

Reshaping American Identity: *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* and its Take-Away Twin

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Figure 1. All images by the author (unless indicated otherwise).

I. INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* opened in Montgomery, Alabama. Informally known as the Lynching Memorial, it is a new monumental milestone in American memory culture. The impressive physical manifestation of the permanent memorial consists of several sculptural works testifying to the history of slavery, lynching, segregation and ongoing racial

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discrimination in the US. The memorial is an invitation to participate in a transformation process. This ambition is clearly expressed in the memorial's exceptional design and pedagogical concept. Next to the pavilion-like structure consisting of 805 stelae inscribed with the names of the lynching victims are duplicates waiting to be claimed by and erected in the counties in which those murders were once committed (Figure 1).¹ The future dissolution of this part of the memorial anticipates a commemoration process yet to come. The take-away twin will travel to the scenes of the crimes to memorialize the specific act of horror and trauma *in situ*. The envisaged erection of single memorial markers in places throughout the US promises to refurbish and thereby fundamentally reshape American identity based on the acknowledgement of the country's history of racial violence.

This article provides an in-depth description and comprehensive analysis of *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*. It begins with an introduction to the organization that commissioned the memorial, The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), and the theme it predominately commemorates, terror lynchings of African Americans, followed by a portrayal of the wider memory landscape in which *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is embedded.

The main section, Part III, takes the reader on a walk through the memorial site, which invites each visitor to open up for a ritual-like performance through a carefully designed setting leading to a cathartic experience (cp. Duncan 1995: 2, 11–13). As it is the purpose of the memorial to implicate the visitor in the dreadful history of lynching by creating a visceral and personal reaction, the description is strongly informed by my own experiences on recurring visits to the site during a week-long study trip to Montgomery in November 2019. The detailed description is intended to provide a vivid impression of the emotional experience the encounter can provide. Besides my own experiences, I draw on observations of, and spontaneous conversations with, other visitors. These observations were complemented by additional information gathered when participating at two public talks organized by the EJI at the visitor center opposite the memorial,² and through conversations with other citizens and staff members at several museums in Montgomery. Important sources include the numerous newspaper articles published since the memorial's inauguration. Other relevant literature was helpful to contextualize the displayed works within (art) history. Some remaining questions were

¹ In an email from the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), the organization behind the memorial, to the author (31 March 2020), the staff members underlined that what I call "stelae" is by the EJI identified as "monuments." The use of this word seems to express the will to honor the individuals represented on each stela – the single markers being a monument for the dead, like a headstone one would find in a cemetery. However, in order to not confuse the reader, I hold on to the term 'stela'.

² The EJI regards the memorial site as a place for silent contemplation. Therefore, no guided tours are offered but talks are held at the visitor center at least four times a week. Following a short introduction, visitors can ask questions and share their thoughts before or after visiting the memorial.

clarified by email conversations with the artists involved and the staff of the EJI.³

Part IV explores how *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* operates, and what is truly novel about it. I compare it to two milestones of German memory culture: Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin, 2005) and, especially, Gunther Demnig's *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones; mid-1990s ongoing). These projects all share several aesthetic and conceptual similarities. Furthermore, the EJI has been influenced by the German way of *Aufarbeitung* (coming to terms with the past).

I conclude by suggesting that the Montgomery memorial is truly transforming American memory culture – anachronistically as it may sound, by tying on to core American values that the memorial makers, and many with them who are currently reshaping the cultural landscape, see as not yet fulfilled (cp. Neiman 2019: 140–141).

Investigating this memorial site at close range shows how *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* aims to create a strong awareness of the ongoing legacy of racial discrimination in American public discourse. Thereby more general insights are revealed into how memorials can function as apt tools to rewrite national identity and work towards a broader consciousness of current injustices and inequality resulting from past events. The novel concept of the memorial proves the vitality of a genre often regarded as static and old-fashioned. With its future dissolution this memorial rethinks the monument genre, understood not as a fixed endpoint of former negotiations but as a process of societal transformation yet to come. Thus, the article contributes to discussions about the relevance of monuments in contemporary democracies, intensified since the violent events in Charlottesville in 2017 over the planned removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. As these events have shown, the nostalgic entanglement with the Confederate myth that for a long time characterized the established memorial landscape rests on a “precarious foundation” (Savage 2018 [1997]: 155). This discussion has reached another level of intensity in the nationwide protests following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 at the hands of police, many of which have seen confederate monuments and statues of prominent slaveholders toppled. *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* aims at an American identity built on more solid ground. This however demands first a close confrontation with its painful past.

II. THE NEED FOR REFURNISHING AN INCOMPLETE MEMORY LANDSCAPE

The Equal Justice Initiative and the Legacy of Lynching

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice was commissioned by the non-profit law-organization Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), founded in 1989 at a time

³ I thank Elizabeth Woodson and Josh Cannon from the EJI for answering remaining questions (emails from 26 and 31 March 2020).

when death penalties were on the rise in Alabama (Stevenson 2015 [2014]: 67–69). Bryan Stevenson was one of its founders and is still its executive director. He is the great-grandson of slaves from Virginia. His grandfather was murdered during a robbery at the age of 86 (ibid.: 267). His family history strongly influenced him. Stevenson attended Harvard Law School and became a successful lawyer and highly acclaimed human rights activist. Among his many awards is the Olof Palme International Human Rights Award, which he received in 2000. This prize is mentioned because it seems that the Swedish juridical system with its emphasis on reintegration of former inmates had made a huge impression on Stevenson (cp. ibid.: 250–253). Today, Stevenson is a well-known media figure. In 2019, he was the subject of the HBO documentary *True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality*, following the publication of his 2014 best-selling book, *Just Mercy. A Story of Justice and Redemption*, which by the end of 2019 was turned into a feature film with Michael B. Jordan.

During the last 30 years, Stevenson and the EJI have provided legal representation to illegally convicted or unfairly sentenced persons, and have challenged the death penalty, particularly when imposed on children, and aided formerly incarcerated people to reintegrate into social life (EJI's homepage; Stevenson 2015: 160, 276, 302). Beside its legal work, the EJI conducts intensive research leading to educational programs and comprehensive reports. So far, it has published three – on slavery, lynching and segregation. The report on lynching is the most relevant for this article. It is based on the analysis of existing scholarship (e.g. by E.M. Beck, Stewart E. Tolnay, Manfred Berg, Allen W. Trelease, Sherrilyn A. Ifill, Leon F. Litwack), and supplemented by research undertaken by Stevenson and a group of lawyers. For the period 1877–1950, they were able to document 800 more lynchings than previously reported: almost 4,100 in twelve Southern states and more than 300 in eight states outside the South (EJI 2017). The research continues. EJI's work is characterized by their willingness to gather and scrutinize all accessible evidence with the greatest possible accuracy, and by determination, commitment and perseverance (cp. Stevenson 2015: 164). These features also characterize the Montgomery memorial.

The EJI defines racial lynching as acts of torture and terrorism that traumatized African Americans throughout the country (Stevenson 2015: 299). These murders happened in public, largely tolerated by state and federal officials, and often attended by large crowds: "Many were carnival-like events, with vendors selling food, printers producing postcards featuring photographs of the lynching and corpse, and the victim's body parts collected as souvenirs" (EJI 2017). Together with the photographs and postcards documenting the lynchings, these public executions expressed a "triumph of a belief system that defined one people as less human than another" (Litwack in Allen 2018 [2000]: 34). Their aim was to instill fear among the black population, who were meant to feel inferior, and to hinder their striving towards privileges regarded for whites only: education, civil rights, security, wealth and power. Committed by ordinary, often respected citizens, these acts were effective tools to uphold segregation – in fact a strictly maintained racial caste system,

rooted in the idea of white supremacy (Stevenson 2015: 16). Lynching, and the threat of being lynched, restricted black advancement, independence and citizenship (Ifill 2018 [2007]: XVII).

These crimes had lasting consequences: lynching and other forms of violent intimidation in the South traumatized millions of black people and fueled mass migration. From 1910 until the 1970s, almost six million African Americans fled the South to urban areas in the Northeast, West and Midwest where they were less exposed to physical violence. The newcomers worked hard and often managed to get higher paying jobs than many blacks who were born in the North (Wilkerson 2011: 528, 530–531). Yet they shared similar experiences with foreign refugees: of being unwanted outsiders facing the hardships of establishing new livelihoods (EJI 2017). The difference was that they were immigrants in their own country. Some of their ancestors had been in these lands before the US was even founded, having arrived 400 years earlier (Wilkerson 2011: 531, 537). It “took their leaving the South to achieve the citizenship they deserved by their ancestry and labors alone. That freedom and those rights had not come automatically, as they should have, but centuries late and of the migrants’ own accord” (ibid.: 538). The feeling of abandonment profoundly shaped black communities across generations.

In her thought-provoking book, provocatively titled *Learning from the Germans. Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil* (2019), American philosopher Susan Neiman contrasts Germany’s response to the Holocaust with America’s response to slavery. She is not interested in comparing the evils committed but in comparing how the two nations responded to these crimes. While the German situation with the following partition of the country and the decades-long occupation means that it is not a model easy to apply, other nations can still look to (West) Germany for orientation. The lesson to be learned above all is that *Aufarbeitung* is not a linear process. It takes time, and includes failure, backlash and conflict. According to Neiman, this painful and frustrating process is as necessary as it is worthwhile: confronting the crimes committed has the potential to make a nation more mature and better equipped to handle contemporary challenges.

Similarly, the EJI is led by the idea that the inflicted suffering of millions of victims needs to be adequately recognized by the majority population and incorporated into the official national narrative.⁴ According to the EJI, it is important to address enslavement, lynching and segregation because they continue to result in economic, social and legal inequality that shape America’s demographics to this day. In order to implement a greater awareness of these historic legacies and to correct and complete the established national narrative, the EJI makes their research findings accessible through various forms of outreach activities. Influenced by the German *Aufarbeitung* and the work undertaken by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa,

⁴ See EJI’s short clip “Why are memorial to lynching victims important?” <https://eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/> (accessed March 31, 2020).

