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THE REFLECTIONS OF NECROPOLITICS IN *"THE NICKEL BOYS"*, A NOVEL BY COLSON WHITEHEAD

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To my parents, Vilmar and Tânia, who, even in the face of difficulties, always believed in me and supported my dreams with love and dedication.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the concept of Necropolitics, developed by Achille Mbembe, manifests itself in the narrative *The Nickel Boys* (2019), by Colson Whitehead, a work that portrays racial oppression and institutional violence in the United States. Based on real events that took place at a reform school in Florida, the novel reveals how structured racism shapes lives and institutions, highlighting the sovereign power that decides who lives and who dies. Based on a qualitative methodology and a critical reading of Whitehead's work, the analysis seeks to connect literary fiction with the historical and political dimensions of institutional racism, highlighting the scars left by these practices in contemporary society.

Keywords: The Nickel Boys; Colson Whitehead; Necropolitics; Achille Mbembe; institutional racism.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora como o conceito de necropolítica, desenvolvido por Achille Mbembe, se manifesta na narrativa de *The Nickel Boys* (2019), de Colson Whitehead, uma obra que retrata a opressão racial e a violência institucional nos Estados Unidos. Baseado em eventos reais da escola reformadora Dozier School na Flórida, o romance revela como o racismo estruturado molda vidas e instituições, destacando o poder soberano que decide quem vive e quem morre. A análise, fundamentada em uma metodologia qualitativa e na leitura crítica da obra de Whitehead, busca conectar a ficção literária com as dimensões históricas e políticas do racismo institucional, evidenciando as cicatrizes deixadas por essas práticas na sociedade contemporânea.

Palavras chave: The Nickel Boys, necropolitics, Achille Mbembe, Colson Whitehead, racismo institucional.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature often serves as a tool to describe the social landscape, allowing us to reflect on fundamental issues of human experience. Colson Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) examines the scars left by racial oppression and institutional violence in the United States, based on real events that occurred at the Dozier School for Boys, a reform school in Florida where young men were brutalized and often killed during their time there. The work is part of the context of contemporary literature and stands out for its critical approach to American racial history.

Colson Whitehead is a renowned American writer, born in 1969, whose literary production focuses on exploring themes such as racism, history, and identity (Adams, 2019). His career includes highly influential titles such as *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which earned him the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, consolidating him as one of the most relevant voices in contemporary literature. His works create fictional spaces to bring to light buried stories of racial segregation in the United States, offering a narrative that engages with the country's historical and political reality (Adams, 2019).

Structured in 16 chapters, *The Nickel Boys* presents the journey of Elwood Curtis, a young black man inspired by the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., who, after being unjustly accused of a crime, is sent to Nickel Academy. At the reformatory, he witnesses and experiences a series of systematic abuses, reflecting institutionalized violence against marginalized populations (Adams, 2019). Whitehead constructs a narrative that, without resorting to sentimentality, highlights how the American racial structure perpetuates cycles of violence and social exclusion.

This work was chosen for analysis due to its literary and historical relevance since it exposes the legacy of racial segregation and the persistence of necropolitical practices in the contemporary context. Published in 2019, the novel emerged at a time of heightened debates about racial justice in the United States, especially in light of the growth of movements such as Black Lives Matter, which denounce police violence and the mass incarceration of the black population.

This paper analyzes the presence of the concept of necropolitics, developed by Achille Mbembe (2018), in Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, to investigate how the novel exposes the practices of power that determine who lives and who dies. The

research seeks to understand how literature can serve as a critical tool to denounce structures of oppression and contribute to a broader debate on institutional racism and social history. To this end, a qualitative approach is adopted, with a bibliographical analysis of Mbembe's work and a critical reading of the novel, aiming to explore its political and social implications.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

This study's theoretical framework is based on concepts developed by Achille Mbembe, Michel Foucault, and other scholars who analyze the relationships between power, oppression, and social institutions. These theoretical frameworks are essential to understanding how political and racial domination structures can manifest themselves in different historical and social contexts.

One of the central concepts for this research is necropolitics, developed by Achille Mbembe (2018b), which expands Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics to discuss how sovereign power not only manages life but also exercises the right to determine who dies and under what conditions. According to Mbembe, necropolitics materializes through regimes of systematic violence that relegate certain populations to a precarious existence, marked by physical or symbolic death.

To understand the development of this concept, it is necessary to revisit Michel Foucault's (1999, 2002) contributions to biopolitics and state racism. Foucault argues that biopower manifests itself through control mechanisms that regulate bodies and populations, promoting the selection of those who should live and those who can be discarded by the State. This perspective is complemented by the studies of Duarte and Simioni (2019), who analyze the selectivity of fundamental rights, highlighting how certain social groups are systematically deprived of protection and basic rights.

