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Tautological Revisions: Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* and the Construction of Black Life

Toward the end of Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), readers discover that the protagonist, Elwood Curtis, is actually another character, Jack Turner. A flashback reveals that Turner takes the identity of Curtis after the latter dies in their escape attempt from the Nickel Academy, a juvenile reformatory in Florida. This surprising reversal of perspective forces readers to reconsider all that they have just read. The epilogue suggests that Turner took Curtis's name "[t]o live for him" (Whitehead 202) and had been retelling Curtis's story for years, in an ongoing attempt to get "it right" (Whitehead 204). Foregrounding processes of revision and repetition, the novel possesses an enclosed and a recursive structure, which gets narratively thematized as a tautological circle. Tautology seems to promote an arrangement that goes nowhere, but I focus on the potential of tautology to figure emancipation and freedom in narrative plotting. I locate, then, a productive force in this ostensibly non-productive figure, and I argue that Whitehead confronts the vicious circles of anti-Blackness with 'counter-tautologies' of emancipation and freedom that figure new forms of Black life.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead; tautology; anti-Blackness; Black life; narrative form

Tautology and African American Literary Form

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. reads Frederick Douglass's famous chiasmus—"You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 72)—as a paradigm for the figurative strategy of the slave narrative. According to Gates, Douglass's text establishes chiasmus as "the central trope of slave narration, in which a slave-object writes himself or herself into a human-subject" (Gates, *Signifying* 171–172). Gates writes that "[t]he overarching rhetorical strategy of the slave narratives written after 1845 can be repres-

ented as a chiasmus, as repetition and reversal" (172). But what if we read Douglass's rhetorical expression as a tautology rather than a chiasmus? For we do end where we began, albeit with a difference. Reading Douglass's chiasmus as tautological admittedly undercuts the dialectical movement of the slave narrative, but it emphasizes that Douglass was already a man: it was only acceding to the racist demands of the genre and society that required this chiasmus. In *Figures in Black*, Gates describes chiasmus as a way "to understand the tautology at the heart of Black Aesthetic criticism" and as a means to get beyond tautology's limits (53). For Gates, then, tautology names the anti-Black negations that slave narratives work against. To reread Douglass's chiasmus as a tautology does not, however, necessarily fall into this critique; instead, it allows us to recognize that tautologies of anti-Blackness must be confronted by what I will describe as 'counter-tautologies.'

Before turning to these 'counter-tautologies' as they appear in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), I linger with the fundamental tautologies of anti-Blackness that appear, in various guises, in the slave narrative genre to clarify a fundamental challenge that continues to face Black writers in the United States. Saidiya Hartman takes the demands of an anti-Black world to task in her influential reading of the slave narrative and its dependence on a model of empathy that, she argues, reinforces the white reader rather than, and at the expense of, the Black subject it ostensibly valorizes. Formally and structurally, slave narratives appeal to a white readership through strategies of address and identification. Hartman suggests in her critique of the slave narrative's dependence on empathic identification that "every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration" ("Position" 185). This obliteration takes place because, according to Hartman, such narratives can only account for the position of the slave by converting that position into "a locus of positive value," which "fill[s] in the void" of its abyssal negativity (185). This critique suggests that the slave narrative genre has always already been co-opted by the anti-Black order it positions itself against, such that slave narratives often work to "integrate" the slave into the national order rather than radically disrupt that order (185).¹ Hartman has become a central reference point for Black Studies and American literary studies in general, but I would argue that with such insights, she also ought to be recognized for her contributions to narrative theory.

¹ Hartman's most elaborate articulation of these positions appears in *Scenes of Subjection*, especially in the chapter that addresses Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (79–112).

