

# RAMReS

N°009 - Juin 2020



**Revue Africaine et Malgache de Recherche Scientifique**

**Semestriel de Publication de la Conférence des Recteurs des Universités  
Francophones d'Afrique et de l'Océan Indien (CRUFAOCI)**

## Littérature, Langues et Linguistique...

**N° 009—1<sup>er</sup> Semestre 2020**

**ISSN 2630-1148**

**Conférence des Recteurs des Universités Francophones  
d'Afrique et de l'Océan Indien (CRUFAOCI)**

**01 B.P. 134 Ouagadougou / Burkina Faso**



# Revue Africaine et Malgache de Recherche Scientifique (RAMReS) *‘Littérature, Langues et linguistique’*

**N° 008–1<sup>er</sup> Semestre 2019**

**ISSN 2630-1148**

Semestriel de publication de la Conférence des Recteurs des Universités  
Francophones de l’Afrique et de l’Océan Indien

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## SOMMAIRE

1. **Laré KANTCHOA & Djibrila TETEREOU**  
Étude du Numéral dans le Fulfulde Parlé à Kpenzinde au Togo  
*Pages 1-17*
2. **Yémalo C. AMOUSSOU & Judes ASSOGBA**  
Investigating the Tenor Continua in Femi Osofisan's Women of Owu through the Hallidayan Mood Grammar  
*Pages 18-31*
3. **André KABORÉ**  
Feminism in Burkinabe English Literature  
*Pages 32-49*
4. **Ferdinand KPOHOUE, Sènakpon Fortuné AZON & Raoul AHOUANGANSI**  
Institutional Injustice and Murders of Black People in John E. Wideman's Writing to save a life and Colson Whitehead's Nickel boys  
*Pages 50-63*
5. **Koffi Jules KOUAKOU**  
An Ecocritical Analysis of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Revolutionaries*  
*Pages 64-83*
6. **Kouabena Théodore KOSSONOU**  
De la Non Pertinence Phonologique des Tons Modulés (Descendants et Montants) dans Quelques Langues Kwa et Gur de Cote D'ivoire  
*Pages 84-99*

# Institutional Injustice and Murders of Black People in John E. Wideman's *Writing to Save a Life* and Colson Whitehead's *Nickel Boys*

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**Abstract** - This article focuses on anti-Black institutional racism in the USA through John Edgar Wideman's *Writing to Save a Life* and Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. It denounces acts of torture, racist murders and unfair trials perpetrated, in contemporary American history, against Black people, under the aegis of official institutional procedures. It exposes the injustice present in some of the most visible flagships of a political system which purports to be democratic and equalitarian: the educational institutions, the criminal justice system, and the army of the USA. It demonstrates that between the assaults of civil courts and courts martial, between escaped prisoner hunts and firing squads, torture and police blunders, that black lives do not really matter. The Marxist literary theory and Critical Race Theory are used as prism for the analysis in this paper. Its objective is to highlight, through the two books, the instrumentalization of the institutions of the United States for the purpose of acts of racist violence, biased procedures, and murders, committed on black people, in order to contribute to putting an end to it.

**Key words:** African Americans - racism - violence - murder - criminal justice

**Résumé** - Le présent article se focalise sur le racisme institutionnel anti-Noirs aux Etats-Unis à travers *Writing to Save a Life* de John Edgar Wideman et *The Nickel Boys* de Colson Whitehead. Il dénonce les actes de torture et de meurtres racistes perpétrés de nos jours sur les Noirs et les procès iniques dont ces derniers font l'objet, sous le couvert des procédures institutionnelles officielles. Il met à nu l'injustice qui règne au cœur de quelques fleurons et joyaux d'un système politique qui se veut démocratique et égalitaire: les institutions éducatives, les organes de la justice pénale et l'armée des Etats-Unis. Il démontre qu'entre l'assaut des tribunaux civils et des cours martiales, qu'entre chasse aux prisonniers évadés et peloton d'exécution, torture et bavures policières, que la vie des Noirs n'a aucune valeur. La théorie littéraire marxiste et le *Critical Race Theory* servent de prisme d'analyse au présent article. Son objectif est de mettre en exergue l'instrumentalisation des institutions des Etats-Unis au service des actes de violence raciste, des procédures biaisées et des meurtres perpétrés contre les Noirs, afin de contribuer à y mettre fin.

