

Taking the Reparatory Turn at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice

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This article suggests that communication scholars take the reparatory turn in critical public memory studies. Using a case study based on the reparatory efforts of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), we critique the affective materialization taking place at Montgomery's National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ) in Montgomery, Alabama. We argue that the NMPJ invites visitors to experience both the magnitude of historical lynchings as well as the affective afterlife of racial terrorist pasts that are linked to those historical lynchings. Consistent with the EJI's goals, the NMPJ's reparatory rhetorics are aimed at revising lynching histories in race-conscious ways so that visitors from some of America's 800 counties might acknowledge, apologize, or even consider paying reparations for past lynchings as well as present carceral injustices.

Keywords: reparations, countermonument, public memory, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, racial terrorism

The emotional journey greeting those who visit Montgomery, Alabama's National Memorial for Peace and Justice (NMPJ) begins when they first enter the memorial. They are confronted by a moving sculpture that displays the breakup of seven members of a family who were chained and enslaved. The sculpture, provided by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, shows one of the enslaved people carrying an infant as they reach out for another person, a shackled individual who is about to be taken away from the rest of the group. Yawn (2018) contends that this portion of the memorial allows visitors to reflect on the experiences of the "12 million Africans" who were kidnapped during the transatlantic slave-trade era, and there is little doubt that this particular site of memory looks nothing like the more uplifting, and reconciliatory, civil rights commemorative museums or memorials such as the National Civil Rights Memorial (down the street from the NMPJ), the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Atlanta, GA, or the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (Yawn, 2018, para. 10; see Blair & Michel, 2000; Gallagher, 1999).

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Work on planning some of the features of the NMPJ began in 2010, at about the same time that those who supervised the collection of funds for these spaces—the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) staff¹—were putting together some of the first textual accounts of 21st-century chronicles of U.S. lynching pasts. When this memorial opened to the public, in April 2018, visitors learned that the traditional stories told about the major role the Ku Klux Klan had played in carrying out lynchings in America papered over the complicity of ordinary U.S. citizens—including sheriffs, lawmakers, and countless others—who attended the mass lynchings of more than 4,400 individuals between the end of the Reconstruction years and the beginning of the Cold War.

It is our contention that the EJI, instead of celebrating 1960s race-neutral civil rights victories, built the NMPJ and the nearby Legacy Museum so Americans could confront these lynching pasts as a prelude to real reconciliation and restorative justice. In the same ways that the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe was intended to be pedagogical (Young, 2016), the NMPJ was designed to educate future generations about the “six million black people” who fled “the South as refugees and exiles” as they confronted “racial terror lynchings” (Wright, 2018, para. 7). “Racial terror lynching” was a term used by the EJI to refer to those “acts of violence that were done with complete impunity, where there was no risk of prosecution” (Song, 2016, para. 2).

As we explain in more detail below, the NMPJ efforts at countermonumentality were reparatory in nature, in that visitors to these Montgomery sites of memory are encouraged to believe that owning up to partially forgotten lynching pasts will serve as a prelude to acknowledgment of the genocidal nature of enduring racial terror processes that still affect the lives of millions of people who suffer from mass incarceration.

The EJI could have approached the historicizing of many of these lynchings in classical or traditional ways, but instead we would argue that the members of this organization, including Bryan Stevenson, were more interested in using sculptures, descending walkways, hanging steel beams, and other material objects to create a sense of what we will be calling affective materialization. By this, we mean the objects the EJI used to build this dark tourism structure were purposely selected and positioned so visitors to the NMPJ would feel as though they were witnessing historical lynchings. This, we contend, is a unique form of race-conscious monumentalization and memorialization that is reparatory in nature in that visitors are encouraged to do something about marking these lynching pasts long after they leave Montgomery.

This attempt at creating affective moods through memorializing materials was not accidental. Civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson,² and his EJI, used private funds to build the NMPJ,³ and this “national” site of memory etches into stone and metal some of the race-conscious ideologies that have been circulated by the EJI and its supporters. At the same time that visitors were supposed to applaud the appearance of

¹ The EJI was formed in 1993 by African American public interest lawyers.

² For an excellent overview of the linking of the twin Montgomery commemorative lynching structures with today’s legal challenges for African Americans, see Stevenson (2017).

³ To help publicize the opening of the NMPJ, the EJI orchestrated conferences, panel presentations, and visits from well-known politicians, civic leaders, musicians, and other artists who helped with the inaugural ceremony.

markers for lynching victims, they were also being invited to see how some of these materials were being used to help Montgomery become a multicultural city rather than a city surrounded by Confederate statuary that seemed to celebrate slave cultures or the wealth that came from slave trades. MASS Design Group, the Boston firm that designed the memorial, helped set the tone for NMPJ visitors when it created facilities that would aid those who wanted public spaces for critical reflection, respect for the lynched, and confessions. Part of the affective materiality that was swirling around the NMPJ involved countering the emotive nature of the Confederate memorials that left generations "burdened by iconography" (Stevenson, quoted in Sisson, 2018, para. 27).

