From Postcards to Pillars:
Memorializing the Lynching of African Americans

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I. Introduction

"I'm not interested in talking about America's history because I want to punish America. I want to liberate America."[1]

- *Bryan Stevenson, 2018*

Following the brutal lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, mourning mother Mamie Till decided to have an open casket funeral, declaring, "Let the people see what they did to my boy."[2] In 1955, Emmett "Bobo" Till purportedly whistled at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant in Money, Mississippi, where he was staying for the summer with relatives. This "crime" led his torturers, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, to dislodge his eye from its socket, shoot him in the head, and discard his body in a river, among many other heinous acts. At the insistence of his family, Till's body was transported back to Chicago for a proper burial. Mississippi officials tried to prevent the viewing of Till's body, compelling family members and A.A. Rayner, owner of the largest African American mortuary in Chicago, to sign and certify that they would not open the casket. But Mamie Till insisted on witnessing the remains of her only son.[3] Shocked, horrified, and in utter distress over what she saw, Mamie Till made the courageous decision to publicize her grief despite the silence, erasure, and shame that had long surrounded the victims of lynching in the United States.

The loss of Emmett Till quickly transcended his own mother's loss. Over 50,000 people attended the public viewing of Emmett Till's disfigured corpse day and night over the 1955

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[1] Campbell Robertson, "A Lynching Memorial Is Opening. The Country Has Never Seen Anything Like It.," *New York Times*, April 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html.

[2] Both the Associated Press and the United Press International printed Mamie Till's quote. It was reprinted in newspapers across America. Some examples: "Mourn Lynch Victim: 50,000 Line Chicago Streets for Look at Lynch Victim Home Coming." *New York Amsterdam News* (1943-1961), Sep 10, 1955, City edition. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mourn-lynch-victim/docview/225650890/se-2; "I Want You to Know what they did to My Boy." *Afro-American*, Nov 12, 1955. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/i-want-you-know-what-they-did-my-boy/docview/531934286/se-2.

[3] Elliot J. Gorn, *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 58.

Labor Day weekend on the southside of Chicago.[4] Thousands gathered for his open-casket funeral at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ. "Bobo Till belonged to them," wrote a reporter for *The Chicago Defender*. "They came to see him, to talk to him, all swore they never would forget him."[5] Because Mamie Till understood the power of seeing, the loss of Emmett Till extended beyond even Chicago. She allowed photographer David Jackson to photograph Emmett Till's remains and print the image in *Jet* magazine. The images were then reprinted in other Black newspapers. Emmett Till's body was on display, but in a completely different context from other racial terror lynchings of previous decades.

Figure 1: Mamie Till looks at the brutalized body of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till with future husband Gene Mobley | David Jackson, *Jet Magazine.*[6]

Over the course of the twentieth century, lynching has come in and out of American collective memory, but lynchings have always been memorialized. For decades before Till's

[4] David Smothers, "50,000 Chicago Area Negroes Jam Funeral Parlor to See Dead Boy," *Lowell Sun,* Sept. 3, 1955.
[5] Ibid.
[6] David Jackson, *Emmett Till in Coffin*, 1955, *Jet Magazine* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1955).

murder, white mobs publicized the spectacle executions of African Americans to assert white domination and maintain Black subordination. The racial terror practice of lynching was often a celebratory, public event where white mobs acted with impunity. Mobs often conducted lynchings in broad daylight and chose prominent locations where whites and African Americans would witness the remains. White communities participated or attended with their children, sporting their Sunday best. Photographers profited greatly from capturing images and distributing postcards of the lynchings widely, even selling prints door to door.[7] On occasion, individuals advertised upcoming lynchings in newspapers, prompting special "excursion" trains to transport spectators to the scene. Despite the abundant evidence of these spectacle executions, Congress failed again and again to act to prevent these crimes, as I will explore more later.

The photographs of Emmett Till are often remembered as a wake-up call to the state of racism in America. For the African American community, it was a moment of reckoning. Widely distributed images of Till's remains sparked conversation in the North and the South about how to combat this great injustice. Historian and sociologist Adam Green called it "a moment of simultaneity," of "Black national feeling," or "collective racial will" where Black Chicago and Black Mississippi "convened" into one congregation.[8] Outrage over the lynching of Emmett Till launched letter campaigns, fundraising drives, and rallies. It united African Americans in the fight against segregation, ultimately giving the Civil Rights Movement a powerful jolt.[9]

And yet, most white people did not view the images of Emmett Till until thirty years after his murder. The news was segregated like most aspects of American life in the 1950s. Nearly one

[7]Amy Louise Wood, "The Spectacle of Lynching: Rituals of White Supremacy in the Jim Crow South." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* 2018, 757–88.
[8] Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 179-210.
[9] Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 74.

hundred reporters covered the trial of the murderers, on behalf of *Life*, *Newsweek*, the *Nation*, the *New York Post*, and all three television networks. But unlike the Black press, the mainstream press did not reprint the images of Emmett Till's mutilated body. The images were also deemed too graphic for television.[10] Despite the efforts of African American activists and their allies, their prevalence on the national stage diminished quickly over time in white mainstream consciousness. Historian Elliot J. Gorn tracked news coverage surrounding Till's murder: in the two years following his lynching, over 3,000 articles about him were published. In the 1960s, 300 articles were published; in the 1970s, fewer than fifty stories were published.[11] Broadly speaking, white Americans first saw the images of Emmett Till thirty years later in the opening scene of *Eyes on the Prize* (1987), a PBS series that documented the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It was only then that Mamie Till got her wish and many more white Americans finally saw "what they did to my boy."

This paper examines efforts to memorialize the lynching of African Americans in the United States since Mamie Till acted to change the script on how the nation understands these crimes. She said:

> I knew that I could talk for the rest of my life about what happened to my baby, I could explain in great detail, I could describe what I saw laid out there on that slab at A. A. Rayner's place, one piece, one inch, one body part at a time. I could do all of that and people would still not get the full impact… They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this. I knew that if they walked by that casket, if people opened the pages of *Jet* magazine or the *Chicago Defender*, if other people could see it with their own eyes, then together we would find a way to express what we had seen.[12]

[10] Gorn, 84.
[11] Gorn, 249.
[12] Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America.* (New York: Random House, 2003), 140.

Till understood that from the beginning white mobs had made lynching a memorial to their power. She courageously decided that the way to combat that power was to present the body of her son as both a memorial of white oppression and a call to action. This paper will trace not only the memorialization of lynching but also what happens when a nation collectively ignores its mistakes by perpetuating moral innocence in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

Beginning with a discussion of the racial terror of lynching, I argue that the unregulated, unpunished, and often even unacknowledged violence wrought against African Americans engendered a collective and inherited trauma over time. Furthermore, memorials are contested spaces through which the public interprets the past, but they can also act as interventions aiming to help process and resolve collective trauma.

The following sections analyze the history of efforts to memorialize lynching as horrific crimes committed by whites against African Americans along the battlelines of specific memorials. The lynchings of other racial minorities is beyond the scope of this essay. In 1988, lynching survivor James Cameron founded America's Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to commemorate both his personal experience and the trauma writ large on African Americans. This essay argues that his efforts, while incredibly important, failed to reach mainstream audiences, demonstrating the difficulty of commemorating racial violence. The next section discusses the explosive impact of "Without Sanctuary," an exhibition of ninety-eight postcards of lynchings taken as souvenirs across the South between 1882 and 1950. The opening of "Without Sanctuary" in New York City in 2000 acted as a turning point, this essay argues, finally exposing a modern (and largely white) audience to the repressed horrors of these crimes that had long been hidden in plain sight. The ensuing national tour and book publication led to the 2005 Senate Resolution apologizing for Senate inaction over lynching. The exhibition also

provoked intense interest inside the museum world and the academy, leading to many more attempts to memorialize lynching victims and studies and activism aimed at confronting America's history of racial violence.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the most sophisticated and far-reaching of these memorialization efforts, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice which opened in Montgomery, Alabama in 2018. The work of previous activists shaped this memorial's approach by altering the victimization narrative that some critics leveled at the approach of the "Without Sanctuary" exhibit. Instead, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ) aimed to act as a site of delayed mourning for the victims of lynching. NMPJ has revitalized the conversation around lynching memorialization, encouraging counties across the country to reckon with the crimes that occurred on their soil. The memorial creates an environment where truth-telling can be empowering, inspiring participation in a process that repudiates the white supremacist landscape of Alabama and the nation at large. Taken together, the different memorials to lynching victims demonstrate that memorialization efforts have built on each other and that advances come through the work of courageous civil rights activists generation after generation. Nations have long recognized that memorialization is a political act with real impact on ideas of which citizens matter. This essay shows how the efforts to publicly recognize these crimes against African Americans have forced a national conversation that seeks not to punish whites, but to free all Americans from this painful history.

II. Lynching, Collective Trauma, and Memory

An awareness of the history of lynching itself is essential to understand its contested memorialization. Between 1877 and 1950, over 4,400 African Americans were lynched in the United States.[13] Racial terror lynchings sharply increased with the legal end of chattel slavery; former slaveholders had an economic stake in keeping freed men and women subordinate. Although African Americans were free under the law, most white Americans did not recognize them as equal. In 1867, Edward A. Pollard, editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, wrote *The Lost Cause* manifesto, stating, "All that is left of the South is the war of ideas." The war determined the "restoration of the union and the excision of slavery, but the war did not decide Negro equality," Pollard argued.[14] The ideology of racial hierarchy persevered after the legal end of racialized chattel slavery, and the myth of white supremacy in the United States went virtually unchallenged by white people. Lynchings of African Americans became part of a widespread campaign to enforce segregation and subordination. Officials tolerated and even participated in the public and violent spectacles, and thousands of African Americans endured the terror and trauma of this violence that forced many to flee their homes and avoid any action that looked like resistance. As I will explore further, this led to the collective traumatization of African Americans.

Mob violence did not occur in secret; on the contrary, white mobs broadcasted their crimes so the African American community would live in fear. This was the case when a white mob kidnapped Laura and J.D. Nelson, mother and teenage son, from the Okemah County jail in

[13] Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.* Third Edition. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 44. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/
[14] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 51.

