



More than 800 Corten steel monuments represent victims of lynching at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in downtown Montgomery, Ala. The powerful memorial is meant to perturb, not console — and to encourage truth-telling far and wide. (Johnathon Kelso/The New York Times)

NYT

A CIVIL RIGHTS PILGRIMAGE

In Alabama, America can learn the truth about itself

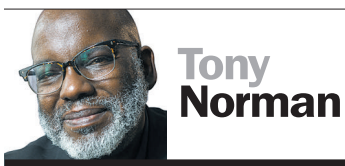
MONTGOMERY, Ala. —

Montgomery was already a balmy 92 degrees when I arrived shortly after 10 a.m. last Sunday. The 90 mile drive from Birmingham had been uneventful, though my phone's GPS gave inexplicably sketchy coordinates to the Legacy Museum during the last minute of the journey.

Driving around the backstreets of a warehouse district still displaying evidence of industries from the previous century, I spotted the Legacy Museum the old-fashioned way. It was too early for tourist buses, so the walk to entrance from the side street where I parked felt lonely.

Would I be one of a handful of visitors that day? It seemed possible that in Alabama, the most segregated and violent state during the civil rights era, few people would want to spoil their Sunday by contemplating America's original sin up close.

I anticipated a museum experience similar to the one offered at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute the day before: a polite recitation of themes and milestones that paved the way to theoretical equality in America. I assumed there would be lots of



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photographs, historical documents, recordings and perhaps a docent or two eager to put our civil rights struggle into context.

What I didn't expect as I stepped into the air-conditioned darkness of the Legacy Museum's exhibition entrance was a full-spectrum, mind-blowing narrative dedicated to telling the most comprehensive story imaginable about the Black experience in America.

The first thing visitors experience as they step into that darkened space is an immersive wall of ocean water projected on a wall accompanied by the sound of roaring waves. It stirs every primordial fear a person can have, because we know exactly what we'll see next.

The ferocious Atlantic waves projected on the wall are the opposite of Moses' Red Sea miracle. If you were in the position to see those waves up close, there would be no safe passage

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Brynn Anderson/AP

This photo shows names of "unknown" lynching victims as a part of the display at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala. The memorial aims to teach about America's past in hope of promoting understanding and healing.

Holding onto hope in, and for, America

On Juneteenth, a trailblazer for Black women in Pittsburgh considers America's unfulfilled promises

By Cynthia Ackron Baldwin

The South Vietnamese poet H.L. Pham wrote a brief poem on the Fall of Saigon, which he called "Lost Item." That "item" is his country, and he pleads with the reader, "If you should happen to find it / Return it to me / Please!"

While I, unlike the poet, did not flee from my beloved country, my country is fleeing from me and I am devastated.

Because I grew up Black and female in a country that historically devalued both, many people don't understand why I love

this country, my country, so fervently. It's hard for them to understand that while my country is not yet an idea realized, it is still a treasured idea. Call it a dream, a principle, an ideal. Whatever you call it, it gives one hope.

It is the hope that immigrants arriving on the Mayflower had as they escaped religious persecution.

It is the hope that Black people, who arrived in shackles after being removed from their homeland, had when they escaped the cruelty of the plantations.

It is the hope that Native Americans had

when they struggled to keep their heritage while being placed on reservations.

It is the hope that the Chinese had when they immigrated to California during the gold rush to escape economic conditions in China.

It is the hope that the Irish immigrants had when they came to these shores to escape religious conflict and famine in their native land.

It is the hope that the Italians, Hungarians and Polish had when they came here to escape rural poverty and revolution.

It is the hope that white, Black, brown, Asian and Native American people had when they donned the khaki uniforms to fight on foreign shores.

It is the hope that these same uniformed people of color clung to when they returned home to find nothing had changed.

It is the hope that the Americans of Japanese descent had when they were rounded up and placed in detention, but people of German and Italian descent were not.

It is the hope that poor people of every color have when they work to educate their children so they can be better off than their parents.

It is the hope inked into the Constitution and its 27 amendments that has kept people going through starvation and wars, natural disasters and lynchings, inhuman treatment and poverty.

It is the hope envisioned and written into the preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America in these words:

We, the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States

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Telling the truth about America sets us all free

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or liberation for hundreds of years. Walking the long, stony path in the next room, visitors are surrounded on both sides by partially buried heads and torsos sculpted by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo depicting the mute horror and incomprehension of those Africans forced to make a journey that would succeed in both debasing them and stripping them of their identities, whether princes or paupers, in their previous lives.

Even if you can manage to look away from the sculpture garden, you will soon be confronted by digital tallies of the number of Africans enslaved during the years of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, including regional breakdowns in America and beyond. There are electronic flow charts using figures provided by ships' manifests and documents of sale that show how many Africans were sent to the original 13 colonies, and how many became the backbone of the Southern economy during the post-Revolutionary era.

Every technology is enrolled by the Legacy Museum to make the irrefutable case that ignorance of the slave trade and its importance to the growth of this country's economy has led to inequality and ignorance — including many of the arguments about race and justice and history we're still having today.