From a methodological standpoint, our critical analyses of these unique NMPJ spaces and places are based on a "rhetorical pilgrimage" to the cradle of the civil rights movement in Montgomery as well as a critical rhetorical review of journalistic and academic coverage of these sites between 2016 and 2018. We will be claiming that this place of memory serves as an opening for public memory scholars to consider what we are calling the reparatory turn for critical public memory studies. By this we mean that materials that are a part of the NMPJ are used affectively to convince visitors that they, and other Americans, need to acknowledge, apologize, and perhaps even pay monetary reparations for racial terrorist activists that included lynching pasts.

Other scholars have also noticed national and international trends moving in the direction of this reparatory turn. For example, Hall (2018) argued that in light of England's bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, British scholars must consider the "possibilities of repair"—that included interventions that placed "the emphasis is on reconstituting the past, in ways that enable thinking about responsibility in the present" (p. 8). In that particular case, affective materialization came in the form of actual slave vessels, former British sites of slave trading, and abject objects of horror that were used to try and convince visitors of British dark tourism sites that perhaps the UK needed to apologize for slavery pasts.

In this article, we argue that the EJI's reparatory efforts are even more radical in nature, given that Bryan Stevenson and others in Montgomery want to use American acknowledgment of the magnitude of lynching pasts as an entrée point for discussions of mass incarceration or reparations. With this in mind, we begin our critique with a discussion of what we mean when we invite communication scholars to take the reparatory turn. We then analyze the reparatory rhetorics of the EJI and the material affectivity of the NMPJ as we consider how these spaces are used for historical revisionism, acknowledgement requests, apologies, and reparations conversations. Finally, we speculate on how future generations might react to the EJI's race-conscious efforts.

Taking the Reparatory Turn

When the NMPJ opened to the public in May 2018, staff writer for *The New York Times*, Campbell Robertson (2018), said, "There is nothing like it in the country," and that "is the point" (para. 6). We concur. In fact, we feel the NMPJ is so unique in its calls for restorative justice that it subtly attempts to cover subjects that are not usually linked to lynching pasts, such as acknowledgment of America's genocidal "racial terror" history or the need to rethink the ways that we conceptualize or document reparations.

From a critical communication vantage point, taking the reparatory turn means being conscious of the need for public memory scholarship to become interventionist in ways that aid the efforts of those who are trying to cope with the legacy of racial terrorism. Taking this turn also means adopting what Ono and Sloop (1992) once called a critical telos that is oriented toward the necessity of having motivated goals for critics exploring contentious public debates. In this case, it means being sensitive to the reparatory efforts of those who are using historical revisionism, or even affective materiality, as a form of instrumentalism to help “liberate” America from the amnesias that are related to half-forgotten lynching pasts.

Public memory scholarship has been moving in the direction of being reparatory with various calls for witnessing, studies of critical interventions, and critiques of postmodernist structures that look nothing like detached classical or modernist monuments or museums. For instance, in their studies of “places of public memory,” Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) mentioned how ideological, affective, or subjective forces could affect “experiential landscapes” (Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2006, p. 29). And in her study of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Gallagher (1999) underscored the importance of “reconciliation and regeneration rather than conflict and debate” in remembrances of the American civil rights movement (p. 318). We are convinced that the taking the reparatory turn would allow critics themselves to aid the cause of this reconciliation and regeneration.

In the case of the NMJP and Montgomery’s Legacy Museum, communication scholars take the reparatory turn when they see how public memory can be instrumentalized to raise consciousness about both forgotten lynching pasts and mass incarceration presents.

As Dickinson et al. (2006) argue in their analysis of the Indian Plains Museum, places of public memory can passively reinforce the very racial ideologies they should call into question through the passive “observational gaze,” which produces what they call “rhetorics of reverence,” that ultimately absolve social guilt associated with white colonial conquest (p. 28). If this is the case, should we not also acknowledge that there are times when places like the NMJP ought to be approached as an invitation to acknowledge fraught racialized pasts and lynching legacies? As Ore (2019) recently pointed out, the very nature of citizenship should involve presentist critiques of the enduring power of racism, and researchers were admonished to remember that they needed to demystify the “ideological code that haunts both physical and discursive” spaces (p. 112). This, we hold, is especially true for places of public memory.

Taking the reparatory turn at our current historical juncture—a period in time that has witnessed not only the attempted preservation of Confederate statuary but also Antifa (antifascist) clashes with White nationalists in places like Charlottesville—underscores the politicized nature of public memory work that will not go away.