Bryan Stevenson is convinced that memorials and museums are suitable tools to establish trust between unfairly treated communities and the government institutions that have failed them. Monuments to Civil Rights activists can help to correct the distorted national narrative, but they do not give a complete history. The EJI considers it necessary to erect public markers commemorating lynching as visible signs of recognition that provide a more accurate and complete picture of American history and allows conciliation as a precondition for a just society (Robertson 2018).

Montgomery's Conflicted and Contested Memory Landscape

In 1819, Alabama was admitted to the union as the 22nd US state. Some 40 years later, Montgomery had become the state's center of the domestic slave trade. In 1861, it was here that Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as the first, and only, president of the Confederate States of America. Montgomery was the capital of this provisional government and is listed as such on the National Register of Historic Places. Davis's bronze statue on a granite plinth looks out from the white shining Capitol Hill, not far from the First White House of the Confederacy, which was moved to this site in 1921. This is not the only Confederate image in, on or around the state capital. For more than 150 years, the American South's memory culture has been dominated by the heritage of the Confederacy. The Alabama Confederate Monument close to the Davis statue is just one, monumental, example (for images, see slide show).

In the 100 years between Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, monuments and public markers that celebrate the Civil War (1861–5) were raised in Montgomery, as well as across the state and across the country. Almost two thousand exist in the US today, 108 in Alabama.⁵ Confederate commemoration rests on the idea of white dominance. The purified idea of white valor was also widely accepted by many white Northerners (Savage 2018: 157). Confederate monuments acted as sites of annual commemorations and were especially important during Civil War anniversary events. Memorial sites of significance are also re-commemorated in everyday life on souvenirs such as postcards, metal drink trays and tea towels, or caps for children – the latter still on sale in the Capitol's Goat Hill Museum Store. Confederate memorabilia continue to decorate Southern homes.

Side by side with Confederate monuments are statues and markers that are harder to decode but which likewise uphold the ideas and values of the former slave-owner society. This is the case for example with the statue of James Marion Sims in front of the Capitol in Montgomery, installed in 1939. The inscription celebrates Sims as the father of gynecology, as does a public marker downtown, raised in 1994 in front of his former office. Nothing reveals that his writing of "surgical history," as stated on the marker, was based on

⁵ The EJI has developed a graphic map that collects Confederate markers according to their date of dedication and placement. The map illustrates the dominance of the Confederate iconography over the landscape (<https://segregationinamerica.eji.org/iconography>; accessed December 8, 2019).

experiments conducted on enslaved women and children, treating them as racially inferior. While his New York sculpture was removed in 2018 (Holland 2018), Sims remains elevated in Montgomery. Such sculptures make up a deceitful landscape. The danger emanates from their installation in the public sphere, which invests them with a degree of authority and bestows them with the potential to influence audiences. Given their predominance they continue to define which values and ideas are on display in the public arena.

Wanting to reflect the plurality of their societies, many American communities today are addressing the social issues raised by Confederate monuments. More and more understand them as purposeful celebrations of a fictional and sanitized history that ignores the reasons for the Civil War, ensuring slavery, and comprehend that these publicly erected markers transport clear messages of intimidation. So did New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu when the city, after two years of community dialogues, public hearings and judicial review, removed four Confederate monuments in May 2017 (Landrieu 2017). The removal of statues often presents a legal challenge because at the time they were erected Southern states passed laws requiring official approval to move, remove or alter these works (Brundage 2017). The legal situation risks freezing a status quo of how history should be commemorated, privileging a one-sided image of the past.

The prevailing presence of Confederate monuments and the values they uphold remain problematic, especially in sites where they are the only markers commemorating the past, while slavery, segregation and lynching are absent from the landscape. Until *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* was erected in 2018, there was no monument to commemorate the thousands of lynching victims in the US. A few memorials were erected to single events, such as the *Lynching Memorial* in Duluth, Minnesota (2003), but most sites where these murders were committed were, and remain, unmarked. This is also true for Montgomery.⁶

However, the city does not only display Confederate history. Montgomery is duly celebrated as the birthplace of the modern American Civil Rights Movement, and numerous historic sites associated with it can be found on the National Register of Historic Places. It was here that Rosa Parks's refusal to move from her seat started the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. A museum, opened in 2000, is dedicated to her and the 55,000 men and women who joined the 13-month long boycott that led to the ending of segregation on public transport in 1956, if only in Montgomery. The fight, taken up again in 1961 by the Freedom Riders, which succeeded in ending segregated interstate travel, is reflected in another museum at the former Greyhound Bus Station.

⁶ The EJI claims that the three public reminders of slavery raised on their initiative in 2013 were the first in Montgomery. However, I walked by markers erected in central public spaces that are reminders of slavery and were erected prior to 2013 (e.g. one from 2001 near the fountain in central Montgomery). It seems that much of the current developments – from memory culture to city renewal, is assigned solely to the EJI. As *Aufarbeitung* is a process which takes time and many participants, the EJI's achievement should be acknowledged in relation to earlier developments.

Martin Luther King, Jr., who became the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, pastored in Montgomery from 1956 to 1960. His home can be visited as well as the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, a building with National Historic Landmark status, the highest designation for historic preservation in the US. Montgomery is also the home of institutions such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (founded in 1971), another non-profit legal advocacy organization which documents hate crimes. It sponsored Maya Lin's *Civil Rights Memorial*, dedicated in 1989 in downtown, followed by the memorial center in 2005.

More recently, other events and personalities have been highlighted. In 2019 a public marker was erected to honor the long-overlooked artist Bill Traylor. Born into slavery, Traylor died in Montgomery in 1949. His art became the subject of an exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, in 2018. That there is a will to integrate conflicting histories into a more inclusive narrative is also reflected in the remaking of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Alabama at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, opened as *Alabama Voices* in 2014.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is placed on a low hill overlooking the city. From this position, visitors may envision the river where the enslaved were sold and shipped to other ports. If one knows how to read the memorial in relation to its surroundings, the new memorial would face a complex memorial landscape: Montgomery as both the cradle of the Confederacy and the birthplace of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The memorial challenges these two colliding narratives of celebratory character. It could hardly be realized without the foregoing developments, but it was also a reaction to what was still missing: the open confrontation of the destructive legacy of racial discrimination in the US. Instead of war and glory, denial or one-sided celebrations of the past, it offers a sobering encounter with history in a carefully composed environment that crafts the historic injustices of slavery, lynching and racial violence, reminding us of suppression, poverty and death while recognizing resistance and resilience.

EJI's willingness to openly broach neglected past events and invite performative interaction is already demonstrated in the photos on the façade of the Legacy Museum – From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, which was inaugurated in tandem with the memorial, as well as the window display of the EJI's office. Both are situated in Downtown, in the Alley, where many of the city's restaurants can be found. Even those who have no intention of visiting the museum or the memorial will be captured by the displayed images exposing the consequences of racial discrimination, from slavery to today's overrepresentation of black people in prisons. The photos are effective, especially in the dark, when people are on their way to the restaurants, or to the museum, which is the only one in Montgomery open late. Thus, the memorial is not the only tool the EJI uses to correct and complete American identity. Both museum and memorial can be seen as physical manifestations of the EJI's research on slavery, lynching, segregation and mass incarceration. They clearly make a statement about the importance of visualizing neglected histories, driven by the conviction that only a confrontation of this dreadful past

can lead to a different future. The shuttle buses between the museum and the memorial act as mobile reminders of their existence and additional tools to mediate their message.

III. NO WALK IN THE PARK – WALKING THROUGH *THE NATIONAL MEMORIAL FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE*

While the memorial and the legacy museum can be visited independently, and each is worth seeing in its own right, there is obviously a connection between the two. It takes about 15 minutes to walk from the museum to the memorial, and many tourists visit both. There is also a free shuttle service between them.

Walking from downtown, one passes the memorial garden with its brick wall remembering the skilled slaves who built the city theatre in 1860. After purchasing a ticket at the visitor center across the street, one enters the memorial through a wood-lined passageway where the following words from Martin Luther King, Jr. state: “True peace is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice.” Already here a mission is postulated, which is then retrieved in the designed memorial landscape and reaffirmed through quotes and inscriptions.

The walk up and from the central monument directs the visitor past several figurative sculptures, giving physical form to or textural information on the history of slavery in the US, from the earliest transatlantic crossings via the Middle Passage until the end of the domestic slave trade and its continuation by other means such as convict leasing, along the Civil Rights Movement, and today’s police violence against blacks and people of color. The sculptural works are placed within a 6-acre park. This landscape offers a well-choreographed memorial walk, but it is no walk in the park. The carefully designed landscape introduces the visitor to a painful past and present injustices, insisting that lynching cannot be understood outside the context of slavery, nor separated from its aftermath.

The first work encountered is the vivid and dramatic sculpture group *Nkiyinkyim* by Ghanaian artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo (Figures 2–4). The title indicates that this group is part of a larger, ongoing project that the artist started in 2006 with the same name, dedicated to the enslavement of Africans.⁷ The Akan word *Nkiyinkyim* refers to the twists and turns which occur during a lifetime, and the adaptability and resilience these hardships demand. From a distance one may assume that the sculptures are made of bronze, but they are crafted in synthetic resin, reinforced by fiberglass and wrought iron,

⁷ For the larger project *Nkiyinkyim* see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC0ZPCJveO4> (accessed January 23, 2020). My text is based on a WhatsApp voicemail conversation with the artist on January 22, 2020. As Bamfo told me, there was insufficient time to cast the sculpture in bronze. The patina was intended to resemble bronze, but it was hard for the artist to anticipate how the local weather conditions would affect the work. The flaking of the patina, which I noticed, were, however, intended by the artist. Bamfo did not receive his visa in time to attend the inauguration of his work.