**Mots-clefs :** Afro-américains - racisme - violence - meurtre - justice pénale

## Introduction

Works of fiction are generally based on imagination. But they may also draw on reality and still catch the reader with most surprising stories. The

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African American literature justly finds an interesting source of inspiration in the numerous famous cases of denial of justice for black people and in the film-like killings of Eric Garner, Jeremy McDole, Oscar Grant, Ramarley Graham, Kendrec McDade, Trayvon Martin, Tamir E. Rice, and Atatiana Jefferson, to list only a few. Cases of gross miscarriage of justice and police murders, whose images got accidentally caught by camera lenses and travelled on social media, certainly played a part in the widespread concern and commitment, among black writers, for the denunciation of systemic brutality against black people in the USA. Wideman's *Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File (Writing)* and Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys (Nickel)* belong to this category of works that stage true, startling stories of black people whose destinies are taken in the nets of the American law enforcement services, the criminal justice system, and prison administrations, baring the fondness with which the system exploits these people, violates their rights, and claims their lives. Through these two texts, this research paper analyses the perversity of some American institutions instrumentalized for the purpose of torturing, terrorizing, exploiting, and killing black people. The paper has adopted the theoretical and interpretive lens of Critical Race Theory and literary Marxism. It purports to scrutinize the injustice committed against African Americans within the institutions of the USA and to speak for the advent of a fairer world for black people.

## 1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Institutional injustice refers to the biased, unfair, practices and procedures in public institutions which deny a category of people the righteous treatment they are entitled to. Individuals of the targeted group may suffer abhorrent atrocities in the hands of individual perpetrators. They may also fall victim to injustice in the hands of public institutions. Human societies usually establish institutions and endow them with authority to ensure fair, standardized, rule-based social interplay. But these institutions may sometimes be the very sources of the wrongs that they are meant to remedy. Acts of systemic discrimination, violence, and murder, may be committed by people who are vested with public power, in the performance of their duties. It is this category of injustice that this research work focuses on, using Critical Race Theory and the Marxist literary theory.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is derived from critical legal studies and radical feminism in the USA in the late 1980s and 1990s (Delgado and Stefancic *Introduction* 5). It is intended to opening people's eyes to the endemic racism embedded in social culture and practices in the USA. CRT tries to engineer social transformation by reinterpreting the [American] legal system which serves as backbone to the dynamics of power, privilege and wealth, and



therefore, to the subjugation, marginalization, and exploitation of minorities. It is a theoretical lens that assesses the portrayal or entextualization of race and racism across literature, films, and all categories of media. It also purports to expose the gap between social facts and ideals in existing power structures which allocate status such as the educational system, the job market, the criminal justice system, police forces, the prison system, the army, and home ownership.

CRT intends to show that contrary to the collective belief that the law is a color-blind body of measures indiscriminately enforced on all, that legal provisions are more or less subtly oriented toward the objective of white supremacy and privilege. That is why CRT scholar Roy L. Brooks identifies the theory as “a collection of critical stances against the existing legal order from a race-based point of view” (86). Racial discrimination may be a social practice, but it is first and foremost a practice rooted in public institutions and procedures that guarantee white people statistical advantages: the *white privilege*. CRT advocates contend that it is through its political and economic structures that the power exercises social control and forces individuals into roles that they are ascribed. It is the same domination of one group of people or *class* by another, in the scramble for material acquisition in modern society, that Marxism denounces.

