

African Americans, Lynchings and Memory: Equal Justice Initiative Project or the Dreadful Gift of Pity

Afro-americanos, linchamientos y memoria:
Equal Justice Initiative Project o el terrible don de la compasión

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Abstract: Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* suggests that it is being present before us that makes it possible to feel pity for a “co-human” sufficient to make us act on our feelings. We care about others in inverse relation to their distance from us. I want to suggest that in the case of the dead who, on the other side of a seemingly unbridgeable chasm, are immeasurably further from us than even the most distant of the living. It is art—broadly understood—that teaches us to feel for them and that makes a narrative in which their bodies and bones matter. It is art that makes the dead live again in culturally important ways. This article takes as its case study the new National Lynching Memorial in Montgomery Alabama.

Keywords: Empathy; Antigone; dead bodies; Primo Levi; National Lynching Memorial; imagination.

Resumen: Primo Levi en *The Drowned and the Saved* sugiere que el estar presente ante nosotros es lo que hace posible que sintamos lástima por un “co-humano” y actuemos de acuerdo con nuestros sentimientos. Nos preocupamos por los demás en relación inversa a la distancia que nos separa de ellos. Por lo que respecta a los muertos, situados al otro lado de un abismo en apariencia insalvable, se encuentran inconmensurablemente más lejos de nosotros que incluso el más distante de los vivos. Es el arte—en su significado más amplio— lo que nos enseña a sentir por ellos y lo que genera un relato en el que sus cuerpos y huesos importan. Es el arte lo que hace que los muertos vivan de nuevo de maneras importantes dentro de la cultura. Este artículo toma como caso de estudio el nuevo National Lynching Memorial en Montgomery Alabama.

Palabras clave: Empatía; Antígona; cuerpos muertos; Primo Levi; National Lynching Memorial; imaginación.

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What Primo Levi said about the living –about their place in our moral compass– can be said also about the dead: they are not all equal in the moral, political and emotional demands they make on us. We do not, and are not bound to, care equally for all of them from all times and places. “Compassion itself eludes logic,” he said. “There is no proportion between the pity we feel and the extent of the pain by which pity is aroused... If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live”. The “dreadful gift of pity”, for the many, he says, may be “granted only to saints”. For the rest of us “there remains in the best cases only sporadic pity addressed to the single individual, the *Mitmensch*, the co-man: the human being of flesh and blood standing before us, within the reach of our providentially myopic senses”. If there were a physics of pity we would say that varies in an inverse relationship time and place.¹

Levi reprises an old problem in the history of thinking about humanitarianism, one that Diderot had already identified in the eighteenth century: the fact that the death or suffering of one person –or millions– at a distance matters little while our own suffering or the suffering of those close to us is inescapable and morally compelling.² He is writing about the circumference of the circle of the we, about the reach of our moral obligation, about how widely and how intensely we care for the suffering of others. About understanding our limits.

This is in one sense irrelevant to the question that motivates this volume: how does literature –and by extension art more generally– make us believe so fervently that some of the dead belong to us and conversely that others decidedly do not?

In the modern disenchanted world pity is beside the point: to be dead is precisely to be beyond pity because to be dead is to not be. The dead do not suffer for the same reason. This has become a cliché. It is hard for us –in a way that seems to have been taken for granted to our ancestors who heard Homer recited or read Book 11 of *Aeneid*– to imagine the dead having wishes and preferences and feeling.

No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man–

¹ *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Summit Book, 1988, 39.

² See Carlo Ginsburg, “Killing a *Chinese Mandarin*: The Moral. Implications of Distance,” *Critical Inquiry* 21.4 (Autumn 1994): 46-60.

some dirt-poor farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over the breathless dead.³

So spoke Achilles from the underworld. The dead today no longer ask us for pity or tell us that they suffer. But Levi remains relevant for two reasons. First, what he says about the limits of caring for the living is true with respect to the dead. Everyone can not belong. We could not conceivably encompass them all, all those who might demand to be made again into fellow humans. Their numbers are uncountable; their suffering unfathomable: the dead of the Armenian genocide; the Holocaust; Leningrad; Belarus; the Spanish Civil War; the Cultural Revolution, etc. And these are only a fraction of the lost dead on the last century. Just as pity and succor are not equally urgent for all who live so care of the dead does not follow simply from their belonging to our species or from the condition of their bodies: lifeless.