The critical literature on racial practices in the United States also supports this research. Thompson-Miller and Feagin (2018) discuss the historical impact of legal segregation on the structuring of institutional racism, demonstrating how discriminatory practices were and continue to be reproduced within the educational and penal systems. In the field of literary criticism, Júnior (2023) explores the relationship between necropolitics and the contemporary (neo)slavery narrative, establishing an essential dialogue for understanding works that denounce racial violence.

The structure of literary narrative as a way of highlighting systems of oppression is also analyzed by Martín-Salván (2022), who investigates the relationship between concealment and revelation in the construction of narratives about trauma and institutional violence. These critical reflections help to understand how contemporary literature employs narrative strategies to expose historical processes of marginalization and racial violence.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to examine the manifestations of necropolitics within the context of institutional violence, exploring how these structures of domination are articulated and reproduced throughout history. The discussion of these theories is essential to establish the critical foundation of the research and to understand the relationship between power, racism, and literature in contemporary times.

3. METHODOLOGY

This monograph will be developed in light of detailed bibliographical research, to delimit the theoretical and critical framework necessary for the identification, investigation, and discussion of the question proposed in the introduction: how the concept of necropolitics, developed by Achille Mbembe, manifests itself in the narrative of *The Nickel Boys* (2019), by Colson Whitehead, and how this concept reveals the practices of power that determine who lives and who dies within the context of the work.

The bibliographical research includes the reading, analysis, and interpretation of books, academic articles, and other relevant materials on the central themes of the study. All collected and selected material will be subjected to a screening, from which it will be possible to establish a reading plan. This reading will be carried out carefully and systematically, accompanied by notes and records that will contribute to the theoretical foundation of the study. The bibliographical research aims to understand the various theoretical and scientific contributions already available on the subject, providing support for the definition of the problem, the construction of objectives, the elaboration of hypotheses, and the structuring of the discussion.

Studies on necropolitics, whose main theorists are Achille Mbembe and Michel Foucault, will serve as the main basis for the monograph, which includes an

analysis of Colson Whitehead's work *The Nickel Boys*. Other publications by secondary authors who discuss institutional racism, structural violence, and literature as a form of social criticism will be used to deepen the discussion and contextualize the concept of necropolitics within the literary narrative.

The discussion on necropolitics and institutional racism leads to a theoretical approach to the relationship between power and violence in the historical context of the United States. To this end, a study of the social and political conditions of racial segregation in the United States and its consequences for African-American populations will be necessary. In *Necropolitics* (2018b), Mbembe expands on Foucault's concept of biopolitics and argues that sovereign power is expressed not only through the regulation of life but also through the ability to exercise death, both physical and social, of individuals (MBEMBE, 2018). Thus, to establish an appropriate framework for this discussion, it will be necessary to draw on the reflections of scholars who analyze the impact of structural violence on racial minorities and their representation in literature.

Finally, the monograph emphasizes the importance of analyzing how literary fiction can be a tool for social criticism, allowing for reflections on institutional violence and how it perpetuates itself. The intersection between literature and politics allows for a deeper understanding of the consequences of structural racism, making the study relevant to both the fields of literature and social and political studies.

4. NECROPOLITICS

Achille Mbembe, an important Cameroonian historian and political scientist, developed the concept of necropolitics, which he first presented in 2003 in an essay organized by the author himself. This term is defined as “the maximum expression of sovereignty,” which resides “in the power and capacity to dictate who can live and who can die” (Mbembe, 2018b, n.p. our translation).

This concept is an evolution and critique of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. In this sense, while Michel Foucault analyzed biopower as a form of control over life, through disciplinary techniques and population management, Mbembe expands on this idea by exploring how sovereign power manifests itself through the capacity to inflict death, especially on groups considered disposable within the capitalist system (Mbembe, 2018b).

The concept of biopolitics developed by Michel Foucault was designed to analyze the European reality. In this way, Foucault addressed the theme of power, especially its excess and relations of subjection, as a central issue in his works. In the 19th Century, poverty and misery were the main focus. Still, in the 20th century, attention turned to the growth of political power and control technologies, particularly in the Modern State (Duarte, Simioni, 2018). Foucault highlighted that classical sovereign power, characterized by violence and the logic of "the right to life and death", gave way to a more subtle and comprehensive model, based on the control of life (Foucault, 1999).

This transition generated two complementary forms of control: disciplinary, which focuses on the individual, and biological, aimed at the collective (Foucault, 2002). The human body began to be treated as an object of power, leading to the surveillance and conditioning of individuals. The concept of "subjected subjectivity" explains how individuals are shaped according to dominant interests and normative systems (Duarte; Simioni, 2018).

In this context, institutions such as schools, universities, and the army played a crucial role in a standardized society. These social and institutional practices, legitimized by implicit social consensus, aimed to standardize behaviors and align society with certain values and ways of life (Duarte; Simioni, 2018).

