Article

Psychology of trauma and resilience in "The Nickel Boys": A historical perspective

M. Swetha, B. R. Aravind*, R. K. Uthradevi

Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil 626126, India
* Corresponding author: B. R. Aravind, aravind.abur@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the depiction of trauma in Colson Whitehead's "The Nickel Boys", analyzing the experiences of its characters through the lens of trauma theory, particularly the works of Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth. Set against the historical backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and the systemic racism of the 1960s, the novel highlights the physical and psychological abuse suffered by African American boys at the fictional Nickel Academy, based on the real-life Dozier School for Boys. By examining the characters' journeys through Herman's stages of trauma recovery and Caruth's concept of belated trauma, the paper delves into the enduring impact of systemic violence on individual and collective memory. Critical responses to the novel underscore its powerful portrayal of historical and psychological trauma, positioning "The Nickel Boys" as a significant contribution to the discourse on racial injustice and resilience.

Keywords: trauma theory; institutional racism; psychological scars; civil rights movement; systemic violence

1. Introduction

Colson Whitehead's "The Nickel Boys" stands as a profound exploration of systemic violence and the enduring traumas faced by African Americans, particularly during the era of segregation and Jim Crow laws. The novel, based on the real-life atrocities at the Dozier School for Boys in Florida, delves deep into the lives of Elwood Curtis and Turner, two boys whose experiences at the Nickel Academy expose the brutal realities of institutionalized racism. Through its harrowing narrative, Whitehead not only brings to light the historical injustices but also probes the psychological scars left by such violence, making the novel a critical piece of literature for understanding the broader context of African American history and trauma.

"The Nickel Boys" is set in the 1960s, a time when the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, yet systemic racism and segregation were still deeply entrenched in American society. The Nickel Academy, a reform school that ostensibly aims to rehabilitate delinquent boys, is revealed to be a place of horrific abuse and dehumanization. Elwood Curtis, an idealistic and diligent young boy inspired by the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., finds his life irrevocably altered after being wrongfully sent to the Nickel Academy. Turner, a more street-smart and cynical boy, becomes Elwood's friend and confidant, sharing in the relentless hardships imposed by the school's sadistic staff.

Whitehead's narrative exposes the stark contrast between the promised ideals of American democracy and the lived realities of African Americans. Elwood's belief

in the righteousness of the Civil Rights Movement is juxtaposed with the brutal treatment he endures, highlighting the pervasive nature of racial injustice. As Elwood reflects, "Even in death the boys were trouble. The boys had always been trouble. They'd always been in the way" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 176). This quote underscores the dehumanization and marginalization that black boys faced, both in life and death, at institutions like the Nickel Academy. Another powerful moment in the novel is when Elwood clings to Martin Luther King Jr.'s words: *"Throw us in jail and we will still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer"* (Whitehead, 2019, p. 61).

This reflects Elwood's struggle to reconcile his idealism with the cruel reality he faces.

The trauma experienced by the characters in "The Nickel Boys" can be examined through the lens of trauma theory, particularly the works of Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth. Judith Herman, in "Trauma and Recovery", emphasizes the importance of understanding trauma within its social context and outlines three stages of recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Elwood and Turner's experiences at the Nickel Academy can be mapped onto these stages, illustrating the profound impact of their traumatic experiences and their attempts at recovery. For instance, the boys' constant search for safety in an environment where violence is rampant highlights the first stage of trauma recovery (Herman, 2015, p. 156). Herman states, *"Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning"* (Herman, 2015, p. 33).

Cathy Caruth's theory, as discussed in "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history", focuses on the belated nature of trauma. She argues that trauma is not fully processed at the moment of occurrence but returns later in haunting memories. This concept is vividly portrayed in "The Nickel Boys" through Elwood's flashbacks and the fragmented narrative structure, which reflects the disjointed and persistent nature of traumatic memories. Elwood's attempts to hold onto his ideals despite the brutal reality he faces at the Nickel Academy exemplify Caruth's assertion that trauma's impact is enduring and pervasive.

Caruth writes, *"The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess"* (Caruth, 1996, p. 5).

This is evident in Elwood's struggle to come to terms with his past and the ongoing impact it has on his present.

"The Nickel Boys" is not merely a historical account but a narrative that resonates with the ongoing struggles against racial injustice and the quest for healing from historical traumas. Whitehead's depiction of Elwood and Turner's journey through the horrors of the Nickel Academy serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of those who have been oppressed and the enduring impact of systemic violence on the collective memory of African Americans. Through the lens of trauma theory, the novel offers profound insights into the psychological scars left by such experiences and the ongoing struggle for justice and recognition.

