

Torn

Thaddeus Davis

Quaint southern towns.

History locks them in time.

It's been thirty years since I departed in my youth.

In my absence, the Black spaces that I remember have disappeared.

Montgomery and Selma, once strongholds in Civil rights and voting rights, are now recovering from disinvestment caused by white flight, which is when white citizens abandon one community for another due to a perceived threat from those deemed others.

In urban environments, Black people have often been the other.

In the South, history is the other.

Thaddeus Davis is Co-Director of Wideman Davis Dance and Associate Professor of African American Studies at the University of South Carolina—his research, performance, creative, and community practices center on Southern Black experiences. He has received multiple honors and grants for his work, including the 2022 Mellon Monuments Grant; 2022 Alternate Roots: Partners in Action; 2022 and 2019 National Endowment for the Arts; 2024 and 2021 International Association of Blacks in Dance: COHI | MOVE Comprehensive Organizational Health Initiative; 2018 National Dance Project Grant; 2017 Provost Grant to support the creations of a research team for the development of *Migratuse Ataraxia*; 2013 Map Fund Grant to support the research and development of *Ruptured Silence: Racist Signs and Symbol*; Jerome Robins New Essential Works Grant (2011); University of South Carolina Arts Institute Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Reading/Dance Collaboration, *Balance: Homelessness Project* (2009), *Canvas: The Master Class* (2010); 2007 Cultural Envoy to Portugal, U.S. State Department.

Selma

I never knew the significance of the Alabama River. There were things adults didn't talk about in public, or they didn't talk to me about them. In my community, a child had a place, and most conversations with adults were one-directional, with me doing most of the listening.

In the 19th century, the Alabama River was a highway for commerce; trafficking enslaved people were trafficked along the river en route to my hometown, Montgomery, a major slave trade center. I cannot recall a single conversation about enslavement in my childhood. Black history began with Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver in Tuskegee, then jumped to Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery.

My grandfather and I drove to and through Selma, but we never discussed the history.

Selma #2

Unlike Manhattan, where I lived for twenty years, urban environments in the South often dissolve into rural landscapes. Selma is one such place. The center of trade when cotton was king, in the Blackbelt region of Alabama, farmers brought their goods to Selma to sale. Its 19th-century economic boom pales in comparison to its 20th-century contributions to the liberation of Black people and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Migratuse Reimagined in Selma was performed on the grounds of the Good Samaritan Hospital on Highway 80. Many of the Civil Rights marchers beaten at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday in 1965 were treated there.

Selma #3

Selma is a shell of itself. Its main street feels like the center of any quant southern town. But behind many of its structures are worn-out and decade-old buildings. I questioned what effect this had on the people who lived there. I learned there are still two Selmas.

There is a Black citizenry living north of Highway 80 near Brown Chapel AME Church and a White citizenry living south of Highway 80 down West Dallas Ave.

History is suffocating the place and punishing those who choose to remain and those who have no choice.

Montgomery

When the Equal Justice Initiative built the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum, they started a global conversation from Montgomery, Alabama, on lynching and enslavement to mass incarceration.

My first time walking through the National Memorial, my heart, neck, and soul ached. But with all the aching, I was proud an institution in my hometown dared to create a space for reflection and acknowledgment of Black suffering.

The structure is architecturally and aesthetically beautiful. The execution of the hanging monuments causes physical discomfort in the body when viewed. And the feelings of mourning lives lost due to thousands of violent lynchings in America is humbling. I expected sadness before visiting The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum. But I departed with gratitude because we can now recite the names of many ancestors lynched in the hope their souls can rest.

After a few visits to the Memorial and Museum, I began to think about them as metaphors for something more than lynched, enslaved, and incarcerated Black bodies.

Maybe the monuments are also memorializing lives that once lived on the Black side of town in Montgomery; the many boarded-up abandoned houses, and the stairs that lead to nowhere.

Torn #1

The Equal Justice initiative brings much to Montgomery, yet they deplete it of life narratives beyond trauma. They are building new structures and activating spaces that are changing the topography of the city's downtown and riverway. Montgomery has become a destination for Civil Rights memory. However, as more of the city's architecture on the Westside, which is the Black side of town, gains national landmark status due to its significance in the Civil Rights movement, history once again suffocates the unfettered potential of what were once Black spaces.

I am torn!

Torn #2

The Monument and museum are essential, but so is the memory of life.

Architectural structures that are significant to Civil Rights should be preserved. However, if efforts to protect the vitality of the communities that produced the foot soldiers of the movement are prioritized, those living in the community will benefit from previous fights for Civil Rights. Montgomery will then become an example of what social change can do and not a graveyard or memorial for ideas achieved.

I am torn!

Torn #3

We must include Black narratives of perseverance in the landscape of American History so that we can acknowledge oppression and decenter it to allow narratives of hope to play an equal part in telling our stories.

Historian Georgette Norman says, "Black Montgomery is more than Civil Rights and Lynching."¹

I am torn!

Torn #4

Montgomery has a 63% Black citizenry and a Black Mayor, yet what was once the Black side of town is abandoned.

I am Torn!

¹ personal communication, August 2, 2022

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Credits

Written, Directed, Filmed, and Edited by Thaddeus Davis

Additional Film Footage by Ronald McCall

Music by Liquid Memoirs

Sound Effects by West Wolf, La Burbuja, Craig Carter Collection, Sound Holder



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