Hanging by a Thread: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Complexities of Memorialising and Mourning Lynching in America

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In response to Black Lives Matter, considerable attention has been granted to the complex power memorials and statues hold across society. Many scholars have come to analyse them as significant *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). A term constructed by French Historian Pierre Nora, this label has turned these complex sites into symbolic and material representations of how a given society has come to memorialise a particular history. Whilst recently constructed, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ) and its accompanying Legacy Museum hold a similar usefulness. An analysis of both their material features, alongside how people have chosen- or not chosen- to interact with the space, serves as a perfect illustration of how divided America remains around memorialising Lynching and its darker past more broadly.

The NMPJ opened in Montgomery, Alabama in April 2018 and was designed and produced by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). As the nation’s first memorial dedicated to what the EJI condemns as ‘racial terror lynchings’, the site pays tribute to the more than four thousand Black victims who lost their lives in the terrible affair. As a recent memorial, Jenny Woodley is one of the first historian to analyse the site. She argues through ‘remembering the dead, the Lynching Memorial also allows and encourages visitors to mourn’, a process ‘white supremacy has long sought to deny.’ Whilst Woodley’s work highlights a more sensitive memorialisation of lynching that is beginning to take shape across America, her optimism

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3 Jenny Woodley, ‘ ‘Nothing is lost’: Mourning and memory at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice’, *Memory Studies*, (2022), 4.
5 Ibid, 1.
has led to her painting a far too utopic picture. A more critical analysis which examines the difficult experiences African Americans have experienced during their visit to the NMPJ, alongside how practices of white supremacy have continued to take shape across the site, both through how white Americans have chosen to interact-or avoid-the space, is therefore required. Such an analysis reveals a less romanticised picture where Americans remain extremely conflicted over memorialising Lynching.

To highlight such complexities, this essay will explore the EJI’s memorial and museum from a Material Culture perspective and Memory and Public History one, alongside incorporating scholarly work on the process of mourning. Due to the memorial being situated in America, it will rely heavily on the descriptive accounts of those who have been able to physically visit the site.

In terms of structure, this essay is divided into three main sections. Firstly, it will explore how the Lynching Memorial and Legacy Museum, both materially and symbolically, promote a more representative history which acknowledges lynchings’ ‘interconnectedness’ with broader practices of white supremacy, alongside its violent and devastating nature. This leads the essay onto an examination of Woodley’s argument on grief. Bringing in Kenneth Doka’s argument of ‘disenfranchised grief’, this section will explore how the cemetery-like characteristics of the memorial has prompted a process of mourning from both white and Black visitors. Lastly, the essay will analyse the Lynching Memorial more critically, exploring how in practice, full memorialisation of a more representative history, alongside a sensitive

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6 Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 5.
7 Kenneth Doka, ‘Disenfranchised Grief’, Bereavement Care, 18.3 (1999), 37, cited in Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 4; Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 5.
process of mourning, is yet to be achieved. To do so, it will focus on the complex ways features of white supremacy, although less overt, have taken shape across the site. That being through both the ways white Americans have chosen to interact with the space (through the act of taking photographs) and equally avoid it (by opting not to claim their personal state’s lynching memorial). An analysis of the ways this has impacted African Americans’ visits to the sites highlights how such decisions can have lasting ramifications. In pointing out such, this essay wishes not to criticise the considerable work of the EJI, but to stress just how entrenched white supremacy has become across America. So much so, people who believe they are commemorating those who have died to the hands of white supremacy are unconsciously perpetrating similar practices. Clearly, there is a great deal to be learned and considerable space for memorials to be even more critical.

**Memorialising a More Representative History**

A central aim of the EJI when constructing the memorial and museum was to challenge the ‘distorted national narrative’ and acknowledge ‘the harms borne by the African American Community.’

The founder of EJI, Bryan Stevenson, stresses the importance of this through expressing how the American South’s “littered landscape” of romanticised “iconography of the confederacy” has left the country “vulnerable to replicating those features of white supremacy that we’ve actually never repudiated.”

