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**Framing History at Three Commemorative Sites to Atrocity:  
the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Whitney Plantation Museum,  
and National Memorial for Peace and Justice**

By

Erin M. Escobar

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of *Arts*

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Erin M. Escobar

12 February 2021

**Framing History at Three Commemorative Sites to Atrocity:  
the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Whitney Plantation Museum,  
and National Memorial for Peace and Justice**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Erin M. Escobar  
February 2021

## **Abstract**

In this work, I engage in comparative analysis of the institutional histories of three American commemorative sites to atrocity: the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., the Whitney Plantation Museum in Edgard, Louisiana, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Using comparative case studies and employing a narrative-focused analytical framework to analyze each site, I determine how the origins of each site influences the ways it uses atrocity, and how the specific framing of atrocity in each space shapes historical consciousness and collective memories for visitors. This thesis demonstrates the power of commemorative sites to influence historical understanding in the U.S., and the potential for commemorative sites to foster inclusivity and promote more socially just mindsets and practices nationally.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis committee for so many iterations of feedback and source recommendations: they were all very necessary for this work to progress to its present state. Thank you to my WWU History graduate program friends and trivia group Pretzel Prenup: the emotional, academic, and symbolic solidarity (in the form of commemorative matching pretzel tattoos) we provided each other helped me survive this process. Thank you to myself for not giving up...even when you almost did; I wanted to quit repeatedly but kept going in an effort to live without regrets, which meant in this case finishing what I started.

This work is a commemoration to my work ethic (which faded at times but always reignited), love of learning and writing (though it pains me as well), and to the lovely and supportive group of professors and peers who encouraged me to keep going. I may have completed this work largely in physical isolation due to Covid-19, but I could *never* have done this alone.

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## **Introduction**

In this work, I engage in comparative analysis of the institutional histories of three American commemorative sites to atrocity. Atrocity refers to cruel and violent acts against specific groups of people. The United Nations denotes three legally recognized “atrocity crimes”: genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.<sup>1</sup> The Holocaust is an example of genocide and American slavery and lynching qualify as crimes against humanity per the United Nations definitions.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this work is to determine how each sites use atrocity and how their framing of atrocity shapes historical consciousness and collective memories.<sup>3</sup> The first site, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), is located in the National Mall in Washington D.C. The second site, a heritage site, Whitney Plantation Museum (Whitney), is in St. John the Baptist Parish, outside New Orleans, Louisiana. The final site is a memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, the National Memorial to Peace and Justice (NMPJ), and it commemorates primarily victims of lynching in the United States, but also those victims of mass incarceration, racial segregation, and slavery.<sup>4</sup>

Whitney Plantation Museum and USHMM claim the title of museum and one, the USHMM, is both a national museum (it has a Congressional, so national/federal sanction, and is partially maintained by Congressional funds) and a memorial museum. The remaining site, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, self identifies as a memorial; regardless of their

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. “Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention.” 2014. Accessed Feb. 2021. [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3\\_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. “Framework of Analysis,” 26-7.

<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs created and explored the term in his posthumously published book *On Collective Memory*. Ed. and trans. Lewis Coser. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). In a work predating this one, Paul Connerton explores collective memory using the term social memory, and he reaffirms its distinction from historical memory. See *How Societies Remember*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1989] 1996), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Though it is not my primary investigative focus and I mention it only briefly, this memorial’s corresponding Legacy Museum is an important extension to the memorial.

nomenclature, each site uses the majority of its allotted physical space to memorialize atrocity. The USHMM memorializes atrocity differently than the NMPJ and Whitney. The memories it promotes demonize the Nazis and collaborators while celebrating American bystanders, all in the name of memorializing Jewish victims ; Whitney and the NMPJ ask visitors to see Americans as the direct perpetrators of atrocity in the name of social justice, but both approach memories of their atrocity uniquely. The NMPJ asks visitors to see the evidence of lynchings that it provides factually and via abstract art and to act on that evidence. This site is firmly grounded in historical evidence and continues the work of earlier anti-lynching activists. Whitney relies far more on memories of atrocity than sound histories and ends up overemphasizing certain aspects of slavery while ignoring or obscuring others.

Despite differences in historical topic and site genre, again, these three sites all share in the task of exhibiting atrocity, and all attempt to do so without romanticization<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, they are distinct from many earlier commemorative sites, which primarily commemorate and romanticize the past:

[m]onuments from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [which] were blatantly built for the nation- state, an integral part of what Benedict Anderson calls ‘official nationalism’ (1991). [These earlier monuments] were triumphant and celebratory symbols of a nation’s courageous past, erected to memorialize the nation’s heroes in order to create an imposing sense of shared history for a population being consolidated around the idea of the nation. [...] Because monuments and memorials of this era were

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<sup>5</sup> Although the USHMM does romanticize American participation in oppression by focusing more on American liberation of camps instead of American failure to provide more helpful aid; this is a result of the museum’s institutional history and siting and not a result of any attempts to deny American responsibility.

intended to be celebratory and to inculcate a unified sense of a great history, difficult or controversial subjects were avoided.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of following earlier commemoration trends, these sites display difficult histories that are neither tidy nor celebratory<sup>7</sup> - they do not overtly glamorize the past. One, the USHMM, does, however, at times romanticize American participation in ways that avoid asking Americans to assume more liability for past inaction.

Amy Sodaro argues that memorial museums are “deeply political institutions and their utopian goals are often challenged by their political genealogies.”<sup>8</sup> James Cuno confirms the idea that national museums are highly politicized and are used as instruments of the state<sup>9</sup> and thus are tools to promote state-sanctioned ideas.<sup>10</sup> The USHMM is both a national and memorial museum with ongoing state sponsorship, so it will naturally promote at least some national ideals and commemorate something nationally approved. It is also a Holocaust museum, a highly politicized event. Although The NMPJ is a nonprofit national memorial without a Congressional mandate and Whitney is a nonprofit heritage site also without Congressional support, memorializing atrocity is politicized at all three sites as each atrocity is itself politicized. The only site whose goals are at times undermined by this politicization is the USHMM: it is the only

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Sodaro. *Exhibiting Atrocity Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick [New Jersey]: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>7</sup> At least not fully.

<sup>8</sup> Sodaro. *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> State here means nation: the nation state.

<sup>10</sup> James Cuno. *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage*. (Princeton, New Jersey ; Woodstock, Oxfordshire [England]: Princeton University Press, 2008), xix. He also says encyclopedic museums can be viewed as a way to counter the nationalist aims of the state, since they bring together cultural property from across the globe in a comparative way, Cuno 123. This could lead to interesting analysis of encyclopedic versus national museum Holocaust exhibitions (though encyclopedic museums can also be national as is the case of the British Museum).

site that has an interest in allowing Americans to stand in the background in terms of how they are depicted as participating in atrocity because of its national sanction and location.<sup>11</sup>

Comparing these three sites demonstrates that commemorative sites “can never hope to rise above politics” as “interpretation will remain political because people have always been political animals and because our collective memories contain elements that are both shared and individual.”<sup>12</sup> But state politics are not the only ones that can prevent a commemorative site from achieving its goals, as Whitney demonstrates. One goal of this site is historic education and awareness, but because of the desire to highlight the brutalities of slavery and the denigration of the slave’s body, which is directly related to this site’s attempt to stand out among other plantations, this site is unable to fully realize its status as a historic space for education building. This site is hampered (though unnecessarily) by the desire to distinguish itself to generate visitors...and therefore capital to continue to exist as a heritage site.

Whitney appears to be a heritage site amongst so many others in Louisiana and the Lower South, but it is really a conglomerate of thematically linked memorials that makes a highly political argument for specific memories of American slavery. It makes its argument so single-mindedly that at times it veers into ahistoricism. And although the NMPJ is not remotely ahistorical, it too promotes a political agenda: but unlike the other two sites it could not exist without this agenda. Whereas USHMM and Whitney could have chosen to harness and promote different collective and historical memories than the ones they currently exhibit, the NMPJ has only one memory of lynching to pursue: the historical truth that lynchings during the 1880s-

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<sup>11</sup> As I argue in chapter one, this political undermining seems more a result of space issues along with the political origins of the museum than solely a result of the site’s political origins.

<sup>12</sup>Diane Barthel. *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 154.

1950s were used for racial control and upholding white supremacy. This limits the arguments the site can make, but not the avenues it might use to do so.

After establishing the institutional histories of each site, I will look at how the sites' institutional histories play a role in framing their content. The curatorial choices that determine how historical information is framed at each site plays a direct role in shaping collective memory and historical consciousness, so understanding the framing at each site is crucial for scholars interested in historical collective memory.<sup>13</sup> Museum studies is a relatively new field and the first book on history museums was published in 1989<sup>14</sup> by Warren and Rosenzweig and is used in this work. Many works on the theory and practice of museums, including Starn's 2005 review of the field's latest insights, have been published since 1989 and museum studies continues to expand. Though the USHMM was opened in 1993, I have located no extended studies of the main exhibition; opened in 2014, the Whitney also has evaded in-depth study, except that by architecture students surveying its Creole main house.<sup>15</sup> The newest of the sites, the NMPJ opened in 2018 and no historians have published detailed analyses on the site.<sup>16</sup>

Museum studies is also an interdisciplinary field, so engaging in academic exhibition analysis in this field demands time-consuming multi-disciplinary engagement. The field

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<sup>14</sup>Randolph Starn. "'A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies.'" *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 1 (2005): 68. 68-98. Accessed Dec. 2020. *Oxford University Press Journals*; Warren Leon and Rosenzweig, Roy. *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*. Eds. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xii; for a narrower look at museum exhibits and historical consciousness, see Gosselin, Viviane, and Livingstone, Phaedra. *Museums and the Past*. Eds. Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingstone. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), vii.

<sup>15</sup> See Ibrahima Seck. *Bouki Fait Gombo: A History of the Slave Community of Habitation Haydel (Whitney Plantation): Louisiana, 1750-1860*. (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>16</sup> This also means none have studies of the cite along with the Legacy Museum.

concerned with the study of commemorative sites, memory studies, arose around the same time as museum studies and is also interdisciplinary.<sup>17</sup>

In his widely cited work on Holocaust memorials, James Young writes that memorials generally are incredibly diverse as well as incidental and intentional. They might exist as archives, museums, parades, memorial malls, moments of silence, or take any number of other forms.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of their name and genre, each of the three sites in this thesis stand as memorials to specific atrocities. Therefore, this work aims to delve into the ways these sites attempt to stand as memorials (and whether their intentions differ from how they exist as memorials), the histories they convey, and the historical consciousness and memories that result from their framing.

I argue that the origins of each commemorative site are influenced by distinct motivations, which determine the construction of each site and the histories they preserve and convey. These histories shape the historical consciousness of each atrocity at these popular sites and have important ramifications for American historical consciousness and collective memories. The USHMM was initially created as a political maneuver to appease Jewish Americans who were upset about President Carter's relations with Syria, but quickly became a space for memorialization and awareness-building education. Whitney was founded as a pet project by former attorney John Cummings, who wanted to eradicate ignorance about slavery in the American South, as well as appease his own sense of guilt over benefitting from slavery's

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<sup>17</sup> Adam D. Brown, Yifat Gutman, Lindsey Freeman, Amy Sodaro, and Alin Coman. "Introduction: Is an Interdisciplinary Field of Memory Studies Possible?" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 2 (2009): 117. 117-24. Accessed Dec. 2020. *SpringerLink Journals*.

<sup>18</sup> James Young. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1993), *viii*.

legacy;<sup>19</sup> he operated primarily under the desire to improve education, awareness, and, to some degree, to promote justice. Finally, the NMPJ was created by a renown non-profit to shed light on the huge number of lynchings against primarily black men that were sanctioned by the national and local governments in the U.S. from the 1880s through the 1950s, primarily within the South. This site is motivated by an educational drive to foster national awareness, national atonement, and national justice. Its educational agenda is necessary for the EJI to achieve its political and judicial reform agendas. The motivations and sometimes politics behind each site, which intersect with their missions, determine the “frames of remembrance”<sup>20</sup> used to shape each site’s content, and by extension the specific collective memories and historical consciousness each fosters.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pioneered the study of collective memory in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He argued that individual memories were acquired within the context of a society and interactions with members of that society usually prompted individual reflection on those memories, and the person remembering often found their memories were influenced by those around them. This was his evidence that “there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory [which] our individual thought places itself [within and is therefore] capable of the act of recollection.”<sup>21</sup> Cultural sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka characterizes collective memory as “as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past [that are] best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share,” with no resource type inherently

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<sup>19</sup> Amsden.

<sup>20</sup> Iwona Irwin-Zarecka. *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. (New Brunswick [N.J.]: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 9. This is Irwin-Zarecka’s own term, defined below and used throughout this paper.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*. Edited, translated, and introduced by Lewis Coser. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.



more important than others.<sup>22</sup> Resources include films, books, and other ephemera, such as the material culture housed in museums and depicted in other commemorative sites - in signage, on plaques, etc. These resources all play a role in framing how history is remembered.

These resources or “varied texts” that are used to engage with the past, are the “infrastructure” or “raw materials” of collective memory.<sup>23</sup> Those who create the raw materials (films, books, memorials...) and those who interrogate those materials are engaging in “memory work,” which becomes remembrance when it activates the viewer’s/interrogator’s/memory worker’s sense of the past.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars create artifacts of memory and some study them: “[w]hile the past is an existential reality, cultural and collective meaning are made of past events through their embodiment in cultural forms.”<sup>25</sup> In this thesis, case studies of the three sites have been conducted to both study and create memory work. The raw materials or texts informing the memory work at the three sites include ethnographic research of the sites themselves, archival research where possible, primary source analysis, and historiographical engagement. The USHMM is the only site for which archival research was conducted as I was able to visit this site a full week and spend time in the museum as well as access primary source materials in its on-site library. The USHMM’s website also hosts digitized primary sources, which can be accessed anywhere. Whitney possesses no formal archive, nor formal museum departments so some of the material on the site’s institutional history was the result of a one-on-one interview with resident historian Ibrahima Seck, some was the result of email correspondence between myself and the museum director, and much was gleaned from newspaper articles. The NMPJ has an archive full

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<sup>22</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 13, 181.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 21.

of source material [documenting racially based lynching](#) but my visit was far too short to accommodate a visit.<sup>26</sup> Given this site's framing of lynching as a broad phenomenon and its refusal to highlight any single lynching as more 'important' than others, engagement with the material in the EJI archives would have been more intellectually stimulating than academically necessary for this work.

Using framing devices as an analytical method to understand how collective memory comes into being as well as how historical memory is shaped, as framing devices or frames of remembrance<sup>27</sup> per Irwin-Zarecka's usage, are a "heuristic approach" to the use of history to create collective memory among a group; Frames are specific ways of showcasing information, in this case history, that "establish the likely range of meanings" history will elicit.<sup>28</sup> These frames of remembrance can be subtle or explicit and depend on audience awareness of shared social knowledge (social cues, taboos, history...) for understanding.<sup>29</sup> Since frames are constructed by language (whether visual or textual), it is important the audience understand that language, and this is why it is important for audiences to share the social lexicon of the frames.

Since frames of remembrance are socially shared and socially dependent, they will only make full sense in their specific social context and by their intended audience(s); this is why Irwin-Zarecka cautions readers to always remember that this heuristic is only a tool to interrogate collective memory, and must not be used to generalize too widely about museums; this is likely

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<sup>26</sup> Of necessity, all site visit costs were paid for of my own funds and done during the 2019 and 2020 academic terms, so visit durations and dates were largely dependent on funding and time constraints.

<sup>27</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance*, 4-9. Her first discussion of framing is here.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 4. I suspect she includes the modifier "likely" because the viewers each bring their own context to the texts, so it is impossible to determine all meanings each text will elicit.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 5, 9.

also why she emphasizes that case studies<sup>30</sup> should always be used to test the value of this heuristic at the individual level.<sup>31</sup> That is why I engage in them here.

Collective memory is so complex because so many frames can be layered to construct it: the text or object itself is not the sole determiner of its meaning, but each individual and group who examines a text interprets its meaning.<sup>32</sup> This adds another level of meaning, another frame. Further, what the examiners interpret as the text's meaning varies based on the experiences they bring to their reading: their personal context. It is crucial to attend to collective memory as it is an "orienting force" that plays a role in shaping collective identity and moral imperatives like justice and kinship obligations.<sup>33</sup>

Individual experience "serves as the key reference point" to understanding the past.<sup>34</sup> As such, the frames of remembrance in conjunction with individual experience will influence the experiences of each viewer and therefore their memories. Those closer to the text temporally and emotionally may have drastically different understandings of its significance than those more distant. For this reason, Irwin-Zarecka believes "we must also, [in addition to attending historical narratives and understanding] and I believe foremost, attend to the construction of our emotional and moral engagement with the past. When looking at public discourse, this translates into questions about how the past is made to matter."<sup>35</sup> By shaping how individuals *remember* the past, frames of remembrance shape how individuals care about the past, *and* these frames help determine whether or not they do care about the past.

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<sup>30</sup> This strengthens my choice to use the case study of each site, which I am doing to achieve in-depth study of diverse site types (both topically, geographically, and temporally).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 7.

Remembrance of the past requires some level of exposure to it, which is where historical consciousness comes into play. Historical consciousness is a “reflective state of mind about the past”<sup>36</sup> and represents the “interplay between memory and history”.<sup>37</sup> Historical consciousness is what we know after we hear or read about the past. Mark Salber Phillips reminds us that historical memory is more distant from the past than memory in terms of emotional distance: in some ways it can be seen as more objective.<sup>38</sup> Tone Kregar says museums rely upon society’s individual and collective memories to shape their historical memory<sup>39</sup> or how they remember the past. This historical memory is tailored and censored by the museum’s exhibits and is shaped by the social and political environment the museum reflects; the material culture within exhibits links elements of memory in the audience.<sup>40</sup> It is also important to note that “[i]ndividual and collective memories can be part of the public history production.”<sup>41</sup> After all, what visitors bring to the site will help determine what they get from their visit, both in terms of memory and history.

Historical memories and consciousness can have massive impacts on daily life; for example, despite the end of slavery and lynching in practice, Black people can carry the memories of those historical traumas with them and this trauma impacts physical and psychological wellbeing.<sup>42</sup> Further, the nation carries those memories within its infrastructure,

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<sup>36</sup> Gosselin, Viviane, and Livingstone, Phaedra. *Museums and the Past*. Eds. Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingstone. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), viii.

<sup>37</sup> Gosselin, *Museums and the Past*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Salber Phillips. “History, Memory, and Historical Distance.” *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*. Ed. Peter Seixas. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 91.

<sup>39</sup> Tone Kregar. “Memory as a Museum Practice.” *Kultura (Skopje)* 4, no. 8 (2015), 95.

<sup>40</sup> Kregar, “Memory as a Museum Practice,” 96.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Cauvin. *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 16.

<sup>42</sup> Mohatt, Nathaniel Vincent et al. Manuscript of “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative: A Conceptual Review of How History Impacts Present-day Health.” *Social Science & Medicine (1982)* vol. 106 (2014). These researchers cite medical, anthropological, and psychological studies that indicate groups who suffer from historical trauma may

leading to structural oppressions that compound psychological ones. Due to a national infrastructure that devalues Black lives, Black individuals in the United States are still routinely subjected to a host of oppressions, ranging from discrimination to murder. These oppressions are directly tied to widespread structural and individual racism linked to inaccurate understandings and misrepresentations of the history of slavery.<sup>43</sup> Because museums and monuments (commemorative sites) juxtapose artifacts and ideas in specific contexts – e.g. the exhibition, the monument... - they can “bring together specimens and artifacts never found in the same place at the same time and show relationships that cannot otherwise be seen.”<sup>44</sup>

Due to their power to collate artifacts, connect histories, and gather people together, as well as their ability to entertain and educate, commemorative spaces hold immense power and must be handled with care by their creators and those who study them. These sites can instill national pride in individuals who visit them by making heritage visible.<sup>45</sup> This means creators should work hard to promote the ‘right’ national pride: pride for actions that help and support the populace, not pride in actions that harm them. They work to keep the memory of the dead alive by rendering it publicly visible, thus acting as public reward or sanction for past actions: commemoration is therefore a “social ritual.”<sup>46</sup> If commemorative sites can ritually reward and punish those who merit it, and since commemorative sites are often popular tourist draws, then holding them accountable to produce spaces that do not reproduce dangerous mythologies and

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develop epigenetic changes and often exhibit psychological and physical symptoms as a result of ongoing historical oppression.

<sup>43</sup> This will be discussed in Chapter 3 as it relates to the mission of the NMPJ.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Kirshenblat Gimblett. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1998), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Barthel, *Historic Preservation*, 144.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

biases, which continue to isolate and harm specific groups, is paramount to working toward a just, inclusive society.

## **Chapter 1**

President Bill Clinton dedicated the USHMM on April 22, 1993<sup>47</sup> and it opened April 26, but President Jimmy Carter initiated its origins two decades and two presidents earlier. He proposed a commission to determine an appropriate monument to the Holocaust to a group of rabbis to appease and retain Jewish American voters who felt isolated by Congress' approval of fighter aircraft sales to Syria, and who were angry over Carter's endorsement of a Palestinian homeland.<sup>48</sup> The commission was established Nov. 1, 1978 and presented its report to the president September 27, 1979. In the report, the Chair, Elie Wiesel, shares the group's proposal. He writes the primary concern of the site must be the "memory" of the Holocaust, it must focus on Jews as primary victims, it must not glorify the Nazi Germans, and it must stand as an emblem of their defeat: the space will be a memory site to prevent the Nazis from achieving one of their ends: the total destruction of Jews. "The question of how to remember makes up the bulk of the Commission's report. Memorial, museum, education, research, commemoration, action to prevent a recurrence: these are our areas of concern."<sup>49</sup>

In 1980 the museum Council was created and codified in Public Law 96.388. The law dictates the Council will report to the president and it gives the president the right to appoint most of the 60 member Council: 5 members are appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, 5 by the House Speaker, and 1 each by the Secretaries of the Interior, State, and Education.<sup>50</sup> The President elects the remaining 47 members. PL 96.388 authorized the creation of a "permanent living memorial museum to the victims of the holocaust, in cooperation with the

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<sup>47</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "About the Museum: Mission and History: Museum History (timeline)," Accessed Mar. 15, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Miller, "Holocaust Museum: A Troubled Start," *The New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 22, 1990.

<sup>49</sup> "Report to the President: President's Commission on the Holocaust." Sept. 27, 1979, I-iv.

<sup>50</sup> Congress, "Public Law 96-388," "An Act to Establish the United States Holocaust Memorial Council," Accessed Jan. 2020. See also <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/united-states-holocaust-memorial-museum>.