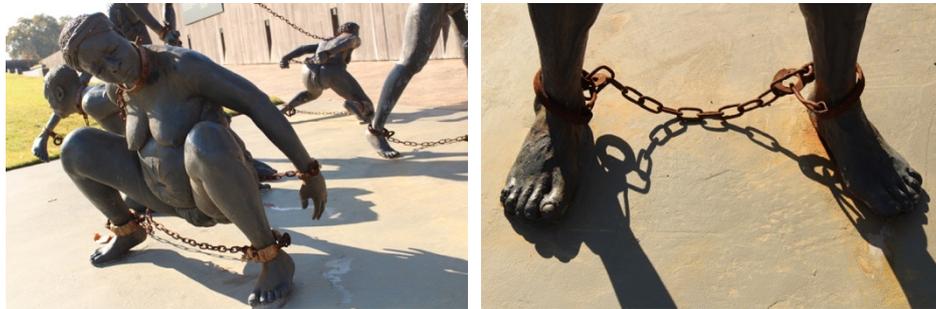
covered with a patina. The group consists of six adults, among them a woman holding a baby. Almost naked, they are all clearly suffering, having been dragged away from their loved ones. The empty metal shackles on the floor do not indicate freedom as the broken shackles in many sculptures after the end of slavery do (cp. Savage 2018, e.g. 63, 74, 78, 86). Here they indicate that someone has already been sold into slavery. The others are next. The baby is crying. All adults are terrified about what is happening to them. The man turns away in shame from his wife and child as he is unable to protect them. The people represent different ages and status within their society: “The very muscular guy has tribal marks that identify him. The big woman has marks on her belly. The teenager has a specific hairstyle that identifies her as an ‘Akan’ royal. There are certain clues that show you that nobody was free from slavery,” as the artist described it (*The Root*). The shackles that ties them together in their misery are replicas of historic chains found at the Cape Coast Slave Castle (ibid.). The visitor meets the chains’ bleeding reddish color again when walking through the stelae that make up the main monument (cp. Laquer 2018).



Figure 2.

It was deemed important that the first sculpture the visitor meets would be figurative, as the main monument, on the hill, is abstract (Helm 2018). But the work’s importance exceeds its stylistic choice and function within the memorial park. Although not intended by the artist, the title, the composition of the group, representing different ages, their expressive gestures, as well as its placement on the ground, *Nkiyinkyim* calls to mind Auguste Rodin’s *Burgheers of Calais* from 1889. This resemblance arises from the successful combination of both despair and dignity that Akoto-Bamfo bestows on his protagonists. Both artists depict scenes from a threshold, a departure from the life known

to uncertainty and most likely cruelty and death (Bünemann 1964: 6, 18). Akoto-Bamfo succeeds in inscribing enslaved people into art history with the same implicitness seen in Rodin's iconic sculpture group. It should be remembered that Rodin's work was initially not widely appreciated (ibid.: 8, 10). He had to redefine what 'heroic' meant, here understood as sacrificing oneself for the community (ibid.: 6). In Akoto-Bamfo's case, 'heroic' means preserving one's dignity and humanity even when enslaved. This is of crucial importance. In his groundbreaking book *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves* (1997), Kirk Savage explains how hard the South worked to erase the memory of slavery from their reconstructed history. The black body was not depicted in Confederate monuments. 'Lost Cause' narratives, which began to appear during the Reconstruction era and Jim Crow, recognized a South without "the moral impediment of slavery" – a reality that never existed (Savage 2018 [1997]: 130), leaving Southerners to romanticize the war and, at the same time, pull back on recently won political and social freedoms for African Americans who would lose much of the newly gained ground in the succeeding decades. Thus, representing the black body at all can be regarded as a form of emancipation (ibid.: 16). Today, in ways large and small across memorials and museums, the black body is being archeologically excavated, reshaped in bronze and returned to the landscape from which their history, memory and identity was erased.⁸



Figures 3 & 4.

However, the achievement of Akoto-Bamfo's ensemble and its contribution to art history is more profound. Savage demonstrates that the classical tradition of sculpture was "devoted to the human body in its most noble and

⁸ The desire to restore the visibility of slavery and its impact on American memory is expressed in many places across the South, including: the Whitney Plantation, opened in December 2014 (Louisiana, <https://www.whitneyplantation.com/>), the McLeod Plantation Historic Site, opened in April 2015 (South Carolina, <https://www.ccprc.com/1447/McLeod-Plantation-Historic-Site>), and the exhibit *The Mere Distinction of Colour* at James Madison's Montpelier, opened in June 2017 (Virginia, <https://www.montpelier.org/resources/mere-distinction-of-colour>), to give only three examples.

divine form. The body, in effect, was a metaphor for mastery, and slavery was the very antithesis of that ideal” (Savage 2018: 14–15). Some rare examples, created just before or after Reconstruction, demonstrate the challenge faced by artists when representing the liberation of former slaves, the liminal position of the freed on the edge of a new social order (ibid.: 55). In contrast, Akoto-Bamfo reconfigures the enslaved body and in fact contributes to the sculptural tradition by depicting the transition of a free individual forced into slavery. He succeeds in representing the very moment when human beings are stripped of their universal human rights. Although displaying their distress and suffering, Akoto-Bamfo succeeds in bestowing the enslaved with a sense of agency and dignity.

Such a reinvention of the sculptural tradition was postponed for more than a hundred years after tentative attempts around the time of the Civil War had failed (cp. Savage 2018: 50, 53–55, 82–83). By displaying the enslaved with similar despair and anguish as well as the same level of dignity and humanity as Rodin’s *Burghers of Calais*, Akoto-Bamfo opposes and overcomes a classical fixation on the white body as heroic and ideal. He writes the black, enslaved body into art history, not as the eternal Other, but as individualized human being. In this way, Akoto-Bamfo emancipates public sculpture itself.

After the encounter with this first impressive sculpture at the foot of the main monument, the visitor turns around and faces a series of gray text panels occupying most of the concrete walls that surround large parts of the memorial. These texts, as the signposts giving walking instructions, are mostly invisible on the highly aestheticized photos one can find online,⁹ and in fact, the text panels are delicately integrated into the memorial’s design. They inform visitors about slavery’s deathly consequences and the wealth it brought to Europeans and white Americans, about slavery’s continuation by other means after the Civil War, namely labor exploitation through sharecropping and convict leasing, which implied the criminalization of former slaves for minor offenses (cp. Stevenson 2015: 299; on convict leasing see Blackmon 2009), and about terror lynching as a tool to sustain racial hierarchy, leading to mass migration and the traumatizing of African Americans throughout the US, to poverty and overrepresentation in prisons to this day. Visitors pause, sit down on the benches provided and read the long texts carefully.

Moved by the encounter with *Nkiyinkyim* and full of new knowledge, one walks slowly along the marked-out, gradually descending zig-zag path up to the main monument. From a distance, the dominant view of the memorial’s central space reveals a pavilion, reminiscent of a classical Greek temple or Mies van der Rohe’s National Gallery in Berlin from 1968. The main monument evokes architectural references that can be read art historically as a critical reflection on Western civilization, with its imagined beginning in an idealized white Greek Antiquity and its supposed superiority. This heritage

⁹ This is the case for the newspaper articles consulted for this article; see also images on TripAdvisor (https://www.tripadvisor.se/Attraction_Review-g30712-d13977560-Reviews-National_Memorial_for_Peace_and_Justice-Montgomery_Alabama.html#photos;aggregationId=&albumid=101&filter=7 (accessed May 6, 2020).

roof with all its accomplishments also houses a history of atrocities against humanity (cp. Neiman 2019: 184). Coming closer, one realizes that this architectural structure testifies to one of them.



Figures 5 & 6.

The pavilion consists of a multitude of rectangular russet-toned, 6-foot corten steel stelae, most of them covered under the roof. The stelae are engraved with the names of the county and state where lynchings took place, the names of the victim(s), if known, and the date of the murder. At this stage, the visitor encounters the stelae at eye level (Figures 5 & 6). Names are easily readable, and the stelae may be touched (Yawn 2018). This creates an intimate relationship with the work. In their shape, the stelae remind us of headstones – a pointed reference, considering that lynching victims were rarely given a proper funeral or gravesite (Robertson 2018). The size of the stelae thereby acts symbolically, in a double sense: its length corresponds to the average height of a male body (5 feet 10 inches/1.78 m), and together with the rectangular shape the stelae remind us of coffins. Traditionally, coffins are buried six feet under but here the stelae are placed in a vertical position confronting the visitor at eye-level. The visitors may discover the names of their home counties, or places they have visited, realizing the magnitude of the murders. During my visits I overheard conversations that reveal that the sheer quantity of killings, and how widespread they were in the country, occupies many people. They may have heard about lynching, but many would have had no knowledge of their scope, nor how long they lasted. As I walk through the stelae forest, encountering more and more names, the enormity of the cruelties presses on me. This new information becomes embodied knowledge that leaves a deep emotional impression (cp. Ater 2018, homepage; Chandler

2018). The main monument's stelae are constructed in such a way that the wooden floor's patina will darken when the rain washes the russet tones down the stelae, thereby "enforcing the staining legacy of lynching" in the US (Trent 2019: 137).

As one walks on and enters the second corridor, the floor descends, and slowly the stelae rise. Having first walked up the hill with the sky above, overlooking the neighborhood, one enters the inner structure, and the horizon disappears out of sight. This creates a feeling of being more and more enclosed and overwhelmed by the architecture. With each step, I feel smaller. New perspectives are given, the names of the counties appear now under the hanging stelae. Visitors' steps echo from the wooden floor. For security reasons, dripping boxes are installed on the floor, under the stelae, to guide blind people through the sinking forest, and prevent them from colliding with the stelae hanging from the roof.

At the corner of the second and the third corridors, all stelae are hanging above the visitor. What began as an experience of standing in front of 'gravestones' transitions into an intimidating and fraught formation of the stelae hanging above the visitors. Although the memorial is abstract, visitors may recall images from their individual image repertoire while walking through. Photos of tortured lynching victims hanging in trees, from bridges and at lampposts seen in history books, documentaries or at museums may appear in one's imagination, adding an additional layer to the built environment. Others may recall Billy Holliday's *Strange Fruit*, composed in 1939 (cp. Trent 2019: 134). Being reminded of that song, both its sound and its lyrics, influences of course the experience of the visual, associating the hanging stelae with the tortured lynching victims.

On the concrete walls, embedded text panels offer short accounts of why people became targets of lynching: for having protested for fair wages, for having achieved some sort of progress, for having performed a marriage between a white woman and a black man, for having practiced the right to vote, for being the wife or child of a man suspected for a crime, simply for being black and not behaving appropriately in the eyes of a complaining white. The weight of history, death and misuse of power can easily overwhelm the visitor (Figure 7). With the weight of the stelae above, it is hard to digest the absurdity of the accusations, to swallow the bitterness over the injustice and cruelty innocent people were exposed to.

