continues to be appropriated today for entertainment and socio-political reasons. It is for this reason that King stresses that the actual lived experiences of African Americans and not the blackpain represented in popular culture must be made available for sharing and claiming (125). Indeed, as both Schönfelder and Culbertson contend, in order for the survivor to obtain recognition and to tame the specters of their past, they must tell their experiences (83; 191).

2.4 The Necessity of an Addressable Other in Telling

Central to the task of telling is the substitution of the pre-language of pain, i.e., the cries and whispers of anguish, with every-day language (Culbertson 179; Scarry 6). According to Culbertson, telling is a process of "disembodying memory" (179), of making the traumatic memory that lay trapped beneath the victim's skin available for interpretation. What is more, in order to be shared, King states that pain "has to become pain of, for, or like something" (125). In other words, the sensation needs to have an *outside referent* in order to move from the inarticulate pre-language of pain into, what Scarry terms, "the realm of shared objectification" (11). Since the person in pain is ordinarily bereft of the ability to speak, it is

not uncommon for someone else to speak on behalf of them (6), to act as an interpreter of sorts. Even though such interpretations may give rise to complications, e.g., the interpreter may not express the pain correctly or appropriate it for personal gain, Scarry believes that there are various avenues through which pain can successfully enter into the realm of public discourse, one of these avenues being the field of medicine, i.e., a physician's work indeed depends "on the acuity with which he or she can hear the fragmentary language of pain, coax it into clarity, and interpret it" (6). The listener thus plays an integral role in the process of telling for they are "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (Griffiths 2). They are the outside referent, or *the addressable other* as Laub terms it, who not only recognizes the victim's pain but also confirms its realness (2). The process of telling, however, is not only confrontational for the survivor because it also exposes the listener's vulnerabilities: by witnessing the traumatic story of a person in pain, the listener comes face to face with their own limitations and mortality (2); they become, as it were, witnesses to their own struggle to fully comprehend and express another person's pain. Nevertheless, Laub maintains that it is only through this awareness that the listener can "'become the enabler of testimony – the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum'" (2). As such, it is in the bodily transaction between the teller and the listener, in their mutual struggle to comprehend the body's response to trauma, that memories are pieced together and meaning is created (2).

The importance of the listener is also acknowledged in the interdisciplinary field of *narrative medicine*, a movement that emerged in the 1990s and which was, as previously explained, further developed by Rita Charon in America (Hutto et al. 303). Unlike narrative therapy's focus on improving the storytelling abilities of patients, narrative medicine seeks to improve the narrative skills of health care professionals (303). The movement's proponents believe that enhanced narrative competency will deepen professionals' "empathetic ability to

listen to and learn from their patients" (303), i.e., by creating narratives, physicians and therapists will be able to enter, albeit imaginatively, into their patients' worlds and "see and interpret these worlds from the patients' point of view" (304). The expected result is a more personalized type of health care where the individual stories of patients are respected and where the relationship between doctors and patients is improved (303). Indeed, as King maintains, the objective of empathy is understanding, which requires a person to substitute themselves for the other (135), i.e., to walk, as it were, in the other person's shoes and to perceive the situation through their eyes. In narrative medicine, the listener's empathetic abilities will grow when they become "a receptive vessel for the language and experience of another," which requires them to develop "great powers of absorption and attention" (Charon 263). However, as with the language of pain, experiences are not always communicated through words but can also become apparent through gestures and movements (263). The listener's role then is to give the experience an *interpretable form*, a form that Charon believes is offered by narratives: by conferring all the aspects of a narrative text, e.g., "narrative situation, focalization, allusion" (266), onto an experience, the listener can create a representation through which details that were initially unavailable, become available for interpretation (266). In short, advocates of narrative medicine believe that narrative competency is essential for gaining a better understanding of patients' individual experiences with pain. Empathy is a key component here because understanding can only be reached if the listener is willing to enter into the teller's world and perceive the situation through their eyes. As Laub maintains, the absence of an addressable other, a listener who willingly listens and confirms the teller's pain, annuls the story that lay trapped beneath the victim's skin (Griffiths 2). The listener is thus an essential component of telling for they are the ones who coax the language of pain into clarity so that the process of disembodying traumatic body memories can begin and the survivor of violence can reconnect with the self.

3

"Who Spoke for the Black Boys?"

The Dozier School Scandal and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

The men remember the same things: blood on the walls, bits of lip or tongue on the pillow, the smell of urine and whiskey, the way the bed springs sang with each blow.

Ben Montgomery and Waveney Ann Moore (3)

The state of Florida closed the school three years ago and now it was all coming out, as if everyone, all the boys, had to wait for it to be dead before they told the tale.

The Nickel Boys (Whitehead 207)

3.1 A Horrific Past is Dug Up

"Even in death the boys were trouble."

With this iconic phrase Whitehead opens *The Nickel Boys*, a novel that moves between four different points in time and centers on the experiences of two Black boys, Elwood and Turner, at a notorious reformatory in the United States. Though fictional, Whitehead's story was inspired by a real-life scandal that was not, until recently, publicly acknowledged, consequently leaving dozens of men with a horrific past that lived on in their bodies.

It all started in 2012 when a group of forensic anthropologists from the University of South Florida (USF) excavated the cemetery of a recently closed reformatory in Marianna, Florida, known as the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys. Prior to its closure in 2011, its former students had spoken up about the physical abuse they had suffered during their time at the reformatory in the 1950s and the 1960s (Allen). Collectively referred to as the 'White House Boys,' over the years the men had shared stories about the punishments that were administered by staff members in a small building on the school grounds known as the White House (Allen). As former student Dick Colón relayed to journalists in 2009, he once

witnessed a Black boy being stuffed into an industrial dryer, a memory that continued to haunt him nearly five decades later (Montgomery and Moore 8). Other White House Boys shared similar stories, some recalling the three-foot-long leather strap that was used for beating their behinds, causing bits of their pajama pants to become embedded in their bodies (8). Until this day the boys remember, their traumatic experiences reappearing in nightmares or as phantom pains in the places where they were beaten or raped (8).