Marxism is a political and social theory born from the social philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels which mainly addresses the mode of production in society. It postulates that the material living conditions of humans, particularly their position in the production relations, determines their perception or conscience. Marxism theorizes that human history is an ever-changing interplay of powerful minorities seizing the opportunity to dominate the majority, then creating the discourse to rationalize their domination. Society is moved by the contradictions between the diverging interests of its classes on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the opposition between the new developments of the forces of production and the social relations that they had formerly engendered: Marxists call these contradictions *dialectical materialism*. Marxist theory then intends to address the crushing domination and exploitation of this majority, the proletariat, by the minority class of bourgeois. It is in this vein that Terry Eagleton defines Marxism as “a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression” (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* xii).

The application of the Marxist theory to literature focuses on the “sociology of literature”, i.e. the identification of class struggles and productive forces in the literary text (Eagleton *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 3). Of course, books are money-making commodities “manufactured” and sold on the market for a



profit. But the content of the book is a major component of the net that entraps individuals into the narrative of an ideology, familiarizing them, in the class society, with the role that they are expected to play. Each work of literature is then produced fully imbued in either the didactics of submission when it hallows the interests of the ruling class, or in the logic of rebellion when it espouses the interests of the dominated. The literary text then comes both upstream and downstream of ideology, "as the product of ideology, but [also] as a necessity of ideology" (Eagleton *Criticism and Ideology* 76). Literature, and art in general, becomes a core constituent of what Marxists call *superstructure*, "whose essential function is to legitimize the power of the social class which owns the means of economic production" (5). Literature, as a human enterprise, breathes its dynamics into the forces and course of historical struggles.<sup>1</sup> The *superstructure* is opposed to the *base* which is the clearly expressed body of rules that, in Marxist philosophy, govern the socio-economic organization.

The interest of using these two literary theories for the analysis of *Writing* and *Nickel* lies in the fact that they play up the social context of exploitation, oppression and domination whose roots they theorize on, respectively emphasizing the paradigm of "race" and that of *class*.

## 2. The Unjust Criminal Justice System

The protagonists of the two works this study focuses on show, at an early period of their lives, an explicit refusal to live down to the expectations of the American society. Louis Till in *Writing* rejects social conveniences and refuses to comply with the Jim Crow segregation policies of the South, and Elwood Curtis in *Nickel* decides to get a college education. Their refusal to comply with social standards seems to be one of the reasons which triggers their issues with the criminal justice system.

Based on the real story of Arthur Dozier Academy, a juvenile rehabilitation center in Florida, *Nickel* stages the life of an eerie-fated high school boy, Elwood Curtis, left only with his grandmother. Elwood refuses to take up a job as a porter in the same hotel in which four generations in his family line have held menial jobs. On his first day to college, he accidentally hitchhikes a stolen car. He lands up in a juvenile detention center, *Nickel Academy*, convicted of car theft. He tries to hire a white lawyer who swindles him out of all his savings and vanishes. The superintendent of *Nickel* plans to secretly execute him in reprisal for his attempts to report to the inspection board on visit all the horrors the inmates are subjected to. It does not occur to him that the state prison

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<sup>1</sup> It is useful to point out that materialism denies art the power to change the course of history as art first works outside the direct material condition of the human. But art can play an important part in historical change. Cf. Eagleton *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 9



inspection board is in collusion with the prison staff on the theft of foodstuff supply, the young men's exploitation, and abuse. He is condemned because his intellectual abilities, ambition, and refusal to comply with injustice threaten the interests of the prison administration and social order. The only way for him to avoid being killed is to escape. But during his escape, he is shot down, a few inches from freedom.

