

Q&A

The Visitors' Corner with Sia Sanneh and Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative

In 2010, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)—a nonprofit legal aid organization dedicated to challenging racial and economic injustice—began to branch out from the courtroom and into public commemoration. The group's staff spent years investigating more than 4,400 racial terror lynchings across the American South, many of which had not been documented before. They visited hundreds of sites of violence, collected soil, and erected markers.

The United States had no national memorial dedicated to the horrors of slavery and lynching, the humiliations of Jim Crow, or the continued racial injustices that have cast dark shadows over modern American society. So EJI set about creating a site where people can gather to reflect on the history and legacies of racial inequality. On April 26, 2018, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened to the public in Montgomery, Alabama.

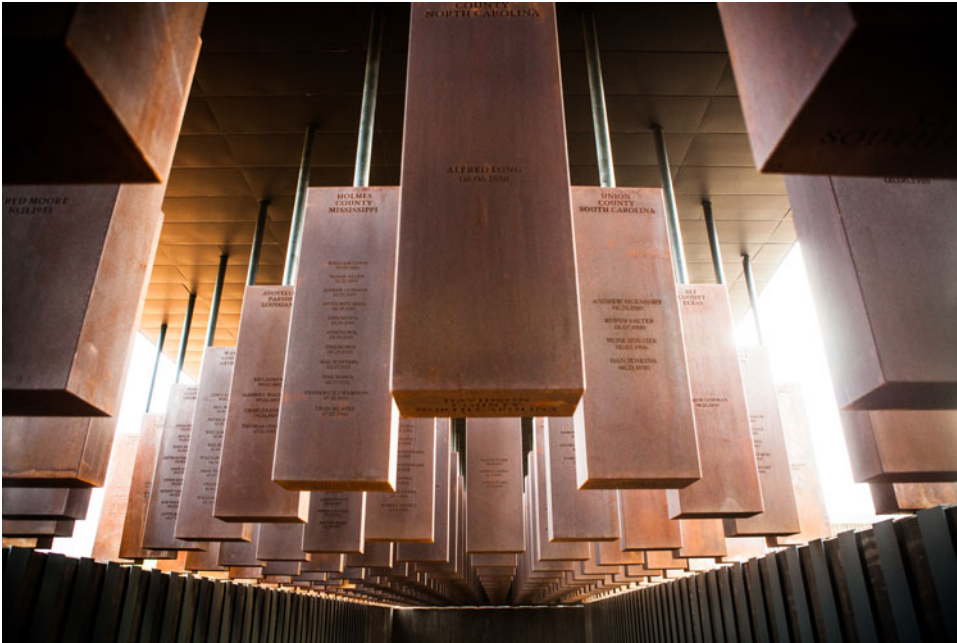
Commissioned art, including from the sculptors Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, Dana King, and Hank Willis Thomas, punctuate the site's grassy six-acre expanse. At the center sits a memorial square, filled with over 800 six-foot-long steel columns that loom overhead, one for each county where extralegal murder of one or more African Americans took place and each engraved with the names of the lynching victims.

In a surrounding plaza rest identically engraved slabs, waiting for the residents of their counties to come to claim and display them in their own communities. As the columns slowly disappear from the park, those that remain will serve as a reminder of painful pasts that have yet to be confronted. A nearby museum provides broader context on the history of racism and racial injustice from the era of enslavement to the age of mass incarceration.

Earlier this year, MAH's Brooke L. Blower and Adriane Lentz-Smith interviewed EJI's founder and executive director Bryan Stevenson, as well as the group's senior attorney Sia Sanneh about what it means for lawyers to become monument builders, and what it means for us all to engage with these sites.

Why build monuments and memorials? What special work does public commemoration do that restitution in the courts or stories told in books and films, for instance, can't do? What does the National Memorial for Peace and Justice hope to accomplish?

Stevenson: The public narrative a nation creates about what is important is reflected in memorials and monuments. Who is honored, what is remembered, and what is memorialized tell a story about a society that can't be reflected in other ways. Monuments and memorials speak to the truths about a community, about history in a way that everyone is forced to acknowledge. In that way, I think they occupy an important space for truth-telling that can't be replicated by books or films.