Yet, despite the men's collective outcry for justice, investigations by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in 2009 did not produce sufficient evidence to support the men's allegations, causing staff members to go unprosecuted and testimonies to go unheard (Allen). It took the work of Dr. Kimmerle, the executive director of the Institute of Forensic Anthropology and Applied Science at USF, and her team to re-open the investigations in 2012 for they discovered certain discrepancies in the documentation of Dozier's deceased students: the researchers exhumated far more remains from the school's graveyard, called the Boot Hill Burial Ground, than had been recorded by the reformatory (Allen). Moreover, various testimonies of the White House Boys hinted towards there being more unmarked graves outside of Boot Hill's perimeters, prompting the USF researchers to widen their scope and request permission to excavate other parts of the school grounds.

Their study focused on the deaths and burials that occurred between 1900 and 1960, and their primary objectives entailed locating and documenting the unrecorded burial places, investigating the causes of death, and lastly, identifying remains for repatriation (Kimmerle 12). To achieve these goals, the USF researchers not only performed archeological fieldwork, they also interviewed family members and witnesses associated with the school, and researched Dozier's archival and historical documents (Kimmerle et al. 11; Kimmerle 12). However, as Greg Allen reported at the time, the researchers' request to excavate the grounds beyond Boot Hill was not immediately granted: because some of the land was up for sale, the

local government sought to block further investigations (Allen). After months of legal battles, Dr. Kimmerle and her team eventually received access to all of the grounds and they uncovered remains far removed from the official graveyard, some buried in the surrounding forest (Allen; Wagner). Three years later the researchers published an extensive report detailing their findings: a total of 55 graves were discovered across the school's 1,400 acres of land, 42 more than had been marked with white crosses on Boot Hill during the 1990s (Kimmerle et al. 44; Wagner). Even though the report did not weigh in any criminal conduct, for this went beyond the researchers' field of expertise, it stated that the "lack of record keeping and absence of grave markers suggests intent to obfuscate the true number of burials and to hinder potential investigations into specific individuals' deaths" (Kimmerle et al. 15).

The archeological findings and the testimonies form the starting and ending point of *The Nickel Boys*, though Whitehead places the discoveries in the year he first read about the Dozier school scandal, namely in 2014. Other noticeable differences in the book are the reformatory's name, which has been changed to the Nickel Academy, and the manner in which the unmarked graves are discovered has been altered, i.e., not a team of professionals but rather an archeology student from USF accidently discovers the graves during a fieldwork assignment; she happens upon them while looking for a cellphone signal. This rather satirical introduction to the scandal is enhanced by the state's displeasing attitude towards the discovery: it is considered an "expensive complication" and they cannot wait for the place to be "razed, cleared and neatly erased from history" (Whitehead 1). As the narrator states, "even in death the boys were trouble" (1), and though the surviving students had been speaking up for years, "no one believed them until someone else said it" (3).

The abuse that occurred at the Dozier School for Boys and the testimonies of the White House Boys remain topics of critical debate in the United States and the school's painful history continues to live on inside of the bodies of its former students. With his

fictional account of the Dozier school scandal, Whitehead not only gives insight into the lasting impact of physical abuse, but he also provides a voice for those Black students who were forgotten in unmarked graves, who were "waiting for someone to find them" (3). What is more, Whitehead's manner of storytelling makes the physical pain and the traumatic body memories of Elwood and Turner interpretable because the story requires an active participation on the side of the readers; they must interpret the rhetoric devices in order to understand their relation to the boys' traumatic experiences at Nickel. In addition, with their actions, the two protagonists underscore the importance of telling and listening, of making their own stories available for once, so that understanding can be reached and the survivor of violence can reconnect with the self they had lost amidst the trauma.

3.2 What is the Story with the Reformatory? — The Public Image versus the "Brutal Heirloom"

Opened in the year 1900 as the Florida State Reform School and later renamed as the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys, the state of Florida created the reformatory with the intention of offering both white and colored juvenile offenders a safer and more productive alternative to the prisons they would have otherwise ended up in (Kimmerle et al. 25). In an excerpt from the Laws of Florida from 1897 it states that the Reform School would provide young offenders with an education in order to restore them to the community with "purpose and character fitting for a good citizen" (25). The reformatory was thus intended as a school, not a prison, and the children would be referred to as students rather than as inmates (22). In addition, only children between the ages of ten to sixteen years old and with a conviction for felony were allowed to be admitted, their sentence ranging from six months up to a maximum of four years (22).

On paper, the school sounded like a favorable alternative to a prison sentence: instead of being incarcerated with, as the law puts it, "vicious associates" (25), the juvenile offenders would be educated at the Reform School and receive a helping hand in obtaining an occupation befitting a so-called honest man. This is what Elwood initially believes as well: even though he was falsely accused of a crime, he considers himself lucky to be sent to Nickel for he sees it as "a real school, a good one," with well-kept lawns and "the nicest-looking property [he] had ever seen" (Whitehead 45). However, in practice, Dozier's outward appearance and its intentions proved difficult to maintain because within three years of its conception, stories of abuse and inhumane living circumstances began to circulate outside of the school (Allen). Similarly, after receiving his first beating at Nickel, Elwood comes face to face with the harsh reality that the actual violent offenders are not in prison but on the school's staff. Like in the real-life scandal at Dozier, the Nickel Academy presents a public image that portrays the school and its manner of reforming as a just course of action, while in reality the students are being physically abused by staff members.