Oklahoma in 1911. They were awaiting trial for allegedly murdering a deputy sheriff, but the preliminary hearing demonstrated insufficient evidence for a conviction. Stolen from the jail, Laura Nelson was raped, and then she and her son were strung up on a bridge near the African American part of town. The white mob selected the location to cultivate fear and intimidation across the community. White people from Okemah viewed the Nelsons' bodies the next day and circulated postcards with photographs of the hanging bodies widely. White mobs were not picky in choosing their victims: "One Negro swinging from a tree will serve as well as another to terrorize the community," a Black observer noted.[15] Lynchings were designed to communicate the expendability and interchangeability of Black life. Often, lynching victims were already dead before they were hung to make a more lasting, public statement about what would happen if African Americans challenged their subordination.[16]

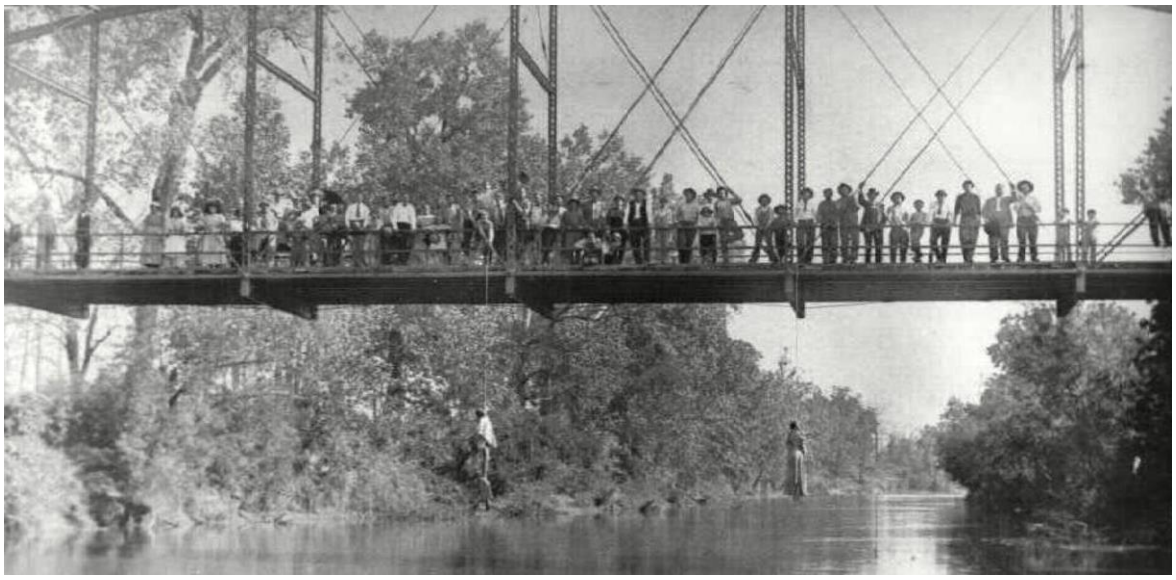

Figure 2: White mob from Okemah, OK hung Laura and JD Nelson from a bridge on May 25th, 1911 | Allen-Littlefield Collection.[17]

[15] James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000), 16.
[16] "'Without Sanctuary': Lynching Photos on Exhibit." *WUWM 89.7*. Milwaukee, WI: NPR, May 7, 2004. https://www.wuwm.com/2004-05-07/without-sanctuary-lynching-photos-on-exhibit, 3:45.
[17] *The lynching of Laura Nelson and her son, several dozen onlookers in Okemah, Oklahoma*, May 25, 1911, Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard. 5 1/2 x 3 1/2", Without Sanctuary collection, https://withoutsanctuary.org/

The racial terror campaign was largely successful. Lynching and the threat of lynching regulated and restricted Black advancement, independence, and citizenship across America.[18] Between 1910 and 1940, many African Americans left the South to escape the dangers of lynching and to pursue greater economic and social opportunities, a historic time period known as the First Great Migration. The possibility of violence impacted many African Americans, even those who did not witness or experience the violence first hand. For example, novelist Richard Wright grew up in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee before migrating to Chicago. His childhood experiences in the South shaped much of his later writing and his understanding of American racism. In his 1937 memoir *Black Boy*, Wright discussed how his fear of lynching impacted his behavior and well-being:

> I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings… The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; *I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness.* Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew.[19]

Wright's experience is only one example of the mental pain wrought by lynching. The visual reminders that circulated widely traumatized even those who never directly experienced violence at the hands of whites.

While the racial terror campaign against African Americans had the desired effect of evoking fear and maintaining racial subordination, many African American activists resolutely fought against the injustice of these extra-legal, spectacle murders. In 1892, Ida B. Wells fled Memphis for Chicago for fear of violent repercussion after publishing an editorial about the

[18] Sherrilyn A. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the 21st Century.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), XIII.
[19] Richard Wright, *Black Boy*. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945), 150-51, emphasis added.

lynching of her friend Thomas Moss. In Chicago, Wells was the first to try and document the statistical dimensions of lynching, documenting how widespread and accepted the practice had become. She mobilized her findings to launch an international anti-lynching campaign writing pamphlets and books and speaking tirelessly.[20] Since local and state officials were often unwilling to prosecute any members of lynch mobs, activists pushed for federal action. In 1900, North Carolina Representative George Henry White–the only Black lawmaker in the U.S. House of Representatives–introduced the first anti-lynching legislation. The bill did not advance out of committee.[21] In 1916, W.E.B. DuBois published, "The Waco Horror," in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) magazine *The Crisis.* This photo essay repurposed postcards of William Stanley's lynching in Waco, Texas–initially sent as celebratory missives among whites–as evidence to galvanize the anti-lynching movement (a decision that future activists would replicate).[22] In 1919, the NAACP published, "Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1919," to demonstrate the widespread impact of lynching and provide data about the numbers, states, and alleged offenses of the victims of lynching. The publicity generated from the (failed) anti-lynching bill and the NAACP's report led to a dramatic decline in lynchings in 1919. From 1920 to 1938, the NAACP hung a banner that read "A Man Was Lynched Yesterday" after every known lynching outside of their national headquarters in New York City. The practice only ceased because their landlord threatened eviction over the matter.[23]

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[20] Ida B. Wells-Barnett, & J.J. Royster, *Southern horrors and other writings: The anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2016).
[21] Benjamin R. Justesen, "George Henry White and the Anti-Lynching Bill of 1900." *George Henry White*, 2020. https://www.georgehenrywhite.com/single-post/2016/09/17/george-henry-white-and-the-anti-lynching-bill-of-1900.
[22] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Burden," *The Crisis*, Vol. 11, No. 3, January 1916.
[23] NAACP, "History of Lynching in America." *History Explained*, 2023. https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america.

The persistent campaigning and constant agitation of African American activists and their white allies during the first half of the twentieth century succeeded in drastically reducing the number of lynchings over the decades, even without legislation making it a federal crime. Lynching as a common practice had almost completely disappeared by 1950—with the well-publicized exception of the murder of Emmett Till in 1955—but the mental scars inflicted by the threat of lynching did not heal so easily. In a climate in which the white majority chose to ignore this history and look away there could be no reconciliation.

The lynchings of over 4,400 African Americans between Reconstruction and World War II collectively traumatized African Americans. Psychologist Gilad Hirschberger defines collective trauma and highlights the far-reaching effects of societal misdeeds on the well-being of the population over time.

> The term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people. It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it… Collective trauma is a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. Aside from the horrific loss of life, collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning.[24]

Reaching beyond the generation that was directly impacted, the trauma fundamentally changed the future identity of Black Americans.[25] Witnessing the murder of loved ones instigated complex psychological harm and marked the memories of African Americans forever. The nation also communicated a lack of value toward Black life by failing to intervene to protect

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[24] Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning." *Frontiers in psychology*, *9*, 2018, 1441. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441

[25] Patricia G. Davis, "Our Stories in Steel: An Autoethnographic Journey to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice," in Christina L. Moss, and Brandon Inabinet, *Reconstructing Southern Rhetoric* (Jackson: Mississippi Scholarship Online, 2021). https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.14325/mississippi/9781496836144.003.0002

African Americans from lynchings. There were stricter government regulations for the deaths of wild animals than there were for the lives of African Americans: "They had to have a license to kill anything but a n—" recalled an African American man from the Mississippi Delta. "We was always in season."[26]

Navigating the impulses of white people was a matter of life and death for people of color in the South. Lynchings instilled fear and terror in the African American community, prompted pain at their powerlessness, and caused guilt for not being able to protect loved ones, speak out, and even for surviving. African Americans faced danger on a daily basis; white mobs instigated lynchings for casual social transgressions, such as referring to a white police officer without the title of "mister," or accidentally running into a white girl while running to catch a train.[27] African Americans lived in fear for the lives of their loved ones, who were always at risk. No amount of negotiation or plea could sway a vengeful crowd. Parents feared for their children, but even perfect adherence to watchful warnings provided no guarantee of safety. Many also had to grapple with immense guilt over surviving when other members of the community did not. If people spoke out against the lynchings of community members, they could be the next targets of vicious attacks, prompting a culture of silence surrounding the atrocious acts that only intensified the feelings of guilt in the community. Powerlessness in the face of complete and utter injustice against even those closest affected members of the African American community emotionally and psychologically.[28]

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[26] Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.* Third Edition. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 73. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/

[27] These examples refer to the 1940 lynching of Jesse Thornton in Luverne, AL and the 1916 lynching of Jeff Brown in Cedarbluff, MS. See Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.* Third Edition. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 32. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/

[28] Danielle L. McGuire. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010). ProQuest Ebook Central, 250.

Lynchings also had unique psychological effect on those who attended, participated, and celebrated the spectacle executions. In her groundbreaking book, *On the Courthouse Lawn*, civil rights lawyer and academic Sherrilyn A. Ifill contrasts the different ways in which white people and Black people described lynchings along the Eastern Shore of the United States. "Often in the vaguest terms, whites would confirm that yes, there had been a lynching–two, in fact. But where blacks had often identified a family member–grandfather, uncle, or other relative–who heard the lynching, saw the body the next day, or knew the lynched man, whites consistently professed to know very little about the lynchings."[29] Many white people interpreted and internalized the mass violence as a continual demonstration of the inferiority of African Americans, reinforced by a culture of silence within families and communities. This led to diminished empathy and an inability to acknowledge their role, as either perpetrators or bystanders, in the violence wrought against African Americans. Parents would often bring children to the spectacle executions, contributing to the children's acceptance of such acts and perpetuating their violence and values in future generations. Children were socialized to believe that a lynching was a praiseworthy event, and those that instigated the crimes were heroes. "I have seen very small children hang their Black dolls," one African American woman who worked for a white family observed. "It is not the child's fault, he is simply the apt pupil."[30] Both the overt and covert lessons of white supremacy had a unique psychological impact on white people.

There is a growing body of research suggesting that trauma can be genetically inherited. Our society understands inherited material assets, such as a family home or a savings account. We also recognize the inheritance of physical traits, such as hair or eye color, and even, on

[29] Ifill, XIII and XVII.
[30] Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.* Third Edition. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 70. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/

occasion, inherited personality traits like work ethic. But rarely is trauma or loss–of both the perpetrators and the victims–considered something that is passed down genetically.[31] In *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, Monica Muñoz Martinez discusses the extrajudicial violence of Texas Rangers against Mexicans at the turn of the 20th century. Weaving together historical documents and current accounts of Tejanos—many of whom descend from the victims—Martinez displays how the collective trauma endured for generations along the Texas-Mexico border. "It's always there. It's part of their life I think," one of her interviewees recalled, "It's an injustice. It never leaves you. It's inherited loss."[32] America lives under the burden of the largely undiscussed legacy of racial violence, which, in turn, perpetuates the inheritance of trauma. The ensuing environment affects us all.

People navigate the past in different ways. "Members of perpetrator groups may deal with the dark chapter in their history by thoroughly denying the events, disowning them and refusing to take any responsibility for them," Hirschberger suggests. "But, more often than not, reactions to an uncomfortable history will take on a more nuanced form with group members reconstructing the trauma in a manner that is more palatable, and representing the trauma in a manner that reduces collective responsibility."[33] The debate about the legacy of slavery in the United States embodies this phenomenon. Descendants of the perpetrator group, or, since the chattel slavery system in the US was race-based, white people at large, encounter tension when

[31] Researchers at Emory University studying epigenetic inheritance found that the genetic markers of first generation mice transmitted a single traumatic experience across generations, leaving behind traces in the behavior and anatomy of future generations. For more information about this study and consequent research, see: Brian Dias, Kerry Ressler, "Parental olfactory experience influences behavior and neural structure in subsequent generations." *Nat Neurosci* 17, 2014, 89–96 https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3594. For more information about cultural trauma, see: Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. *Cultural trauma and collective identity*. (Univ of California Press, 2004).

[32] Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2018), 117.