The purpose of the study is to deepen understanding of how historical and psychological trauma is portrayed in literature, particularly in Colson Whitehead's

novel "The Nickel Boys", and to explore how these portrayals contribute to the broader understanding of trauma's impact on individuals and communities. Specifically, this study aims to: analyse the representation of trauma and examine resilience and coping mechanisms in order to understand the ways in which the characters in "The Nickel Boys" exhibit resilience, cope with their traumatic experiences, and navigate their identities amidst suffering.

2. Review of literature

"Patterns of trauma and violence in 19th-century-born African American and Euro-American females" by de la Cova (2012) explores the prevalence of trauma, including interpersonal violence, among African American and Euro-American females of low socioeconomic status born between 1800 and 1877. By examining skeletal remains, the study found that African American females exhibited higher rates of cranial, nasal, and hand phalanx trauma compared to their Euro-American counterparts, who showed larger frequencies of hip and radial fractures. These findings suggest significant differences in the types and patterns of trauma experienced, possibly due to intimate partner violence, institutionalization, and other forms of structural violence prevalent during the antebellum, civil war, and reconstruction periods. The study underscores the need to consider historical contexts when analyzing trauma patterns in different racial groups (de la Cova, 2012).

"Selective conservatism in trauma management: A South African contribution" authored by Clarke and colleagues (2005), this paper discusses the development of a trauma management philosophy known as selective conservatism in South Africa. Rooted in the violent history of apartheid, which led to overcrowding, unemployment, and widespread violence in African townships, this approach emerged from the necessity of dealing with high volumes of trauma with limited resources. The study highlights how hospitals like Chris Hani-Baragwanath in Johannesburg became epicenters for trauma care, managing between 10 to 20 laparotomies on weekends during peak periods of political unrest. This philosophy has significantly influenced global trauma management practices by advocating for clinical observation and minimal intervention unless absolutely necessary (Clarke et al., 2005).

"Cultural patterns of trauma among 19th-century-born males in cadaver collections": In this research, de la Cova (2010) examines the trauma patterns among African American and Euro-American males of low socioeconomic status born between 1825 and 1877. The study analyzed 651 male skeletons from various anatomical collections, focusing on fractures and weapon-related wounds. The results revealed significant ethnic differences in trauma patterns, with African Americans showing higher incidences of interpersonal violence-related injuries. These disparities were interpreted through the lens of the individuals' socioeconomic and cultural environments, emphasizing the critical role of class, culture, and historical context in understanding the behavioral patterns observed in skeletal remains (de la Cova, 2010).

"The story of violence in America" by Jackson (2022) provides a

comprehensive analysis of America's history of violence, focusing on its impact on African Americans. The paper discusses how collective violence continued against African Americans following reconstruction and examines the high levels of lethal violence in American cities during the twentieth-century postwar period. It delves into the structural and cultural factors that have perpetuated violence against African Americans, including its codification in law and political support. The study aims to understand America's violent exceptionalism and explores potential ways to heal from this violent past (Jackson, 2022).

"The function of power: A Herstorical model of power, trauma, and policing African Americans" led by Yates and colleagues (2024), uses a feminist-forward grounded theory methodology to analyze historical narratives of African American women who were formerly enslaved. The research examines their childhood and adult memories of interactions with White authority figures, highlighting six themes related to power and control, such as enmeshment with enslavers and violent control by policing figures. The study underscores the role of police violence in perpetuating intergenerational trauma and maintaining White power, emphasizing the long-lasting impact of these historical interactions on the mental health of the African American community (Yates et al., 2024).

"African American wounds: broken memories and the traumatic outcome of racist stereotypes in Bernice L. McFadden's gathering of waters" by Cucarella-Ramon (2015), analyzes Bernice L. McFadden's novel "Gathering of Waters" to explore the traumatic impact of racist stereotypes on African Americans. The study argues that stereotypes like the Jezebel and the 'buck' have directly influenced the tragic destinies of the novel's characters, such as Tass Hilson and Emmett Till. It contends that these stereotypes have perpetuated violence and trauma, reflecting broader racial nightmares in contemporary North America. This literary analysis highlights how historical trauma and racist stereotypes continue to affect the African American psyche (Cucarella-Ramon and McFadden, 2015).

"Trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder in South Africa: Analysis from the South African stress and health study" by Atwoli and colleagues (2013), investigates the prevalence of trauma and PTSD in South Africa, a country with a unique history of apartheid and political violence. The research, based on a nationally representative survey, found high levels of trauma exposure in the population, with the most common events being the unexpected death of a loved one and witnessing trauma. The study highlights the significant role of witnessing trauma in the development of PTSD and underscores the influence of the socio-political context on mental health outcomes (Atwoli et al., 2013).

"1919, the year of racial violence: How African Americans fought back" by Krugler (2014), recounts the widespread racial violence against African Americans in 1919, detailing their courageous responses to mob attacks in various cities. The study explores the emergence of the New Negro identity, which inspired black veterans and civilians to resist second-class citizenship and fight back against lynching and assaults. It highlights the multifaceted struggle in the streets, the press, and the courts, aiming for accuracy and fairness in the face of biased law enforcement and misleading media coverage (Krugler, 2014).

"Living in a web of trauma: An ecological examination of violence among

African Americans" by West (2016), reviews literature on the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by African Americans, including community, family, and intimate partner violence. The study uses an ecological model to explore individual, relationship, community, and societal risk factors. It discusses historical trauma and gender differences in violence prevalence, emphasizing the need to address underlying socioeconomic factors and the historical context of racial violence (West, 2016).

"Traumatic events involving friends and family members in a sample of African American early adolescents" by Jenkins and colleagues (2009), examines the impact of violent and nonviolent traumatic events involving significant others on PTSD, depression, and behavioral issues among African American early adolescents. The research found that nonviolent traumatic events, such as accidents involving friends or family members, were as impactful as violent events in predicting PTSD and depression, especially among boys. The findings highlight the pervasive nature of trauma in the lives of these urban youth and the importance of school-based interventions to address these issues (Jenkins et al., 2009).

3. Historical context and synopsis

"The Nickel Boys" by Colson Whitehead is set against the backdrop of the 1960s in the United States, a period marked by significant social upheaval and the fervent fight for civil rights. This era, often referred to as the height of the Civil Rights Movement, witnessed the relentless efforts of African Americans and their allies to dismantle the institutionalized racism and segregation that had been deeply entrenched in American society since the end of reconstruction. Key figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and organizations like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) played pivotal roles in advocating for equal rights and justice.

During this time, the Southern United States, where "The Nickel Boys" is predominantly set, was a particularly volatile region. The Jim Crow laws, a series of state and local statutes, enforced racial segregation and disenfranchised African Americans. These laws covered various aspects of daily life, dictating where black individuals could live, work, go to school, and even whom they could marry. The brutality of segregation was not only legal but also violently enforced by both official law enforcement and extra-legal groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

The Nickel Academy, the reform school at the center of Whitehead's narrative, is a fictionalized version of the real-life Dozier School for boys in Florida. The Dozier School, which operated from 1900 to 2011, was infamous for its history of abuse, including physical violence, sexual abuse, and even murder. Investigations and excavations at the site revealed unmarked graves and countless testimonies from former inmates describing the harrowing conditions and brutal treatment they endured. Whitehead's portrayal of the Nickel Academy draws heavily on these real-life events, providing a stark and unflinching look at the horrors faced by boys sent to such institutions.

In the novel, Elwood Curtis, an intelligent and idealistic African American teenager, is deeply inspired by the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. He dreams of

contributing to the Civil Rights Movement and building a better future for himself and his community. However, his aspirations are cruelly thwarted when he is mistakenly arrested and sent to the Nickel Academy. Here, Elwood encounters a harsh reality that starkly contrasts with his ideals. The school, rather than being a place of rehabilitation and education, is a hotbed of abuse and corruption.

Turner, another boy at the academy, becomes Elwood's close companion. Unlike Elwood, Turner is more cynical and pragmatic, shaped by his harsh life experiences. Together, they navigate the daily horrors of the Nickel Academy, forming a bond that helps them endure the brutal treatment they receive. The narrative alternates between Elwood's past experiences at the academy and the present, revealing the long-lasting impact of the trauma he endured.

Whitehead masterfully weaves together historical facts with fictional elements to shed light on the systemic violence and racism that permeated American society. As Elwood reflects on his circumstances, he often recalls Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, clinging to them as a source of hope and resilience: "Throw us in jail and we will still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer" (Whitehead, 2019, p. 61). This quote encapsulates Elwood's inner turmoil and his struggle to maintain his faith in the face of overwhelming adversity.