Between the years of 1903 and 1913, the rumors of alleged abuse at Dozier led to multiple official inquiries and the state formed not one but six legislative investigative committees (Kimmerle et al. 27). At the time, the committees' reports detailed the discovery of children as young as five "in irons, just as common criminals" (Montgomery and Moore 13), while other students had been severely beaten or had been hired out for manual labor (Kimmerle et al. 27; Montgomery and Moore 13). Over the years the state investigations led to various changes in the reformatory's policies, and staff members were fired for misconduct. However, as Montgomery and Moore point out, "juvenile justice rides the waves of public perception" (16), and once the public's outrage had subsided, so also did the school's promises for improvement, causing it to remain operative until 2011. Noticeable elements in the reformatory's history are the students' backgrounds as well as the inconsistency in the

death certificates that were and *were not* issued to the public. Even though the admitted boys varied in race and offence, Kimmerle et al. note that African American children were primarily sent to Dozier, their offences ranging from assault to simply running away from broken homes (15). In addition, as was previously stated, deceased Black students "were three times as likely to be unnamed in historical records and buried in unmarked locations" (Wagner), which the researchers attributed to the Jim Crow practices of the time (Kimmerle et al. 15). Departing from Michel Foucault's arguments in *Discipline and Punishment*, Nadine Ehlers maintains that, throughout American history, the law has been employed to not only divide Black and white Americans but also to legally strengthen the argument that their differences are grounded in the body, i.e., the law has been used as a tool to reinforce corporal distinctions, effectively equating whiteness with superiority and blackness with inferiority (32). Consequently, by legalizing said corporal distinctions, disciplinary powers received the arena "to reprimand, punish, and correct the recalcitrant subject" (36). King similarly asserts that from the dawn of slavery, African Americans have been viewed through a racial lens that has characterized their bodies as belonging to "'a brute,' a criminal and illegitimate heir of U.S. citizenship whose presence is a national threat" (12-13).

The punishments the colored students were subjected to at Dozier attest to Ehlers's and King's arguments: not only were the Black youths at times sentenced for non-punishable deeds or even falsely accused of crimes, the physical abuse they suffered at the hands of staff members was informed by a racial code that marked them as separate and inferior. As the narrator of *The Nickel Boys* relays, a father taught his son "how to keep a slave in line," who then passed this "brutal heirloom" (189) down to his son and so forth. A dark cell, a term in a sweatbox, as long as the sons of those sons remembered, "they waited for wayward boys in need of an attitude adjustment" (190). In accordance, Culbertson contends that the act of wounding a person's body is informed by a system of power, or in the case of African

Americans, a brutal heirloom, where both the weapon and its carrier are communicating a message to their victim (172). In the case of Dozier's Black students, from Kimmerle et al.'s report and the newspaper articles about the scandal it becomes apparent that the racist view of Black bodies was translated to the punishments delivered by Dozier's staff members: the people who were abusing the Black boys acted as though they were teaching them to be good citizens, while in reality they were putting the colored students in their 'rightful' place in society, a place reinforced by the notion that their inferiority was grounded in their bodies. And it is in this environment that Elwood, a boy who believes himself to be as good as anyone, finds himself when he is falsely accused of aiding a robbery.

As was previously maintained, Elwood's sense of self was influenced by the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose speeches he listened fervently to on his grandmother's record player. Rather than letting her grandson listen to music of a "licentious nature" (Whitehead 9), Harriet had provided him with an album of Dr. King's speeches. After her grandson had come under her care at the age of six, Harriet raised him in a strict manner and separated him from neighborhood kids she believed to be of a bad influence on him. Her protectiveness towards Elwood is understandable when viewed in light of their family's tragic history: Harriet's father became a victim of the Jim Crow laws and was found strung up in his cell, while her husband was killed amidst his attempt to break up a scuffle between a colleague and three white men. By raising her grandson strictly, the woman sought to protect Elwood from facing a similar fate as the men before him, yet it are the very words of Dr. King on Black American's civil rights that eventually cause "his undoing" (9).

Prior to being sentenced to Nickel, Elwood used every opportunity to learn more about the Civil Rights Movement and while working at the local tobacco shop, he read about their protests in various magazines. The young protesters' steadfastness in the face of opposition inspired him and instead of being scared off by photos depicting blood and violence, the

images provided him with “models for the man he wished to become” (20). In Whitehead’s representation of the protesters, the Black body moves beyond the stereotypical image described in King’s research: even though blood is streaming down their faces, the Black men and women are “glamourous” in Elwood’s eyes, and they resemble “knights taking the fight to dragons” (20). In their plight for equal rights, the protesters are linked together like a living “human chain” (33), a bond that surpasses violence and strives for a future in which skin color no longer determines Black people’s fates. Whereas popular culture has repeatedly used the Black body in pain as a rhetorical device, hereby separating colored people from the pain-free American identity, Whitehead uses the image to bring into focus how African Americans are living human beings whose lives stretch beyond pain, i.e., the blood testifies of the protesters’ efforts to be more than just bodies in pain, to no longer be confined by the brutal heirloom passed down from slavery. As such, even though the demonstrating men and women are “beaten with metal bars [and] blasted by fire hoses” (20), they persevere, and it is their very perseverance that catches Elwood’s eyes, not their bodies in pain.

In result, Dr. King’s speeches and the Civil Rights protests fed the boy’s dreams and motivated him to look for ways in which he could contribute to the “Negro uplift” (35). Yet, before Elwood’s plans can even take flight, his future is snatched away from him: on his way to attending early-college classes, he hitches a ride with a Black man who, unbeknownst to him, had just stolen the very car he stepped into. When the two are then stopped by the police, Elwood’s side of the story is left unheard and he is arrested for theft. As the white deputy officer maintains, “‘only a ni***’d steal [the car]’” (40); even though Elwood was innocent, the very fact that a Black boy was present in a stolen car, automatically marked him as an accomplice of the driver. It did not matter whether he had committed the crime or not since his Black body equated him with the image of a criminal “whose presence is a national threat” (King 13). The racist perception of Black bodies can also be observed in Elwood’s first

punishment at Nickel, a punishment he receives after following the example of his grandfather and his beloved Civil Rights activists. Despite his previous encounters with racism, the boy carries his sense of self-worth into the school and intervenes in a scuffle between three Black students. Like his role models, he steps up when he sees injustice, but his noble act has disastrous consequences. The following section focusses on the boy's punishment and offers an in-depth analysis of the ways in which Elwood's physical pain is made interpretable through Whitehead's style of narration.