And, there is an added ontological problem. The dead “Mitmensch” can never, unlike the living, be a creature of actual presence: all of the dead have “passed away”, all the dead are “gone” by their very nature. They can therefore never be before us in a literal sense as individual co-humans. And except at the molecular level they are all identical mere matter. The great chasm of death separates them from us more profoundly than any of the multitudes of distant suffering humans that only a saint can pity. And some are even more distant than others. The nearly one hundred shackled dead Greek bodies, their hands still bound, which were recently unearthed in an almost three-thousand-year old Athenian cemetery belong—as mere matter, as bones and ancillary artifacts—to the Greek state and as culturally relevant only to archaeologists who study the remains to determine what the dead ate while alive and to ponder the political circumstances of their death.⁴ The bones of French, Prussian, and English—once bitter enemies—have moldered together for two hundred years and no one cares, or ever cared. The dead are by their nature gone and time makes them even more distant.

But the dead—some of them at least—do matter. The 127 bodies of migrants whose bodies were found in the Arizona dessert last year, dead

³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated Robert Fagels, Viking: New York. Book II, 555ff, p. 265.

⁴ This find in 2016 near Athens was widely reported. See for example <https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2016/03/shackled-skeletons-to-shed-light-on.html>

in as a consequence of express United States policy to deter crossing the border by making the trip as dangerous as possible very much do belong to us even though they are gone and were never flesh and blood standing before us. They matter. Who belongs with whom and where from many score years ago can also matter: the presence of the bodies of Primo de Rivera and Francisco Franco and the mixed-together remains of both the Republican and Nationalist dead at Valle de los Caídos.

Everywhere else death is an end. Death comes, and they draw the curtains. Not in Spain. In Spain they open them.... A *dead* man in Spain is *more alive than* any place else in the world.⁵

Maybe. But the dead are alive and present to the living everywhere. How is this possible? Levi suggests it is something that makes the not-present human –indeed the no longer existing human– present enough for us to care and to make them somehow belong to us in a culturally important way.

It is –and this brings us closer to the role of art– an irresistible power of the imagination, independent of any particular religious beliefs, that blinds us to the cold reality of what a dead body really is. Or rather what it is not. Adam Smith made our capacity for sympathy toward the dead– this “illusion of the imagination,” contrary to our certain knowledge that they feel nothing –the ground zero of moral sensibility as well as the origin of our dread of the nothingness that is death.⁶ We are speaking here of a primal idolatry –of an uncanny collective commitment to the dead who we know to be nothing and yet cannot simply throw over the walls for the beasts and the birds to eat as the Cynic philosopher Diogenes wanted done with his body.⁷ The corpse remains consequential.

⁵ Federico García Lorca, “Play and Theory of the Duende,” *In Search of the Duende* Christopher Mauer, trans. New York: New Directions, 1998, 55.

⁶ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1, 13.

⁷ He ordered himself to be thrown anywhere without being buried. And when his friends replied, “What! to the birds and beasts?” “By no means,” saith he; “place my staff near me, that I may drive them away.” “How can you do that,” they answer, “for you will not perceive them?” “How am I then injured by being torn by those animals, if I have no sensation.” Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, I, 43.