To meet the demands of the EJI’s advocacies in Montgomery, we proffer a critical, and shamelessly political, study of how places and spaces of memory can serve as inventional resources for those who are interested in social justice pursuits. We find this especially pertinent in our era of the “Twitter presidency,” which circulates White supremacist rhetorics of White rage (Ott & Dickinson, 2019) and masculine victimhood (Johnson, 2017) and stirs racialized violence (see Perry, 2018). In times like these, critics are obligated to intervene as advocates for racial justice—namely, reparations—when studying racialized (and

deracialized) places of public memory. This has everything to do with social justice activism in the academy (see Báez & Ore, 2018; Frey & Hanan, 2020; Wanzer-Serrano, 2015).

Although various forms of reparatory justice would be of heuristic value in memory studies, some variants could focus on “beneficiaries” rather than “perpetrators” of dark and abusive pasts. These forms of reparatory justice analyses, argues Hall (2018), focus on “social justice” instead of retributive forms of behavior (p. 8). Hall (2018) has high hopes for this type of reparatory work when he asks, “Could re-thinking the past, taking responsibilities for its residues and legacies, be one way of challenging rightwing politics and imaging a different future?” (p. 8).

From both theoretical and praxiological standpoints, the move toward reparatory public memory efforts involves a two-step process. First, instead of dismissing the EJI’s talk of systematic American “racial terrorism,” genocidal practices, fraught lynching pasts, or links to present-day capital punishment activities, the critic would need to understand, and appreciate, the radicalness of the EJI’s conscious-raising efforts. This would mean contextualizing the EJI’s arguments to extend the work of critical race theory scholars in the law schools that, for years, have interrogated what Alexander (2012) calls “the New Jim Crow,” which maintains structures of inequality and mass incarceration behind race neutral, colorblind façades of equality (see also Delgado & Stefancic, 2005). Again, we would reference the work of other critical scholars in the field who are moving in the direction of recognizing, or acknowledging, the racial nature of some of these race-conscious critiques (see De La Garza & Ono, 2015, 2016).

The second—and perhaps more difficult—step that would need to be taken by those interested in taking the reparatory turn involves a willingness to provide more than just descriptive or prescriptive studies that stop short of critiquing the instrumental desires of those who put up memorials and museums or other acts of monumentalization. It would mean admitting that the critics who are involved in public memory work can also intervene in making known the radicalness of some instrumentalist positions that are missed by journalists, decision-makers, or laypersons who may only be familiar with just a few of the goals of those who put up memorials like the NMJP.

Critics can intervene by advancing the EJI’s arguments about the transgenerational effects of racial terrorism rather than watering down those messages by taking more popular stances that see these Montgomery spaces and places as mere accounts of those lynched between the 1870s and the early 1950s. As the EJI has noted, they are also interested in asking Americans to take the difficult step of acknowledging that racial terrorism persists, and that remembrances of lynching have affected the daily lives of those who lived through Jim Crow years, the Great Migration North, and the historical failures of passing antilynching legislation.

If organizations such as the National Communication Association are going to call for increased diversity and inclusion, and for studies of Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education Collective (PCARE; e.g., Báez & Ore, 2018; PCARE, 2017, then is not now also the time to take the reparatory turn and help the EJI with it peace, justice, mercy, reconciliation, and social justice efforts?

At the very least, taking the reparatory turn might help start conversations about the need to confront the effects of racialized histories at places of public memories. As Bacon (2003) noted in her analysis of the reparations debate, continued discourse about reparations can continue to “challenge traditional narratives” about our racialized past (p. 191). Before the advent of the EJI, however, those reparations efforts stalled. Perhaps now is the time to reenergize these debates by having critical communication scholars adopt reparatory readings of the NMPJ. This is why it is so crucial that critical communication scholars unpack the NMPJ’s affective materializations that are now encouraging so many to do something about both memories of lynching pasts as well as mass incarceration presents.

Affective Materialization at the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice

If place matters (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011), then the very sites that were chosen for the building of the twin lynching structures added even more layers of meaning for the pursuit of what the EJI and Stevenson have called American reconciliation and truth.⁴ Visitors who travel to the Legacy Museum will find that this building is located halfway between the site of a historical slave market—note on a massive brick display—and the train station and river dock that was used to transport arriving enslaved persons. The 11,000 square feet of the Legacy Museum were once used to imprison Blacks who were parts of slave trading Southern cultures. The Legacy Museum, with a subtitle of “From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration,” serves as an interactive, didactic center that recirculates many of the arguments and the visual materials that have been collected by the EJI. The museum uses a host of rhetorical and pedagogical techniques to teach visitors that by the beginning of the Civil War, Alabama had become one of the largest slave-owning states in America. Museum curators assembled first-person oral histories of the slave trade years, videographic materials, EJI research, and exhibits on lynching (Wright, 2018) so that those who may have walked over from the NMPJ see the evidence that supports the claims of those like Bryan Stevenson, who talk about the legacy of racial terrorism.