[33] Hirschberger, 1441.

considering the past. They potentially want to acknowledge the advancements of the nation or their ancestors. At the same time, most can acknowledge that slavery—the system that enabled America's prosperity and growth—was a severe moral transgression. It is easier to dismiss this tension or to attempt to reduce collective responsibility than to genuinely wrestle with the implications of what historian Bernard Barilyn long ago called the fundamental contradiction between slavery and freedom—or between white supremacy and racial violence, in this case—in the nation's past.[34]

The public uses memorials and monuments as a bridge between atrocity and understanding to sort through collective trauma, as was the case with the Civil War. With so many dead—the Civil War remains the deadliest war for Americans in history—the nation needed to rebuild and recover, and that involved making meaning from the destruction. A large influx of monuments in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—a phenomenon that historian Erika Doss describes as "statue mania"—was the result. Statue mania occurred in both the North and the South as people tried to rebuild meaning after such devastating loss. Southerners began erecting symbols of the Confederacy that converted "their defeat into a triumphant remembrance," or perpetuated the Lost Cause narrative.[35] The erected monuments "encouraged passionate and consensual understandings of nationhood."[36]

The Southern Poverty Law Center describes the two waves of Confederate monument construction. The first spike was between the 1900s and 1920s, where the construction of Confederate monuments symbolically supported the rise of Jim Crow laws. These monuments

[34] Bernard Barilyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed., Stephen G. Kurtz - editor, James H. Hutson. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1973).
[35] Blight, 40.
[36] Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 20.

supported a "'reconciliationist' narrative of the Civil War—emphasizing the commonalities between Northern and Southern whites and celebrating the valor of individual soldiers—over an 'emancipationist' alternative that privileged the struggle for racial equality."[37] The second uptick was between the 1950s and the 1960s. As the Civil War's centennial approached, new Confederate monuments were erected in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement. These two spikes demonstrate the intention behind many Confederate monuments: as a means to represent the past as a narrative reaffirming a white supremacist agenda in the present. The narrative that a monument promotes becomes the official narrative and its very presence on public land implies consensus—erasing the often-fraught process leading to its creation.[38]

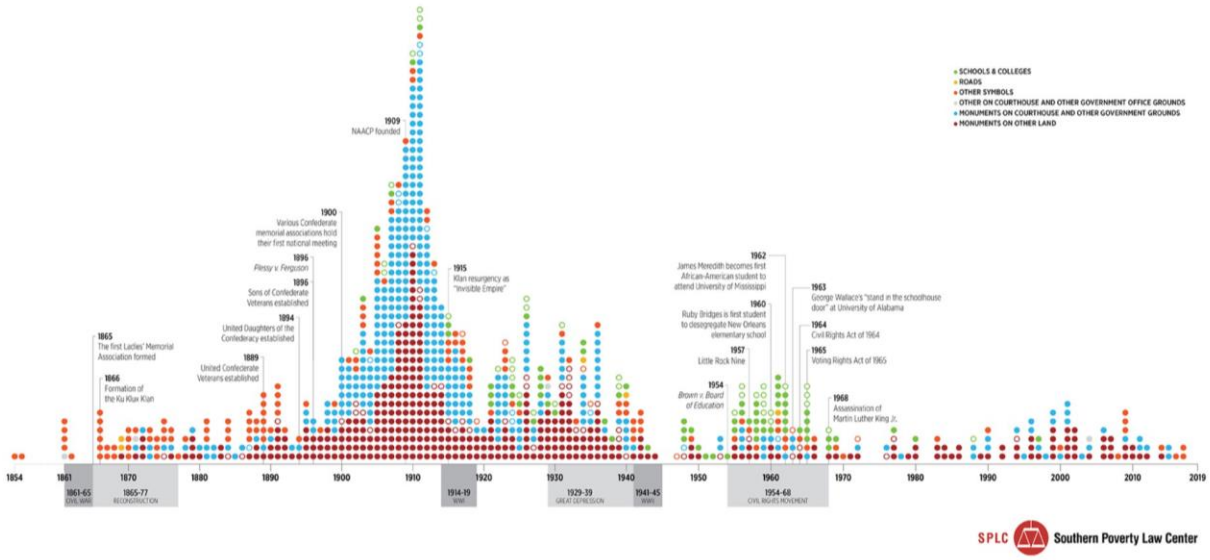

Figure 3: This timeline demonstrates the waves of Confederate monument construction juxtaposed with current events related to the enfranchisement and education of African Americans | Southern Poverty Law Center.[39]

[37] Christina Simko, David Cunningham, Nicole Fox, "Contesting Commemorative Landscapes: Confederate Monuments and Trajectories of Change," *Social Problems*, Volume 69, Issue 3, August 2022, 592-3. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa067

[38] James Loewen, *Lies Across America*. (New York: New Press, 1999), 38.

[39] Booth Gunter and Jamie Kizzire, *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy*. 2nd Edition. (Montgomery: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy.

"History is told on the landscape all across America," writes sociologist James Loewen, suggesting how monuments subliminally create a landscape of civic and political imagination.[40] We pass monuments on our daily commutes, in parks, in front of municipal buildings, and even when we are not expecting them. As scholar Dell Upton explains, "Even if we never pay attention to the statue of Robert E. Lee when we walk by, his presence there says that that is a legitimate part of our civic life. He belongs there, the values he represents belong there and deserve to remain there."[41] Monuments mobilize memory to give the impression that the interpretation of history is consensual and permanent. "By themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape," notes historian James E. Young. "But as part of a nation's rites or the objects of a people's national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory."[42] Presence on public land endows monuments with a degree of authority that has the potential to influence audiences.

The attempt to unwind and heal collective trauma raises unique questions of memorialization: namely, who is deserving of remembrance and under what circumstances? While there are no shortages of memorials to wars and their victims in the United States, activists have attempted to bring the crimes of lynching to light with varying degrees of success over the last century. As historian David Blight explains, "nations rarely commemorate their disasters and tragedies, unless compelled by forces that will not let the politics of memory rest."[43] The United States heretofore has not adequately commemorated its role in the racial terror campaign against African Americans. The selective public memory and continued silence

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[40] Loewen, 15.
[41] *As the Statues Fall: A Conversation About Monuments and the Power of Memory* (webinar), 2020. https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/statues-falling/.
[42] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 2.
[43] Blight, 9.

of these events "compounds victimization."[44] The creation of memorials to the victims of lynching is one way to correct the distorted racial narrative in the United States. These memorials can serve as interventions to help process and resolve the trauma that has been passed down for generations. The memorials complement white accountability with African American agency in the attempt to work through this trauma.

In mass media, politicians, reporters, and interested parties discuss accountability in simple terms. It is much more complicated. While white children should not be taught to feel bad about themselves–a common criticism of teaching Ethnic Studies in schools, for example–Americans still need to reckon with what a sanitized narrative of American history includes and excludes. The last enslaved person or slaveholder died several generations ago. This essay by no means holds white people accountable for the crimes of their ancestors, but it does attempt to hold the nation accountable for the representation of its past *in the present.* What does an honest look at the past tell us about the foibles and dangers of human fallibility? Psychiatrist Aaron Lazare, reflecting on national shame, argues:

> People are not guilty for actions in which they did not participate. Just as people take pride in things for which they had no responsibility (such as famous ancestors and great accomplishments of their nation), so, too, must these people accept the shame of their family and their nations. Accepting national pride must include willingness to accept national shame when one's country has not measured up… this accountability is what we mean when we speak of having a national identity.[45]

Shame—the feeling of humiliation caused by consciousness of wrongdoing—is painful. And yet, the discomfort of shame is necessary to feel remorse and regret. Conversations surrounding lynching are not attempts to make white people feel guilty, a classic right-wing caricature. The

[44] Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.* Third Edition. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 74. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/

[45] Aaron Lazare, *On Apology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

point of scholarship is not about assigning blame or responsibility for wrongdoing. It is about fostering understanding and promoting justice. It is not about fault; it is about truth and reconciliation.

The nation as a whole has not reckoned with the legacy of its unjust treatment of African Americans, choosing to largely ignore its racial misdeeds instead. The dangerous ignorance regarding the United States' history makes the nation weaker, not stronger. The nation must overcome this pattern of sweeping challenging issues under the rug, particularly in the name of protecting kids or promoting patriotism. We must instead choose to acknowledge the legacy of past trauma and pain and, as a result, create a new civic identity founded on principles of honesty and justice. Patriotism and accountability are not mutually exclusive. After the practice of lynching by and large ended in the 1950s, recognition of the crimes and memorialization of the victims was slow in coming. The next sections will discuss the challenging road to force a broader reckoning to commemorate these crimes. Three attempts with varying degrees of success—by James Cameron, James Allen, and Bryan Stevenson—aimed to publicly commemorate the lawlessness and criminality of lynching and to honor the victims who were rarely properly laid to rest.

III. America's Black Holocaust Museum

One of the first attempts to openly memorialize the trauma of lynching came from James Cameron. In August 1930, Thomas Shipp, Abram Smith, and James Cameron were accused of murdering a white man and assaulting a white woman. A white mob gathered around the county jail in Marion, Indiana, where they were being detained and violently broke in to beat the three young African American men. The white mob brutally lynched Shipp and Smith and hung their bodies from trees in the courthouse yard. The spectacle execution attracted thousands of men, women, and children. Crowd members vied for body parts of Shipp and Smith as souvenirs, and many posed for photographs in front of the mutilated bodies. Though the crowd did little to conceal their identities and these postcard photographs circulated widely, authorities claimed that no one could be identified and punished. Due to mounting pressure, two of the mob leaders were eventually put on trial, but both were acquitted by all-white juries. Years later, the alleged assault victim testified that she had not been raped.[46]

[46] Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America: Outside the South," Equal Justice Initiative, accessed November 2022, https://eji.org/issues/lynching-in-america-outside-the-south/

Figure 4: The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith never appeared in local newspapers, but it circulated widely through postcards. This image inspired Abel Meeropol to write the anti-lynching poem "Strange Fruit" in 1936, made famous through Billie Holiday's 1939 recording | Lawrence Beitler, Allen-Littlefield Collection.[47]

James Cameron, though badly beaten, survived the lynching attempt. He was convicted as an accessory for murder and served four years in jail. Once released, he committed "to pick up the loose threads of [his] life, weave them into something beautiful, worthwhile and God-like."[48] Cameron devoted his life to the promotion of civil rights. He founded three chapters of the NAACP and became the first president of the NAACP Madison County chapter in Anderson, Indiana. He also served as the Indiana State Director of Civil Liberties from 1942 to 1950, reporting to Governor of Indiana Henry Schricker on violations of laws designed to end segregation. Because of his position, he endured countless violent threats, eventually forcing him to move his family to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He participated in protests in Washington D.C. during the 1960s and became a self-taught historian. Over a period of twenty-five years, Cameron wrote and published over thirty pamphlets about the African American experience and the need for civil liberties. In 1982, after searching in vain for over fifty years for a publisher, Cameron mortgaged his home in order to self-publish his memoir, *A Time of Terror*.[49]

In 1988, Cameron opened America's Black Holocaust Museum after visiting Yad Vashem in Israel. He filled the museum with materials and artifacts about slavery that he originally collected in his basement. Inspired by the "Jewish insistence on the preventive importance of keeping the memory of mass atrocity alive in the world's conscience," the

[47] Lawrence Beitler, *The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a large gathering of lynchers in Marion, Indiana,* August 7, 1930, Gelatin Silver Print, 9 1/2 x 7 1/2". Without Sanctuary collection, https://withoutsanctuary.org/.

[48] James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story.* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994), 201.