Here, the very decision to construct the lynching site in Alabama became a political act of defiance in and of itself. It revealed how

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8 Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 5.
despite efforts of Southern state officials to protect a fanciful picture of its past, this is a memorialisation a vast number of people do not adopt and are determined to challenge. As Paul Stock asserts how spaces can become physical representations of ‘specific periods’, the NMPJ and accompanying museum serves as a direct exemplification of how memorialisation surrounding lynching and America’s darker past are changing.10

The EJI’s effort to promote a more representative history is displayed through the materiality of the EJI’s Legacy Museum which is located a short twenty-minute walk from the memorial.11 Upon entry to the museum, visitors are met with a black and white image of the American flag, which reads: ‘from enslavement to mass incarceration’ [Image One]. The symbolic importance of embedding this message within the American flag should not be downplayed. It functions as a visual expression of how the violence of white supremacy remains woven within the very identity of the country, juxtaposing against Alabama’s romanticised iconography of the confederacy which the current governor, Kay Ivey, remains committed to protect.12 In doing so, the EJI utilise the museum as a political tool to encourage the visitor to recognise the long-lasting legacies enslavement continues to have across society. The colour of the icon reasserts this discomforting truth, both visually and metaphorically, in black and white.

The unsettling connection made between America’s identity and practices of white supremacy is enforced not just artistically, but spatially. One aspect of the museum display includes an image of a brick wall, which asserts: ‘you are standing on a site where enslaved people were warehoused’ [Image Two]. Immediately, the destination of the museum, and Alabama state more broadly, are made synonymous with the immoral institution of slavery. The impact of this should not be downplayed, as for a visitor unaware of this fact, it becomes incredibly difficult to disassociate themselves from this truth as they are physically standing in the same spot the atrocities of slavery took place. The EJI leave no space for distraction. The result of this can be best exemplified through the various reviews left by visitors who have described the space as ‘deeply moving’ and ‘heart-breaking.’ Evidently, the museum not only represents an emerging memorialisation of a less sanitised history of

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America, but encourages others to embrace the same. Here, the EJI successfully materialise David Olusoga’s refusal to advocate histories which create “a place of greater safety.”

Clearly, a memorialisation of these more representative histories do not need to remain confined within scholarly textbooks.


Whilst on the surface, the above depictions do not seem to be referring directly to lynchings, an acknowledgment of them as broader examples of white supremacy allow them to speak to their interconnectedness with the incident. Woodley suggests this is

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practically enforced through the physical journey the EJI encourages the museum’s visitor to embark on.\textsuperscript{15} Reflecting on her visit, Woodley highlights:

The main museum space is open and there are no delineations between the different subject areas... there is no obvious route round the space and therefore visitors wander at will and perhaps randomly, encountering different parts of the narrative in different orders.\textsuperscript{16}

Physically surrounded by all of the museum’s content, the visitor is forced to acknowledge the wider significance of lynchings, reflecting ‘with what Saidiya Hartman calls the ‘afterlife of slavery.’”\textsuperscript{17} Such a reckoning is integral to not reproducing the very same romanticised picture the EJI sets out to critique. If the EJI had focused solely on lynchings, visitors would have had an easier time disassociating themselves from the event, categorising white supremacy as something of the past. Instead, by asserting the contemporary ramifications white supremacy continues to have in the form of mass incarceration, a sense of moral responsibility and urgency is handed to the visitor to both acknowledge and spread a more representative memorialisation of America’s past. Considering the museum’s power here, it comes to little surprise journalist Campbell Robertson has labelled it ‘a companion piece to the memorial.’\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 5.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
\textsuperscript{17} Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 6, cited in Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 5.
The sheer scale of the Lynching Memorial serves best to acknowledge the magnitude of the lynchings which took place across America. In the middle of the Lynching Memorial, is a cloister of 800 hanging steel columns. Engraved onto each of these ‘weathered’ columns, you can find the name of an American county and the victims lynched there, many of which are ‘unknown’ [Image Three]. Visitor Campbell Robertson describes how:

The columns meet you first at eye level, like the headstone that lynching victims were rarely given. But as you walk, the floor steadily descends; by the end, the columns are all dangling above, leaving you in the position of the callous spectators in old photographs of public lynchings.