From a reparatory justice standpoint, visitors are encouraged to think about how Americans might provide redress for descendants of those who suffered from the legacy of racial terrorism, starting with slavery. The combination of slave-pen replicas, accounts from those formerly enslaved, and the acoustic registers used to convey the horrific sounds of the slave trade bombard the visitor’s senses as they witness what it was like to live in the capricious and precarious Jim Crow cultures.

By the time that visitors walk a few blocks and reach the middle of the nearby NMPJ, they realize that those who built this complex in Montgomery had used these six acres to produce a type of revisionist counterhistory, one that began with iconic images of the slave trade, included materials from the post-World War II civil rights era, and ended with displays that highlighted the contemporary issues that were

⁴ Place and space are used here relatively synonymously, given the ways that they each mutually articulate one another. As Dickinson and associates (2010) note, the two terms are neither oppositional nor equivalent. Wherein “a place that is bordered, specified, and locatable by being named is seen as different from open, undifferentiated, undersigned space” (p. 23). See De Certeau (2011).

faced by those Blacks who have to contend with 21st-century mass incarceration, disparate sentences, and excessive police brutality.

Each of the massive six-foot columns suspended over the heads of visitors at the permanent NMPJ represent the U.S. counties where documented lynchings took place. Each of the columns—which are architectural representations of hierarchal power relationships—are engraved with the names of some of the thousands of known victims of Jim Crow violence. Visitors often comment on the evocative power of actually seeing the names of those who were lynched, and several parts of the NMPJ document the more than 4,400 African Americans who died between the end of the Reconstruction (1877) and the post-World War II years (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The base of the NMPJ. Source: Photo taken by one of the authors.

The hundreds of reddish-brown, rusting steel columns suspended from the ceilings of the memorial do more than just aggregate statistics for those who wish to emphasize the magnitude of these lynching horrors. When it rains, the rainwater falling onto the steel columns turns a copper color, and the material dripping of the water helps bring together objects and persons, both of which seem to be weeping, as visitors walk among the columns. Some of those who helped plan this affective materialization explain that the dripping that accompanies the rain is intended to remind visitors of the terror of lynchings, which involved public spectacles and the building of scaffolding in open and high places, which was “lifted up over

communities to taunt and terrorize" (Wegman, 2018, para. 15). On the wall of one corridor of columns, visitors are informed that there were thousands of "African Americans" who were "unknown victims of racial terror" whose "deaths cannot be documented," and they, too, were being honored by the EJI and the NMPJ.

The NMPJ produces a reparatory rhetoric for racial justice through what we have called an affective materialization of lynching pasts that encourages visitors to feel as though they are encountering a lynching. In ways that are similar to Blair and Michel's (2000) rendition of the rhetorical performances of the Civil Rights Institute, the NMPJ's columns are positioned performatively as brown bodies being lynched. However, here the NMPJ's affective materialization does not stop at merely displaying these horrific acts. Vertical walkways and spatial distance under the columns are also used to convey the sense that visitors are surrounded with evidence of mass lynchings.

Some of the affective materialization of racial terrorism that circulates at the NMPJ involves immersion techniques in which visitors who walk under columns also read the arbitrary, irrational, and petty rationalizations that were used to justify lynchings in a segregated South. Visitors to the NMPJ learn that Elizabeth Lawrence would be lynched because she scolded some White children who threw rocks at her, and Black men could lose their lives for allegedly violating social codes, such as knocking on the door of a White woman (Cason, 2018, para. 13).

Recall how some of these lynchings were attended by thousands of Americans who treated lynchings as public spectacles. Many also took away morbid souvenirs after the burning and mutilation of lynching victims. Experiencing the horrors of these stories is part of the NMPJ's reparatory rhetorical strategizing: How could one take this tour without going home and demanding that commemorative markers be placed at sites where people of color were lynched?

These critical participatory, pedagogical messages are reinforced when visitors walk along the pathways of the six-acre memorial park that surrounds the NMPJ. Here, visitors encounter duplicates of the same monuments they encountered in the memorial, stacked in rows that sprawl across the park. Each one of these "temporary monuments" awaits a more permanent location in the counties in which the lynchings occurred.

The temporary monuments in the memorial park portions of the NMPJ have intrigued many observers, who comment on how counties who do not come to claim their smaller monuments may be shamed for not acknowledging difficult lynching pasts. Michael Murphy, of MASS, argued that those counties that came to Montgomery to get their monuments were a part of a "participatory process of healing and reconciliation" that could be compared with the old agrarian acts of "barn-raising" (Sisson, 2018, para. 23).

This populist way of framing revisionism about lynching pasts helps with public memory work and aids the documentation of the magnitude of America's lynching pasts—but what are some of the specific reparatory requests that are coming from the EJI's efforts at the NMPJ and the Legacy Museum?