Hartman enables us to see an anti-Black tautology organizing the slave narrative: its defense of Black humanity potentially, and paradoxically, reinforces Black subjection in the name of whiteness. This occurs in part because the Black subject must appeal to the very logics and structures of the anti-Black world that negate them. But if tautology undermines the dialectical chiasmus that structures Douglass's narrative, I would nonetheless argue that tautology adds another movement, one in which the narrative repetition generates meaning and refuses the obliterating demands of the slave narrative's integrationist framework. To distinguish these two forms, I will mark a difference between, on the one hand, anti-Black tautologies of inequality and unfreedom and, on the other hand, 'counter-tautologies' of equality and freedom that seek to figure Black life. I would further suggest that tautology ought to be understood as the master trope of anti-Black racism, for anti-Blackness begins and ends with both the assumption and imposition of violent hierarchical difference that works to reaffirm ideologies of whiteness.² Anti-Blackness functions, in other words, as a self-perpetuating feedback loop.³ Rather than reform this loop, 'counter-tautologies' propose a break from the anti-Black world and its structures to figure new forms of Black life and being. If chiasmus, for Gates, offers an exit from such anti-Black tautologies, then 'counter-tautology' can be read as an immanent critique: not an escape from but an internal antagonist to anti-Blackness.

² Although I do not have space to elaborate further consequences of tautology, it is worth noting that any totalizing order, including sovereignty, could be said to depend on tautology to constitute and mystify its pervasive existence. Carl Schmitt's fundamental definition of the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception" posits a tautological origin of sovereign power constituted by a metaleptic reversal: sovereignty's effect functions as its cause (5).

³ Feedback generally refers to the process in which a system's output becomes its input, which produces forms of distortion and either increases or decreases the amplification of the original signal. This has different resonances in cybernetics, sound studies, and media theory. Friedrich A. Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* provides one foundational reference point. For my purposes, the metaphor is useful because it figures the anti-Black world as an ostensibly closed system that desires to amplify its own distorted constructions.

Colson Whitehead's Tautological Enumerations

It is no accident, then, that numerous texts in the Black literary tradition depend on one or more instances of tautological repetition, both to stage the anti-Black world's reproduction of itself and to disrupt it.⁴ Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* consistently foregrounds the relation among tautology, narrative structure, plot, and modes of living. While Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) more obviously speaks to the slave narrative genre on which Hartman and Gates focus their attention, *The Nickel Boys* also reads as a kind of neo-slave narrative in the sense that the novel foregrounds the afterlife of slavery and slavery's reconfiguration into a system of incarceration. Frank Rich in fact claims in his review from *The New York Times* that *The Nickel Boys* "is as much a slave narrative as" its predecessor. Where Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* explores these questions of Black being and freedom through its experiments with speculative genres—most notably in the way it literalizes the figure of the underground railroad—*The Nickel Boys* seems to ask whether tautologies of anti-Blackness can be contested in a predominantly realist world.⁵

In *The Nickel Boys* readers follow Elwood Curtis, a promising Black student in Tallahassee, Florida, across different periods in time. After a prologue set in New York City in the present, which readers later learn to be 2014, the narrative shifts to Elwood's life in Florida in the early 1960s. On his way to a university class for advanced high school students, Elwood hitchhikes with a man named Rodney; however, the car, which turns out to be stolen, is pulled over by a white deputy. Elwood is wrongly convicted of car theft and sent to the Nickel Academy, a juvenile reformatory. When Elwood enters Nickel, the narrator asks "[w]here to fit this place into the path of his life" (64). The novel thus foregrounds that the central problem has to do with emplotment and life, as well as the relation between contingency and necessity. For it is in a sense by chance that Elwood ends up incarcerated, but in another sense, this event reads as

⁴ I have in mind a range of texts that deploy tautology as a figurative technique and/or formal structure, including Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

⁵ I say predominantly realist because, as just suggested, the novel does reconfigure several other genres, including the (neo-)slave narrative, gothic horror, and prison narrative. Paula Martín-Salván focuses on the prison narrative in her reading of the novel (205–206).

inevitable given the anti-Black climate of his daily life. Whitehead's plot line should sound all too familiar, even clichéd, considering the ongoing anti-Black environment of the United States.⁶ At Nickel, Elwood befriends another boy: Jack Turner. The retrospective narrative concludes with Elwood and Turner attempting to escape Nickel; one of them is shot and killed in the process.

