The Legacy of Lynching: On Representation, Remembrance, and Reconciliation

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The Legacy of Lynching: On Representation, Remembrance, and Reconciliation

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Introduction

In April 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative opened The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The memorial is a means to truthfully confront a dark part of American history. The six-acre collection of sculpture and commemorative architecture is the first of its kind to address the impact of racial terror in the United States. In an interview with Matthew Shaer of the Smithsonian, EJI’s director, Bryan Stevenson, says, “We need truth and reconciliation in America, but I believe that process is sequential. We must first tell the truth before we can frame a response that heals and repairs the damage of racial injustice.” The hope for this monument, according to Stevenson, is to start a truthful conversation about the shameful mistreatment of people of color by facing the facts directly (Shaer).

Fig. 1, An outside view of the memorial. National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (photo William Abramowicz).
The memorial is dedicated to the legacy of the victims of more than 4,000 lynchings that occurred in 800 American counties from Reconstruction to 1950 (Schneider). These names and counties are memorialized on these steel structures and have the dates of the lynchings etched beneath the names. The site was developed out of necessity, according to Stevenson.

In an interview with Keith Schneider of the *New York Times*, Stevenson says, “I became focused on cultural spaces for people to deal honestly with the past. We’ve done a terrible job in America of talking honestly about slavery and segregation . . . I knew it was going to be significant because it hadn’t happened in America and it needed to be done. I just wasn’t sure how much interest there
would be.” The project has seen close to 400,000 people visit the site since its opening, giving individuals a safe space to confront this past (Schneider).

**Architecture, Walkthrough, & Emotion**

The memorial, constructed by Michael Murphy and his team at the MASS Design Group of Boston, is compelling because of its architecture and its design. The experience begins by walking a path before entering the actual structure of hanging pillars. On one side of the walkway, there are four plaques that line the walls that enclose the memorial, and these give a brief description of African American injustice in a timeline format. “Evenly spaced, these texts outline a history of the transatlantic slave trade and the rise of violence in the post-Civil War period; Reconstruction and the rise of convict leasing in the South; racial terror lynching in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and the justifications that white Americans gave for lynching African American men and women” (Ater). On the other side of the walkway, facing the plaques, are benches for reflection.

In front of the first plaque is the Nkyinkyim Installation, a sculpture by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. The statue depicts seven semi-nude Africans chained together, suffering through the first terrible trial of being captured and led on a long walk from the interior of the African continent to the coast to be transported across the Atlantic Ocean (see Fig. 3). Dr. René Ater describes the installation, stating, “[the] memorial evokes the horror of slavery through the figures’ anguished expressions; chained necks and manacled hands and feet; and simulated slashed backs.” These graphic images depict the initial horrors that African Americans faced. Instead of just reading about enslaved people suffering by being whipped, chained and kidnapped, all who see this installation experience the anguish on their individual faces (see Fig. 4).
Fig. 3, Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, *Nkyinkyim Installation*, 2018.
National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (photo Michael Delli Carpini).

Fig. 4, Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, *Nkyinkyim Installation*, 2018.
National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (photo Ron Cogswell).
After ascending a hill, visitors reach the memorial itself. Here, they encounter over 800 rectangular boxes hanging from the ceiling, each one six feet tall with the names of the lynched victims of racial terrorism. These boxes are arranged along a descending path mimicking the perimeter of a square. On the first side of the square, the observers are on the same level as the boxes, but, as they progress, the floor descends.

Fig. 5, Wretha Hudson, 73, stands with the pillar for Lee County, Texas, on the first stretch of path in the memorial. National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (photo: Bob Miller).

Each pillar has the name of the county and state that it represents. Names of the victims for each county are engraved on their respective pillars, and, underneath those names, the dates of their recorded deaths are also etched. “The names are not engraved the way they are on the Vietnam Memorial but cut out of the steel, creating a negative space that makes the named person present and absent at the same time” (Candler).
This is an excellent metaphor for the way that these individuals have been represented in our past. Though they have not been recognized formally in most contexts, these individuals represent gaps in not only our history, but in the reconciliation of Americans with this history.