3.3 The Devil is in the Detail — Physical Pain, Interpretable Forms, and Elwood's Punishment

In 2009, two journalists from the *St. Petersburg Times* interviewed a total of twenty-seven White House Boys for their news report titled "For Their Own Good." At the time, former student Eddie Horne stated that he could still "'feel the pain from where they beat me'" (Montgomery and Moore 19), recounting how he was whipped with a "'3-foot-long leather strap'" (4). James Griffin on the other hand talked about his difficulty with sleeping in the dark (19), while Dick Colón remembered all the times he was taken to the White House for 'misbehavior,' the scars on his bottom testifying of the 250 lashes he received during his time at the school (8). Individually, these former students had their own personal set of traumatic experiences, but together they were unified in their plight for recognition and justice. Yet, it would take several more years for their testimonies to finally be publicly acknowledged. As was explained in the preceding chapter, what makes physical pain so difficult to communicate is the fact that it "has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth" (Scarry 1), i.e., because the sensation is played out inside of the victim's body and not in every-day language, it is inaccessible, and at times even incomprehensible, to those who were not hurt in a similar manner. To be understood by outsiders, physical pain needs an

outside referent, an *interpretable form,* that moves the sensation from its inexpressible form into "'the realm of shared objectification' and a world of language, image and metaphor" (King 125; Scarry 11). When it comes to the White House Boys, despite the men's repeated attempts at explaining their traumatic experiences with physical abuse to the public, it was not until the first remains were dug up by Dr. Kimmerle and her team that their pain literally "manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth" (Scarry 1), i.e., the men's painful experiences obtained an outside referent in the form of broken bones and dozens of unmarked graves.

In Elwood's case, his first punishment at Nickel shares various similarities with the experiences of the White House Boys, the primary resemblance being the infamous building in which the physical abuse took place, unofficially named the White House. Its nickname and function have remained the same in *The Nickel Boys,* but unlike its prominence in the testimonies of the former students, the building's purpose as a type of torture chamber only becomes apparent in a later chapter: in the first couple of chapters the place only appears in passing remarks and its nickname is never used. In addition, Elwood's initial description of the building does not make it seem like a place where students are physically abused; he thinks it is a storage shed and observes how it is covered with rust. The simplicity of the building is deliberate for it masks the brutality that occurs inside, i.e., to those readers who, like Elwood, are unfamiliar with its purpose, the building may initially appear unimportant and therefore unworthy of inspection, effectively protecting the image that the school seeks to portray to the public. Yet, both the readers and Elwood will soon learn that it is this very place that prevents students from running away, i.e., "[it] was the wall that kept them in" (69).

Prior to the White House's formal introduction in chapter six, readers are provided with details that hint towards the building and the brutal practices that occur inside. In the introduction of Nickel's superintendent Maynard Spencer, the narrator offers the first outside

referent to the pain Elwood will later suffer at this man's hands in the infamous torture chamber. The use of details is a general trend in *The Nickel Boys*: in Whitehead's style of narration, metaphors and images are used to either foreshadow events or to indicate deeper layers, effectively creating a space where the reader can insert themselves. As Rigney explains, unlike in movies, authors have limited tools to their disposal to 'show' their characters or settings (*The Life of Texts* 169). Whereas a camera can capture, for instance, an entire group of people in one single shot, authors have to be selective in their choice of words in order to achieve the same result (169). The words that *are* used, however, become "all the more meaningful because they are scarce" (169). In Spencer's introduction, Whitehead uses Elwood as his lens to provide readers with an image of the superintendent, an image that is meaningful because of its specificity: "Spencer was fastidious with his dark blue Nickel uniform; every crease in his clothes looked sharp enough to cut, as if he were a living blade" (Whitehead 46). Noticeable is how Spencer is described as a "living blade" that is "sharp enough to cut." In this sentence the man is used as a metaphor for an object that, at first, seems unrelated. Yet, the detail is relevant because, as Scarry explains, people tend to recognize pain in weapons since they provide the inexpressible sensation with a tangible form that can be interpreted; weapons lift pain, as it were, out of the sufferer's body and make it visible to outsiders (16). Indeed, as Charon similarly maintains in her study on narrative medicine, by providing a formless experience like pain with a form, "the creator can perceive and display all dimensions or facets of the situation … that were, until bestowing form, unavailable" (266). With 'form' Charon means any narrative technique that enables writers to coax the formless sensation into clarity (266), to move it into what King and Scarry term, "the realm of shared objectification" (125; 11).

Returning to the book, even though Elwood's punishment has not yet taken place, by describing Spencer as a living blade his pain not only receives its first interpretable form, the

metaphor also ties the sensation to a living human being, a connection that is important because a weapon in and of itself is incapable of inflicting pain (Scarry 16); the actual wounding is done by the person who wields it. According to Scarry, in order for a weapon to function as a referent for pain, the object must not be separated from the body: when the body is taken out of the equation, meaning that the weapon is taken as the sole representative of pain, both the sensation's felt characteristics and the one who caused these characteristics are left unattended (17). As such, Scarry maintains that "to express pain one most *both* objectify its felt characteristics *and* hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics" (17). In Spencer's case, his description as a living blade is relevant because the metaphor ties his body to the act of inflicting pain, hereby making the living referent of Elwood's pain visible to the reader.