Whitehead's Nickel Academy is based on the Dozier School, a reform school in Florida whose violent history was exposed in a recent investigation (Allen).⁷ The novel depends, then, on a repetition with a difference of 'reality' in its realist fiction. This collapse of fiction and reality, as well as of inside and outside, offers another instance of tautology as "correspondence" that, I argue, structures the narrative (Goldstone 176).⁸ Questions of emplotment therefore seem to apply to life within and beyond the narrative. In the novel, Nickel, like its real counterpart, appears as a school in name only; it is better understood as part of what Hartman calls "the after-life of slavery," a phrase that insists on a past that is not past but part of "the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril" ("Venus" 13). In a chapter detailing the history of Elwood's family, it becomes clear that in the era of Jim Crow, the prison has reconfigured the

⁶ With this comment I follow Black studies scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, who refers to the emancipation following the Emancipation Proclamation (1862) and the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) as a "nonevent" (*Scenes* 116). According to Hartman, the plantation system was not dissolved but reconfigured, evident in Jim Crow laws and mass incarceration, the latter of which was enabled by the qualification of the Thirteenth Amendment: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime* whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States" (emphasis added). Ava DuVernay's documentary film, *13th* (2016), offers one account of this history.

⁷ Investigations developed over a decade when several hundred men, "the White House Boys," spoke out about the abuses they suffered while at the Dozier School. A research team from the University of South Florida discovered remains on site using ground-penetrating radar technology and, eventually, following a court order, 55 bodies were exhumed, a number that "represents 24 more bodies than official records say should be there" (Chappell).

⁸ This paradoxical form of tautology speaks to the way that tautology insists, on the one hand, on textual autonomy and non-referentiality, and, on the other hand, on an "extraliterary reality" (Goldstone 175). Andrew Goldstone's reading tracks this phenomenon in the poetry of Wallace Stevens and the work of Paul de Man (149–185): "literary language is not permanently insulated from external reference, but it can temporarily suspend such referentiality in favor of a self-reference that can and must be embedded in relations among people" (185).

plantation (Whitehead 70). Nickel itself operates more as a space of incarceration and punishment than one of reform or education. White and Black students are segregated in the school, and the logic of punishment affects these students unevenly.⁹ The narrator points out that Elwood and his fellows in Nickel refer to the space outside of the school as the “free world”: “Free world was prison slang, but it had migrated to the reformatory school because it made sense” (88).

In this school-as-prison, the scene of pedagogy works as a scene of subjection, in which “the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject” appear coextensive (Hartman, *Scenes* 4). Students who disobey the school’s regulations, or those who are merely perceived to be disobedient, face violent punitive measures from the staff. The novel, in fact, offers a series of tautologies related to the broader climate of anti-Blackness inside Nickel. Tautology can be schematized as A = A, but as Eric Sundquist has noted, it can also be found in the equation, A = not-A, such that “*is* and *is not*” appear “entangled in a spiraling dialectic” (182). In *The Nickel Boys*, it is only a catachresis, that is, a perverse misnaming that obscures the tautological equation of school as prison. Elwood’s first experience with the violence of Nickel’s disciplinary function occurs after he attempts to intervene in a fight among three other boys. Following this, the four boys are brought to a building known to the Black students as the “White House,” the ironically but appropriately named space of punishment. The White House is also “its official name and it fit” because it “delivered the law and everybody obeyed” (Whitehead 66).¹⁰ Its official name alludes, of course, to the other White House, that metonymic center of U.S. government, but Nickel’s White House reveals that the center of law and order is also the center of disciplinary punishment. It operates, in this sense, as a perverse underside to its allusive referent, emphasizing the violence of the law. At the same time, White House refers to the configuration of the plantation by naming the master’s house, and this sense proves a more accurate “fit” given the violence that takes place within its walls (Whitehead 66).

⁹ The events of the novel take place after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision that declared racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. The segregation in Nickel reveals that this Supreme Court decision went into effect in schools and other public institutions according to an uneven and delayed timeline, especially in the South.

¹⁰ The white boys of Nickel “bruised differently than the black boys” and refer to this space as “the Ice Cream Factory because you came out with bruises of every color” (Whitehead 66).