In the end-corner, opposite an amphitheater-like structure where one can sit and pause, at the core of the memorial, one encounters what can be regarded its dedication: the commitment to remember and to overcome (Figure 8). It reads,

For the hanged and beaten.
 For the shot, drowned, and burned.
 For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized.
 For those abandoned by the rule of law.

We will remember.

With hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice.
With courage because peace requires bravery.
With persistence because justice is a constant struggle.
With faith because we shall overcome.



Figure 7.

Water flows down the last corridor's outer concrete wall, displaying a single sentence which honors those unknown and unnamed murder victims: "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." Here, the sound of the water, first heard upon entering the pavilion, has a sobering effect.

Further down the alley stands a showcase containing soil collected from twelve different lynching sites, hinting at the Community Remembrance Projects organized by the EJI since 2015. In contrast to the otherwise carefully designed environment, this component seems misplaced. The showcase acts intentionally as a disturbing element that points out to an ongoing need to confront this past, delving into history, bringing further knowledge to the surface.

After passing the showcase, one can walk out and up into an open space surrounded by the four corridors one has just passed through (Figure 9). The Memorial Square in the atrium acts as a reminder that these acts of terrorism regularly happened on public squares and courthouse lawns, often in broad daylight. Corpses were left to rot in order to intimidate and threaten black people and to embolden whites to act against them without fear of punishment. Standing on the Memorial Square, the visitor is again on the same level or

even above the stelae, but now standing under the clear blue sky. The relief I felt after escaping the haunting atmosphere of the hanging stelae disappears quickly. I now become aware of my changed position: exposed, on public display, visible to others still on the inside, hidden in the underground stelae forest. With a powerful sense of discomfort, I rush down the hill again, leaving the pavilion.



Figure 8.

Once more, the respite is short-lived. Just after the exit, there is a passage from Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* encouraging black people to not lose self-respect despite all the cruelty inflicted on their bodies throughout history:

... and o my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.

After reading the quote and turning around, the view opens onto the field of duplicate stelae lying in the Monument Park. A sign informs us about the future dissolution of this part of the memorial when the counties in which lynching occurred claim and erect the stelae that commemorates the event that once happened in their community. We will come back to the take-away twin.



Figure 9.

Visitors cross the field of more than 800 stelae, and can then rest on one of the low, cylindrical concrete plinths in the Ida B. Wells Memorial Grove, a tribute to the human rights activist and journalist who at the beginning on the 20th century revealed that the lynching mania had spread nationwide, from the South to the North and middle West.¹⁰ From this spot in the shadow of the pines, one might contemplate why it took almost 120 years before Wells's fundamental insight became manifest in a monument of this scale and dignity.

The path leads further towards statues of three women determinedly approaching. Dana King's bronze *Guided by Justice* (2018) honors, in particular, the resilience of those women who participated in the 13-month-long Montgomery bus boycott in 1955–6 (Figure 10). The figures represent women of different ages, the youngest pregnant, the oldest clearly marked by age.¹¹

¹⁰ In May 2020, Ida B. Wells received the Pulitzer Prize retroactively for her courageous reporting on the violence committed against African Americans during the era of lynching. A compilation of her writings can be found in: Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynching*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 2014. See also Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely. The Life of Ida B. Wells*. New York: Hill and Wang 2009.

¹¹ Dana King has modeled the elderly woman after her great-great-grandmother who was enslaved. The tall woman with the glasses was modeled after her aunt who



Figure 10.

On the ground, among the figures, are three pairs of bronze footprints. They seem to invite passers-by to join the women. However, these footprints were incorrectly installed, and originally pointed in the opposite direction (Figure 11).¹² Given that the arrangement of the footprints during my visit in November 2019 allows a particularly convincing reading, I start with this interpretation but revisit it vis-à-vis King's intended composition in Part IV.

Walking through the memorial, visitors are exposed to the violent treatments experienced by African Americans throughout centuries. In contrast, King's sculpture group and its invitation to stand among the women allows one to feel joy, pride and hope. What first appears as a concession to the self-image is indeed a powerful symbolic gesture. To join the group of women by stepping in their shoes establishes a vivid connection with the positive spirit that characterized the movement and the 55,000 men and women who participated in it. Unlike the captured men and women in Akoto-Bamfo's piece, these women were able to employ a scope of action. They resisted – with success. Their non-violent fight was taken over by the Freedom Fighters. Their march continued, literally, on the 54-mile civil rights protest from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 in which 25,000 people participated, and which raised awareness of the need for a national Voting Rights Act.

worked as an educator in the segregated South. All information is based on an email conversation with the artist in November 2019.

¹² Images on the artist's homepage reveal the original installation, pointing in the opposite direction. They were incorrectly re-installed after construction work at the site, as confirmed via an email conversation with Dana King in November 2019. Most likely, the artist's intention will soon be implemented, and this composition will then lead to an entirely different interpretation as discussed in Part IV.



Figure 11.

Among the many markers in Montgomery reminding us of these events, King's sculpture group raises particular associations with the footsteps on the asphalt close to the Capitol, where the march from Selma ended (Figures 12 & 13). Despite all prevailing injustices, the Civil Rights Movement has indeed made great achievements.

Joining the women, stepping onto the footprints, the visitor faces the field of stelae. It seems as if the women say: "Get this done!" Instead of being overwhelmed by despair in the face of the memory work waiting, I felt energized by their determination, encouraged to continue their non-violent struggle, trusting that we too can face today's challenge, and bring about change by establishing a new movement, spreading knowledge and erecting public markers throughout the US.



Figures 12 & 13.

But the memorial does not release the visitor on this optimistic note. The walk continues. Circumventing the main memorial, following the zig-zag walk now slowly descending, one passes a final sculpture: Hank Willis Thomas's *Raise Up* from 2016. The original small-size bronze piece from 2014 is usually displayed with the faces turned towards the gallery's white walls so that the men are viewed from behind.¹³ The enlarged version is encountered face on, walking towards them. It is open to several interpretations.

Ten pairs of arms reach up to the air. The men's eyes are closed (Figures 14-16). Some of their heads are sunk into the concrete wall. The work conveys the feeling of impotence experienced especially by black men in police controls. This sensation that many African Americans are familiar with is suitably expressed by Bryan Stevenson: "Constantly being suspected, accused, watched, doubted, distrusted, presumed guilty, and even feared" (Stevenson 2015: 301). Associations with police controls may arise, particularly in the dark (see slide show).¹⁴ During the day, one might read the sculpture as a more general statement about injustices against African Americans during the last 400 years.

Again, it seems important to encounter a figurative work which depicts fully individualized portraits, reminding the visitors that behind each figure who was tortured, murdered, persecuted, or discriminated against stands an individual. Together, the memorial's sculptures are an invitation to start deeper conversations about ongoing inequalities and their historical roots. Against the city's silhouette with its complex history and as the last sculpture in this memorial landscape, the title *Raise Up* sounds as an appeal to continue the struggle for justice.



Figures 14, 15

¹³ See artist's homepage: <https://www.hankwillisthomas.com/WORKS/Sculpture/18> (accessed March 10, 2020).

¹⁴ According to Picard the work is "based on a photograph by Ernest Cole of 13 South African miners as they undergo a humiliating group medical examination in the nude" and "stands as a reminder of police brutality and racial bias in the US criminal justice system" (2019).



Figure 16.

This interpellation reappears in the memorial's very last element. The remaining part of the walk leads back towards the entrance. Not far from the exit stands a black granite displaying Elizabeth Alexander's poem *Invocation*. The poem was written specifically for the memorial site on request of the EJI.¹⁵ Its title is without doubt significant, as is the pillar's upright position and the distinctness of the wording. Together, these elements act as an exclamation mark set in stone, underlining once more the memorial makers' commitment to remember, entreating the visitor to do the same, and act on the insights gained by walking through the site. *Invocation* reads,

The wind brings your names.
We will never dissever your names
nor your shadows beneath each branch and tree.

The truth comes in on the wind, is carried by water.
There is such a thing as the truth. Tell us
how you got over. Say, Soul I look back in wonder.

Your names were never lost,
each name a holy word.
The rocks cry out—

call out each name to sanctify this place.
Sounds in human voices, silver or soil,
a moan, a sorrow song,

¹⁵ According to an email by Michael Shattner (Senior Executive Assistant to the President, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) on behalf of Elizabeth Alexander from May 11, 2020.

a keen, a cackle, harmony,
a hymnal, handbook, chart,
a sacred text, a stomp, an exhortation.

Ancestors, you will find us still in cages,
despised and disciplined.
You will find us still mis-named.

Here you will find us despite.
You will not find us extinct.
You will find us here memoried and storied.

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

Here you endure and are luminous.
You are not lost to us.
The wind carries sorrows, sighs, and shouts.

The wind brings everything. Nothing is lost.

The white lettering on black granite, in contrast to the familiar black ink on white paper, hints at the memorial's symbolic complexity as well as its consistency. While appearing to follow established monument traditions, much in *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is in fact reversed: African Americans, so far widely marginalized in public sculpture, are in this memorial the only ones represented. And they are represented by black artists. All quotes are by African American civil rights activists or writers. Instead of the white marble or granite used since Antiquity, which dominate in Confederate Monuments, the sculptures are created in different materials evoking numerous shades of black and brown.

Given that the poem expresses the belief that its own chosen form of remembrance is reinstalling the victims with dignity, I read it here, just before leaving the site, as EJI's hope to have accomplished just that: of having provided a worthy form of commemoration for the lynching victims. And indeed, visitors and critics alike seem to agree that the EJI has succeeded in creating an outstanding memorial. The walk's thoughtfully designed choreography combines aspects of a history lesson with that of a theater performance, that indeed moves visitors, literally through space, and, by its forms and its composition, emotionally. Given the horrific cruelties it commemorates, it is remarkable that the memorial's overall impression is nevertheless one of elegance and dignity.