[49] Cameron sold the 4,000-copy run of his book from the trunk of his car and after speaking engagements around the Midwest. In 1994, Black Classic Press republished the title. See also: America's Black Holocaust Museum, "Dr. James Cameron, Museum Founder And Lynching Survivor" ABHM, 2022, https://www.abhmuseum.org/about/dr-cameron-founder-lynching-survivor/.

museum emphasized the importance of truth-telling to give African Americans strength and hope in the future.[50] The museum was revolutionary in connecting the history of lynching to modern police brutality. But at the heart of the museum was James Cameron himself. He would often give tours and tell his own story of survival to visitors. After surviving one of the most hateful acts of violence, Cameron, who died in 2006, devoted his life and the museum to four principles: remembrance, resistance, redemption, and reconciliation. "My father had that strength," recalled Virgil Cameron, son of James Cameron. "He could forgive the thing that people tried to do to him."[51]

Figure 5: James Cameron inside the Black Holocaust Museum in January 2003 | Morry Gash, AP File[52]

The activism of James Cameron displays unquestionable courage, forgiveness, and grit in the face of immense racism and violence. And yet, when one searches "James Cameron" on the internet, the results are of the movie director of the same name. At its peak, 25,000 people per

[50] America's Black Holocaust Museum, "Our Mission and Vision," ABHM, 2022, https://www.abhmuseum.org/about/our-mission/

[51] Syretta McFadden, "How To Survive A Lynching" *Medium,* 2016, https://medium.com/buzzfeed-collections/how-to-survive-a-lynching-4d77ab221615.

[52] Morry Gash, The Associated Press File, January 2003, Milwaukee Wisconsin. Retrieved from, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna13263142.

year visited America's Black Holocaust Museum, which had to close in 2008 due to financial hardship. One can only speculate the reasons behind the limited impact of America's Black Holocaust Museum. Was it just the wrong time? A lack of funding? Did the museum lack the credibility of a major, mainstream institution? Was its low visitor count due to the difficult topic of lynching of which many white people were increasingly ignorant? Most likely, a combination of all of these factors played into the obscurity of America's Black Holocaust Museum, demonstrating the challenge of commemorating the history of lynching at all.

Moreover, there is a lack of consensus on how to define progress; there is not a monolithic response to monumentalizing the history of lynching within the African American community. Cameron founded America's Black Holocaust Museum to hold the United States accountable to its founding documents and its promise of "liberty and justice for all," but some African Americans disagree with the decision to openly and regularly discuss the victimization and trauma of the past. Despite Cameron's tireless efforts to memorialize the victims of lynching, even today the city of Marion, Indiana has not created a public marker to record the crime that occurred there or honor his work and legacy. Within the community of Marion, Indiana, there are three contingents that further complicate the creation of a monument: some want to repress the history, others feel that it has already been sufficiently discussed, and some feel that not enough is being done.

The ongoing debate over a memorial in Marion, Indiana, demonstrates the challenge of memorialization in the nation as a whole. In 2003, there was approval for a plaque within the Marion courthouse dedicated to Shipp and Smith, but the descended families presented a petition to defeat the proposed plaque. They explained that they did not want the memory conjured up each year, reopening old wounds. According to *IndyStar*, a local newspaper that reported on the

progress of the plaque, the proposed monument did not make a direct reference to the lynchings.[53] The families' disapproval of the monument can be understood in a different light when considering the plaque did not contain information about the context of their murders.

Still, the descendants of the lynching victims continue to quash memorialization efforts in Marion. In 2018, Jack Heller, associate professor of English at Huntington University, re-opened the conversation about a marker for the site of the lynchings. He petitioned the Grant County Commissioners to collect soil from the sites for each victim of lynching and place a historical marker at the scene of the crime, an action in line with the recommendations of the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and Memorial, which I will explore more later. Heller wanted to acknowledge the crime that took place in Marion, but the county commissioners were unresponsive to the commemorative project.[54] Descendants of Shipp and Smith also expressed their disapproval. One expressed worry over vandalism, a known occurrence for other lynching memorials, which would further disrespect the memory of the victims. Others explained the organizers did not approach their family for consent. As *IndyStar* reported, "Pansy Bailey, Shipp's first cousin, said a memorial isn't necessary because 'the only people it should really matter to is the family.' She said the family just wants closure."[55] Some of the descendants of Shipp and Smith prefer to keep their grief private. As previously discussed, during the twentieth century, speaking out against lynchings was a dangerous act that could provoke retaliation. The

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[53] WTHR, "Family Nixes Memorial to Lynching Victims." *WTHR 13*, October 14, 2003. Updated August 26, 2016. https://www.wthr.com/article/news/family-nixes-memorial-to-lynching-victims/531-fa43df27-7027-4027-8eb3-c50658c09d94.

[54] Dawn Mitchell and Maureen C. Gilmer, "Last-Known Lynching in Indiana Included in National Memorial for Peace and Justice." *IndyStar,* April 26, 2018. https://www.indystar.com/story/news/history/retroindy/2018/04/26/last-known-lynching-indiana-included-national-memorial-peace-and-justice/553199002/.

[55] Associated Press,"Family of Marion, Ind., Lynching Victims Opposes Proposed Memorial." *IndyStar*. June 2018. https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2018/06/08/family-indiana-lynching-victims-against-proposed-memorial/683552002/.

danger perpetuated a culture of silence, one that still reverberates today. Opposition to the memorial, especially by remaining family members, will likely stop the project indefinitely.

Certainly, the presence of a historical marker or memorial does not directly impact the material conditions of historically marginalized communities. “There's other things, other issues in life today than to worry about something that happened 70 years ago and nothing's been done up until now,” said one Marion resident of the 2003 proposal.[56] And yet, as James Cameron reminded America, the power to interpret and perpetuate lessons from the past enables the dominant group to shape stereotypes and normalize historical and modern violence. There is a connection between representations of the past and priorities of the present. Public history is not an end unto itself, but figures like James Cameron understood that it must be part of a multifaceted effort to change American culture.

Regardless of reach, the creation of America’s Black Holocaust Museum was foundational for future activists to build upon. James Cameron “was a pioneer in articulating the legacy of America’s racial violence,” said Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative. “I consider him a huge influence and someone who inspired me enormously.”[57] James Cameron made true his commitment to “weave [the threads of his life] into something beautiful.” He repurposed his trauma, which he had every right to keep private, into a confrontative and educational experience for Americans to learn about racial terror. After closing its doors in 2008, America’s Black Holocaust Museum re-opened in October 2022.

[56]WTHR, “Family Nixes Memorial to Lynching Victims.”
[57]Mary Louise Schumacher,“Trailblazing America’s Black Holocaust Museum Poised to Reopen.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.* June 15, 2018. https://www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2018/06/15/trailblazing-americas-black-holocaust-museum-poised-reopen/688105002/.

Figure 6: Virgil Cameron, son of James Cameron, outside of America's Black Holocaust Museum | Chris Kohley, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.*

IV. "Without Sanctuary"

In 2000, the exhibit "Without Sanctuary" used postcards of lynchings to create a memorial to the long-repressed history of extra-judicial violence in the United States. The exhibit forced a national reckoning with the history of lynching that led to empathy among a wider section of white Americans than ever before, increased scholarship, and Senate action. The exhibit's success at sparking dialogue among influential members of white society paved the way for advances in the memorialization of lynching.

"Without Sanctuary" organizer James Allen, describes himself as a picker. A collector by trade, Allen finds value in things that others have discarded.[58] For over a decade, Allen and his life partner John Littlefield collected over 145 postcards from antique stores and estate sales across the South that depicted brutal lynchings of African Americans. Many of the postcards contained historical information—such as the date and location of the lynchings—otherwise unavailable. Most strikingly, however, the postcards displayed the brutal capabilities of human beings. Once Allen started collecting, he began to see just how deep the widespread truth was repressed. "I started calling around to libraries, state university libraries, state societies. Nobody would know or admit they had any of these. That was the real impetus of what I was doing this for. The violence was buried."[59] For decades, the nation had claimed moral innocence by ignoring and repressing the abundant pictorial evidence of these crimes "hidden" throughout the public and private collections of white Americans.

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[58] *Without Sanctuary (Movie)*, n.d. https://withoutsanctuary.org/.

[59] Brian Lyman, "'Without Sanctuary' and How We Remember Lynching." *Montgomery Advertiser,* April 25, 2018. https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2018/04/25/without-sanctuary-and-how-we-remember-lynching/499641002/.

In January 2000, the public witnessed ninety-eight of the photographs collected by Allen for the first time at the Roth Horowitz Art Gallery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.[60] The gallery had capacity for only twelve visitors at a time. The size of the space created an intimacy with the viewer, magnified, too, by the small size of the images. Allen wanted to ensure that any art gallery would display the images in their original dimensions. He believed their postcard-size was more powerful than an enlarged version of the photographs because it simulated the experience of the original viewers of the postcards.[61] Like Mamie Till, James Allen understood that the power of seeing surpassed all description. The photographs contained evidence of a history that America chose to forget.

Viewers of "Without Sanctuary" were immediately accosted with the casual and unfeeling reaction of the mob. Included in the collected postcards is a photograph of the 1915 lynching and burning of William Stanley in Temple, Texas. The atrocity of his charred corpse is juxtaposed with the white mob unapologetically staring into the camera. Almost unbelievable is the inscription on the back of the postcard: "This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son, Joe."[62] One need not speculate at the thoughts or identities of the participants. This note documents the brutality and dehumanization of African Americans in plain text and horrifying black and white.

[60] Scholars had access to the material two years prior to the exhibition.
[61] Brian Lyman, "'Without Sanctuary' and How We Remember Lynching."
[62] *Charred corpse of William Stanley suspended from utility pole*, May 16, 1916, Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2", Without Sanctuary collection, https://withoutsanctuary.org/

Figures 7-8: The charred body of William Stanley, lynched by burning in Temple, Texas, July 29-30, 1915. This photo first appeared in *The Crisis* in January 1916 with the caption "The Crucifixion" | Allen-Littlefield Collection.[63]

White people's acceptance and promotion of the vilest of crimes enraged Allen, who wanted to call attention to the everyday, "perfectly normal human beings" who participated, vied for body parts, and brought their children to the spectacle executions.[64] Historian Duane J. Corpis also highlighted the openness of the crimes displayed. "There are no hoods here. The fact that these harrowing scenes are recorded in photographs underlines the complete impunity of the perpetrators and their accomplices," Corpis emphasized. "Lynchings were not staged simply to kill specific people; they were spectacles intended to send a message far and wide."[65] Allen wanted the exhibit to force white people to truly recognize the "moral character of the white community" and their "enormous capacity for cowardice and savagery."[66] The project went beyond documentation, or the creation of a library archive. In the act of creating a museum exhibition, the postcards became a memorial to the casualness of white supremacist violence in our past.

[63] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Burden," *The Crisis,* Vol. 11, No. 3, January 1916.
[64]Leon F. Litwack, "Hellhounds." In Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000), 34.
[65] Duane J. Corpis, and Ian Christopher Fletcher, "Without Sanctuary." *Radical History Review* 85, 2003, 282-285. muse.jhu.edu/article/37722.
[66] Litwack, 28.

"Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield" quickly set the world on fire.[67] It attracted the attention of an influential cross section of people, including politicians, creative workers, and academics. The exhibition ran from January to February 2000, but the little gallery could not accommodate the viewers' demand. *The Los Angeles Times* reported, "The crowds who come each day to see the exhibit must wait. Today, one of the coldest days of the year, the wait is three hours, and still the line stretches down the block."[68] The *NYTimes* said the images are "incendiary; they will burn a hole in your heart."[69] The New-York Historical Society mounted the renamed exhibition "Without Sanctuary" a mere six weeks later. From mid-March to October 2000, over 50,000 visitors viewed the exhibit, one of the highest viewed exhibits of the New-York Historical Society's history.[70] "Things were changing in the 1990s, but that show put an exclamation point on change," said former President and CEO of the New York Historical Society Kenneth T. Jackson in a phone interview. In Jackson's view, the show made the point that history was not limited to stories about white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants who came to America on the Mayflower. The show said, "we are not going to run away from controversy."[71]

Over the next twelve years, "Without Sanctuary" was displayed at eight institutions. Despite its reach and explosive impact on the nation, as I will explore further, an encyclopedic

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[67] Grace Elizabeth Hale, "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America." *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 3, 2002, 989–94. https://doi.org/10.2307/3092350.
[68] J.R. Moehringer, "An Obsessive Quest to Make People See." *The Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 2000. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-aug-27-mn-11152-story.html.
[69] Roberta Smith, "Critic's Notebook; An Ugly Legacy Lives On, Its Glare Unsoftened by Age." *New York Times*, January 13, 2000. https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/13/books/critic-s-notebook-an-ugly-legacy-lives-on-its-glare-unsoftened-by-age.html.
[70] Grace Elizabeth Hale, "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America." See also Catherine Fox, "Images Too Painful to See? Atlantans Squabble Over How and When to Exhibit Lynching Photographs" *The Atlanta Constitution*, Aug 02, 2001. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/images-too-painful-see-atlantans-squabble-over/docview/413961928/se-2.
[71] Kenneth T. Jackson. Personal Interview about "Without Sanctuary." Phone, March 8, 2023.

record of its run does not exist. I used historical newspapers and reviews to recreate a record of its national tour. In its first stop after New York City, "Without Sanctuary" opened at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Warhol Museum reported a record crowd of 31,400 who viewed the exhibit on display from September 22 to December 31, 2001, opening right after the 9/11 terrorist attack.[72] "Without Sanctuary" next opened in Atlanta, Georgia at the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site from May 1 to December 31, 2002. There were lots of unexpected challenges in getting the show mounted in Atlanta—where collectors Allen and Littlefield lived—mostly due to trouble in finding a venue. As Allen commented, the exhibition was harder in general to mount in the South because the majority of lynchings occurred there. "As Southerners and Americans face up to the brutality of our racial history," commented former chairman of the Fulton County Commission in Georgia, "we're going to find all sorts of connections with people, families, institutions."[73] The trepidation demonstrated the power of the exhibition in bringing to light the repressed history of racial terror.

In April 2003, "Without Sanctuary" opened in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at America's Black Holocaust Museum. James Allen considered James Cameron to be "the memory of America on lynching. He is the one who brought life to this story."[74] James Allen attended the Founder's Day Gala, a fundraiser for the museum already in the throes of financial hardship (and which would close its doors 6 years later). The exhibition continued its national tour at Jackson State University in Mississippi in May 2004, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American

[72] Caroline Abels, "Chilling Warhol Show Ends Museum's Display of Lynching Photographs Drew Record Crowd of 31,400." *Pittsburgh Post - Gazette*, Jan 22, 2002. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/chilling-warhol-show-ends-museums-display/docview/391205797/se-2.

[73] Catherine Fox, "Images Too Painful to See? Atlantans Squabble Over How and When to Exhibit Lynching Photographs"

[74] Leonard Sykes Jr., "Lynching Exhibit Finds Sanctuary in Milwaukee." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Apr 30, 2002. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lynching-exhibit-finds-sanctuary-milwaukee/docview/261632029/se-2.

History in Detroit, Michigan in July-February 2005, and the Chicago Historical Society in Chicago, Illinois, in June 2005.[75] After a five-year gap, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, hosted the exhibition for the first half of 2010, and the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte, North Carolina, displayed it at the end of 2012.[76]

The accompanying book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* was published at the same time as the original exhibition in 2000. It contained a collection of 98 lynching photographs and essays by James Allen, historian Leon Litwack, *New York Times* critic Hilton Als, and Congressman and Civil Rights leader John Lewis. Twin Palms Publishers printed a mere 4,000 copies in its initial run; over 60,000 copies have been sold to date.[77] The book reached individuals not able to visit one of the exhibition sites. Fifty years after the practice of lynching all but disappeared, the nation finally began to grapple with the legacy of lynching.

The images shocked the white visitors.[78] The lynching photographs were irrefutable proof of the barbarity of everyday citizens and the complicity of authorities. "There, one horrific apparition after another makes visceral what one dares not imagine. Comprehension is also elusive when confronted with the limp human forms that hang doll-like in broad daylight in public spaces," described a critic in Pittsburgh.[79] It was both the depictions of violent deaths and the gleeful crowds that horrified the visitors. They served as reminders of the vilest acts that

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[75] "MAAH Hosts Photography Exhibition on Lynching." *Michigan Chronicle*, Jun, 2004. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/maah-hosts-photography-exhibition-on-lynching/docview/390126758/se-2.

[76]Mark Curnette, "Lynching Exhibit Brings Ugly Reality to Freedom Center." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Jan 19, 2010. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lynching-exhibit-brings-ugly-reality-freedom/docview/237651546/se-2.

[77]Leonard Sykes Jr., "Lynching Exhibit Finds Sanctuary in Milwaukee"

[78] As discussed previously, African Americans were largely already aware of the painful reality of lynching. Passed down through oral tradition, especially, the photographs prompted a deeply emotional experience, but unfortunately, not a shocking one.

[79]Mary Thomas, "Art Review: 'Without Sanctuary' Digs Deeply into Painful Issues of Inhumanity." *Post-Gazette Arts & Entertainment*. September 29, 2001. https://old.post-gazette.com/ae/20010929thomas0929fnp5.asp.

humans committed against each other, not in a far away time or place, but mere decades ago, primarily in the South but also in the Midwest and the North. The images presented "a deeper, more visceral experience of knowing history," wrote a critic in New York. "It is one thing to read that some lynchings were publicized beforehand, another to see firsthand evidence."[80] Mamie Till understood this phenomenon in 1955 when she turned her son's brutalized body into a memorial. Now, the postcards did the same.

"Without Sanctuary" prompted radical reflection and empathy, primarily on the side of white spectators. Many were finally forced to confront the psychological trauma that African Americans have lived with and passed down for decades. White critic Catherine Fox wrote of her experience visiting the exhibition in Atlanta:

> Certainly, Without Sanctuary provokes introspection. Since seeing the show, I've wrestled with many thoughts. I have tried to imagine what it is like to live in fear that one small misstep --- the wrong eye contact, for instance --- might mean a noose around my neck. I've tried to fathom what kind of mentality permits human beings to do such things to other human beings. Or even how a photographer could take these pictures and then hand-color them in delicate tints. I wonder about my own conscience. What would I have done had I been present when a mob started to gather?[81]

White visitors could not explain away the historical events they witnessed through the photographs, even if they were not directly implicated in the crimes. The photographs brought to life a tension for white people about what their ancestors or, more broadly, members of their race did to the African American community. The exhibition made viewers imagine what their own role would have been. The Levine Museum of the New South institutionalized this reflection by staging questions throughout the exhibition, including, "Can you imagine yourself in the picture? As a bystander, a victim, member of the mob, photographer or someone who chose to stay at

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[80] Roberta Smith, "Critic's Notebook; An Ugly Legacy Lives On, Its Glare Unsoftened by Age."
[81] Catherine Fox, "Exhibition Tells the Awful Truth about Lynchings." *The Atlanta Constitution,* May 1, 2002. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/exhibition-tells-awful-truth-about-lynchings/docview/336875145/se-2.

home?"[82] The exhibition forced the audience to consider the modern relevance of lynching photographs for people historically removed from them in both time and place.

The exhibition connected the past with the present in a way that encouraged viewers to consider their role in shaping the future. "Without Sanctuary certainly portrays one of the darkest, most painful chapters in southern and American history," commented Levine Museum of the New South President Emily Zimmern. "Our intent is not to dwell on this chapter, but to provide people a chance to learn and remember, and to feel empowered to stand up against bigotry and atrocity in the future. We hope visitors will view the exhibit without blame or guilt, and ask themselves: 'Who among us is without sanctuary today?'"[83] "Without Sanctuary" was a memorial to the victims of lynching, created to remember and discuss the atrocities openly committed without accountability or remorse. While "Without Sanctuary" did not hold people responsible for the actions of their ancestors, it did utilize these images to provoke shame. This shame can be a tool in constructing a more equitable future–it can help the nation both define our values and actually live up to them.

The exhibition produced far-reaching political impact, but it was not immune to critiques and differing opinions regarding the proper representation of lynching. One critique of the exhibition was its insistence at both viewing and re-circulating imagery of violent acts against African Americans. While the exhibition intended to remember past evils, some viewed it as exploitative and profit-mongering.[84] "Without Sanctuary" was designed to elicit a reaction of

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[82] Katherine Balcerek,"'Without Sanctuary' Examines a Horrific Chapter in Our History." *Knight Foundation,* November 5, 2012. https://knightfoundation.org/articles/without-sanctuary-examines-a-horrific-chapter-in-our-history/.

[83]Michaela L. Duckett, "Levine Museum of the New South to Present Exhibit on Lynching." *The Charlotte Post,* Sep 06, 2012. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/levine-museum-new-south-present-exhibit-on/docview/1080548691/se-2.

[84] JR Moehringer, "Scavenger Or Voyeur?: Why did James Allen Collect Pictures of Lynchings in America and Ask Us to Look at them?" *Calgary Herald,* Oct 21, 2000.

outrage and sympathy from the mainstream audience by creating a spectacle of the violence. Some critics questioned how this practice was different from the original onlookers. Indeed, informing the white population of the past atrocities had the adverse potential to re-victimize the African American community by providing a painful reminder of the community's past. African American Studies scholar Karlos K. Hill credits James Allen with inserting lynching into mainstream consciousness perhaps more than any individual in the last few decade. Yet, Hill still contends that "Without Sanctuary" utilized lynching images to "perpetuate a victimization narrative of the lynched Black body." This narrative "hinges upon highlighting white brutality against Blacks," or presents victimization as the defining characteristic of African-Americans.[85] The one-sided narrative denies the agency and resistance of African Americans, seen only as passive objects who were acted upon, not as organizers and resistors against the crimes of lynching.

Deviating from the shock and awe approach of "Without Sanctuary," future artists and individuals began to imagine ways to memorialize the victims of lynching and highlight the brutality of the mob *without* displaying violence. Artist Ken Gonzales-Day repurposes lynching photographs by photoshopping out the victims: "Rather than re-victimizing those murdered in such collective and often premeditated acts of killing, the work allows the viewer to literally focus on the crowd - complete with their jeering and smiling faces."[86] His art began as a response to anti-immigration and anti-Latinx rhetoric, but highlights the crowds at lynchings of all races. The project allows viewers to understand how widespread and well-attended public lynchings

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http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/scavenger-voyeur-why-did-james-allen-collect/docview/244836551/se-2.

[85] Karlos K. Hill, *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-4.

[86] Ken Gonzales Day, "Erased Lynchings," April 9, 2022. https://kengonzalesday.com/projects/erased-lynchings/.

were without including graphic images that could force African Americans to experience the collective, and perhaps, inherited trauma again.

Figure 9: The Wonder Gaze (St. James Park, CA. 1935), Erased Lynching Series (print and installation) | Ken Gonzales-Day.[87]

By 2000, the nation stood at an inflection point. Would it continue to reckon with the legacy of lynching? Or would it attempt to repress the memory? The nation began to take steps towards healing because the albeit graphic postcards made the public's broad complicity in the crimes irrefutable. The exhibition unquestionably led to an increase in scholarship on the topic of lynching. Historians of the mid-twentieth century paid lynching very little attention prior to this moment. Renowned American historian C. Vann Woodward, for example, wrote the *Origins of the New South* in 1951 to examine the social, political, and economic evolution of the South from 1877-1913. The book was very attentive to issues of race and class, but Woodward dedicated only two paragraphs to the study of lynching.[88] In 2002, in contrast, Emory University hosted "Lynching and Racial Violence in America: Histories and Legacies," a conference where over ninety historians and academics gathered to discuss collective violence in the United States.