At the same time, Spencer's introduction also provides readers with the first reference to the White House's purpose. When Elwood is admitted to Nickel, the superintendent informs him and the other newly admitted students that the reformatory is like a school where the boys will be taught "'how to do things like everyone else'" (Whitehead 46). Those who "'mess up'" (46), however, will be sent to a *place* where he personally sees to their 'education,' "'and [they] will not like it'" (47). Spencer's words and his appearance as a living blade should function as a warning, one that hints to the torture chamber and its purpose, but Elwood does not pick up on it: since he has always been an exemplary student as well as an excellent grandson, Elwood initially behaves the same way as he did back at home. Yet, it is his very behavior that eventually lands him on a blood-stained mattress in the White House. As the narrator states, had he spent time at the county jail, "Elwood would have known that it is best not to interfere in other people's violence, no matter the underlying facts" (63). Rather than heeding Spencer's warning, Elwood intervenes when he witnesses a fellow student being bullied by two other boys; like his beloved role models, he steps up when he

sees something wrong. However, by stepping up, he simultaneously steps outside of his inferior position as a Black boy; he acts above his so-called station, which causes him to be beaten more severely than the actual bullies. Elwood's punishment at the White House thus holds a message, one that 'teaches' him "'how to do things like everyone else'" (46), i.e., how to behave as a Black boy should behave in a place dictated by a racial code passed down from slavery. Indeed, as long as the sons of those sons remembered, "they waited for wayward boys in need of an attitude adjustment" (190), and Elwood was desperately 'in need' of an attitude adjustment.

In his review of *The Nickel Boys*, Frank Rich states that a general characteristic of Whitehead's novels is the author's "unstinting insistence on serving violence full up" (Rich), providing neither his characters nor his readers with a means of escape (Rich). Interestingly enough, even though the violence is hinted at in the description of the bullies' punishment at the White House, the severity of Elwood's beating is never explicitly stated; he passes out before his punishment is over, "so when people asked later how many licks he got, he didn't know" (67). Since Elwood is the lens through whom readers obtain knowledge about this situation, they similarly pass out: the chapter ends with the boy falling unconscious and the narrator does not reveal what transpires afterwards, leaving the reader in the dark until he wakes up in the following chapter. This gap of information extends an invitation to the reader for they are the ones who must pick up on the details that *are* provided in order to understand the severity of Elwood's beating.

According to Panhofer et al., literal language offers limited tools for accessing people's inner worlds and they instead suggest that metaphors, images or poetry can be used for expressing internal experiences such as love or sadness (319). They maintain that metaphors in particular are useful because they are embodied, i.e., the literary device connects abstract internal experiences with ones that are rooted in bodily experiences, e.g., "love is a

'journey'" (319). Yet, instead of providing access to Elwood's inner world, the narrator offers readers a view of his treatment at the school's hospital ward:

> There was a new pair of denim pants on the chair next to Elwood's hospital bed. The beating had embedded bits of the first into his skin and it took two hours for the doctor to remove the fibers. It was a duty the doctor had to perform from time to time. Tweezers did the trick. The boy would be in the hospital until he walked without pain (Whitehead 70).

In the above portion, the narrator describes Elwood's treatment in a matter-of-fact way, as if picking fabric out of someone's skin is as common as brushing one's teeth. The description is rather desensitized, which sets the tone for the situation, i.e., the treatment's routineness indicates how the abuse has not motivated the doctor to report it to the authorities, in turn revealing his indifference towards the children's suffering. Other details reveal how hard Elwood must have been beaten for not only did the boy pass out, it also takes the doctor *two hours* to remove the fibers from his skin. In addition, he will no longer be able to *wear* his pants let alone *walk* without pain for some time. These descriptions are both measurable and visual in nature for they offer readers a view of where Elwood was beaten and provide insight into the force that was used by the violators. As Dr. Andrea D. Thompson and Dr. Michael J. Shea explain in their web articles, people lose consciousness when the blood flow to their brains is disrupted (Thompson and Shea "Fainting"). Said disruption can be caused by a number of things, such as sudden movements, but also by "unpleasant physical or emotional stimuli" like pain (Thompson and Shea "Syncope"). When it comes to the degree of pain, the testimonies of the White House Boys indicate how severe their punishments must have been because despite being beaten nearly fifty years ago, the men continue to be haunted by their experiences at the White House.

What the above description thus achieves is that it moves Elwood from the realm of fiction into the realm of facts, effectively confronting readers with the realness of the situation. Whereas a fictional account may have distanced the reader from both the boy's pain and his treatment, i.e., the rhetoric devices pointing out how the setting has been invented by an author, Whitehead's style of narration brings the realness of Elwood's pain up close. Noticeable is how the narrator does not relay what the boy is feeling inside of his body, nor do they use any metaphors or literary devices to describe his pain or treatment; the elements that would have indicated the text's fictionality are absent. Unlike in Spencer's introduction, where the man's appearance is metaphorically tied to a weapon, in this scene the narrator tells you *how it is*: they do not use words belonging to the realm of fiction but tell readers about Elwood's treatment in a matter-of-fact way, thus providing them with no means of escape, i.e., readers will not be able to put Elwood's pain away as unreal or fictional because his experiences align with those of former students like Dick Colón and Eddie Horne, hereby bringing the realness of the situation, its skin-shredding truth, to the forefront. Moreover, the bits of fiber in Elwood's skin are telling about his pain for they offer readers "an interpretable signature" that is "tethered to pain's origins" (King 124). His ruined pants are tethered to his beating at the White House, a beating that not only knocked him unconscious but also damaged his legs. Elwood's pain thus obtains an interpretable signature in the form of shredded pants; the bits that are embedded in his skin objectify the severity of his beating, in turn providing readers with an outside referent to the pain he must be experiencing. In addition, as was previously quoted, the White House is the wall that prevents students from running away. In Elwood's case, the White House has literally made him incapable of running away, his legs bearing the memory of his punishment. What is more, the pants will later serve as a locus of his traumatic body memory for the sight of them triggers a physical response within his body, one that "resuscitate[s] the past as if it were present" (Fuchs 19).

In the following section I will elaborate on Elwood's traumatic body memory and demonstrate how the beating alters his very self. Yet, as Culbertson maintains, in order for the survivor to restore the connection with the self, they must arrange their experiences in the form of a story (179). In the end, Elwood orders his experiences in the form of a letter, hereby bearing witness to the atrocities he experienced at Nickel and reclaiming the self Spencer attempted to beat out of him. However, once more, Elwood's actions have unforeseen consequences that will forever alter his life.