Michel Foucault identified that to improve the population's quality of life, the modern State adopted mechanisms that not only controlled but also promoted life, based on the logic of "making people live" (Foucault, 2002). This involved public policies, such as health, hygiene, social security, and education, to regulate and balance all aspects of life. However, Foucault pointed out that these measures, although they seemed humanitarian, hid deep strategies of control that encompassed even the most intimate aspects of existence.

This expanded control, called biopolitics, sought to normalize human life and eliminate deviations, integrate bodies into the productive system, and create a healthy and disciplined workforce. Foucault highlighted that this technology of power was fundamental to the advancement of capitalism, as it consolidated a model of society in which freedom and authenticity were suppressed (Duarte; Simioni, 2018).

In addition, control over biological phenomena did not reduce violence, but contributed to its increase, strengthening ideas of eugenics and standardization.

Everything that did not conform to established standards was marginalized or eliminated, reinforcing societal distinctions and hierarchies. This process fostered structural and contemporary racism, which legitimized exclusion and violence against certain groups, influencing the policies and social practices of modern states (Duarte; Simioni, 2018).

In this sense, Mbembe, using a more comprehensive and less Eurocentric approach, developed the concept of Necropolitics from this, arguing in his work that, in today's world, capitalism creates "worlds of death", where marginalized people are dehumanized and forced to live in conditions that bring them closer to death, whether physical or social (Grisoski; Pereira, 2020 p. 204). Unlike traditional European thinking, Mbembe includes in his analysis of colonial and post-colonial contexts, such as apartheid in South Africa and the conflicts in Palestine, to illustrate how Necropolitics operates in practice today (Mbembe, 2018b).

The author highlights the state's capacity, as a sovereign entity, to decide which individuals have the right to life or death. According to Mbembe, this practice is directed at specific groups and is considered irrelevant within the current capitalist social model.

In this scenario, Mbembe's thinking connects Necropolitics to capitalist dynamics, defining it as a mechanism that results in the mass elimination of individuals seen as disposable by society. This process triggers a systemic crisis since the prevailing economic logic favors market competition and values those who can accumulate greater capital. In contrast, it excludes and disregards those who do not meet the demands of this system of power, classifying them as disposable (Grisoski; Pereira, 2020, p. 204).

The author expands on Foucault's ideas by addressing the politics of sovereignty, which is characterized by the capacity for self-institution and self-limitation. This politics establishes its limits, functioning as a mechanism by which society creates itself through institutions shaped by specific social and imaginary meanings (Mbembe, 2018b). The focus is on the forms of sovereignty that, as a central project, instrumentalize human existence and promote the material destruction of bodies and populations (Mbembe, 2018b).

Inspired by the thoughts of Hegel and Bataille, Mbembe presents sovereignty as intrinsically associated with the risk of death. The authority to transgress the prohibition of killing is linked to the social norms and customs that legitimize it. In

this way, sovereignty is conceived as a violation of prohibitions, marked by cyclical transgressions, functioning as "politics as the work of death" (Mbembe, 2018b).

Furthermore, Mbembe, analyzing the contemporary State, identifies the intersection between the state of exception and the relationship of enmity as determinants of the murderous functions of State power. These factors regulate death by dividing and classifying groups within a population, reflecting what Foucault described as racism — the imposition of biological barriers between different segments. Based on Foucault and Arendt, the author argues that this dynamic underlies the power structure that legitimizes practices of exclusion and violence.

> That “race” (or, indeed, “racism”) figures prominently in the rationality of biopower is entirely justifiable. After all, more than Dasse thought (the ideology that defines history as an economic class struggle), race has been the ever-present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples—or the domination to be exercised over them. Referring both to this timeless presence and to the spectral character of the world of race as a whole, Arendt locates its roots in the shattering experience of otherness and suggests that the politics of race is ultimately related to the politics of death. Indeed, in Foucauldian terms, racism is above all a technology designed to enable the exercise of biopower, "this old sovereign right to kill."18 In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the State. According to Foucault, this is "the condition for the acceptability of causing death." (Mbembe, 2018b, n.p. our translation).
> [1]

Achille Mbembe analyzes the relationship between biopower and social enmity, using historical periods such as slavery and apartheid as examples, where practices of death were legitimized by racial discrimination. He also highlights the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine, characterized by daily militarization that involves extreme control, arbitrary violence, and the destruction of civil institutions, resulting in total subjugation of the population (Mbembe, 2018b). This domination combines biopower, necro power, and discipline to consolidate absolute control.