As for Private Louis Till, the protagonist of Wideman's *Writing*, he is not shot but court-martialed and hanged in Italy in 1945. The narrative opens with Mammy Till, his former wife and Emmett Till's mother who refuses to close the casket in which his teenage boy's mangled body is laid. She wants all the world to see the mutilated body of that black boy killed for whistling at a white woman. The boy's murderers get acquitted and the hope of convicting them for kidnapping before a grand jury is shattered by the timely release of the secret military file that reveals how his father died. In effect, two US Senators order that Louis Till's legal file be declassified and leaked to the press. The file reveals that Emmett's father, Private Louis Till, was hanged during the Second World War in Italy, convicted of raping and murdering an Italian woman living next to their garrison. Wideman requests Till's file. After he has closely studied it several times, he finds no consistency in the evidences it purports to show. While *Nickel* tells the true story of Dozier's black inmates, changing their names, the narrative of *Writing* blurs the boundary between meditation, investigative journalism, memoir, and fiction, to recreate the lives of Louis Till and his son, both killed.

Elwood Curtis showcases the fate of all those innocent black youngsters who fall prey to the horrible systemic violence of the criminal justice system. Some of them are killed in total impunity. As for Louis Till, he stands for the African Americans expeditiously convicted and executed, without solid evidence from investigations, by civil courts and courts martial, while the case of his son Emmett speaks for the victims of the white murderers who get acquitted by condoning courts.

Hitchhiking a stolen car does not make sufficient ground for a conviction. One interpretation of Elwood's condemnation by the court is the threat he poses pursuing college education. The oppressive social and political system which feeds on black people's illiteracy and ignorance has very little use of a black person equipped with higher education. So what the text purposefully magnifies is that Elwood becomes eligible for prison mainly because he is outrunning the bulk of white people in the race for knowledge in his racist community. The narrative does mention that there were not many white students who make it to college in Tallahassee (Whitehead 29). By getting college education, Elwood threatens the white people's natural superiority. The first alibi that Elwood offers to prove his innocence, one can assume, is his



enrollment and first day at college. But unfortunately, college attendance for a black teenager in his backwood community signals a danger worse than car thievery: "Education among all kinds of men, DuBois says, always had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent" (*The Souls* 20).

The stereotyping of the black youth as criminal can also account for the violation of Elwood's presumption of innocence. His essentialized skin color determines what he is supposed to have done: playing a part in the car theft. To establish his innocence, it would have been sufficient to locate his house, his letter of recommendation and check the registration procedure he has started at Melvin Griggs Technical College. This would have enabled to identify his itinerary which in no way crosses the place where the car is stolen. Wideman precisely probes this mechanism of distortion of the truth to suit the needs of the white dominating class. Each power produces its truth, the truth that sustains its legitimacy and perpetuation. There is relativity of judgment at the heart of social experience that follows on from conflicting interests and determines "truth's status in a universe where all truths are equal until power chooses one truth to serve its needs" (Wideman 18).

It is most obvious that, in the case of Emmett Till, the "truth" that suits the power is that the teenager has assaulted the white lady Carolyn Bryant Donham and deserves to be killed. This truth is "established" even before the hearing of Emmett's case in 1955: the deliberation lasts less than an hour. The all-white jury of the trial is exclusively made of sharecroppers, logically, the profession which is most pitted against black people in the rural south. Both classes are mostly in the same trade and therefore in competition. In this case of evident bias, it is punning how the defendants' lawyer appeals to the noble ideals and archetypes of divinity, light, freedom, and bravery to buttress a discourse loaded with racism that obviously offends common sense: "I want you to tell me where under God's shining sun is the land of the free and home of the brave if you don't turn these boys [Milan and Bryant] loose" (11). The American national Anthem from which the phrase "land of the free and home of the brave" is taken is itself known to have racist and discriminatory overtones. Thus the lawyer referring to this official discourse that threatens [black] slaves with "the terror of flight" and "the gloom of the grave" (Key, 21-22) subtly hints to the denial of an equal protection of the law before the court.

Both *Writing* and *Nickel* unveil the scope of the perversity in American public institutions. It would be naïve to overlook the fact that these institutions operate with the complicitous networks of high ranking administrative figures. In *Writing*, the social control of the White-supremacist *panoptikon* is made evident in the timely intervention of two US Senators from Mississippi, James Oliver Eastland and John C. Stennis. These superior hands intervene in the



arcane workings of power, just in time to remove the seal of confidentiality from the classified military file of Louis Till, in order to get his son's murderers acquitted (69). Their motivated intervention rigs the legal proceedings. It is the leak of the content of the file to the press that crushes any hope for a second trial: "news of her husband's execution erased the possibility that killers of her fourteen-year-old son Emmett would be punished for any crime, whatsoever" (12).

