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## Lynching, Memory, and Memorials

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**Abstract:** This article touches upon three important topics—lynching, memory, and memorialization—looked at from the perspective of the twenty-first century. As far as lynching is concerned, it focuses on a significant growth of interest in this painful historical, social, and political issue. In the context of lynching it discusses memory and the process of memorialization, sometimes seen as a relatively new trend, and the creation of memorial sites, such as the American lynching memorials in Duluth, Minnesota and Montgomery, Alabama.

**Keywords:** lynching in America, memory, collective memory, memorialization, lynching memorials

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“Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.”

—Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

“Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe: it gives back life to those who no longer exist.”

—Guy de Maupassant, “Suicides”

Writing about American encounters with the Civil War, Michael Kreyling quotes W. Fitzhugh Brundage who claims that “[f]or a historical memory to retain its capacity to speak and mobilize its intended audience, it must address contemporary concerns about the past” (qtd. in Kreyling x), or in other words, there is a certain “continuity [that] extends from the present into the past, and in this transcendence the past is known through its meaningful relationship with the present” (Morris 7). Thinking about lynching in the context of the Senate apology over total failure on anti-lynching legislation, one may ask the question: why now? And, obviously one may try to answer that question. It seems that in 2005 it was high time, at the dawn of the new millennium, to point to the failures that occurred in the previous one. It was, perhaps, the time to speak about and condemn the atrocity when one of the last of the lynching survivors, James Cameron, a 91-year-old man at the moment of approving the Senate resolution, was still alive. Or it was the last moment to apologize for the horror when the addressees of the apology and the descendants of the victims were still alive too. As one of them commented, “Someone is finally recognizing our pain,” adding “I have to let God be the judge... because I don’t know if they [the Senators] meant it out of their heart or they’re just saying it out of their mouths” (qtd. in Stolberg).

The turn of the twentieth century was the time when much public awareness was directed towards the racial crimes of the past, especially the atrocities of the civil rights movement era, and American prosecutors tried to revisit the killings from that period. Between 1989 and 2006, 29 civil rights period killings were reinvestigated (Kemper). In 1994 Byron De La Beckwith was convicted of 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers, the civil rights activist. In 1997 the case of the notorious 1963 Alabama church bombing was reopened. The explosion at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama killed four black girls—Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia

Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Carol Denise McNair (14).<sup>1</sup> In May 2000, the two suspects, Thomas Blanton Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry, were charged with the crime, and in April 2001 the trial opened. *The Crisis*, and many other media outlets, announced in Summer 2004, that the U. S. Department of Justice assisted by the Mississippi District Attorney would reopen the case of Emmett Till, an African American 14-year-old boy, who was brutally murdered in the state of Mississippi in 1955 (“Emmett Till” 7).<sup>2</sup> In 1997, President Clinton issued a call for a national debate on race. Sherilyn A. Ifill commented on this “idea of a conversation involving the entire nation” as “naively ambitious, although admirable” (133). The conversation was soon sparked by the 1998 lynch-like murder of James Byrd Jr. in Texas.<sup>3</sup> Dwight D. Murphey, writing in 1995 about his interest in lynching, clearly combines the atrocity with what happens in late twentieth century America: “What has caused my interest to grow has been a realization that lynching raises important unresolved historical issues that are significant in the context of today’s social tensions” (“Lynching”).<sup>4</sup> The turn of the twentieth century was also marked by several projects focusing on racial issues, including racial violence. The Greensboro, North Carolina Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the first TCR started in the United States of America. It dealt with the examination of a racial murder committed in 1979. Another attempt, which Ifill calls “reconciliation initiative” (174), was the creation of the Southern Truth and Reconciliation (STAR) project. The organizations and projects tried either to initiate discussions about racial violence or tried to reopen old cases of lynching. All these initiatives are of prime importance as both reminders of the past and lessons about America’s shameful history. As Ifill points out, “[t]he lessons about race, trust, violence, and community will live on, even as the names of the participants and the details of lynchings fade from memory” (175).