[87] Ibid.
[88] Michael J. Pfeifer. "At the Hands of Parties Unknown? The State of the Field of Lynching Scholarship." *Journal of American History*, Volume 101, Issue 3, December 2014, 832–846, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jau640.

Hosted in Atlanta during the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site's exhibition of "Without Sanctuary," many scholars reflected "on the variety and extent of inquiry evident at the conference [that] signaled that the study of lynching and racial violence had reached a scale and depth that would have seemed unrealistic even just ten years earlier," according to historian and conference attendee Michael Pfeifer.[89] The field continued to evolve after this point with researchers producing seminal works on the study of violence, trauma, and racial terror.

Furthermore, *Without Sanctuary* led to a 2005 Senate resolution apologizing for the Senate's failure to pass anti-lynching legislation. African American activists and organizations petitioned the Senate for action to outlaw lynching throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and an apology over its inaction in the late 20th century with no success. The movement renewed its momentum with the publication and popularity of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.[90] "The intensity and impact of the pictures tell a story…that written words failed to convey," said Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu, one of the co-sponsors of the Resolution. Reading *Without Sanctuary* "has been an extremely emotional, educational experience for me. And the more I learned, the more sure I became [about] the effort to pass this resolution." The public now understood the photographs, originally taken by whites to demonstrate white triumph over alleged black criminality, as a direct reflection and irrefutable proof of white barbarity. The white populace could dismiss this charge with words, but the photographs made the repressed reality plain. Virginia Senator George Allen explained, "The apology is long overdue. Our history does include times when we failed to protect individual freedom and rights."[91] Perhaps

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[89] Ibid.
[90] *Talk about Without Sanctuary,* 2005. https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4861637/user-clip-talk-sanctuary.
[91] Avis Thomas-Lester, "Repairing Senate's Record on Lynching; 'Long Overdue' Apology would be Congress's First for Treatment of Blacks" *The Washington Post*, Jun 11, 2005. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/repairing-senates-record-on-lynching-long-overdue/docview/409800786/se-2.

even more surprising, while serving as Governor of Virginia, that same senator had signed a proclamation in 1997 that made April Confederate History and Heritage Month. He also flew the Confederate flag from his home during his gubernatorial race.[92] Perhaps his co-sponsorship was nothing more than an attempt to appeal to African American voters. And yet, the images in *Without Sanctuary* prompted even one who was inculcated in white Southern history and pride to recognize the importance of apologizing to African Americans for the deprivation of constitutional protections and Senate inaction.

The text of Resolution 39 read: "The Senate (1) apologizes to the victims and survivors of lynching for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation; (2) expresses its deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets to the descendants of such victims whose ancestors were deprived of life, human dignity, and the constitutional protections accorded all other U.S. citizens; and (3) remembers the history of lynching, to ensure that these personal tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated."[93] This resolution marked the first time Congress has apologized to African Americans for any reason.[94] Past efforts to honor the victims of lynching, such as attempts to lay decimated bodies to rest, were marred by brutal retaliation, torture, repression, and ignoral. In stark contrast, the Senate Resolution specifically calls on both the Senate and the nation to *remember* the history of lynching. Because of the media attention this resolution garnered, some historians credit the Senate Resolution with beginning a public conversation about the memorialization of lynching.[95] As this paper has explored, the effort to initiate public

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[92]Spencer S. Hsu, "Allen's Confederacy Month Brings Outcry." *Washington Post,* April 11, 1997. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/04/11/allens-confederacy-month-brings-outcry/3a402f9f-e8ef-4366-acf0-0b31536962f4/.

[93]U.S. Congress, Senate, *A resolution apologizing to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation.* S Res. 39, 109th Cong, introduced in Senate February 7, 2005, https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/senate-resolution/39.

[94] Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "The Senate Apologizes, Mostly." *New York Times*, June 19, 2005. https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/weekinreview/the-senate-apologizes-mostly.html.

[95] Michael J. Pfeifer, "At the Hands of Parties Unknown? The State of the Field of Lynching Scholarship."

conversations surrounding lynching began long before this resolution, and in fact, provided the momentum for this resolution to pass. Nevertheless, this represented a huge change in the national attitude surrounding lynching.

Certainly, there are limitations to any apology. Is there value in an apology that does not lead to restitution of past harms? James Cameron attended the vote on the Till Resolution. "The apology is a good idea," Cameron said. "*But it still won't bring anyone back.* And I hope that the next time it won't take so long to admit to our mistakes."[96] Cameron was not learning about lynchings for the first time, unlike Senator Landrieu or many white Americans across the nation. To Cameron, lynching victims were not abstractions, they were the friends he could not save in 1930. This apology was made to him and to thousands of African Americans directly impacted by the ruthless crimes. As Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page wrote, quoting national director of the Anti-Defamation League Abraham Foxman, "Apologies are important in the healing of a nation. Apologies are more than the closing of an old chapter. They are the beginning of a new one."[97] Cameron expressed hope in the future, but he still regretted that the Senate failed to act when they could have saved thousands of lives.

Not all senators, however, were on board with the apology or the beginning of a new chapter. Out of the 100 senators, 75 senators were co-sponsors of the resolution, a fact that disappointed Massachusetts Senator John Kerry: "It is a statement in itself that there are not 100 co-sponsors."[98] After the resolution passed, the number of senators who did not list their names

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[96] Sheldon Alberts. "U.S. Senate to Apologize for 80 Years of Black Lynchings: But Vote Won't be Unanimous ... Even Now" *Daily Townsman,* Jun 14, 2005. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/u-s-senate-apologize-80-years-black-lynchings/docview/356183158/se-2.

[97] Clarence Page, "Apologies for Past are really about Future" *The Sun*, Jun 28, 2005. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/apologies-past-are-really-about-future/docview/406670673/se-2.

[98] Sheldon Alberts, "U.S. Senate to Apologize for 80 Years of Black Lynchings."

as co-sponsors had fallen to eight, all Republicans. The senators from Mississippi, Trent Lott and Thad Cochran, both opposed the Resolution. Not surprisingly, Mississippi had the highest proportion of African Americans in its population at the time and had the highest number of lynchings. Both senators opposed the idea of the government apologizing for its actions. Senator Lott said, "Where do we end all of this? Are we going to apologize for not doing the right thing on Social Security?"[99] Senator Cochran specifically noted that he did not think he should apologize for actions that occurred before his time. *The Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi, reported, however, that he previously co-sponsored measures apologizing to Japanese-Americans for internment and to American Indians for mistreatment.[100] Apologizing to African Americans, on the other hand, seemed to be a step too far and received his critique on the efficacy and role of government apology.

"Without Sanctuary" was quite remarkable for achieving a near consensus in anti-lynching legislation, given the topic's incredibly divisive nature. Governmental inaction and opposition to anti-lynching measures were not new phenomenon. Beginning over a century before, the Senate continually suppressed legislation that could have helped to prevent lynchings. In 1900, North Carolina Representative George Henry White–the only Black lawmaker in the U.S. House of Representatives–introduced the first anti-lynching legislation. The bill did not advance out of committee.[101] In 1918, Missouri representative Leonidas Dyer introduced an anti-lynching bill following a riot in his district in East St. Louis during the summer of 1917. The Dyer bill classified lynching as a federal felony, allowing instigators of lynching to be tried

[99] Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "The Senate Apologizes, Mostly."
[100] Clarence Page, "Apologies for Past are really about Future."
[101] Peter Granitz, "Senate Passes Anti-Lynching Bill and Sends Federal Hate Crime Legislation to Biden." *NPR*, March 8, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085094040/senate-passes-anti-lynching-bill-and-sends-federal-hate-crimes-legislation-to-bi.

federally. The bill proposed prison time and fines for state and city officials who failed to protect a victim or who failed to prosecute a perpetrator. The bill also outlined prison time for any ordinary citizen that participated in a lynching and proposed a fine for the county where a lynching took place to be paid to the victim's family. The measure, too, never left the committee. In the next Congress, Dyer re-introduced the bill, but Southern Democrats passionately opposed the measure. During the debates, Texas Congressman Hatton W. Sumners denounced the bill for violating state sovereignty and suggested local communities take up the issue instead. He stated, "This bill can not pass this House unless it is put through by that same spirit which inspires the mob," equating the bill to an act of "mob" violence.[102] A Senate filibuster ultimately quashed the attempt. Over the next century, legislators failed to pass anti-lynching legislation even though over two-hundred attempts were made and seven U.S. presidents requested Senate action on the matter, according to the Justice for Victims of Lynching Act of 2018.[103] In 2005, the Till Resolution expressed remorse over the Senate's inaction, but it, too, did not make lynching a federal crime.

The Senate Resolution, though incomplete in its protection against future violence, was made possible because of the dam that "Without Sanctuary" burst. "Without Sanctuary" is a case study of the power of memorials to effect change in the public sphere. Certainly, the reach is limited to shifting public consciousness as opposed to changing structures and institutions. But, as seen with the Senate Resolution, the raised awareness can, and in this case, did, create a widespread consensus that would ultimately translate to material changes in the law. "Without Sanctuary" did not act alone, but it was at this moment that the nation truly began to pay

[102] Representative Sumners, speaking on Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, on January 4, 1922, 62 Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* Vol. 62, pt. 1: 794. https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-CRECB-1922-pt1-v62/
[103] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Justice for Victims of Lynching Act of 2018,* S.3178, 115th Cong, introduced in Senate June 28, 2018, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/3178/actions.

attention to the crimes that it had permitted only a few decades before. America's Black Holocaust Museum and the images from the "Without Sanctuary" exhibition were foundational memorials to the victims of lynching that set the stage for public conversation and future memorialization efforts. America's Black Holocaust Museum linked the crime of lynching with state-sanctioned police violence. "Without Sanctuary" repurposed the photographs taken by whites to display the reality of racial terror. The efforts built upon each other and paved the way for the next wave of attempts to memorialize the history of racial violence, including the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the subject of the following section.

Very few white Americans understood how widespread and normalized the crimes against African Americans were when Mamie Till made her decision. A half century later, "Without Sanctuary" successfully awakened a growing number to "the fragility of freedom and the pervasiveness of racism in American society" by showing the violence and complicity of white authorities and bystanders. Garnering immense national attention in the press, the exhibition became "a grim reminder that part of the American past we would prefer to forget we need very much to remember. It is part of our history, part of our heritage," wrote historian Leon Litwack.[104] Our heritage does not only consist of the accomplishments of the past; it should also record and reflect when the nation fails to measure up to its ideals. It may seem easier to forget, but that is precisely why we must remember.

[104] Litwack, 34-35.

V. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice

The work of previous activists has led to the most sophisticated and far-reaching of memorialization efforts surrounding the lynchings of African Americans, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice which opened in Montgomery, Alabama in 2018. The city of Montgomery, Alabama engages in a civil war of public history, a microcosm of the battle over the predominant racial narrative in America as a whole. Montgomery is known, paradoxically, as both the "Cradle of the Confederacy" and the "birthplace of the Civil Rights movement." Unsurprisingly, the monuments in Montgomery reflect this dual narrative. An eighty-eight-foot Confederate Memorial Monument in front of the Alabama State Capitol is within eyeshot of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led his first congregation from 1954 to 1960.

Figures 10-11: Left: Confederate Memorial Monument; Right: View from the Alabama State Capitol, on the left is the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. | Photo by author, September 2022.

The First White House of the Confederacy, where Jefferson Davis lived when Montgomery was the capital of the Confederacy, is a mere two blocks away from a memorial designed by Maya Lin, inscribed with the names of and dedicated to forty-one martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement. A bronze statue of Rosa Parks positioned where she first instigated the year-long bus boycott was erected across the street from a plaque at the Court Square Fountain that describes the main slave market as a "historic hub for business in Montgomery" without further explanation.