The figures of the complicit Senators of *Writing* find their equivalent, in *Nickel's* narrative, in the hypocritically benevolent faces of the state prison inspection board. Elwood trusts them and gives them the well-documented complaint he files on the horrible abuses of the prison. These officials are the very people on whom the onus falls to ensure the orthodox operation of these criminal justice institutions. But they seem to be at the core of the abuses. No hope is left when the authority figures that one should appeal to when one feels wronged are themselves complicit with the perpetrators. The biases of these highest-ranking officials simply makes an appeal to any higher administrative authority a useless endeavor.

In another respect, the judicial officers' decision in Emmett's case is based on the premise that as Louis's son, Emmett has forcibly offended Mrs. Carolyn Bryant Donham. Is his father not attracted to white women and prone to use violence on them? This confirms the myth of the atavistic lust African American males nurture for white women: "All colored males are guilty of desiring to rape white women" (Wideman 140). The exoneration of the son's murderers because the father is convicted of rape and murder, conviction which besides is without firm ground, signals a subtle language game that substitutes the son for the father and enables to condone the son's torture and murder. Louis Till is executed for rape and murder, crimes whose evidence, Wideman thinks, is not well established.

The point that he makes after reading the file several times is not much that Private Louis Till is innocent than that there is no sufficient evidence to accuse him. The way civil courts and courts martial deal with the lives of the protagonists of the two books shows that these lives are expendable. In the cases of Elwood Curtis and Louis Till, the court commits a dereliction of duty in violating their presumption of innocence. *Nickel* and *Writing* detail how the system entraps innocent black youth. *Writing* offers a glimpse into Louis Till's accusation file whose pages are arranged in the wrong order and are fraught with blatant inconsistencies and lack of convincing arguments for an indictment. In both cases, the conviction for crime solely stems from a systemic need for violence and humiliation.

In addition to the conviction of innocent black people for crime, another bias in the justice system, emphasized in the two narratives, is the offhanded



acquittal of the murderers of black people. Authors of White-on-Black crimes, especially law enforcement officers and stakeholders of the criminal justice system, are seldom charged. When prosecuted, in one way or another, they get away with their crime. That is what Mamie Till denounces as she pleads for justice for her son's murder with an open casket. However, Harriet, Elwood's grandmother in *Nickel*, seems to have paid to this phenomenon a heavier tribute than Mamie Till. She does not lose only a grandson, but also her father and her husband. Now with the loss of her grandson who is the only family member she is left with, she has lost all the males of her family to unprosecuted murders. Like Emmett Till's killers and Louis Till's executioners, Elwood's murderers go unpunished. And so do the killers of all those black boys of Nickel Academy – and real Dozier Academy – whose bodies are tied in potato sacks and thrown in the prison's marked and unmarked graves.

In *Writing*, both father and son fall victim to a system intent on clearly asserting white supremacy and privilege. In *Nickel*, several generations in Elwood's family are killed by white people without any trial. The justice system is turned into an instrument of domination which crushes black people generation after generation, operating on deception and fear. Ruffin observes this in an ironic note: "If you watched enough award-winning films or read a bunch of crime thrillers, you would get the distinct impression that courts of law, indeed, the entire system of codified expectations, was fueled by the search for truth. This was not so. Our courts were powered by two things and two things alone: fear and fear itself" (93).