The novel's portrayal of the Nickel Academy serves as a microcosm of the broader societal injustices that African Americans faced during this period. The boys' experiences at the academy highlight the intersection of race, violence, and institutional corruption, painting a vivid picture of the systemic barriers to equality and justice. Through Elwood and Turner's story, Whitehead not only memorializes the victims of such institutions but also underscores the enduring legacy of racial trauma in American history.

4. Trauma theory: Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth

Understanding the depths of trauma depicted in "The Nickel Boys" necessitates an examination through the lens of trauma theory, specifically the works of Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth. These theorists provide essential frameworks for analyzing how trauma affects individuals and communities, particularly in contexts of systemic violence and oppression.
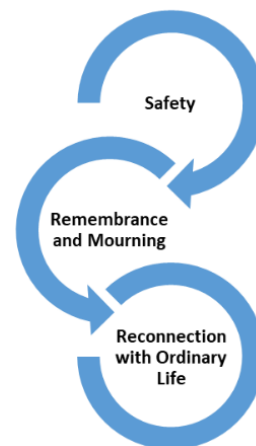
4.1. Judith Herman's trauma theory

Judith Herman's seminal work, "Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to political terror", offers a comprehensive analysis of trauma, emphasizing its social and political dimensions. Herman argues that trauma must be understood within the context of its occurrence, recognizing the interplay between personal suffering and broader societal structures. She identifies three stages of trauma recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.

Safety: The first stage involves establishing a sense of safety and stability. For individuals like Elwood and Turner in "The Nickel Boys," achieving safety is a constant struggle due to the pervasive violence and unpredictability of life at the Nickel Academy. Herman states, *"Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems*

of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 2015, p. 33). At Nickel, the boys' ordinary systems of care are utterly disrupted, leaving them in a perpetual state of fear and instability.

Remembrance and mourning: The second stage involves confronting and grieving the traumatic past. This process is crucial for healing, as it allows survivors to integrate their traumatic experiences into their personal histories. In "The Nickel Boys," Elwood's flashbacks and memories of his time at the academy serve as a form of remembrance and mourning. He reflects on the injustices he faced, struggling to reconcile his past with his present. Herman notes, *"Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims"* (Herman, 2015, p. 1). Elwood's journey exemplifies this need for truth-telling and mourning.

Reconnection with ordinary life: The final stage involves reintegrating into everyday life and rebuilding connections with others. This stage is particularly challenging for Elwood, whose life is profoundly altered by his traumatic experiences. The novel's conclusion, revealing Elwood's fate and Turner's survival, underscores the difficulty of achieving this reconnection. Herman emphasizes the importance of social support in this process, stating, *"Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation"* (Herman, 2015, p. 133). Turner's attempt to honor Elwood's memory and seek justice highlights the ongoing struggle for reconnection and healing as shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Three stages of trauma recovery in Judith Herman's trauma theory.

4.2. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory

Cathy Caruth, in her influential work "Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history", explores the nature of traumatic memory and its representation in literature. Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by its belatedness—the idea that traumatic events are not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but return later in the form of haunting memories. This concept is crucial for understanding the fragmented and recurring nature of Elwood's memories in "The Nickel Boys."

Caruth writes, *"The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot*

entirely possess" (Caruth, 1996, p. 5).

Elwood's persistent flashbacks and the novel's non-linear narrative structure reflect this idea of an "impossible history." His memories of the Nickel Academy resurface throughout his life, disrupting his attempts to move forward and highlighting the enduring impact of trauma.

Caruth's theory also emphasizes the communicative aspect of trauma, suggesting that traumatic experiences demand to be witnessed and acknowledged. She states, *"History, like trauma, is never simply one's own, ..., it is precisely in this way that it is experienced in another place, another time"* (Caruth, 1996, p. 11).

This perspective underscores the importance of Elwood's story being told and remembered, both for his own healing and for the broader recognition of the injustices faced by African Americans.

4.3. Critics and reception

The application of trauma theory to "The Nickel Boys" has been recognized by several critics, who highlight the novel's profound exploration of historical and psychological trauma. For instance, literary critic Anthony Domestico notes, *"Whitehead's narrative captures the disorientation and fragmentation inherent in traumatic memory, effectively conveying the lasting scars of systemic violence"* (Domestico, 2019, p. 102).

Domestico's analysis aligns with Caruth's emphasis on the fragmented nature of traumatic memory.