On July 13, 2005 the U. S. Senate admitted to its own failure to enact any anti-lynching legislation in the whole history of American Congress. All attempts to pass such legislation, including the Dyer Bill (1922) and the Costigan-Wagner Bill (1935), failed. Each time the House of Representatives (three times in its history) successfully approved anti-lynching legislation, it was blocked in the Senate. Finally, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Senate apology, co-sponsored by four fifths of its members, was passed. As Sen. Mary Landrieu (D. Louisiana) remarked before the vote, “[t]here may be no other injustice in American history for which the Senate so uniquely bears responsibility” (qtd. in Thomas-Lester).

The bill was an expression of apology “to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching

1 In 1997 Spike Lee made his famous documentary film, *4 Little Girls*, about the bombing.

2 One of Bob Dylan’s early lyrics, “The Death of Emmett Till,” commemorates this murder.

3 One of the white men convicted of killing Byrd was recently executed in Texas.

4 In recent years and months one could also witness relatively many instances of revising American racial history which has resulted in certain significant growth of awareness among, for instance, the participants of academia in the United States; the decision of the president of Yale University to remove the name of John Calhoun from a residential college, after a series of protests, the decision to sue Harvard University for earning profits from nineteenth century photographs of slaves, or Georgetown University’s decision to pay reparations to the descendants of Maryland slaves who were sold by its Jesuit founders to offset college debts.

legislation” (S.Res. 39). The resolution stressed that lynching was a crime and widely acknowledged practice. In the words of the resolution, the Senate

- (1) Apologizes to the victims of lynching for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation;
- (2) expresses the deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets of the Senate to the descendants of victims of lynching, the ancestors of whom were deprived of life, human dignity, and the constitutional protections accorded all citizens of the United States; and
- (3) remembers the history of lynching, to ensure that these tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated. (S.Res. 39)

There is an unfortunately profuse history of lynching in America. And there were numerous attempts to enact some anti-lynching federal laws. Although the awareness of lynching was common, it almost never resulted in a successful legal reaction to the horror. What we know about acts of lynching comes from newspaper reports, from photographs taken during lynching, and sometimes from the narratives of the witnesses. Moreover, more than once, the local newspapers gave advance notices, and the reaction to such news was far from protesting; what happened was maybe even just the opposite: more people gathered at the scene. As Senator Landrieu, who co-introduced the resolution, said about the well-documented lynching of Claude Neil,

The newspapers in Florida had given advance notice, and they recorded it, one horrible moment after another. One of the members of the lynch mob proudly relayed all the details that reporters missed, seeing it in person. Yet, even with the public notice, 7,000 people in attendance and people bragging about the activity, federal authorities were impotent to stop this murder. State authorities seemed to condone it. And the Senate of the United States refused to act. (“Senate Apologizes”)

The way we learn the history of lynching is somehow blurred since the witnesses often shared their narrative only in local circles. For obvious reasons, the witnesses neither shared what they saw by radio nor did they speak about it, later, on television. Irrespective of that, the history of lynching is relatively satisfactorily documented, however not ideally. Borrowing, *mutatis mutandis*, from Hayden White, one could say that, in case of documenting lynching, it was not always easy to translate or transfer “knowing into telling” (1). It seems that sometimes both the witnesses and the family (or friends) of the victims, tried to remove this experience from their memory; “Anthony Crawford’s granddaughter went to her grave without speaking to her own children about his lynching, so painful was the family history” (Stolberg). In case of certain witnesses the mechanism of such removal, or distortion of memory, could be similar to the mechanism of what Primo Levi calls the memory of the offense.