The pervasive policy of terror instills in all black people an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability. Wideman reports a stunning similarity of his own life circumstances to those of Emmett Till: age, experiences, love stories, family setting, all of which could have very easily placed him in the same position as Emmett Till, and thus made him also a victim of the system. These most strange resemblances, bringing the Tills' fates closer to that of Wideman himself, also reveal how easily what happened to Till could have happened to any single black person in the USA: "If I return to Till's grave, I will confess to him first thing that the Louis Till project is about saving a son and brother, about saving myself" (116). All black people are in the same ballpark. This sense of endemic vulnerability, the feeling that one's life could end at any moment, is one of the reasons that instills fright in most black people in the USA.

### 3. Power Structures and the Policy of Terror

One striking resemblance between *Writing* and *Nickel* is the centrality of the graveyards to the tales of their protagonists who are murdered by power structures. Both books are tales of mashed black bodies, bruised bones, and



graveyards. Elwood's story opens with a scene of secret graveyard excavations. Moreover, the official graveyard is separated from the prison cells merely by the torture and beating room ironically referred to as the "White House." The inmates, black children, some as young as *five* years (Colson 55), adolescents, and young adults, live with the constant anguish of falling into the invisible traps of the prison's punishment system. Beating, rape, and mutilation are omnipresent threats they face. The most unfortunate are killed and dumped into unmarked graves at the untended cemetery (1). As a matter of fact, in addition to the official cemetery where the bodies of the young people whose deaths are declared are buried, there is another secret graveyard. The opening scene of the narrative presents some archeology students from the University of South Florida digging that field for the sparsely buried remains of the dead inmates whose bodies were tied up in potato sacks. Likewise, Wideman, in *Writing*, meditates on the "officially designated 'dishonorable'" Plot E (7).

Plot E is the remote patch of the American military cemetery in Italy which is set aside at for the bodies of the "shameful" American soldiers executed at war. It happens that almost all of those *shameful* American soldiers buried on Plot E are black: 86 graves of black soldiers out of the 93 (Wideman 13). The novel itself is divided in three parts, with the third part entitled "Graves".

These life-sized replicas of the horrors inflicted by the system on black youths makes the singularity of the stories that Wideman and Colson's books tell. Both novels present readers with real facts documented on real people. The constant threat of death, torture, and beating for trespassing invisible fences gives the two narratives a nightmarish scent of doom and inescapability. The last hours of Till's life rush through a high-speed concatenation of events that bare the implacable institutional gnarl set around his neck. Furthermore, the condemnation runs down from one generation to another. Louis Till himself has never known his father, and his own son, Emmett, is orphaned of his father too. As for Elwood Curtis, his grandmother Harriet loses her father to prison. Her husband is killed by white men. Elwood's father, mentally bruised by army service, flees with Harriet's only daughter (Colson 61). So she is deprived of father, husband, only daughter, and son-in-law. And again her last hope, her only grandson Elwood, is snatched away by prison and killed: "Rarely did Harriet make proper goodbyes to her loved ones" (51).

Wanton wickedness, raised to the perfection of the art, creates this Kafkaesque prison atmosphere that leaves stigmas on the minds of Nickel boys all their lives:

Spencer had a severe face, but when he touched the enormous key ring on his belt the corners of his mouth twitched in pleasure, it seemed, or to signal a murkier emotion. The supervisor turned to Franklin, the boy who'd come back for a second taste of Nickel. "Tell them, Franklin." Franklin's voice cracked and he had to fix



himself before he got out, "Yes, sir. You don't want to step over the line in here."  
(Whitehead 35)

The very lines one should not cross seem invisible: "even if you avoided trouble, trouble might reach out and snatch you anyway" (Whitehead 61). Justice is dispensed haphazardly and the punishment system is harsher and nastier toward the weaker boys than it is to the less vulnerable. Bullies get less severe punishments than their victims, and well-meaning young people who interfere with the "smooth" working of bullying practices get the worst punishments. Elwood is whipped to unconsciousness when he tries to defend a young boy against his bullies. During his few weeks in the prison hospital, wounded, bruised, and with his testicles swollen, he gets the invariable treatment administered to all black boys, whatever their health condition: one or two tablets of aspirin (54). So these boys navigate their lives as in a tightrope walk in which any simple blip throws you off balance.

