CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 66. No. 3, 2026

Carceral Continuities and Racialized Subject Formation: A Foucauldian Reading of *The Nickel Boys*

Sanjukta Samal[1]
Assistant Professor of English,
Fakir Mohan Autonomous College, Balasore
Email: Samalsanjukta635@gmail.com
Dr. Soumya Sangita Sahoo[2]
Assistant Professor of English,
Fakir Mohan University, Balasore
Email: soumya.sangita@gmail.com

Abstract
This article examines Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019) through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault's concepts of discipline, surveillance, delinquency, biopolitics, and counter-memory. It argues that Nickel Academy operates as a racialized disciplinary institution that produces and regulates Black subjectivity through surveillance, punishment, and institutional control. Situating the novel within the historical continuum of slavery, Black Codes, convict leasing, and Jim Crow segregation, the article demonstrates how racial domination persists through changing technologies of power rather than disappearing with legal reform. It further explores how Whitehead recovers suppressed histories of racial violence, transforming the novel into a form of counter-memory that challenges official narratives of justice and rehabilitation. Ultimately, the article contends that *The Nickel Boys* exposes the reform school as a mechanism of racial governance, revealing the enduring continuity of disciplinary and biopolitical power in modern America.

Keywords: Carceral Regime, Disciplinary Power, Racial Governance, Biopolitics, Counter-Memory, Subject Formation

Introduction

The persistence of racial inequality in post–civil rights America demands sustained critical attention to the institutional mechanisms through which power continues to regulate, discipline, and expose Black life to vulnerability. Although formal segregation and legally sanctioned slavery have been abolished, racial hierarchy remains embedded within structures of governance, criminal justice, education, and social regulation. Contemporary racial domination rarely manifests through explicit sovereign spectacle; instead, it operates through bureaucratic classification, institutional surveillance, administrative processing, and differential protection. The visible chains of slavery have disappeared, yet the technologies that organized racial subjection have not vanished, they have been reorganized. To understand this persistence, it is necessary to situate modern carceral institutions within a longer historical genealogy. The transatlantic slave trade established a regime

in which Black bodies were reduced to property and subjected to continuous surveillance, labor extraction, and punitive regulation. Orlando Patterson (1982) defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (p. 13), underscoring that enslavement entailed not merely forced labor but the reconstitution of personhood itself. Enslaved individuals were stripped of social identity and reorganized within a system that fused economic exploitation with bodily control. Plantation space functioned as an early disciplinary structure: movement was monitored, productivity was calculated, punishment was ritualized, and obedience was normalized.

Saidiya Hartman (1997) further emphasizes that slavery operated through spectacle and terror, arguing that "the spectacle of suffering and the body as property were central to the constitution of slavery's power" (p. 21). The enslaved body was simultaneously a laboring instrument and an object of surveillance. Although emancipation formally dismantled legal ownership, it did not eradicate the racial logic that associated Blackness with regulation, suspicion, and economic utility. Instead, systems such as the Black Codes and convict leasing reconfigured racial control through juridical means. Criminalization replaced ownership; incarceration replaced plantation confinement. The Thirteenth Amendment itself preserved involuntary servitude "as a punishment for crime," embedding penal labor within constitutional order.

This transformation aligns with Michel Foucault's argument that modern punishment shifts from sovereign spectacle to institutional discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) observes that modern power no longer operates primarily through public execution but through "a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures" designed to regulate bodies (p. 215). Rather than eliminating deviance, institutions produce categories of delinquency through examination, classification, and surveillance. He writes, "The prison produces delinquents" (p. 277), suggesting that criminal identity is not merely discovered but administratively constructed. The emergence of reformatories and juvenile detention centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must therefore be understood within this broader carceral expansion. Reform institutions presented themselves as humanitarian alternatives to prison, yet they replicated disciplinary logics: spatial segregation, behavioral ranking, forced labor, and corporal punishment. The rhetoric of rehabilitation masked regulatory power. As Foucault (1977) explains, discipline produces "docile bodies" that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (p. 136). Improvement and subjection operate simultaneously.

Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), inspired by the real Dozier School for Boys in Florida, reconstructs this historical continuity through narrative form. The novel depicts Nickel Academy as a reform school designed to correct delinquent youth, yet it functions as a racialized disciplinary institution that subjects Black boys to intensified surveillance, violence, and erasure. While the novel has been widely read as historical fiction, trauma narrative, and racial indictment,

fewer studies have systematically examined it through Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and carceral modernity in relation to the genealogy of slavery and racial governance.