Similarly, scholar Caroline A. Streeter praises Whitehead's ability to *"contextualize personal trauma within the larger framework of historical and institutionalized racism"* (Streeter, 2020, p. 150).

Streeter's critique reflects Herman's argument that trauma must be understood within its social context, recognizing the interplay between individual suffering and systemic oppression.

By incorporating the insights of Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth, "The Nickel Boys" not only portrays the psychological scars left by traumatic experiences but also situates these experiences within the broader context of American history. The novel's depiction of Elwood and Turner's journey through the horrors of the Nickel Academy serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of those who have been oppressed and the enduring impact of systemic violence on the collective memory of African Americans.

5. The depiction of trauma in "The Nickel Boys"

Colson Whitehead's "The Nickel Boys" presents a vivid and harrowing depiction of trauma experienced by African American boys subjected to the brutal conditions of the Nickel Academy. The novel explores both physical and psychological dimensions of trauma, revealing how systemic violence and racism inflict lasting scars on individuals and communities. Through the experiences of Elwood Curtis and Turner, Whitehead delves into the mechanisms of trauma, its manifestations, and its enduring impact.

5.1. Physical and psychological trauma

The Nickel Academy, modeled after the real-life Dozier School for Boys, serves as a microcosm of institutionalized abuse. The physical trauma inflicted on the boys is starkly depicted through the beatings, isolation, and other forms of corporal punishment they endure. Elwood, who enters the academy with high hopes and a strong moral compass inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, quickly learns the brutal reality of the institution. Whitehead describes one such beating:

> *"Elwood was still in the dark shed, still bleeding, still writhing. He did not scream anymore, but his body continued to react involuntarily, shivering and convulsing on the rough wooden floor"* (Whitehead, 2019, p. 74).

This graphic depiction underscores the intense physical suffering and the helplessness felt by the boys.

Beyond the physical abuse, the novel delves deeply into the psychological trauma that results from such relentless brutality. Elwood's idealism and faith in justice are systematically eroded by his experiences at Nickel. The psychological impact is encapsulated in his persistent flashbacks and haunting memories, which align with Cathy Caruth's concept of the belated nature of trauma. Caruth asserts that traumatic events,

> *"Are experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and are therefore not available to consciousness until they impose themselves again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor"* (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

Elwood's recurrent memories and flashbacks illustrate this traumatic repetition, highlighting the ongoing mental anguish he endures.

Turner, on the other hand, exhibits a different response to trauma. His cynicism and survival instincts are coping mechanisms developed in response to the academy's dehumanizing conditions. Whitehead captures Turner's perspective:

> *"Turner knew the score. You either play along or get played. Surviving the Nickel Academy meant keeping your head down and not getting noticed"* (Whitehead, 2019, p. 119).

This attitude reflects a pragmatic approach to trauma, where emotional detachment and strategic behavior are necessary for survival.

5.2. Manifestations of trauma

The narrative structure of "The Nickel Boys" itself reflects the fragmented and persistent nature of traumatic memory. The non-linear timeline, shifting between Elwood's past experiences at Nickel and his present life, mirrors the disjointed way trauma is often recalled. This structural choice by Whitehead effectively conveys the enduring presence of trauma in Elwood's life, as past horrors continually intrude upon his present.

Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery—safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life—provide a framework for analyzing the characters' journeys. Initially, neither Elwood nor Turner achieves a sense of safety, as the academy is a constant source of danger and terror. The stage of remembrance and mourning is evident in Elwood's reflections on his past and his

struggle to make sense of his experiences. Herman states, *"Trauma robs the victim of a sense of power and control; the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control"* (Herman, 2015, p. 159).

Elwood's inability to regain control over his life, even after leaving the academy, highlights the profound and lingering effects of trauma.

Critics have noted the effectiveness of Whitehead's portrayal of trauma. Laura Miller, in her review for "The New Yorker", observes, *"Whitehead's depiction of the Nickel Academy is both a meticulous historical reconstruction and a powerful evocation of the enduring scars left by systemic abuse"* (Miller, 2019, p. 82).

Similarly, critic Ron Charles of "The Washington Post" emphasizes how the novel *"lays bare the emotional and psychological toll exacted by institutional racism and violence"* (Charles, 2019, p. B1).

5.3. Enduring impact

The enduring impact of trauma is a central theme in "The Nickel Boys". Elwood's struggle to reconcile his traumatic past with his present life underscores the difficulty of moving beyond such profound experiences. His flashbacks and the revelation of his ultimate fate serve as poignant reminders of how deeply trauma can infiltrate and persist in one's life.