Before Elwood's violent abuse, the narrator points out that "no one had asked Elwood for his side of the story, that he was trying to break up the fight in the bathroom—but maybe he'd get less for stepping in" (68). Elwood's naivety is quickly dispelled as the degree of corporal punishment seems to follow no logic, and readers also recognize, well before Elwood does, that his side of the story does not matter to those who run Nickel.¹¹ To be caught was to be guilty, according to the tautological equivalence of the laws of Nickel. Elwood soon realizes this as he recognizes that the punitive violence "didn't make sense" ("why did the bullies get less than the bullied?"), and he speculates: "Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why" (68). The corporal punishment in Nickel is described as illegal, so the White House operates as a space of exception.¹² Yet at the same time the exceptional nature of violent punishment constitutes the norm, for life at Nickel organizes itself around this ever-present threat of violence. In this way, the exception proves to be the rule (Agamben 9). Later, the irrationality of Nickel's disciplinary system gets situated within the irrationality of the world at large, for as Elwood notes, many of the boys are sent to Nickel for offenses they never heard of ("malingering, mopery, incorrigibility"); however, this lack of understanding does not make a difference since the "meaning" of the words for these offenses "was clear enough" (74).¹³ As the narrator states late in the novel, "you teach what you're taught" (163), and in the case of the violent Nickel staff, readers are told that "their daddies taught them how to keep a slave in line, passed down this brutal heirloom" (191). Far from progression, this violent pedagogy seeks to maintain the order of the same in a vicious circle.

¹¹ While violence permeates *The Nickel Boys*, the novel does not offer a graphic description of Elwood's first punishment, in part because "he passed out before they were done" (Whitehead 69). However, readers learn that the boy to be punished enters a room in the White House with "a bloody mattress and a naked pillow" (69). In this room is a "gigantic industrial fan" with a strap called "Black Beauty" attached to it: "[t]he strap was three feet long with a wooden handle" (69). The boy lies on the mattress, and when the fan is turned on, the strap comes down on the boy's legs (69).

¹² Readers learn that the industrial fan was moved to the White House "after one of the periodic reforms where the state made up new rules about corporal punishment" (Whitehead 69).

¹³ The vicious circles that circumscribe the life and existence of the Nickel boys attest, in their sheer enumeration and brutality, to the anti-Black world's "libidinal investment in violence" (Hartman, "Venus" 5).

Tautological and Counter-Tautological Emplotments

These examples demonstrate the proliferation of tautological figures in the novel, but there is also a question of tautology and plot. If, following Aristotle's fundamental definition, plot can be minimally understood as an arrangement of incidents or actions, an arrangement that could be further specified as a causal and/or temporal chain, then tautology seems to be inimical to plot. For tautology, at face value, distorts arrangements in its coincidence of the end and beginning, such that we might say we are always in the middle of things. According to Paul de Man, tautology thus generates "an endless [...] enumeration that never goes anywhere" (266).¹⁴ Because tautology "add[s] nothing by way of further explanation," as Andrew Goldstone elaborates, it often figures a sense of excess and exhaustion (162). "The static nature of tautology" therefore "forms a neat circle of itself" (Wright 1123). Tautology generates no plot per se because there is nowhere to go within this enclosure. In a different context, Frank B. Wilderson III and Dylan Rodríguez have challenged the tautological constructions of whiteness, revealing the imbrication of the figurative structures of literature and of life. For Rodríguez, "[t]he fraud of liberal white futurity is nestled in the reformist narratives" that

reproduce a stubborn tautology: [...] reforms of the anti-Black, racial-colonial state amount to an intensive, historically specific remapping, reimagination, and rearticulation of the aspirational white supremacist entitlement of liberal futurity. (223)¹⁵

Yet tautological repetition can generate a form of insight precisely because its repetition potentially asks us to reconsider the repeated content. In this way, tautology reveals that what comes next in a narrative might be nothing but what we have already read, with a difference. I am therefore interested in the potential of tautology to figure or disfigure forms of emancipation and freedom in narrative plotting. Given this interest, I argue for the productive force of the seemingly non-productive figure of

¹⁴ This claim, from "Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*," builds on de Man's reading of Baudelaire's "Correspondances" in the preceding essay, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric."

¹⁵ See also Frank Wilderson's discussion of anti-Black tautologies in *Red, White, & Black* (107). For a political example, we might note that the call "Black Lives Matter" ought to be a tautology, but in an anti-Black society, it is not; instead, it functions as a polemic about the human.

tautology such that it paradoxically generates both an aimless enumeration and the movements that constitute a plot.