The National Memorial for Peace and Justice's central square. Credit: Human Pictures / Equal Justice Initiative.

The Memorial for Peace and Justice has a central focus on racial terror lynchings, but it is more broadly about what we have failed to acknowledge and address and the way it continues to haunt us, to burden us. The memorial's sculptures and the nearby Legacy Museum also reflect upon enslavement, racial segregation in the mid-twentieth century, and current issues around police violence.

We want this place to inspire and motivate people to no longer be silent about this history. We want visitors to leave with a determination to speak truth more urgently when it comes to confronting our history of racial inequality. You can't understand this history without resolving to think more about the demands of justice. You can't create true justice if you are unconcerned with peace. In that sense the memorial seeks for those we honor what they have been most tragically denied. By honoring them we also create a better future for ourselves. This is a memorial for the living and the dead.

What was the hardest part of the memorial to get done? The easiest? The most surprising?

Sanneh: There have been so many challenges. It is obviously an enormous challenge for a non-profit to take on a project of this scale while keeping—and in fact increasing—our commitment to represent so many people in need of free legal assistance in the criminal justice system. We have a small staff, and many of our folks had to step up and take on new roles to help EJI expand into this new space, and at the same time help acculturate new folks we brought on to join the team. We also realized during this process how much we needed to engage directly with art, architecture, and design in order to ensure that the spaces tell a coherent story, and that the story they tell helps people confront this difficult history, but come away feeling hopeful.

Stevenson: Everything has been hard. We've never done anything like this before. It's exciting and energizing but enormously difficult. What's been easy is to continue working on it despite



The Legacy Museum in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. Credit: Human Pictures/Equal Justice Initiative.

the complexity and the challenge. It's become increasingly clear how important narrative work is given the current political climate and the challenges we face as a nation.

Were there any other monuments in the United States you were thinking about while developing the Memorial for Peace and Justice?

Stevenson: Very few in the United States. The Holocaust Memorial in Miami is very powerful, and of course the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC.

Sanneh: We were inspired primarily by sites of conscience, and most of these spaces are outside of the United States. One place that inspired us was the Apartheid Museum in South Africa, which is a narrative space that asks people to confront difficult history and commit to this idea of never again. My mother grew up in Johannesburg during apartheid, and I have visited that museum many times. After one of those visits almost ten years ago, I remember talking with Bryan about what it would be like to create a space like that in Alabama, and how critical a space like that could be in starting a process of truth and reconciliation here. The Holocaust memorial in Berlin is also a space from which we drew inspiration, along with the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda.

Why, until now, has there been no comparable collective recognition of racial violence and injustice in the United States? What conditions are needed for such commemorations to take shape?

Stevenson: In these other countries, there was a transfer of power that made acknowledging horrific violations of human rights and painful narratives achievable that would have been



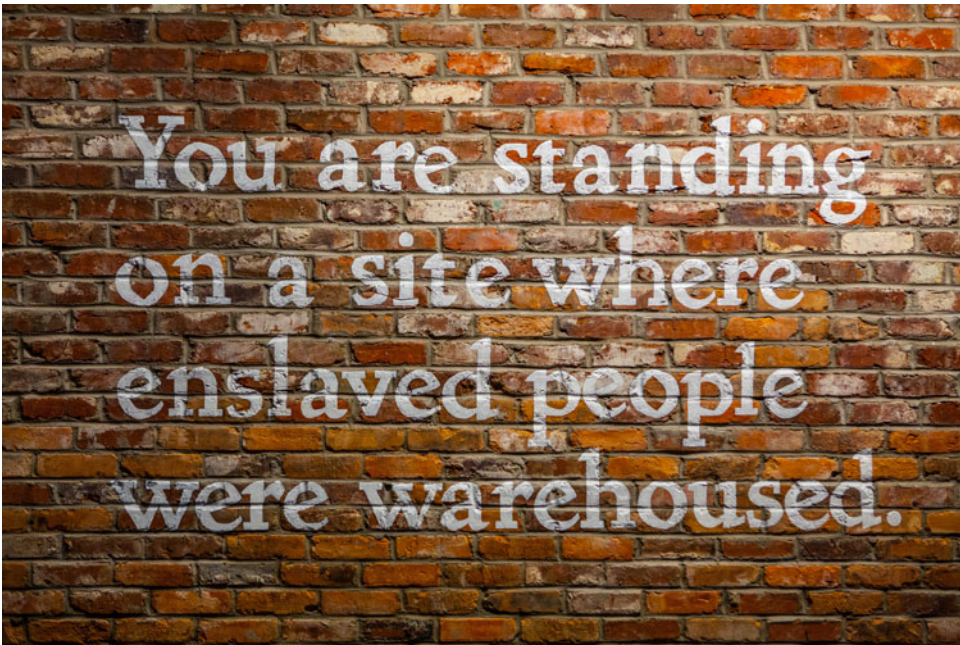
Bronze sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas. Credit: Human Pictures / Equal Justice Initiative.