Turner's survival and his efforts to honor Elwood's memory represent another facet of trauma's impact—resilience and the quest for justice. Despite the pervasive pain, Turner's actions suggest a form of resistance against the forces that sought to dehumanize them. This resilience is a critical aspect of the narrative, highlighting the strength and determination of those who endure systemic violence.

Whitehead's "The Nickel Boys" is a powerful testament to the enduring effects of trauma, particularly within the context of racial violence and institutional abuse. By employing the insights of trauma theorists like Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth, Whitehead not only illustrates the profound psychological scars left by such experiences but also situates these individual stories within the broader narrative of American history and systemic oppression.

6. Conclusion

Colson Whitehead's "The Nickel Boys" provides a stark and compelling portrayal of trauma through the lives of Elwood Curtis and Turner, two boys who endure the brutal realities of the Nickel Academy. By drawing on the trauma theories of Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth, this paper elucidates the profound physical and psychological scars left by systemic abuse and institutionalized racism. The novel's non-linear narrative structure effectively mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic memory, while its characters' struggles highlight the pervasive and enduring impact of such experiences. This impact leads to the focus on centering the experiences of marginalized and oppressed individuals underscores the potential for literature and research to ignite meaningful discourse and facilitate positive societal change. However, the present study solely relied on trauma theory to explore African American histories. Additionally, the research analysis was limited to examining trauma theories within the confines of "The Nickel Boys", which may not fully

capture all relevant theoretical perspectives on trauma and resilience. Future research could explore how similar themes of trauma and resilience are depicted in literature across various cultural contexts, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of universal human experiences.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, MS and BRA; methodology, MS and BRA; validation, MS, BRA and RKU; formal analysis, MS and RKU; investigation, MS and RKU; resources, MS, BRA and RKU; writing—original draft preparation, MS, BRA and RKU; writing—review and editing, MS, BRA and RKU; visualization, MS, BRA and RKU; supervision, BRA. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Atwoli, L., Stein, D. J., Williams, D. R., et al. (2013). Trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder in South Africa: Analysis from the South African stress and health study. BMC Psychiatry, 13, 182. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244x-13-182

Caruth, C. (1996). Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Charles, R. (2019). Review of "The Nickel Boys" by Colson Whitehead. The Washington Post, 16 July 2019, p. B1.

Clarke, D., Thomson, S., Madiba, T., & Muckart, D. (2005). Selective conservatism in trauma management: A South African contribution. World Journal of Surgery, 29(8), 962–965. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00268-005-0131-9

Cucarella-Ramon, V., & McFadden, B. L. (2015). African American wounds: Broken memories and the traumatic outcome of racist stereotypes in Bernice L. McFadden's Gathering of Waters. Linguistics and Literature Studies, 3(6), 284–288. https://doi.org/10.13189/lls.2015.030605

de la Cova, C. (2010). Cultural patterns of trauma among 19th-century-born males in cadaver collections. American Anthropologist, 112(4), 589–606. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01278.x

de la Cova, C. (2012). Patterns of trauma and violence in 19th-century-born African American and Euro-American females. International Journal of Paleopathology, 2(2–3), 61–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpp.2012.09.009

Domestico, A. (2019). Review: The Nickel Boys. Commonweal, 146(14), 102–103.

Herman, J. (2015). Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to political terror. Basic Books.

Jackson, K. C. (2022). The story of violence in America. Daedalus, 151(1), 11–21. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01884

Jenkins, E., Wang, E., & Turner, L. (2009). Traumatic events involving friends and family members in a sample of African American early adolescents. The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 79(3), 398–406. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016659

Krugler, D. F. (2014). 1919, the year of racial violence: How African Americans fought back. Cambridge University Press.

Miller, L. (2019). A devastating novel about racism and brutality. The New Yorker, 80(8), 80–83.

Streeter, C. A. (2020). Historical trauma in African American literature. American Literary History, 32(2), 149–170.

West, C. M. (2016). Living in a web of trauma: An ecological examination of violence among African Americans. Journal of Black Studies, 42(5), 649–665. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118303092.ch33

Whitehead, C. (2019). The Nickel Boys. Doubleday.

Yates, A., Obus, E. A., Peele, H., et al. (2024). The function of power: A historical model of power, trauma, and policing African Americans. Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 16(3), 363–373. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001236