Standing under these heavy and tall cloisters, the visitor is forced into a state of inferiority. As a result, sole focus is granted towards the thousands of lives lost in the terrible affair. Visitor Vanessa Croft, comments on the memorial’s power here, stating how “it’s almost overwhelming how many of these people are represented, it’s sobering.” Such feelings are heightened through the stories provided alongside these columns. One of which is dedicated to Caleb Gadley who was hung in Kentucky in 1894 for ‘walking behind the wife of his white employer.’ Alongside individualising the victims of lynching, the unsettling nature of these stories help to exaggerate just how inhumane and unjustified lynchings were.

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20 Ibid
21 Ibid
Through opting not to include photographs of lynchings alongside the cloisters, the EJI are able to maintain a great deal of sensitivity when addressing such a violent and troubling history. This conscious decision becomes all the more important when acknowledging Amy Wood’s critique of how lynching photographs can serve to enforce processes of white supremacy, functioning ‘as visual proof for the uncontested ‘truth’ of white civilised morality over and against supposed Black bestiality and savagery.’ By not displaying graphic images, the EJI do not confine Lynching victims to a similar state of ‘inferiority’ ‘lawless mobs’ assigned to them. Here, the EJI’s memorial exemplifies how a representative memorialisation of America’s past can be promoted all whilst remaining sensitive. This level of empathy is further demonstrated through the fact the memorial and museum are a non-profit organisation, highlighting how the construction of the memorial has not been distorted by monetary incentives. In turn, ensuring the lives lost to lynching remain at the centre of this memorialisation.

‘Disenfranchised Grief’

Kenneth Doka’s theory of ‘disenfranchised grief’ describes an ‘experience by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.’ Considering such, Woodley asserts the memorial’s sensitive characteristics encourages visitors- both Black and white- to mourn. This process of mourning is best promoted through the memorial’s cemetery like characteristics. Reflecting on this, Woodley describes how:

28 Woodley, ‘Nothing is lost’, 1-7.
29 Ibid, 5.
There are frequent signs around the site, reminding visitors it is a ‘sacred place’ and asking them to be ‘respectful’. Visitors generally seem to take head of this; on my visits the atmosphere was muted.\(^{30}\)

Woodley’s experiences of mourning are not an isolated case. After touring the memorial, Montgomery native and African American, Wretha Hudson, reflected how “to me, this is more than just a memorial. It’s also a sacred place because my ancestors paid the ultimate price.”\(^{31}\) For many African Americans, the journey around the memorial becomes a deeply personal journey, providing an opportunity for them to search for ancestors whose lives could not be publicly grieved at their time of death. Woodley asserts this has the power to ‘enfranchise Black grief.’\(^{32}\) Here, a sense of closure is offered not only to those directly related to lynching victims, but the African American community more broadly.

What is important to stress is how this process of mourning is not limited to African Americans, but carried out by white visitors. Patricia from Lockport, New York, left a review on TripAdvisor, sharing how ‘while this is a peaceful place, it is very emotional. I was blessed to have a very sensitive guide to help me understand my emotions as an old white lady and the savagery of what happened that this memorial was depicting.’\(^{33}\)

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\(^{30}\) Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost”’, 5.
\(^{32}\) Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost”’, 4.
The importance of the memorial’s power to evoke these ‘emotional’ feelings should not be dismissed. Encouraging wide-spread grief, the memorial asserts that lynching victims are just as worthy of being mourned as white Americans. Whilst such facts are undeniable, this was not something widely accepted during the ‘spectacle’ of lynching. In this sense, the memorial makes the previously ‘ungreivable’ lives of lynching victims ‘grievable.’