Secretary of the Interior and other Federal agencies” and with providing specific ways for the museum to commemorate the Holocaust during the National Days of Remembrance.<sup>51</sup>

In November 1985 Elie Wiesel, Chairman of the Council, formed and directed the committee charged with researching and submitting the museum’s Design Concept Proposal. The members reaffirmed the Commission’s earlier recommendation that the site educate and memorialize via a focus primarily on Jewish victims since they were the primary victims of the Nazis and comprised 6 million of the deaths.<sup>52</sup> They also, and this is not an exhaustive list of the objectives, propose the site/“living memorial” “reveal the inhumanity of the perpetrators and the humanity of the victims” and act as an instructive space on “ethical behavior” for future generations.<sup>53</sup> These objectives would be accomplished through the proposed guiding principles, including but not limited to: helping visitors emotionally connect to victims, demonstrating that victims did not create their circumstances, showing the Holocaust was the “worst case of genocide in history,” and helping visitors understand the “global and ethical issues [present during the Holocaust] which have personal relevance now and forever.”<sup>54</sup>

The Design Concept Proposal was a guide for museum planners and given its proposals and the American site the museum would reside upon, the chosen umbrella theme of perpetrator/liberator seems almost natural. Framing the space according to this dichotomy highlights the inhumanity of the perpetrators’ actions toward Jews and the humanity of victims

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<sup>51</sup> Congress, “Public Law 96-388.”

<sup>52</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Design Concept Development Committee. *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Design Concept Proposal*. (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1986), 7. See also United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “About the Museum: Mission and History: Mission Statement,” Accessed Mar. 2020.

<sup>53</sup> *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Design Concept Proposal* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1986), 5.

<sup>54</sup> *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Design Concept Proposal*, 6.

and their liberators by juxtaposition; it showcases Nazi unethical acts whilst highlighting their American antithesis; it also sets up the visitor to feel shocked, disgusted, sad, outraged: a host of emotions that might help them identify with victims. Moreover, its setting in the center of America's capital city allows the site to justify this framing over any others because it centers the American role of liberators (along with centering Nazi roles and the victims), which is not only a true aspect of American heritage, but a favorable one.

Americans did play a large role in Jewish liberation after Nazi German defeat in WWII after all, and that heritage fits nicely in the National Mall. Additionally, the very creation of the museum by the highest legislative body in the country supports the implicit claim by the site that Americans are 'good guys' who care enough to not only liberate victims to Nazi atrocity but will go beyond liberation via memorialization of the Jewish victims of European<sup>55</sup> persecution. The Design Concept Proposal's members explicitly want visitors to make this connection, even if the curators only implicitly suggest it throughout the site: "Americans will be encouraged to feel pride in our armies as liberators [...] and in the government's deliberate actions in support of humanitarian principles through its support of this museum."<sup>56</sup>

The USHMM appears as a space that will illuminate the history of the Holocaust, starting with the Nazi rise to power in Germany, so it may educate visitors on how and why it occurred, while simultaneously memorializing Jews. Its architecture is intentionally complex and jarring to disorient visitors and, in the words of the architect James Ingo Freed, "tell the visitor something

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<sup>55</sup> I use 'European' intentionally because it is important to emphasize that Nazi Germans were not the sole perpetrators of crimes against Jews and other groups who Hitler deemed 'undesirable.' Further, the USHMM emphasizes the liberator identity of Americans over their perpetrator one, so I am being a little bit ironic here. I will use the term 'Nazi Germans' when referencing their specific crimes, and a variety of other terms when referring to the crimes against humanity perpetrated by varied other European and world actors.

<sup>56</sup> *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Design Concept Proposal*, 8.

is amiss here,”<sup>57</sup> to prepare them for the skewed logic Hitler and his believers bought into, which visitors will encounter when they enter the main exhibition and learn more about the Holocaust. Germany, after all, was a democracy-turned-Dictatorship and Hitler used science, albeit by twisting it, and modern technologies to murder millions of individuals.<sup>58</sup> To share the history of Hitler’s rise to power and persecution of so many ‘undesirables’ in the name of a ‘pure’ German state, the main exhibition relies primarily on a broad cultural historical approach to the Holocaust, while parts of the main exhibition highlight micro-histories of the atrocity. It engages with select local Holocaust histories while subjugating them to an overarching singular history that stands more cleanly alongside the national history of the United States – neither deeply highlighting diverse local histories of the Holocaust that do not align with Hitler’s desires for a ‘pure’ German Aryan race, nor fully ignoring variances in killings and modes of survival across space and time.

The curatorial choices at USHMM are a result of limits on museum space due to the museum’s Congressional mandate (to educate and memorialize in an allotted space), the museum’s origins and proposed direction, and its funding. The mandate dictates the museum cater to broad (primarily) national and (secondarily) international audiences; within these audiences are smaller ones, the stakeholders who fund the site, both private donors and Congress. The mandate also dictates the setting for the museum, in the National Mall. This setting places unique restrictions on the site: the site must justify its existence in this ‘sacred’ space by demonstrating that it exemplifies American ideals. To do so, the museum positions its

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<sup>57</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Architecture and Art: Hall of Witness,” Accessed July 2020.

<sup>58</sup> See the USHMM *Holocaust Encyclopedia*’s “Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution” for approximate breakdowns: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>

main exhibition as a space highlighting the Nazi regime as a symbol of the antithesis of American Democratic ideals. This juxtaposition is easier for a broad audience - with likely little Holocaust background - to digest as it frames the motivations for the Holocaust in terms of a clear binary that highlights Americans as the 'good guys. Further, the use of the Americans as liberators theme allows the museum to showcase the Holocaust as part of American history while keeping Americans at a distance from the atrocity,<sup>59</sup> so Americans are not required to assume too much responsibility for the inaction the country rendered prior to liberation.

The theme of Nazi perpetrator versus American liberator also allows the museum a pathway to condense a very complicated, nuanced history that incorporates a huge array of international actors. The Nazis were motivated by hate and intolerance, whereas in this framing Americans are motivated (at least as liberators) by inclusion and altruism. The choice to depict the Holocaust as a clearer, more singular narrative instead of as a collation of widespread entangled narratives allows the museum to tell a far more linear narrative, which helps this broad audience to more easily make this Americans are 'good'/Nazis are 'bad' comparison, whereas too much emphasis on local histories where motives to kill often had nothing to do with hatred of Jews as a race and religious group make that comparison more muddled and invite deeper comparisons to the ways WWII<sup>60</sup> American indifference and fear of lost resources was very similar to the local Eastern Europeans who persecuted Jews for those reasons.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 154.

<sup>60</sup> And contemporary.

<sup>61</sup> In conclusion for chapter, highlight the potential dangers in this approach: if audiences fail to see themselves as having the potential to harm others, if circumstances become just right, then they may not take action to help those in need both before and during atrocious circumstances (like a hateful leader in power, economic downturns...) I don't want to take this too far because I'm not sure being aware that genocide is bad is enough to keep it from occurring again...action is required.

Using a diverse array of primary sources<sup>62</sup> that include the USHMM, particularly the main exhibit, as a historical text that adds to Holocaust historiography, I will demonstrate that the USHMM constructs a narrative framed through its funding, Congressional mandate and other guiding documents, location and genre, and curatorial choices as a narrative that directly juxtaposes Nazi intolerance and persecution against American inclusivity and altruism. Given the U.S.'s history of hate and intolerance toward its own Black and Indigenous populations at home, this politicized narrative helps uphold a semi-mythological national narrative of the U.S. as a beacon of freedom for all, which has been historically only partially true in practice. Thus, the maintenance of this mythological U.S. national narrative depicting Americans primarily as 'good guys' represents a specific politicization of this museum as subtly pro-American Exceptionalism. Though well-meaning, this narrative is misleading because it oversimplifies and in ways overstates the role Americans played in the Holocaust, and its thematic dichotomy unintentionally leads the museum to memorialize far more than Jews: the USHMM unintentionally memorializes Nazi German atrocity and the tolerant liberators from Nazi oppression, Americans.

This narrative also demonstrates that national museums may not have moved away from their celebratory nationalistic portrayals as much as some historians have claimed.<sup>63</sup> Amy Sodaro

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<sup>62</sup> Primary sources used: funding documentation: the US Government Manual, information from the USHMM's website, and the Congressional mandate to establish the museum and provide public appropriations to it; the museum's exhibits, primarily the main exhibition, brochures, and the website; the USHMM's Design Concept Proposal and the 1979 President's Commission report; and a book by museum staff titled *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, which is a primary source as it documents the creation of the museum by staff.

<sup>63</sup> See Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick [New Jersey]: Rutgers University Press, 2018); and to a lesser extent Simon Knell, "The Gift of Historical Consciousness: Museums, Art, and Poverty," *Museums and the Past: Constructing Historical Consciousness*. Eds. Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingstone (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 209. While she does not discuss the turn-of-the-century move of museums from celebratory to embracing negative legacies, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett does discuss heritage sites and heritage displays in museums as cultural productions to draw tourism based on the past in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of

writes about memorial museums that they are indicative of a societal move away from a nineteenth century national focus on triumph and achievements, and forgetting of anything viewed as harmful to that image. Memorial museums bring the “negative legacy of the past” to the foreground so visitors might learn from past acts.

Around the world today, it is increasingly a political and moral expectation that societies will confront past violence as a way of moving forward, indicating a new temporal orientation toward the past in political and social life [...]As mechanisms of political legitimation, memorial museums are created with the goal of instilling in their visitors and societies democratic values by demonstrating the violence that results from the lack of these values.<sup>64</sup>

If we connect Sodaro’s ideas to the USHMM, it is apparent that this site celebrates America’s role in the past without fully ignoring the atrocities of that past, so in this regard the museum has moved beyond 19<sup>th</sup> century primarily celebratory nationalistic tendencies. Sharing the defeat of the Nazi regime by American soldiers (which is seen as a celebratory part of our nation’s past by Americans) is not the overall aim of the museum, and the museum clearly indicates its desire to come to terms with the past via the Design Concept Proposal and mission.<sup>65</sup> The overall goal of the museum is sharing Holocaust history and memorializing those slain, not a nationalistic celebration of American troops. However, the site clearly emphasizes the role of Americans as liberators to increase national pride, among other reasons. So though the site does not celebrate

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California Press: 1998), 1, 149-56. This is relevant to the USHMM as this museum works connect the Holocaust to American heritage to draw visitors in order to educate and memorialize.

<sup>64</sup> Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> The Museum Guide and banners in the museum’s main hall pose the museum as a place to raise questions, not answer them, and to interrogate our past and present thoughts and acts.

the country in the same way earlier national museums did, it still tends toward highlighting the favorable role of Americans during the Holocaust.

The USHMM's funding structure plays a role in this focus and narrative. Congress provided no funds to build the museum: "As required by law, all funds for planning, constructing, and equipping the Museum were raised exclusively from private, tax-deductible contributions." Those donations include about \$168 million in building costs – "\$90 million for the building's construction and \$78 million for the exhibits."<sup>66</sup> Operating costs are another story. Public Law 96-388 allots the museum Council funds to implement the museum's exhibits and programs. Those funds include, per Section 8 of the law, "\$722,000 for the fiscal year 1981, \$800,000 for the fiscal year 1982, and \$850,000 for the fiscal year 1983." In addition, Section 7 of PL 96-388 dictates that "[t]he Council may solicit, accept, hold, administer, and use gifts, bequests, and devises of property, both real and personal, to aid or facilitate the construction, maintenance, and operation of the memorial."<sup>67</sup>

Further, on October 12, 2000 President Clinton approved Public Law 106-292, which gave the museum access to ongoing Congressional appropriations ("such sums as may be necessary") contingent upon a favorable Annual Report to Congress from the Museum Director, verified via audit by the Comptroller General.<sup>68</sup> In terms of the most recent operating costs, the base operating budget for fiscal year 2020 is \$101.5 million, broken down by federal funding of

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<sup>66</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Ask a Research Question: Frequently Asked Research Questions," Accessed Sept. 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Congress, "Public Law 96-388."

<sup>68</sup> Congress, "Public Law 106-292," "An Act to Authorize Appropriations for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and for Other Purposes"; and "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *U.S. Government Manual*, Accessed June 2020.

\$56.4 million and private funding and investment income of \$45.1 million.<sup>69</sup> The latest numbers show that the museum receives about half public and half private funding.

This means the museum is beholden to quite a few stakeholders: the U.S. government as well as those who donate (some with stipulations as to how money may be used). It is not clear how many donors make such stipulations: what is clear is that there are a number of donor recognition groups based on donation amount and purpose: the Founder's Society (donations of \$1 million or more to ongoing museum "efforts"), the Leadership Circle (donations of \$25,000 or more to the annual fund), the Wings of Memory Society (donations of \$5,000 or more to support core education and outreach goals), and two other societies dedicated to honoring those who have committed to donate to or fundraise for the museum.<sup>70</sup> That these recognition groups exist suggest there are likely many donors since elite groups like this are meant to distinguish a select few, usually the largest donors. Since the USHMM depends on private funds to exist, it remains accountable to these important stakeholders in upholding the objectives listed in the Design Concept Proposal, which translates directly into the public mission. The USHMM also must demonstrate to Congress that any money it allots will be directed toward further achievement of the site's mission.

Even though celebrating the American liberator's successes post-Holocaust is not part of that mission statement, nor the primary goal of the main exhibition, the Nazi/American juxtaposition makes it harder for the stated goals to arise. Instead of seeing the space as a place to remember the Jews and to understand as much as possible how such atrocity occurred, the visitor can too easily become preoccupied with proving to themselves they are incapable of the

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<sup>69</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Museum Press Kit: Facts and Figures," Accessed July 2020.

<sup>70</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Donor Recognition Societies," Accessed July 2020.  
<https://www.ushmm.org/support/donor-societies>



atrocious acts the Nazis and collaborators enacted: for how many people choose to see themselves as ‘evil’?

Celebrating American successes via this thematic juxtaposition also makes it easier to ignore American failures (unless they are adequately highlighted, and the failures of Americans during the Holocaust are not highlighted near as much as their liberatory role in the main exhibition), which are still ongoing in terms of inclusion and justice for all. As a result, the framing guides visitors to confront the negative aspects of the past at a distance and as non-actors (Americans were not Nazis, so did not do what they did under this framing). It poses questions at times, but never provides a space that invites sustained, deep reflection on how the attitudes that led to violence in the European parallels some of the racial and religious violence in the American present, nor does it show fully what Americans saw and could have done to aid victims before liberation. As a result, the main exhibition does not meaningfully connect the Holocaust to America’s own past and present heritage, which is strange given it is a *national* memorial museum.

The USHMM’s mission statement says, “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is America’s national institution for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country’s memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust.”<sup>71</sup> The Holocaust symbolizes both the resilience of those who survived and the horror that humans are capable of. Given that the event did not occur in the U.S. or to U.S. citizens in mass and the victims were not American, it makes little sense to emphasize as primary objective the resilience of survivors in this setting. However, since the U.S. has touted itself as a

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<sup>71</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “About the Museum: Mission and History: Mission Statement.”

tolerant nation since its inception and in its founding documents, it serves national self-interest to frame the site as a space sanctioned by the same good-hearted, ethical Americans who liberated Holocaust victims.

In a critique of national memorial museums, Tim Cole says the USHMM conveys the Holocaust as American and not as Jewish-American through its siting in the National Mall – the “symbolic heart” of the country.<sup>72</sup> And since the Holocaust is not an event America or the rest of the world wants to repeat, the acts of atrocity the museum conveys are positioned as un-American, so the museum in the Mall symbolizes what Americans should aspire *not* to be<sup>73</sup> (those who oppress Jews and ‘others’) as well as what Americans should be, saviors of the oppressed or liberators. This framing fits into America’s historic view of itself as exceptional: the U.S. has consistently colonized people domestically and abroad in the name of ‘liberating’ them from non-American ‘oppressors’ or in the name of ‘civilizing’ and thus ‘helping’ them.<sup>74</sup>

Further, the museum’s Raoul Wallenberg Place entrance and the permanent exhibit’s narration frame the site as a “juxtaposition [...] between a European past (Nazism) and an American past and present (the founding fathers and democracy). The Holocaust is constructed as the most un-American of crimes and the very antithesis of American values.”<sup>75</sup> Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish Diplomat to Hungary in 1944 who despite little experience “led one of the most extensive and successful rescue efforts in the Nazi era.” He established social services for Jews, safe houses, and provided “certificates of protection,” saving nearly 100,000

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<sup>72</sup> Tim Cole, "Nativization and Nationalization: A Comparative Landscape Study of Holocaust Museums in Israel, the US and the UK." *Journal of Israeli History: After Eichmann: Collective Memory and the Holocaust since 1961* 23, no. 1 (2004): 133-4.

<sup>73</sup> Cole, "Nativization and Nationalization," 134.

<sup>74</sup> This is disturbing given that ideas of national exceptionalism plus racial ‘purity’ inspired Hitler to target and murder Jews. This is not to say that American Exceptionalism will lead to a Holocaust-like event.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid* 138-9.

Jews in Hungary by the Soviet liberation. He was last sighted in January 1945 with Soviet officials<sup>76</sup> and the Soviet Union later stated he died in their care.<sup>77</sup> That one of the museum's two entrances opens to a street named after him highlights the European past of the Holocaust through a brave historical European who fought against Nazis and collaborators. Wallenberg might be said to exemplify America's espoused values of aiding those in need and self-sacrifice, especially given that he has been honored in numerous ways throughout the country: he is an adopted European emblem mirroring America's ideals.

Interestingly, even though the museum uses this entrance as its main address, the Raoul Wallenberg entrance is the back entrance along part of 15<sup>th</sup> Street SW, while the front or primary entrance stands along 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW.<sup>78</sup> “The curved portico of the 14th Street entrance—with its squared arches, window grating, and cubed lights—is a mere facade, a fake screen that actually opens to the sky, deliberately hiding the disturbing architecture of skewed lines and hard surfaces of the real entrance that lies behind it,” and the architecture of the museum in general “contains elements of concealment, deception, disengagement, and duality.”<sup>79</sup> This deception and duality is mirrored by the main exhibition. Though the museum aims to be a space that memorializes and educates while provoking questions about right and wrong, good and evil, the main exhibition's framing does do this. But it does not expose the right and wrong, good and evil of all participants in the Holocaust equally, but in a deceptively skewed fashion: it narrates the Holocaust as an event perpetrated primarily by Nazi Germans and liberated primarily by the American aspect of

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<sup>76</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Special Focus: Choosing to Act: Raoul Wallenberg,” Accessed July 6, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Bibliographies: Raoul Wallenberg,” Accessed July 2020.

<sup>78</sup> The bill proposed to the House to rename part of 15<sup>th</sup> Street as Raoul Wallenberg Place can be found here, although the text is unavailable in digital form: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/2119/actions?r=36&s=1>

<sup>79</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Architecture and Art: Museum Exterior,” Accessed July 2020.

the Allied Forces. Although the Nazi Germans indeed initiated policies and took actions that led to the Holocaust, overemphasizing their direct role is misleading in its oversimplification. Further, overemphasizing American troops as liberators is misleading in its overshadowing just how much more Americans could have done before liberation to help ease or maybe help end Jewish suffering earlier.

Despite its efforts in providing an historically accurate yet broad overview of the Holocaust, the main exhibition's overarching dichotomous narrative oversimplifies the differences between Nazi and American ideologies and cultures. This means the historical consciousness and memories shaped by the museum's primary exhibit are overly broad and simplistic. Although the rotating exhibits supplement the main one, it is doubtful these supplemental exhibitions alone provide the average visitor with a full enough understanding of the Holocaust as a broad and diverse event that touched parts of Europe at different times and in different ways, because it is doubtful the visitor will engage fully with the lengthy main *and* supplementary exhibits.<sup>80</sup>

Given the recency of the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s, scholarship in the field is still relatively new, although robust. Two scholars are known as central figures in shaping American Holocaust studies, which developed in the 1950-60s: Philip Friedman and Raul Hilberg; Friedman, a Polish-Jewish historian who made it through the Holocaust in hiding and later relocated from Poland to the U.S. due to growing Polish anti-Semitism and Communism, is known for arguing that Jews did not act as passive sheep going to their slaughter, they instead responded similarly to other Nazi victims and resisted in varied ways, subtle and not. He

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<sup>80</sup> As discussed later, the main exhibit alone takes a few hours to get through and ends in a mentally spent visitor (if they did a lot of reading, which they likely did).

believed armed resistance was too narrow a definition of resistance and ignored the ways many resisted, such as Judenrate members who often did what little they could to help some survive. He also argued that Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust meriting study and emphasized Roma victims. Additionally, he urged scholars to view all sources as biased and specifically urged scholars against using only German sources to understand the Holocaust.<sup>81</sup>

Friedman served on Hilberg's Doctoral dissertation committee. Hilberg's dissertation-turned-book was the most comprehensive study of Nazi German bureaucracy leading to the Final Solution and used primarily German sources to explain how the Holocaust occurred. In his book but not the dissertation Hilberg argues that the Jews were complicit in their destruction by passively appeasing their persecutors to their own detriment.<sup>82</sup> Later in his career, Hilberg expanded his views on the victims and came to see them as varied as any other group in their responses to atrocities committed against them.<sup>83</sup>

European Holocaust historians had up until this point relied first on newspaper articles and laws to understand the Holocaust, as they were what was available, and then primarily on German documents as these documents became available after WWII when the Allies gained access to German archives and used the documents to conduct the Nuremberg Trials.<sup>84</sup> As more archives became available in the 1960s onward more scholarly arguments arose about the rationale for the Holocaust<sup>85</sup> and this led to increasingly complex arguments about the Holocaust,

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<sup>81</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding*. (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2016), 15-7.

<sup>82</sup> Lipstadt. *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, 17-25.

<sup>83</sup> He discusses this in detail in Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

<sup>84</sup> Raul Hilberg, "The Development of Holocaust Research – A Personal Overview. *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics, and Achievements*. (Jerusalem and New York: Yad Vashem and Bergham Books, 2008), 25-6.

<sup>85</sup> Hilberg, "The Development of Holocaust Research," 30.

which Hilberg says revolve around local contexts, as well as the realization that the Holocaust can never be fully understood.<sup>86</sup>

It was also at this time that perpetrator histories arose as the dominant area of Holocaust study. These histories studied Nazi German officials' roles in the Holocaust and often labelled them as either "evil" or "banal" and just following orders. These works followed either Intentionalist or Functionalist modes of thinking.<sup>87</sup> Functionalists emphasize the role Nazi German bureaucracy and social structures played in creating a "mood" that made the Holocaust possible. Intentionalists emphasized the ideological role of the Nazi Germans in leading to the Holocaust.<sup>88</sup> These perpetrator histories were supplanted largely by Christopher Browning's 1992 work *Ordinary Men*, which showcased members of a Police Battalion, low-level local government actors, persecuting Jews in Lublin, Poland.<sup>89</sup>

Holocaust scholar Dan Stone says that "[h]istorical scholarship on the Holocaust has been, until fairly recently, under the sway of an analysis that sees the murder of the Jews as an 'industrial genocide' - implemented on the basis of a eugenic world-view that regarded Jews as an inferior 'race'."<sup>90</sup> After the Cold War, scholars began broadening Holocaust studies - ironically - by narrowing in on varied localities where the Holocaust was enacted, particularly in Eastern Europe (as Christopher Browning did): so began micro-histories of the Holocaust. This

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 33, 36. Hilberg wrote this essay at the end of his career for a book published in 2008, prior to his death in 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Jürgen Matthäus, "Agents of the Final Solution – Perpetration in Historical Perspective." *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics, and Achievements*. (Jerusalem and New York: Yad Vashem and Bergham Books, 2008), 329-30.