impossible without those who transgressed the rights of others losing power. The Germans lost the war, Black South Africans came to power, a Tutsi-backed military took control of Rwanda, and so on. In the United States we haven't seen any real shift of power that would facilitate the kind of memorialization we see in other parts of the world. We have a much harder task in America because we are calling on people to own up to a painful, violent, and racist past even when they are not militarily required to do so. Even after the North won the Civil War, it was white Southerners who won the narrative war. They recovered their political and economic privileges and retained the ideology of white supremacy long past the war's end. In this way, America needs a narrative shift rooted in an understanding that we are all burdened by the legacy of slavery, the terror of lynching, and the stain of segregation. These are not just issues for people of color, since the entire society was involved. Postwar Germans didn't have to be as vigilant about memorializing the Holocaust despite their defeat; they wanted to be an honorable nation despite a dishonorable era where millions were victimized. The power of truth and reconciliation is that it offers a way forward for everyone.

Does it matter where a memorial goes? Whether it is located in the nation's capital, or elsewhere? What significance does place have for commemoration?

Stevenson: It's critical that some of the memorialization be in the space where the legacy of slavery and racial terrorism is most keenly felt. The landscape of the American South is littered with the iconography of the Confederacy. There is a problematic narrative of the South's glorious past that needs to be challenged and reinterpreted in that region.

Sanneh: The National Memorial to Peace and Justice is a physical manifestation of an idea we have talked about for many years. We spent over six years researching the history of lynching in the Deep South, and during this process our staff visited hundreds of spaces where lynchings



A brick wall at the Legacy Museum reminds visitors of the history of their location. Credit: Human Pictures/Equal Justice Initiative.

occurred. We were really struck by the absence of memorialization in these spaces, and the memorial is an effort to remedy that by creating a space that both captures the scale of racial terror lynchings, but also the deeply personal, local character of this violence. That is why part of the design invites communities across the country to claim their monuments and erect them in a local space. We think it is important that we encourage people to have the same experience we did—driving down a quiet road, hours away from a major city—and encountering this history there. It drives home the geographic scale of the violence in this era, and the fact that there was simply no space where African American people were safe and protected.

Bryan, in Just Mercy you wrote that “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” This lesson seems wise for contemplating a single bad act taken by a single individual. But should the history of lynching be thought of as an accumulation of single crimes, contemplated one by one? Or does the memorial recognize the structural underpinnings that made this practice something systemic? Does that suggest different lessons?

Stevenson: No, I think that we are more than a nation of slavery, lynching, and segregation. Despite this brutal, horrific past, we are not beyond redemption and recovery. People of color have contributed so much to what’s great and valued in America that there is ample evidence of how we are more than just our failings. However, my clients who go up for parole can’t win their freedom if they are unwilling to acknowledge the wrongfulness of their crimes. Without remorse and atonement, we don’t trust people who have been convicted of crimes to be released because we worry they will offend again. With acknowledgment of a wrongful history, with remorse there is hope and increased trust for those who are incarcerated. It’s that way for our nation too. There is a lot of distrust and tension in this country because we haven’t been truthful about our past.