Encouraging Americans to unite and grieve together here, the memorial can help promote racial justice. Reflecting on the memorial, civil rights activist Jesse Jackson asserts “for there to be reconciliation, both sides must be willing to reconcile. For there to be healing, you have to take the glass out of the wound.” Evidently, mourning the lives lost to the violence of white supremacy should not remain a task solely undertaken by African Americans, but a wide-spread commitment. Only then can racial injustices begin to be achieved. However, what Woodley fails to address are the issues that can arise with the memorial’s efforts to promote such.

Continuous Complexities

It is undeniable the Lynching Memorial promotes wide-spread and respectful processes of mourning and memorialisation. However, these practices do not always play out in reality. For some, engaging with the memorial has become a form of ‘entertainment’.

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34 Woodley, ‘ ‘Nothing is lost’’, 2.
on their visit to the memorial, one African American, William Anderson, recalls witnessing ‘a white man taking photos of the columns’, reflecting ‘I couldn’t help but think, They’re still taking photos.’ The act of taking photos should not be dismissed, as being able to disconnect from the sensitive nature of the memorial, is an act of privilege in itself. Here, the memorial quickly transitioned from a sensitive space to one where as Anderson reflects, ‘white onlookers engage in the spectacle of lynching.’ The process of turning the site into a form of entertainment is not a one off and can be further exemplified through visitor’s reviews that label the space as a perfect ‘tourist destination’ and ‘stunningly new outdoor memorial.’ Whilst words such as ‘stunning’ may be clumsy mishaps, these risks turning the suffering of lynching victims into a mere piece of art. Despite EJI’s attempts, practices of white supremacy and detachment, continue to ensue.

39 Ibid
The ramifications of such should not be downplayed, as they have proven to hinder the mourning process of African Americans. Anderson recalled how ‘I walked faster than I had to in order to outpace any white people around me who might distract me from my grief, which prevented me from taking time with the monument.’\(^4\) While such distraction may be unconscious, for many African Americans, white visitors possess an implicit bias that can make sharing these spaces difficult. Clearly, the trauma of lynchings continues to hinder the African American experience, making their mourning extremely tenuous and vulnerable to a

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similar dichotomy which led to the event in the first place. Unfortunately, the fight for complete freedom is far from over.

A close examination of how people have not interacted with the space can also serve as a useful signifier on how complex America’s memorialisation surrounding lynching remains. Outside the walkway of 800 cloisters, are replicates of the columns, ‘lined up in rows like coffins’ designed to be distributed to American counties where lynchings were committed.42 Research by The New York Times reveals how many counties have requested that their columns be retrieved.43 However, what becomes particularly troubling is despite the memorial being constructed over six years ago, Lincoln and Larue are yet to retrieve their monuments, indicating a reluctancy to take ownership for their state’s involvement in the terrible affair [Image Four]. Despite all of the EJI’s efforts, the memorial has become yet another opportunity for those in positions of power to opt not to engage with America’s darker past. Clearly, America is far from being able to unite over the matter, demonstrating a need for further efforts like the EJI’s to promote a more representative memorialisation of America’s past.

43 Ibid
Conclusions

From a Material Culture and Public History perspective, analysing the NMPJ and its accompanying museum provides a sense of hope towards the way America is beginning to memorialise lynching and its darker past. The sites’ material intensity and how this has provoked wide-spread memorialisation of the true violence of lynchings, marks an unprecedented shift in American consciousness. Woodley’s comprehensive study surrounding the way the Lynching Memorial and Legacy Museum has sparked a sensitive process of mourning, helps to stress just how important this commemoration of a historically marginalised group has become to many Americans—both Black and white.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Woodley, ‘‘Nothing is lost’’, 5.
Whilst times are certainly changing, a more critical analysis of the way processes of memorialisation and mourning remain hindered by issues of white supremacy reveals how the fight for racial justice is far from over. Many American counties, such as Lincoln and Larue, continue to show little effort to acknowledge its involvement in the affair. Whilst this dichotomy continues to play out, at least for the time being, it is time for us to learn from the EJI and use our platforms as public historians to implement long-term change. As similar horrors of lynching continue to take shape in new forms, like police brutality and mass incarceration, such efforts appear as important as ever.
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