<sup>88</sup> "An Interview With Prof. Yehuda Bauer," interview by Amos Goldberg, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 18 Jan. 1998, 14-16. [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203856.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203856.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> Tom Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust*. 1st ed. Issues in Historiography (New York, NY Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 193. *Proquest Ebook Central*.

<sup>90</sup> Dan Stone, "Beyond the 'Auschwitz syndrome': Holocaust historiography after the Cold War," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 44, no. 5 (2010), 455.

was possible due to the post-Cold War opening of archives in Eastern European countries: in the 1990s “previously inaccessible archives were opened, at least for long enough for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to acquire copies of most of the documents.”<sup>91</sup> This turn to micro-history was also a move away from primarily perpetrator histories to perpetrator *and* victim/survivor histories. After all, localized histories showcase more fully not only the variances in murder apparatuses and murderers, but also the diverse survival strategies of Jews.<sup>92</sup>

As an example of this approach, David Shneer offers a micro-historical view of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union’s Babi Yar site in Kiev, Ukraine. While he primarily discusses the complexity of Soviet photographs of killing sites in the Soviet Union, the main value of his work here is his focus on killing sites outside of concentration and death camps. He says, “[t]he problem with Auschwitz as a metonym of genocide is that it conceals as much as it reveals. Genocide takes place less often in purpose-built death centers than in mundane sites of daily existence, like ‘killing fields’ in Cambodia or by the sides of roads in Rwanda. So too with the Holocaust. In the Soviet Union, the Holocaust was more mundane, by which I mean it was more integrated into daily life under Nazi occupation.”<sup>93</sup> Micro-history, therefore, not only illustrates the diversity of murder strategies and perpetrators across space, it also showcases the realities of genocide: it consists of “mundane” murder, of everyday violence taken to extremes. This is a valuable reframing that illuminates the ordinariness of the killings and thus of the killers: the

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<sup>91</sup> Stone, “Beyond the ‘Auschwitz syndrome,’” 462.

<sup>92</sup> Additional micro-histories of the Holocaust include: Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, *Microhistories of the Holocaust*. First Paperback ed. War and Genocide ; v. 24. (New York: Berghahn, 2019); Christopher Browning and Mazal Holocaust Collection. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Devin Naar, *Jewish Salonica : Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>93</sup> David Schneer, “Ghostly Landscapes: Soviet Liberators Photograph the Holocaust,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 5, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 236.

perpetrators cease to stand as unfathomably ‘evil’ archetypes and assume the more relatable status of ordinary individuals.<sup>94</sup> This makes it easier for audiences to compare themselves to the perpetrators instead of waving off the idea that they could ever participate in crimes so heinous - for only evil villains could do so.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the USHMM’s main exhibition’s use of micro-historical content at times, the focal point of the exhibition is never a composite of micro-histories. It instead nods toward these diverse histories without emphasizing them as a collective too heavily. The most sustained micro-history is the exhibition’s focus on the Nazi regime in Berlin, which encompasses much of the first third of the exhibit titled “the Nazi Assault: 1933-1939,” and starts on the fourth floor. Despite this micro-historical look at Berlin as the Nazis rose to power and began persecuting Jews and other ‘undesirables,’ this is not a micro-history akin to those that began replacing perpetrator histories: this is a perpetrator micro-history, and a somewhat broad one at that. Moreover, this more general history of the Nazi regime’s rise and acts is probably the information most visitors already possess about the Holocaust – although this exhibit likely adds additional content on perpetrator motives and actions to visitor repertoires. Therefore, this part of the exhibition represents a sort of fusion between older perpetrator scholarship and newer micro-historical scholarship.

Raul Hilberg’s triangle of those who experienced the Holocaust is a relevant and a useful aid in understanding the diverse actors Holocaust historiography now covers. As early perpetrator histories attest, the Nazi state and its actors are included here, and as more contemporary histories of perpetrators show, local police forces and state actors as well as

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<sup>94</sup> See Christopher Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. (New York: HarperCollins1992).

<sup>95</sup> See also Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).



average citizens are also included. These actors form one point of the triangle; the second point is comprised of all the victims, primarily Jews. And the third point completing the triangle is made up of the bystanders: those who saw the atrocities and did not act against them. Hilberg says understanding each group is crucial as each “saw what happened from its own, special perspective, and each harbored a separate set of attitudes and reactions.”<sup>96</sup> It is important to this study and more generally to note that individuals and nations can fit into different points of the triangle at different times.

The first encounter with non-perpetrator micro-history at USHMM occurs before entering the elevator from the main hall to the main exhibition. At the entry to the main exhibition, docents instruct visitors to take a ‘passport’ from the holders on the walls. These passports are artifacts created by the USHMM that contain summaries of the life of an individual persecuted during the Holocaust, which allow the visitor to encounter their first micro-histories of individual Holocaust victims (in some cases survivors). Visitors may then continue their journey into the world of the Holocaust, and if they choose, from the experience of the individual in their passport.<sup>97</sup> As scholar Diane Barthel states: the meaning of artifacts is not intrinsic, but “wrapped up with the special relationship people form with the objects that they perceive as special, as having aura.”<sup>98</sup> This can apply to objects in commemorative site exhibits and to objects for sale in site gift shops, souvenirs. Souvenirs can be meaningful for a variety of reasons, one of which

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<sup>96</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), ix.

<sup>97</sup> There are apparently a few stations throughout the main exhibition where visitors can find additional information about their passport individual; I was unable to locate those stations.

<sup>98</sup> Jane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historical Identity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 138.

is they act as a “visual hook” that prompts remembrance of the site itself and the visit to the site.<sup>99</sup>

In the case of these passports, they provide the visitor with two learning avenues: an opportunity to encounter a biographical micro-history and an opportunity to realize the value of the seemingly simple identification document as they delve into the main exhibit and come to understand the meanings of such identification as legal identification documents to those who were persecuted. These visual hooks might come to signify the meaning of citizenship, race, and freedom and the agony when they are denied during the Holocaust. Despite the micro-historical information presented in the passports,<sup>100</sup> given the brevity of the information presented as well as the positioning of the passports at the start of a long, intensive exhibition, it seems more likely that the objects will act more as souvenir than provoke thoughtful analysis.<sup>101</sup>

One area at the end of the first floor<sup>102</sup> of the exhibition that is a perfect place to engage with the micro-history of a place in Europe impacted by the Holocaust is the glass bridge with names of “Lost Communities” etched into it. The plaque on the wall informs viewers that the names of cities and towns are arranged by country and comprise the places who lost their Jewish communities as a result of the “Final Solution.”<sup>103</sup> If the visitor keeps walking a hundred meters of so to the end of the first floor of the exhibit, they will encounter information on the Eishishok shtetl, near Vilnius in modern Lithuania. This shtetl is listed as one of the lost communities on the glass bridge, and this part of the exhibit seems it will provide a chance to

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<sup>99</sup> Barthel, *Historic Preservation*, 135.

<sup>100</sup> The passports are brief but do include reference on the last page to the USHMM website and the Wexner Center on the museum’s second floor for further research on specific individuals and places. How many people use these resources to delve into deeper history is unclear.

<sup>101</sup> For a fascinating critique of this aspect of the museum, see Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packages, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 161-4.

<sup>102</sup> Keep in mind that the first floor or start of the main exhibition is on the fourth floor of the museum.

<sup>103</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Lost Communities,” Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

engage with a shtetl micro-history. Instead, the placard only says that the photos were taken from 1890-1941 by a few individuals, it provides some information on the shtetl's name and population, a few sentences on how the photos were collected, and three sentences on shtetl life.<sup>104</sup> In brief, the placard provides no in-depth details about the place nor about any individuals residing in it.

Even more interestingly, at the end of the second part of the main exhibition on floor three, visitors end up at this shtetl again, this time one floor lower; visitors encounter a plaque that recounts "The End of the Shtetl" in far more detail than the initial plaque introducing the ghetto.<sup>105</sup> This demonstrates that the main point of showcasing this tiny town is to show its death and to add objects (hundreds of photos) to the museum exhibit. The exhibit, at least in this instance, seems more interested in Jews as victims and curiosities who died than in a vibrant culture of people who thrived before the war *and also* struggled to survive it.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "A Shtetl: The Ejszyszki Shtetl Collection," Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

<sup>105</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The End of a Shtetl," Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

<sup>106</sup> This emphasis on Jews as victims more than survivors and resisters throughout this main exhibition will be revisited later in this chapter.



Figure 1: "The End of a Shtetl" (Eishishok)

Lack of engagement with microhistories in mass tends to erase diverse Jewish responses to the Holocaust as much as it erases the ways of life lost to it. Regarding Jewish political thought, Crysler and Kusno point out that the main exhibit highlights Zionism but ignores other forms of Jewish consciousness, which implies “that cultural difference can be tolerated if, and only if, ‘difference’ does not constitute a threat to the state and its ideology.”<sup>107</sup> In this case,

<sup>107</sup> Greig Crysler and Abidin Kusno, "Angels in the Temple: The Aesthetic Construction of Citizenship at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *Art Journal: Aesthetics and the Body Politics* 56, no. 1 (1997): 64.

since Zionists sought a Jewish homeland/state of their own, the “state”<sup>108</sup> that Zionism does not challenge is the United States of America; however, to expand the authors’ point, if other forms of Jewish consciousness were highlighted by the museum (such as Jewish Bundism<sup>109</sup> or Autonomism<sup>110</sup>) then those might challenge the unity of America since those movements are about maintaining ‘Jewishness’ in diaspora, whereas nationalism – in this case American identity – tends toward assimilation. Additionally, the failure to address non-Zionist consciousness leaves audiences with questions the museum only partly answers: where did Jews go who did not immigrate to the newly formed state of Israel postwar and why? Did some return to their country of origin and why or why not? How much did Jews that migrated to America assimilate versus acculturate? These are important questions whose answers help visitors focus on the Jewish life that continues to exist despite oppression, and this focus might bolster the museum’s memorialization efforts if emphasized further. Memorialization under this sway would be for the lives lost and equally the resilience in the face of oppression. At present, this aspect of the museum reaffirms that the main exhibit is more focused on showcasing the perpetrators and liberators than the Jews who they interacted with.

One area does offer a more sustained micro-historical examination: the start of the second level, floor three, of the narrative, where the museum showcases some of the ghettos that existed throughout Europe between 1939-44, among them the Warsaw Ghetto. Visitors do not just read about this ghetto: they walk on cobblestones that once paved Chłodna Street inside the

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<sup>108</sup> Or country, nation.

<sup>109</sup> Henry Abramson, “Two Jews, Three Opinions: Politics in the Shtetl at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, Ed. by Steven Katz (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 95; see also an overview of the Jewish Labor Bund or Bundism can be found here: <https://jewishcurrents.org/rise-fall-jewish-labor-bund/>

<sup>110</sup> Abramson, “Two Jews, Three Opinions,” 96; a very broad overview of Autonomism can also be found under the “Simon Dubnov” entry in *Oxford Bibliographies*: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0099.xml>

ghetto.<sup>111</sup> Visitors learn that “Warsaw was the center of Jewish life in Poland” pre-war and the largest concentration of Jewish people in all of Europe resided there; moreover, the ghetto was established in 1940 and Jewish Poles were forced into it. The plaque also mentions the Judenrat’s creation in Warsaw and the increasing prohibitions against Warsaw’s Jews before the creation of the ghetto, as well as the Judenrat’s attempts to protect Jews as they were eventually transported in batches to concentration camps.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, visitors can see the container that held part of the Warsaw ghetto’s Oneg Shabbat archive and learn about a few of the group’s members, including Emanuel Ringelblum and David Graber.<sup>113</sup> A few archival materials are displayed as well. Further, a casting of part of the remnants of the ghetto wall lines the pathway that contains information about some of the ghettos. Its corresponding plaque states that in addition to open and closed ghettos (Warsaw was closed, so Jews could not leave) there were fenced and walled ghettos (Warsaw was walled with barbed wire atop).<sup>114</sup> The information on the Warsaw Ghetto neither covers the site in overwhelming breadth or depth, but relative to the rest of the exhibits’ content this ghetto receives a lot of attention – aside from the rise of and ideology of the Nazi regime.

This in-situ display of the ghetto is meant to help visitors experience Jewish persecution by walking through and past it: these types of displays are “immersive and environmental” and “tend to thematize rather than set their subject forth.”<sup>115</sup> Jews are the main subject here, but not their life: their destruction. Yes, the placards tell of the few who struggled to assemble and hide

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<sup>111</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Ghetto Cobblestones,” Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

<sup>112</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Warsaw Ghetto,” Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

<sup>113</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Documenting Life and Death in the Warsaw Ghetto,” Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

<sup>114</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Warsaw Ghetto Wall,” Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Barbara Kirshenblat Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1998), 3.

an archive of Jewish persistence for life under persecution, but the emphasis is not on Jewish struggle. It is on the walls that held Jews in, the rules restricting their actions, the deaths most of them met. This thematic emphasis maintains the overall perpetrator/liberator theme of the exhibit: Nazis conquered Poland in September 1939, established the ghetto October 1940, carried out deportations to the Treblinka death camp as of mid-1942, and quelled the Ghetto Uprising between January and May 1943.<sup>116</sup> These aspects of perpetration are the focus here. The strength of ghetto resisters and liberation of the country in January 1945 is not: it was liberated by Soviets, not Americans.

This thematic curatorial choice is indicative of a specific historiographical inclination. In addition to micro-historical approaches, as of the 1990s historians have approached the Holocaust from a cultural historical perspective.<sup>117</sup> “In general,” per Stone, “this influence [of cultural history] has increased the more historians of the Holocaust turn away from the dominant, structuralist interpretation of the 1980s and 1990s and toward a renewed emphasis on what, for the moment, I will designate with the shorthand “ideology.”<sup>118</sup> The move from Structuralist history to Cultural history was in Stone’s perspective a move from a social scientific approach to history to a more “symbolic, anthropological” method of doing history: it represented a move toward analyzing the ways ideology informed cultural institutions such as Nazi agencies, the Nazi military, academic institutions...<sup>119</sup> In other words, Stone’s approach is defined not by the belief systems of the perpetrators or victims/survivors of the Holocaust, but by the ways those

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<sup>116</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Warsaw.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw>

<sup>117</sup> See Alon Confino, “Fantasies about the Jews: Cultural Reflections on the Holocaust,” *History and Memory* 17 (2005); see also Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Random House, 1996).

<sup>118</sup> Dan Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History,” *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, Making Sense of History; v. 16, edited by Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 50.

<sup>119</sup> Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History,” 52.

belief systems/ideologies held by Nazi, non-Nazi collaborators, bystanders, and victim/survivors shaped the cultures they existed within. To frame it more simply, he defines cultural history as a study of how the ideologies social historians study are made visible through cultural apparatuses.

The majority of the main exhibition highlights the culture of the Nazi regime that touched the daily lives of Germans in addition to citizens of countries invaded and occupied by Nazi German troops. Once the visitor disembarks the elevator to the main exhibit they encounter a massive image of emaciated corpses piled atop one another in a concentration camp: their first visual of death. Keep walking and the visitor learns of the rise of the Nazi regime, which is infused with violence: the Reichstag fire, April 1, 1933 Jewish store boycotts by Germans, Spring 1933 book burnings, Nazi propaganda including race science that inflamed distaste of and violence toward Jews in Germany. Visitors also briefly encounter Jewish responses that included emigration out of Germany, suicide, and waiting and hoping the persecution will end, as well as American responses before encountering more Nazi German action as the regime retook and militarized the Rhineland and later invaded Austria. The Museum Guide says of this floor, “[t]he artifacts and photographs on display document how an entire nation was mobilized against groups deemed to be ‘racially inferior’ or ‘enemies of the state.’”<sup>120</sup> All of this content draws attention to the violence enacted by Nazi Germans and German collaborators as a result of the cultural infusions of Nazi ideology into German institutions.

The next floor recounts the “Final Solution” and is an entire floor devoted to showcasing the varied ways Nazi Germans and European collaborators dealt with their Jewish populations. Mobile killing squads decimated towns and cities of Jews, ghettos confined them, concentration

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<sup>120</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Permanent Exhibition: 4<sup>th</sup> Floor: The Nazi Assault,” *Museum Guide* (Washington D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).



and work camps overworked them, and killing centers routinely murdered them. The problem with the huge emphasis on German ideology and its infusions into German culture are that it leads visitors to assume that German ideology was the impetus for the murder of Jews throughout Europe. In fact, as the aforementioned micro-historians have demonstrated, the incorporation of more micro-histories into the historiography (and ideally the museum as part of historiography) allows individuals to see that Nazi ideology was not the only reason, or even the reason, for the murders at varied locales. Throughout Europe, including in Germany, many who may not have been Nazi followers capitalized off the Nazi-sanctioned violence against Jews to accommodate their own circumstances. The current extended focus on the Nazi regime tends toward memorialization of Nazi ideology instead of the intended memorialization of the Jews, and the museum certainly does not want to idolize and memorialize Nazi German thought and acts.

The final floor, floor two, is titled “The Last Chapter” and depicts the Nazi-led death marches out of the death camps at the end of the war, liberation of camps by Allied forces, and the Nuremburg trials. This section also delves into the differences between bystanders and perpetrators, shares the founding of the State of Israel post-war, shares rescue efforts throughout varied European countries, and showcases acts of resistance by Jews, other persecuted individuals, and Jewish sympathizers. This is the only floor of the exhibit that does not focus on the Nazi culture that enabled the Holocaust to occur. Instead, it emphasizes select post-war reactions to this culture. For example, visitors see a Danish ship that transported Jews out of Denmark to the safety of Sweden to avoid Nazi deportation, and they learn that because Denmark’s citizens and government resisted Nazi prescriptions and protected their Jews, the

majority of Danish Jews were saved from persecution.<sup>121</sup> In this plaque, a hint at the inclusiveness of Danish culture allows visitors to imagine how the Holocaust might have been avoided or lessened in extent if more states had resisted the Nazis wholesale. But because there is no extended discussion of how Denmark was different culturally than other states,<sup>122</sup> and since no questions are directed at the visitor here to make them compare Denmark to other places in Europe – and to American responses – it is easy to move on.<sup>123</sup>

Space is not unlimited in any museum and must be considered in any study of museum exhibitions. In the case of the Holocaust, it is a complicated historical event for professional historians to tackle, so is logically difficult to distill into exhibits for public consumption, even in larger exhibits. The USHMM's main exhibition spans three full floors and takes at least two hours to complete.<sup>124</sup> It contains so much content that in the "Planning Your Time at the Museum" page of the museum's website guests are encouraged to visit one of the smaller exhibitions if they have less than two hours at the museum.<sup>125</sup> Since the museum uses a narrative approach to its exhibitions, visitors may not understand the lead-up to the Holocaust well if they do not follow the exhibit path – unless they are already knowledgeable or have already visited. But this also means visitors can peruse any exhibit and have a sense that they learned something about the Holocaust since each tells its own story.

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<sup>121</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Saving the Danish Jews," Permanent Exhibition. Jan. 2020. See also a brief but interesting discussion of Danish aid to Jews and possible motivations in Raul Hilberg, "The Development of Holocaust Research – A Personal Overview. *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics, and Achievements* (Jerusalem and New York: Yad Vashem and Bergham Books, 2008) 32-3.

<sup>122</sup> For example, Jews were also citizens of Germany pre-Hitler and he worked to strip them of that; it would be pertinent for the museum to share that history with visitors more fully to make that comparison to Denmark possible for more visitors.

<sup>123</sup> Visitors are also likely exhausted emotionally and intellectually by now.

<sup>124</sup> I went through it at a fast pace (under two hours) the first time and a slow pace the second time (closer to four hours) and still did not fully read every plaque but left mentally exhausted both times.

<sup>125</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Planning Your Time at the Museum."

Physical space is not the only consideration curators must attend to either: the mental space or energy and attention span of the audience is key as well. Two hours is a long time to engage with history – to read, analyze, and examine artifacts. Especially for those not practiced in historical analysis, these tasks can be fatiguing. According to museum statistics, since the opening in 1993 the museum has welcomed 40 million visitors, 10 million of those students of “school-age” (so in high school or below).<sup>126</sup> Given the large number of young students visiting the museum, the fact that the main exhibition is marketed as appropriate for children 11 and up,<sup>127</sup> along with physical space limitations, it makes sense that the main exhibition is not even larger and more comprehensive. Finally, the museum represents “a living memorial to the Holocaust”<sup>128</sup> so it must have changing content; the museum curators have chosen to craft a permanent exhibition that is more general and static and rotating content as well as online content that is more mutable and specific. However, the fact that the museum can and does supplement the main exhibition with a plethora of supplemental content online and in rotating exhibits does not mean the average visitor will engage with that content; and this is why the main exhibition remains problematic.<sup>129</sup> Alone, it emphasizes Nazi German policies and roles as perpetrators; but in conjunction with the current exhibition “Americans and the Holocaust,” for example, the main exhibit becomes richer and more complex. Holes in the main exhibition are

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<sup>126</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Museum Information: About the Museum.” The Museum Press Kit provides a higher visitor number at 45 million, but the same percentage of students. See United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Museum Press Kit: Facts and Figures.”

<sup>127</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Planning Your Time at the Museum.”

<sup>128</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Museum Information: About the Museum.”

<sup>129</sup> If statistics exist to show how many museum visitors visit the main exhibition and how many return to the museum multiple times and what they see each time then I have not yet found them. My guess is that museum members probably do return again and again, but I have located no such statistics (except on the number of members since the opening in 1993: see “Museum Press Kit: Facts and Figures.”

filled in after visiting this supplemental exhibit, but this exhibit is temporary and not all will see it even while it exists physically.<sup>130</sup>

Alone and in its current state, the main exhibition will not likely propel citizens to see that the Holocaust began in a place legally similar to the U.S., which the USHMM's strategic plan claims is important: "Its significance is not only that it happened, but that it occurred in one of the most educated, advanced regions of the world and was led by a nation—albeit a struggling one—with a democratic constitution, a rule of law, and freedom of expression,"<sup>131</sup> Since one of the museum's guiding documents demonstrates that the significance of the Holocaust is that it was instigated by people similar to Americans (educated, Democratic, with freedoms and laws), then it should be an emphasis throughout the museum's core. In its current state, the museum's patrons may not see the ways the modern U.S. state and citizens continue to act toward some members of the populace in ways similar to Nazi German and collaborator governments and citizens.<sup>132</sup>

Again, due to the narration of the Holocaust emphasizing the perpetrators, their values, and the ways those values impacted the lives of those they touched, the museum frames persecution as primarily Nazi German and in the past and liberation – which is framed as mostly American – in the future. The Museum Guide asks the visitor a huge question that helps maintain this framing: "[w]hat is your responsibility now that you've seen, now that you know?"<sup>133</sup> This question acts as an 'out' for visitors, as if they had no responsibility to act ethically until after

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<sup>130</sup> This exhibit, though not nearly as long as the main one, is information heavy, and took me over an hour to peruse, after which I was exhausted. I could not have done the main exhibit and this supplemental one in the same day while remaining engaged.