The Race-Conscious Goals of the NMPJ

The general features of these Montgomery countermemorials or countermonuments sites appear to appropriate some of the styles and functions of other countermemorials or countermonuments, and we see these features being used to advance four key reparatory purposes: (1) historical revisionism about lynching records, (2) acknowledgment of the magnitude and nature of "racial terrorism," (3) apology requests, and (4) merciful restorative justice.

Lynching Historiography and the Search for Historical Revisionism

The EJI attempts to critique the traditional, uplifting civil rights stories told about America's pasts by underscoring the lack of federal antilynching legislation. The EJI uses the Legacy Museum and the NMPJ to argue that most Americans—including many African Americans—are unwilling to admit that massive numbers of lynchings took place, and that public remembrances gloss over traumatic racial terror pasts. EJI commentators, and their supporters, also point out that few recognize that these overlooked racial histories are connected to "new forms of bigotry and discrimination" that need to be addressed (Edgemon, 2017, para. 2).

Part of the affective materiality of these Montgomery spaces and places that has to do with revisionist historiography involves the use of novel techniques that can be used by laypersons who may not be acquainted with traditional, academic archival work. For example, take the act of collecting soil at lynching sites, which is promoted at the Legacy Museum as a performative way of raising historical consciousness. As Jackson (2017) observed, communities that engage in these individual and collective acts produce a "harvest of healing," where the soil served as a reservoir for historical remembrance and reflection. "Whether it's the red clay of North Alabama, the rich soil in Central Alabama's Black Belt Region or the dark brown grayish clay to the south," she was convinced that "Alabama's history" was "tied to the soil" (Jackson, 2017, para. 1). No wonder that the executive director of the EJI noted how the coal mines and the steel mills and the agrarian portions of the state were all part of the economic infrastructure that had everything to do with the soil that contained the "sweat of those enslaved people" who were humiliated by Alabama's segregationist policies (Jackson, 2017, para. 3).

Stevenson and other EJI members note that instead of remembering that Montgomery was a major slave-trading hub of the former Confederacy, most tourism before the opening of the Legacy Museum were primarily interested in visiting places like the site of the famed Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was sparked by Rosa Park's refusal to follow Jim Crow expectations that she would give up her seat to Whites. Montgomery was also the place that helped catapult the career of a Baptist church minister by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., who, before his untimely death, won the Nobel Peace Prize for aiding the universal cause of human rights. The EJI's efforts are intended to provide visitors to this city with more melancholic ways of thinking about civil rights' failures as well as successes, given the failure to pass federal antilynching legislation. The EJI wanted to present a different side of this city by helping revise historical records of segregation and Jim Crow so that people can be "liberated from the chains" that were forged by those who glossed over systemic racial terrorism (see Song, 2016, para. 14).

To help supplement the performative aspects of the affective materialism of the visitors' walks around the NMPJ, EJI pamphlets, reports, and interviews are used to constantly underscore the point that too many Americans—in spite of the efforts of the Tuskegee Institute or the NAACP or Ida Wells-Barnett—are unwilling to deal with the populist nature of American lynching pasts.

The EJI, and its supporters throughout 2018 and 2019, referenced the arbitrary nature of Jim Crow formal and informal laws and codes that contributed to the rise of lynchings. In Maryland, for example, George Armwood, a 23-year-old mentally ill Black man, was dragged from his county jail cell and lynched because of accusations that he attacked an elderly White woman (Capehart, 2018, para. 4). In Hernando County, Florida, in 1877, a minister by the name of Arthur St. Claire was lynched for performing a wedding of a Black man and a White woman (Yawn, 2018). Research by the EJI indicates that nearly a quarter of those who were lynched were accused of having committed sexual assault, while another 30% were said to have committed the crime of murder.

These stories about the victims of lynching have everything to do with reparatory efforts in public memory contexts. As Hall (2018) noted, the possibilities associated with "reparatory history" help overcome the disavowal of Black suffering in the annals of Western history. As she notes in an essay in *Race & Class*, "reparatory history . . . begins with the descendants, with trauma and loss, but the hope is that the work of mourning can be linked to hopes for reconciliation, the repair of relations damaged by historical injustice" (p. 12). It is these relationships—that involve many generations of sufferers—that concern the EJI when it works on publicizing its revisionism.

Acknowledgment Requests

The EJI's work on historical revisionism is complemented by the NMPJ's efforts that help with the pursuit of acknowledgements of "racial terrorism" pasts. The EJI moves into treacherous terrain when it joins those multicultural cities across America who are interested in the removal of Confederate statuary as one part of reparatory efforts. Although many Southerners argue that the use of Confederate markers, statues, memorials, and other artifacts has little to do with lingering racism or attempts at social control of Blacks, supporters of the NMPJ are convinced that those types of arguments provide even more proof that too many suffer from cultural amnesia. While driving from Richmond, Virginia, to Washington, DC, on Independence Day, Mock (2015) noted how the very route that he was taking was named the Jefferson Davis Highway, and that along the way his family could see dozens of markers and monuments that commemorated "areas where important Confederate soldiers" marched or were killed (para. 1). EJI supporters who ask for acknowledgment of racial terrorist horrors oftentimes contrast all of this hypervisibility of Confederate symbolism with the relative invisibility of lynching victims.