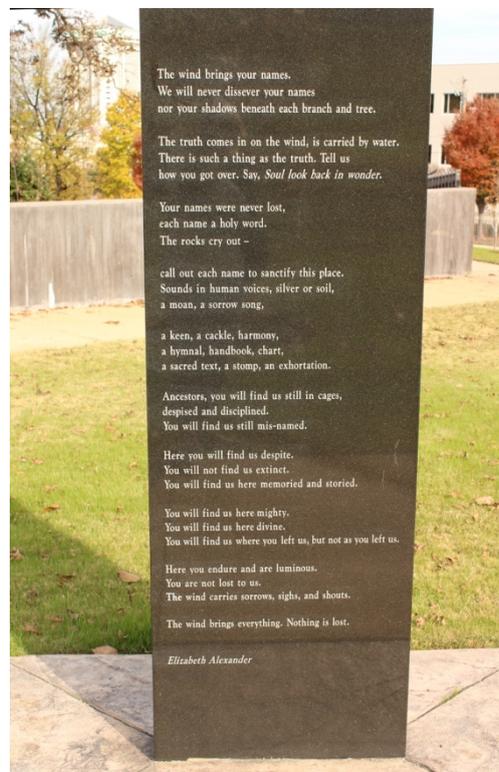


Figure 17.

IV. THE MEMORIAL AND ITS TAKE-AWAY TWIN

In line with the genre's tradition, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* acts as a reminder of the past, viewed through the lens of our contemporary norms and values, driven by the desire to establish a better society. Raised up on a hill, it performs as an everlasting aide-mémoire of a past, intended not to evoke adoration but acting as a reminder of painful historic events which demand public assessment. The Montgomery memorial thereby follows a now established tradition in democracies where monuments confront national shame, guilt, grief, trauma and loss rather than celebrating heroic moments, triumphs or military glory (Doss 2010: 258, 264, 303). The twentieth century, marked by wars and genocide, led to new forms of expression. Abstract monuments often aim to visualize the wound and loss that traumatic events have left behind, as exemplified by Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Washington, D.C., 1982) and Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (Berlin, 2005).

Eisenman's work with its field of concrete blocks and the information center beneath clearly influenced the Montgomery memorial both stylistically and conceptually (Figure 18). Combining monuments with knowledge transfer has become quite common, as seen in other recent projects such as Michael

Arad's 9/11 memorial in New York from 2011 with its adjacent museum (Sodaro 2018). The strength in using such a combination points to the general capabilities of each. Simplified, a museum can provide the comprehensive facts needed to understand complex historic events, while a monument offers foremost emotional engagement (and historically, a site for official ceremonies). Compared to Eisenman's monument that leaves the knowledge transfer to the information center, the Montgomery memorial has not only a strong connection to the nearby Legacy Museum but provides itself extensive textual information.



Figure 18: Peter Eisenman, *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, Berlin 2005

Its rusty stelae further include the names of the victims and thus make the architectonic forms more personalized than Eisenman's concrete blocks. The major difference between the Montgomery and the Berlin memorials is, however, that the latter is public and accessible. Signs caution visitors to behave appropriately and, occasionally, guards remind visitors to be respectful. But no one can control behavior within such a monumental structure where people can move around freely day and night. Scenes appear that some will find disturbing, given the monument's purpose, namely to commemorate the Nazi genocide on the European Jews, yet people play hide-and-seek among the stelae in the uneven labyrinth or pose for selfies (cp. Stevens & Franck 2016: 121–129). In Montgomery, too, several signs remind visitors that they have entered a sacred space that demands respectful conduct (Ater 2018,

Panorama). Given that *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is gated and can be visited only during opening hours on payment of an entrance fee and after passing through the security check with a metal detector, the signs forbidding visitors from bringing skateboards or bicycles seem superfluous. Only water is allowed.

The carefully designed path leads the visitor through the memorial on a prescribed route. The repeated signs reminding visitors how to behave, and which path to follow, can at times be perceived as intrusive. But they seem to achieve their purpose. And no one is prevented from going back to revisit a particular sculpture or from starting the walk anew. However, once the visitor has left, he or she cannot reenter without purchasing a new ticket. Inside, the design of the whole area with its descending and ascending ground levels makes people walk slowly. Few visitors talk and if they do, it is quietly. The many benches, whose shape in fact recalls Eisenman's simple rectangular blocks (see Figure 21), encourage visitors to sit down and read the texts available. Especially towards the end of the walk, having passed Willis Thomas's *Raise Up*, numerous benches invite contemplation of the raised subjects further.

A fence and a concrete wall surround the site. Staff and security guards both inside and outside watch out for trespassers. The presence of these regulations discourages inappropriate behavior or vandalism.¹⁶ It is important to note that the fence and the surrounding wall do not interfere with the memorial's aesthetics as it is placed on a hill, allowing views inside for passersby as well as views outside to the historic neighborhood of Cottage Hill with its Old Chip A.M.E. Zion Church and the wooden family houses (Figures 19–21).



Figures 19 & 20.

¹⁶ One of the security guards told me that they started to surveille the memorial day and night after intruders jumped over the low fence, and sprayed graffiti and hate slogans on the monument the night after the opening. Since then, to my knowledge, no further acts of vandalism have occurred.



Figure 21.

The Stolpersteine and The Memorial for Peace and Justice

At first sight, Gunther Demnig's *Stolpersteine* seem fundamentally different from *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*. Obviously, they are much smaller: simple blocks of concrete with brass plates measuring approximately 4×4 inches (10×10 centimeters), modestly integrated into the pavement (Figure 22). In contrast, the stelae are giants with a height of six feet, placed in the central space of the permanent monument where they hang from the roof, appearing, as we have seen, even larger. The major objection to a comparison, however, concerns not size but placement. The stumbling stones are not situated in a detached memorial site that one actively chooses to visit. Instead they are inserted in the ground in front of the houses where victims of Nazi persecution had lived before they were arrested, deported or killed. In this sphere of everyday life where people come across them accidentally, the stones arouse the thought-provoking impulse to remember crimes committed under Nazi rule. Admittedly, the permanent memorial in Montgomery is placed in a protected environment. However, the individual 'twins' of the stela, which will be relocated in the future, will, like the *Stolpersteine*, appear in public spaces, accessible to everybody, filling similar functions, exposed to similar difficulties. It is above all the conceptual similarities of the two projects that motivates the following exegesis.



Figure 22: *Stolpersteine* in Babelsberg. Photo: Kai-Britt Albrecht, Potsdam, Germany.

From its inception in the mid-1990s, Gunter Demnig had no precise plan about how many *Stolpersteine* would ever be laid during his lifetime, or after. Actually, his project started off illegally (Hesse 2017: 89, 105). Over the last three decades, it has developed into the most widespread memorial commemorating victims of Nazi persecution. Today, more than 70,000 stones are installed in 24 countries all over Europe, meeting the necessary legal requirements and with widespread official support. The project can be described as national in so far as the *Stolpersteine* span thousands of cities all over Germany, and as transnational, as the stones appear in countries all over Europe (ibid., in particular: 18, 381). Its spread reflects the scope of the Nazi rule during World War II as well as the comprehensive interest in commemorating these crimes today. The decentralized, supranational character of this (trans)national memorial is highlighted by the fact that the different initiatives behind the stones often network with each other (ibid.: 350).

Over time, the meaning and significance of the *Stolpersteine* has to some degree evolved. The stones still have the potential to act as thought-provoking impulses in everyday life, but given their dispersal, many people recognize single stones as *pars pro toto* of the larger project, and as such as hints to a larger community, an otherwise invisible but nevertheless existing community, a community of values. Through laying single stones people have expressed their common commitment to remember the Nazi atrocities and their will to be guided by this commitment in their daily life.

In contrast, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* with its pavilion and surrounding sculpture park provides monumentality and permanence in one specific site. Still, it does not content itself with offering one physical, static manifestation seen as the endpoint of renegotiations of the past. Instead, it self-reflectively acknowledges the process that needs to come after. This process resembles the one that resulted from the spread of the *Stolpersteine*: the

creation of a community of spirit and shared values. In Montgomery, this community is intended outright. Its addressee is the nation as a whole, as the memorial's name indicates: *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*. Its double existence and the duplicate's interactive element fulfil two functions: they provide monumental presence as well as missionary dispersal in the form of "a take-away memorial to erect at home" (Capps 2019). The latter acts as tool for the EJI to initiate a nationwide movement, equipped to fundamentally reshape the American memory landscape.

Actually, it is not entirely correct to talk about a take-away twin. There are in fact more stelae in the Monument Park (currently 818) than placed under the roof of the pavilion (805).¹⁷ As already mentioned, the EJI continues their research. Thus, other names of lynching victims, mostly outside the South, can now be found on additional stelae added to the Monument Park. Further research may lead to new findings and thus further stelae, I assume, especially if counties so far not mentioned in the main monument are identified as sites of murders to ensure that the monument truly can become a national memorial.

The duplicate's intended future dispersal is without doubt the memorial's most interesting component, clearly echoing Demnig's *Stolpersteine* concept.¹⁸ But to a large degree, it is still thanks to the permanent marker's outstanding design that the memorial has achieved nationwide attention and acclaim within such a short time. Thus, both parts have important roles. The duplicates outside the pavilion are now waiting to be claimed in the counties where lynchings took place, from the Deep South to Western states such as Utah and California. Albeit more limited in numbers than the *Stolpersteine* and bound to one nation, the envisioned goal of hundreds of single monuments erected throughout the country with almost 330 million citizens is impressive. This goal is not unrealistic given that 300 counties have already announced their interest in erecting 'their' stela (HBO 2019).

There will never be a *Stolperstein* for every victim of Nazi persecution. Demnig's project was never meant to be completed (Hesse 2017: 379). And although extensive research on the history of lynching has been undertaken, and the current numbers are already revised, it will likewise never be possible

¹⁷ According to email from EJI to author, March 31, 2020.

¹⁸ Albeit not intended, Eisenman's memorial also found 'dispersal': in the *Memorial to Homosexuals Persecuted under Nazism* by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset in Berlin from 2008 and, in particular, in the replicas produced by the Zentrum für politische Schönheit (Centre for Political Beauty). Their art installation from 2017 (ongoing) consists of 24 downsized blocks modeled after Eisenman's memorial, erected on a rented property adjacent to the home of extreme right-wing politician Björn Höcke in Bornhagen, Thuringia. Höcke is the leader of the political party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany); he had opposed Eisenman's memorial and questioned what had finally seemed a consensus in German politics, namely to accept responsibility for the crimes Germans had committed under Nazi rule and to erect visible markers which commemorate these crimes and remind them of their moral responsibility.

to document all lynchings that occurred. Despite their comprehensive scale, both memorials are, in the end, essentially symbolic. They rest on the belief that societal transformation can be achieved when past injustices are confronted and a revised understanding is integrated into the memorial landscape.