What I am calling ‘counter-tautologies’ oppose themselves to the tautologies of plot that continue to be pervasive: the endless examples of anti-Black violence, the phallocentric order that re-inscribes itself in normative conceptions of masculinity, the persistence of racial capitalism that deems some people to be more valuable than others, and the pathological reconstructions of whiteness that depend on the exclusion and subjugation of non-white subject positions. All these organizing logics ground themselves on narratives and plots that work to produce unequal hierarchies and values that are in fact already constitutive. I further propose that some of the examples of ‘counter-tautology’ I cite can be read according to what Christina Sharpe names “anagrammatical blackness,” a way of describing Black being “in the wake” of slavery: “blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made” (76). Blackness, in other words, constantly disrupts the languages and worlds in which it appears, revealing that it cannot simply be fit into existing anti-Black orders of being. Tautology is therefore not simply an isolated rhetorical figure but also a structure of repetition that in turn structures Whitehead’s narrative about Black life. Having enumerated some of the tautologies of anti-Black violence in *The Nickel Boys*, I now turn to the novel’s ‘counter-tautologies’ of emancipation and freedom.

Counter-Tautologies of Black Life

Whitehead’s novel most explicitly foregrounds tautological emplotment in its reversal of the implied reader’s sense of narrative perspective and in its interest in narrative circularity and recursivity. The narrative ‘surprise’ of *The Nickel Boys* appears in the final chapter when readers discover that the protagonist, Elwood Curtis, died in the attempted escape from Nickel. In the chapters that seem to narrate Elwood’s post-Nickel life, readers have in fact been following Jack Turner, Elwood’s friend in the Nickel Academy, who took his name. This reversal asks them to reconsider all that they have just read. It also seems to violate a central principle of tautology. If, as Goldstone argues, “where tautology rules, there can be no surprise” (163), then this narrative twist suggests that tautology’s rule may not be as totalizing as it seems.

This twist of perspective and plotting also seems like it should be what Sianne Ngai calls a gimmick, a time- and labor-saving device that works both too hard and not hard enough. The gimmick, as an “extravagantly impoverished, simultaneously overperforming and underperforming” aesthetic device, “binds value to labor and time” (Ngai 1). That is, the gimmick appears to readers “as working too little (labor-saving tricks) but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention)” (Ngai 1). Yet I contend that Whitehead’s narrative surprise resists being reduced to the gimmick precisely because of the time and labor that has gone into building toward this moment, as well as, perhaps most importantly, the amount of care he invests in the narration. There is, then, an ethical practice that elevates the narrative reversal above the status of the gimmick. James Phelan develops a notion of “the ethics of the telling” to “refer to the ethical dimensions of author-narrator-audience relationships as constructed through everything from plotting to direct addresses to the audience” (*Somebody* 8–9).¹⁶ Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* follows what Phelan describes as the modernist paradigm of the ethics of telling “based on reciprocity and trust”:

The author and the audience assume that narrative communication is a shared enterprise, albeit one in which the author takes the lead. More specifically, the audience assumes that attending carefully to the author will result in a worthwhile reading experience. For his part, the author assumes that the audience can be trusted to recognize synergies, fill in the gaps, and otherwise follow the art of mediated communication. (*Somebody* 22)

In the case of *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead’s narration suggests a communicative sharing, but it playfully withholds and displaces what is or can be shared. It is also this narrative reversal that I believe Rich alludes to in his review as “a brilliant sleight-of-hand that elevates the mere act of resurrecting Elwood’s buried story into at once a miracle and a tragedy.” Whitehead’s narrative surprise therefore seems to succeed as a rhetorical and narrative effect where the gimmick fails and succeeds by failing. With reference to Phelan’s narrative theory, Paula Martín-Salván argues that the novel’s “surprise ending” “modifies readers’ judgments on plot and characters” to produce a new ethics of reading (214). Arguably, Whitehead sets up this twist not to betray readers but to allow them to come to a new

¹⁶ The ethics of the telling is distinguished in Phelan’s rhetorical theory from “the ethics of the told,” which “refer to the ethical dimensions of characters and events, including character-character interactions and choices to act in one way rather than another by individual characters” (*Somebody* 9).

and richer understanding of the characters organizing the novel. Perhaps most importantly, this “ethics of the telling” works to break the tautological enclosure of the narrative by generating a sense of doubleness in the reading experience.