This call for "racial terror" acknowledgments was not just a request that emanated from the ranks of EJI membership. Angel Smith Dixon, who traveled from Lawrenceville, Georgia, to see the NMPJ thought that the building of these structures meant that we are "publicly grieving this atrocity for the first time as a nation" (Harpaz, 2018, para. 6). Dixon went on to explain that you cannot "grieve something you can't see, something you don't acknowledge," and that acknowledgment was characterized as the first step of "the

healing process” (Harpaz, 2018, para. 6). This echoed many of the remarks that Stevenson made during countless interviews between 2015 and 2019.

Acknowledging the extent of past crimes and their structural nature—from the era slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, to mass incarceration—radically alters the directionality of Lost Cause narratives and, by pointing out the epistemic limits to White supremacist logics, challenges the truth effects of Confederate commemorative practices. As Bergin and Rupprecht (2018) argued, when these practices were placed “within the wider context of the dominant disavowal of Europe and America’s imperial and racializing origins, the controversy over what gets remembered by whom, and the form that memorialization takes, are urgent questions for a reparative history” (p. 24).

Should Americans who visit the Legacy Museum or the NMPJ be asked to apologize for lynching pasts or other racial terrorist horrors?

Apology

Usually, when scholars study apologies for atrocities, genocides, and other large-scale massacres, they focus on the rhetoric of leaders who give speeches or decision makers who lay wreathes or kneel at various global commemorative sites, but those who built the NMPJ have more inclusive, vernacular ways of conceptualizing reparatory justice. Recall how, in theory, those nonpermanent columns at the NMPJ, that are assembled in the gravel areas behind the permanent exhibits, are waiting to be accepted as each of the 800 counties acknowledge their own, local complicity in all of this phantasmagoria.

Whether one characterizes this theorizing as a strategic, zero-sum blame game or a form of public acknowledgment, those who support EJI efforts can point to instances in which counties and local newspapers are already showing their willingness to come to Montgomery and take bricks back home. As Yawn (2018) argued, this peripheral, nonpermanent portion of the NMPJ may yet become some of the most important commemorative features of these structures, as those who wish to redress past injustices join the EJI and others who believe that restorative justice has to begin with truthful engagements with difficult pasts.

From a critical communicative vantage point, taking home these parts of the peripheral, temporary exhibits by representatives of American counties can be viewed as a form of open apology, where admissions are made about the need for U.S. locales to ask for forgiveness and express acts of contrition. Stevenson has described the gradual removal of these peripheral columns by various U.S. counties as a type of “report card,” and Yawn (2018) goes so far as to claim that the performative removal of these exterior columns serves as “tool of atonement for a culture of killing that could have been labeled genocide if the murders were not so individual and scattershot” (paras. 20–21). Almost every week, different county representatives report a willingness to visit the memorial and atone for past sins by taking away parts of this periphery.

As Celermajer (2013) has observed, political apologies are one way that societies can address “collective dimension of [human right] violations” (p. 52). By recognizing there are other subjectivities by actions, as Adorno would suggest, apologies can radically “shif[t] our being in the world” (p. 53). Apologies

are thus performative speech acts that, to Celermajer (2013), commit to “re-mapping . . . identities . . . through the deflection of time’s arrow.” In this way, apologies are oriented toward the “relational expression of shame” and “announce the active presence of a different political cultural context: one in which the wrongful actions cannot proceed with the people’s stamp of legitimacy” (p. 53).

Though only “time’s arrow” can tell how different U.S. counties respond to the exigency for apologies with their temporary monument, it is worth noting the piecemeal efforts taken by the U.S. Senate to apologize for lynching. In 2005, the Senate apologized to the victims of lynching for the first time in U.S. history. Apologizing “for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation” and “the descendants of victims of lynching,” the resolution testified its memory of “the history of lynching” and to “ensure that these tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated” (S. 39, 2005, paras. 15–17). This apology was a bold step for a chamber of government that, for more than a century of struggle, had not passed an antilynching bill.

Those interested in seeing reparatory justice could take solace from the fact that U.S. legislators finally saw the need for the passage of some federal antilynching legislation. In December 2018, after more than 200 failed historical attempts, the Senate passed an antilynching act making lynching a federal hate crime, and portions of the text used by senators noted the importance of apologies for “reconciliation” and “improved racial relations.” Reporters credited the NMPJ for helping intervene in ways that helped catalyze these efforts (Lockhart, 2018).