The exhibits illustrate both the formal end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in 1808, the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865 — but it doesn't take a celebratory lap.

Despite the ban on the importation of enslaved people from Africa, the number of those forced into involuntary servitude increased five-fold between 1783 to 1861. It was the kind of free labor worth going to war for if you were a member of the southern aristocracy. When force failed to maintain the antebellum status quo, other means were found.

"Slavery did not end," the legend on a wall opines in raised letters: "It evolved." The stylized American flag made with the words "From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration" provides the thesis statement for the entire exhibit.

Every element at the Legacy Museum is connected to what comes before and after, creating a seamless narrative argument about the truth of race in America.

Every assault on civil liberties gets called out: lynching, racial terror, mass incarceration, employment discrimination, the war on drugs, mandatory minimum sentencing, police violence, wealth as a determinant of who goes to jail, vagrancy laws, red-lining, the entire panoply of "passive" racism whether rooted in institutional or personal animus.

There are animated videos, short documentaries, longer form pieces and other interactive technologies that make it impossible to claim ignorance. Because there was so much to see, what I thought would be a 90-minute visit stretched into four hours. Even so, I felt I'd merely scratched the surface.

As I worked through feelings of familiarity while staring at a person in a photograph I was sure had to be a lost relative, I suddenly noticed that what had been a solo journey through the museum had become a crowded pilgrimage. People were everywhere. Whites outnumbered Blacks, but not dra-



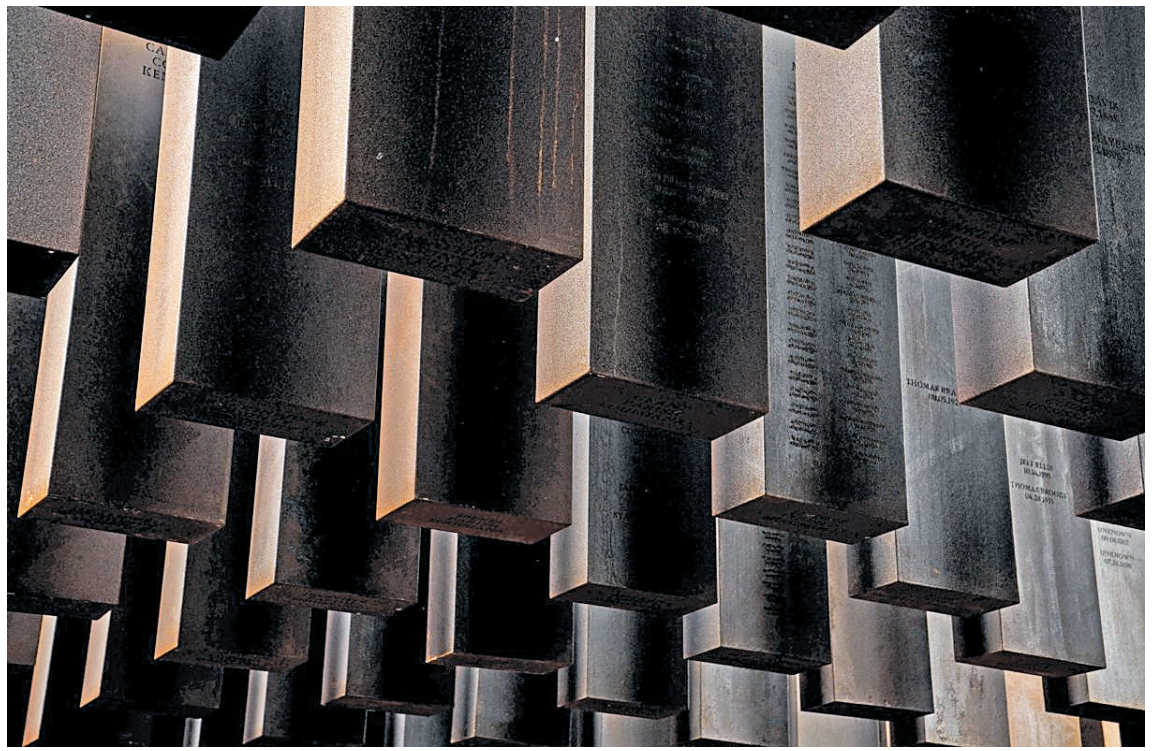
Names of lynching victims listed by county cover the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in downtown Montgomery, Ala., May 23, 2018. (Johnathon Kelso/The New York Times)

The design of the memorial is reminiscent of the Vietnam War Veterans Memorial in D.C., and generates similar feelings of loss. Some monoliths have more than a dozen names etched on them, while others have only a few. As more victims are unearthed and identified, their names will be added to a monument representing their town or region.

matically. Everyone maintained a respectful posture while taking in soul crushing information and images.

On a blazing hot afternoon that felt like 99 degrees, I made my way to a shuttle bus for the crosstown trip to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, known informally as the Lynching Memorial. It is a six-acre site where the names of lynching victims, mostly murdered during Jim Crow, have been stenciled on 805 six-foot steel monuments suspended at different heights. What begins at eye level subtly shifts to tree level by the end of the slow walk through the sacred site.

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The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala.