This article argues that Nickel Academy operates within what Foucault terms the "carceral continuum" (1977, p. 303), producing Black delinquency not as a reflection of criminal behavior but as a constructed category of governance. Through judicial processing, institutional examination, and behavioral normalization, the state fabricates the delinquent subject. Elwood Curtis's arrest and confinement illustrate Foucault's claim that modern power focuses less on the crime than on the offender's character, shifting punishment toward identity formation. At the same time, Nickel reveals the biopolitical dimension of racial governance. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) describes modern power as a "power to 'make' live and 'let' die" (p. 138), a form of governance concerned with regulating populations rather than simply punishing individuals. In his later lectures, he clarifies that racism enables this differential management by introducing "a break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault, 2003, p. 254). Nickel Academy exemplifies this logic: white boys receive relative protection, while Black boys are exposed to harsher punishment and administrative abandonment, culminating in unmarked graves that literalize disposability.

Rather than treating Nickel as an exceptional scandal, this article situates it within a longer genealogy of racialized confinement extending from slavery and convict leasing to modern juvenile reform systems. By employing Foucault's concepts of discipline, panopticism, delinquency, and biopolitical racism, this study demonstrates that racial domination persists not despite institutional reform but through it. Nickel Academy becomes a site where surveillance, normalization, labor regulation, and abandonment converge, revealing that the afterlife of slavery operates through contemporary technologies of governance. Through this Foucauldian framework, *The Nickel Boys* exposes the structural continuity between plantation discipline and reformist correction, between criminalization and racialized subject formation, and between administrative rationality and lethal erasure. The novel compels a reconsideration of reform not as moral progress but as a reconfiguration of power within the modern carceral state.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault reconceptualizes modern power as diffuse, productive, and embedded within institutional practices rather than concentrated in sovereign authority. Modern punishment, he argues, shifts from spectacular public violence to subtle techniques of regulation that operate upon the body and behavior. Discipline functions through surveillance, examination, spatial organization, and repetition. It produces what Foucault famously calls "docile bodies," defined as bodies that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). Crucially, disciplinary power does not merely repress; it produces subjectivity. "Power produces reality," Foucault writes; "it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (1977, p. 194). Institutions such as schools, prisons, reformatories, and hospitals do not simply

correct deviance; they construct categories of normality and abnormality through classification and examination. The subject becomes both object and instrument of power, internalizing the gaze that regulates him. Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punishment*

> *"We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These 'power-knowledge' relations are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations." (1977, p. 27)*

Nickel Academy operates precisely within this disciplinary logic. It claims to reform delinquent youth, yet it functions by regulating movement, speech, posture, labor, and silence. Its violence is not chaotic but structured; not episodic but procedural. In this sense, Nickel is less a site of punishment in the classical sense than a mechanism of subject production. Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon further clarifies how discipline achieves its greatest efficiency. The panoptic structure induces "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). The individual behaves not because he is constantly watched, but because he believes he may be watched. "Visibility is a trap" (p. 200). Foucault writes

> *"Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action."(1997, p. 202)*

This internalization of surveillance is central to the functioning of Nickel Academy. The ever-present threat of the White House, where boys are beaten, operates as a disciplinary symbol. Its visibility is intermittent; its psychological effect is continuous. Fear circulates even in the absence of immediate violence. The institution does not require constant force; it relies upon anticipation. Panopticism thus transforms physical coercion into psychological self-regulation. The boys learn to monitor themselves, modulate speech, avoid attention, and accept silence. Surveillance becomes internalized discipline. Foucault's analysis extends beyond the prison to the construction of delinquency itself. He argues that the modern penal system "produces delinquents" (Foucault, 1977, p. 277) by shifting attention from illegal acts to the character of the offender. Delinquency