This 2018 bill, however, failed to pass in the House of the Representatives before the end of the legislative session. That is why the sponsors of the bill—Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, and Scott Lead—reintroduced the bill in February 2019, which passed unanimously. And a year later, the House of Representatives did its part by passing its own antilynching bill—The Emmett Till Antilynching Act—with a 410–4 vote. Though the Senate must still approve certain changes to the bill, such as the title change, before it arrives on President Trump’s desk, these legislative successes (and failures) are evidence of the cultural and attitudinal changes inaugurated by the EJI. No wonder reporters of these events credit this organization, and the NMPJ, for making antilynching law possible (Grisales, 2020; Harris, 2019; Lockhart, 2018).

Is the legislative passage of these bills evidence that the American mainstream is willing to apologize for racialized lynching pasts, and if so, is it willing to take the next reparatory justice step and perhaps think about reforming America’s carceral practices?

The Quest for 21st-Century Restorative Justice

Although many commentators are familiar with the EJI’s consciousness-raising efforts dealing with the chronicling of individual and collective lynching records—part of an unassailable archival record that would combat “a narrative of denial” (Song, 2016, para. 11)—what is often missing in mainstream analyses of the Legacy Museum or the NMPJ is any recognition of how this archiving is used to call attention to 21st-century conditions of racial terrorism. EJI revelations of these lynching records are being used for larger critiques of America’s current mass incarceration practices. The EJI is interested in using talk of racial

terrorism to show visitors and others that capital punishment needs to be abolished or that juveniles should not be tried as if they were adults.

Bryan Stevenson's central role in planning and building the NMPJ signaled to many African Americans and other visitors that this would be a place where stories about racial terror and Jim Crow extrajudicial lynchings would be used as entrée points for commentary on today's continued social injustices. As detailed in his international bestselling book *Just Mercy*, which is also now a major motion picture, Stevenson was a famous lawyer who won many legal cases as he battled on behalf of juvenile defenders and wrongly convicted and condemned prisoners, and more than a few observers were convinced that his experiences affected the dark tourism and morbid nature of the lynching commemorative sites in Montgomery (Stevenson, 2015, 2017). This is part of the reason why the executive architectural director of MASS, Michael Murphy, told Boston radio listeners that they did not want a "memorial that stood still" and why they designed some features of the NMPJ that "changed over time" (Sisson, 2018, para. 19).

Are Americans—even those who visit the NMPJ and participate in the affective materiality of the NMPJ—willing to see the symbolic and material linkages that are made by the EJI when they claim that lynching pasts, and mass incarceration presents, are both just parts of longer "racial terror" legacies?

Conclusion

As readers might imagine, many of America's citizens are going to be bothered by the radical, race-conscious messages that are purveyed by Stevenson and others who refuse to accept at face value the hagiographic tales of progress that appear in dominant "colorblind" renditions of civil rights histories. The former mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, for instance, who also happens to be a Harvard Fellow of the Kennedy Institute of Politics, said in a press call with a reporter, "Most White people don't have a full understanding of our past or how it shapes our lives today. . . . The legacies of slavery and Jim Crow are visible everywhere you look, if you really care to look" (Mock, 2019, para. 6). Landrieu, a somewhat iconic figure in the recent sagas of "monument wars," also recently conducted a tour of the South to learn more about the "blind[nesses] to racism" after the release of his book *In the Shadows of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History*. As reporter Brentin Mock noted, from Landrieu's recent initiatives for "confront[ing] the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow," "most whites surveyed believed that black Southerners are mostly responsible for their own economic and educational shortcomings, and that the vestiges of slavery and segregation have little to do with it" (para. 3). And when it comes to reparations, "forget it" (para. 3).

As we noted, this is certainly not the stance of Stevenson, the EJI, or their supporters, who are trying to reopen all sorts of reparatory justice debates about acknowledgments, apologies, and perhaps even reparations for genocidal or near-genocidal acts.

Those who celebrate the strategic usage of Montgomery's spaces at the NMPJ are not simply asking for nonpolitical acknowledgment of more than 4,400 lynchings—they are also focusing on how to best help today's victims of racial injustice. When Stevenson was interviewed by Jonathan Capehart of *The Washington Post*, he implied many Whites today were in denial about the enduring power of the structuralist features of

those Jim Crow years: "People today have this misconception that black people a hundred years ago were . . . too timid or didn't have the right values or just weren't strong enough to not cooperate with Jim Crow" and this view can be "insulting view of the African-American community that sometimes gets expressed" (Capehart, 2018, para. 12). The implication here was that the descendants of those who once confronted Jim Crow's formal and informal rules were still having to fight the legacies and structures left behind by those racial terrorist acts of yesteryear.