Figures 12-13: Left: Fountain at Court Square; Right: Prominent plaque positioned at the fountain does not mention slave auctions. A plaque a block away from the fountain on the opposite side of the road does acknowledge slavery. | Photo by author, September 2022.

The exclusion within this narrative contributes to the culture of silence surrounding racial violence in America. The Legacy Museum broke the silence, however, by explaining the significance of the fountain as the site where thousands of slaves were bought and sold. These

two versions of Montgomery are fundamentally at odds with one another, and yet they exist side-by-side, representing the contradictions and tension that exist in Montgomery and in the nation.

Monuments are weapons on the contested battlefront of racial narratives in America, but in Montgomery, the only way to change the commemorative landscape is to add to it. The Alabama State Legislature demonstrated their understanding of the power of a monument to showcase public values by passing the 2017 Alabama Memorial Preservation Act. It prohibits "the relocation, removal, alteration, renaming, or other disturbance of any monument located on public property which has been in place for 40 years or more." The act includes a provision that fines an entity $25,000 for "disturbing" a monument without a waiver.[105] This law effectively nullifies the possibility of reducing the number of Confederate statues, or even recontextualizing them. In April 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal advocacy non-profit organization, added to the commemorative landscape by creating two entities: the Legacy Museum: From Slavery to Mass Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ). The museum argues that slavery was not abolished, it simply evolved. Its resonances lie in the practice of lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration.[106] The memorial is the first national memorial dedicated to the victims of lynching in the United States. The museum provides important context for the memorial, serving as a reminder that lynching cannot be fully understood without a reckoning with slavery and its many legacies.[107] Taken together, the

[105] Alabama Historical Commission. "Monument Preservation Requests." State Historic Preservation Office, 2017. https://ahc.alabama.gov/MonumentPreservation.aspx/PDF/legislativeupdates

[106] The subject of this museum deserves analysis of its own, but the focus of this essay is the impact of the memorial site, situated 0.5 miles away from the museum. For more information, see https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/museum.

[107] Tanja Schult, "Reshaping American Identity: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and its Take- Away Twin." *Liminalities* 16, no. 3, 2020, 9. http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reshaping-american-identity-national-memorial/docview/2450655856/se-2.

Legacy Museum and Memorial are both a "physical site and an outreach program," aiming to use the truth to liberate America.

Careful decisions by designers and organizers demonstrated the EJI's intention to combat the prevailing racial narrative in Montgomery and the nation at large. For example, the museum opened in April during Alabama's Confederate History Month. Established in 1994 to honor and remember the history of the Confederate states, Confederate History Month is officially commemorated in five states in the South.[108] The opening of the Legacy Museum and Memorial did not change the reality of this month, but it did insert the unacknowledged history of Southern African Americans who lived in the Confederacy as enslaved people to the month's festivities.

This incredibly effective memorial was possible because of the foundational efforts of activists and scholars in both the public history sphere and the academy. The Legacy Museum and Memorial benefited greatly from increased public awareness about the atrocity of the racial terror acts from both more extensive scholarly research and comparatively more widespread knowledge of lynchings in general. Though it is a continuation of the conversation, the design choices of the memorial demonstrate a departure from the former memorialization efforts. The size of the memorial, especially in comparison to the postcard sized images of lynchings showcased in the "Without Sanctuary" exhibition, demonstrates the enormity of the loss, and the memorial evokes the imagery of personhood without a demonstration of violence.

The size of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice mirrors the scale and individuality of the loss of the victims of lynching. The site occupies six acres in Montgomery, Alabama, and contains over 800 steel monuments, one for each county in the United States with a lynching victim, with the names of the victims inscribed on each monument. The memorial

[108] The states are Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida.

specifically honors the victims of lynching from 1877-1950 because the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 marked the end of Reconstruction and catalyzed an uptick in unregulated racial terror acts.[109] In terms of size, however, the Vietnam War Memorial offers an interesting comparison. It honors 58,000 fallen soldiers in about 500 feet. NMPJ uses six acres to honor over 4,400 known lynchings, making the argument that the loss is more than just a numerical one. The design of the memorial functions to create a particular somatic experience for African Americans to relieve the trauma of lynching by using the size of the monument to capture the scope of the tragedy.

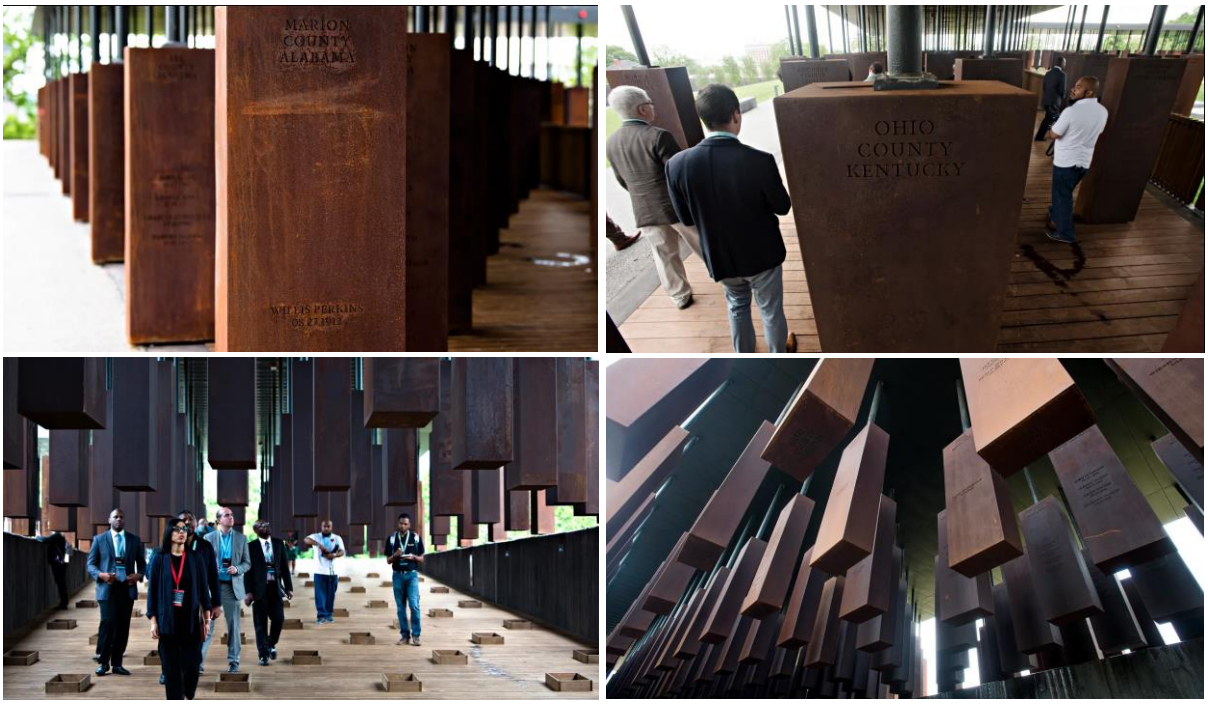
Figure 14: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice April 2018 | Mickey Welsh, *Montgomery Advertiser*.[110]

Furthermore, the memorial invokes the imagery of lynched bodies without circulating the literal images of the violence. The steel monuments elicit the physical characteristics of a victim of lynching. Each monument is six feet tall and is made of corten-steel, a "living material" that

[109] In recent years, the Equal Justice Initiative created separate sites to honor the victims of lynchings from different time periods. A plaque outside of the Peace and Justice Memorial Center, unveiled in April 2019, honors the victims of lynching in the 1950s, many of whom were Civil Rights advocates. The Legacy Pavilion, opened in January 2020, was built right outside of the museum to honor the 2,000 victims of lynching during Reconstruction between 1865-1876.

[110] Mickey Welsh, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, April 2018, Montgomery, Alabama. https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2018/04/23/reconciliation-walk-through-nations-first-lynching-memorial-eji-peace-justice-memorial-montgomery/544474002/

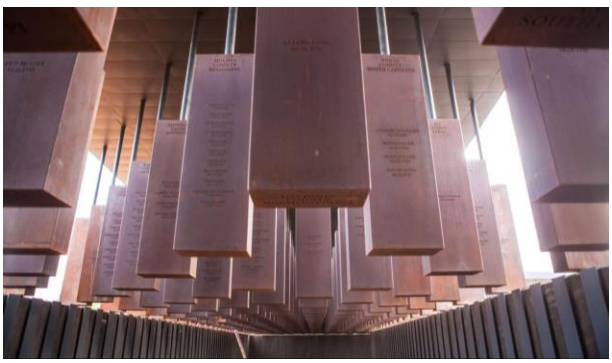
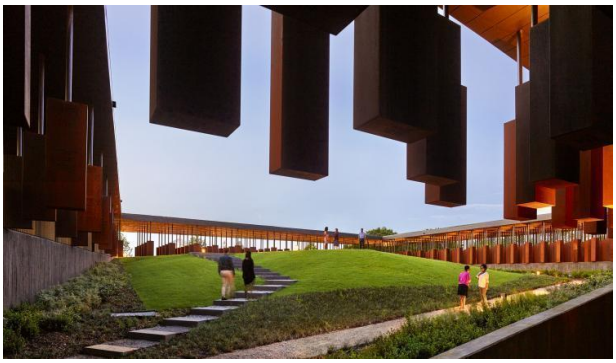
weathers to different shades of brown over time. This natural weathering process over time would "create over 800 unique tonal expressions, reflecting the diversity of Black people in America," explains Regina Yang of the MASS Design Group, the architectural firm commissioned to design this memorial.[111] The square structure within the monuments has four corridors that frame a garden courtyard. As one walks through the first corridor of the memorial, the pillars meet the viewer at eye-level. In the subsequent corridor, the floor slopes downward while the monuments remain on the same plane. This shift in perspective evokes the feeling that one is examining rows of hanging bodies.



Figures 15-18: Press walking through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice before its official opening on April 23, 2018. | Mickey Welsh and Albert Cesare, *Montgomery Advertiser*.[112]

[111] Marita Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory: Memorials, Museums, and Architecture in the Post-9/11 Era*. (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 248. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479811670.001.0001.
[112] Mickey Welsh and Albert Cesare, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, April 2018, Montgomery, AL, https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2018/04/23/reconciliation-walk-through-nations-first-lynching-memorial-eji-peace-justice-memorial-montgomery/544474002/

Past memorials–such as the images of Emmett Till's mutilated body and the images on display through the "Without Sanctuary" exhibition–depended on the violent depictions of torture to prompt visceral, outraged reactions to the injustice. "I think for some people 'Without Sanctuary' created this optic that was shocking, and we were less interested in shocking optics," recalls Bryan Stevenson, who spearheaded the Equal Justice Initiative and founded the Legacy Museum and Memorial. "We really wanted to create a narrative that is in some ways even more shocking. That it wasn't the Klan. It was the teachers and the lawyers and the journalists and law enforcement officers cheering as a man was brutalized."[113] NMPJ refocuses the public on the loss of the victims instead of the conditions under which they were murdered. The memorial in no way denies the violence of the murderers and the danger of a complicit citizenry. However, it does "take the spectacle of violence out of it while making the collective violence so visible."[114]

Figures 19-20: The hanging monuments | Audra Melton, *New York Times*; Alan Karchmer, MASS Design Group[115]

Literal and figurative stains evoking blood also mark the space. Lynching is a stain on a democratic nation whose ideals profess "liberty and justice for all," but contradictorily allowed

[113] Brian Lyman,"'Without Sanctuary' and How We Remember Lynching."
[114] Wendy Wolters,"Without Sanctuary: Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness." *JAC* 24, no. 2 (2004): 399–425. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866631.
[115] Audra Melton, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, 2018, New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html; Alan Karchmer, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, 2018, MASS Design Group, https://massdesigngroup.org/work/design/national-memorial-peace-and-justice.

murder with impunity to freely persist. In addition to the unique tones of each of the monuments, the rain will wash corten-steel residue down the monument, leaving its mark on the ground beneath, evoking blood traces that seep into the nation's very soil. Over time, this natural process will visually reinforce the staining legacy of racial terror in America.[116] Knowing that many lynched individuals are unknowable by name and undiscoverable by record leaves the viewer with a haunting conclusion. The site names the absence. The final corridor has a wall with falling water with the inscription, "Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynchings whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known. They are all honored here."