Demnig's *Stolpersteine's* 25-year-long existence has demonstrated that coming to terms with a national painful past takes time and cannot be achieved by raising just one monument. But with a broad engagement, a national, or in Demnig's case even transnational, transformation of the memory landscape can be accomplished. The *Stolpersteine's* achievements are clearly reflected in the Montgomery monument's dispersal that encourages the commemoration process yet to come.

The EJI had cooperated with the MASS Design group on the Montgomery project; a suitable partner as this non-profit organization is likewise committed to humanitarian values.¹⁹ The choice has another advantage. To choose this group ensures that the Montgomery monument is associated with the EJI and its founder rather than with a single, well-known artist or architect, as is the case with Peter Eisenman's Berlin memorial. Whether referred to as *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* or, shorter and simplified, as the *Lynching Memorial*, it is, and the same is true for the *Stolpersteine*, first of all the subject that is remembered rather than the creator(s).

Nevertheless, behind both projects stands a highly engaged individual: the artist Gunter Demnig, and the lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson, who some have described as a prophet or Moses (Sacco 2019: 9).²⁰ Demnig now has a couple of co-workers (Hesse 2017: 241–248); Stevenson has the EJI behind him, with currently about 145 employees, from lawyers to educators to guards and cleaners. As significant as both these charismatic men were for initiating and realizing these projects, Demnig and Stevenson underline the importance of cooperating partners and the participation of thousands of individuals, initiatives, organizations, authorities and local governments for seeing them through. Neither projects are government initiatives. Each one was developed from the ground up, demonstrating the power of a single individual, depending upon broad and recurring civil engagement from various groups to be fully realized and continued (cp. Hesse 2017: 18, 252–253, 350, 361; Sacco 2019). Thereby, both projects display obvious similarities to Joseph Beuys' social sculpture developed in the 1960s with its emphasis on participation leading to concrete actions and social change (Bidle 2013).

The *Stolpersteine* have created a civil engagement without parallel. Each stone needs people to initiate the installment, provide the necessary information as well as secure legal approval (Hesse 2017, especially 235, 248, 379). It is not the artist who does research for the stone's inscription (ibid.: 236) but

¹⁹ The MASS Design Group's mission statement reads: "Architecture is never neutral. It either heals or hurts. Our mission is to research, build, and advocate for architecture that promotes justice and human dignity" (MASS Design Group homepage).

²⁰ In this article, I have not taken up the important role that Christian faith plays in American society and the South in particular, and also for the realization of this project. This will be the subject of another article.

individuals or initiatives who “commission the stones, conduct the research, fundraise, arrange installation ceremonies, and clean the stones on designated days” (Katzman & Paulix 2017: 43). Ordinary people are the initiators, the commissioners and laymen-researchers as well as godparents (*Paten*) who also purchase the stone for a small fee (€120). In contrast, the Montgomery monument is based on prior research by experts who, during the course of more than a decade, have secured the facts now displayed on the stelae, and subsequently added additional stelae in the Monument Park. However, the EJI also needs the interest and engagement of the counties where the duplicates are due to be erected. And a project that demands a whole nation to come to terms with its past and asks for nationwide commitment, of course, requires people to seek new knowledge about hitherto unknown lynchings in places all over the States. Newly established committees reacting to the Montgomery memorial, such as the grassroots coalition The Jefferson County Memorial Project (JCMP) have conducted further research (Sacco 2019: 11). Their findings are important, not just because of the additional cases found, but because this shows that the established memorial already acts as an engine which kick-starts or intensifies people’s interest and commitment to confront this past. This is remarkable given that the dispersal of the stelae has not even started yet. Nonetheless, a nationwide dialogue and a number of activities have already been set in motion (*ibid.*).

As the EJI has not yet begun the dispersal of the duplicates, the organization and handling of that process will be the subject of future research. The well-thought-out memorial in Montgomery suggests that the EJI will put considerable efforts into orchestrating the country-wide dispersal of the stelae. The EJI has already collected soil from hundreds of lynching sites into glass jars, displayed at the Legacy Museum as well as the visitor center opposite the memorial, marked with a label naming the date and place of the lynching, and erected 30 historical markers across the country where lynching had occurred. Thus, there already exists a wide network with community leaders. These earlier outreach activities have prepared the process to come, and partly explain the immediate and comprehensive interest in participating.

While there is, as yet, no formalized plan of action for the dispersal of the stelae, there exist very detailed guidelines on how to erect historical markers. These 13-page guidelines point to how the future dispersal of the stelae might be organized.²¹ The EJI covers all costs for the production, transportation and installation of the historical markers, and eventually plans to do the same with the stelae. The erection of the public markers is bound by a tight communication with the EJI who helps, but also supervises and controls each step taken (cp. Sacco 2019: 25). For instance, the text on the local lynchings must be negotiated with the EJI, and the text on the other side will be identical for all historical markers throughout the US. This text is non-negotiable, as underlined in the guidelines. Also important to the EJI is the marker’s public

²¹ See the EJI’s *Historical Marker Project. General Guidelines*, <https://alachuacofl.civiccclerk.com/Web/GenFile.aspx?ad=15571> (accessed March 27, 2020).

inauguration as a community event and an essay competition on racial justice to be held in a local high school. It reckons that the erection of the marker alone takes 1–3 years and urges that community coalitions include representatives from the local African American community.

It seems that the EJI wishes to coordinate the civil engagement which comes with the dispersal with a firm hand to ensure that their partners are really committed to the cause.²² They do not want communities simply to “acquire an object”.²³ Each stela is an extended arm of the EJI, a tool to reach out to people, nationwide. Instead of quickly putting up one visible marker and leaving the subject behind, the EJI wants to ensure long-term engagement that involves many people from different backgrounds, leading to a number of events that also draw the attention of the media, thereby creating, step by step, a national movement that truly transforms the American nation within the next decade. Thus, in order to register for the Monument Placement Initiative, to receive the duplicate stela, the participating organizations first have to demonstrate a sustained commitment (cp. Sacco 2019: 22–3), for example by taking part in the Community Remembrance Projects, which implies soil collection from former lynching sites and the erection of a public marker.

The dispersal of the stelae is only the kick-off of a transformation yet to come. The *Stolpersteine* have not only grown in numbers, but resulted in various forms of activities, initiatives, publications such as brochures and booklets, internet portals, cleaning groups, inspired novels and artworks, and led also to a copying of the concept, without the artist’s approval, as well as the laying of similar stones (Hesse 2017: 362–382).²⁴ The future will tell what spin-offs, beyond the erection of the duplicates and additional facilities opened by the EJI in 2020, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* will call forth. A spin-off no doubt resulting from the erected memorial was exhibited at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in November 2019, showing works by pupils from the local Booker T Washington Magnet High School, among them Jasmine Shirofsky’s drawing of Hank Willis Thomas’s *Raise Up* on the grounds of the memorial.

²² It was a real challenge to come in contact with the EJI. For months, the EJI did not answer my emails and refused to meet with me. From various conversations with staff at other museums in Montgomery I learned that many who share the EJI’s goals and admire their work experience a lack of transparency and cooperation which stands in contrast to the organization’s wish to reach out and create a movement that entrusts others to spread the values they believe in. As is already apparent in the memorial’s design, the EJI wishes to control the narrative and as it seems they aim to supervise the future dispersal of the stelae very tightly. Future research will need to examine EJI’s relationship to cooperating partners, researchers and the press at closer range. Here I focus on the memorial’s aesthetics.

²³ Email from the EJI to author March 31, 2020.

²⁴ Hesse mentions the project *Stopping Stones* by the American entrepreneur, lawyer and Venture philanthropist Paul Growald (Hesse 2017: 308). Here, stones very similar to the *Stolpersteine* are laid at the sites where African Americans were enslaved are forced to work (<https://stoppingstones.org/> retrieved 22 July 2019; no longer in use).

Some journalists are convinced that the memorial's and museum's openings increased tourism and kick-started construction projects in downtown Montgomery (see e.g. Schneider 2019), a much-desired economic boost for a city which has seen better, and much worse, days. However, regeneration projects in the city center started earlier, and go back to various master plans for Downtown Montgomery, of which most were accomplished. Another reason is certainly the bicentennial – the celebration of Alabama becoming the 22nd state 200 years ago. The three-year commemoration started in 2017 and ended in the state's capital Montgomery with a parade and fireworks in December 2019.²⁵ Future research will investigate cause and effect in closer detail, but it is a fact that the areas around the memorial and the museum testify to city renewal. Without doubt, the delicately designed memorial on Cottage Hill became a tourist magnet bringing about positive changes (Harper 2019) in a neighborhood which fell apart after the interstate highway I-65 was built in the 1960s.

Reconfiguring the National Narrative

Gunter Demnig was often accused of retrospectively having extended his project to include ever more victim groups over the years. But as Hans Hesse shows in his comprehensive documentation, the *Stolpersteine* were from the very beginning directed towards *all* victims of Nazi persecution (Hesse 2017: 18, 350). In contrast, the Montgomery monument is dedicated solely to black lynching victims. Public shaming and causing fear among different ethnic minorities was however not directed solely towards blacks (Doss 2010: 265, 268, 275; Litwack in Allen 2018: 13). Thus, it seems worthwhile to reflect on this limitation.

The EJI distinguish terror lynching of black people from other lynchings as they were directed at a particular minority group that was the target of repeated and multiple threats. Although they were not the only victims of lynching, after the Civil War blacks became the main targets in an America obsessed with lynching (Doss 2010: 265, with reference to Dora Apel's *Imagery of Lynching* from 2004). These crimes were conducted in communities with functioning criminal justice systems within a democracy. Accused black people, in contrast to whites suspected of similar crimes, rarely had a fair trial, if they had one at all, but were convicted and exposed to mob violence (EJI 2017). Lynchings were also used as preemptive strikes to suppress black people's advancement. Their murderers were rarely held accountable, communicating that black citizens were not regarded as equal, no matter what the constitution guaranteed.