3.4 When Bodies Must Tell — Traumatic Body Memories and the Restoration of the Self

Until this day the White House Boys continue to suffer from the abuse they were subjected to at Dozier, and at times their traumatic memories reappear in physical symptoms. Former student Eddie Horne, for instance, relayed to journalists in 2009 that he sometimes experienced phantom pains in the locations where he was beaten by Dozier's staff members (Montgomery and Moore 19). According to neuroscientists Gentsch and Kuehn, people who have been raped or tortured in the past can develop a psychosomatic disorder, whereby symptoms like muscle pain, panic attacks, or fatigue emerge whenever they find themselves in a situation that mirrors conditions from the traumatic incident (4). Feelings of fear and distress, even sounds and particular weather circumstances can cause a victim to reexperience the incident as if it were present, the traumatic past manifesting itself "in the form of somatic flashbacks including physical sensations such as smells, tastes, pain, haptic experiences, pressure or sweating" (4).

In Elwood's case, following his punishment at the White House, the boy physically reexperiences his traumatic past whenever he encounters elements that correspond with the incident. The bits of fiber in his skin, for example, not only provide his pain with an interpretable form, they also offer a reference point to the trauma that became embedded in

his body memory: while the boy recuperated in the hospital ward, he "got sick of looking at his new pants sitting there on the chair" (Whitehead 77). Here, the new pair of pants trigger a physical response within Elwood's body because they are related to the ones that were beaten into his skin. The feeling of sickness is thus a physical manifestation of his traumatic experience at the White House. Then, at a later moment, Elwood sweats through to his bed sheets when he hears the sound of Spencer's jingling keys, which are the same keys the superintendent used to open the door to the White House. The narrator relays that "the noise paralyzed him," and Elwood "waited for the sound of the leather strap scraping the ceiling" (78). Once more the boy's traumatic past resurfaces in his body, manifesting itself in a somatic flashback which causes him to sweat excessively and to feel paralyzed. The sound of the keys momentarily transports Elwood back to the White House, where he laid on a bloodstained mattress and waited for the leather strap to land on his body. These two examples thus reveal how his beating not only left scars on the surface of his body, but also inside of him. The memory of violence is like a haunting presence beneath his skin, resurfacing whenever he faces elements that correspond with the traumatic incident at the White House.

Traumatic bodily experiences like Elwood's also leave a lasting impression on victims' perception of the self. According to Payne, people define and perceive themselves through what narrative therapists call *self-stories*, which are first-person narratives that are based on people's past experiences, their relationships, and present circumstances (19). Yet, at times, these self-stories can be influenced by outside factors such as sociopolitical norms (21). Depending on what these norms entail, they can negatively affect people's self-perception and consequently distort the stories they tell about their lives as well as limit the possibilities they see for themselves (21). Prior to his sentence at Nickel, the self-story that Elwood told the world was one of self-worth; through his behavior he tried to show other people that he was

"as good as anyone" (Whitehead 25). As was explained, the boy's self-story was shaped by Dr. King who preached that, though "'there are big forces that want to keep the Negro down,'" African Americans "'have to stand up straight and maintain [their] sense of who [they] are'" (25). As such, Elwood walked down the streets of his neighborhood with "this sense of somebody-ness" (25), demonstrating that even if people spit in his face or harassed him for his behavior, he would hold onto Dr. King's words about Black people's worthiness. However, the boy falls silent after his traumatic experience at the White House; he no longer holds his head up high but rather keeps it down to avoid trouble. As the narrator relays, the beating "had him scarred all over, not just his legs. It had weevilled deep into his personality" (119); the message that had been beaten into his body had damaged Elwood's very sense of self-worth.

In her research, Culbertson discusses the impact of traumatic bodily experiences on survivors and states that in an attempt to suppress the traumatic past, they will become silent "so as not to relive the victimization countless times" (169). Yet, memories of violence will invariably reappear, and the more victims try to suppress them, the more they will negatively affect their daily lives. It is for this reason that Laub asserts that "the event must be reclaimed" (86) for it is through the act of reclaiming, of bearing witness to the traumatic past, that survivors will be able to restore "the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violation" (Culbertson 179). Proponents of narrative therapy similarly maintain that *reauthoring*, i.e., the act of retracing those events that negatively affected patients' self-stories, will enable people to chart a future trajectory that is no longer overshadowed by said events (Hutto et al. 312). In Elwood's case, after witnessing Nickel's violent regime on several more occasions, he comes to the realization that it was not Spencer's beating that had necessarily ruined him but rather the fact that "he'd stopped fighting" (Whitehead 153). Back at home, the boy had actively expressed his opinions about the racial question in various

essays and had sent these to local newspapers for publication; the essays were the fourteen-year-old's way of contributing to the Civil Rights Movement. In contrast, he now kept his head down "so that he made it to lights-out without mishap" (153), essentially falling in line with those Black people Dr. King criticized in his letter from prison, i.e., people who had become complacent after years of oppression, causing them to readjust to it and "'to sleep in it as their only bed'" (154). Similarly, by keeping his head down and staying out of trouble, Elwood had convinced himself that he had outsmarted Nickel, that he had found a way to oppose its system, while in reality he had become docile. Indeed, sociopolitical norms, like the racial code that was passed down from slavery, can negatively affect people's self-perception and cause them to believe the stories that others tell about their lives, effectively curbing their behavior (Payne 21). Narrative therapists therefore encourage their patients to take back their storytelling rights and break free from the thin conclusions that were projected onto them (Hutto et al. 311). In accordance, Elwood had survived the onslaught to his body, but now he needed to reauthor his story in order to undo the grasp of violence, hereby enabling him to restore the self that is as good as anyone.