Whitehead’s playful act of simultaneously disclosing and concealing Elwood’s (mis)identification can actually be traced to the very beginning of *The Nickel Boys*. For attentive readers, Whitehead gestures to the novel’s ending revelation in the prologue that introduces Elwood: “In New York City there lived a Nickel Boy who went by the name of Elwood Curtis” (7). Whitehead’s colloquial expression is unlikely to draw suspicion from most readers, but once the narrative surprise reveals itself, readers can return to this early moment and recognize that this expression, “who went by the name of,” in fact reveals that Elwood Curtis is not this man’s name. The novel thus ends where it began, albeit with a difference.¹⁷ Martín-Salván argues for the aesthetic and ethical success of Whitehead’s plot and character twist by noting that it conforms to Phelan’s definition of the “surprise ending” that surpasses the mere “cheap trick” or gimmick (Martín-Salván 14; Phelan, *Experiencing* 95). For Phelan, an ethically and aesthetically successful surprise ending must be anticipated by the author’s narration, such that the audience can be prepared for the twist and recognize its necessity, and the surprise should therefore give the sense that “the audience’s emotional and other investments in the characters are rewarded [...] rather than undermined” (Phelan, *Experiencing* 95). Upon rereading the prefatory section of *The Nickel Boys*, readers can recognize more readily how Whitehead subtly prepares them for the final revelation, and this revelation itself lends them a much more nuanced sense of Turner, who seemed only accessible in relation to the young Elwood.

The epilogue further reveals that Turner took Elwood’s name “[t]o live for him” and had been revising and retelling Elwood’s story for years, in an ongoing attempt to get “it right” (202; 204). This recursive process

¹⁷ In a subsequent reading, or in a first reading for particularly attentive readers, Elwood’s identity becomes an “open secret” in D.A. Miller’s sense of the term: readers are encouraged to disavow what they know for the sake of preserving or “guarding” the fantasy that Elwood is Elwood and not Turner (27). Whitehead manipulates characterization and focalization to generate this plot twist. Readers are limited to Elwood’s point of view; it simply takes time to realize that there are two Elwoods. Martín-Salván offers a helpful reading of the imbrication of the two characters, especially in the way Elwood and Turner seem to adopt each other’s governing ideological positions in the final chapter of the narrative before its revelatory epilogue (213–215).

also suggests that Turner constantly rereads Elwood's story, much as readers are encouraged to reread the narrative itself. Turner learned that "[i]t was not enough to survive, you have to live" (204).¹⁸ Much earlier in the novel, when Elwood is recovering in the Nickel hospital from his violent punishment, Turner visits him and notes a tautological equivalence between Nickel and the world: "now that I been out and I been 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" (81).¹⁹ Turner speaks to Elwood here from the position of having been in and out of Nickel, and with a more cynical—or realistic—view compared to Elwood's optimism. After Turner's claim of an equivalence, the narrator comments: "[h]e was talking in circles, everything pointing back at itself" (81). The circle is an exemplary image of tautology and its closed system of referentiality, and as the epilogue emphasizes, the novel possesses an enclosed structure, much like the Nickel Academy itself. *The Nickel Boys* foregrounds in this instance how that circle appears when trying to narrate—or make sense of—lived experiences that can only inadequately be represented.

For as the end of the novel suggests, Turner comes to find what the narrative suggestively and ambiguously refers to as "another way" (205), which seemed impossible from within the confines of the Nickel Academy. Despite the carceral logic of the narrative, something exceeds the hold. Yet it remains unclear whether Turner has merely survived or lived by the end of the narrative. The epilogue concludes with Turner back in Tallahassee at a restaurant with rather quotidian concerns: "[h]e was hungry and they served all day, and that was enough" (210). The novel's final clause, "that was enough," intensifies rather than resolves this ambiguity between surviving and living. The novel's tautological structure and its ambiguity also point to what Sharpe characterizes as "blackness's signifying surplus: the ways that meaning slides, signification slips" (80). *The Nickel Boys* narratively works by pointing to itself in a series of substitutions and reversals, but it nonetheless generates some-

¹⁸ While I am generalizing the various strategies of *The Nickel Boys* as forms of tautological repetition, see Audrey Wasser's reading of Samuel Beckett's work in terms of epanorthosis, "a figure of speech that entails going back over what one has just asserted, either to add nuance, to weaken or retract, or to reassert the original statement with greater force" (112), for a means of distinguishing forms of repetition in Whitehead's novel.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the novel as a prison narrative and an articulation of a "carceral topography," see Martín-Salván.

thing in excess of its own signifying chains.²⁰ In one of the present-day chapters, Turner (still known to readers as Elwood at this point) remarks that the Nickel boys “had been denied even the simple pleasure of being ordinary” (166).