Figure 21: The final corridor of NMPJ | Alan Karchmer, Mass Design Group.[117]

Beyond the structure of the memorial are duplicates of each of the monuments, arranged horizontally. The Equal Justice Initiative invites counties across the country to pick up their monument and install it locally. As lynching history has been largely ignored and repressed for decades, the EJI embedded accountability into the memorial itself, challenging counties to

[116] Sturken, 248; Noelle Trent, "Review of *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* dir. by Bryan Stevenson." *The Public Historian* Volume 41, Issue 1, 2019, 133-137. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/737442.
[117] Alan Karchmer, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, 2018, MASS Design Group, https://massdesigngroup.org/work/design/national-memorial-peace-and-justice.

"resurrect memory" while also displaying the counties that do and do not take up the challenge.[118] The memorial, then, becomes a two-tiered monument by documenting the original act of lynching as well as the continued denial. The memorial is able to document both past and present, demonstrating that lynching will continue to be a stain on American history until the nation collectively summons the courage to confront it.

Figure 22: The horizontal duplicate monuments outside the main structure of the memorial | EJI.[119]

Over 4,400 African Americans were lynched, and most Americans cannot name a single victim beyond Emmett Till. Consequently, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice names as many names as they can, "transforming the undifferentiated mass of victims into individuals, family members, and ancestors, turning them back into grievable bodies."[120] The memorial is a site of commemoration, but it is also a site of mourning.[121] It engages in the transcultural ritual of honoring the dead, a delayed experience for families and communities who were unable to properly lay their loved ones to rest for fear of retaliation. There were grave consequences for

[118] Dora Apel, *Calling Memory into Place*. (Ithaca: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 49. https://doi-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.36019/9781978807877.
[119] Equal Justice Initiative, "The Legacy Museum and Memorial Homepage," EJI, accessed September 2022, https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/
[120] Apel, 49.
[121] Jenny Woodley, "'Nothing is lost': Mourning and memory at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice." *Memory Studies*, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221114080

speaking out. Ida B. Wells reported on the lynching of her friend Thomas Moss and his two colleagues, and an angry mob burned her newspaper offices and chased her out of Tennessee. bell hooks wrote that "African Americans have at times had to hide their grief because revealing it could give white oppressors information about how to hurt and control them and could also give those oppressors sadistic satisfaction."[122] Lynching created social conditions that made public grieving a near impossibility. Thus, NMPJ provides an opportunity, albeit delayed, to grieve the bodies that were deemed ungrievable. The horizontal monuments evoke the imagery of a long line of graves or coffins. This is particularly resonant in parts of the deep South like Louisiana, where tombs are placed above ground.

The Equal Justice Initiative believes that the first step to reconciliation is honest acknowledgement of the past. "I really do believe in truth and reconciliation," says Bryan Stevenson. "I just think they are sequential. You have to tell the truth first."[123] The National Memorial for Peace and Justice at long last asks the nation to be accountable for cruelty and complicity. The site is necessarily sobering, yet the memorial strikes a balance of honesty and empowerment. It suggests to the public that something can be done to change the legacy of slavery and that the first step lies in remembering. In April 2022, the EJI expanded the memorial to include a Community Reckoning section. The area of the memorial contains almost fifty duplicate plaques, representative of the efforts of communities across the nation to mark sites of known lynchings. It also includes a sculpture by Branly Cadet called "Arise," which is dedicated to the thousands of people across the United States who use public memorialization to reckon with the history of racial terror. The figures are all modeled after descendants of lynching

[122] Ibid.
[123] Jane McFadden, "1000 Words: Bryan Stevenson." *ArtForum,* May 2018. https://www.artforum.com/interviews/bryan-stevenson-talks-about-the-national-memorial-for-peace-and-justice-75160.

victims, and represent the multiplicity of people and ways that memorialization happens. Lynching is an oft-unacknowledged part of local heritage, so the sculpture honors local efforts to remember.

Figure 23: Branly Cadet's "Arise" begins the Community Reckoning section of the memorial | EJI.[124]

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice inspires participation. The public tends to understand monuments and memorials as inspirational but static spaces. In contrast, this site will "constantly evolve as communities do the work," says Bryan Stevenson to the *Montgomery Advertiser*. "My hope, my vision, is that there's a marker in every lynching site in America."[125] As explained previously, the duplicate monuments with county names are meant to be removed from the memorial and installed locally; part of the memorial was designed to be disembodied. It is not a fixed site but rather a conversation starter. University of New Mexico researcher Kathy

[124] EJI, "EJI Announces New Expansion of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice," *EJI*, April 8, 2022, https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/news/2022-04-08/eji-announces-new-expansion-national-memorial-peace-and-justice.

[125] "More than a Name: Community Remembrance Work Honors Lynching Victims' Stories in a New Section of Equal Justice Initiative Site." *Montgomery Advertiser,* April 11, 2022. https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2022/04/11/addition-national-memorial-peace-and-justice-open-week/7224265001/

Freise writes about how effective memorials do not offer a narrative that is complete, but rather alert viewers to the tension between the past and the present. As a result, "when a memorial performs effectively, viewers are called to look within themselves for creative possibilities. They may recall the dead and realize some kind of responsibility for the living." This engagement "opens up the notion that an effective piece of art presents people with the opportunity to move closer not just to those remembered there but to themselves. At some level, a monument should both encompass an event from centuries past and offer a kind of resonance for the present."[126] NMPJ bridges the gap between the past and the present, offering insight into the viewer as well as the victim.

In contemporary society, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice plays the essential role of not allowing us to forget our troubled past. At the entry to the site stands a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice." This quote contextualizes the aspirational name of the memorial and frames the experience for the viewer. The memorial is not meant to console or comfort, nor is it meant to resolve tension or guilt. This is especially apparent in how the experience at the memorial concludes without a redemptive spin, unlike many history museums or sites that commemorate unsavory pieces of history. While the memorial does not hold today's white population responsible for lynching, it does ask the viewer to reflect on how the nation did not live up to its ideals, and consider how we might forge a nation that does. "I'm not interested in talking about America's history because I want to punish America," Bryan Stevenson says. "I want to liberate America."[127] It encourages people to honestly see and then seek justice.

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[126] Kathy Freise, "Contesting Oñate: Sculpting the Shape of Memory." In *Expressing New Mexico: Nuevomexicano Creativity, Ritual, and Memory.* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 245-6.
[127] Campbell Robertson, "A Lynching Memorial Is Opening. The Country Has Never Seen Anything Like It.," *New York Times,* April 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html.

VI. Conclusion

"But in order to change a situation, one has to see it for what it is… To accept one's past–one's history–is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought."[128]

- *James Baldwin, 1963*

Despite the commitment and sacrifices of generations of civil rights advocates, it took decades for memorialization efforts of lynchings to take root, demonstrating the developmental nature of activism. While there remains work to be done in the confrontation of the history of racial violence, we are poised at a unique inflection point in American history. For example, in 2022, multiple, seemingly unconnected events made concrete the legacy of Mamie Till's decision to force a national reckoning with racial terror crimes. In March, Congress unanimously passed the 2022 Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act to make lynching a federal hate crime.[129] In October, in Greenwood, Mississippi, about ten miles from where Emmett Till was brutally murdered, a nine-foot tall statue of Emmett Till was erected, spearheaded by Mississippi State Senator David Lee Jordan.[130] It is still the only official statue of Emmett Till in the country. Also in October, Argo Community High School in Summit, IL announced plans for a memorial walkway with statues honoring Emmett Till and Mamie Till, the first and only statues in Illinois honoring the legacy of either figure.[131] Additionally, Mamie Till's relentless efforts to shed light on the racial terror lynching of her son were turned into the 2022 film "Till." The tireless efforts

[128] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 81.
[129] U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Emmett Till Antilynching Act.* H.R. 55, 117th Cong, introduced in House January 4th, 2021, https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/55.
[130] Jasmine Liu, "Nine-Foot Bronze of Emmett Till Is Unveiled in Mississippi," *Hyperallergic*, October 27, 2022, https://hyperallergic.com/774264/bronze-statue-of-emmett-till-is-unveiled-in-mississippi/.
[131] ABC7 Chicago Digital Team, "Memorial Honoring Civil Rights Activist Mamie Till-Mobley Debuts in West Suburbs," *ABC7 Chicago*, October 28, 2022, https://abc7chicago.com/emmett-till-mother-argo-community-high-school-summit-il/12389559/.

of generations of activists, unwilling to let the politics of memory rest, have built upon each other and led to this moment.

And yet, debates continue to rage about how history should be talked about in public schools. In January 2023, Florida Governor Ron Desantis rejected the College Board's AP African American Studies course because "we want education, not indoctrination."[132] Politicians argue against teaching a fuller version of American history stating that their opponents want to "push a political agenda" onto children, contradictorily ignoring that their efforts to sanitize history merely substitute in a different political agenda. The advocacy in Florida shows us that silence on issues of racial injustice has not been a failure to speak, rather, it represents a willful ignorance. Despite successes in efforts to memorialize our fraught history, the advocacy against honest discussions of our history is a danger to our democracy. Efforts to censor the history of the United States may be framed as an attempt to help the young be patriotic, but these efforts are shortsighted and prevent us from true reconciliation.

The United States of America is the first and the oldest multiracial democracy, a revolutionary experiment and an incredible feat. As evidenced by even the most casual survey of American history, however, the composition of the country has led to intense obstacles. The Civil War, for example, almost destroyed the nation over the matter of Black subordination. In President Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, he offered words of reconciliation, not of blame, to attempt to begin a process of healing: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace,

[132]Terry Spencer and Anthony Izaguirre, "Florida's Rejection of Black History Course Stirs Debate," *AP News*, January 23, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/ron-desantis-florida-education-6603c0aa4de0098423eb7b6c04846d0c.

among ourselves, and with all nations."[133] The nation, not yet aged a century, perhaps could not confront the history of violence and racial subordination for fear of its disintegration after such a destructive conflagration.

The nation is not young and fragile anymore, and the narrative of silence long perpetuated in the United States has run its course. What is tearing us asunder is the fact that we have not addressed the legacies of racial violence in this country. Ignoral of heinous crimes committed against African Americans does not signify resolution. It means we allowed the issues to fester. With countless evidence to the contrary, America can no longer continue to assert its moral innocence. We must embrace the "patriotic recognition that America is a constant work in progress," as President Barack Obama reflected at the long overdue 2016 dedication of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. "Each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is within our collective power to align this nation with the high ideals of our founding."[134] An embrace of the history of lynching–an embrace of the truth–can help the nation heal from a culture of silence that trapped the victims, the perpetrators, and the complicit bystanders alike. Rather than resist and repress the nation's dark history to avoid any indications of weakness, we must find our strength through the embrace of truth and a move towards reconciliation. We deny ourselves the beauty of redemption when we deny our past. An open acknowledgment of our history helps us understand the past, appreciate the present, and create a brighter future.

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[133]Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009), 349.
[134] Barack Obama. 2016. "Celebrating the National Museum of African American History and Culture." Transcript of speech delivered at Washington D.C., September 24, 2016. https://www.obamalibrary.gov/timeline/item/dedication-national-museum-african-american-history.

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