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[1] Que a "raça" (ou, na verdade, o "racismo") tenha um lugar proeminente na racionalidade própria do biopoder é inteiramente justificável. Afinal de contas, mais do que o pensamento de dasse (a ideologia que define história como uma luta econômica de classes), a raça foi a sombra sempre presente no pensamento e na prática das políticas do Ocidente, especialmente quando se trata de imaginar a desumanidade de povos estrangeiros - ou a dominação a ser exercida sobre eles. Referindo-se tanto a essa presença atemporal como ao caráter espectral do mundo da raça como um todo, Arendt localiza suas raízes na experiência demolidora da alteridade e sugere que a política da raça, em última análise, está relacionada com a política da morte. Com efeito, em termos foucaultianos, racismo é acima de tudo uma tecnologia destinada a permitir o exercício do biopoder, "este velho direito soberano de matar'.18 Na economia do biopoder, a função do racismo é regular a distribuição da morte e tornar possíveis as funções assassinas do Estado. Segundo Foucault, essa é "a condição para a aceitabilidade do fazer morrer" (Mbembe, n.p. 2018b).

Furthermore, Mbembe proposes the concepts of Necropolitics and micropower to describe contexts where populations are reduced to a condition of "living dead", living in "worlds of death". These concepts point to practices that promote mass destruction, whether physical or symbolic, especially against marginalized groups in the global capitalist system (Mbembe, 2018b).

Therefore, although he starts from Foucault's ideas on biopolitics, Mbembe criticizes his Eurocentric limitations and broadens the debate to include non-European contexts, emphasizing how social control manifests itself more strongly in certain populations. In this perspective, Necropolitics is presented as an evolution of biopower, encompassing modern realities where the management of death, and not just life, is central to the exercise of power.

5. HOW THE CONCEPT OF NECROPOLITICS IS REPRESENTED IN THE WORK *THE NICKEL BOYS* BY COLSON WHITEHEAD

The novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019), by Colson Whitehead, explores the deep scars left by racial oppression and institutional violence in the United States. Based on real events that occurred at a reform school in Florida (Dozier School), the work reveals how the brutality of structured racism can profoundly impact the lives of individuals and influence the formation of social institutions. The book tells the story of Elwood Curtis, who is unjustly arrested and taken to Nickel, where he befriends Jack Turner, another young African-American. After experiencing several abuses within the institution, in a twist, the two characters end up becoming one, when Turner assumes the identity of Elwood after escaping from Nickel (Júnior, 2023). The work has several points that are associated with Mbembe's thinking. In this sense, it is important to analyze how the concept of Necropolitics is reflected in the author's narrative.

In *The Nickel Boys* Whitehead presents a narrative that reflects the theory of Necropolitics throughout all the periods illustrated through the journey of his characters (especially Elwood and Turner). It is possible to analyze, through the illustrated context and setting, the presence of the theory during Elwood's previous life, the time he lived in Nickel, and in his life after the reformatory, now with the figure of Turner as the center.

Starting with the analysis of the first part of the work, which focuses on Elwood's childhood and adolescence, it is possible to see that he was inserted in the scenario that illustrates the struggles of African Americans for civil rights, in the transition period of the abolition of Jim Crow laws (1887-1964) (Whitehead, 2019), which legally promoted the segregation of the African-American population in the United States. In chapter seven of the book, which begins with Elwood's grandmother's description of a series of events involving her family members, it is possible to see the consequences of such laws on the lives of black citizens and the trail of violations that were legitimized thanks to the strength of this state mechanism, as we can see in the following passage:

> Rarely did Harriet make proper goodbyes to her loved ones. Her father died in jail after a white lady downtown accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk. Bumptious contact, as Jim Crow defined it. That's how it went in the old days. He was waiting for his appointment with the judge when they found him hung in his cell. No one believed the police's story. [...] Harriet's husband, Monty, got hit in the head with a chair while breaking up a scuffle at Miss Simone's. Some colored GIs from Camp Gordon Johnston in a rumble with a bunch of Tallahassee crackers over who had next on the pool table. Two people ended up dead. One of them was her Monty, who'd stepped up to protect one of Simone's dishwashers from three white men. The boy still wrote Harriet letters every Christmas. He drove a taxicab in Orlando and had three kids. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 52).

Elwood's grandmother, as the passage above demonstrates, is marked by violence and instability. Another passage that shows the same type of environment is the following:

> Perhaps his life might have veered elsewhere if the US government had opened the country to colored advancement like they opened the army. But it was one thing to allow someone to kill for you and another to let him live next door. The GI Bill fixed things pretty good for the white boys he served with, but the uniform meant different things depending who wore it. What was the point of a no-interest loan when a white bank won't let you step inside? Percy drove up to Milledgeville to visit a buddy from his unit and some crackers started something. He'd stopped for gas in one of those little towns. Cracker town, crack-your-head town. He barely got out—everybody knew white boys were lynching black men in uniform, but he never believed he'd be a target. Not him. Bunch of white boys jealous that they didn't have a uniform and afraid of a world that let a nigger wear one in the first place. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 55-53).