Those who think upon the subject have long regarded their care as the sign of civilization—as opposed to savagery—and as a distinguishing characteristic of a specific civilization. Sophocles' Antigone pronounced that it to be an “unwavering, unwritten customs of the gods . . . not some trifle of now or yesterday, but for all eternity.” And more locally, we might understand ourselves to be engaged with specific histories of the civilization-making powers of the dead, or to be more modest, of the role of the dead in making an ethically and politically acceptable present and future. How we care for them makes and unmakes communities. They divide as often as they connect. (I am thinking, at the extreme, of the mutilation or dumping of bodies into pits: the Fossar de la Pedrera in Montjuïc Cemetery in Barcelona with its thousands of murdered Republicans, for example. Less brutal are borders to exclude the dead who are not welcome—the six-foot-high, or better described as deep, underground wall, built at the insistence of the Catholic archbishop of Belfast, to separate Catholics from Protestant in the new nineteenth-century civil cemetery).⁸ All of this is the work of the dead.

A history of the work of the dead is about how they dwell in us—in individually and communally—and from these places act in the world.⁹ It is a history of how we imagine them to be, how they give meaning to our lives, how they structure public spaces, politics, and time. It is, in the first instance, a history of the imagination and of the emotions, a history of how we invest the dead—and I will be speaking primarily of the dead body—with meaning. It is really the greatest possible history of the imagination. It is, to go back to Levi, about how something unimaginably distant—the dead—can become present. Levi suggests that it is being present before us that makes it possible to feel pity for a “co-human” sufficient for us to act on our feelings. I want to suggest that the case of the dead is art—broadly understood—that teaches us to feel and that makes a narrative in which the dead matter possible. In short, it is art that makes the dead live again in culturally important ways. I take as my case study a new memorial and my responses to it.

On April 28 this year the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit law firm founded in Montgomery, Alabama in 1994, dedicated two new me-

⁸ Tom Hartley, *Belfast City Cemetery: The History of Belfast, Written in Stone* (2nd ed.). Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2006.

⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.

morials: *The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, that documents the history of slavery, and *The National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, that commemorates the more than 4000 terror murders of blacks by whites in the American South between 1877 and 1950.¹⁰

For almost two decades the Equal Justice Initiative and its brilliant executive director, Brian Stevenson –the political, aesthetic and moral force behind the museum and memorial–, have been fighting against the cruelties and racial inequities of the criminal justice system. Over 2000 children sentenced to die in prison, more than 70 of these less than fourteen years old; indefinite solitary confinement; capital convictions on little or no evidence. Its case by case, decision by decision legal trench warfare has met with considerable success in the Supreme Court and other venues.

It continues with this work. But in 2012 the Equal Justice Initiative began to devote considerable resources to a new strategy, to the work of changing the deep cultural narratives that sustained the injustices it had been fighting one by one. The dead were enlisted in this effort. The hope was that by changing this narrative, that by confronting its past, the United States could begin to imagine new stories of its future. In 2015 it published *Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade*; two years later came the first of three massively documented editions of *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, which cumulatively discovered 800 more cases than had been known before. *Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans* reported on attacks directed specifically against the black men who had served in the armed forces and thereby claimed the dignity of citizenship. Altogether we now know of well upwards of 4000 terror lynchings of black people by whites in the American south between 1877 and 1950 and some 300 in the rest of the country. The exact number can never be known and if one begins with the end of the Civil War –1865, rather than the end of Reconstruction, 1877– the number is considerably higher.

The United States is sometimes astonishingly –one wants to say willfully– committed to amnesia, to forgetting its great national sin of

¹⁰ What follows is a shortened version and modified version of an article in the *London Review of Books*, 11 October 2018 where I give full citations for the works I rely on here.

chattel slavery and the violence, repression and endless injustices and humiliations that have sustained racial hierarchy since emancipation. Stevenson writes about how in Germany he was struck by the density of monuments to the victims of that nation's great crime: the Stolpersteine—stumbling stones by the thousands with the names of the murdered that mark the site where they once lived; the sculptural Holocaust Memorial near Brandenburg Gate and its subterranean museum; the thousands of reminders all over the country of the evils done in the name of Germany. Maps, markers, preserved camps are everywhere. Likewise, in South Africa: the Apartheid Museum witnesses to the racist system that dominated that country's history; monuments and plaques surrounding the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg recognize those who suffered under the former regime. There was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which, whatever its flaws, brought light to the shadows of the past. Likewise, in Rwanda. The dead are made present. There is no memorial culture remotely comparable in the United States to the legacy of slavery.