He begins by retracing those events that had ruined his self and he writes a letter containing details about his beating at the White House and information about those involved in Nickel's violent and corrupt regime. As he tells his friend Turner, "'[you] can't go around it — you have to go through it. Walk with your head up no matter what they throw at you'" (Whitehead 172): it was not just his own self that had been broken; Nickel needed to be exposed in order to free all those lives that had been univocally damaged by the school. As was explained, by giving a formless experience like pain a narrative form, e.g., a letter or a poem, the writer can see things that were previously unavailable to them. In a similar manner, by writing about his experiences, Elwood comes to the realization that from an early age, "boys had been trained to wait until spoken to," and had "it reinforced at Nickel: you are a

colored boy in a white man's world" (Whitehead 177). His letter would thus be his way of resisting, of joining the living chain of Civil Rights protestors whom he admired. Unfortunately, even though his letter does reach a visiting inspector, an outsider who could confirm his story and report the school to the authorities, it does not lead to the expected result but rather to the boy's untimely death. Despite of his numerous encounters with racial injustice, Elwood still wants to believe in common decency because this was the message of the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, as Turner had told him earlier on, "'[in] here and out there are the same, but in here no one has to act fake anymore'" (79). Elwood's letter indeed arrives in a landscape where Black bodies are treated as inferior and where their physical pain is not acknowledged. What is more, Nickel is part of a larger system of power whereby its sponsors and associates benefit greatly from the school's 'services,' e.g., free labor, festivities during the holidays, a yearly boxing match etc. As such, following a string of events, Elwood tragically dies amidst his and Turner's escape from the reformatory. As was previously maintained, the absence of an addressable other annuls the story within the victim, and in Elwood's case, the boy is literally annulled for his attempt to expose Nickel. This twist may come as a big surprise to first-time readers because the student who was introduced as Elwood at the start of the book appears to have died: the man from the prologue is none other than Turner who assumed his friend's identity after he was killed. Rather than giving readers a 'happy ending,' i.e., one where Elwood successfully escapes from Nickel and builds a life for himself, Whitehead gives us Turner, someone who struggles with the reality of his friend's death and initially remains silent about his and Elwood's past.

Throughout the book, Turner functions as a type of character foil of Elwood: whereas the latter boy tries to see the good in people, the first tends to see the worst in others and often opposes his friend's moral views. At the same time though, Turner respects Elwood and by taking over his identity, he seeks "to honor his friend" and to "live for him" (200). His

decision to suspend his own identity for Elwood's corresponds with an argument from narrative medicine: according to Charon, in order to help patients who are unable to explain their illness, health care professionals must learn how to "suspend the self so as to become a receptive vessel for the language and experience of another" (263), i.e., they must become the mouthpiece of those who cannot tell. Since Elwood is no longer alive and thus incapable of telling, Turner lives for the both of them and attempts to lead a life that "Elwood would have been proud of" (Whitehead 202). As was stated, *The Nickel Boys* moves between four different moments in time: whereas the largest part of the story takes place during the 1960s, aside from the prologue, in three chapters readers are transported to 1968, 1988, and once more to 2014. These chapters provide an image of the life that Turner leads as Elwood and demonstrate to readers the long-lasting impact of trauma on survivors. As Culbertson explains, even though survivors have been freed, they are silenced by their traumatic memories, "or more precisely, by the loss of the self who might communicate" (173), i.e., though they have survived the violence, the trauma has remained inside of their body and has consequently deprived them of a voice. Similarly, following his escape from Nickel, Turner falls silent: for nearly fifty years he lives his life as Elwood and does not talk about his traumatic experiences nor about the injustices he witnessed at Nickel. In contrast to his friend who spoke up against the reformatory and was killed for his efforts, Turner-as-Elwood remains in the shadows. Even when he learns about the archeological discoveries and the testimonies of the White House Boys in 2014, "he stayed away from the reunions and didn't add his name to the lists" (Whitehead 5).

Turner's silence is understandable when viewed in light of his circumstances: following his escape from Nickel, he became a fugitive who had witnessed first-handedly what happened to students who opposed Nickel, the image of Elwood's death engraved in his memory. In addition, as was previously explained, for the longest time the state did not

acknowledge the testimonies of the White House Boys, let alone those of former Black students. Like the narrator relays, the boys "had to wait for [the school] to be dead before they told the tale" (Whitehead 207). Yet, Griffiths maintains that a "false witness occurs whenever the listener thwarts the creation of testimony to avoid its painful truths" (10). The same can be said of Turner because even though his friend's memory is alive inside of him, to the rest of the world Elwood is just another dead boy in an unmarked grave, one that needs to be "neatly erased from history" (Whitehead 1). As such, by avoiding the painful truths from his past, Turner essentially thwarts Elwood's testimony as well. Nevertheless, the traumatic past can only be ignored for so long before it begins to invade the survivor's daily life. Like with Elwood, Turner's traumatic past resurfaces at various moments in somatic symptoms, causing him to feel back pain, to have nightmares, or to walk out of movies "because a scene — of violence, of helplessness — abducted him and took him back to Nickel" (203). In the end, it is the availability of an addressable other, a listener who acknowledges Turner's story, who changes everything for him.

According to King, before a person can safely open up about their past, a degree of distance and security from said past is needed (114). Something similar can be observed with Turner: in the last chapter, the story returns to 2014 and the reader learns how he tells his wife Millie about his true identity. After five decades, Turner has finally found a secure place where he can safely open up about his past without fear of repercussions. Millie is the addressable other who accepts him for who he is, not for the lie he has told. Indeed, as she thinks to herself, "his deception was nothing compared to what he had done with his life" (204). The safety that she has provided him with has "unbent him from who he had been" (206), i.e., a scared boy who, after his escape from Nickel, continued to be a scared man. His relationship with Millie, then, has given him the security he needed in order to tell and it is in their bodily transaction, in their mutual struggle to understand his traumatic past, that Turner

is able to restore the self he lost when Elwood died. In addition, by opening up, he realizes that his silence simultaneously silenced his friend's testimony; though he had tried to live for them both, he had not been a receptive vessel for Elwood's experiences. Therefore, in the book's closing act, Turner at last moves out of the shadows and decides to tell the White House Boys and anyone who cared about "Elwood's story and what they did to him when he tried to put a stop to [Nickel's] crimes" (207), hereby becoming the addressable other his friend never had.