These fragments demonstrate the institutionalized violence during the full force of Jim Crow laws, which highlight the abuses suffered by the characters. The lives of African-American citizens were threatened by insignificant everyday situations,

whether it was an injury suffered in an interaction with a white woman, enjoying the night at a bar or even taking a break to fill up the car. All of these scenarios led to the death or assault of one of Harriet's family members. The time frame that encompasses the duration of the Jim Crow laws marks a period of legally constituted state control capable of controlling and subjugating the lives of the African-American population. It is noted that:

> Legal segregation (Jim Crow) was a social system that southern (and border states) whites utilized after the abolition of slavery. The primary function was to continue the social system of servitude, the racial caste hierarchy, and the economic control of African Americans. The social system was at base controlled through the use of overt and implied racial violence. Even though the official segregation system was finally outlawed by the 1968 Civil Rights Act, nearly 40 years ago, its reality and impact continue. The personal narratives of older African Americans that we collected and that will quote later in this article indicate that the emotional, economic, and social ramifications of the experience are still greatly felt (Thompson-Miller; Feagin, 2018. p. 457).

During the period of legal segregation, racial violence became a legitimized practice and integrated into the daily functioning of this system. Violent acts committed by whites against African-Americans were considered normal or traditional, rather than deviant. This violence often manifested itself in collective assaults, sexual abuse, burning of homes and churches, and lynchings. These practices, in turn, were sustained by a broadly institutionalized structure of racial oppression (Thompson-Miller and Feagin, 2018).

Thus, Whitehead's narrative (1019) illustrates this context of oppression and the marks that were not overcome. Even though Jim Crow laws were in the process of being repealed, in the practical and everyday context, the changes were minimal for the African-American population, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> The morning after the decision, the sun rose and everything looked the same. Elwood asked his grandmother when Negroes were going to start staying at the Richmond, and she said it’s one thing to tell someone to do what’s right and another thing for them to do it. She listed some of his behavior as proof and Elwood nodded: Maybe so. Sooner or later, though, the door would swing wide to reveal a brown face—a dapper businessman in Tallahassee for business or a fancy lady in town to see the sights—enjoying the fine-smelling fare the cooks put out. He was sure of it. The game began when he was nine, and three years later the only colored people he saw in the dining room carried plates or drinks or a mop. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 12).

The highlighted excerpt highlights the disillusionment experienced by the character Elwood, who thought that the annulment of segregationist laws would

automatically lead to overcoming the context of violation, prejudice, and racism directed at African Americans. However, as pointed out by the character's mother, this phenomenon is not an easy situation to resolve, when society carries such a deep-rooted burden of prejudice. It is clear then that the historical context illustrated in Colson Whitehead's work (2019) was almost indistinguishable from the period of full-blown segregation experienced by Elwood's predecessors. The character Elwood never had the opportunity to see a “person of color” enter the hotel where he worked, except in positions of subservience.

Furthermore, there are other scenarios described by the author that demonstrate the institutional control of African Americans, such as the school where he studied, which was segregated and received donations from institutions intended for white people. It is possible to note not only the control imposed on black children over the spaces they should occupy but also the extremely racist and violent attitudes and thoughts that demonstrate the thoughts and ideals prevailing at the time, as we can see in the following excerpt:

> On the first day of the school year, the students of Lincoln High School received their new secondhand textbooks from the white high school across the way. Knowing where the textbooks were headed, the white students left inscriptions for the next owners: Choke, Nigger! You Smell. Eat Shit. September was a tutorial in the latest epithets of Tallahassee’s white youth, which, like hemlines and haircuts, varied year to year. It was humiliating to open a biology book, turn to the page on the digestive system, and be confronted with Drop dead NIGGER, but as the school year went on, the students of Lincoln High School stopped noticing the curses and impolite suggestions. How to get through the day if every indignity capsized you in a ditch? One learned to focus one’s attention. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 20).

However, Elwood's description of the treatment of black people in civil rights movements gives an idea of the context of violence and insecurity offered to this population group, in an attempt to repress and deny them essential rights to human dignity.

> He knew Frenchtown’s piece of the Negro’s struggle, where his neighborhood ended and white law took over. Life’s photo essays conveyed him to the front lines, to bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, to counter sit-ins in Greensboro, where young people not much older than him took up the movement. They were beaten with metal bars, blasted by fire hoses, spat on by white housewives with angry faces, and frozen by the camera in tableaus of noble resistance. The tiny details were a wonder: how the young men’s ties remained straight black arrows in the whirl of violence, how the curves of the

> young women's perfect hairdos floated against the squares of their protest signs. Glamorous somehow, even when the blood flowed down their faces. Young knights taking the fight to dragons. Elwood was slight-shouldered, skinny as a pigeon, and he worried about the safety of his glasses, which were expensive and in his dreams broken in two by nightsticks, tire irons, or baseball bats, but he wanted to enlist. He had no choice. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 14-15).