The Equal Justice Initiative is, in the first place, demanding a reckoning with the past as past. It evokes Holocaust remembrance by quoting Eli Wiesel: "Without memory," he writes "our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living. If anything can, it is memory that will save humanity. For me, hope without memory is like memory without hope..." "We will remember with hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice", echoes the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. At a personal level the Equal Justice Initiative's memorial is about helping ageing survivors of near lynching and the descendants and friends of victims to heal from the trauma of racist terror. It aims at a national reckoning with collective crime. The Equal Justice Initiative is in these ways very much part of mainstream museum and commemorative culture.

But there is a difference. The German Holocaust and South African Apartheid and the Rwanda Genocide are over and not likely to happen again, at least not in Germany, South Africa or Rwanda. Slavery and lynching in America are, of course, over too. But the past is not past in Montgomery. That is the political denouement of the Equal Justice Initiative's story: "From slavery to mass incarceration". And from slavery to black subjugation through terror. This story, it insists, is not over.

An exhibit of three hundred glass jars each with dirt from a lynching site connects the story of the Legacy Museum, which documents the continuity between the regime of slavery with the regime of racially inflected mass incarceration, on the one hand with terror –with the National Memorial for Peace and Justice– about a half mile distant. A statue there of slaves in shackles completes the circle.

In representing the black American past in this way the Equal Justice Initiative is obviously making a case for coming to terms with history, with an unmastered past, just as would the sponsor of any museum or memorial complex. But it is also engaged with a past that is immediately exigent to its day to day work in the present. It would otherwise not have devoted tens of thousands of hours and millions of dollars to putting this memorial complex together. The elision of the divide between then and now is at heart of the Equal Justice Initiative project. As the great black anti-lynching campaigner Ida B. Wells put it “the way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”

It is nothing if not an ambitious, perhaps utopic, project: a shift in the conscience of the United States that will make the Equal Justice Initiative’s house to house combat of litigation against systemic injustices and individual criminal defense no longer necessary. The museum and lynching shrine which I want to focus on aim at nothing less than redemption through narrative, a national changing of heart–heart by heart.

It is not a memorial to lynching in general but specifically to the victims of its largest sub-genre: the more than 4000 documented terror lynching of blacks by whites and “in honor of those whose work built the foundations upon which we stand,” i. e. those like the black anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells and the pioneer black sociologist Monroe Work, who began to track lynching at Tuskegee. The Equal Justice Initiative has also recently published evidence of 300 more terror lynching of blacks outside the Deep South, a fraction of the real number.

Lynching –charivari at its most violent, murderous popular enforcement of majority community values– is nowhere else in the world as sustained and common as it has been in the United States. It happens in some Central American countries with weak governments; it is now on the rise in India. But it is indigenous here. Before the Civil War, whites were the primary victims especially but not exclusively in the relatively

lawless west. Afterwards, close to 75 % of lynching were in the Deep South; more than 90 % of these were of blacks.

Other lynchings, of course, are not in any sense consequential; mobs murdered an unknown number of Mexicans—in the thousands—by hanging, burning and shooting in the American west; 547, a fraction of the total, are documented to have died, the victims of racial terror, between 1844 and 1928. Foreigners were victims. A huge mob lynched eleven Italian Americans in 1891 because some of them had been acquitted in a murder trial; five Sicilians, all from one village, were lynched in the tiny town Tallulah for allegedly assassinating a prominent local doctor. They hadn't. There were scores of lynching of Chinese in California. All these are more profoundly forgotten than even the terror lynching of blacks in the south. And of course, whites were lynched: Wobblies in the labor wars of the northwest in 1919; most famously Leo Frank, a Jew wrongly convicted of murder in Atlanta in 1914 and the victim of anti-Semitism.

But the story of African Americans constitutes a special case in the history of the United States and the modern world more generally. No other post-slave society turned to terror lynching to maintain white racial dominance. The past intrudes insistently on the present.