An extreme case of the distortion of memory of a committed guilty act is found in its suppression.... The rememberer has decided not to remember and has succeeded: by dint of denying its existence, he has expelled the harmful memory as one expels an excretion or a parasite.... The best way to defend oneself against the invasion of burdensome memories is to impede their entry, to extend a *cordon*

*sanitaire*. It is easier to deny entry to a memory than to free oneself from it after it has been recorded. (20)<sup>5</sup>

Thus, as in lynching, in many other cases the representation of the past events is even more incomplete as, according to Pierre Nora, history which “is the reconstruction, [is] always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). As one can see, the reasons for not telling are different. Mark Twain who thought about writing a history of lynching in America, abandoned finally this idea, “fearing that he would alienate too many of his readers who accepted or even approved of the practice” (Arnold 30). Edwin T. Arnold, writing about the absence of the lynching topic in research, especially between late 1930s and late 1970s, finds the reasons for this particular silencing in shame and embarrassment. As he writes, “This shameful period became an embarrassment, and several generations of Americans developed collective amnesia” (185). Tracy Thompson writes about certain code of silence: middle-class white Southerners did not talk much about lynching and “[b]lack Southerners kept their lips sealed, too. They walked a tightrope between the need to tell their children enough to keep them out of danger and the desire to shield them from knowing that such horrors existed” (72). Silence often results in forgetting; Kenneth Foote, referred to by Arnold, examined historic sites across America and suggested “four categories for the way these sites are remembered or intentionally forgotten: sanctification, designation, rectification, and obliteration. Of these, the fourth is traditionally associated with lynching. ‘Obliteration results from particularly shameful events people would prefer to forget.... As a consequence, all evidence is destroyed or effaced’” (qtd. in Arnold 192, Foote 7-8). This category shares much with Primo Levi’s concept of the memory of the offence.

Another factor causing the disappearance of lynching from public conversations was the tendency to remain silent about the horrific events, especially when the division between the victims and the perpetrators was significantly formed along the racial line, and when the ones involved feared any kind of punishment and revenge. Ifill goes to some examples:

The news blackout in the *Salisbury Times* the day after the lynching of Matthew Williams, the decision by white clergymen to exclude the lynching from their Sunday sermons, the refusal of witnesses to come forward and identify lynchers, the determination of black witnesses... to never speak of the lynching—all of these are examples of the silence imposed by the terror of lynching. And the silence of lynching can last for decades. (133–134)

Ifill more deeply discusses the reasons for this silence. Lynching, as a past event, is never or almost never discussed by members of white communities. Interracial conversations occur extremely rarely. African Americans, however, sometimes talk about lynching in the form of stories, often passed from generation to generation. As Ifill writes,

5 Levi’s “memory of the offence” finds its equivalent in serious academic psychological research which examines all kinds of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); negative, traumatic memories are often suppressed blocking the memory in the present.

Whites fear or resent being branded as racist, or they simply refuse to see themselves as responsible in any way for incidents in which they were not directly involved.... The reasons for maintaining this silence are plentiful. For them, discussing lynching is merely an exercise in dredging up the past, and an unpleasant past. Other whites may fear that breaking the silence on these violent events will place them on the defensive, that blacks will be accusatory and will try to compel whites to take responsibility for actions that many will claim they knew nothing about.... Whites may find themselves deeply conflicted by the realization that family members were Klansmen, present at lynchings or deeply implicated in racial murder or assault. (134)

However, in a black community, especially in African American families, stories about lynching are sometimes passed from generation to generation. This can be “a way of ensuring that the children knew the potential for violent reprisals by whites if they crossed racial mores or boundaries” (135). It seems that lynching is somehow more rooted in the minds of African Americans than in the minds of white citizens. The memory of the victim contains the picture of the wrongdoing, whereas the memory of the perpetrator is suppressed in different ways. “The memory of lynching,” in Ifill’s words, “is indelibly engraved on the collective psyche of blacks. Even blacks who never witnessed a lynching can describe one” (143). The memory is passed into communal, racial memory for African Americans. One lynching victim becomes, in a sense, everyone’s murdered ancestor. This process is similar to commemoration understood as certain “collective being together” (Leichter 23), here as a group of people whose members experience the same. One is also tempted to consider this experience of sharing as close to what Jan Assmann and his followers call communicative memory. The memory that “contains memories... that an individual shares with his contemporaries” (Assmann 112). Communicative memory comprises only some recent past, three to four generations, less than one hundred years, so “[i]t is bound to the existence of living bearers of memory and to the communicators of experience” (Welzer 285). Here one can mention the remaining survivors of lynching, families and friends of lynching victims, anti-lynching activists and so on.