How may one interpret this system set in the prison which reverses the very principles of justice? The machinery rewards spying and betrayal, gives more severe punishment for petty infractions, crushes and kills the weak and people who mean to stand for justice. Would that not be with the deliberate intent of creating chaos and psychological disorientation? Terror becomes a device intended to instilling fear and divide. Louis Till's co-accused, Private James Thomas, Jr., is reported to have participated in the crime with Private Louis Till. But he gets released and reinstated while Louis get hanged.

The American criminal justice apparatus, in the two books, is described as a labyrinthine and cynical power structure. Neither Louis Till nor Elwood Curtis really make sense of their weird predicament. Elwood exclaims: "It didn't make sense. Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why" (Whitehead 49).

In a context where the boys' *nickel*-worth bodies are at auction sale to any bidder and their fates subject to the zigs and the zags of circumstances, only the lucky ones succeed in surviving. The system breaks the bodies of the boys and gnaws at their psyches as it does with Elwood. The horrors and terror of Nickel "had weeviled deep into his personality. The way his shoulders sank when Spencer appeared, the flinch and shrink" (Whitehead 85).

Of course, the boys are subjected to beatings, torture, and killings. Still, the real politics of terror goes beyond all this. Fear does not seem in fact to be nurtured only with something corporeal, material which can be pinned down, covered with eyes or appraised with senses. It is the feeling of unsurmountable terror, similar to the fright that, for children, emanates from the bogeyman lurking in the dark, never seen, but always present. Only their fancies give shape and color to these monsters looming in the dark: "Elwood was asleep when a different *roar* commenced. It came from outside, a rush and a whoosh



without variation. Forbidding and mechanical and granting no clue to its origin. He didn't know which book he'd picked it up from, but the word came to him: *torrential*" (Whitehead 39). The symbols of roar, whoosh, rush, outside, no clue, and nighttime, all crystallize the unseen source of the panic which makes all the inmates senseless.<sup>2</sup> "It was crazy to run and crazy not to run" (100). This kind of refined system of fear that permeates the soul is the chain by which their bodies and minds are tied and controlled by the system.

Even when they are not shot down or killed by physical violence at Nickel, lots of the inmates, Claude Sheppard (131), Turner (140), Sammy, Nelson, Lonnie, Chickie (112), twenty years after that traumatic experience of prison, with their fractured bodies and shattered psyches, look like walking dead that wobble and hobble around, awaiting entombment. Most of these devastated souls walk around carrying before them invisible bars of seclusion, and "never fit in at all with normal people... It [past prison life] wasn't far off at all. Never will be" (8-9).

The secret target of the implementation of the terror politics is not to break only its direct victims, but it also targets their families, friends, all African Americans outside of prisons. Sometimes, whether they make the physical experience of prison hardly matters, as the prison lesson, with the dread of torture, solitary confinement in tiny dark cells, rape, mutilation, bruising and killing, reaches out to black people out of prison, on streets and in schools, at home and in churches.

Wideman gives this account of the effect of Emmett Till's photo on him, long years after his murder: "I was fourteen the first time I saw the photo in *Jet*. Emmett Till's age that summer they murdered him. Him colored, me colored. Him a boy, me too. Him so absolutely dead he's my death, too" (26). And he goes on: "I'd hide years later from [the] photo in *Jet* magazine of a colored boy's disfigured face, one eye swollen shut, the other eye missing. A dead, blind boy and no way to escape his awful, silent stare" (133). For years, Emmett Till's face traumatizes and haunts him. Even more than that, all the similarity of their life circumstances seem to make the narrator vicariously experience Emmett's fate. The murder and violence committed on other black people are an instrument for the spread of terror in the whole community.