I want to insist that the power of this monument to make the dead belong to us is, at least for me, born of art that teaches how to feel and to make narrative matter. Or to be more precise, it is art which made me connect what I knew in a rather distanced way with how I felt about the absent dead. I did not learn anything I did not know. No one has seriously argued for the beneficence of US slavery since the 1950's. I did not know by any means of all of the lynchings that the Equal Justice Initiative documents; any number is imprecise both because there is often a question of what constitutes a lynching—does an attack on workers count and of how many died in any given instance? Some acts of terror have been erased from the historical record or never made a mark in the first place. In my teaching I have always said “more than 4000”.

At the memorial's threshold is a Kwame Akoto-Bamfo sculpture representing “slavery”. In the beginning there was slavery. Seven life-size figures—men, women, children, infants—nearly naked are shackled; the rust of the shackles prefigures the rust on the 804 hanging columns and resting coffins that form the body of the memorial. An eighth, empty set of shackles, represents one of their number already sold away. As the

Legacy Museum makes the case for the continuity of the ante-bellum old regime with mass incarceration today, the sculpture demands that one regards the dead of lynching as belong to the same story.

Further along a path and under a large open pavilion hang, by a single rope-like metal rod, 804 corten-weathered-steel rectangular columns the same powdery reddish-brown rusty color of the shackles in the slavery statue. Each bears the names of the murdered in one of the 804 southern counties where blacks were lynched. Many say “Unknown” in place of a name or give only a number if many died in one act of terror. Outside the pavilion on a large lawn rest 804 coffin-like replicas of the columns as if they held remains of victims of a natural disaster or terror attack. They are waiting to be claimed by counties throughout the south as memorials. Like other gatherings of names –the Vietnam Memorial, Yad Vashem, Menin Gate and the names in memorial books of pictures like Serge Klarsfeld’s *Children of the Holocaust*– the abstraction of statistics and large numbers, the numerical sublime, demands attention. These dead. These specific, enumerated dead. Elbert Williams lynched in Brownsville, Tenn., in 1940 for working to register black votes and so on by the thousand.

Between the hanging columns and the field of coffin-like memorials waiting to be claimed, visitors pass a coffer of dirt from various lynching sites, a wall with water flowing over it dedicated to the “unknown victims of lynching,” blocks of poetry and panels that give the purported reasons for selected lynching. “Reasons” is the wrong word. As Claude Lanzmann said in another context “To ask why the Jews have been killed is a question that shows immediately its own obscenity”.

“Pretexts” would be a better word, a hodgepodge of offenses, large and small against the nuanced niceties of racial domination: Henry Bedford lynched for talking disrespectfully to a young white man”; Jesse Thornton for “addressing a white police officer without the title “mister”; Malcom Wright for “yielding too little of the roadway to a white man as he passed in his wagon”. Anthony Crawford rejected a “white merchant’s bid for cottonseed”. And pretexts beget pretexts for cascades of terror. Mary Turner was “lynched with her unborn child [it was in fact ripped from her belly and murdered separately] for complaining about the lynching of her husband, Hayes Turner”. Eleven more lynchings followed.

Suspicion, however slight or absent any evidence, that a black man had murdered a white was probably the single most frequent pretext: an existential threat to the racial order, as if a partisan had killed a soldier of the opposition. The Equal Justice Initiative does not feature such cases on the Memorial's walls but documents them in its research, ghastly precursors of the miscarriages of justice and disproportionate punishments against which it and its allies are fighting today. A local paper on May 6, 1922 informs its readers that, after a thrilling manhunt brought them to justice "three colored men were burned here [Kervin Texas May 6] at dawn for the murder of Eula Ausley, pretty 17-year-old school girl...". The men inconveniently delayed the proceedings by insisting on their innocence, which made "third degree" methods necessary. These failed to force a confession. The crowd of 500 waited. The men's bodies were mutilated while they were still alive, the article continues, so that "no organ of the negroes was allowed to remain protruding". In the final act, one of the men was roped and dragged back and forth over the coals until he was dead. A second was drenched in oil and set afire. He chanted as the flames rose "O Lord, I'm a comin'" so loudly that he could be heard all over town. Foxes' *Book of Martyrs* would come to mind except that the twenty-six-year-old "Shap" Curry was a martyr not to religious conviction but the cause of white supremacy.