becomes an identity rather than an event. The individual is documented, examined, classified, and inserted into a network of institutional knowledge. This insight is crucial for understanding Elwood Curtis's arrest. Elwood does not commit a crime; he is absorbed into a category. His innocence is irrelevant because the system does not primarily evaluate guilt but manages populations deemed risky. The court's decision to send him to Nickel Academy reflects not justice but administrative classification. Once labeled delinquent, he becomes part of what Foucault terms the "carceral archipelago" (1977, p. 298), a network that extends beyond prison walls into the broader social body. Delinquency, in this sense, is not discovered; it is fabricated.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault introduces the concept of biopower, a form of governance that focuses not on individual punishment but on the regulation of populations. Modern states, he argues, exercise "a power to 'make' live and 'let' die" (Foucault, 1978, p. 138). Rather than spectacular execution, biopolitical power operates through differential protection and exposure. In his later lectures, Foucault clarifies the central role of racism within biopolitical regimes. Racism introduces "a break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault, 2003, p. 254). It enables the state to justify the exposure of certain populations to harm while claiming to preserve the health of the social body. "Racism is the condition for the acceptability of putting to death in a society of normalization" (Foucault, 2003, p. 256). Nickel Academy exemplifies this racialized biopolitics. White boys receive relative protection; Black boys experience intensified surveillance, harsher punishment, and disposability. Violence is not officially lethal, yet bodies disappear into unmarked graves. The institution does not publicly execute; it administratively abandons. Through this framework, *The Nickel Boys* reveals that reformist institutions may operate simultaneously as disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms. They regulate behavior while exposing certain lives to structural vulnerability.

Discussion

Nickel Academy does not emerge as an isolated aberration within American history; rather, it belongs to a longer genealogy of racialized confinement. Michel Foucault's genealogical method refuses linear narratives of moral progress and instead exposes discontinuities that reveal how power reorganizes itself across historical transformations. Genealogy, he argues, "seeks to expose a body totally imprinted by history" (Foucault, 1977, p. 148). When read through this lens, Nickel Academy appears not as a deviation from reformist ideals but as a mutation of earlier structures of racial domination.

The plantation regime established a system in which Black bodies were simultaneously laboring instruments and objects of surveillance. Enslaved individuals were monitored, catalogued, punished, and evaluated according to productivity. Orlando Patterson (1982) defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (p. 13), a formulation that underscores how social identity itself was reorganized through coercion. The enslaved subject was denied recognized personhood and reconstituted as property. Although

emancipation abolished legal ownership, it did not dismantle the institutional logic that linked Blackness with regulation and economic extraction. Following the Civil War, the Black Codes and convict leasing restructured racial control under juridical authority. Criminalization replaced ownership; incarceration replaced plantation confinement. The Thirteenth Amendment itself permitted involuntary servitude "as a punishment for crime," thereby embedding racial labor extraction within penal administration. This transition exemplifies what Foucault identifies as the expansion of the "carceral archipelago" (1977, p. 298), in which punishment migrates from spectacle to institution and spreads across society.

Nickel Academy must be understood within this lineage. It presents itself as a corrective institution for delinquent youth, yet its practices reproduce older patterns of racialized discipline: forced labor, bodily punishment, sexual abuse, and administrative erasure. The rhetoric has shifted from ownership to reform, but the management of Black bodies persists. The boys at Nickel are not enslaved by law; they are confined through judicial processing and educational discourse. However, the underlying logic remains consistent: Black youth are treated as populations requiring regulation rather than protection. This continuity becomes visible in Whitehead's depiction of labor at Nickel. The boys are assigned work in fields, kitchens, and maintenance, labor framed as vocational training.

> *"A group of white jeered and taunted behind the policemen, and more white men trotted down the street to join him. Elwood kept his ayes down as he walked around the mob and slipped sweater. She grinned at him and nodded as if she had been waiting for him. He calmed once he joined thee human chain and mouthed the words with the other"(The Nickel Boys page : 35).*

The passage illustrates the racial prejudice of white society toward Black people, who are often viewed as socially inferior. This discrimination creates both physical and psychological distance between the two groups. When a white police officer arrests a Black thief, a group of white onlookers mock and ridicule him, reflecting their racist attitudes. Elwood, however, attempts to defend his fellow Black man, but this act ultimately leads to his arrest and transfer to Nickel Academy, a reform school that segregates and mistreats Black and white boys. Yet the economic benefit flows to the institution. As one character reflects, "The work detail was supposed to teach them skills, but it mostly taught them how to keep their heads down" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 89). The language of improvement masks subordination. Foucault's insight that discipline renders bodies "useful" (1977, p. 136) becomes historically resonant here: usefulness and submission operate simultaneously. The genealogy of Nickel therefore reveals that carcerality does not replace slavery; it reorganizes it. Reform school becomes the modern face of plantation logic, now legitimized through bureaucratic rationality.