Speaking about racial categories, one cannot escape from two attitudes towards painful and traumatic events in which the two races were involved, one as perpetrators, the other as victims. Arnold writing about Sam Hose’s lynching speaks about the “negro version” and the “white version” (185, 191) concerning the event. One version may dominate the other depending, among others, on who has power and thus better access to the media, more difficult in the times of our information age. Writing about how to remember and what to remember or forget, one can quote Jonathan Markovitz’s observations: “Decisions about what and how to remember and forget... are always open to contest and based on struggles over meaning and power” (xxii).

Another question is why certain traumatic past events are discussed now and why some of them are brought to our minds more intensively than the others. Raj Andrew Ghoshal asks a question “why do some efforts to transform collective memory of traumatic pasts attain greater success than others” (330)? Trying to answer this question he focuses our attention on three elements of mnemonic opportunity

structure, as he calls it: “(1) an environment’s present-day *commemorative capacity*; a past incident’s (2) *ascribed significance*; and *moral valence* of its characters *at the time it occurred*” (330–331). Irrespective of this or that theory, it must be admitted that today there are more and more efforts in the U.S. to commemorate traumatic past, including the horrors of lynching. For years lynching was excluded from public commemoration, but in the last two decades new monuments commemorating lynching have been erected, and more ceremonies remembering the atrocity have been held in various American states. Still lynching memorials seem unusual to many; LaTonya Autry, doctoral art history student, remarked, while visiting the Duluth Lynching Memorial: “I didn’t know lynching memorials existed” (“Scholar”). The memorial is a big-scale architectural and artistic site on which the members of the Duluth community organize the annual day of remembrance, commemorating the triple lynching that occurred in the town. Another significant project is Bryant Stevenson’s wall with jars containing soil from all confirmed lynching sites in Alabama (Mayfield and Olson 37). Commemorating traumatic events, and erecting memorials is, undoubtedly, of primary importance and significance for a collective memory.<sup>6</sup>

Commemorating or, in other words, memorializing different significant historical events and paying tribute to important people, in this case important Americans, is certainly a crucial activity within so-called memorialization practices. In comparison to commemorative activities concerning, for instance, the American Civil War, commemorating lynching or racial violence as such was relatively rare till the last decades of the twentieth century. The beginning of the new millennium witnessed a strong commemorative impulse as far as lynching is concerned. Perhaps one of the reasons for this impulse was the increasing importance of heritage in many discussions over the nation’s history, filtered through the significant events of today. Sabine Marschall, alluding to the work of Nick Shepherd and Steven Robins, emphasizes that since the last decade of the twentieth century “heritage discourse has emerged as one of the principle sites for negotiating issues of culture, identity and citizenship” (1; see also Shepherd and Robins 124). She focuses on the fact that heritage “relates both to the past (‘history’) and the present (‘living heritage’)” (1). Various attempts at commemoration, according to Marschall, take the shape of a certain global tendency and commemoration in America and elsewhere manifests itself in similar ways; it can be “(re) naming of streets, ... the construction of new museums, ... the installation of memorials [and] monuments” (2). As Assmann would say, “groups tend to make [ a memory] by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we call cultural