It can be seen then that the chapters that narrate the past life of Elwood and his family demonstrate a scenario marked by the context of institutionalized violence, directed at the black population, in which the sovereign power of the state is seen being used for the oppression of the African-American population. This situation dialogues with the theory of Achille Mbembe (2018b), in addition to highlighting the discriminatory nature that exists in the application of Necropolitics as an instrument of social control:

> [...] race does not exist as a natural physical, anthropological or genetic fact. Race is nothing more than a useful fiction, a phantasmatic construction or an ideological projection, whose function is to divert attention from conflicts considered, from another point of view, as more genuine - the class struggle or the struggle between the sexes, for example (Mbembe, 2018ª. n.p. our translation).[2]

This excerpt from Achille Mbembe shows that the concept of "race" is a social and ideological construct, devoid of biological or scientific bases, used to justify inequalities and structure power relations (Mbembe, 2018a). This ideological construct, which diverts attention from other struggles such as class or gender, was widely used during the Jim Crow laws in the United States when racial segregation was institutionalized to perpetuate the marginalization of black people. Under these laws, "race" became an instrument of material and symbolic oppression, restricting black people's access to education, health, housing, and civil rights, while naturalizing white supremacy and reinforcing oppressive hierarchies.

Furthermore, after Elwood's arrest, which begins to be described at the beginning of part two of *The Nickel Boys*, it is possible to observe that, if the world outside Nickel (described previously) was struggling to free itself from the stigmas that years of repression and segregation had caused, in Nickel reformatory this entire battle appears to be lost, given the great setback that the world inside the reformatory presents

[2] (...) a raça não existe enquanto um fato natural físico, antropológico ou genético. A raça não passa de uma ficção útil, uma construção fantasmática ou uma projeção ideológica, cuja função é desviar a atenção de conflitos considerados, sob outro ponto de vista, como mais genuínos - a luta de classes ou a luta de sexos, por exemplo (Mbembe, 2018a. n.p.).

in terms of the rights and guarantees offered to inmates, especially concerning the black population.

In the chapters that address the characters' time at Nickel, Whitehead develops a narrative that allows us to reflect on institutionalized racism. To this end, the author uses a prison narrative to illustrate the justice system and how this space serves as a means of persisting practices of racial supremacist thinking, which dates back to the times of slavery, creating a kind of metaphor to illustrate how society works (Martín-Salván, 2022). Therefore, the only difference between Nickel and society would be the existence of community moral surveillance, which allows the free use of violence, without dissimulation (Martín-Salván, 2022), a fact that can be illustrated in the following passage:

> I used to think out there is out there and then once you're in here, you're in here. That everybody at Nickel was different because of what being here does to you. Spencer and them, too—maybe out there in the free world, they're good people. Smiling, nice to their kids [. . .] But now I been out and been brought back, I know there's nothing in here that changes people. In here and out there are the same, but in here no one has to act fake anymore. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 60).

In this sense, throughout the reading, it is possible to observe that Nickel did not practice the resocialization bias that it claimed to adopt and the idea of an impartial treatment that "Whatever their life stories, whatever they'd done to get sent to Nickel, the boys were chained together in the same fashion and headed to the same destination." (Whitehead, 2019, p. 33). On the contrary, it is possible to perceive that the differences of race and class begin to be amplified in this place and that "Nickel was racist as hell—half" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 79), imputing cruel and segregationist treatments to the imprisoned boys (Júnior, 2023).

In Nickel reformatory, places such as the White House, the infamous oak trees, and the dark cell represent spaces destined for the destruction of bodies, especially those of African-American boys. These places, hidden from the public eye, symbolize a microcosm of plantation slavery, where racial brutality continues to be perpetuated (Júnior, 2023).

The White House, although it seems like an ordinary building, reveals the segregated violence imposed on the imprisoned boys, highlighting Mbembe's critique of the duality of modern democracies, which hide their necropolitical practices under a

facade of freedom and equality (Júnior, 2023). The interior of the place is described as a scene of torture, unsanitary, and with instruments that recall punishment artifacts used in the era of slavery:

> The beating room had a bloody mattress and a naked pillow that was covered instead by the overlapping stains from all the mouths that had bit into it. Also: the gigantic industrial fan that was the source of the roaring, the sound that traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed. Its original home was the laundry—in the summer those old machines made an inferno—but after one of the periodic reforms where the state made up new rules about corporal punishment, someone had the bright idea to bring it in here. Splatter on the walls where the fan had whipped up blood in its gusting. There was a weird thing to the acoustics where the fan covered the boys' screams but right next to it you heard the staff's instructions perfectly: Hold on to the rail and don't let go. Make a sound and you'll get more. Shut your fucking mouth, nigger.
> The strap was three feet long with a wooden handle, and they had called it Black Beauty since before Spencer's time, although the one he held in his hand was not the original: She had to be repaired or replaced every so often. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 51).