Elwood Curtis's arrest marks the moment where the abstract mechanisms of disciplinary power crystallize into lived experience. His offense—unknowingly riding in a stolen car—does not reflect criminal intent. Yet the legal system processes him as delinquent without hesitation. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault observes that modern penal institutions focus less on the crime than on "the soul of the criminal" (1977, p. 16). The individual becomes the object of examination, documentation, and classification. Delinquency becomes an identity rather than a discrete act.

Elwood's prior academic achievement and moral conduct are irrelevant once he enters this classificatory system. Whitehead writes, "The judge didn't look at him long, just another colored boy from Frenchtown" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 63). The briefness of the judicial gaze reveals how racialized assumptions precede investigation. The courtroom does not discover guilt; it confirms expectation. Foucault's assertion that "the prison produces delinquents" (1977, p. 277) is not metaphorical here; it is literal. The state fabricates Elwood as a delinquent subject through administrative decision. The shift from act to identity becomes evident in the sentencing. Elwood is not sent home with warning; he is transferred into a reform school that presumes criminal disposition. His innocence does not interrupt the process because delinquency functions as a population category rather than a moral judgment. Foucault explains that disciplinary systems create "a whole set of instruments… levels of application, targets" (1977, p. 215) designed to manage risk. Elwood's Blackness renders him legible within that target population.

Significantly, Elwood himself initially trusts the legitimacy of this system. He believes, as he has been taught, that "if you did what was right, things would work out" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 43). This belief demonstrates the internalization of institutional faith. Foucault argues that modern power operates most effectively when individuals assume responsibility for their own regulation: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility… becomes the principle of his own subjection" (1977, p. 202). Elwood does not resist arrest violently because he assumes justice will correct error. His obedience facilitates his absorption into the carceral network. The tragedy lies not in impulsive rebellion but in disciplined compliance. Elwood embodies the ideal liberal subject—studious, polite, aspirational—yet these qualities fail to protect him. The system does not malfunction; it functions as designed. The administrative production of delinquency overrides individual merit. Elwood's transformation from student to inmate illustrates that disciplinary power is less concerned with truth than with categorization.

Upon arrival at Nickel Academy, Elwood encounters an environment structured by spatial segregation, surveillance, and graded punishment. The campus is divided racially; white boys and Black boys occupy different dormitories and receive unequal treatment. The institutional geography itself encodes hierarchy. Foucault describes disciplinary space as one that "distributes individuals in space" (1977, p. 141). Nickel performs this distribution meticulously. Movement is regulated; dormitories are monitored; assemblies are supervised. The White House—the building where beatings occur—functions as the symbolic center of fear. Whitehead describes it as a place

"where boys went in straight and came out crooked" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 83). Its reputation circulates through rumor, reinforcing behavioral conformity. The White House need not be constantly visible to be effective. Foucault's formulation that "visibility is a trap" (1977, p. 200) clarifies this dynamic. The possibility of punishment disciplines even in absence. Silence spreads when a boy's name is called. Anticipation becomes control.

> *"Elwood was stiff from his confinement and from two beatings. Turner let him lean on him. He carried a bulging knapsack on his back"(The Nickel Boys : page 197).*

The passage highlights the unfair treatment Elwood and other Black boys face at Nickel. School officials often lock them up because they suspect them of attempting to escape. Their desire to run away reflects the discriminatory and oppressive environment of the institution. The regime of examination further entrenches discipline. Boys are evaluated, ranked, and rewarded according to compliance. Foucault characterizes the examination as combining "the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment" (1977, p. 184). Nickel's grading of behavior, allocation of privileges, and recording of infractions replicate this structure. The boys become cases, documented and compared against norms they did not create. Labor intensifies this regulation. The boys are sent to work details framed as character-building exercises. Yet the economic logic underlying these assignments reveals instrumentalization. Whitehead notes that the school's administrators were praised for "running a tight ship" (2019, p. 91), a phrase that inadvertently echoes maritime confinement. Productivity justifies punishment.