Later that day the sheriff announced that two white men—brothers—had been detained in connection with the murder and that tracks from the scene of the crime led to their house.

American labor struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were violent but those that involved black workers were another order. These, until now largely forgotten, efforts to organize unions threatened not only capitalist profits but the whole racial order in which the poorest white was still superior to any black. A strike was to the dominant white order of post-emancipation slave era what a slave revolt had been before. An existential threat. "Hundreds of black women and children were lynched in the Elaine Massacre in Philips County, Arkansas, in 1919" reads a plaque on the wall of the memorial; 257 "unknown" is inscribed on the hanging column. (We will never know the exact number.) A local planter and real estate developer told the *Arkansas Gazette* right after the killings that the efforts by the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America to unionize sharecroppers was in fact "a deliberately planned insurrection of the Negroes against

the whites”, masterminded by an organization established “for the purpose of banding Negroes together for the killing of white people”). After one of the bloodiest days in American labor history when mobs of white men killed any black person they could find during a strike of sugar cane plantation worker in 1887, the widow of a local magnate called it as she saw it: “I think this will settle the question of who is to rule, the nigger or the white man for the next fifty years”. It did. For generations. (But, by comparison nine strikers were killed in the far better remembered Homestead Strike in Pittsburgh; twenty-five in the infamous “Ludlow massacre” of miners in Colorado orchestrated by the art loving Mr. Frick).

The strangest of pretexts emerge where the racial meets the sexual order, a merger of racism and patriarchy. Roughly twenty five percent of lynchings were on the pretext of rape of a white woman. The Equal Justice Initiative does not single out this issue but the percentage is far higher if one counts a very broad penumbra of fantasmatic threats which it records: “Thomas Miles, Sr.... lynched in Shreveport Louisiana for ‘allegedly writing a note to a white woman’”; “David Walker, his wife, and four children lynched in Hickman, Kentucky, in 1908 after Mr. Walker was accused of using inappropriate language with a white woman”. “Warren Powell, 14” in 1899 for “frightening” a white girl. Henry Patterson for asking a white woman for a drink. Henry Scott, a Pullman porter, thrown off his train and lynched for purportedly insulting a white woman. A later investigation showed that she had become incensed when he had asked her to wait until he finished making up another white woman’s berth.

Actual sexual relations even if, as was often the case, they were consensual met with explosive violence. The most important black scholar of his generation, W. E. B. Dubois wrote that he was moved to activism by reading about grotesque torture and burning alive, followed by the display of various body parts in local stores, of Sam Hose in 1899 Georgia, purportedly for rape. (In fact, a later investigation by the NAACP showed that he had a long-standing consensual relationship with the woman in question).

The Equal Justice Initiative rightly resists the temptation both in the *Memorial* and in its “Report” to offer a Freudian interpretation for the peculiar prevalence of rape accusations: a class of men who for two centuries had had unlimited access to black women are suddenly, guiltily,

faced with the threat that black men have an unbridled passion for their wives and daughters. Projection. Fear born of a bad conscience that perhaps white women might find black men attractive. “Every Negro lynched is called a ‘big burly, black brute’”, wrote the editors of a black Wilmington, N. C., newspaper in 1898, “when in fact many... were sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with them as is very well known to all”. Their article set the town on edge.

A few months later the newspaper’s offices were burnt to the ground and the owners narrowly escaped with their lives –along with 2000 other blacks who were forced to flee– during the so-called Wilmington Insurrection of 1898. At least thirty blacks –Equal Justice Initiative estimates 60– did not escape and were murdered. And again, terror succeeded: “North Carolina is a WHITE MAN’S STATE and WHITE MEN will rule it”, announced the local paper; “no one will ever dare establish negro rule here”.