This denial marks the condition of Black (non-)life in an anti-Black world. Wilderson elaborates the “unbearable ethics” that emerge in a world constituted by anti-Black violence when, glossing Hortense Spillers, he notes that “the world—not its myriad discriminatory practices, but the world itself—was unethical” (2). Turner’s response to this unbearable situation is to invent a way to live with and through it. Lauren Berlant explicates this constitutive paradox of the unbearable: “to call a thing unbearable is to admit that it must be borne” (152). To bear what cannot but must be borne, Turner becomes Elwood and finds in this renaming the possibility of making a life. Where Whitehead cultivates an ethics of telling based on care, Turner’s own act of taking Elwood’s name introduces a different basis in the ethics of the told, a fidelity to the image of Elwood sustained and affirmed by Turner’s lifelong project of revision, which in turn constitutes a life.²¹ Since Turner’s post-Nickel life remains haunted by Elwood, however, the narrative maintains that this life cannot be unambiguously distinguished from mere survival.

Revision as a Practice of Black Life

This project of revision also alludes to the slave narrative form with which I began. For Turner’s appropriation of Elwood’s name to honor his friend and make a life for himself feels analogous to Harriet Jacobs’s “loophole of retreat” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Concealing herself in a garret for nearly seven years, Jacobs paradoxically discovers a space of freedom from her enslavement. Hartman designates this as “a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity” (*Scenes* 9). Similarly, Turner’s liberation emerges through the enclosure brought on

²⁰ An extended reading of *The Nickel Boys* could interpret Turner’s repetition and revision of Elwood’s story as an instance of what Sharpe theorizes as Black redaction and Black annotation, forms of resistance and care. Here, I merely want to signal that a tautological structure makes such practices possible.

²¹ With this phrasing I have in mind Alain Badiou’s redefinition of ethics, which he summarizes as the following set of injunctions: “Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you” (47).

him by Elwood's name. Constructing a new self after his escape, Turner makes a life that he had not conceived of as possible, and the chapters that follow him often emphasize the ordinariness of life he has had to struggle to obtain. Despite the trauma of his past experiences at Nickel, which, as the novel's temporal shifts emphasize, are not past at all, Turner is able to access a “[glimpse] of Black freedom,” which characterizes a moment “of the something more that exist[s] inside of the dire conditions of [his] present Black unfreedom” (Walcott 2). Against the linearity of modernist and liberal narratives of progress, Rinaldo Walcott describes Black freedom as “much more eruptive and much more disruptive” (3). Turner's revelation disrupts the narrative expectations and presses readers to consider new “modes of intelligibility” (Walcott 4). The final section of *The Nickel Boys* oscillates between the post-Nickel life of Turner (who is still identified as Elwood) and the past episodes at Nickel leading to the boys' escape attempt. Yet the anticipated convergence of these two tracks does not occur in the way readers might expect since they learn that there are two Elwoods organizing—and disorganizing—the narrative unity.²²

With these questions of revision in mind, it is worth rereading the close of Whitehead's novel, when Turner has returned to Nickel following the investigation into its various crimes and acts of violence. This decision to return is framed simply as one of necessity: once investigators discover “the secret graveyard, he knew he'd have to return” (Whitehead 8). Readers last see him at the restaurant of a nearby hotel, coincidentally the same location as the hotel that Elwood's grandmother worked in. He does not remember that Elwood once frequented this hotel as a boy, but the narrator concludes that “[h]e was hungry and they served all day, and that was enough” (210). Again, the final “enough” seems both deflating and a mark of Turner's endurance. Turner's story offers a ‘counter-tautology’ of being as being-free that cannot be annihilated by the anti-Black perpetuation of unfreedom. These two tautologies work, on the one hand, in dialectical tension.