In the revisionist narrative histories that are offered by members of the EJI and their supporters, the legacies of lynchings cannot be redressed simply by keeping an account of the dark horrors of individual abuses that can be calculated and summarized in compendiums that serve as updated lynching archives. Those who truly want to appreciate the risks that were taken by leaders of the civil rights movement like Martin Luther King, Jr. need to become acquainted with the depths of depravity, the dehumanization, and the systematic usage of lynching for purposes of social control if they truly want to understand today's "generational poverty and exclusion" (Capehart, 2018, paras. 16–17).

Echoing many of the arguments of critical race theorists who adopted consequentialist ways of framing racialized histories, those who agree with the EJI can point out that the African communities who traveled to Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis during the "Great Migration" still feel the aftereffects of those Jim Crow years. In theory, they, too, need reparatory justice.

Talk of liberating generations from their "denial" or "silence" is said to come from acknowledging how lynching amnesias have everything to do with today's police killings of unarmed black men or the jury verdicts that come from those who refuse to be conscious about lynching histories. In the age of the Black Lives Matter Movement, it is imperative to recognize that Blacks are not the only agents who acknowledge how the burdens of dark pasts influence present and future racial relations. In 2017, in LaGrange, Georgia, police Chief Louis Dekmar, a White police officer, publicly apologized for the September 1940 abduction of Austin Callaway, a 16-year-old who was dragged out of his jail cell by a band of masked White men. As he spoke to the crowd gathered at a traditional African American church in LaGrange, Dekmar expressed deep regret and denounced the role that LaGrange police had played in Austin's death, and he commented on both the inaction and action of those who, almost eight decades earlier, had done little to prevent Austin's death (Blinder & Fausset, 2017, paras. 4–6). When Dekmar was interviewed after his public apology, he explained to reporters that some of the things that had been done in the past continued to affect police-civilian relationships and the trust that was needed for local law enforcement. Trust, he argued, depended on officers stepping up when they did wrong and apologizing for those misdeeds.

Many of the academics who have commented on the form and function of the NMPJ recognize the hurdles that will confront those who try to follow the lead of individuals like Dekmar. Academics, for example, may provide radical critiques of America's dominant civil rights mythologies. Professor Jason Ward (2016), the author of *Hanging Bridge: Racial Violence and America's Civil Rights Century*, underscored the confrontational nature of what he calls the "EJI's offer of ready-made monuments" that are a part of that peripheral, outside, temporary memorial (Ward, 2018, para. 9). Though Ward (2018) is hopeful that the disappearance of the duplicate markers might begin the therapeutic process of filling "a gap in American

history" (para. 4), he nevertheless recognizes that calls for the removal of Confederate statues are oftentimes met with arguments like those of Vice President Mike Pence, who wants to see "more monuments, not less" (para. 9). Ward (2018) views the steel columns arrayed in the NMPJ as "much a challenge as an invitation" to those who want to see more monumentalization (para. 9).

After visiting these Montgomery lynching sites during the spring of 2018, only weeks after they opened, we noticed that with every passing week, some local or regional newspaper published an account of how American counties either apologized for local lynchings or had groups actively investigating lynching sites so that they could send their own jars of soil to the Legacy Museum. Given the public nature of lynching pedagogical performances, whenever counties collect their temporary monuments from the NMPJ, those declarative acts may be viewed as a public act of acknowledgment and contrition, evidence that others are willing to join in the radical conversations about systematic lynchings that were inaugurated by EJI followers. As Balthrop (1984) argued in his analysis of the mythical, ideological, and cultural demise of Southern culture, it is through "ideological dialectics that one can become aware of the dominating myth and can . . . subject it to critical examination" (p. 351).

We have argued that critics, as well as builders of edifices like the NMPJ and Legacy Museum, can become involved in reparatory public memory work.

Academics in disciplines like communication can reveal some of the coded messages that are missed by those who may not see the radical nature of EJI instrumentalism and activism. As Bergin and Rupprecht (2018) have noted, challenging the symbolism of the former Confederacy "points to a politics of active and potent resistance to the project of disavowing black and black labour in race-making capitalism," and although this is just one of the goals of the EJI, it is nevertheless an important one. For reparative critics, "the commitment to excavating interconnected histories" confronts a "multi-racial inherited past which we inhabit" and "in the very architecture and streets of the towns in which we live" (Bergin & Rupprecht, 2018, p. 35).

The efforts of Stevenson and the EJI have certainly been reparatory, and we, in this article, have joined the lists as we note how the architectures mentioned above have involved drastic changes in places like Montgomery as well as Washington, DC.

That said, while reparatory rhetorics have become more commonplace among certain politicians—namely, among former 2020 presidential candidates such as Kamala Harris, Corey Booker, and Andrew Yang—there is still much to be done. What we have offered in this manuscript is an interventionist effort that allows scholars of critical memory studies a way of taking the reparatory turn, where they not only study EJI activists but also help raise consciousness about historical lynching legacies and presentist mass incarceration practices.

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