The rape pretext like all the others go back to slavery: a synecdoche for the fear of blacks either in revolt against bondage or against the Jim Crow Regime. Rebecca Latimer Felton, a leading Southern advocate of women’s but an inveterate racist, makes the link blindingly obvious in her 1911 memoirs. “Southern fathers and husbands”, she writes in her autobiography remembering the fear of slave insurrection during Civil War” were desperate. “It is the secret of lynching instead of a legal remedy. It was ‘born in the blood and bred in the bone’, and a resultant of domestic slavery in the Southern States”. This goes a long way to explaining her insistence in another context that “if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary” she opined in 1897.

So, what is to be learned from the Montgomery Museum, memorial, and Equal Justice Initiative publications? In the first place the convenient power of forgetting. Equal Justice Initiative has recovered something about deaths by lynching in the American south of more than 800 black victims than had been known of before although the base number is far from stable. But the more staggering fact is that most of the story has been well known since it happened. There is no plausible deniability. No one sent post cards back from Auschwitz with pictures of the extermination process as they did of lynchings; pogroms were not

announced as carnivalesque affairs in the headlines of newspaper. The documentation of the terror memorialized in Montgomery goes back almost to its beginning. There were at least twenty congressional hearings in decades of failed efforts to pass federal anti-lynching laws. Some lynchings were secret but many were bizarrely public as if to flout State authority. “3000 will Burn Negro” blares the *New Orleans Statesman* for June 26, 1919 in a headline that overshadows the news “Kaiser Under stronger guards”. “Negro Jerky and Sullen as Burning Hour Nears” says the header of one of the articles; the hour of the lynching is announced in the other. In short, tens if not hundreds of thousands witnessed or took part in lynchings. No one was ever punished.

Historians have also been on the track. There have been more than a score of monographic treatments of lynching in general plus local studies specific lynching plus many more articles. W. E. B. Dubois’ observation that “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back into slavery”, is scholarly and pedagogic orthodoxy. Too much so some would argue. And yet what I saw in Montgomery came as something of a surprise.

First, and I speak here personally, it is because of how little the story has penetrated the conscience of this country. One can read ever so much about the Holocaust and yet when confronted with the face of a woman looking up at her killers from a pit full of naked bodies and still be taken aback. “Really?,” one asks. A stab at our guarded consciences. It is a little like seeing children in a lynching postcard eating ice cream, the body bearing the scrawled sign “This nigger tried to vote,” or the wedding ring of a black woman hanging from a tree in front of a great crowd. Horses graze in the background.

Ida B. Wells, the anti-lynching crusader, in a 1909 article “Lynching our National Crime”, identifies another, unassimilable strangeness of this well-worn history: “No other nation, civilized or savage, burns its criminals”: she writes, “only under that Stars and Stripes is the human holocaust possible”. Europe had not seen the sort of sacrificial logic –the political theology– of public burnings since the auto-da-fé of the Spanish Inquisition and the burning of heretics aftermath of the Reformation. Montaigne had held a mocking mirror to all these four centuries ago.

Racial terror was more than instrumental –a way of keeping blacks in their place. It was –in the hundreds of large scale carnivalesque

burnings and torture-hangings— ritually constitutive of the white south and more broadly of the country. A holocaust in its old testament, pre-1933 sense. Wildly excessive ritual violence. Lynchings also had something of the primitive fears that we think explain the early modern European witchcraft prosecutions and medieval pogroms: Charlotte Harris lynched in Rockingham Co Virginia “after a white man’s barn burned down”, three people lynched because the white family for whom they were working claimed to be poisoned; seven black people lynched near Screamer Alabama for drinking from a white well. In modern times?