The boxes that hang from the structure were created out of corten steel, also known as weathering steel. This material, when exposed to the elements, produces a “bleeding” effect, as seen in Fig. 7. This process is explained by Noelle Trent: “The monument is constructed so the rain will wash the russet tones down the monuments staining the wooden floor beneath. With time the floor’s patina will darken, enforcing the staining legacy of lynching in America.” This is a metaphor for the erasure of records of the lives and deaths of these people memorialized on these pillars, and the permanence of these marks serves as a representation of the effect that racial terror has left on America’s history and people.
The memorial begins with the observer on equal ground with these structures, but as mentioned above, the floor of the memorial descends slowly while the columns remain suspended at the same level. As visitors go forward and take a right, they continue onto another stretch of path. The observer descends lower and the columns are dangling above, “leaving you in the position of the callous spectators in old photographs of public lynchings” (Campbell). Those “callous spectators in old photographs” would witness something similar to the description of Ray Stannard Baker in his 1905 account of the lynching of Richard Dixon in Springfield, Ohio: “And there the N... hung until daylight the next morning -- an unspeakably grisly, dangling horror, advertising the shame of the town. His head was shockingly crooked to one side, his ragged clothing, cut for souvenirs, exposed in places his bare body: he dripped blood.” The observer must look up at the pillars (Fig. 8), visually reminding themselves of the nature of these deaths.
As the observer takes a right and continues to descend through the third stretch of the path to complete their tour through the monument (see Fig. 9), the walls become lined with small placards that encourage people to approach. Each placard lists a person’s name and the location of their lynching, then describes the reason given for the lynching of the identified person. This is the
part of the memorial that invokes the most reaction from audiences because of the awful justifications behind the lynchings of these people.

As the observer begins the fourth and final stretch of the path, there are several notable features. Beyond the placards, on the left wall is the quotation, “For the hanged and beaten. For the shot, drowned, and burned. For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized. For those abandoned by the rule of law. We will remember. With hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice. With courage because peace requires bravery. With persistence because justice is a constant struggle. With faith because we shall overcome.” This quotation asserts the memorial’s power as a peaceful, truthful remembrance device for the horrors of lynching. The last path has a 127-foot-long water wall dedicated to all unknown and undocumented victims of racial terror and lynching.
Past the water wall is an exit to the left and an entrance to the center walking path to the right. The right path leading inside the center of the structure has a monumental view. If the observer stands in the center, they are surrounded by pillars representative of the victims of racial terror lynching. On the left path, the observer is confronted with a courtyard of identical pillar monuments laid out like coffins and facing the sun. These monuments will later be collected by community coalitions dedicated to educating local communities about racial terror lynching, remembrance, and reconciliation and will become part of community memorials all over the country.

![Fig. 10](image)

Fig. 10. (Left) The Ida B. Wells Memorial Grove is on the right side of the path just before reaching (Right) *Guided by Justice*, a set of statues constructed by Dana King, 2018. National Memorial for Peace and Justice, 2018, Montgomery, Alabama (photos: René Ater).

Beyond the coffin-like monuments, there are three more installations. One is a memorial for Ida B. Wells, who was an African American born into slavery (Fig. 10). She became a journalist, civil rights and women’s rights activist, and educator. Wells co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Association of Colored Women’s Club (NACWC). The other is a group of statues representing the women who were arrested while challenging segregation on Montgomery busses in 1955.
The third installment (Fig. 11), titled Raise Up, is intended to draw attention to police violence directed at black lives. Beyond Raise Up, visitors continue down the concrete path and, just before the exit, encounter a black stone with the poem “Invocation” by Elizabeth Alexander etched into it. This poem asserts that black lives and black voices will not be forgotten. It focuses on truth and remembrance, and the last two stanzas solidify this theme:

You will find us here mighty.
You will find us here divine.
You will find us where you left us, but not as you left us.

