

EDITORIAL OBSERVER

At This Memorial, the Monuments Bleed



By Jesse Wegman

Mr. Wegman is a member of the editorial board.

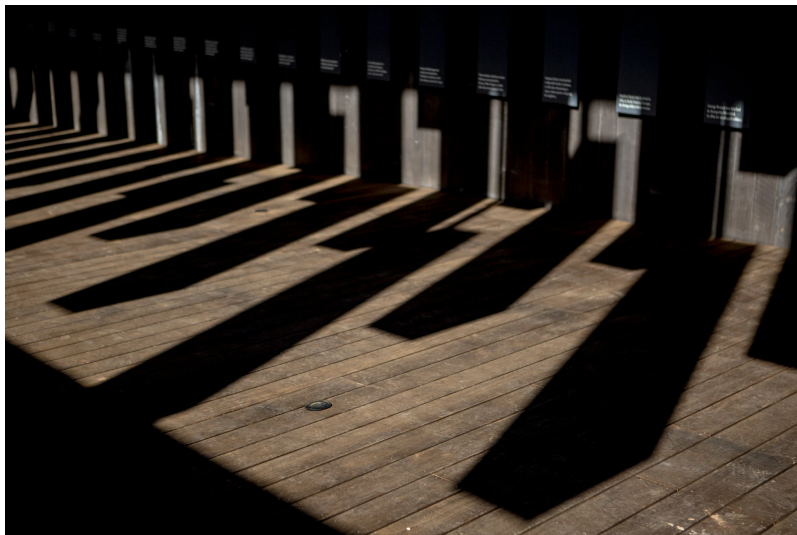
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From the bottom of a gentle grassy slope a hundred feet away, the rusted steel columns look like nothing remarkable. Lined up in rows under an open-air shed, they could be abandoned I-beams or castoffs from an old railroad bridge. Then, before you know it, you're among them. Hundreds of reddish-brown hulls, each maybe six feet tall, surrounding you. Each bolted to a thick metal post anchored not to the floor but to the ceiling. Each — you imagine, feeling a bit crazy — watching.

You'd turn and run right out of there if you could.

Then you see the names. Simon Jenkins. 7.17.1877. Frank Harrell. 02.09.1893. Unknown. 08.08.1883. Stenciled into the face of each column, the names of the men and women hanged, shot, drowned, beaten and burned because of the color of their skin. The columns — more than 800 — are the heart of the stunning new National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opens on Thursday in Montgomery, Ala. They represent the counties throughout the South and across America where lynchings were carried out with impunity. So far researchers have documented more than 4,400 killings starting from the end of Reconstruction in 1877, a campaign of racial terror by white people against black and brown people lasting more than seven decades.

If the memorial were simply an accounting of all those names lost to history, it would be devastating enough. But as you walk among them, two things happen: The wooden path under your feet begins to descend and the columns appear to rise. They rise until they are suspended above your head, unreadable and unreachable, a forest of scarred brown figures. There are no more names, only a growing pressure on your chest as you try to absorb the scope of it all.



Columns bearing names and dates rise until they are suspended above your head, a forest of scarred brown figures. Andrea Morales for The New York Times

The memorial is the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal rights organization in Montgomery, and its director, Bryan Stevenson, who started representing impoverished death-row inmates in Alabama 30 years ago. As his work expanded to include juveniles and other vulnerable people trapped in the criminal justice system, he realized he needed to think broadly about the role of racism in American history.

"I think of it like smog," Mr. Stevenson said last week at his office in downtown Montgomery. "It's just in the air — anyone living in this country has inherited a narrative of racial difference that shapes the way we see the world."

Americans' refusal to fully confront our own past, he said, has bound us to that narrative. "Nobody is required to learn about slavery. Nobody's required to learn about lynching. You're not required to think about segregation. And in fact, you're encouraged to not do those things."



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How do we begin to do those things? Mr. Stevenson is a very good lawyer, and he knows that the most effective way to make your case — particularly to people who see the world very differently from you — is not with outrage and condemnation but with a slow, thorough accumulation of evidence and argument leading to an inevitable conclusion.

That's how he has won a series of landmark criminal justice cases at the Supreme Court, and it's how he has approached the project of ending what he calls America's "reign of silence" around slavery, lynching and racial subjugation.

A few years ago, he tested the waters by getting city officials to let him erect a series of historical markers indicating where a slave warehouse or market once stood. It was an impressive feat in a place where, despite its significance to the modern civil rights movement, many residents remain invested in a different narrative — the one that emphasizes, for example, that it is home to the first "White House" of the Confederacy.

The memorial was a far bigger task, of course (it has an accompanying museum downtown that ties slavery to mass incarceration), but it reflects the same lawyerly deliberativeness and attention to detail. Mr. Stevenson and his team included only lynchings that could be verified by two contemporaneous accounts, and they were deeply involved in every element of the design, down to what plantings would line the pathways.

This creates a feeling of welcome — surprising, perhaps, in the context of such a damning exhibit, but natural for Mr. Stevenson, who sees the potential for growth and change in everyone, his fellow citizens no less than his clients on death row.



Rainwater runs red on the rusted steel columns, a reminder of the terror inflicted by lynching. Andrea Morales for The New York Times

“In these communities where people actually cheered and celebrated while black people were burned and brutalized, you want people to recover, to repent,” he said. “Not just because you want to see them on their knees, but because you know that on the other side of that there’s a kind of liberation. There’s a kind of redemption.” The price of that redemption, though, is clear: a willingness to face up to America’s brutal and racist past with open eyes, and to understand how it lives on in different forms today.

“You know, when it rains that rainwater turns copper, it turns red, and it drips off of those things,” Mr. Stevenson said of the columns. “And because the violence, the terror, of lynchings was lifted up over communities to taunt and terrorize, you can’t have an awareness of that history without those monuments rising.”

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