

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/reckoning-with-americas-history-of-lynching-and-racial-terrorism>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As I was weaving through a six-acre field recognizing over 4,500 black people who were lynched and tortured in America from 1877 to 1950, I realized, as a person of color, that I was more indebted to the black Americans that came before me than I ever imagined.

The [Equal Justice Initiative](#) (EJI) hosted a two-day opening summit on April 26-27 for the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#), which is paired with a museum located in a renovated building on the grounds of a former slave warehouse called [The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration](#) in Montgomery, AL.

The summit was jeweled with national leaders and advocates including Michelle Alexander, Sherrilyn Ifill, Gloria Steinem, Marian Wright Edelman, Rev. William Barber, Ava DuVernay, Elizabeth Alexander, Anna Deavere Smith, former Vice President Al Gore, and Piper Kerman. The opening ceremony also featured national figures such as U.S. Congressman John Lewis and a video address from former President Barack Obama.

"To remember and reflect on our long history of racial violence should make us uncomfortable," Obama said. "These tragedies are part of our history. No matter how painful that truth is, it helps us recognize the mistakes we've made so that we don't repeat them."

As these leaders and activists spoke, it was conveyed to me, that paying respect to the memorial and museum is informative for people who are not black, but both informative and intimate for people who are. Despite working with the Vera Institute of Justice, an organization that is determined to address racial disparities in the justice system and waiting eagerly for the day when everyone will have equal justice under the law, my heart throbbed heavily as I took an even deeper look into black suffering.

EJI also hosted a Peace and Justice concert at Montgomery's Riverwalk Amphitheater featuring performances by The Roots, Dave Matthews, Usher, Common, Brittany Howard from Alabama Shakes, Jon Batiste, Kirk Franklin, Tasha Cobbs, Robert Glasper, Valerie June, Greg Phillinganes, Alabama State University Choir, and a surprise performance by Stevie Wonder. Although each performance was filled with emotion and dedication, the one song that hummed through my ears was Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday. I repeated the words southern trees bear strange fruit over and over again and while the lyrics never mention lynching, the metaphor was painfully clear.

EJI's Executive Director Bryan Stevenson's hope is that people will confront the pain, suffering, and anguish that was felt by black people during the terrorism of lynching. He also hopes people will see the humanity, strength, dignity, and the capacity to endure through each life that was taken and their family members who survived through it.

The memorial starts with a chain of slave sculptures, then proceeds with a selection of texts that craft a historical narrative leading to the central memorial, which features 800 suspended rusted steel columns, resembling strange fruit. Each column is titled with the county name and state, which follows inscribed names of each lynched victim. Those who remain unidentified are marked unknown.

It feels very drenched in blackness in a very beautiful way. It's exciting, it's nourishing, it's necessary.... This has to be a place where every American who believes in justice and dignity must come. said Ava DuVernay, Oscar-nominated director of the documentary [13th](#).

The hanging columns were conceived in collaboration with [Michael Murphy](#) of MASS Design Group, a Boston-based architecture firm best known for its public-interest projects in Africa and Haiti. In the park around the central memorial are 800 duplicate pillars, waiting to be adopted by their respective counties. Over time, this will reveal which communities have helped spread the Memorial's message and which have not.

The museum houses the nation's most comprehensive collection of data on lynching. It also offers unseen archival information brought to life through first-person accounts from enslaved people as they narrate the sights and sounds of the domestic slave trade. The extensive research and videography helps visitors understand the racial terrorism of lynching, and the humiliation of the Jim Crow South.

"There is still so much to be done in this country to recover from our history of racial inequality," Stevenson said. "I'm hopeful that sites like the ones we are building and conversations like the ones we're organizing will empower and inspire people to have the courage to create a more just and healthy future. We can achieve more in America when we commit to truth-telling about our past."

As Stevenson mentions, there is much to do to recover from our history of racial inequality. Vera is committed to addressing racial disparities in the justice system, as well as [ending the era of mass incarceration](#) that has devastated communities of color. Until then, we will continue to confront our history and begin healing.

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