6 Our personal memory, sometimes referred to as our individual memory, was the only one known until the research done by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. The achievement of Halbwachs was the concept of so-called collective memory that “is composed from... convergent individual memories; the collective memory fixes itself as a mass of common remembrances that gain consistency as their members remember it vividly” (Cordeiro 13). These remembrances in a sense “unite” the groups of people who share the same or similar memories, for instance the memories of racial hatred, experienced or painfully learned about. The collective memory is thus shared by members of a group. “For Halbwachs, memory is always collective and recollection is the effect of our inclusion in the groups which provide it with ‘frameworks’” (Péquinot 80).

memory” (111).<sup>7</sup> The process of commemorating (or memorializing) must often revise popular narratives that during the workings of cultural memory lose some of their significance giving rise to new interpretations of significant events and/or important historical people. Often these people or groups previously marginalized in the public national discourse, as for instance the victims of lynching, regain their position in public memory. Though one remembers the past, the past is always interpreted in the context of “now.”

Memory itself is viewed today as a collective activity. As Iwona Irvin-Zarecka states, “[a] ‘collective memory’—as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past—is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share” (4; also qtd. in Blair, Dickinson, and Ott 14). It must be also noted that this type of memory is constantly influenced by social, political or other group demands. That leads one to the conviction that the way we (collectively) remember (or do not remember) things, people and events is a result of a certain clash that is observed in the process of gaining and retaining power. Thus, to translate “knowing into telling,” to borrow once again a phrase from Hayden White (1), often depends on the groups in actual power who, in some sense, “control” collective memory, and the way they control it can be seen as certain expression of various social and/or political issues.<sup>8</sup> As Edwin Arnold notices, the exceptionally brutal lynching of

Sam Hose was lost to history, as were so many victims of that horrible crime.... More recently, ... the burning of Sam Hose has slowly taken center stage as a primary example of lynching at its worst, and in the process, what Professor Willcox labeled the ‘negro version,’ has gained acceptance over the white narrative that explained and attempted to excuse the event. (185)

In order to better explain how this (collective) memory works, Blair, Dickinson and Ott present different popular scholarly approaches to the issue: “(1) memory is activated by present concerns, issues, or anxieties; (2) memory narrates shared identities constructing senses of communal belonging; (3) memory is animated by affect; (4) memory is partial, partisan, and thus often contested; (5) memory relies on material and/or symbolic supports; (6) memory has a history” (6). To follow all these approaches one may state that the way “groups tell their pasts” is filtered through “their current moment” (6). The unity and exceptionality of a group is built upon its collective memory. The process involves some “emotional attachment” that is often a decisive factor that determines which events or people are worthy of preservation (7). Public memories can be challenged by different versions of the past, by introduction of different information or valuations.

<sup>7</sup> For Assmann, “[c]ultural memory is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural identity” (110).

<sup>8</sup> Johnson gives an example of politicizing a memory site reporting the heated debate about the decision of the city council to place a memorial to Arthur Ashe in Richmond’s Monument Avenue, the South’s most significant Confederate memorial site. The potential placing resulted in serious tensions between black and white inhabitants of the city. Both groups opposed the location; African Americans did not want the statue in a white neighborhood representing white Confederate history, whereas white citizens emphasized that despite all Ashe did for tennis, he had not achieved enough “to be located adjacent to Confederate soldiers” (323).

Based on the discussion above one may certainly conclude that collective (public)<sup>9</sup> memory responds “to needs of the present, animating the present” (12). Since public memory is “believed to be true,” it may acquire certain cultural but also social and/or political authority. Collective memory (“believed to be true”), in order to connect the past with the present, often enters into conversation with place and space, sometimes treated as equivalent terms. (23) One of the reasons for the importance of place in memory is that “[p]articular kinds of places are more closely associated with public memory than others, for example, museums, preservation sites, battlefields, memorials and so forth” (24). The study conducted by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen resulted in the conviction that “Americans put more trust in history museums and historic sites than any other sources exploring the past” (qtd. in Blair, Dickinson and Ott 25).<sup>10</sup> Speaking about such memory places, different from each other in many respects, Blair, Dickinson and Ott mention their credibility and also touch upon the importance of “their capacity to attract and secure the attention of visitors” (25). Memory places are significant sites performing multitudinous functions; according to Rosenzweig and Thelen, they create a certain solid space for public identification as they “represent, inspire, instruct, remind” (qtd. in Blair, Dickinson, and Ott 26). The visitors “‘consummate’ their relationship to the place” in various ways “[b]ut the primary action” the place initiates is “traveling to and traversing it” (26). The conclusion that emerges from the study is that the visitors should feel the authenticity of such places as if participating emotionally in what really happened.