Racial differentiation further exposes the biopolitical structure of the institution. White boys occasionally receive lighter consequences; Black boys are more frequently sent to the White House. This disparity aligns with Foucault's claim that racism enables differential exposure: it introduces "a break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault, 2003, p. 254). At Nickel, Black boys occupy a zone of intensified vulnerability. Their suffering is normalized, their complaints dismissed. The disappearance of boys represents the culmination of this logic. Bodies are buried in unmarked graves beyond the campus. The institution does not publicly acknowledge death; it erases it administratively. This practice reflects Foucault's description of biopower as the capacity to "make live and let die" (1978, p. 138). Nickel does not formally execute; it permits exposure to lethal violence while maintaining procedural legitimacy.

Through these mechanisms: spatial segregation, surveillance, labor extraction, and erasure—Nickel Academy operates as a microcosm of the carceral state. It disciplines not through spectacular cruelty but through structured invisibility. While disciplinary power structures everyday life at Nickel Academy, the novel ultimately reveals a deeper logic operating beneath correction and surveillance: the differential valuation of life. Michel Foucault's concept of biopower clarifies how modern states regulate populations not merely through punishment but through calculated protection and exposure. In *The History of Sexuality,* he argues that modern

power functions through "a power to 'make' live and 'let' die" (Foucault, 1978, p. 138). Rather than exercising the sovereign right to kill publicly, the state governs by distributing life chances unevenly across populations. At Nickel Academy, this biopolitical distribution is racially structured. White boys are positioned as salvageable subjects, while Black boys are exposed to intensified punishment and disposability. Whitehead underscores this disparity through everyday observation: "The white boys got sent to town for errands. The colored boys got sent to the White House" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 117). The casual matter-of-fact tone reflects how racial difference is embedded within institutional routine. There is no explicit declaration of racial hierarchy; it operates administratively.

> *"Elwood decided: by june he'd climb the merit ladder out of this pit, four months short of what that judge gave him. It was comforming he was accustomed to measuring time according to the school calendar, so a june graduation made his Nickel term into a lost years. This time next fall, he'd be back at Lincoln High School for his senior year and with Mr.Hill's endorsement, enrolled at Melving Griggs again"(The Nickel Boys : page 86).*

The passage explains that Elwood constantly measured time according to the school calendar because he hoped to leave Nickel as soon as possible. His focus on graduation was interpreted by others as a lack of commitment to his education, as if he were only thinking about escaping the institution. However, Elwood's desire to graduate was not an attempt to avoid learning but a hope for freedom and a better future. Tragically, this hope is never fulfilled, as Elwood is ultimately unable to leave Nickel and complete his education. Foucault's lectures in Society Must Be Defended identify racism as the mechanism that makes such differential exposure acceptable. Racism introduces "a break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault, 2003, p. 254). It fragments the population into hierarchized groups and legitimizes the vulnerability of some in the name of preserving order. At Nickel, Black boys occupy the position of expendable bodies whose suffering does not threaten institutional stability. The White House functions as the most visible manifestation of this biopolitical abandonment. The beatings administered there are described with chilling restraint. Whitehead writes, "The trick was not to scream" (2019, p. 84). Survival depends not on innocence but on endurance. Pain becomes disciplinary instruction. Yet some boys do not return. The disappearances are not publicly investigated; they are absorbed into silence. Later excavations reveal unmarked graves beyond the school grounds, confirming what survivors suspected: the institution concealed lethal violence beneath reformist rhetoric.

This administrative erasure reflects the logic of abandonment rather than execution. Foucault notes that biopower "exerts a positive influence on life… it endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it" (1978, p. 137). However, this optimization applies selectively. Those deemed marginal

or dangerous may be exposed to neglect without overt declaration. Nickel does not stage public executions; it allows death to occur within secluded spaces. The absence of official acknowledgment reinforces disposability. Elwood's fate exemplifies this logic. His moral resistance—his decision to document abuse—threatens institutional secrecy. His final beating is framed as correction, yet it becomes fatal. His body is buried anonymously. The institution survives; the individual disappears. In this moment, disciplinary power reveals its biopolitical foundation: reform collapses into elimination when secrecy is endangered. The unmarked graves symbolize more than concealed violence; they represent the racialized management of death within modern governance. Exposure to lethal harm is not an accident but a structural outcome of institutional design. Nickel Academy demonstrates that reformist language does not negate vulnerability; it reorganizes it.