Here you endure and are luminous.
You are not lost to us.

The wind carries sorrows, sighs, and shouts.

Tania and Paul Abramson, in their article in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, argue that “By heralding a world of captivating artistic visions unbound by customary constraints, artists who express the appalling torments of severe trauma in their artworks are also inevitably creating tributes to autonomy, defiance, and resilience, and by doing so, their artworks are affectingly illustrating the power of aesthetics.” The architecture of this memorial is representative of the past events that this memorial is addressing. Sharp angles, the emptiness of the etched words, and the dangling of the columns displace the observer as they travel through the memorial. This graphic imagery makes an effective aesthetic that discomforts the audience, while also ensuring that the display of accurate information is striking.

Pete Candler, in his article focusing on the architectural design of the memorial, writes, “This is not a feel-good story. But the aim of the memorial is ultimately hope: a clear-eyed and unromantic hope, grounded in honesty about the harsh reality of white supremacy and its relentless stranglehold on African American lives. The overall effect of the memorial is immense sorrow but oriented toward the regeneration that comes only from genuine confrontation with horrific injustice, from the recognition that there is no reconciliation without truth.” The effect that is achieved by the memorial is furthered by its design. Lynching is an important part of our history. As a nation, Americans cannot ignore their past and must draw attention to the societal pressures rooted in racial terror still present today. The honest recognition that is instilled in visitors to the memorial will not stop in Montgomery, but will spread, as visitors take their experiences home and as monuments move to their individual counties.
Why a Lynching Memorial?

Robertson Campbell of *The New York Times* wrote this after interacting with the small placards (see Fig. 10), “The magnitude of the killing is harrowing, all the more so when paired with the circumstances of individual lynchings, some described in brief summaries along the walk: Parks Banks, lynched in Mississippi in 1922 for carrying a photograph of a white woman; Caleb Gadly, hanged in Kentucky in 1894 for ‘walking behind the wife of his white employer’; Mary Turner, who after denouncing her husband’s lynching by a rampaging white mob, was hung upside down, burned and then sliced open so that her unborn child fell to the ground.” This extreme violence is unthinkable, but this happened in America. People were killed, tortured, and maimed for unjustifiable reasons. Figure 12 highlights how a seemingly insignificant misdemeanor could lead to lynching. "Allegedly writing a note to a white woman" led to the lynching of Thomas Miles, Sr. in Louisiana.

![Fig. 12. A collage of four placards on display at the memorial. National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (Photos: Briene Lermitte).](image-url)
Bryan Stevenson in an Equal Justice Initiative YouTube video (see Fig. 13), says that racial terror lynchings are “lethal violence directed at people because of their race in an effort to terrorize the entire community.”

This terrorizing habituates compliant behavior, and this compliant behavior becomes a societal standard — subservience, acceptance, and general dehumanization. Each of the accounts of Figure 10 is an example of this kind of terrorism.

People who voiced their opinions, like Mary Turner, were killed to incite fear in people of color. Those who acted outside of social standard, like Arthur St. Clair, were lynched to prevent the disruption of social barriers. In the case of Will Brown, the public lynching of a black person was used as a unifier of white people. Lynchings were promoted as social events and public spectacles. 15,000 people attended his lynching and crowds like this promoted fear among African Americans. In a 1905 McClure's Magazine article, Ray Stannard Baker, in a first person account of a lynching, reports: “with the crowds of men both here and at the morgue where the body was publicly exhibited, came young boys in knickerbockers, and little girls and women by scores, horrified but curious. They came even with baby carriages! Men made jokes: ‘A dead n****r is a
good night.’ And the purblind, dollars-and-cents man, most despicable of all, was congratulating the public: ‘It'll save the county a lot of money!’ Significant lessons, these, for the young!” Baker shows that lynching was a social event for white people. Introducing and endorsing racial terror lynchings with children reinforced the social prejudices that defined American society. Children were born, raised, and encouraged to participate in the racial terror that defined the 19th and early 20th century.