Furthermore, lynchings of African Americans were distinct in their extreme and often prolonged brutality. White men, women and children watched and participated in the humiliation, torture and murder. These public

²⁵ See the 200 Alabama Bicentennial: <https://alabama200.org/about/why-a-bicentennial/> (accessed February 10, 2020).

events were power demonstrations, meant to frighten and subjugate the whole black community and instill a sense of inferiority. They served as a threat against blacks who had managed to achieve some economic success or independence or questioned ruling hierarchies (Litwack in Allen 2018: 25, 27, 29–30; Ifill 2018 [2007]: 119, 144). Lynchings, their photographic documentation and their spread were tools of racial control designed to enforce social norms and racial hierarchy that profoundly shaped the self-identity of the targeted group and societal norms and values. These crimes also had a lasting impact on those who committed them and socialized new generations into these norms, supported by eugenics, at the time considered up-to-date science. Against this background the limitation on this targeted victim group is comprehensible.

The Montgomery memorial is also well-defined in numbers as well as in its time frame: it is dedicated to the 4,400 victims of racial lynching murdered between 1877 and 1950. But lynching occurred even later. However, this is the era in which, according to existing research, most racial lynchings in the US were committed.²⁶ This is because the federal troops which remained in the South after the Civil War to ensure that the freed were treated fairly, were removed in 1877 (Stevenson 2015: 27, 192). This led to intensified violence against former slaves. Perpetrators who committed lynching did so with impunity until 1950.

Lynchings that occurred after this period had initially not found an explicit mention in the memorial. However, in autumn 2019, an additional work was set up at the newly inaugurated visitor center, opposite the memorial. This work commemorates 24 activists, community leaders and other victims, such as Emmet Till, killed during the 1950s. This addition points to the characteristic of this memorial, which also is what substantially differentiates it from traditional monuments: being subject to change, ready to respond to further findings and the societal transformations that in future will allow the visibility of the revised conception of history by accepting the duplicates.

The memorial, as permanent marker and through the process of dialogue its duplicates demand, aims to relate formerly silenced stories, insisting that the history of lynching must be integrated into the national narrative if a more just society is to be created (cp. Ifill 2018: 133). The future dispersal of the duplicate stelae will serve both as an engine and an indicator of a memory culture in change. The stelae, which remain in place close to the permanent memorial, will raise issues of moral obligation. Unclaimed, the leftovers can be understood as a refusal to confront this painful past, or a constant reminder to do so.

In *Memorial Mania. Public Feeling in America*, Erika Doss, Professor of American Studies, dedicates one chapter to memorials dealing with national shame. First and foremost, coming to terms with a shameful past demands a nation “to admit that there is something to be ashamed about” (Doss 2010:

²⁶ See the EJI’s *Historical Marker Project. General Guidelines*, <https://alachuacofl.civ-icclerk.com/Web/GenFile.aspx?ad=15571>.

256). Regardless of nationality or ethnicity, when facing the nature of these rituals of torture, conserved and mediated through photos, postcards and distributed body parts, most people will profoundly question human nature, especially given the hypocrisy of justifying lynching's sadistic and exhibitionistic violence in the name of restraining black people's postulated savagery and depravity, declaring them inferior and deeming their lives worthless (Litwack in Allen 2018: 12–14). The disgust and renunciation of the crimes needs to be followed by insight into how influential this past was, and still is, for the victims and later generations.

Doss regards shame as a key affect in identity formation. Like taking pride in things we have not accomplished ourselves, such as winning the World Cup, members of a community must also accept responsibility for crimes committed in the name of their nation or their ancestors (Doss 2010: 291 in reference to Aaron Lazare). Doss highlights that it can be positive to embrace shame on reparative terms, knowing how it impacts generations and the social contract (ibid.: 311). She emphasizes that this feeling “has enormous potential as a revitalizing instrument of shared national purpose centered on redeeming the past,” and can “mobilize shared understandings of civic morality,” leading to the affirmation of those to whom shameful things were done (ibid.: 307, 309, 312).

In the process of coming to terms with the history of lynching it is also necessary to realize that the perpetrators were profoundly shaped by this past. Both victims and perpetrators, and their descendants, need to enter a dialogue, and to accept that building a more just society will take time (Ifill 2018: 120, 126–127). This painful and lengthy process must be public precisely “because silence was used to compel complicity and to enforce the terror of lynching” (ibid.: 128). Breaking the silence contributes to acceptance of the injustices suffered by blacks and makes it impossible for whites to disconnect themselves from complicity (ibid.).

When erecting *Stolpersteine*, representatives of the victim as well as the perpetrator groups have the chance to contribute, sometimes to come together, to confront the crimes committed and take care of this heritage. The stones were laid on the initiatives of both relatives to survivors but were often the result of school projects discussed by grandchildren of perpetrators (Hesse 2017: 254). As the Germans forced the majority of German Jews either into exile or killed them, victims and perpetrators seldom had to live together when the war ended. The situation in the US was, and is, entirely different. Relatives of former slaveholders and slaves live within the same society. This fact, and the effects the historic events had and have, seem also to determine why the Montgomery memorial is limited to specific lynchings, as the consequences affect black experience to this day, as described above. If the nation wants to become a unified nation, the calls for conciliation need to be answered. Social gatherings or symbolic manifestations are a start but cannot conceal the urgent need for economic redistribution and equality of opportunity (Neiman 2019: 343).

When her book was published in 2010, Doss regarded shame as a feeling still very much absent in American society. She was convinced that many whites would rather put the past behind them (Doss 2010: 256). In the US of 2020, society is deeply divided. Neiman is convinced that Obama was replaced by Trump because of America's failure to face its own history (Neiman 2019: 26). The Republican government under President Trump has brought to light that many whites do not want to give up their privileges (ibid.: 56). The friction this presidency has caused has, however, unleashed a wave of initiatives throughout the US. Activities throughout the country testify to a growing interest and commitment to encounter historic injustices (Halifax 2018; Neiman 2019: 34). As it seems, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* came right in time to channel people's despair. By getting organized to demand a stela they can express not only their dislike of the government's politics but do something specific against racial injustices within their community.²⁷

The monument's novel design suggests that it is high time for radical change if conciliation is ever to be possible. This process of *Aufarbeitung* must be based on the insight that there is no former, ideal society to return to – reconciliation, restorative justice or restoration are, as Ifill underlines, impossibilities. What was cannot serve as a model (Ifill 2018: 123). Instead, conciliation must imply the will "to create something new" (ibid.: 124). What Stevenson envisions is a major change in memory culture, which in many ways departs from established practices just because he considers America still to be a "guilt" culture, neither attuned, accustomed nor comfortable in accepting guilt and shame (HBO 2019). *The Memorial for Peace and Justice* aims to change American memory culture fundamentally and uses shaming to achieve this goal.

In Montgomery, the duplicate memorial is meant to migrate while the main monument remains in place. This might be a lengthy process, and as elaborated, it may be that some stelae will not be claimed and will remain in place. An unclaimed stela may nevertheless affect American memory culture, leading to questions about why the respective county refuses to claim and erect it. This potential becomes apparent when compared with not-realized *Stolpersteine*. Despite the project's wide acceptance, some cities, such as Munich, continue to resist the laying of stones. This resistance towards an established memory praxis earns today foremost incomprehension (Hesse 2017: 351). However, it does not mean that the local memory culture remains unaffected. In Munich, initiatives even went to court. Their claims remained unanswered, but they succeeded in raising public awareness and media attention about the topic of the Nazi past. In a country that values success above all,

²⁷ Neiman argues that *Aufarbeitung* apparently needs a generational shift. She regards the Civil Rights Act in 1964 as a dividing line as it banned racist policy by law. She reminds us that the *Wehrmachtausstellung* in 1995 acted as a catalyst. This exhibition came 50 years after the war ended. If we agree with Neiman and regard 1964 as demarcation line, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* also proves a generational renewal. *Aufarbeitung* is the product of the generation that has not committed the crimes but is ready to address them.

such failures might not (yet) be regarded as ideal or American, but they, too, are part of the public shaming strategy described above, and the refusal to claim a stela can stimulate public discourse and eventually change attitudes. Lingering duplicate stelae, nevertheless, do the important work of instructing us on the role of cultural amnesia and cognitive dissonance that is a barrier to justice, reparations and conciliation.

Finally, one may ask: But where are those who should be most ashamed? Where are the perpetrators in this memorial? “Depicting only those to whom shameful things were done, rather than those who did shameful things, is inadequate,” according to Erika Doss (2010: 297). As noted, lynchings were public crimes, committed by whites, watched and photographed by white men, women and children. Whites acted as eyewitnesses and sat on the juries that decided not to conceal the names of perpetrators (Litwack in Allen 2018: 8–10). Thus, ordinary white citizens were also perpetrators, spectators and accomplices, as were the judges of the crimes committed (*ibid.*: 20). Those who did not participate or watch, mostly did little to oppose these crimes. So, why then are the perpetrators not visualized within the Montgomery memorial?

As noted in Part III, they appeared, at least initially, within Dana King’s sculpture group. Photos of the installation on the artist’s homepage show the footsteps turned in the opposite direction. This original composition includes not murderers but those who resisted the Civil Rights Movement, if only in adumbration. The women of the bus boycott are depicted in full scale, those “who braved such hatred, walked through that wall of racism, at great danger to themselves and their families,” as the artist points out on her homepage.²⁸ This version suggests the women carried on while many turned their backs and/or failed to participate. Given the prescribed direction for walking through the memorial, this would turn the visitors into those who opposed claims of equality.

Given that the memorial offers other sites for critical self-reflection, as the open square in the atrium, I wonder if there is a need to impose on the visitors such a difficult position. To me, the situation encountered in November 2019 was convincing. It evoked a sense of community, instilling hope and commitment to contribute to conciliation. This reading is also in line with the overarching goal of *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* and with the work of the EJI, namely, to create a novel sense of national belonging.

But maybe I make it too easy for myself, as a white, middle-aged European? Admittedly, the perception of the work is fundamentally different depending on one’s own background. The black male teenagers who seemed to be deeply distressed and asked by the guards to calm down, have maybe realized that they would once have been the likely targets of lynching. A black family talked about lynchings in their family history. Both black and white visitors were shocked by the sheer numbers of the murders. A Jewish

²⁸ Statement by the artist, see her homepage: <https://danakingart.com/#/guided-by-justice/> (retrieved January 9, 2020).

travelling group, identified by the men wearing kippot, may not necessarily feel the same degree of guilt or bad conscience that some white Northerners or Southerners may sense, as they come from a persecuted group themselves and many Jews were engaged in the Civil Rights Movement.