Various memory places, as Blair, Dickinson, and Ott claim, are places of significant attention being sites of “significant memory of and for a collective” (25). As Rosenzweig and Thelen emphasize, “Approaching artifacts and sites on their own terms, visitors... could feel that they were experiencing a moment from the past almost as it had originally been experienced” (qtd. in Blair, Dickinson, and Ott 26). Memory places show very well the way cultural memory works as they make a visitor not only imagine a “connection to people of the past, but” make him/her experience “connections to the people in the present” (27).

Erecting memorials and monuments is certainly an expression of the process of commemoration. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Sabine Marschall clearly sees “[a] global trend towards commemoration spurred on by a quest for identity through recourse to public memory” (20). In the case of monuments, but also memorials, the visitors to such places can often regain their identity and the identity of the ones close to them; they can commemorate what was often marginalized or forbidden to be shown or uncovered. Individuals or groups, important for public memory, who are often “politically” neglected or erased from the public realm, can reenter and find deserved recognition in public space. As Marschall states, the so-called heritage products “can be viewed as visual signifiers communicating ideologically [and often politically] charged ‘messages’ to diverse audiences in different contexts” (9).

9 According to some researchers as, for instance, Nuala C. Johnson, the term “public memory” practically equals the term “collective” memory (323).

10 An example of this interest in and caring for historic sites in The United States is the Commemorative Works Act (1986, with several amendments), which is the federal law that regulates the construction of such sites in Washington D.C.



Any attempt to differentiate between a monument and a memorial is difficult, and dictionary definitions are often blurred. Marschall in order to provide her readers with the distinction between the two, goes to Arthur Danto's attempts at distinguishing both terms. According to Danto, "Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honour the dead. With monuments we honour ourselves" (qtd. in Marshall 11; see also Danto 112). Another scholar, Neville Dubow claims that "[m]onuments outwardly proclaim something. Memorials invite introspection and interpretation" (qtd. in Marschall 12; see also Dubow 375). However, it must be admitted that even monuments, though simpler in their construction, obviously can and often do undergo some interpretation. Memorials, being more compound and sophisticated creations, involve more complicated and advanced processes of interpretation, aiming at more introspective considerations/contemplations by those who come to the place.

Speaking about commemorating lynching, it is clear that history of American lynching memorials is not long. The first lynching memorial, the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial, was erected in Duluth, Minnesota<sup>11</sup> and was officially open to public on October 10, 2003. It was erected to memorialize three victims of white hatred: Elias Clayton, Isaac McGhie, and Elmer Jackson, who were lynched in 1920. They were accused of raping a white young woman, though the evidence supporting this accusation was weak, and the local physician did not find anything that could indicate the crime. The mob, with no resistance from the town police, broke into the jail and seized six African Americans suspected of the rape. During the illegal and grotesque trial the members of the mob found three of them guilty of the rape. Then they were severely beaten and hanged, surrounded by a crowd of men, women and children.