In an EJI video, *Lynching in America: Wes Johnson’s Story*, James Johnson, a descendent of a lynching victim Wes Johnson, describes the shadow racial violence cast on his own life. Johnson describes himself as an outspoken boy who always questioned what was asked of him and, when marches in Selma and Montgomery were happening, Johnson participated in local Civil Rights Marches, himself. Word got around in Johnson’s small town that he was active in the Civil Rights Movement, and his mother received a direct threat to him, saying “Chastise that grandboy of yours, otherwise he gonna get in trouble.” Because of this threat, Johnson left his hometown, went on to get his college education, and returned to the place where he grew up to teach. He says, “It allowed me to be able to give the kids some of the answers that they were searching for that I couldn’t get.” Johnson has worked to transcend the shadow of racial violence that not only infiltrated his life, but his community. He helps the next generation by educating them and refusing to allow his community’s history to be forgotten about.

This memorial is important for descendants to reconcile with the horrors inflicted on their ancestors. Lynchings ripped apart families and descendants are left still facing consequences, even years later. Luz Myles’s great-grandfather, Thomas William Miles Sr., was lynched in 1912 in Shreveport, Louisiana. In the EJI video, *Lynching in America: Uprooted*, Luz Miles is shown approaching the tree at the site of the lynching of her great-grandfather: “You know, you can read
something. Hear it second hand. But it's not the same as when you see it and feel it. I think it's starting to hit me, starting, like, last night. Where it was like, my great grandfather was lynched. This man was taken, and he was hung up and strangled to death. He was also shot. They shot bullets in him. I'm just hoping I'll feel his spirit there.” Myles hugs the tree and begins to weep at the base of it.

The memorial can offer a similar reconciliation with the past. Isaac J. Bailey offers a personal account of his experiences and thoughts in *Time* magazine, following a visit to the memorial. He talks about his past job as a columnist in South Carolina in which “elderly black people would call to check on me… to tell me why they feared I would be disappeared, too, if I kept on criticizing the white governor and other white officials... They had seen too much to dismiss what may feel to some like a remote possibility.” Bailey goes on to talk about the memorial: “The museum in Alabama, as gut-wrenching as any ever conceived, is for all of us, but especially for them [elderly black people]. They will no longer have to speak in hushed tones about what happened. Such an unflinching portrayal of the hell they lived through is public confirmation that their lives still matter, that what they survived was real, as are the lingering effects of the trauma.” This memorial can provide a point of reflection, acceptance, and reconciliation for many people like Bailey. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice validates the suffering placed on African Americans because of racial terror. Bailey concludes his article by saying: “The lynching monuments can’t erase the rage and the shame and the fear that lingers. But by correcting the historical record, they allow a deeper healing to begin. I have felt it myself.” Validating this dark history shines a light on the connections of racial terror violence and its influence on the political, social, and economic climate of today.
Beyond Montgomery

The Equal Justice Initiative’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice is focused on extending its impact though its Memorial Monument Placement Initiative.

Fig. 14. The companion monuments outside of the memorial. National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama (Photo: Briene Lermitte)

The identical pillars located just outside of the interior of the monument (see Fig. 14) are meant for display in their respective counties. “Over time, the national memorial will serve as a report on which parts of the country have confronted the truth of this terror” by claiming the monuments that memorialize lynching in their communities (EJI).

On their website, the Equal Justice Initiative explains the process of bringing these memorials back to their respective counties through the Memorial Monument Placement Initiative: “EJI shares historical and educational material with community members, encourages participation from communities of color, and works with partners to find an appropriate geographic
location for each monument to ensure that the process of claiming monuments helps local communities engage with this history in a constructive and meaningful way.” A tangible monument gives people the opportunity to reflect on this dark part of America’s history. Each monument is a county’s individual piece of history, as well as an extension of The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the EJI takes this transfer process very seriously. As of now, the EJI has not yet launched the official Memorial Monument Placement Initiative registration, application, and management process, but they had anticipated that claim approvals and transfers would begin in 2019.