At the end of *The Nickel Boys*, the story goes full circle and a type of resurrection occurs, one where Turner's and Elwood's stories have received their due telling and are no longer buried within Turner's body. What is more, by speaking up and thus reclaiming his traumatic past, Turner has found the courage to do more than survive: he can now chart a future trajectory in which his self has a place beside the memory of Elwood. Like Laub maintains, "one has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (77), and Turner has finally taken this step.

4

Conclusion

4.1 Why Telling Stories about Black Bodies Matters

The current study investigated how memories of traumatic experiences with pain can become encoded on a physical level, and researched how far narratives can provide pain with interpretable forms, hereby demonstrating that telling and listening to stories is imperative to restoring the self that was lost amidst traumatic experiences. In the theoretical background I established that traumatic memories of violent incidents leave a lasting impression on the bodies of victims. In order to distance themselves from the past, said victims will attempt to dispel the traumatic memories from their minds, which consequently relocates the memories to their violated bodies. The trauma thus manifests itself in people's body memory, reappearing in physical symptoms whenever they encounter elements that correspond with the traumatic incident. What is more, the lack of an outside referent makes physical pain a difficult feeling to communicate to outsiders, leaving victims with a haunting presence beneath their skins that has no reality outside of their bodies. Yet, in order to heal, victims must externalize their traumatic bodily experiences and by using Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* as a case study, I explored the avenues through which the Black protagonists' physical pain and traumatic body memories are made interpretable.

In my third chapter I first focused on the book's textual qualities: by close-reading various sections, I demonstrated that Whitehead provides Elwood's pain with outside referents that the reader must interpret. The first interpretable form was the description of Spencer as a living blade, a metaphoric connection that lifts Elwood's pain out of his body. Indeed, the connection between Spencer and the weapon is important because a weapon in itself is incapable of inflicting pain: the one responsible for the violation must be included for the weapon to function as a referent of pain. What is more, rather than stating that the boy

experienced pain, Whitehead offers readers an image of his treatment whereby a doctor removes fibers from Elwood's skin. As I explained, these fibers are tethered to his beating at the White House, one that knocked him unconscious and caused his pants to become embedded in his legs. The fibers in his skin therefore provide his pain with an outside referent that can be interpreted by the reader.

Following my close readings, I used concepts from various medical studies to analyze Whitehead's portrayal of traumatic body memories and his representation of the damaging effects of traumatic experiences on Elwood's and Turner's self. As was shown, Elwood responds physically whenever he encounters elements that correspond with his beating at the White House, e.g., the sight of a new pair of pants or the sound of Spencer's jingling keys. These responses are physical manifestations of his traumatic past and momentarily transport him back to the White House, succinctly curbing his behavior. In the end, Elwood decides to retrace the events that affected him negatively, and reauthors his self-story in a letter. Through the act of writing, of speaking up about his experiences in a letter, Elwood attempts to reclaim his traumatic past and create a future trajectory in which the reformatory is no more. Yet, as was stated, the story within a victim becomes annulled when there is no listener, and Elwood, who does not have a listener, is killed for his efforts.

As such, it was established that the availability of an addressable other is a crucial component of telling for they are the ones who listen and succinctly confirm the story that lay within the teller's body. When it comes to the White House Boys, though the state of Florida did not acknowledge their stories for many years, their testimonies were invaluable to Dr. Kimmerle's research, and eventually inspired Whitehead to speak up for the former Black students in *The Nickel Boys*. With regards to Turner, by eventually telling both his and Elwood's story, he brings an end to witnessing: the act of telling does not bring back his dead friend but it does offer a reconciliation with the traumatic past so that a future trajectory can

be created. As was shown, Turner finds in his wife Millie an addressable other to whom he can safely tell his story, thus enabling him to restore the self he lost when his friend was killed. Even though Elwood's memory had stayed alive in Turner, to the rest of the world his friend was just another body in an unmarked grave. By telling his story and reclaiming his past, Turner simultaneously speaks up for his friend, at last providing Elwood with the addressable other he never had.

In short, telling stories about Black bodies matters because in order to live a life that is no longer overshadowed by the traumatic past, victims of racial violence need to acknowledge the truth that lies within their bodies, and this starts by telling their stories to a willing listener.

4.2 Final Reflections and Suggestions

In many ways, my Master thesis opened a pandora's box and I consequently did not attend to every subject or expand on ones from my theoretical background. One missing subject, for instance, is my discussion of the differences between male and female (Black) bodies: I approached the human body in a universal manner and did not discuss how violent acts can be informed by sociocultural messages related to gender norms, e.g., the act of beating a man's body may simultaneously be an attack on his masculinity. In a following study it would therefore be good to perform a comparative analysis between, for instance, *The Nickel Boys* and another literary case study in which the bodies of women are purposely subjected to pain.

A concept I did not expand on in my discussion of *The Nickel Boys* is reenactment, nor did I explain its connection to performativity. This would have been an interesting discussion because the idea that Turner's and Elwood's physical responses to their traumatic memories are a type of performance, puts the reader in the position of spectator, hereby turning them into another type of addressable other. In addition, aside from symbolism and

imagery, there are other narrative techniques that appear in the novel, among other, the presence of an unreliable narrator and the use of focalization. Furthermore, I focused primarily on Elwood and the rhetoric devices that make his painful experiences at Nickel interpretable. A more in-depth analysis of Turner would be a worthwhile addition to a future study of *The Nickel Boys*: his role in the book is quite peculiar for he functions as a type of doppelganger of Elwood, and some reviewers have suggested that the two boys are actually the same person.

With regards to my thesis's central topic, i.e., traumatic body memories, the medical studies about this concept are quite extensive, and I only covered a fraction of the research that has been conducted in the past three decades. Future studies would do good to expand on the concept for it offers fertile ground for analyzing literary works and historical situations in which (Black) people's bodies are purposely subjected to pain and become conflated in sociopolitical debates.

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