<sup>131</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Strategic Plan Summary 2013-18," Accessed July 2020.

<sup>132</sup> The museum's funding is related to its chosen narrative as discussed below.

<sup>133</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "And the Question Always Is," *Museum Guide* (Washington D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

visiting the museum. Further, the Holocaust is over so it is impossible to take responsibility for helping stop it now; what it is possible to take responsibility for is thinking critically about one's actions and one's country's actions.<sup>134</sup> Framing the main museum space as one in which Americans are primarily liberators allows us to imagine ourselves and our ancestors as incapable of oppressing Jews at best. At worst, it allows visitors to imagine that Americans were only innocent bystanders who could do nothing to help because they did not know enough or had no resources or means to provide aid. This serves the museum as a national site as it allows it to stand for American ideals, not realities. Under the current narrative framing as well as the name of the site, this museum is a national one before anything else: before it is an educational museum to the Holocaust and a memorial to the Jews.

Cole argues the USHMM might be more aptly called a "nationalist" instead of national museum due to its upholding of the American nation's ideals in its narrations of the Holocaust,<sup>135</sup> and his work implies that any challenges to nationalism will be subordinate to nationalist goals. Whether this museum is more national or nationalist is not of concern here, but Cole is right in asserting the USHMM does uphold and neglect to really challenge American ideals. It challenges Nazi German nationalism at the same time it applauds and promotes American nationalism.

The particular national-ness of the USHMM also leads to a rather strange memorialization of more than the Jews, which it must memorialize given its memorial museum genre. Jews are of course represented throughout the main exhibition of necessity: one cannot discuss perpetration without including their prey. Yet, the focus of the main exhibition is not the

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<sup>134</sup> The current temporary exhibit at the USHMM "Americans and the Holocaust" addresses American complicity during the Holocaust, but is also lengthy (not nearly as much as main exhibit) and it is unlikely most visitors will see both exhibits. It is also discussed in Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, 96-8.

<sup>135</sup> Tim Cole, "Nativization and Nationalization," 143

Jews: it is the oppression and murder of the Jews. The atrocity is the focus of memorialization and the oppressors are given center stage. The Jews are the individuals memorialized on the surface: not a negative light is shed on them, nor are their actions unfairly critiqued. But the perpetrator is the one who remains in the visitor's mind because the majority of the main exhibit is spent analyzing them. Further, the American liberators open and close the main exhibition, so they remain foregrounded as well. The direct Nazi perpetrators and the American bystanders (and perpetrators, though this aspect of Americans during WWII is downplayed in the main exhibit) are given more gravity than the Jews on the exhibit's whole, so the bulk of the museum acts as a memory bank to their actions. The only place in the museum that is solely dedicated to the Jews is outside the exhibit spaces, in the Hall of Remembrance – and even that space emphasizes death over life.

Superficially, the museum upholds its mission to educate the public on the Holocaust and honor the victims. The average visitor will probably leave with more overall knowledge – details, dates, names – than when they came. They will probably even have a deeper understanding of the scale of the persecutions. But they will likely leave without understanding that it was not only or even primarily Nazis persecuting Jews in every locale during the war: it was often the average citizen, motivated by ordinary fears similar to ones many modern Americans face: scarcity of material goods and job insecurity. Further, visitors will likely leave the main exhibition without comparing the morals the main exhibition aims to instill (that we must stand up against injustice at all times and at all costs) to the injustices ongoing in this very country; the U.S.'s centuries-long history of indifference and oppression toward Indigenous peoples, Black people, as well as Jews and other groups is still ongoing. The strategic plan's emphasis on Germany as a democracy immediately prior to Hitler's rise indicates that the

museum planners see the potential for democratic societies, such as the U.S., to turn on their citizens, so connections to the ways modern America is mistreating varied racial and religious groups seem an important way to connect the Holocaust to the present. The strategic plan is the basis for the museum's mission: education and memorialization; and though the education and memorialization relate to the Holocaust and the Jews, the Americanization inherent in this site means the site should connect to its main audience whenever possible. The main exhibition draws no comparisons to these modern oppressions and indifferences, which seems strange on one hand given its strategic plan, but which is logical given its emphasis on American exceptionalism. But if America is truly exceptional it should not oppress its own.

The USHMM shares an important story that is part of world history and the heritage of all countries involved – whether as bystanders, perpetrators, victims, or a combination of these roles. It also exists as a place where anyone can come to remember the lives lost to inhumanity and apathy. Finally, through its chosen frames of remembrance, the USHMM's main exhibition is a space that uplifts a partly accurate American mythos of extreme exceptionalism; it brings atrocity to the forefront of the Holocaust story, which in some ways subsumes the memory of the Jewish life that existed then and now despite overwhelming persecution. It does not memorialize the Jews as much as its mission and planning documents state it is concerned with doing. The USHMM is indeed a national museum. It is indeed a memorial museum. It is also a Holocaust museum, one whose main exhibition and the core of the museum nationalizes and memorializes select aspects of the Holocaust in a way that allows American visitors the opportunity to avoid taking full responsibility for past inaction.

## **Chapter 2**



## **Introduction**

The case study presented in this chapter will demonstrate how specific frames of remembrance depict slavery at Whitney Plantation Museum in a narrow way that ultimately misleads the public and clashes with contemporary historiography on American slavery. Although frames of remembrance by their nature will limit how visitors view the histories presented in commemorative spaces, it is always possible to use narrow frames without misleading visitors and courting ahistoricism.

## **Thesis**

As a historic slave plantation that aims to share the history of slavery in the space, one might expect Whitney to hold a variety of material artifacts from its slave period that help guides convey a clear narrative of enslaved experiences on the plantation. Instead, visitors encounter mostly a hodge podge<sup>136</sup> of memorials that make it appear to be an incoherent and chaotic space to an historically aware visitor.<sup>137</sup> This strange assemblage of statuary becomes more cohesive once the very specific frames of remembrance that glue the pieces together become visible: slavery is depicted and memorialized by this site as a monumental tragedy, brutal and harmful everywhere, which of course nobody outside Lost Cause proponents disputes. Whitney Plantation frames the story of slavery as a monolithic entity that was always (implicitly) equally brutal and consistent across time and space (frame one), and it frames the site as a space where (primarily) Americans can learn about slavery's history to work to prevent the legacy of slavery from continuing to harm black individuals in the U.S. (frame two). This view of slavery is only

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<sup>136</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Jared Hardesty for suggesting this term to describe the site; it is perfect.

<sup>137</sup>By "historically-aware" I mean those who have a nuanced understanding of American slavery, whether academic historians or not.

one piece of the story, and perhaps even a dangerous one on its own as it negates the agency of the enslaved and it breezes over changes across time and nuances per the varied spaces slavery existed.

The first frame is clearly invoked throughout the memorials on site, and the second is more implicit and becomes clear as the tour progresses.<sup>138</sup> The first frame in particular causes this site to qualify more as memorial than museum: the site does not display many contextualized artifacts to increase cultural awareness and comparative analysis as museums do, but instead tends to highlight specific aspects of the site's past (and sometimes the region's more broadly) in order to convey the sentiments of loss, sadness, regret – to depict tragedy. This site manipulates visitor emotions in non-historical ways, which is antithetical to history commemoration praxis. Given these issues, this space should be lauded for the good work it is doing to promote slavery education and ongoing social justice, and it should be critiqued where it veers into ahistoricism and otherwise misleads.

### **Institutional History**

Whitney Plantation Museum opened December 7, 2014 after 15 years of restoration.<sup>139</sup> According to David Amsden, the site was purchased and founded using private funds by John Cummings, a white Southern former trial lawyer and current real estate investor who bought the land after Formosa Chemical's proposed rayon factory was thwarted by environmentalists and preservation advocates. After learning its history as a site of slavery, Cummings personally

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<sup>138</sup> These are certainly not the only frames of remembrance the site uses, but they are the ones I see most emphasized – and that I am able to cover due to space and time; it is also prudent to remember that each visitor and tour guide constructs their own frames in addition to these as they experience the site, but those are not the focus of this paper; they would make an interesting additional study, though such would be a challenge to write due to the time-consuming and challenging nature of collecting that data.

<sup>139</sup> Whitney Plantation, "History of Whitney Plantation," Accessed Nov. 2019 & Dec. 2020. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/history/>

researched slavery and the plantation's own slave history, then invested around \$8,000,000 of his own funds into its restoration. Cummings thought that if he was ignorant to the history of slavery in the United States, others must also be, so despite no background in history or museum work, he determined to open his plantation to the public to share the realities of slavery. His plantation would be different than others, which was a result of his recognition of a void in plantation museum offerings.<sup>140</sup> "Approximately 375 plantation museums exist in the United States"<sup>141</sup> but none before Whitney told of the experience of occupants on their plantation from the perspective of the enslaved. In fact, the Whitney Plantation's website markets itself as the sole museum in the state to exclusively focus on "the lives of enslaved people."<sup>142</sup>

Given the significance of Whitney Plantation representing the first heritage site in the U.S. to focus entirely on enslaved people, and given Cummings' resources, one might safely assume this space would be one carefully overseen and planned by historians. Instead, this site seems to follow an almost do-it-yourself template, with trial-and-error as roadmap. This aligns with the founder's background as a trial lawyer; Cummings is accustomed to making arguments using select evidence and this site is certainly an argument for slavery being a brutal institution in America's past; but that tells us nothing about what slavery looked like region by region, nor does it tell a full story of the lived experiences of those enslaved at Whitney.

This disconnect is likely also due to the funding of the site, in addition to its founding, which was entirely personal prior to the site opening its doors to the public. This funding meant Cummings was accountable to nobody but himself when staging the site for the public; of

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<sup>140</sup> David Amsden, "Building the First Slavery Museum in America," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 2, 2019. For additional information on Formosa's ownership see *Bouki Fait Gombo* by Seck.

<sup>141</sup> Arnold Modlin, et. al., "Can Plantation Museums Do Full Justice to the Story of the Enslaved? A Discussion of Problems, Possibilities, and the Place of Memory," *GeoHumanities* 4, no. 2 (2018): 337.

<sup>142</sup> Whitney Plantation, "Home," Accessed Nov. 2019. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/>

course, he had to keep his audience, the public, in mind, but he was not beholden to them at this stage for funding. As long as he was doing something innovative to market the site as unique, in this case foregrounding the enslaved plantation experience, Cummings could likely assume he would attract an audience to his plantation. Now, however, the site is self-supported via visitor admission, and it is no longer owned by Cummings since he donated it in 2019 and it was incorporated as a board-overseen 501(c)(3) nonprofit.<sup>143</sup> The plantation site now operates under management of The Whitney Institute.<sup>144</sup>

The planning for the site was done before a board of directors was assembled, and “largely in secret.”<sup>145</sup> The site seems to have operated far more like a start-up than a museum. No information about the board of directors is available on the website: nothing about when the board was created, nor its members, nor if the members changed when the site was incorporated as a board-governed nonprofit. The most informative document on the site’s planning strategy is not located or linked anywhere on the site: it is an excerpted funding application circa 2016/2017 submitted by Whitney Plantation Museum to The Institute of Museum and Library Services.<sup>146</sup>

According to this excerpted document, Whitney was granted \$24,976 by the Institute to develop a strategic plan; build organizational infrastructure for funding, training staff and volunteers, and governance; and collect data on visitor expectations and experiences.<sup>147</sup> In the

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<sup>143</sup> Whitney Plantation, “History of Whitney Plantation”; Whitney Plantation, “FAQs: Who Owns Whitney Plantation?” Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/faqs/>

<sup>144</sup> Whitney Plantation, “Plantation Ownership,” Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/history/plantation-owners/>; “Museums Empowered: Sample Application MA-41-17-0644-17: Whitney Plantation Museum,” 1. Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/ma-41-17-0704-17-whitney-plantation-museum.pdf>

<sup>145</sup> Amsden. That the board was created long after the museum’s opening was confirmed via personal email between myself and Ashley Rogers, Director of Museum Operations.

<sup>146</sup> This document was located online via a Google search of “The Whitney Institute nonprofit” without quotation marks.

<sup>147</sup> “Museums Empowered: Sample Application,” Abstract, 1.

document, the site demonstrates an understanding of the importance of a guiding strategy: “The Whitney Institute board and management understands that a professionally prepared strategic plan -- one that crystallizes mission, vision, goals, strengths, and challenges and opportunities; and sets a measurable action plan -- will be critical to sustaining growth and maximizing long-term sustainability and success.”<sup>148</sup>

It seems likely the odd nature of the institution’s creation bled into the site’s elusive mission. It takes a lot of sleuthing to locate the mission on the website. It is only actually articulated as the mission in one place on the website: the donations page. “Whitney Plantation’s mission is to educate the public about the history of slavery and its legacies.”<sup>149</sup> Yet, it is clearly articulated everywhere via implication: the only words on the cover of the museum’s brochure, which visitors are given upon arrival, are the plantation name and “the story of slavery.”<sup>150</sup> This is verbatim the language of the large entryway sign as visitors turn off Highway 18 and onto plantation property. According to the site’s funding application, the mission was part of the strategic plan the museum was bound to create by the end of 2018 in return for the funds.<sup>151</sup> Why is this crystallized mission hidden in the donations page?

The founding and funding histories are not the only strange narratives related to this site. Part of Whitney’s website prepares visitors to learn of the site’s history as a “sugarcane plantation” from an enslaved focus.<sup>152</sup> But if you visit another part of the website you find that indigo was the staple crop on Louisiana plantation in their earlier years, although Whitney is not

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<sup>148</sup> “Museums Empowered: Sample Application,” 2.

<sup>149</sup> Whitney Plantation, “Donate: Your Support Matters,” Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/donate/>

<sup>150</sup> Whitney Plantation, Museum Brochure, Visited Nov. 2019.

<sup>151</sup> “Museums Empowered: Sample Application,” Abstract.

<sup>152</sup> Whitney Plantation, “Home.”

specifically mentioned here.<sup>153</sup> Things become more confusing after diving deeper and reading the resident historian's monograph and definitive history of the plantation.



Figure 2: Whitney entrance sign

In this work, Ibrahima Seck uses primarily inventories and deeds of sale to trace the ownership and cultivation practices of the site since its inception in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The plantation was initially named Haydel Plantation and a German named Ambroise Heidel purchased the land it resides on in 1752, and his son Jean Jacques Haydel inherited and expanded it.<sup>154</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century indigo cultivation arose as an important income crop

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<sup>153</sup> Whitney Plantation, "Slavery in Louisiana," Accessed Dec. 2020.  
<https://www.whitneyplantation.org/history/slavery-in-louisiana/>

<sup>154</sup> Ibrahima Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo: A History of the Slave Community of Habitation Haydel (Whitney Plantation): Louisiana, 1750-1860*, New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2014.

throughout Louisiana, including at Haydel Plantation. By the 1766 St. John the Baptist Parish census Ambroise Haydel owned twenty slaves and on-site indigo processing facilities.<sup>155</sup> By 1800 the plantation switched from primarily indigo to sugar cultivation,<sup>156</sup> aligning with the statewide collapse of indigo cultivation by the turn of the century and its move to sugar cultivation.<sup>157</sup>

Although sugarcane was the primary crop – and a very lucrative one for the owners – at Whitney from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1940s,<sup>158</sup> indigo is shown by Seck to be an important early part of the plantation’s and larger region’s history. Thus, it is a strange choice for “local scholars”<sup>159</sup> and Cummings to overemphasize sugar as the plantation’s historical crop and revenue generator. Indigo was more important in the site’s early decades – in fact, sugar was not cultivated on-site then. It is also strange that Whitney claims it is telling “the accurate story of slavery through museum tours, education and research.”<sup>160</sup> When it comes to the story told by guides on the site tour, it is only accurate if depicted as *a part of the story of slavery in one region*.

## Site Visit

Touring this site feels weird and a lot of analysis goes into determining why: the site is far less akin to a historic space or museum than a strange assemblage of thematically connected memorials. Half of the site consists of a random assortment of (mostly) artworks to the enslaved on the plantation and in the region. The memorials are very effective at eliciting strong emotional

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<sup>155</sup> Seck, 73.

<sup>156</sup> Seck, 73.

<sup>157</sup> Seck, 2.

<sup>158</sup> Seck, 154-5.

<sup>159</sup> Seck, 157.

<sup>160</sup> “Museums Empowered: Sample Application,” 2.

responses from many visitors (see Trip Advisor reviews, for example) but they are odd additions to the site.

The first stop on my group's site tour was the plantation church,<sup>161</sup> located steps away from the entrance building and gift shop. Our tour guide explained this church is the first stop on the tours, and invited us to sit down on the pews to watch a short video; in the video, the stories of multiple enslaved children from the site were narrated. Their stories were gathered, per the video, as part of Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration Federal Writers Project in 1936. Adults when sharing their experiences in slavery, those interviewed were young children when enslaved. To make their presence felt at the site, the plantation curator(s)<sup>162</sup> not only included their stories in the introductory video, but they commissioned clay sculptures of those children by artist Woodrow Nash.<sup>163</sup> We were told that the reason the sculptures contain no eyes is to depict the hopelessness of enslavement.<sup>164</sup> This implies that slaves could not guess their future; they could only assume it would be bleak.

And while there is a lot of truth in this idea, it is not the whole truth. While it was unlikely enslaved people would earn their freedom with hard work or money in the Lower South, especially as time moved forward, it was possible. And taking their freedom in other ways was also possible. "[S]laveholders severely circumscribed the lives of enslaved people, but they never fully defined them."<sup>165</sup> Slaves had agency, however minimal and varied based on geography and

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<sup>161</sup> Antioch Baptist Church was donated and relocated to Whitney as a stand-in for the original church on site. It was never part of the plantation's history until it became a 'museum.'

<sup>162</sup> It is still unclear who curated the site, and all sources together seem to point to no single person. I received no answer to this question when I inquired via email after my visit.

<sup>163</sup> Henrietta, "Guided Tour of Whitney Plantation," Visited Nov. 2019; See also Whitney Plantation, "FAQs: Who Is the Artist Who Did all the Statues Around the Property?" Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/faqs/>

<sup>164</sup> Henrietta, "Guided Tour of Whitney Plantation."

<sup>165</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, Acls Humanities E-book. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 18.



circumstance. Marronage was a frequent enough method of enslaved revolt in antebellum Louisiana that the state adopted the Code Noir in 1724, and it laid out increasingly severe sentences for maroons based on attempts at escape.<sup>166</sup> Marronage was not a possibility for slaves across the colonies/eventual U.S. because it depended largely on geography providing secluded spaces. Whatever the form of resistance, the point is resistance was always possible and always present (especially if one agrees with historians who argue the act of living in slavery was resistance to death).<sup>167</sup> Since slavery's bleakness was only *part* of the slave's narrative, the eyeless somber statues are clearly intended to elicit specific emotions and form select memories of slavery in viewers.

The sculptures are scattered inside the church, and our guide, Henrietta, encouraged us to find the child who was depicted on our individual tour badge, given to us when we paid for the tour.<sup>168</sup> Modlin et. al. argue that "tour guides encourage tourists to find their card's subject, potentially helping tourists make a connection to a formerly enslaved child."<sup>169</sup> If this is true, and it does seem the site wants to personalize slavery, so it seems likely, then these sculptures are intended to show visitors a child's hopeless experience of slavery. On one hand, this approach takes the romantic notion of slavery as the foundation upon which great wealth and lovely plantation houses were built and flips it, showing that the brutal capture and exploitation of Black humans – particularly children – was truly the groundwork for the 'rewards' of the institution. This flipping is necessary to understanding slavery, but showing only children in

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<sup>166</sup> Seck, 106-7.

<sup>167</sup> See, for example, Stephanie Camp's "Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South" for a look at female resistance strategies.

<sup>168</sup> This is a pseudonym per her request when I told her I was studying the site for my thesis and asked if she would prefer her true name omitted from my work.

<sup>169</sup> Modlin et. al., "Can Plantation Museums," 338.

statuary here misconstrues the realities of slavery.<sup>170</sup> Most enslaved on a plantation were not children because children could not do the most brutal work required: young adults could. The historians consulted in the planning of this site would know that, so the inclusion of these sculptures combined with the way they are presented in the tour is peculiar.



*Figure 3: Woodrow Nash sculpture of sitting boy*

The children’s memorial “The Field of Angels” is another anomalous work of art on the tour. It commemorates the 200 enslaved children who died in birth or before their second birthday in St. John the Baptist Parish.<sup>171</sup> I found this memorial particularly intriguing since it touched upon an aspect of slavery I seldom consider given my areas of study: slavery imposed its reach on bodies that were not yet born, and on tiny bodies not yet capable of hard labor. It did not only wreak havoc on adults. In a sense, slavery was perfectly egalitarian, touching any Black body it could. However, this is not the takeaway the memorial is meant to impart in visitors. If

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<sup>170</sup> This choice might also have been a result of the sources that inspired the statues: the WPA narratives. Since the storytellers were children during slavery, maybe Cummings thought it logical to depict them as such here.

<sup>171</sup> Henrietta, “Guided Tour of Whitney Plantation.” The placard also states this.

one considers the mission of the site along with the emphasis early in the tour on children as slaves, along with the likely average visitor, it seems more likely this memorial is meant to elicit rage, sadness, and regret toward slavery because it harmed kids and unborn babies. This is an effective tactic since most people would agree that harming children is an atrocity.

But highlighting slavery's destructiveness to childhood is not even the primary goal of the site. If this site were all about enslaved children the "Wall of Honor" would be entirely out of place. It contains names and select anecdotes of the 354 *documented* slaves throughout Whitney's history as a working plantation, as well as "107,000 individuals who were listed as [Louisianan] slaves in the Gwendolyn Midlo Hall project, the Louisiana Slave Database."<sup>172</sup> On one side of the memorial wall is a blank space that symbolically commemorates those slaves unrecorded in Whitney's records. At this stop on the tour, Henrietta spoke of the trans-Atlantic trade that brought the majority of the slaves to Whitney, including the 20% death rate during the voyage. She also mentioned the sexual assault of women by sailors during the voyage, sharing that the slaves were separated by gender so women were especially vulnerable to assault by white men, the suicides by some slaves during the Atlantic crossing, and she emphasized that slaves brought much knowledge of food cultivation with them from Africa.<sup>173</sup>

Sharing these facts about the horrors of the slave voyage just to get to the colonies demonstrates that slavery began before individuals set foot on the plantation, meaning, again, a single plantation can never tell the story of slavery. It also indicates the long and dynamic process that was slavery (versus a static state of being), which is another fact antithetical to the signage at Whitney. If only these facts are considered, this memorial sticks out blatantly on the

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<sup>172</sup> Modlin et. al., 338.