Sia, have you been surprised at all by reactions to the opening of the museum and the memorial?

Sanneh: After the past three years, it has been really moving to experience people engaging with the space. I watched a man tear up when he found the county in Louisiana where his family was from, and then recognized their family name on one of the monuments. Seeing families from all over the country starting to understand the violence of this era and how it created a generation of refugees from the South. I'm impressed with the number of young people who are making the trip to visit. People coming to the memorial from hundreds of miles away on a pilgrimage, people coming from other countries. The level of interest in and thoughtful engagement with the space has been really gratifying.

After the Memorial for Peace and Justice, what should be next? What other public commemoration work is pressing?

Stevenson: The opening of the memorial is just the beginning. Over 800 counties in the United States are being asked to claim a replica of the six-foot monuments we have created for every community where a lynching took place. Our Memory Plaza will contain a replica of every monument in the memorial waiting for community members to organize and claim their history by taking the monument back to the county for public display. In this sense the Memorial for Peace and Justice will be born in Montgomery, but it is intended to live in communities all across the nation.

Sanneh: This memorial is about lynching, but really, it is about the way slavery continued to assert itself in American life long after formal abolition. There were ideas that justified, legitimated, and celebrated slavery: the narrative of white supremacy, the idea that black people in fact *needed* to be enslaved because they were culturally, morally, intellectually inferior. That narrative has proven extraordinarily stubborn and difficult to eradicate. It continues to sustain injustice today. We think that by exposing and confronting the narratives and ideas that sustain injustice, we can ultimately undermine them. This is why the next step is local engagement to further this process.

We think that the process of truth and reconciliation can be both national and local. Our experience doing restorative justice work in criminal cases has taught us how much progress you can make if you engage with a local community. This is why we are so committed to the next phase of the project, where we are working with local communities to erect monuments. We think this process, if handled with thought and care, can have a profound impact.

Have professional historians helped you in your work? How might they?

Sanneh: There are of course several historians whose work has contributed tremendously to shaping our understanding of this era: Isabel Wilkerson's book on the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*; Walter Johnson's books on slavery in the antebellum period, including *River of Dark Dreams*; Edward Baptist's book, *The Half Has Never Been Told*. There are also many journalists, psychologists, and artists whose work has contributed a great deal. The scholarship on trauma and its effects on people has been very influential in terms of the way we at EJI approach this research. A bookstore next door to the Legacy Museum offers these titles and many others to visitors who want to learn more and engage with this scholarship.

Otherwise, our staff completed all of the research for this project in-house. We spent over six years documenting every racial terror lynching we could identify first in the twelve states with the highest rates of lynching, then we expanded to eight more states, and now we have expanded this research even further. This process involved searching through newspaper archives, county courthouses, other primary sources, and we also read many, many books and articles that were relevant to this period.

Many of these research skills are actually similar to what goes into doing work as death penalty lawyers, where we have to be historians, sociologists, researchers, and build a deliberate and comprehensive picture of our clients' lives, sometimes going back several generations. So many of the same skills apply here. And we followed a similar approach for writing the script for the Legacy Museum, and we did all of the work internally with a very small team, to ensure that the museum would tell a single story and speak with one voice.

Stevenson: I do think academics and scholars need to be more vocal and vigilant when we ignore the difficult parts of our past. Silence can make you complicit in narratives that undermine the health of our society. If we are not honest about our past, we will lose our capacity to sustain hope.

The most enduring, transformational hope is not rooted in some sugar-coated telling of history that ignores or avoids the difficult parts. As Václav Havel writes, transcendent hope is an orientation of the spirit, not simply a preference for optimism over pessimism. A willingness to face the most daunting and painful parts of our history and still believe that we can achieve more, do more, create something that gets closer to our most cherished values and beliefs is critical. Harriet Tubman said that "slavery is the next thing to hell." That knowledge inspired her to free thousands of people. It's when we don't understand the evil of slavery or lynching or racial oppression that we hope for too little and accept too much inequity and injustice. We are convinced more than ever that history as a discipline is essential to the health and future of our society. Historians are guardians of our future as much as the narrators of what has come before.