After recovering from his wounds in the White House, Elwood is taken by Turner to an even more terrifying location: the oak trees. There, the torture and death of black boys reflect the brutal murder practices on plantations, where victims were tied up and beaten to death. The oak trees, next to an abandoned stable, amplify racial violence and segregation, reinforcing the continuity between slavery and incarceration (Junior, 2023):

> "This is out back," Turner said. "They say once in a while they take a black boy here and shackle him up to those. Arms spread out. Then they get a horse whip and tear him up."
> Elwood made two fists, then caught himself. "No white boys?"
> "The White House, they got that integrated. This place is separate. They take you out back, they don't bring you to the hospital. They put you down as escaped and that's that, boy." (Whitehead, 2019, p.78-79).

> They came for Griff that night and he never returned. The story spread that he was too proud to take a dive. That he refused to kneel. And if it made the boys feel better to believe that Griff escaped, broke away and ran off into the free world, no one told them otherwise, although some noted that it was odd the school never sounded the alarm or sent out the dogs. When the state of Florida dug him up fifty years later, the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 86).

Furthermore, the dark cell in the reformatory is portrayed as a space of brutal isolation, evoking the punishment practices of the slave era. This experience

transforms Elwood, who begins to see the world in a less idealistic way, understanding that the racist violence in Nickel is an extension of the necropolitical practices that African Americans have faced since slavery. Elwood's escape attempt, led by Turner, ends in his death, but his legacy lives on through Turner, who adopts the name Elwood in his new life in New York (Júnior, 2023).

Thus, Nickel reformatory symbolizes the continuity of oppressive practices rooted in slavery and colonialism, reflecting the persistent impact of these matrices on contemporary mass incarceration (Júnior, 2023). For this reason, incarceration at work can be seen as a model of state necropolitical control, similar to plantation slavery, to confine, control, and eliminate African Americans (Martín-Salván, 2022).

Finally, when analyzing the chapters that illustrate Turner's life after he escapes from Nickel, especially his reflections on the fate of former reform school students, which he makes during his meeting with Chickie Pete (a former Nickel inmate who suffered sexual abuse during his first years in reform school) (Whitehead, 2019), it is once again possible to analyze the failure of the state mechanism in providing a space for resocialization and preparation of students for reintegration into the community.

In the dialogue that takes place between Turner and Chickie, it is possible to perceive that the career and lifestyle options offered to former students of Nickel, or institutions similar to it, capable of offering reintegration into society were almost non-existent (Whitehead, 2019). Without options, most ended up having military enlistment as their only option, as we can see in the following passage: "A lot of guys went from juvie into the armed forces. It's like a natural option, especially if you got no home to go back to. Or want to go back to." (Whitehead, 2019, p. 122)

However, the vast majority of former students found themselves unable to lead a normal life, ending up giving in to addictions or, as in Chickie's case, living on handouts and without any prospect of employment:

> Chickie mentioned the Nickel Boys he ran into over the years—Sammy, Nelson, Lonnie. This one was a crook, that one lost an arm in Vietnam, another one was strung out. Chickie said the names of guys he hadn't thought of in forever, it was like a picture of the Last Supper, twelve losers with Chickie in the middle. That's what the school did to a boy. It didn't stop when you got out. Bend you all kind of ways until you were unfit for straight life, good and twisted by the time you left. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 123).
>
> "I don't want to ask," Chickie said.
> Here it comes.

> "But if you're looking for a hand, I could use the job. I'm sleeping on a couch." (Whitehead, 2019, p. 125).

The excerpts highlighted draw attention to both the physical and concrete harm as well as the psychological harm caused by the incarceration and inhumane environment to which the characters were subjected during their time in the reformatory. Turner himself presents several moments that reflect his traumas, whether consciously or unconsciously, such as being addicted to a film that reminded him of his escape with Elwood, or when he chose the name of his trucking company that referenced the Nickel system (Whitehead, 2019). The fact is that none of the inmates received any state aid to enable them to lead a dignified life.

In the narrative, the public discourse presented to the population that the students received education and practical courses capable of inserting them into the job market after leaving Nickel proves to be a true fallacy, since the story tells that the reformatory had a deficient system, where the students did not receive good education.

> The teacher Mr. Goodall appeared, but no one paid him any mind. Goodall was a pink-skinned man in his mid-sixties, with thick tortoiseshell eyeglasses, a linen suit, and a mane of white hair that gave him a learned air. His scholarly demeanor swiftly evaporated. Only Elwood was dismayed by the teacher's distracted, lackluster efforts; the other boys spent the morning goofing and joshing. Griff and his cronies played spades at the back of the classroom, and when Elwood caught Turner's eye, the boy was reading a wrinkled Superman comic. Turner saw him, shrugged, and turned the page. Desmond was out cold, his neck cracked at a painful angle.
> Elwood, who did all of Mr. Marconi's accounting in his head, took the rudimentary math lesson as an insult. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 43).