<sup>173</sup> Henrietta, "Guided Tour of Whitney Plantation." Interestingly, the only mention of the Domestic Slave Trade was to say that it existed after the Trans-Atlantic was outlawed by Congress. More on this later.

tour as not belonging due to refuting site illusions to singularity and regularity. However, showing the documented slaves throughout Whitney's history as well as those documented in the entire state while a tour guide shares facts about death rates, rape, and suicide is an effective way to maintain a heightened emotional state in viewers. This memorial also provides a space for the enslaved to 'share' their brutal experiences with plantation visitors in a more personal way since direct quotations from select slaves appear on the memorial.

Slave cabins, some original, fields of sugarcane, an optional German Coast Uprising memorial, and other buildings are also part of the tour. Due to space constraints, not all tour features will be discussed, but more will be discussed below as they provide key insights into the historical and memorial aims of Whitney, and therefore illuminate its frames of remembrance.

### **Memory, History, Memorialization**

This site does not make sense as primarily a museum or historical site because memory overruns history here. History can be generally understood as "reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in historical research," whereas historical memory is concerned with recollections and commemorations of the past.<sup>174</sup> Although museums always take positions on the objects they display, they act more as objective parties that display, contextualize, and often compare historical objects and ideas, often via a narrative. They are also seen as highly historically accurate and trustworthy by the public.<sup>175</sup> Memorials are far less objective: they intend to initiate emotional connections and reactions in visitors.

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<sup>174</sup> Adam Dombay, *The False Cause: Fraud, Fabrication, and White Supremacy in Confederate Memory*, (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 3.

<sup>175</sup> American Alliance of Museums, "Museum Facts & Data," Last updated 2021. <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data/>

One particular memorial at Whitney Plantation – “Field of Angels” – honoring the slave children and babies who died in St. John the Baptist Parish, the larger region in which Whitney is located, is a perfect example of Whitney’s aim to memorialize over historicize:

At traditional museums, such memorials come to fruition only after a lengthy process — proposals by artists, debates among the board members, the securing of funds. This statue, though, like everything on the property, began as a vision in Cummings’s mind and became a reality shortly after he pulled out his checkbook.<sup>176</sup>

Amsden believes this “unconventional site” yields “effective results” and he quotes Tulane history professor Laura Rosanne Adderley, a slavery specialist, “who has visited the Whitney twice since it opened,” as saying the site is effective “superbly and even radically. Like Maya Lin’s memorial, the Whitney has figured out a way to mourn those we as a society are often reluctant to mourn.”<sup>177</sup> Though I agree with Adderley that Whitney Plantation does a tremendous job eliciting pathos from visitors by prompting them to see the dark inhumanity of slavery, the site is not an effective *museum* that educates visitors on the nuances of slavery, nor shares a comprehensive site history; it does not live up to its homepage and entry sign promises. It does not tell the story of slavery. Instead of a museum where visitors “will learn about the history of slavery on a southern Louisiana sugarcane plantation,”<sup>178</sup> the site acts more as a memorial *to some of the tragedies of slavery*.

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<sup>176</sup>Amsden, “Building the First Slavery Museum.”

<sup>177</sup> Amsden, “Building the First Slavery Museum.”

<sup>178</sup> Whitney Plantation, “Home.”

As James Young asserts, “the motives of memory are never pure.”<sup>179</sup> Museums, memorials, and heritage sites – all types of commemorative spaces – all convey agendas; and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. Sites get themselves into trouble regarding their motives when they hide the existence of their biases,<sup>180</sup> when they act as sole bearers of an elusive ‘truth,’ and when they make false claims. Whitney makes such a claim when promising that the site will tell visitors the story of slavery through its guided tour (the sole visitor option, whether individually or in a group).<sup>181</sup> Yet, the site seems to evade criticism for this diversion from the truth; a perusal of the site’s reviews by visitors (from those posting comments on TripAdvisor, likely largely average citizens, to critiques by academic historians) contain mostly praise for the plantation.<sup>182</sup> In fact, to my knowledge nobody has written a significant critique and no critiques include the site’s overly broad claim that it will illuminate slavery. Although the site is doing important work educating visitors on some local aspects of slavery, and despite its status as a historic place, the falsity that one will ‘know’ the fullness of slavery after visiting the space is worth considering.

As a heritage site, Whitney gives the façade of acting as a sort of museum: “Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>180</sup> Such as, for example, when museum placards and signage only convey one viewpoint when many exist – especially on contentious topics.

<sup>181</sup> Since the site’s reopening after closing due to Covid-19 in 2020 it only offers self-guided tours, but prior to the pandemic guided tours were the sole kind. See Whitney Plantation, “Whitney Plantation Tour,” Accessed Dec. 2020. <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/whitney-plantation-tour/>

<sup>182</sup> There is, however, a fascinating TripAdvisor review by user ScottyS29 from March 2020. This reviewer makes some inaccurate historical comments (they do not seem to understand that just because a slave was a child while enslaved does not mean they just did “little kid stuff”), but astutely wonders why they are touring so many memorials at the site: “As far as the tour, I felt like 1/2 of it was spent on memorials.” See “Maybe I’m Just Off” Trip Advisor: Whitney Plantation. Accessed 4 Nov. 2020. [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g14166006-d7276731-Reviews-or20-Whitney\\_Plantation-Wallace\\_Louisiana.html#REVIEWS](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g14166006-d7276731-Reviews-or20-Whitney_Plantation-Wallace_Louisiana.html#REVIEWS)

<sup>183</sup> UNESCO, “World Heritage,” Accessed 4 Nov. 2020. <https://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=160>.

As spaces that recall the past locationally, heritage sites generally use narratives to tell their history much like history museums do, especially narrative history museums like USHMM. This site even refers to itself as a museum, further supporting the rouse. Yet, Whitney does not embrace its full site history (to reiterate, it was more than a sugarcane plantation and its history begins before the 19<sup>th</sup> century), or even showcase any single time in its history in any substantial way: it instead bounces across time without clearly articulating why and sometimes broadens its ‘narrative’ to the larger region, but not to demonstrate regional change. It seems to select aspects of regional history that support its tragic theme.

The site’s approach seems strange because it is strange, especially when compared to the formality of other commemorative sites’ institutional beginnings (see the USHMM and the NMPJ chapters for comparisons). But this nonsensical space’s current state makes more sense given its institutional history: it was a site purchased by a non-historian for cultivation and marketing as a historical place, for the purpose of historical education and inducing shame. Cummings sheds some light on his motives with the site when he says: “[i]f ‘guilt’ is the best word to use, then yes, I feel guilt.” And in terms of what he feels guilty about, he shares: “I mean, you start understanding that the wealth of this part of the world — wealth that has benefited me — was created by some half a million black people who just passed us by. How is it that we don’t acknowledge this?”<sup>184</sup> This is a good question, one that Cummings clearly aims to make obsolete by using his power to acknowledge the ways slavery shaped not only the South but also the whole United States, and by extension hopefully encouraging other heritage sites where slavery existed to approach their telling of their own histories with slavery and slaves at the forefront. His intentions aside, that Cummings felt guilty at his ignorance around slavery and

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<sup>184</sup> Amsden, “Building the Fist Slavery Museum.”

ashamed for how he has benefitted from slavery's legacy is important to the site's composition: his guilt manifests in every memorial; the task of each is to make visitors feel, if not guilty for and ashamed of the past, responsible for not repeating the past.

“Memorials reflect not only national and communal remembrance, or their geographical locations, but also the memorial designer's own time and space.”<sup>185</sup> It seems a logical extension in the case of Whitney to assume that any memorials on site will also reflect the funder/founder Cummings' own time and space; he commissioned them based on his understanding of slavery. Specifically, Cummings shaped this site in a personal context of guilt, pain, and sadness. Therefore, the best way to understand this site's importance in terms of educating the public on a part of the nation's past and promoting social justice for Black lives is to understand it as a memorial site that contains sub-memorials highlighting aspects of the past that Cummings thought most moving. This differs from a traditional heritage site, whether a battlefield, house, or plantation, which depends more on a chronological historically grounded story. This site is planned more around emotion than historically informed narrative.

And even more interestingly, although Seck's book carefully paints the history of the plantation, which includes a nuanced look at its crops over time, even he has echoed the misleading claim that Whitney Plantation will show visitors slavery: "What was the life of a slave from cradle to the tomb? You come here [to Whitney], you will learn about it."<sup>186</sup> During a one-on-one interview with him after my own tour of Whitney, Seck responded to my inquiry about whether he found the sign's language misleading for the reasons I articulate above by

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<sup>185</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 8. Although Young is discussing Holocaust memorials the idea is pertinent to memorials of all kinds.

<sup>186</sup> Debbie Elliott, "New Museum Depicts 'The Life of a Slave from Cradle to the Tomb,'" *NPR*. 27 Feb. 2015. Accessed 2019.



saying that “slavery was bad everywhere.” He also said that visitors can only handle so much information and museums must take care to make sure the volume and nature of information is not overwhelming nor indiscernible.<sup>187</sup> Slavery *was* of course bad everywhere. But that is not contested here. What is contested is the idea that a single site could ever showcase the deep nuances of slavery. And while I do not dispute that commemorative site visitors can only digest so much information in a visit, especially when it comes to sites of slavery and other ‘dark’ heritage/tourism spaces, the implication that visitors would be overwhelmed by a fuller review of the plantation’s history, to include indigo as its primary crop pre-18<sup>th</sup> century, is unconvincing.

Because “the memory of race-based slavery is intensely geographic” it is crucial that “[w]hen we remember and discuss slavery, we place it,” which is why “[s]cholars writing about this form of slavery contextualize it in specific places.”<sup>188</sup> This is because slavery was not the same everywhere; it differed depending on the crop, which depended on geography and other factors, and depending on other site-specific exigencies and owner preferences. Ira Berlin has written extensively on slavery’s variances and reiterates in work after work that “[...] the slaves’ history was derived from experiences that differed from place to place and time to time and not from some unchanging transhistorical verity.”<sup>189</sup> More specifically, Berlin organizes American mainland slavery into four distinct categories, each with shared characteristics:<sup>190</sup> Northern slavery, Chesapeake slavery, slavery of the Coastal Lowcountry (South Carolina, Georgia, Florida), and Lower Mississippi Valley slavery. The nature of slavery changed over time in each of these areas as local factors changed.<sup>191</sup> Whitney Plantation lies in the Lower Mississippi

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<sup>187</sup> Ibrahim Seck, “Dr. Seck Interview at Whitney Plantation,” Interview by Erin Escobar. Nov. 23, 2019.

<sup>188</sup> Modlin et. al., 338.

<sup>189</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 19.

<sup>190</sup> Because like Seck said, slavery was indeed horrible everywhere it occurred.

<sup>191</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 23.

Valley and we see change over time as indigo came and went out of fashion as a staple crop, followed by sugarcane. Why isn't this represented in any meaningful fashion in the plantation's tour or marketing materials?

Further, what slavery felt like to the enslaved and the specific horrors it imposed also varied depending on whether a slave experienced a trans-Atlantic crossing, was ripped from their family upon being sold, had a child that perished during birth or resulting from plantation conditions, etc. Berlin articulates three main generations of enslaved people that existed in what became the U.S.: the charter generation, plantation generation, and revolutionary generation.<sup>192</sup> Only those Africans who were brought over to the U.S. via Africa (or the Caribbean, if they were first transported from Africa) would know the horrors of the Middle Passage, for example, but slaves sold as part of the domestic trade would likely have known the pain of separation from family and birthplace felt by those who crossed the Atlantic. Therefore, the current main framing of the visitor's experience upon entry at Whitney, while ambitious and laudable in its aim to educate, is partial truth.

Whitney explains the trans-Atlantic slave trade that initially brought slaves to Louisiana, yet barely mentions the domestic trade of slaves that was active until the 1860s, the meaning of the end of the trans-Atlantic trade, and the origins of most of Whitney's slave population. In 1803 the United States Congress purchased territory from the French in the Louisiana Purchase, and in 1808 Congress passed the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves, barring the U.S. from participating in the international trade of slaves. However, before the international trade was outlawed in the U.S. and before Louisiana was part of the U.S., Sophie White writes that slaves had already stopped coming into Louisiana via the international trade:

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<sup>192</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 28.

Africans were forcibly taken to Louisiana in 1719, but the slave trade to the colony reached a high point in 1730-1731 and virtually ceased thereafter until the end of the French regime. The last known sanctioned shipment occurred in 1743, when the *St. Ursin* transported 220 slaves from Goree to Louisiana, 190 of whom survived. [...] Other slaves arrived through more opaque, and usually illicit, channels. Their numbers, their identities, and their experiences can only be surmised indirectly, for example, from documents such as baptismal records. Any increase in the slave population after 1731 was thus primarily due to reproduction, resulting in an increasingly creolized populace born in the colony.<sup>193</sup>

If the U.S. did not ban the international slave trade until 1808 but it almost disappeared in Louisiana after 1731, then the enslaved population in Louisiana would have been brought there via other states as part of the domestic trade, or, as White argues, was a result of natural reproduction. This is important information as the origins of an enslaved population shaped their lived experiences and identities.<sup>194</sup>

Berlin argues that the “new history of slavery”<sup>195</sup> addresses the differences between memory and history via the historicization of slavery, and historians deal with the history of slavery while non-academics tend to deal with memories of slavery.<sup>196</sup> Historians recognize that

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<sup>193</sup> Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 7.

<sup>194</sup> The Equal Justice Initiative website shares more useful information on the domestic trade than Whitney’s website or tour, which adds to the evidence that Whitney is more memory than history site. See the two following pages for comparison: <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-domestic-slave-trade/> and <https://www.whitneyplantation.org/the-domestic-slave-trade/>. The EJI page shares the timeframe of the domestic trade, some of the impact on the slaves, and it debunks the slave mythology that slavery was benign. The Whitney page only mentions the end of the international trade and provides esoteric details on specific domestic traders or examples, but this does not help the visitor understand the impact on the plantation’s populace.

<sup>195</sup> Ira Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice,” *Journal of American History* 90, Issue 4 (March 2004): 1262.

<sup>196</sup> Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory,” 1261.

slavery was universal and diverse: “[i]n the United States, as elsewhere, slavery was not made but constantly remade, taking a variety of forms that themselves have become a subject of enormous debate.”<sup>197</sup> However, those interested in the memory of slavery focus on the specificity of moments and can mistake the specific experiences of some slaves for the universal experiences of all slaves. As an example, the language on Whitney’s welcoming sign, brochure, and website say they will focus on slavery wholesale, the story of slavery. “The” suggests a singularity or consistency whereas “A” suggests the site contains one of a plurality of slave experiences, so saying the site will tell *the* story versus *a* story that is site-specific are very different claims.<sup>198</sup> Sugarcane cultivation, harvesting, and processing was brutal in specific ways on the body and a host of historiography exists on this crop and North American and Caribbean slavery. It is very different from farming tobacco, rice, wheat, and other crops routinely grown in different parts of the slaveholding early U.S. It is also not the same as cultivating indigo, the crop of import during Whitney’s early decades. Therefore, parts of the website and signage mislead visitors into assuming sugar cultivation was the sole crop of not only Whitney Plantation but all plantations because this site shares the (definitive) story of slavery. Instead, the history shared during the guided tour is a specific slice from Whitney’s past, sprinkled with broader regional histories that support the overall theme.

It seems likely the resident historian Seck is aware of this. During our interview he distanced himself from curatorial duties, sharing that he has never been the site curator. And at the end of his monograph he refers to the plantation as a “site of memory and consciousness”<sup>199</sup> and “a genuine landmark built by African slaves and their descendants,”<sup>200</sup> but he makes no

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<sup>197</sup> Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory, 1261.

<sup>198</sup> Even saying ‘*The Story of Slavery at Whitney Plantation*’ would be different than the sign’s current language.

<sup>199</sup> Seck, 158.

<sup>200</sup> Seck, 157.

reference to the current site as historical – unless one counts his sharing earlier that the site was in 1992 added to the National List of Historical Places. Instead of history, memories of brutality permeate every part of the site.

There were and still are so many models for the plantation to look toward in deciding how to craft the site, and that this site does not appear to model itself after them indicates it is trying to be distinct. George Washington’s Mount Vernon is one good example, though of course imperfect. This site provides a much more comprehensive view of its own plantation slavery across time and covers more detail than Whitney about enslaved everyday experiences. But this site does not focus primarily on its former enslaved residents.<sup>201</sup> It is a memorial and museum to George and Martha Washington’s home, legacy, and burial site. Even so, it does tell visitors that slavery was crucial to the site and slaves were responsible for its upkeep and success. Visitors can choose their tour at Mount Vernon and can avoid touring areas outside the main house, so could avoid seeing where most slaves worked and lived, though, so may not learn too much about slave experiences if they avoid these areas.<sup>202</sup> Whitney’s choice of only providing guided tours that focus on enslaved people ensures this aspect is not ignored by visitors, which is something Mount Vernon does not do. Whitney does not stop distinguishing itself from other sites through its focus on enslaved inhabitants and its guided-tour-only setup; it also aims to appear as *the* authority on slavery. Only it can share the ‘truth’: but horror and brutality is one part of historical truth, valid but partial, and only a memory if selectively shown. The average citizen would probably not realize that, and that is why this marketing is so effective. And it

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<sup>201</sup> Mount Vernon, “The Estate,” Accessed Oct. 2020. <https://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/historic-area/>

<sup>202</sup> Mount Vernon, “Plan Your Visit,” Accessed Oct. 2020. <https://www.mountvernon.org/plan-your-visit/>

needs to be since heritage sites are engines of and rely upon economic consumption,<sup>203</sup> and there is a dearth of plantations in Louisiana, many just down the road. If Whitney aims to distinguish itself it needs to be different and interesting, and it certainly is.

It is important to note where Whitney does not fully ignore aspects of its own history or slavery that demonstrate agency of the enslaved (thus showing that slavery was grim and deadly but hope and life existed) as well as change over time. Henrietta did mention foodways and related knowledge brought to mainland North American colonies by Africans transported during Middle Passage, which is a hugely responsible for the crop cultivation in this country as well as some regional cuisines; their knowledge of foodways and abilities to cultivate food crops demonstrates the brainpower and capabilities of enslaved people, and stands as a brief mention of life and hope sprinkled throughout the tour.

The biggest space given to slave life and agency and the place that most hints at how slavery was dynamic is the memorial dedicated to the slaves who participated in and planned the 1811 German Coast Uprising.

In January 1811, at least 125 slaves walked off their plantations and, dressed in makeshift military garb, began marching in revolt along River Road toward New Orleans. (The area was then called the German Coast for the high number of German immigrants, like the Haydels.) The slaves were suppressed by militias after two days, with about 95 killed, some during fighting and some after the show trials that followed. As a warning to other slaves, dozens were decapitated, their

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<sup>203</sup> Brian Graham, Gregory Ashworth, and John Tunbridge, "The Uses and Abuses of Heritage" *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, Ed. by Gerard Corsane (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 34.

heads placed on spikes along River Road and in what is now Jackson Square in the French Quarter.<sup>204</sup>

The memorial consists of many large placards that share the history of the uprising, from planning to culmination by arrest and murder of the revolting slaves. The plaques include scans of original documents of the uprising and images of those involved. Directly across from the information about the event was the artistic part of the memorial. Sculptural in form, the memorial consists of pikes topped with the decapitated heads of those slaves involved. It recreates the punishment of the uprisers, a punishment chosen to act as a visual warning to other slaves of their fate should they decide to revolt.

What is most interesting about this memorial is it is separate from the guided tour and optional. It is not that separate from the rest of the memorials – just a short pathway from the “Field of Angels,” which is where Henrietta told us we could come back and tour the optional area after the guided tour, and she explained that due to the graphic nature of it, parents may not want children to experience it, and adults may choose not to see it. While it is no surprise that not all visitors might want to see graphic statuary, and that does seem a good reason to disconnect this memorial from the tour, another reason is equally likely. This memorial does not fit into the narrative Whitney wants to convey. It is brutal, yes, in its showcasing of the consequences of being caught revolting, and very brutal in its recreation of the consequence these particular slaves faced. But it also demonstrates that slavery was not static: in some places slaves did revolt on a large scale. And if visitors see this memorial with a guide, they could potentially ask questions about revolt elsewhere: was it common? Was it usual for this many enslaved to revolt?

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<sup>204</sup> Amsden.

Was revolt always armed or violent? The answer is that it depended on place and temporal context. This is exactly what “the” story of a broad slavery cannot afford: variances. It shatters the illusion. Therefore, by separating the memorial while still including it on the site, the planners have found a way to acknowledge history in its variances while keeping those variances under the radar.<sup>205</sup>

“The memory of slavery in the United States is constructed on different ground from its history. Rather than global, it is local. Memories generally derive from the particular rather than from a consideration of the larger context. [...] Rather than dispassionate and boundless, the memory of slavery is immediate, emotive, and highly selective.”<sup>206</sup> This memorial certainly works as a further local and passionate memory of brutality for those engaging in memories, especially in the context of the whole site, but it simultaneously pays tribute to history via its replication and display of primary source documents and its acknowledgment of slave agency and hope. It sits in the liminal space between history and memory. “For the historian, context is all, and to step outside the assumptions of the historical moment violates the fundamental canons of the craft. This does not deny slavery's brutality, mute the violence on which slavery necessarily rested, or even make such brutal impositions more explicable. It simply provides the basis for understanding the actions of master and slave.”<sup>207</sup> In terms of this memorial, the local context of revolt is shown, as are the actions of the enslaved and reactions of their enslavers and local law enforcement. Through this memorial visitors can glimpse what was at stake for all parties involved. But only if they choose to engage with it.

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<sup>205</sup> Whether or not this memorial is a responsible homage to these revolters as it in many ways disembodies the enslaved and erases agency is a fascinating study that one day I plan to engage with in a different space. Amsden delves a bit into critiques of the memorial for those interested in perusing. Moreover, this memorial was originally part of the tour but is no longer as a result of visitor backlash.

<sup>206</sup> Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory,” 1265.

<sup>207</sup> Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory,” 1263.