The idea to create a memorial devoted to the lynching was developed by Heidi Bakk-Hansen, a local white journalist who in 2000 together with Henry Banks co-founded a committee that would work on the erection of the Duluth lynching memorial. The main task of the committee was to "secure land, city and private financing for the project. With the deaths of the principal perpetrators, many felt it was time for a public 'healing' of an old but still festering wound" (Apel 222). The idea to erect a memorial devoted to the Duluth lynching was also understood as an opportunity to "bring communities together," to "embrace and celebrate" growing communal diversity, and also embrace the "shared values," as Minneapolis Mayor, Sharon Sayles Belton said (225). The creators of the lynching project chose for it quotations appealing to the visitors of the memorial, especially to their morality and sense of justice in the light of the evil done. Among several, one can read Siddhartha's statement: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it on someone else; you are the one getting burned," going then to Einstein's sentence: "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."

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11 Duluth, Minnesota is a birthplace of Bob Dylan, who alludes to the lynching or lynching as such in his song "Desolation Row": "They're selling postcards of the hanging, they're painting the passports brown// The beauty parlor is filled with sailors, the circus is in town."

As Dora Apel emphasized, some relatives of those responsible for the lynching came to the opening ceremony to apologize for the Duluth atrocities; among them was Warren Read who took “responsibility for the actions of his relative” (226). As often on such occasions there were also negative reactions to the memorial, ranging from individual commentaries such as: “those [lynched] men wouldn’t have been killed if they hadn’t done nothing, would they? Come on” (qtd. in Davey A22 and Apel 230) to more serious racial incidents. Memorialization as such creates significant context for moral reflection, individual and communal healing, and awareness of evil, but it may also result in the outburst of negative emotions towards its subject.

When in April 2018, the biggest lynching memorial, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, was opened in Montgomery, Alabama, one of the biggest groups that came to the opening ceremony was “the 34-member contingent sent to represent Duluth,” as Brady Slater described the group (Slater). The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is the fruit not only of growing interest in the twentieth century racial past of the United States of America, but its erection can also be a result of the racial incidents that occurred in the country at the end of the twentieth and in the twenty-first centuries. If so, the idea of the memorial, as probably of any memorial, could be activated by present concerns, showing public memory at work. Though its prime goal is to commemorate lynching, the memorial is said to be “dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence” (“The National”).

Mathew Shear describes the important part of the memorial in the following way:

Entering the structure, viewers come face to face with 800 rectangular steel slabs, each representing a county where at least one lynching took place. Each slab is about the height of an adult and appears to hang from the ceiling on a metal pipe. Some slabs hold scores of names. Victims who remain unidentified... are marked ‘unknown.’ In addition to the permanent slabs inside the memorial, an identical set of slabs will be placed outside it, to be claimed by the named counties and erected back home. The design challenges people in places where lynchings occurred to acknowledge that history. (22)

In this sense, the memorial becomes, as if, more active and more dynamic in spreading its message; it crosses its own borderlines “sending the memory” of the atrocities back to the places they had occurred. Creating such institutions as the National Memorial for Peace and Justice shows how significant and multifaceted the process of memorialization is. It activates in individuals, communities and, sometimes, societies moral reflection, a sense of justice, awareness of the unity of group members, and responsibility for what happened in the past. It teaches truth about various past events, activates discussion between and among opponents and proponents of certain ideas. One of its initiators, Bryan Stevenson, emphasized the important goal of the Montgomery memorial which is to search for “truth and reconciliation in America” (qtd. in Shear 22). Here collective memory tries to connect the past with the present, enters into the conversation with place and space, to repeat a phrase expressed elsewhere in this text.

The active and dynamic aspect of the memorial attracts and makes people aware of what happened, not only the visitors but also people in distant places where lynchings occurred, making the memorial place borderless. Creating memory sites, as here in case of commemorating lynching, makes it clearer that memory “is also anchored in places past,” not only in time past, and the idea to create “movable slabs” as a part of the Montgomery monument, the slabs that can be claimed by individual counties and located exactly, if possible, in the place lynching occurred, makes one more aware of the link between memory and place. This kind of mapping process could be a part of “the ongoing project of establishing individual and group identities, symbolically coded in public monuments” (Johnson 323).

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