The city of Alexandria, Virginia, lists several pages on their website focused on remembering the lynchings in Alexandria. Two individuals were the victims of racial terror in Alexandria, Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas. There is also a timeline outlining their plans as a coalition to retrieve their monument. The team has been conducting research on McCoy and Thomas. They have been fundraising for a trip to Montgomery on November 13, 2019. They plan to retrieve the Alexandria Monument on December 2, 2019. This coalition is one of the first groups to be able to retrieve their monument.

The Equal Justice Initiative is supporting other projects as well. These projects include the Soil Collection Project and Historical Marker Project. Stevenson explains the significance of the soil project: “In this soil, there is the sweat of the enslaved. In the soil there is the blood of victims of racial violence and lynching. There are tears in the soil from all those who labored under the indignation and humiliation of segregation. But in the soil there is also the opportunity for new life, a chance to grow something hopeful and healing for the future.” Typically, soil projects foster community involvement and lead to bigger projects of recognition. These involvements vary from installing a historical marker to creating a community memorial, like the efforts of the Ed Johnson
Project in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This project completed the soil collection and their fostered community has designed a planned memorial to honor Ed Johnson, a victim of racial terror lynching.

Historical markers are another method of reconciliation. The Historical Marker Project General Guidelines from the EJI outline several steps in order to foster “longer term level of engagement around truth and reconciliation,” explaining, “If facilitated thoughtfully and cooperatively, with committed local leadership, the steps... could represent a one to three year educational process.” Beyond this educational process, the EJI hopes that their influence would be conducive to foster an environment suitable to erecting a historical marker and, later, their respective memorial monuments.

Presently, several communities are developing long term projects. In Shelbyville, Kentucky, the Shelbyville Community Remembrance Project Coalition is working to place a historical maker outside of the old jailhouse as a part of EJI’s Historical Marker Projects. This marker would honor six men who were taken from the Shelbyville Jail to the Railroad Bridge and lynched, from the years 1808 to 1911, as part of an ongoing legacy of racial terror. Janice Harris, who leads this group, said, “There are people in this community that still don’t want to talk about it,” and other members of the coalition speak of the importance of not forgetting these stories, wanting to bring “healing to the community” (Ting).

Shelby County, Alabama, is also participating in the Historical Marker Project. The “Montevallo City Council has approved the installation of an Equal Justice Initiative historical marker on city property at the intersection of Shelby and Main streets” (Sparacino). Abbeville, South Carolina, has followed suit and erected a historical marker in the town square, “Alongside a stone monument to South Carolina statesman and avowed white supremacist John C. Calhoun,”
providing a “a different perspective on that history, telling a story of racial terror, violence, and brutality, and a story of survival” (EJI). Each of these historical markers is a part of EJI’s reach into individual counties. Placing these markers in high traffic locations or locations of tourist populated spaces promotes recognition of lynched individuals and racial reconciliation.

Fig. 15. An erected EJI Historical Marker in Abbeville, South Carolina, to honor Anthony Crawford, a victim of racial terror lynching. (Photo: EJI)

**Conclusion**

The Equal Justice Initiative encourages participation at the local level in educating people about racial terror lynchings, the individuals who suffered in each of the communities in which these lynchings have occurred, and the importance of recognizing and talking about these topics. Anyone who is interested in participating in a local racial reconciliation coalition should select a monument/community that has been affected. The EJI’s “Lynching in America Interactive Map” is a great starting point for those interested in participating in Memorial Monument Placement Initiative or one of EJI’s projects. After selecting a location, the next step to participating is going to the Community Remembrance Project [Community Remembrance Project](#) website to complete
the [Community Remembrance Project Interest Form](#). After inputting information, the EJI will send information on connecting with others in the community interested in claiming the monument. People are then able to begin developing environment suitable for educating people about racial terror lynchings and the legacy of lynching within the context of their communities.

Only through projects like these, designed to further educate people about racial terror in their own communities, will we be able to loosen the grip that the legacies of lynching and racial terror have had on this nation.
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