The main layer of framing at this site paves the way for the second: the site is a space for Americans to learn about slavery's history, which is American history, so they can understand the past. But given that the oppression slavery imposed on Black bodies and minds still exists in the U.S., the historical education Whitney aims to dispel is also meant to promote social justice. After all, if slavery built the U.S. and benefitted white people, and if its oppressions were never fully eradicated, just morphed, then it follows that white people still benefit from its legacy. If the site can heighten visitor emotions and channel their emotional energy into physical actions toward social justice, then Whitney has additional justification for its being and its current state of being. I believe this is another one of the reasons the site is set up the way it is. The site not only addresses slavery and the slave as its primary focus, but it does so without marginalizing the enslaved's importance to the plantation. This is distinct from most plantation heritage sites, which "deploy a series of tactics to symbolically denigrate, marginalize, or trivialize slavery and its legacies. Their representation and treatment of ... antebellum slave cabins [for example] reveals these tactics in striking ways because these cabins, when compared with mansions are neglected, distorted, or simply left out of accounts."<sup>208</sup>

Whitney not only includes slave cabins in the tour, but restored ones; further, the tour guides emphasize them and provide a few minutes for visitors to walk through one of them. This is the area of the tour that most potently emphasizes the life of the enslaved: visitors get some sense of the scale of their private lives, which is minimal though existent, and mostly within the walls of the small building. And walking through the cabin allows the visitor to sense how community must have been essential to survival on a plantation: having so many bodies

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<sup>208</sup> Kristin L. Gallas, and James DeWolf Perry, *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites, Kindle Edition* (Maryland: Roman and Littlefield, 2015) 113.

crammed into such a small space must have been both stifling and also conducive to positive communal spirit. Henrietta said that bringing the cabins to the property and showing the spaces slaves lived helps the site tell the story of slavery.<sup>209</sup>

Although this part of the Whitney is probably intended to continue to make slavery feel more personal and comprehensible to visitors – they can stand inside a real-life cabin and for a moment feel as though they could imagine how awful it might have been – it also falls short of its potential for social justice and historical education. Here, signage on one of the cabins relates to visitors that two of the original cabins still stand, but the others present are representative of the time period but were obtained from another plantation nearby.<sup>210</sup> Visitors are shown how each cabin was divided into two, akin to a modern duplex, and told they housed 6 to 10 slaves per side. They contained no plumbing and slaves used slop jars for waste, which they had to take outside, dump and bury the waste the next day due to nightly curfews.<sup>211</sup> These few details were about all that was said about the space. There is no contextualization of the importance of this space to enslaved people. There is nothing prompting visitors to consider important issues to social justice that link to slavery, such as the private/public life dichotomy slaves faced, which in many ways still exists for Black people today in this country. The space where enslaved people ‘enjoyed’ some small semblance of privacy seems the place to do that. But instead of deeply contextualizing the few artifacts on-site that are original, much like a museum would generally aim to do, Whitney superficially addresses these artifacts, instead spending more time and depth on the fabricated memorials.

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<sup>209</sup> Henrietta, “Whitney Plantation Tour.”

<sup>210</sup> Whitney Plantation, “Slave Cabin Plaque,” Visited Nov. 23, 2019.

<sup>211</sup> Henrietta, “Guided Tour of Whitney Plantation.”

Whitney focuses more on the absent memory of the enslaved body than the present artifacts that could powerfully convey stories about the enslaved experience in their site construction or use. Perry Carter uses Derrida's concept of 'traces' to argue that slaves are absent presences at most plantation museums. To its credit, Whitney is able to bring those traces of slaves to life at the museum through use of the memorial form, specifically through sculpture, photography,<sup>212</sup> and naming the slaves to reembody them:

[...] the reason why these enslaved men, women, and children are absent presences at most plantation museums [...] is that there is little left of their material lives to affix them to these spaces. [...] a Southern antebellum master narrative (pardon the pun) is limited in its ability to transmit an enslaved counternarrative. Simply, you cannot in any meaningful way tell the story of the enslaved via their masters and their masters' things. This, I believe, is why the Whitney Plantation museum, in its endeavor to remember the enslaved, goes to great lengths to reembody the absent present—terra-cotta statues, ceramic severed heads on poles, lists of names engraved in granite, images of tortured bodies (Gordon's "scarred back" being the most notable). The presentation at Whitney is radically different in that you seldom see embodiments at other plantation museums. At these sites the home ("the big house") embodies the master and the white family, a home that would not have been possible without enslaved black labor. Maybe Whitney should not be considered a plantation museum. Perhaps it should be thought of as a memoryscape of the enslaved. Its project is making the unseen visible by reembodying the traces of the men, women, and children who inhabited and lived these spaces.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> In Henrietta's case, a photograph confirmed her family's plantation presence.

<sup>213</sup> Modlin et. al., 341-2.

Art is used to create many bodies at Whitney because “[b]odies are highly affecting objects. We relate to bodies because we are embodied. Whitney, I think, gets it right: The way to rememory the enslaved is to reembody, to rematerialize the enslaved.”<sup>214</sup> Carter is right that Whitney Plantation should not be considered a museum for it is not one, though it could be one if it wielded the site records and added more context to craft a more historical space (much as Seck does in his monograph). Where I disagree with Carter is in the efficacy of using bodily art alone to enliven the enslaved as an effective method to fulfill the site’s mission. As has been shown, it is not effective as currently organized at painting a historically-sound image of enslaved life at Whitney; it is only effective at provoking select visitor emotions – and maybe to some degree propelling social justice. Before social justice can be accomplished, the wrongs of the past must be uncovered, and this is something Cummings aims to do at Whitney. To a small degree, he has succeeded.

But the use of memory at this site has another dark side: memories of brutality are unpleasant and uncomfortable, and the social sciences tell us it is not uncommon for people to shut down or to ignore that which causes pain, grief, guilt... As such, the particular use of memory at this site might do the opposite of aiding social justice for Black lives; it might instead lead visitors to make the dangerous assumption that slavery is over, thus all injustices have been solved. Visitors can see and remember/form memories of specific brutal enslaved experiences at Whitney and feel grief for the slaves they never knew personally but have been made to feel emotionally close to, acknowledging their victimhood. “Memory is usually invoked in the name of nation, ethnicity, race, or religion, or on behalf of a felt need for peoplehood or victimhood. It

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<sup>214</sup> Modlin et. al., 343.

often thrives on grievance.”<sup>215</sup> This is the case at Whitney Plantation as grief permeates the site and it was grief and guilt that led Cummings to invest time and money to bring the plantation to life again.

“Slavery is the story of power over liberty, of a people victimized and brutalized,” but is also a story of life despite oppression.<sup>216</sup> It must include the stories of resilience and strength. “On the narrowest of grounds and in the most difficult of circumstances, [enslaved people] created and sustained life in the form of families, churches, and associations of all kinds.”<sup>217</sup> If masters and society would not give them space, they would make their own. Whitney tries to give space to the enslaved; that is how they have distinguished the site from all others in Louisiana. Their attempt overemphasizes select memories of brutality, memories related to death and decay, and does not cover the full history of the plantation.<sup>218</sup> The resulting presentation leans toward ahistoricism and casts aside present historiographical findings. The current setup at Whitney gives many visitors what they do not realize they want: the comfort of knowing that slavery is over. “What the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending.”<sup>219</sup> Although the end of slavery did not create a happy ending for former enslaved nor for their progeny, it created a dangerous illusion of one that still creeps into contemporary culture. This illusion is embodied throughout Whitney.

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<sup>215</sup> David Blight, “If You Don’t Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be,” *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, Ed. James Oliver Horton and Louis Horton (New York: The New Press, 2006) 25.

<sup>216</sup> Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory,” 1264.

<sup>217</sup> Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory,” 1264.

<sup>218</sup> This focus is a bit similar to the myth of the “Noble Savage,” the belief that Indigenous populations were homogenous and died out due to oppressions of colonization. It denies the realities that these populations were diverse and still exist today despite their brutalization at the hands of the same people that brutalized Black people.

<sup>219</sup> David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, *Acls Humanities E-book* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003) 1.

## Conclusion

Simply put, Whitney is the way it is because it must distinguish itself from all other plantation sites if it wants to compete in the heritage industry. This is the breeziest rationale for the oddities in this space. Another more complicated reason for the site's presentation is the desire for Whitney to stand as a counter-memorial to the Lost Cause mythology,<sup>220</sup> which still permeates the historical consciousness of many Americans as, for example, indicated by intense ongoing debates over the meaning of Confederate monuments. These monuments uphold "a narrative that celebrates selective parts of the past and at times can support white supremacy."<sup>221</sup> For example, such memorials often depict slavery and those involved in slave ownership and abuse as "benevolent and civilizing."<sup>222</sup> In using WPA Federal Writer's Project evidence to inform the site, Whitney continues the work initiated by the federal government post-Civil War to memorialize the experiences of the formerly enslaved; even this effort was at times only half-hearted as some recorded narratives were "revised" to make slavery appear less harsh and more favorable to all involved in oppressing Black lives because the realities shared were too "unsettling."<sup>223</sup> Whitney tries to counter misinformation about the realities of slavery. This is critical given lies about slavery and misunderstandings about the causes of the war that led to the end of slavery abound. A 2011 survey by Pew Research Center that shows only 38% of Americans polled believed the war was primarily fought over slavery.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> For a nice summary of the Lost Cause tenets see: Adam Domby. *The False Cause*, 4.

<sup>221</sup> Domby. *The False Cause*, 165.

<sup>222</sup> Ethan Kyle and Brian Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy*, (London; New York: The New Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>223</sup> Kyle and Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden*, 238.

<sup>224</sup> Kyle and Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden*, 10.

Opponents to Lost Cause mythos demand memorialization of slavery as “a brutal, inhumane institution that has shaped who we are as a nation.”<sup>225</sup> Whitney works to provide this memorialization by constructing memories of brutality, pain, and death; it works so diligently toward this goal it ends up only partly commemorating its own history and selecting only some narrow generalities about slavery nationwide, neglecting details that would provide a more historically grounded narrative. Quite ironically, it slips up in the same way narrowly focused Confederate monuments do by sharing a sliver of truth. Former Mayor of Louisiana Mitch Landrieu has called reverence for slave owners and advocates “historical malfeasance.”<sup>226</sup> While this is true, glossing over or neglecting aspects of slavery on its own site that do not fit into a narrow frame of remembrance, and promising more than it can prove, such as Whitney does in its attempt to illuminate slavery (fully), is another form of historical malpractice and, especially in light of viewer perceptions of the power of museums, is also dangerous.

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<sup>225</sup> Kytte and Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden*, 4.

<sup>226</sup> Kytte and Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden*, 348.

## **Chapter 3**



## **Introduction & Purpose**

This chapter will demonstrate how specific frames of remembrance depict lynching at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ) so the site can educate visitors on America's history of lynching Black people, illuminate scholarly debates around lynching for the general public through commemorative design, and promote national healing and social justice to atone for the country's legacy of Black brutality and end lynching-related historical trauma. Unlike the USHMM, which frames the U.S. role in the Holocaust as primarily altruistic, this site does not glorify the government's role in lynching but demands a reckoning. Unlike Whitney, the NMPJ never veers into ahistorical territory. In fact, to facilitate social change the site must debunk espoused rationales for these lynchings by the perpetrators, so the NMPJ must highlight lynching in a broad historically sound frame with heightened sensitivity to the role brutality played in terrorizing the lynched and the Black lives who could be lynched. Those who lynched used imagery and spectacle to enhance the terror the lynchings provoked, so this memorial must use imagery with care to support its own goals without inflicting additional harm to the Black populace.

## **Origins of Lynching in America**

The term *lynching* is likely of American origin,<sup>227</sup> dating to the American Revolutionary period, and its general definition is “extralegal punishment meted out by a group of people claiming to represent the will of the larger community and acting with an expectation of impunity.” It can include any number of tortures including death, and its goal is to punish the

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<sup>227</sup> For a detailed account of the origins of the term see Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America*. (Lanham, Maryland: Ivan R. Dee, 2011); see also Ashraf Rushdy, *American Lynching*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 23.

offender and reaffirm community belonging among those who witness the ritual.<sup>228</sup> Lynching was used during America's first century to address the lack of coherent centralized law enforcement and judicial system, as well as to address continual national expansion which further distanced individuals from criminal legal institutions.<sup>229</sup> It enabled colonists to enact "civic identity" as distinct from their British ancestors;<sup>230</sup> "lynch law" allowed local punishment of those who warranted it.<sup>231</sup> Lynching was an expedient way for the local community to hold individuals accountable to local order: to punish the offender and warn the rest of the community against similar disorder.

Given its long history in the realm of American justice, lynching "represents an instance in which the logic and spirit of American democracy are enacted" instead of an "exception" to state-sanctioned justice.<sup>232</sup> The U.S. government has routinely tolerated or participated in lynching despite its historic illegality. A specific period and strain of lynching, however, the routine practice of lynching Black individuals for any number of alleged crimes during the last two decades of the 19th century and into the 1950s is the focus of this chapter. These lynchings are distinct from others in America's past because of their purpose, which will be detailed in this chapter. Few local authorities held lynchers accountable for these specific crimes despite the oft-

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<sup>228</sup> Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice*, ix; Michael Pfeifer, "Introduction," *Global Lynching and Collective Violence: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Vol. 1*. Ed. Michael Pfeifer. (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>229</sup> Michael Pfeifer. "Introduction," *Global Lynching and Collective Violence: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Vol. 1*. Ed. Michael Pfeifer. (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>230</sup> It was also, at least early in the nation's history, a means of separating British and American loyalties and identities. See Ersula Ore, below.

<sup>231</sup> Ersula Ore. *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 11-13. Interestingly, Ore writes that in this period individuals deemed worthy of lynching often included Tories, perceived enemies of the American Revolution.

<sup>232</sup> Ersula Ore. *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*, 15.

known identities of the perpetrators, who often conducted their crimes unmasked and in daylight, locally, and in public.

## **Thesis**

The NMPJ, the first memorial to all “racial terror lynchings”<sup>233</sup> in the United States, directly challenges American Exceptionalism, specifically the belief that Americans are morally superior to other nations; the site’s goal is to end the continued traumatization of Black people by refocusing the national narrative around historic and contemporary domestic issues of racial oppression, specifically the U.S.’s continued legacy of oppressing its Black populace. It accomplished this by broadly showcasing the racial terror lynchings from the U.S. past and connecting them to present injustices. Historical narratives of lynching are reframed by the EJI through this site to acknowledge past racial injustice and to hold the nation accountable for its continued complicity; unlike the lynchers who publicly displayed actual Black people before, during, and after their torture and murders, this memorial follows the tradition of activists such as Ida B. Wells and the NAACP, who turned the violent nature of lynching against lynchers and bystanders. Whereas perpetrators used lynchings to keep Black people in a place of racial inferiority, which the defeat of the South in the Civil War and ensuing Reconstruction threatened, this memorial uses lynching to showcase the injustice that still permeates the nation and prevents fully realized citizenship and health for Black people. The NMPJ uses lynching to make Black people visible to end their oppression, whereas lynchers used lynching to make tortured Black bodies visible to perpetuate their oppression. Through the creation of a primarily abstract memorial that is simultaneously static and dynamic, the EJI’s framing of the site

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<sup>233</sup> Equal Justice Initiative. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 4. The report can also be located in digital, downloadable copy online at <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/>

attempts to harness emotional affect to promote long overdue national accountability for the extralegal murders of Black citizens after the ending of slavery, with the goal of using this willingness to account for the past to bolster the EJI's reform efforts more broadly. The NMPJ therefore relies on the past atrocities of racial terror lynchings, which are linked to slavery, to demonstrate modern realities for Black Americans: the site stands as a memorial to the resilience of Black Americans despite their historic and present realities and is a counter memorial to continued trauma.

### **Racial Terror Lynching**

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a modern 501(c)3 nonprofit whose history is detailed below, documents “racial terror lynchings” in their report *Lynching in America*; in this report the EJI argues that these lynchings were a form of terrorism “used to enforce racial subordination and segregation” and to traumatize Black people in the U.S. They blatantly define these crimes as terrorism: “violent and public acts or torture that traumatized black people throughout the country [between the end of the Civil War and WWII] and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials.” The lynching of Black people was often not punishment for any real crime: “many African Americans who were never accused of any crime were tortured and murdered in front of picnicking spectators (including elected officials and prominent citizens)” for no legitimate reason, and those “who participated in lynchings were celebrated and acted with impunity.”<sup>234</sup> Given the freedom with which lynchers enacted their public terrorism, and given the functioning justice systems in the locales lynchings occurred, (racial terror) lynchings cannot be seen as “frontier justice.” They are also distinct from hate crimes, racial violence, hangings, and mob violence. These acts, unlike lynchings, were sometimes prosecuted, which lessened their power.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 3-4.

<sup>235</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 4.

The EJI continues the work of activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who fought ardently for anti-lynching legislation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. She argued that Black men were not threats to white women as was a common reason for their lynching, showing numerous examples of Black men who were lynched and later proven innocent of assaulting white women. As she says, “the South is shielding itself [from the murder of Black people by lynching] behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women. This, too, in the face of the fact that only one-third of the 728 victims to mobs have been charged with rape, to say nothing of those of that one-third who were innocent of the charge.”<sup>236</sup> This “lynching-for-rape discourse” arose as a primary defense for lynching Black men in the 1870s and was used to support white male chivalry toward white women.<sup>237</sup> Like Wells-Barnett, the EJI confronts lynching mythology head-on with truth backed by statistics. Across twenty states, the EJI has documented over 4,000 racial terror lynchings between 1877-1950.<sup>238</sup> Even though the EJI’s report on lynching represents the most comprehensive documentation of lynching in the U.S., not all lynchings left physical traces or were reported and many more remain unaccounted by any work.<sup>239</sup> Further, given the historically contested definitions of lynching, quantification remains all the more elusive.<sup>240</sup>

Lynching of Black people was widely used to quell Black economic and social advancement beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which prompted anti-lynching activists like Wells.

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<sup>236</sup> These numbers are much larger now, but this work was written in the early decades of lynching. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all Its Phases,” (1894), 13. *Project Gutenberg Ebook* The EJI also provides examples of lynching in defense of white womanhood. Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 68.

<sup>237</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, *The End of American Lynching*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 9.

<sup>238</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, “Explore: Interactive Map,” <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/>

<sup>239</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, “About: More on the Project and the Equal Justice Initiative,” Accessed 2019.

<https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/about>

<sup>240</sup> Christopher Waldrep. “War of Words: The Controversy over the Definition of Lynching, 1899-1940.” *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 1 (2000): 99. Since organizations (both anti-lynching and news outlets) disagreed on the definition of a lynching, they would disagree on how many lynchings occurred over time, making accurate quantification difficult. Some violence might garner attention (as lynchings) whereas some would not, so the historic record may not contain traces of all acts of lynching.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), The Tuskegee Institute, the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), and the International Labor Defense (ILD) were national organizations working to end lynching, and they came together in December 1940 to define lynching and end (or minimize) arguments over tabulating lynchings. The organizations agreed that lynching had become a tactic used for racial violence and they agreed that it was problematic for them to disagree on lynching numbers, so a definition of lynching was necessary to fight their opponents.<sup>241</sup> For if they could not agree on what lynching was, how could they effectively work to stop it? As an example of divergences in how to fight lynching, Wells focused much of her energy proving false the claim that lynching Black men protected white women's virtue, since most lynched Black men were never accused of sex crimes but were lynched for other reasons (and some Black women were also lynched); however, if lynching was defined solely as the torture or murder of Black men for sex crimes against white women, then any other torture or murder of Black men would not qualify as a lynching. Thus, a universal definition among anti-lynching activists was necessary to fight lynching from many fronts by demonstrating the realities of lynching and convincing the nation it was worth eradicating.

Until 1940 there was national disagreement over what constituted lynching. Jessie Daniel Ames of ASWPL believed lynching was a result of moral deprivation and was akin to an environmental social ailment. Therefore, if morality could be instilled in these perpetrators they would cease to engage in lynching.<sup>242</sup> As another example, the NAACP believed lynchings must be committed by groups and supported by the community, whereas other organizations such as the

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<sup>241</sup> Christopher Waldrep. "War of Words," 75-6.

<sup>242</sup> Christopher Waldrep. "War of Words," 77.

League of Struggle for Negro Rights, a Communist organization, saw individually perpetrated racial torture or murder without community backing as lynchings.<sup>243</sup> Further, anti-lynching organizations disagreed on whether “killings” by police officers during arrests would qualify as lynchings: the NAACP said ‘no’ but the Tuskegee Institute thought these instances should qualify when the murdered Black individual was innocent of any crime.<sup>244</sup> Yet another huge point of contention was over defining lynching as necessarily public versus private. Until 1939 the NAACP refused to consider private murder as lynching, even though the ILD and the League for the Struggle of Negro Rights had provided evidence that Southern lynchers including the KKK had begun hiding their work by engaging in it privately. The NAACP realized that a refusal to define lynching as occurring in private narrowed the event enough for some organizations to argue that lynching had been eradicated as of 1939, and this was a problem for the NAACP who saw lynching as the best tactical maneuver against racism, the lifeblood of lynching.<sup>245</sup>

In 1940 the major anti-lynching organizations met in Tuskegee and agreed on a definition. Lynching was broadly defined as the extrajudicial murder of an individual carried out by a group (which was undefined due to disagreement) in the name of “service to justice, race, or tradition.”<sup>246</sup> This definition left a lot of room for interpretation. How many people equals a group? If an individual murders in the name of race or tradition and a group watches and sanctions it, does that count as lynching? This definition also only implies but fails to state that these racially oriented oppressions were enacted to target and undermine Black equality. Saying a murder is for the purpose of enacting justice, upholding tradition, or related to race is a far cry from calling the

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<sup>243</sup> Christopher Waldrep. "War of Words," 81.

<sup>244</sup> Christopher Waldrep. "War of Words," 89.

<sup>245</sup> Christopher Waldrep. "War of Words," 83, 92.

<sup>246</sup> Christopher Waldrep. "War of Words," 98.

murders blatant instances of white supremacy in reaction to emancipation and legal safeguards to equality. The EJI's clear definition of lynching does not shy away from saying what lynchings were intended to do (terrorize in the name of race dominance), which is evident in their chosen nomenclature.

## **Institutional History**

In addition to their unique definition of lynching, the EJI's own history informs the framing of the NMPJ and, consequently, its promotion of reconciliation. Founded in 1989 by lawyer Bryan Stevenson of wide international acclaim for his humanitarian and public interest legal work, the EJI works to safeguard human rights for America's most vulnerable, and "is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, [and] to challenging racial and economic injustice." The non-profit is "committed to changing the narrative about race in America" through its work promoting racial equity. Stevenson is Executive Director and Founder of EJI and in his book-turned film *Just Mercy* he shares the origins of the non-profit, including one of its first cases, a death row case. "The case exemplifies how the death penalty in America is a direct descendant of lynching — a system that treats the rich and guilty [and white] better than the poor and innocent [and Black]."<sup>247</sup> To link lynching to modern inequities like mass incarceration and inequitable arrests and trials, the "EJI is actively engaged in a campaign to recognize the victims of lynching by collecting soil from lynching sites, erecting historical markers, and creating a national memorial that acknowledges the horrors of racial injustice."<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, "The Book," Accessed July 2020 <https://justmercy.eji.org/>

<sup>248</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, "About EJI," *Equal Justice Initiative*. Accessed 2019. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/about>



Stevenson's book intends to demonstrate the ease with which some people receive condemnation in America, along with "the injustice we create when we allow fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us." Beginning in the 1970s the U.S. instituted much harsher and longer prison sentences, including for minor offenses, and started incarcerating in unprecedented mass. Once convicted, individuals are often labelled for life as criminals and the ramifications for themselves and their families can be brutal.<sup>249</sup> When mistakes occur or questionable evidence is ignored in the prosecution of individuals under this system, the results can be devastating or beyond reparations. As a result of his work with the legally disenfranchised, Stevenson argues that the character of the U.S. and each individual citizen is determined by their treatment of the poorest and lowliest. "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated," and while mercy and compassion are essential to building character; "fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair."<sup>250</sup>

The Supreme Court banned the death penalty in 1972's *Furman v. Georgia*, ruling overall that aspects of death penalty statutes were unconstitutional and violated the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment, but this ruling was reversed in 1976 when those problematic aspects were addressed by the ruling *Gregg v. Georgia*.<sup>251</sup> The 1972 ban indicates a step toward more merciful punishment, although Stevenson's own experience demonstrates that the practice of enacting the death penalty remains rife with problems and inequalities. In addition to the violence of punishment via death and terror, racial terror lynching and capital punishment both target Black people. The biggest determinant of the death penalty's use is the race of the convicted.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2014), 14-16.