On the other hand, there is something non-dialectical in the catachrestic relation between these two tautologies. The “enough” of Turner's freedom within a space of unfreedom ought to be understood as “blackness's signifying surplus” that cannot be simply re-absorbed by the regimes of domination, especially that of incarceration, imposed on him throughout

²² Martín-Salván reads in the novel's alternating structure of chapters a sense of progression toward the final revelation that, rather than produce a convergence of the two narrative tracks, produces the jarring twist that asks readers to reread all they have just read (213–214).

the narrative. It is a “loophole of retreat” that shifts from the vicious circle of anti-Blackness to an emancipatory circle by way of a leap from one world of unfreedom to another of freedom.²³ Yet because this loophole is tautological in nature, it comes at the cost of Turner’s persistent revisions of Elwood’s story. As cited earlier, “Turner had been telling Elwood’s story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right” (204). Turner’s acts of revision emphasize a conjunction of repetition and progression, as well as of aesthetics, ethics, and ontology. In revising Elwood’s story, Turner is also writing and rewriting it. To make and have a life, Turner must write it; however, the life he writes is ironically other than his own. That is, he is in the process of creating and recreating a life that will get things “right.” Revision also speaks to the fact that “the unbearable object/scene is never fully faced, if by ‘faced’ we mean incorporated, understood, mastered” (Berlant 152). Tautological recursivity does, in fact, generate something in excess of the repeated content through the work of a specifically differential repetition. Turner’s wife, Millie, does not know about his time at Nickel and, for her, he has always been Elwood. Once she hears his story—and his revelation of a self-identity that is not his own—the narrator asks of Turner, “Who was he?” and answers that “[h]e was him, the man he had always been” (206). The tautology, “he was him,” gets repeated in the following sentence, drawing our attention to its doubled and contradictory axioms: Turner is Turner and Turner is Elwood. Because the narrative of his time in Nickel is focalized on and mediated by Elwood, readers never actually see Turner as Turner. This is also true of the post-Nickel narrative, which readers discover to be focalized on Turner as Elwood, so both characters only appear in mediated forms.

Conclusion

Tautology thus appears in both figurations of anti-Black violence and figurations of an attempted freedom from such violence. In the narrative’s

²³ This is similar to Jared Sexton’s description of “the social life of social death,” but Kevin Quashie offers a different valence that proves helpful. Quashie’s project is to imagine a world of Black aliveness “so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of black death, of blackness that is understood only through such a vocabulary” (1). Quashie critiques forms of Black pessimism that produce totalizing conceptions of anti-Blackness and declares that “Antiblackness is total in the world, but it is not total in the black world” (5).

anti-Black world, a new plot is needed: the vicious circles of anti-Blackness need to be met with an emancipatory circle. To borrow language from Frantz Fanon, Jacques Rancière, and Rinaldo Walcott, if one cannot “progress” from inequality to equality or from unfreedom to freedom, then one must decide to begin with equality and freedom, to break out of—rather than merely reform—the circle of violence and domination.²⁴ Otherwise, one risks finding oneself at the same starting point. As Fanon writes in his conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, “I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence” (179). This axiomatic move offers an exit by way of a leap, which is not a call for reform but for an aesthetic, ontological, and rhetorical rupture. Turner both does and does not find himself where he began. His inventive rupture asks readers to reread what has been written in order to disrupt the smooth functioning of a vicious circle by positing an emancipatory circle that envisions a different mode of structural repetition. *The Nickel Boys* paradoxically figures such emancipation through ‘counter-tautologies’ that reveal Black being as that which works within and against tautologies of anti-Black violence. In the reading of Plato that appears in *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida offers an illuminating note on these two sides of tautological repetition: tautological repetition returns to itself, but the excess of this repetition also ends up moving beyond return (168). In other words, tautological repetition both concentrates itself and “disperses itself” (Derrida 168). This is the risk and possibility of tautology: it at once points to itself and, paradoxically, beyond itself. Turner’s tautological emplotment enables him to “make something of himself” by making space for a life within, against, and beyond the anti-Black enclosure of Nickel that had deemed such life impossible. But there can be no guarantee of what kind of plot will emerge from such ‘counter-tautologies.’ The narrative suggests that the desire for freedom is the desire “to write one’s own story for once” (Whitehead 146). Counter-intuitively, it is by rewriting the story of another that Turner is able to write his own.

²⁴ For Rancière, “there is no path from inequality to equality. There is either a path from equality to equality or a path from inequality to inequality” (139).

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