The museum and memorial also make one reflect how much the scale of the terror and its consequences are out of sync with its place in public consciousness. Far fewer people died in the notorious Kishinev Pogroms of 1903 which shook the world, changed the immigration policies of the west, and became —until the Holocaust— emblematic of the vulnerability of Jews in the diaspora —that were killed at the Elaine massacre in a tiny Arkansas Town that none but experts have ever heard of. The deaths in Colfax, La. and other mass murders of blacks exceed the number of Jews killed in the 1938 Kristallnacht pogroms that began the mass migration of Jews who had the wherewithal to leave Germany. (A white mob enraged by the electoral victory of an alliance of black voters and white republican supporters of Reconstruction murdered some 150 black men on Easter Sunday 1873). Of course, most lynchings were not rampages; the great majority were single murders, the bodies left hanging and riddled with bullets. By the thousands. But still a reign of terror.

Finally, the public claim of facts on a landscape matters. The museum about slavery and incarceration that I write about briefly is on the site of a slave warehouse; dirt from lynching sites sit in jars among other exhibit. And the gatherings of names at the memorial... *Hic locus est* —as if the dead and their suffering are present. It is hard to escape the enormity of the crimes the Equal Justice Initiative documents —slavery and terror lynching for which, incidentally no one —no-one— was ever punished.

All this narrative work is executed in the hope that recognition of past wrongs and moral blindness will open the hearts of the present not only to our collective complicity in this history but also of the continuity of pasts in the present. The black man lynched for “standing around” in a white neighborhood in 1892 or the one lynched after being accused

of vagrancy in Garyville, La. in 1917 ought to give us pause. They dwell among us. They belong to us.

The killing of Trayvon Martin, the seventeen year old boy wearing a hoodie shot in 2012 in Miami Gables by a neighborhood watch volunteer who thought he looked out of place in a white neighborhood (George Zimmerman the killer was at first not charged and when later charged acquitted) or the choking death of Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2014 by police who were arresting him for purportedly selling untaxed cigarettes were not exactly lynchings but they are the offspring of the forces that sustained them and an unequal criminal justice system more generally.

Specifically, Equal Justice Initiative believes that when the localities in which the crimes claim the duplicate memorials a process of reflection, reconciliation and moral reckoning will begin. The dead will be made to belong. In a few places outside the south this has begun; Duluth, Minnesota where three black circus workers were lynched in 1920 for a rape that never happened is a hopeful case although not one directly motivated by the Equal Justice Initiative memorial. A few historical markers on lynching sites in the south have been put up in the past five years. But even with the best of will recalling a terrible unmastered past will not be easy and has its dangers.

The continuing fear of a conservative pro-confederacy backlash is significant. In Jonesboro, Arkansas, for example, the proposals of Gary Edwards, a professor at the local university, to put up a plaque recalling a 1920 lynching in the middle of town, a site now occupied by the Foundation for the Arts has met with resistance from people whom, one would think, would be sympathetic. He suggested in a local newspaper that a production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play by Lorraine Hansberry, a black playwright, with an all-black cast about the travails of a black family in Chicago in the 1950's at the local arts center might be an occasion to remember a lynching that took place on that site almost a century ago. "If we have come a long way in 97 years, we all know there is more –much more" he wrote. "But let this small redemption [the proposed sign] at Main and Monroe be a start". The Mayor was not supportive; but neither was the local NAACP. People are even more reluctant to claim the memorial offered by the Equal Justice Initiative which lists four more lynchings in the county. Arkansas just last year

hived off Robert E. Lee day from Martin Luther King Day. Perhaps remembering is more dangerous than forgetting.

One would like to believe that learning about and remembering a difficult history can change hearts. Right now does not seem like a hopeful moment in the United States for mastering a past of racial injustice. But maybe. Maybe, as Brian Stevenson writes, each of us is “better that the worst things we have ever done;” maybe “we are more than broken”.

Or let me return finally to Primo Levi. I had read about the distant murdered dead who I knew about but who remained emotionally distant. They did not belong. And now they do. Nothing immediately follows from this just as having a co-human standing before me an evoking pity does not compel acting upon it. But one might hope that making the dead present and making them belong to a still consequential history will be for the public good.