<sup>250</sup> Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 18.

<sup>251</sup> View both rulings here: <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/408/238.html> and <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/428/153.html>

<sup>252</sup> Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 142.

## Funding

The NMPJ is the first memorial project of the EJI and one of many tools EJI employs in educating the public on the continuation of anti-Black brutality and inequity post-slavery and lynching in the United States; it is supplemented by the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration a short distance away. “For Mr. Stevenson, the plans for the memorial and an accompanying museum were rooted in decades spent in Alabama courtrooms, witnessing a criminal justice system that treats African-Americans with particular cruelty, or indifference.”<sup>253</sup> The EJI opened the NMPJ on Thursday, April 26, 2018, and the corresponding Legacy Museum opened the same day.<sup>254</sup>

The memorial is funded by government grants and donations by individuals, foundations, and corporations via the EJI and at least 94% of all funding supports the organization’s programs.<sup>255</sup> As of the September 30, 2018 fiscal year, no more than 24% of the EJI’s revenue was from government sources.<sup>256</sup> According to the 2018 Annual Report, the EJI earns the bulk of its revenue from donations, totaling \$19,439,844 for the 2018 year; the next largest income source is grant money at a much smaller \$7,995,129 for the 2018 year.<sup>257</sup> Although not

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<sup>253</sup> Campbell Robertson, “A Lynching Memorial Is Opening. The Country Has Never Seen Anything Like It.” *The New York Times* Apr. 25, 2018. Accessed Apr. 13, 2020.

<sup>254</sup> Due to the focus of this thesis on lynching, the museum is not deeply discussed; however, it is powerful and imaginative and would make a fascinating case study.

<sup>255</sup> “Equal Justice Initiative,” *Philanthropy News Digest*. June 27, 2017. Accessed Jan. 2021.

<https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/npo-spotlight/equal-justice-initiative>; One specific donor, for example, is Deutsche Bank Americas Foundation, donating in support of the museum and memorial. See “Digital Resources Expand Engagement with History of Racial Injustice,” *Deutsche Bank USA*. May 2018. Accessed Jan. 2021. <https://www.db.com/usa/content/en/equal-justice-initiative.html>

<sup>256</sup> “Equal Justice Initiative.” *Charity Watch*. March 2019. Accessed Jan. 2021.

<https://www.charitywatch.org/charities/equal-justice-initiative>

<sup>257</sup> “Financial Highlights for Year Ended September 30, 2018,” Annual Report, <https://eji.org/reports/annual-report-2018/>, 4.

uncommon for commemorative sites to raise their own funding and receive all or primarily non-governmental funding, it is symbolic when non-governmental actors (the EJI here) make greater efforts than the national or state governments to commemorate national atrocities like lynching. Maybe it would not be as symbolic if the atrocity were not condoned by the government. Given lynching was allowed despite its extrajudiciality, the lack of large-scale government support for this site indicates an unwillingness of the U.S. government to account for its past actions, as well as failure to sever past violence from present violence against Black people.

The EJI and its projects, including the NMPJ, have grassroots philanthropic origins and, as their financials attests, exist largely due to community support. In fact, the national community support has grown so much between 2013 and the end of 2016 that the EJI saw explosive growth in revenue and assets from \$3 million combined to around \$40 million in revenue and \$57 million in assets.<sup>258</sup> This is both incredible and disheartening.

It is disheartening that the U.S. government has yet to sanction and fund a national commemoration to lynching; instead, a nonprofit organization brought the first such memorial to the nation. Yet, Congress has sanctioned the commemoration of Jewish Holocaust victims (the USHMM of chapter one), despite the Holocaust not occurring on American soil. The birth of the USHMM is an important step in condemning the hate and bigotry that led to (primarily) Jewish murders abroad during Hitler's reign. But what about reckonings with such hate in our own nation? Former president Jimmy Carter said "because we are humane people, concerned with the human rights of all peoples, we feel compelled to study the systematic destruction of the

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<sup>258</sup> Brad Harper, "One Year Later, EJI Plans New Sites after Launching Memorial to Lynching Victims." *Montgomery Advertiser*. April 26, 2019. Accessed Jan. 2021.  
<https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2019/04/26/eji-plans-new-sites-year-after-launching-memorial-lynching-victims/3542053002/>

Jews so that we may seek to learn how to prevent such enormities from occurring in the future.”<sup>259</sup> How is it that our national government sees it necessary (rightly so) to acknowledge and commemorate Holocaust victims and seeks to learn from their oppression, but it still refuses to acknowledge and learn from the oppression of Black citizens on a national scale? In the words of the EJI, government indifference to lynchings “created enduring national and institutional wounds”<sup>260</sup> that continue today, so it seems fitting the accountable parties, government included, all participate in righting that wrong.

I suspect it is far easier to look at the oppressions inflicted by others while celebrating our own national morality, which is the focus of the USHMM as it casts Americans as liberators and only secondarily as bystanders, whereas Nazi Germans are cast as the primary persecutors of Jews in the museum. Further, if the U.S. confronts the history of racial terror lynchings then it must also confront its direct connection to American slavery: racial terror lynching was a reaction to the end of slavery and the rights granted to the newly freed, and it cannot be understood fully outside that historical context. If the NMPJ was solely a historic site related to lynching it might stop here: establishing a connection between lynching and slavery. The EJI has created more than a historic site with the NMPJ, the EJI has created a space where the past meets the present in order to expose linkages so they can be broken: this site extends lynching to the slave past and to a present society that includes mass incarceration, police harassment, and other modern oppressions faced daily by the Black populace.

### **EJI’s Approach**

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<sup>259</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 66.

<sup>260</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 65.

The EJI believes “monuments and memorials to commemorate lynching [have] the power to end the silence and inaction that have compounded this psycho-social trauma and to begin the process of recovery.”<sup>261</sup> The recovery of Black dignity and faith in local institutions is necessary for traumatic healing, since failure of local and federal governments to protect Black citizens from the indignity and violence of lynching, along with their failure to commemorate the memory of the lynched in a broad and accurate way, have led to massive distrust between these Black citizens and their local and national governments. This distrust has been further widened given a Southern “landscape [...] cluttered” with memorials to white supremacists.<sup>262</sup> Distrust grows with each instance of contemporary state-sanctioned violence against Black people. Montgomery is the home of Jefferson Davis’ Confederate White House, so it is a symbolic space for this memorial and for the EJI’s headquarters nearby, and the NMPJ acts as a counter-memorial to the oppressions of the Confederacy in this same historical space.

In addition to distrust in the nation, Black people in the U.S. suffer additional effects of historical trauma. Many experience psychological and physical effects of historical trauma, “a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance.” According to a group of medical and social science researchers including Nathaniel Mohatt, historical trauma has adverse health effects on those who experience it.<sup>263</sup> It does not matter whether individuals in the group experience the trauma, for example, the trauma of slavery or lynching, directly because the initial trauma lingers in psychological form as ““representation”” of the initial trauma. Mohatt et. al.

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<sup>261</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 65.

<sup>262</sup> Equal Justice Initiative 66-7.

<sup>263</sup> Nathaniel Vincent Mohatt et al. Manuscript of “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative: A Conceptual Review of How History Impacts Present-day Health.” *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) vol. 106 (2014): 2.

propose a narrative framework for a fuller understanding of historical trauma's contemporary impacts on health because past traumatic events have a cause-and-effect relationship on present health, historical trauma is both personal and public, and the ways traumas are represented (addressed, ignored, misconstrued) are all conducive to representation in narrative form.<sup>264</sup>

Since I believe accurate understandings of history and its legacies can help heal ongoing tensions between groups when those tensions have been based on inaccuracies in the historical narrative or partial accounts, and since studies have shown adverse health impacts on historically oppressed groups, I believe narratives of historical trauma have the power to alleviate psychological suffering *if* they address historical trauma faithfully: i.e., if they eschew mythological and whitewashed histories, acknowledging the pain inflicted in the past. Certain current U.S. narratives around lynching (that it was a Southern phenomenon, for example, and that lynching was not racially motivated...which is only true depending on what period of U.S. lynching one is discussing) are not faithful to history and can continue to harm Black people. “Cultural narratives of trauma may be especially relevant to health [...] because they frame the psychosocial, political-economic, and social-ecological context within which that event is experienced.” These narratives also frame the responses of the victims to their trauma.<sup>265</sup> Understanding the linkage between the initial trauma and its representation and ongoing narratives surrounding the trauma is therefore useful in understanding adverse health impacts on, in this case, Black Americans.

The NMPJ shares a narrative of lynching that withstands historical scrutiny and sheds light on historical misinterpretations; it initially tells a story of traumatic destruction as it guides

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<sup>264</sup> Mohat et al., Manuscript of “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative,” 3.

<sup>265</sup> Mohat et al., Manuscript of “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative,” 5.

visitors through a cavern of symbolic lynching victims, and it slowly turns that story into a tale of redemption and resilience as it draws visitors toward responses to lynching and other traumas to Black people in the U.S. Redemption or “cognitive transformation narratives” have positive associations with studies on well-being and resilience,<sup>266</sup> so EJI’s use of them seems strategically aligned with their organizational goals to end oppression.

A large memorial consisting of dozens of smaller monuments to lynching victims, the NMPJ spans six acres of land overlooking the city of Montgomery and is the first national memorial to the more than four thousand victims of lynching in the American South.<sup>267</sup> On their website, memorial planner, designer, and architect MASS Design Group<sup>268</sup> succinctly summarizes the site:

The structure suspends eight hundred Corten steel monuments to represent the counties in the United States where racial terror lynchings took place, each engraved with the names of its victims.

Duplicates of each of the monuments lie in the memory bank outside of the primary structure. The corresponding counties are invited to engage in this process of acknowledgment and reconciliation by claiming their monument and placing it as a marker in their own community.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Mohat et al., Manuscript of “Historical Trauma as Public Narrative,” 7.

<sup>267</sup> Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick [New Jersey]: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>268</sup> MASS Design Group, “About.” This firm aims to use “design that heals” and was chosen to also design the African Center for Peace at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre; Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, 1.

<sup>269</sup> Mass Design Group, “The National Memorial for Peace and Justice.”

It is apparent that a goal of this memorial is to commemorate each victim of lynching at the site as well as to inspire – and compel – each county where lynching took place to do the same. *Space and place matter* as EJI demonstrates in the construction of their memorial; they understand that recovery and healing must be initiated *in all spaces* where trust in legal institutions was lost due to sanctioned violence against Black people. Naming the victims also matters at this site, which is why when known each victim is named. Ersula Ore argues that because lynchings benefitted from silences naming acts as a “counter-rhetoric” to lynching and lifts the “shroud of silence” that intensified the traumatic event. “The act of naming is a chief feature of memory and restorative justice work” and it helps bring “historical truths once considered portions of America’s ‘unusable’ past to the realm of its ‘usable’ past.”<sup>270</sup> Naming is used extensively in EJI’s work, including at the NMPJ.

Lynching is not only named at this site but framed by the NMPJ as a widespread brutal collective history instead of as individual acts of violence that speckle the U.S. landscape. Instead of delving deeply into micro-historical analyses of a handful of lynchings to emphasize specific contexts and responses and to emphasize certain brutalities<sup>271</sup>, this memorial approaches lynchings collectively. This approach is important to this site’s goals for a few reasons. First, if lynching was meant to promote collective terror, it must be looked at as a collective series of acts instead of individually: the ubiquity was a large part of the terror and we will only access that terror if we analyze the whole and not the parts. Additionally, lynching constituted the widespread extralegal murder of Black people throughout the U.S., though most heavily in specific Southern U.S. states, so it is important for national reconciliation that citizens

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<sup>270</sup> Ersula Ore. *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*, 93-4.

<sup>271</sup> For example, the lynchings of Jesse Washington and Mary Turner are often given extended focus due to their particularities in works on lynching, but no lynchings are given such focus at this site.



understand how prevalent these murders were – and how many locales either actively supported them or turned a blind eye. Reconciliation will only be meaningful on a national level if all lynching victims are addressed collectively<sup>272</sup>, though local reconciliations can still be effective to local citizens.<sup>273</sup> If the memorial can emphasize the massive scale of complicity in the lynching of Black individuals then it can encourage contemporary citizens to actively witness the massive impact on those Black citizens who were lynched and those who knew they could be at any time, and it can urge them to consider modern psychological and bodily manifestations of the historical trauma on living Black Americans.

Although some lynchings received far more attention than others in the media, no lynching should be seen as objectively more important or sad or terrorizing than any other since they were all illegal, wrong, and intended to terrorize and demean.<sup>274</sup> Focusing on any single lynching or a group of them would, then, be unsupportive of the broader aims of the NMPJ to show the prevalence of the atrocity and the common aim of every act of lynching.

Second, national reconciliation is only meaningful if the events for which the complicity are reconciling end, which is why the EJI works to educate and enact meaningful change: “[m]eaningful public accountability is critical to bring the cycle of racial violence to a close.”<sup>275</sup> If a critical mass of the public is aware of racial terror lynching and its modern corollaries, and if they see the power of confronting that past and present as a precursor to ending Black state-sanctioned violence, then at least theoretically they will work with the EJI and other similar organizations to promote meaningful change. Once people understand that lynching was an

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<sup>272</sup> This collective addressing acknowledges that all Black people were meant to be impacted by the terror, not only those lynched.

<sup>273</sup> That is, local governments can reconcile for their historic part in lynching history regardless of whether the national government makes wholesale amends.

<sup>274</sup> The degree of the terror depended on many factors, such as visibility, torture methods, publicity.

<sup>275</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 67.

oppressive tactic used to control and punish Black people, and if lynching is linked to modern oppressions of Black people, then visitors can see that Black oppression (trauma) has not truly ended, only taken on new forms.<sup>276</sup>

It seems likely such a critical mass is accumulating. From opening in April 2018 to the publication of *Time Magazine*'s article citing the memorial as one of the best places to visit worldwide in 2018, over 100,000 people visited the site.<sup>277</sup> As of September 2019, over 600,000 visitors toured the memorial and museum sites, leading the city to award the sites with Attraction of the Year for boosting the local economy.<sup>278</sup> One must wonder how many more individuals would visit the memorial given awareness, time, and funding. As Wells-Barnett argued, “[t]he people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press.”<sup>279</sup> The NMPJ receives a lot of press, and the site has been so popular that the EJI has since expanded their commemorative offerings by opening additional sites nearby.

In conjunction with the EJI's other work, the memorial attempts to intervene in and end the trend of Black brutality in America through critical thinking supported by historical awareness and prompted via emotional affect. “Only by telling the truth about the age of racial terror and by collectively reflecting on this period and its legacy can we hope that our present-day conversations about racial exclusion and inequality – and any policies designed to address

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<sup>276</sup> Just as brutality against former enslaved only ended under the name of slavery after 1965, but prevailed in new forms.

<sup>277</sup> Merrill Fabry, “World’s Greatest Places: The National Memorial for Peace and Justice.” *Time Magazine*. 2019. Accessed Apr. 14, 2020. It is unclear when this article was published, but my guess is early 2019 since it highlights 2018’s best attractions.

<sup>278</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, “Legacy Museum and National Memorial Named Alabama Tourism’s 2019 Attraction of the Year,” *Equal Justice Initiative*, Sept. 1, 2019. Accessed July 2020. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/news/2019-08-30/legacy-museum-and-national-memorial-named-alabama-tourisms-2019-attraction-year>

<sup>279</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Southern Horrors,” 22.

these issues – will be accurate, thoughtful, and informed.”<sup>280</sup> The EJI believes the stories we tell matter because only true stories can lead to “informed” and “thoughtful” reflection, reflections which must precede meaningful change.

We might think of the NMPJ as an extension of the historical archive on American lynchings. Tonia Sutherland interrogates historical archives with the goal of restorative justice, and asks of archives: “[w]hy have American archives—through appraisal and other practices—extended amnesty to perpetrators of hate by refusing to document human rights abuses?”<sup>281</sup> If we view commemorative spaces like the NMPJ as an extension of or perhaps another form of archives, since they document and showcase history, then we might ask this question of memorials: why are there no memorials beside this one created in 2018 to commemorate lynchings broadly?<sup>282</sup> As suggested earlier, perhaps this is related to the failure of the national government to sanction such a memorial, to fail to lead the way toward restorative justice.

Perhaps it is also related to educational failures: maybe too few Americans are willing to learn the full history of brutality toward Black people, or perhaps our education system does not consistently tell accurate accounts of slavery that include all major perspectives (that of enslavers/lynchers, the enslaved/lynched, anti-slavery/lynching activists, and bystanders). These may not be the only or primary reasons Black oppression remains in our nation. What is clear is that it does remain, historical sources demonstrate its linkage to past atrocities (slavery and lynching), and the fostering of historical consciousness and fair historical memories throughout the U.S. may help continue to pave the way toward a more just society.

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<sup>280</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 67.

<sup>281</sup> Tonia Sutherland, “Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice,” in “Critical Archival Studies,” eds. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>282</sup> Per the EJI, most commemorations to Black citizens celebrate Civil Rights leaders and events, and few commemorate abuses to Black people after slavery ended. Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 66.

Another massive reason our nation has still failed to honor lynching victims is because it has been preoccupied with the memorialization of their oppressors; Confederate monuments and flags still abound in public spaces across the nation, though they have started coming down in the last decades due to public demand. Confederate memorials, including the Confederate flag, naming sites after Confederate actors, and statuary, are intentional symbols of terror toward Black people. This explains why the majority were erected or reemerged<sup>283</sup> following the end of Reconstruction, coinciding with the establishment of segregation and a resurgence of the KKK (from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1920s), and during the Civil Rights movement in the 1950-60s.<sup>284</sup> The removal or recontextualization of Confederate monuments along with the construction of counter monuments such as the NMPJ that correct mythological American histories around slavery and lynching are steps toward shifting the national mindset around Black oppression.<sup>285</sup>

Stevenson and his organization believe lynching commemoration sites have “the power to end the silence and inaction that have compounded [the] psycho-social trauma [Black people experience in America] and to begin the process of recovery.”<sup>286</sup> Just as lynchings were symbols of terror supporting white supremacy, anti-lynching memorials and monuments are symbols of equality and restorative justice; they stand as visual responses to racist oppression. Instead of

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<sup>283</sup> In the case of flags, which existed before these periods.

<sup>284</sup> American Historical Association, “AHA Statement on Confederate Monuments,” *American Historical Association*. Accessed Jan. 2021. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2017/aha-statement-on-confederate-monuments>; Southern Poverty Law Center, “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*. Accessed Jan. 2021. <https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>

<sup>285</sup> Historical and modern backlash to Black protest for rights has proven this: the erection of Confederate monuments after Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement, and Trump’s use of military forces in reaction to civilian protests around the country this year.

<sup>286</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 65.

littering a landscape with hate and terror, though, they color it with the truth of equality and the intention for and belief in justice.

### **Ethnography, Memory, & History**

The first observation a visitor might make when entering the NMPJ is that it is self-guided. The self-guided nature lends itself to reconciliation and traumatic healing in a few ways. Upon entering the grounds, visitors see the memorial atop the hill, but to get to it they must walk up a pathway lined with sculptures of a group of enslaved people on one side and information about slavery and lynching on the walls of the other. This introduction to the memorial allows visitors to either pass or digest information on slavery and lynching at their own pace. No tour guide labors to narrate any of the site, and visitors are instead left to do the heavy lifting of self-education (or not). According to Azie Mira Dungey, an actress who portrayed Martha Washington's slave at a living history museum, who also created and plays Lizzie Mae on *Ask a Slave*, hundreds of museum visitors daily would inquire about being enslaved, and she often felt frustrated and emotional as a result – especially knowing that oppression was still the norm for Black citizens.<sup>287</sup> Since tours of NMPJ are self-guided, no interpreter/guide/actor assumes the emotional burden of education and no trauma is further inflicted.<sup>288</sup>

Visitors are confronted with the vastness of racial terror lynchings as they encounter the hanging steel monuments at the top of the hill, the highest point of the memorial space; this placement ensures the symbolic lynched 'bodies' are always on display, mimicking the intentional display of bodies by their brutalizers. Yet, they are not on display to instill fear as they were by lynchers; they are on display to educate about the immorality of lynching and to

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<sup>287</sup> Azie Mira Dungey, "About Azie," *Ask a Slave: The Web Series*, Accessed 2020. <http://www.askaslave.com/about-azie.html>

<sup>288</sup> If the visitor wants more information on slavery and lynching, the Legacy Museum provides it a short distance and free shuttle ride away.

remind visitors that Black people are resilient. They are still fighting for equality and demanding to be seen despite their oppressive history.



*Figure 4: Corten steel markers*

Further, the abstract nature of the steel ‘bodies’ does not reproduce the violence nor the same spectacle that characterized many of the lynchings, which minimizes the arousal of negative emotions in Black viewers. These negative emotions surrounding lynching were additional historical forms of trauma, “intensified by a culture of silence about racial violence that grew out of the same systemic terror that produced racial violence. In many ways, this fear

survives and the culture of fear endures.”<sup>289</sup> By refusing to reproduce the fear or other anxieties that might arise from seeing literal lynched bodies by utilizing abstract form, the EJI minimizes the odds that the education process will further inflict trauma on Black people.

Abstract representation also acts as a restorative measure to the spectacle lynchings that were used for entertainment, further humiliating the victims, in addition to inciting tacit fear and maintaining white supremacy. Given this historical intent, traditional statuary could recreate that spectacle and ensuing trauma and potentially retraumatize Black viewers, playing into the historic goal of lynchers. Therefore, abstract lynched bodies are used at this site to “ameliorate [the] work’s sense of mimetic witness”<sup>290</sup> or to remediate the lynched bodies for ‘safer’ witnessing; the memories of the lynched live on through their names engraved on the steel markers and are thus honored, but without duplication of the spectacle and overt violence used to dehumanize and terrorize victims in the past. Although their lynchings were a form of disembodiment and humiliation, this memorial reembodies and honors their memory by presenting whole steel markers with whole names when known. The rectangular steel markers for every county where lynching occurred are all the same size, no matter how many were lynched in each county. This is symbolic of all Black lives being equal.