Demetrius Freeman/Washington Post

Both the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the nearby Legacy Museum are the kind of well-designed introductions to American historical realities that make them a threat in a country still committed to downplaying white supremacy. They are the antidote to the lies — yes, they are lies — that whitewash America's history, and present. They tell the truth and, as another truth-teller said two millennia ago, "the truth will make you free."

Today, some politicians think they will profit from fearmongering about telling the truth about American history, arguing that it might make white children "feel bad." But there is no profit in sell-

ing lies; they become a prison for the mind and the heart, a far worse fate than experiencing a little emotional discomfort with the truth. In fact, maybe those negative feelings come from the new knowledge that they've been lied to for so many years — not because of misplaced guilt. It's humiliating never to have heard of the Tulsa Massacre before it was depicted on an HBO show about masked vigilantes.

The freedom of the truth may make people resent those who kept them captive by lies for so long. Maybe that's what some people really fear.

We're a nation that is always on the lookout for new ways to evade history; but history always has a

way of arriving, even if it runs a little late — like those Union soldiers who arrived in Galveston, Tx., on June 19, 1865, to proclaim freedom for the 250,000 enslaved Blacks who missed out on the news about the Emancipation Proclamation, and hadn't heard about the end of the war, either.

A true accounting of this nation's harrowing racial legacy doesn't allow the luxury of complacency or willful ignorance. Once the truth gets out, we can all move forward without any fear of the past.

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Bobby's dad was good. So was mine. John's wasn't.

"I love life. Life's all good." My friend Bobby has come over to my corner of our townie bar, where I waited to order dinner. The bartender sets down my beer. "I got that," Bobby tells her. "OK," she says and nods. He buys a lot of people beers.

He's got his painters hat on and a Sherwin-Williams t-shirt. He's a house painter and contractor who works for a lot of people in the wealthy communities up river. "You're always so even-keeled. Nothing ever bothers you," I say.

"Nothing ever bothers me!" he says. "I love life," he adds, as an explanation. "Everything's good. Life is great. The soup's always good," he says and laughs. I must look blank.

"The soup's always good." That's what my dad said. He died when he was 48, and he said, "Bobby spaced out the words, 'The soup's always good.'"

He's mentioned his dad before. They seem to have had their difficulties, but he usually speaks of



him well. Bobby describes himself as "old school," especially in his work. He learned to be old school from his dad.

"We was hunkies," Bobby says. "Hungarian?" I ask, not remembering my eastern Europeans. "Hungarian? We was Czechoslovakian!" He forgives my ignorance.

"We hunkies ate a lot a' soup! And the soup's always good! If you make it," he added. "The soup's always good — if you make it." He laughs. "That's what my dad said."

Bobby and I kept talking for a few minutes, mostly about fishing. He's disappointed that I don't fish.

As he started to go back to his girlfriend and leave for the night he stopped talking and rubbed his cheekbones with a thumb and forefinger. "I got tears coming from my

eyes," he said, "thinking of the great things my dad used to say."

"As I reached the top of the stairs my father was waiting," another friend, a distinguished academic, wrote me and some others. "He clubbed me on the side of the head; it must have been a left because it sent me flying into the kitchen, where I righted myself just as the serious blows began raining down on me." He hadn't come upstairs to dinner right when he was called.

John was ten-years-old but weighed less than 50 pounds. His father weighed 200. He wasn't allowed to defend himself from his father's beating. "Until that day I was accustomed to absorbing a few solid rousing whacks to both sides of the head and face followed by an awkward silence, broken only with an expression of contrition from my end."

But that day, "we had suddenly entered a new phase in the war at home: my father pounded me with a fury I had never before experienced, his flailing open-fisted cuffs tagging me not only on both on the sides of

the head, but on top, where the slightly longer hair I now sported over my forehead (with the back and sides remaining at crew cut length) provided a solid grip from which to launch a few rebounding thwacks of my noggin against the white freezer door of our late 1950s-vintage refrigerator."

He sees, now, that his father had been shaped from early childhood by an unstable mother, and had suffered a sensory disorder. "There were lots of ill-equipped parents," John said. "Wish I had greater understanding."

But it's the wise words and the beatings that matter to a child and shape him for life. It's the experience of actual fathers that makes Father's Day more problematic than it should be. A lot of people can't celebrate it. Many women I know have stories as bad or worse than John's. And others whose stories I know have erased a lot of the pain to leave a better picture.

Because, weirdly, even late in life, people can feel embarrassed by what their parents did to them. We

apparently take early judgments as just judgments. If your dad beat you, you must, in some way, have deserved it. "I talked to one of our classmates one night sitting in our front yard," John wrote. "She said she heard my father beat me. It was mortifying."

I liked my dad. We were very different. He was stoic and accepting. I was impassioned and unsatisfied. He wanted to do his job well. I wanted to change the world. He took people as he found them. I thought they could be better. He must have found me vexing, at least till my mid-twenties.

Father's Day is a day for people like Bobby and me. I remember my dad — he died sixteen years ago, as I sat with him in his hospice room — with affection and gratitude. But Father's Day is also a day to remember people who suffered like John.

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