Furthermore, the work performed by children was nothing more than a form of exploitation, destined for corruption, as demonstrated in the following passage, which describes Elwood's new task, given by one of Nickel's managers:

> It was nice to be out, and Elwood said so. In the coming months, Elwood saw all of Eleanor, Florida, as their three-man crew made the rounds. He got to know the back of the short Main Street, as Harper parked by the service entrances. Sometimes they unloaded notebooks and pencils, sometimes medicine and bandages, but mostly it was food. Thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas hams disappeared into the hands of fry cooks, and the assistant principal of the elementary school opened a box of erasers and counted them one by one. Elwood wondered why the boys had no toothpaste—now he knew. They parked behind the five-and-ten, Fisher's Drugs, and phoned ahead to the local doctor, who slithered up to the driver's window with a furtive air. Once in a while they stopped at a green three-story house on a dead-end street and Harper got paid by a well-groomed city-council type in a sweater vest. Harper didn't know the guy's story, he said, but the man had good manners, crisp bills, and liked to talk Florida teams. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 68).

Therefore, note the existence of a vicious cycle faced by the black population throughout the development of the work, in which African-Americans, already in a vulnerable situation, ended up being incarcerated, and if they managed to get out of Nickel alive, they were destined to an existence on the margins of society, with little or no conditions for being reintegrated into society, as highlighted by Whitehead:

> Boys arrived banged up in different ways before they got to Nickel and picked up more dents and damage during their term. Often graver missteps and more fierce institutions waited. Nickel boys were fucked before, during, and after their time at the school, if one were to characterize the general trajectory. (Whitehead, 2019, p. 108).

It is then observed that evidence of institutional failure is present throughout all periods described in Colson Whitehead's work (2019). Thus, when analyzing the work *The Nickel Boys* through the concept of Necropolitics developed by Achille Mbembe, it is noted how the figure of the modern State, illustrated in the book, operating under capitalist logic, perpetuates practices of exclusion, precariousness, and social control that made resocialization unfeasible and intensified the marginalization of the black population (Grisoski; Pereira, 2020 p. 205).

From this perspective, the Nickel reformatory emerges as a clear expression of this power, reducing lives to a condition of disposability, while denying rights and dignity. Incarceration, which disproportionately affected African Americans, reflects the historical continuity of racial and economic hierarchies, reinforcing inequalities and deepening the cycle of exclusion. Thus, the State's inability to promote social reintegration is directly related to its complicity in structuring a society where the lives of certain groups are constantly precarious and marked by invisibility.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As noted, Necropolitics presents itself as a theory that associates state sovereignty with the destruction of bodies and social groups considered dispensable by the system. This concept highlights the power of the state to exert lethal control over these groups, reinforcing ideals imbued with racial issues (Mbembe, 2018b).

The work *The Nickel Boys*, by Colson Whitehead, critically a reformist system of institutionalized racism, and incorporates elements that directly dialogue with the concept of Necropolitics developed by Achille Mbembe. Through the representation of spaces of segregation, torture, and death, such as the Dozier School reformatory — on which the fictional Nickel is based —, Whitehead exposes the continuity of oppressive practices during the transition and overcoming of Jim Crow laws. Settings such as the White House, the infamous oak trees, and the dark cell, all real and transposed into the narrative, highlight the precarious living conditions and injustices imposed on the African-American population.

Whitehead demonstrates how a reformatory such as Nickel functioned as a state instrument for perpetuating violence and degradation. In this environment, instead of experiencing a resocialization system, the inmates were subjected to racial brutality that harked back to the slavery era. Even those who survived the reformatory bore physical and emotional scars that condemned them to a subhuman existence.

Through his literature, Colson Whitehead gives voice to a historical reality that many would rather forget, as well as the victims it produced. His work, therefore, is not only a symbolic tribute but also a powerful instrument of resistance, capable of promoting deep reflections on the inequalities and cruelties that persist in our social context.

When we come across *The Nickel Boys*, we are led to reflect on how the structures of violence, racism, and exclusion do not belong only to the past, but continue to manifest themselves in different ways in the present. The narrative challenges us to question the systems that perpetuate inequality and the naturalization of the suffering of certain social groups, showing that the fight for justice and equity is still urgent.

Furthermore, by giving visibility to stories that could otherwise be relegated to oblivion, Whitehead calls on society to not only recognize the historical pain of marginalized communities but also act against the mechanisms that perpetuate these dynamics. In this sense, the work transcends literary and historical criticism, assuming an active role in social awareness and transformation, by confronting readers with the need to reevaluate their perceptions of memory, collective responsibility, and humanity.

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