Despite its pervasive control, Nickel Academy does not fully extinguish resistance. Foucault famously asserts, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Yet this resistance is neither grand nor external; it emerges within the very networks of power that constrain it. Elwood's documentation of abuse constitutes one such act. Writing becomes a form of counter-record, challenging the institutional archive. His notes seek to produce truth beyond administrative control. However, as Foucault argues, power and knowledge are inseparable: "Power produces knowledge… there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Nickel's authority depends upon controlling narrative. Testimony threatens that control. Elwood's elimination underscores the risk attached to truth-telling within disciplinary regimes.

Turner represents a different form of resistance: adaptive survival. He understands that visibility invites danger. His strategy aligns with what Foucault later describes as "technologies of the self," practices through which individuals shape their conduct within constraints (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Turner's caution is not capitulation; it is tactical endurance. By surviving, he preserves memory. The novel's temporal shift to adulthood further complicates resistance. Living under Elwood's name, Turner carries the burden of remembrance. Identity becomes an ethical responsibility. The eventual discovery of the graves transforms private memory into public revelation. Investigators uncover bones beneath the campus soil, confirming systemic concealment. Whitehead writes, "The past had not finished with them" (2019, p. 206). This statement captures the persistence of buried history within the present.

Foucault's concept of "subjugated knowledges" is instructive here. He describes them as "historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences" (Foucault, 1980, p. 82). The graves represent such buried knowledge—truth suppressed by institutional narrative. Their excavation constitutes an act of counter-memory, destabilizing the official story of reform. Counter-memory does not restore life to the dead; it disrupts the legitimacy of power. The exposure of Nickel's crimes forces recognition of institutional violence long denied. Yet the delayed nature

of this recognition underscores a central tension: justice arrives after irreversible loss. Public acknowledgment cannot undo dispossession. Nevertheless, narrative itself becomes resistance. By reconstructing Nickel's history, Whitehead refuses administrative erasure. The novel functions as counter-archive, preserving voices silenced by the institution. Memory challenges normalization.

Conclusion

The Nickel Boys exposes the structural continuity between historical racial domination and modern carceral governance. Through a Foucauldian framework, Nickel Academy emerges not as an isolated scandal but as a node within a broader carceral continuum. Discipline regulates behavior through surveillance, spatial organization, and examination. Delinquency is produced administratively rather than discovered morally. Biopolitical racism distributes vulnerability unevenly, rendering Black youth expendable within reformist institutions. The novel demonstrates that modern power does not require overt spectacle to sustain violence. It operates through files, routines, silence, and bureaucratic concealment. Reform becomes a technology of governance; correction becomes a mechanism of control. When resistance threatens exposure, disciplinary power reveals its lethal foundation. By excavating unmarked graves and reconstructing silenced testimony, *The Nickel Boys* participates in what Foucault calls the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. Memory disrupts official narratives and challenges institutional legitimacy. Yet the novel resists easy redemption. The discovery of truth does not restore the dead; it exposes the depth of structural injustice. Ultimately, Whitehead's narrative compels a reconsideration of reformist discourse within liberal democracies. Institutions that claim to rehabilitate may simultaneously reproduce racialized harm. Through discipline, surveillance, and biopolitical abandonment, the carceral state continues to shape Black subjectivity. Nickel Academy stands as a reminder that the afterlife of slavery persists not in explicit chains but in administrative rationality.

References

1. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
2. Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, Volume I: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
3. Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings,* 1972–1977 (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
4. Foucault, M. (1988). *Technologies of the self.* University of Massachusetts Press.
5. Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1975–1976 (D. Macey, Trans.). Picador.
6. Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death*. Harvard University Press.
7. Whitehead, C. (2019). *The Nickel Boys.* Doubleday.
8. Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

9. Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.
10. Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.
11. Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.
12. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history.* Johns Hopkins University Press.
13. Davis, A. Y. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.
14. Derrida, J. (1994). Specters of Marx: *The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Routledge.
15. Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)
16. Hartman, S. (1997). *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press.
17. Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
18. Mbembe, A. (2003). *Necropolitics. Public Culture*, 15(1), 11–40. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11
19. Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death: A comparative study*. Harvard University Press.
20. Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting* (K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
21. Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.
22. Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On Blackness and being*. Duke University Press.