Institutional violence, especially in the justice system, usually takes its toll among black males, but as much harm is done to these men's female relatives, mothers, spouses, daughters. Both Elwood's grandmother, deprived of father, husband, daughter, son-in-law and grandson, and Mrs. Till, are terrorized. Though these women may sometimes try to hide their trauma, the visible and

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<sup>22</sup> The noise in fact comes from the gigantic industrial fan installed in the beating house, which up to then is unknown to Elwood.



invisible wounds of terror are what usually actuates their lives. That is what young Elwood who believes that her grandmother was a tough woman finally discovers in the old lady: "It was difficult for Elwood to think that the old woman was afraid of anything. But fear was her fuel" (23). Mamie Till, as for her, ponders on why terror never ends:

Terror is truth and truth is terror and it never ends... Truth of that big stinking crate with a box inside with Emmett's dead body inside the box. Terror of the box closed, truth of the undertaker prying it open with hammer claws. Terror of not looking, truth of looking. She must bear both for Emmett, for love, for justice, a look inside the box she cannot dare until she prays hard and a voice whispers, your heart will be encased in glass and no arrow can pierce it. Truth of listening to herself say, I want the world to see what they did to my baby. Terror of standing beside Bo's open casket at the funeral while she sees in the eyes of mourners who file past the terror and truth of what they see. Terror of lost Emmett. Truth of how he returns. There's my heart underneath that glass lid. Terror of sleepless sleep, sleep, sleep, sleeping all day, never truly asleep. Truth of being wide awake forever, day and night. Terror and truth of nightmares sleepless sleep brings. (27-28)

It is somehow true that the profit incentive that created the need for African slaves is one major reason that underlies the current situation, at least to some extent, and accounts for the system of terror. The richest men of America, living in the Mississippi River Valley "made their riches off our stolen bodies...transfigured ... into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold" (Coates 43). *Nickel's* narrative means to express this concern in pointing out that the young inmates are made to produce twenty thousand bricks a day, and that the prison's profits derived from printing alone in 1926 amounted to \$250,000 (55). The young men are also made to operate a dairy and sell milk (1). They are hired to local farmers for field works, hired for housekeeping chores and works in lots of other domains. The irritation of the administration at the prospect of losing these huge profits generated by the youth incarceration system accounts for their decision to kill Elwood when the latter threatens their machinery by filing a documented complaint on serious child abuse. This may also account for the pervasive system of terror sustained through killing, torturing, mistrials, police blunders, etc. This system of terror breaks Elwood's resilience, but Louis Till maintains his dignity up to the last minute.

Like Orion, Wideman's Till has "that formidable and mocking superiority that makes him look down on his torturers with the remoteness of a god from the sky" (Azon). He fights, unsubdued, prompted by his personal sense of dignity, but with a clear understanding of the near futility of fight. This protagonist's resistance philosophy is well articulated by Ta-Nehisi Coates' recommendation to his son: "History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures your victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life" (60). It is in the same vein that Wideman and



Whitehead register their two works meant to be symbols of denunciation and resistance.

## Conclusion

Do black lives really matter? Even if they did, the prospects that Whitehead's *Nickel* and Wideman's *Writing* offer about the end to widespread blatant infringements of black people's civil rights violations, widespread biased condemnations, killings, police brutality, and prison violence, is far from optimistic. Both narratives demonstrate that the power structures of the USA have no regard for black lives. The two narratives pinpoint the unsettling omnipresence of the threat of institutional violence, death threat, and abuse that should prompt all black people to action. Faced with these threats, all Africa-descended people should feel, more than ever, the urge to design healthy strategies conducive to empowerment and to political, economic and social equality, in Africa and in the diaspora. DuBois, summarizing a widespread artistic politics of commitment among African American intellectuals in 1921, wrote: "We insist that our Art and propaganda be one" (*The Crisis*). He adds: "All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists". Even if this call is not relevant for other human communities, it is for black people. The role of the intellectual of downtrodden minorities is to reflect on strategies of liberation and empowerment. The necessity of fight calls for the intellectual to radically transform his art into that DuBoisian propagandist tool of liberation. And *Nickel* and *Writing* speak up in this way.

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