In this way, the EJI embraces the notion some historians and museum scholars have espoused that literal representations of lynching victims, such as photographs, can cause further trauma, especially without effective contextualization. Lynching photographs have been used by different parties historically: the lynchers and bystanders used them as souvenirs and trophies; the NAACP used them as evidence of brutality; museums and exhibition spaces have used them

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<sup>289</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, 69.

<sup>290</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 10

for educational purposes. Each use has its own limitations. For example, the NAACP used of a photo of Rubin Stacy's 1935 lynching in an anti-lynching fundraising leaflet.<sup>291</sup> The leaflet relies on spectacle to raise money for anti-lynching efforts, but different from that the lynchers and lynching photographers wielded. The NAACP does not want to incite hate and perpetuate white supremacy; instead, the NAACP aims for sympathy and sorrow. The sorrow is not for Stacy, the victim, but for the white children witnessing his murder. "Do not look at the Negro" but "look at the seven white children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right?"<sup>292</sup>

Historically, lynchers and bystanders often used lynching photographs to instill terror in black citizens and keep them 'in their place,' "ensur[ing] black audiences were aware of the strength of white supremacy and the costs of violating the boundaries of the racial order."<sup>293</sup> The NAACP uses a lynching photograph here to instill a different type of fear, fear of white moral corruption. In particular, the organization wants whites to fear the moral corruption of white children at the hands of white adults, and not black men; instead of fearing sexual corruption from black men as the lynchers suggest white women should, the NAACP demonstrates the real corruption that white girls – eventual women – will experience because of lynchings themselves. This is a clever and highly emotionally charged argument that relies on photographs of the

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<sup>291</sup> It's unclear if this leaflet was published in 1935 or 1936: Markovitz provides the photo of the lynching itself and dates it 1935 but does not date the leaflet. See Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Apel and Smith include part of the leaflet including the image and date it circa 1936. See Apel, Dora, and Smith, Shawn Michelle. *Lynching Photographs. Defining Moments in American Photography*; V.2. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. The website hosting the leaflet, Yale University Library, dates it 1936.

<sup>292</sup> NAACP, "NAACP Rubin Stacey Anti-lynching Flier," *Yale University Library Digital Collections*. 1936. Accessed Jan. 2021. <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10834052>

<sup>293</sup> Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, xvi.



lynched body; however, the NAACP also must grapple with the ramifications of using a photograph originally intended to inflict ongoing harm on the Black population.

The EJI avoids this issue of using images taken by the lynchers entirely at NMPJ. Though some curators, or entities like the NAACP as seen above, have used lynching photographs as “shock[s] to thought,” according to Roger Simon, this can be counterproductive as these shocks can lead to “traumatic disruption that leads to the extended abandonment of thought.”<sup>294</sup> Instead of risking retraumatizing Black visitors by displaying lynched bodies realistically, and instead of shocking visitors into emotional apathy, the NMPJ attempts to harness emotional affect, defined as “an unqualified sensory intensity that is felt straight away [but] not always immediately nameable or understandable. [As such, it] operates prior to the conscious articulation of specific emotions.” The viewer is not told or prompted to feel any particular emotions surrounding the pain of the lynched, just to feel as they will and “begin to come to terms with the felt presence of that pain in the present. [As such, affect] is a force to thought as to what is required in order to live one’s life as if the lives of other people mattered.”<sup>295</sup> Affect might lead to any number of emotions: empathy for victims, anger toward injustice, shame for complicity. Any of these emotions could prompt visitors to actions supporting the EJI’s reform work, and none will likely lead the visitor to feel they have been manipulated into feeling anything specific.<sup>296</sup>

To foster *meaningful* action, the memorial must prompt viewers to look at the symbolic bodies (steel markers) with different intentions than the lynch mobs. One way the memorial does this is by presenting the first steel markers at eye level, almost as if the viewer is looking at each

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<sup>294</sup> Roger Simon, *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. (Albany: State University of New York, 2014), 176.

<sup>295</sup> Simon, *A Pedagogy of Witnessing*, 179-80.

<sup>296</sup> Even though, of course, all commemorative sites rely of manipulation, since all framing is manipulative (term used without negative, malignant connotations).

human(s) represented by the marker face-to-face, as equals and with reverence. Gradually, the markers are suspended higher and higher, until eventually the visitor walks underneath them. “As you walk through the memorial, the orientation of the hanging monuments changes from eye level to overhead, evoking the way many lynching victims were hanged, often in public spaces. ‘They lifted these bodies up as a statement to the entire African-American community,’ Stevenson says. ‘They wanted to lift up this violence, this terror, this tragedy for others to see.’”<sup>297</sup> The EJI wants visitors to see the lynching victims, but for alternate purposes – to acknowledge the atrocity of the acts, to grapple with the meaning of living in a nation that espouses freedom without doling it out equally to all, to atone...and to end the violence. The memorial seeks justice for the historic victims and national healing for still impacted by this historical trauma. That justice requires action, and action requires shifting mindsets. Historical awareness can aid in that shift and is infused throughout the memorial.

Although the site casts racial terror lynching as a societal phenomenon and not individual acts of terror, it provides some varied reasons for lynchings as visitors proceed through the memorial: Robert Mallard was lynched in Georgia in 1948 for exercising his Constitutional right to vote, Elbert Williams was lynched in Tennessee in 1940 because he registered Black voters through the NAACP, and Ernest Green and Charlie Lang were lynched in Mississippi in 1942 because a white girl said they were ““threatening””: they were 14 years old.<sup>298</sup> Given the right for Black citizens to vote, the right to register voters, and the right for teenagers to be in public spaces without harassment and accusation, the only logic to the murders is their use as a brutal terror tactic. Visitors are given these facts, which help them see the varied justifications to the

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<sup>297</sup> Debbie Elliott, “New Lynching Memorial Is a Space ‘To Talk About All of That Anguish.’”

<sup>298</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, “Placards with Examples of Reasons for Lynchings,” Visited Nov. 2019.

same end, illegal murder in forwarding white supremacy, and the space to contemplate this terrorism while sitting on the series of wooden steps toward the end of the main part of the site. To promote action against Black oppression, the memorial must not overwhelm visitors to the point of shutting down, as stated previously. The steps for respite and contemplation allow viewers a break if needed. The calming sounds of water from the fountain nearby soothe the mind, helping ease nerves and acting as a further symbol of the lynchings but also of healing: the water trickling down the wall of the memorial evokes the bloodied bodies of the victims of terror, but also the washing away of the stain of that blight as the nation reckons with its ugly past.

Though not the most visually stunning part of the memorial, the most powerful part of the site in terms of promoting action is the adjacent grassy area that holds replicas of every marker in the memorial: the “memory bank.”<sup>299</sup> The point of these replicas is for counties to willingly claim theirs and begin or continue local conversions – and ultimately healing – around lynchings.<sup>300</sup> Claiming one’s marker is also a step toward acknowledgement of and accountability for local history. This part of the site is especially effective at harnessing individual affect; it might arouse guilt or shame in those who find their county marker is unclaimed, and maybe pride in others whose county marker has been claimed. It also provides visitors with a tangible way to participate in the remembrance of lynching after their visit: if viewers agree that lynching must be remembered accurately in every space it occurred, then this part of site shows them how few

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<sup>299</sup> It is unclear how many have been claimed by counties. The majority seem to remain onsite, including the marker for Montgomery County, where the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Legacy Museum, and EJI reside.

<sup>300</sup> Elliott, “New Lynching Memorial Is A Space 'To Talk about all of that Anguish.'”

counties have yet to claim their marker.<sup>301</sup> This may lead viewers to take ownership of their county, when applicable, and urge it to claim its marker.

In terms of strategies to amass anti-lynching action, logic has historically not been as effective at ending lynching and Black oppression as emotional appeals, which is why the NAACP believed using the spectacle of lynching photographs as well as emotion against the lynchers was an effective way to combat lynching. An example of an emotional anti-lynching appeal comes from a 1922 advertisement the NAACP took out in Washington D.C.'s *The Evening Star*. In it, the NAACP argues that lynching in America should end because it is akin to burning people at the stake, which has long been seen as barbaric in Western culture. The ad proclaims in bold font that the U.S. is the “only land on earth where human beings are burned at the stake,” and shares that twenty-eight Black people have been burned by mobs between 1918-21. Once the NAACP has the attention of viewers, they proceed to state reasons many Black people have been lynched, including the common justification: rape. This is odd, says the ad, because 83 women have been lynched but a common reason for lynching Black men has been to protect white women from Black rape.<sup>302</sup> Therefore, why have so many Black women been lynched? And why have “the lynchers go[ne] unpunished?” The answer is that lynching is racial terrorism and was meant to keep Black people ‘in line’ out of fear of what could happen if they lived freely. According to the ad, Americans should see lynching as “the shame of America” and work to “remedy” it.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> The memorial does not provide information on how and if lynchings have been memorialized in other ways in each country where it occurred, though, so it is unclear if any counties have not claimed markers because they have already commemorated lynching, or due to associated costs of transporting the marker, or other reasons.

<sup>302</sup> NAACP, *Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., 23 Nov. 1922, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1922-11-23/ed-1/seq-34/>.

<sup>303</sup> NAACP, *Evening Star*.

In the same way that lynching was harnessed as an emotional weapon to keep Black people terrorized emotionally and keep them in line bodily, the NAACP attempts to harness rage and shame of Americans in this advertisement to galvanize them to act against lynching by supporting the Dyer Anti-lynching Bill in Congress. As discussed above in terms of the dynamic aspect of the memorial, the EJI emulates the NAACP's use of emotional affect in their memorial to propel visitors to support modern anti-lynching and anti-oppression movements.

Sculptures included after the memory bank continue to fuse education with eliciting emotional affect that will inspire action; visitors follow a path that winds past the Ida B. Wells Memorial Grove, an alcove of abstract sculpture and a plaque with a Wells quote: "Our country's national crime is lynching."<sup>304</sup> This reminds visitors to remember that the county lynching markers comprising the main aspect of the memorial fuse together as one massive national crime and tragedy, which a nation espousing the importance of law should address. Lynching as a huge problem with current ramifications is reinforced here.

As visitors progress along the path, they encounter another sculpture of Black women by Dana King, which commemorates the local women who boycotted buses before and during the Montgomery Bus Boycott to challenge segregation on public transit. The plaque shares with visitors that they "are standing in the neighborhood where modern civil rights activism in America was born."<sup>305</sup> These sculptures to Wells and other Black women advocating for equality demonstrate the action taken by the Black community to end their oppression, actions that led to the 1960s Civil Rights movement. Despite these gains, Black citizens still suffer oppression in this country: which is one reason this memorial exists. The memorial shares the long history of

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<sup>304</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, "Ida B. Wells Memorial Grove Plaque."

<sup>305</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, "Montgomery Bus Boycott Plaque." Visited Nov. 2019.

anti-lynching and anti-oppression advocacy by Black individuals and organizations to inspire visitors to contemplate what the Black experience in America might be if all citizens, not primarily Black ones, fought for social and legal justice for Black lives. What would happen if this nation demonstrated that all lives are worth protecting and healing? The EJI believes that would lead to meaningful reform and uses this site to aid their reform work.

This part of the memorial also offers a more uplifting story of redemption to visitors to combat the history of death and destruction. In the face of oppression, Black citizens and their allies have in the past and continue currently to work toward equality and meaningful freedom. The statues of women fighting for Civil Rights prove that lynching and its ancestor slavery did not kill the Black spirit, not can they forever brutalize the Black body and mind: *if* citizens remain dedicated to fighting oppression.

## **Conclusion**

Some people are too entrenched in their biases, too stubborn, or too unwilling to do the self-reflection to determine where they need to learn and grow to become anti-racist and genuine allies, making reform difficult if education and change is only sought on an individual level. This is why Wells-Barnett argued for the necessity for legal action backed by public sentiment, or change on the national level:

The strong arm of the law must be brought to bear upon lynchers in severe punishment, but this cannot and will not be done unless a healthy public sentiment demands and sustains such action. The men and women in the South who disapprove of lynching and remain silent on the perpetration of such outrages, are particeps criminis, accomplices, accessories before and after the fact, equally guilty with the actual lawbreakers who

would not persist if they did not know that neither the law nor militia would be employed against them.<sup>306</sup>

Silence will do nothing to solve Black inequality, nor will it lead to radical racial reconciliation in this country; silence does nothing by allow the harm of lynching to continue, further traumatizing Black people and screaming at them that their pain is irrelevant. The EJI refuses to be complicit in this silence so erected the NMPJ to educate and inspire visitors to join in their refusal. The breaking of silence via education and historical consciousness, such as through commemoration, along with meaningful action (reforms) will lead to long-term change if a critical mass of citizens agree it is necessary. The NMPJ aims to continue the tradition started by Black activists like Wells and the NAACP<sup>307</sup> to educate the public on past crimes toward Black citizens, foster emotional affect on account of the injustice toward some citizens despite the nation's lofty ideals of equality, and work toward meaningful social and legal change. Meaningful action can take a variety of forms. Wells-Barnett and modern-day activists argue that all citizens can advocate for equality with their wallet. Wells-Barnett believed "The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South. A thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution. The white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities."<sup>308</sup>

Visitors to the NMPJ are taking one actionable step by visiting the site and accumulating deeper historical education. They can further act after their visit by educating their social circle on the knowledge amassed during on site. They can also purchase goods from the site shops to

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<sup>306</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Southern Horrors," 20.

<sup>307</sup> I should add that the NAACP was also composed of white people, though its work was on behalf of "colored people."

<sup>308</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Southern Horrors," 21.

support the EJI, or make a direct donation to the organization.<sup>309</sup> And for those unable to venture to Montgomery to visit in person, the EJI's report on lynching, which is detailed, is available as a free PDF via their website or can be purchased in hard copy online; the EJI's site also boasts educational videos on systemic racism, an interactive lynching map in collaboration with Google that corresponds to the one in the Legacy Museum, and links to local organizations where individuals can get involved in social justice work. No matter one's economic situation, the EJI makes their memorial's main message accessible to all: Black lives matter, they have made this country what it is today, and they have not been treated accordingly. And if enough of the historically privileged will set aside their biases, embrace re-education, support Black voices, and demand public accountability and meaningful change, then we can remake our nation into a liberatory, just society.

One must also wonder if the rise of popular sites like the NMPJ will prompt the national government to finally hold lynchers accountable. In 2005 the Senate (but not Congress) issued an apology to victims of lynchings for their loss of rights as citizens and their descendants for their failure to enact anti-lynching legislation.<sup>310</sup> This apology rings hollow since it was only given by one chamber of Congress, and as it consists of ephemeral words and not long-lasting legal commitment. Congress has still not enacted anti-lynching legislation, nor has it supported the commemoration of lynching like it has other atrocities, such as the Holocaust.<sup>311</sup> Symbolically, at least, Congress and by extension the national government still refuses to address the historical

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<sup>309</sup> Gift shops with a modest collection of EJI merchandise and other related goods are located at both sites.

<sup>310</sup> "Senate Resolution 39," "A Resolution Apologizing to the Victims of Lynching and the Descendants of those Victims for the Failure of the Senate to Enact Anti-lynching Legislation," June 13, 2005. Accessed July 2020.

<sup>311</sup> Anti-lynching legislation is currently up for debate in Congress. The Emmitt Till Antilynching Act sponsored by Representative Bobby Rush of Illinois was proposed and passed in the House, but has stalled by Representative Rand Paul of Kentucky in the Senate due to dissent over the definition of lynching. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/politics/rand-paul-anti-lynching-bill-senate.html>



trauma enacted over and over by lynching's legacy. The national government may refuse to enact meaningful lynching legislation, but the American public does not have to stand with their government in complicity. Citizens can work with organizations like the EJI to demand action and accountability and finally end the historical trauma and brutal legacy of racial terror lynching.

## **Conclusion**

The USHMM, Whitney, and the NMPJ all commemorate atrocity in very distinct ways and for distinct aims, which makes sense given they commemorate diverse atrocities. As a result of the uniqueness of each atrocity and every site that commemorates atrocities (not only these three sites), it is dangerous to generalize too broadly about these sites. Broad claims that hold true for each site are that all three sites fuse history and memory to share narratives about their specific atrocity; each site caters to an American audience primarily given the American locations of the sites and the chosen narratives conveyed at each site; the content at each site is shaped by its institutional history, so to understand why a site is framed as it is one must understand how the site came into existence;<sup>312</sup> and each site harnesses emotional affect to help achieve its overall goals.

The USHMM planners hope visitors remember the Holocaust so they can recognize signs of oppression as it builds and intervene, and therefore stop similar atrocities; the USHMM planners also hope the site's memorialization of the Jewish victims ensures the Nazis did not succeed in wiping out the memory of this group. Due to the selective framing of this site, however, the USHMM also memorializes a specific memory of the role Americans played in the Holocaust: the memory of Americans as liberators first and foremost. This contributes to the site's celebration of America and sanctioning of the myth that American and its people are exceptional. It also potentially absolves Americans from more fully owning their role in perpetuating atrocity.

Whitney commemorates the atrocity of slavery, specifically at its own plantation site, to highlight the centrality of the enslaved's role on the plantation and therefore to bring the slave to

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<sup>312</sup> This seems further evidence that history always matters: it always frames present existence.

the center of the story in a move toward restorative justice, but also to distinguish itself as a site different than the plantations surrounding it. Even if other sites follow suit, and some have, and foreground the slave's role, Whitney can claim it was the forerunner and maintain its status as an innovator. This site claims to tell visitors the comprehensive story of slavery and it instead shares a selective story of extreme brutality and oppression. It leaves out aspects of slavery that do not fit into its chosen narrative, therefore undermining its own goals. Instead of a historical site, Whitney is a memory site that is informed by history. The memories it conveys effectively showcase many of the horrors of slavery and hold the slaveowners and other participants accountable for their oppressions, while simultaneously neglecting to share the many ways slaves exerted agency and led lives despite oppression; and while neglecting to show differences in the enslaved experience over time and space. It falls short of prompting visitors to consider their own modern culpability in the continued oppression of Black people. The site leaves the impression that slavery is over, and it is in name, but neglects to share the ways that the racist legacy of slavery is far from dead. If this site is indeed interested in restorative justice, which it claims to be given, among other reasons, its promise to share the story that was slavery, and not solely in distinguishing itself among other tourist attractions, it needs to include a fuller story of slavery...one that includes how the story has not really ended but continues in different forms today.

The NMPJ could act as a model for the USHMM and Whitney: it does not romanticize the role of Americans in perpetuating injustice, but instead holds them fully accountable and asks them to own their actions and beliefs moving forward and wield them toward legislative reform and traumatic healing for Black people. It also uses history broadly, not just selecting more titillating historical memories, to show the enormity of the lynching problem in the U.S. between

the 1880s and 1950s, as well as the aims of lynching in supporting white supremacy and denying Black assertions of citizenship and betterment, and the complicity of all parties involved (all levels of government as well as non-governmental actors). The site demonstrates the responses from the Black community and other anti-lynching activists.

The NMPJ inspires hope in ways neither the Whitney nor USHMM do. While the USHMM inspires visitors to see that someone else (primarily Nazi Germans) in a faraway land hurt Jews and we should aspire not to be like them, and while the Whitney inspires visitors to feel awful slavery existed but relieved it is no more, the NMPJ shows visitors that lynching was a descendent of slavery and its root – racism – is still alive and thriving in the U.S. Therefore, the NMPJ uses history and historical artifacts to educate visitors about their heritage, to demonstrate the horrors and contradictions within that oppressive heritage, and then to show the continued legacy of that heritage to prompt actions to help the EJI bring justice to Black people via the eradication<sup>313</sup> of structural and individual racism.

Each site uses narrative to help achieve their goals, and each shapes their site content using frames of remembrance to guide visitors to see history in specific ways. These narrative framing devices are useful ways to help history stick in visitors' minds: humans understand themselves, their role in society, and their place in the world via narrative. And when trauma is inflicted on individuals or collectives, narrative can help people make sense of the origins of the trauma as well as guide them through the trauma toward healing. Narrative has been proven so powerful in the traumatic healing process that three U.S. academic institutions offer graduate programs in narrative and its relationship to health for medical and social welfare practitioners.

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<sup>313</sup> In an ideal world eradication is the goal. We live in a less-than-ideal world, so it might be more realistic to say the EJI hopes to end racism but amelioration is a worthy short-term goal.

Maryland University of Integrative Health offers a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Narrative Health teaches students how to use “narrative as part of the healing process and [how] to use writing and appreciative inquiry methodologies to achieve health and wellness” and the program is underpinned by research showing that “developing a coherent narrative is necessary for the patient to be able to develop the sense of wholeness that can lead to healing.”<sup>314</sup>

Narrative plays an important role in truth and reconciliation commissions, whose goals include giving victims of atrocities a voice and forum to use it, revealing the many truths that led to the atrocity, and healing the trauma linked to the atrocity. In an article for *Politico*, Sarah Souli argues that the U.S. is in need of a truth commission to address slavery and its legacy. Although small-scale truth commissions have occurred in the U.S., such as the 1980 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians after WWII, none have occurred on a larger scale in the U.S. I.e. no commissions have been assembled on a national level to address issues such as slavery and lynching. Activists interviewed by *Politico* believe this failure is the result of political partisanship and lack of buy-in from politicians, refusal to look outside the U.S. at the relative success of other truth commissions on mass atrocities for how to heal traumas in the U.S., the U.S.’s long history of perpetuating injustices (versus a singular injustice to focus on), and widespread racism.

Two recent U.S. commissions provide hope that one day the federal government might see fit to address the legacy of slavery and help its citizens heal from its continued violence and trauma in a widespread fashion. The 2004 Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission looked into the lynchings of five protesters killed during a 1979 anti-KKK rally; the commission

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<sup>314</sup> “Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Narrative Health,” *Maryland University of Integrative Medicine*. 2021. Accessed Feb. 2021. <https://muih.edu/academics/narrative-health/post-baccalaureate-certificate-in-narrative-health/>

was only able to offer a space for the sharing of stories and truths as well as a 500-page report, since the city of Greensboro's City Council would not support the commission in its work. The city council offered a statement of regret but nothing more to survivors. In 2019 Maryland established the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission with support from its state legislature. This commission is ongoing and has held public meetings virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>315</sup>

There is no guarantee that any single measure, including a national truth commission, could end racial oppression in the U.S. However, there is evidence that education and awareness must precede meaningful change of any kind, and commemorative spaces play a role in raising that awareness. There is also evidence that historical narrative can help heal trauma, as can the work of truth commissions. In lieu of national truth and reconciliation committees in the U.S. addressing the impact of slavery and the impact of lynching, perhaps commemorative sites to atrocity like the NMPJ, Whitney, and the USHMM are among the best options for addressing historic atrocities and helping those impacted heal from the continued wounds the past inflicts. These sites alone will never be enough to create meaningful change, but they might be the catalysts needed to keep alive the spirit of resistance that the victims of oppressions like the Holocaust, slavery, and lynching have been working to address for the last few centuries.

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<sup>315</sup> Sarah Souli. "The Big Idea: Does America Need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission?" *Politico Magazine Online*. Aug. 16, 2020. Accessed Feb. 2021.

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