Maybe a sense of discomfort at this stage of the walk, as originally intended by King, can offer another, necessary possibility for passersby to rethink their own position, even to “ambush” the visitors with a moment of immediate and embodied shaming. After all, segregation did not end that long ago and is by no means overcome. But again, this invitation seems then in the first place directed towards white people, independently of their national origin or religious orientation. Redirecting the footprints in the direction the artist had in mind may underline the threat the women were exposed to. This idea still raises my discomfort. It would stand in strong contrast to the memorial’s aim to heal a nation as it would simultaneously freeze white people into the role of the historical perpetrators. While many visitors may not notice this detail, I argue that the memorial is consciously designed in the smallest detail and that each component matters.

Apart from King’s sculpture group, the perpetrators are present only within the text panels or within the imagination. According to Doss, abstract, architectonic forms such as those of the main monument resist “persistent dangers of re-victimization” (2010: 298), which is a figurative interpretation of slavery might contain. Thus, a figurative representation of the suffering victims is not necessarily free of conflict, but the depiction of perpetrators certainly is particularly difficult. Internationally, abstractionism, broadly established in memory culture today, has proven that a work commemorating traumatic events can be impressive without detailed depiction of cruelty. It seems that abstraction is well chosen in the Montgomery case, as it has the power to withstand the dilemma of representing racial terrorism and trauma by repeating images that once encouraged voyeurism and dehumanization (ibid.: 264, 279, 285). The abstract stelae hanging from the roof remind us of the atrocities without serving voyeuristic desire. Thus, the intention to commemorate the victims in a dignified way, as expressed by Elizabeth Alexander’s poem, is realized.

The challenge abstractionism faces, is that it presupposes a certain level of prior knowledge. In Montgomery, the combination of memorial and museum acts as mediator of historic knowledge, presenting lynching photography in a safe environment, accompanied by explanatory text that enables monument visitors to make associations with the historic context without depicting them in the memorial. The *Stolpersteine* and *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* are characterized by their simplicity and matter-of-fact aesthetics containing only basic information (cp. Hesse 2017: 22). They focus almost exclusively on the victims and can be understood as a rehabilitation of the persecuted. Thereby the work’s materiality expresses esteem. This is especially true for the golden shiny brass of the *Stolpersteine* while the rusty stelae with their reddish color mediate a more melancholic and sorrowful mood –

acting as a juxtaposition to the white marbles erected since Antiquity with its belief in the superiority of white men.

IV. A VERY AMERICAN MONUMENT

The memorial and the museum, together with its founder and the organization behind them, Bryan Stevenson and the EJI, embody characteristics widely associated with the American dream, constantly repeated in popular culture: the idea of the underdog who prevails against all odds, of stunning success and of catharsis towards becoming a better person, family or society. Like a David against Goliath, the EJI has over three decades fought against the death penalty and mass incarceration, and in particular helped imprisoned people with intellectual disabilities, children and juveniles (Stevenson 2015: 269, 264, 270, 272, 295), won major legal reforms, reduced sentences for over 140 people on death row and achieved landmark ruling by the US Supreme Court that impacted thousands of cases (EJI 2018). As a non-profit organization that depends on fundraising, the EJI has over the years developed effective strategies to secure funding, not only for their legal work but also for their outreach activities (cp. Stevenson 2015: 240, 250, 298). They have successfully raised the money to buy the property and built the memorial and the museum. While Bryan Stevenson was initially skeptical about seeking media attention for his legal cases, he has learned how the media can promote the issues he considers relevant and has also created alliances with other organizations (cp. Stevenson 2015: 210, 242, 271–272, 280).

The memorial and the museum are clearly success stories, heralded by the Alabama Tourist Department as “Attraction of the Year” in 2019. The official three-day opening in 2018 attracted 35,000 attendees with many prominent names such as Jesse Jackson, Al Gore, The Roots and Stevie Wonder among the participating audience and performing artists (EJI 2018; Smith 2018). Noteworthy in this context is that the inauguration took place in April. In the South, April is Confederate History Month, introduced in 1994 to honor the history of the Confederate States of America. Thus, already the inauguration at that time of year had symbolic relevance. Since its opening and until March 2020, the memorial and the museum had become popular tourist sites with 700,000 visitors.²⁹ The memorial is celebrated by *The Washington Post* (Kennicott 2018) as “one of the most powerful and effective new memorials in a generation” and was described as unparalleled by *The New York Times* (Robertson 2018). Its photogenic appearance has easily gone viral on social media, and gained wide public acclaim and media attention, including lengthy programs such as Oprah Winfrey’s 60-minute show.

Moreover, the subjects the memorial and museum take up are at the core of American identity. Although lynchings were committed mostly in the South, the lynching mania had spread up to the North and middle West where

²⁹ Their stream of visitors was temporarily suspended due to the Coronavirus pandemic which enforced the temporary closure of both institutions.

it featured many of the same characteristics. As Laquer writes, “nowhere else in the world [had lynching] been employed for as long or as often as in the United States” (Laquer 2018). Thus, racial terror lynchings and their aftermath are a profoundly American phenomenon that has influenced generations and continues to pose a contemporary challenge to the entire nation.

In essence, every monument is an expression of the ruling memory culture. In societies undergoing transformation, these physical markers express altered values and potentially contribute to change. While the shift from slavery to freedom precipitated by the Civil War could have been cataclysmic with the potential to reshape American society and memory culture at the time (Savage 2018: 3), this chance was not taken. *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* has the explicit ambition to induce such a transformation process on a national level. In contrast to the unveiling ceremonies of the nineteenth-century statues which provided the *creation* of national history (Rodell 2002: 236), the dispersal of the Montgomery monument’s twin provides the opportunity to *rewrite* history. Positioned on the ground, the stelae remind one of coffins rather than headstones, but when claimed and erected in an upright position, in hundreds of places in the US, these physical markers will make a statement, performing a common commitment to remember the crimes as an indispensable part of US identity.

Thereby the rusty duplicates and the additional stelae resulting from further research become effective tools to rethink the whitewashed American past represented in the purified marble memorials of the Confederate. This refurbishment of the public space in the midst of antagonism and overt political regression has intensified since the violent events in Charlottesville in 2017 over the planned removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. Most recently, the 2020 protests against police violence springing from the killing of George Floyd has brought a level of iconoclasm unparalleled in democratic society. These events insist on a more honest confrontation with the American past. Some 20 years earlier, Kirk Savage had discussed statues of Lee as sculptural manifestations of canonical whiteness and white supremacy (Savage 2018 [1997]: 129–161). The iconoclasm and demonstrations are indicators of different ideological positions. The attempt to cling on to a depoliticized heroization of a military leader, as with Lee in Charlottesville, without addressing slavery as the real cause of the Civil War, now meets wide public protests; but it also disguises the continuing support of ideas of white supremacy. The monuments turn into stages where values and norms are performed and renegotiated – not only as responses to past events but also as reactions to contemporary injustices and a presidency that further divides the nation.

Most important, the duplicate’s forthcoming dispersal is meant to realign to principals central to American identity: “From its inception, the United States of America insisted on ideals it refused to realize” (Neiman 2019: 316), but is still characterized by the belief in justice and in possible change. One cornerstone of American identity is the constitutional right to be treated as not guilty until proven otherwise. The history of lynching clearly indicates that this presumption of innocence did not previously apply to blacks. The belief

in white supremacy profoundly shapes the criminal justice system to this day with disproportionate incarceration rates and death sentences for blacks and other people of color. The highest rate of incarcerated African Americans can be found in former slaveholding states and the rates of incarceration in Alabama are among the highest in the world, surpassing nations such as Syria and Iraq (Helm 2018; cp. Stevenson 2015: 15, 243, 260; this includes numbers for children and juveniles, 115). Alabama also has the nation's highest per capita death sentence rate (ibid.: 281).

Time will tell if the Montgomery monument is more than an indicator of an American memory culture in transformation. It will become clear if its unique concept succeeds in acting as an engine and works as a tool for conciliation and equality. The already huge interest in the project suggests that more and more stelae will be claimed. Whether former Confederate monuments in the future will be removed or remain in place, a stela commemorating a lynching victim erected next to such a monument will ensure that *Aufarbeitung* continues. Its sheer presence will immediately question the cause that soldiers died for. The additional public markers will offer a more complete representation of past events, amending common perceptions of American history (cp. Sacco 2019: 27–28). A (widely) migrated monument will be proof of a growing acceptance of the permanent marker in Montgomery and what it stands for, and also demonstrate that this novel way of commemorating a shameful American past has become socially sanctioned practice (similar to the *Stolpersteine*, cp. Katzman & Paulix 2017: 51). If every stela is claimed there will be more than 800 additional unveilings. Each of them offers a temporary arena to perform, reproduce and mediate the Montgomery memorial's message. Thus, the Montgomery memorial proves Robert Musil's famous postulate of monuments' invisibility, quoted ad nauseam during the last century, wrong. In fact, this memorial is a wish coming true of memorial makers of all time: it attracts attention, long after its inauguration, and by doing so draws attention to the subjects it is eager to mediate. The EJI's almost impudent challenge and trust that the counties claim their stela, thereby accepting responsibility and ensuring social transformation, echoes the founding American belief in justice and that change, despite all, is possible. In this sense, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is truly a very American memorial.

One day maybe only a single stela might be left in the Monument Park: standing upright, a reminder of the earlier commemoration process that led to a nationwide movement (Figure 23). And in contrast to the Acropolis, which later nurtured a myth of a whitewashed world which never had existed, *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is built on sober research aiming at a more nuanced representation of history. It reminds, as in fact the Greek Gods originally did, that the world is colorful. Finally, the women in Dana King's memorial might come to a rest. And if this means *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice* on its hill may fall in oblivion, even in ruins as the temples on the Acropolis, never mind. A monument that not only fulfilled its commemorative function, but even inspired action, truly served the genre well.



Figure 23.



Figure 24.

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