

Part Three

THE MUSEUM AS A SITE OF RE-EXPERIENCING

Chapter Seven

“A POWER IN THE PLACE”: DISRUPTING THE SILENCE AND MEMORIALIZING LEGACY

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRYAN STEVENSON¹

Susan Shifrin (SS): Let’s start by talking about your trajectory from a young lawyer representing people on death row, to founding the Equal Justice Initiative, to founding the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.²

Bryan Stevenson (BS): I’m a product of *Brown v. Board of Education*. I grew up in a community where Black children could not attend the public schools. There were no high schools for Black kids when my dad was a teenager in that county, and I remember the impact of lawyers coming to our community and making them open up the public schools. That changed everything for me and for lots of Black kids. I got to go to high school, I went to college, and when I reflect on that, I’m struck by the fact that if you had had a vote on whether to end racial segregation in education, we would have lost that vote. Black people were less than 20 percent of the population, and many were disenfranchised. So it took a commitment to the rule of law to end this problem, to open these opportunities. And it was that use of the law to protect the rights of disfavored, vulnerable people that really shaped my thinking as a college student.

When I was in law school in the early 1980s, there was this emerging crisis around mass incarceration and the resumption of the death penalty. It was that that brought me to the Deep South. Meeting people on death row affirmed the instinct I had that this basic human right was being threatened by these political systems, and I wanted to get [out] in front of that. So that’s what shaped my career, it’s what led me to start the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama, a state that didn’t have a public defender system, that had

¹ This interview took place on July 6, 2021. Bryan Stevenson is a public interest lawyer who has argued multiple cases before the US Supreme Court. He is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. He is also the founder of the EJI’s Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice, both of which opened to the public in 2018. Stevenson’s work has been recognized with awards including the MacArthur Foundation’s “genius prize” and the National Medal of Liberty of the American Civil Liberties Union. Stevenson holds degrees from Harvard Law School and the Harvard School of Government, along with numerous honorary doctoral degrees from universities both in the United States and abroad.

² The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society. Founded in 1989 by Bryan Stevenson, EJI works with communities that have been marginalized by poverty and discouraged by unequal treatment, and is committed to changing the narrative about race in America. Excerpted from <https://eji.org/about/>.

a high rate of death sentencing, a high number of executions. I felt called to be with the condemned in this way.

It was about fifteen years ago when I began thinking about our work and realized that the intervention by the courts that created the opportunities that I have didn't seem as viable [then] as it did when I was young. I began to fear that we might not be able to win *Brown v. Board of Education* today. I don't know that our court is as committed to doing something that disruptive anymore, particularly on behalf of a marginalized, disempowered group of people. [This] was really a crisis for me and I realized that what enabled the Court to do what it did in the 1950s and 1960s wasn't just the advocacy within the Court, but it was also things going on outside the Court. The civil rights movement created an environment where legal change and reform was possible. And the absence of that kind of movement made me worry.

That's when we started doing things outside the Court. I believed that we needed to educate this country on the legacy of slavery. This history that we've never really encountered was not something that people understood. The debates we were having—racial bias in the death penalty, voting issues, bias against the poor, housing, policing—all of these issues seemed to be disconnected from this larger historical understanding [that] I think is essential for evaluating and talking about them. And so that's when we decided we were going to begin talking about slavery.

Living in Montgomery, Alabama, that was pretty dramatic, because in Montgomery at the time there were probably sixty markers and monuments to the Confederacy. This is a community that loves talking about mid-nineteenth-century history. Jefferson Davis's birthday is a state holiday here. Confederate Memorial Day is a state holiday. That disconnect from the trauma and tragedy and pain and anguish of slavery and this romanticization of those who tried to perpetuate and defend slavery and sustain white supremacy was for me just soaked with ignorance and confusion. We felt the need to begin dealing with that, and that gave rise to the research and the work that then turned into the cultural efforts we're making [to this day].

SS: You've talked about the disruptive influence of the Supreme Court in the past, which as you've said is no longer something that we can rely on. In this context of disruption, could you describe the kinds of experiences that you envisioned for people coming to the National Memorial and the Legacy Museum, particularly given that they are both situated in a place that may seem anathematic to what you have created?

BS: I think that's a great question and I do believe that our judges, our legislators, our policymakers, most people in America have a very shallow and incomplete understanding of our history as it relates to these issues. You're just not going to be as effective as a decision-maker on questions of racial bias or even questions of policing or voting if you're not informed, and so that has become a priority [for us]. Public history became the tool of choice for me because, you know, education is optional when you get out of school, a lot of people choose to remain ignorant. What appealed to me about public history is that it is, in itself, disruptive and will force some people to see things that they might not otherwise see.

This really became clear to me in 2013. We finished our first report early in 2013; it looked at the domestic slave trade.³ While some people had a basic understanding of the transatlantic slave trade, very few in this country understood anything about the domestic slave trade and what happens in the nineteenth century when we have this massive influx of enslaved Black people from the North to the South. We banned the transatlantic slave trade in 1808. They were coming from the North, they were being moved within this country. These are people largely born in the United States and I don't think people understood that.

Enslavement became the centre of the US economy during the nineteenth century. We found out that Montgomery, Alabama was one of the most active slave trading spaces in America.⁴ That is not something that local historians acknowledge and talk about. Then we discovered that our street, where our office is, was a main thoroughfare where enslaved people were trafficked, paraded up the street from the Alabama River, which is just 200 metres from here, and the slave auction site was just up the street. All this knowledge really began to make an impact on the way we saw our location. We learned that our building was on the site of a former warehouse where enslaved people were held and detained. It changes your relationship to a community once you have that history.

One of the things we wanted to do was to confront the iconography in Montgomery that celebrated the Confederacy. We wanted to put up markers about the domestic slave trade. We got a lot of pushback from the Alabama Historical Association, but when we put these markers up in December of 2013, hundreds of people came out. This is a majority Black city where Black residents have never been able to see something that acknowledges the history that brought them here. These are Black people who are the descendants of enslaved Black people who were here, and the emotion that surrounded that unveiling was quite a revelation for me. That's when the power of public history and art came together in a way that really resonated.

When we issued our report on lynching in 2015, we wanted to replicate that marker project and that's what created the Community Remembrance Project where we're now putting up markers all across the country.⁵ Local residents want to claim this history, they want to talk about this history. It's a way of disrupting the silence that has defined our communities for too long when it comes to race. Then the idea emerged that we should just put a marker at every lynching site [across the country]. We realized that this would take a really long time, and that's when we had the idea of creating a memorial that would allow us to bring this history together and to concretize it. That was the genesis of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

And I did believe that it had to be in Montgomery. People said, well if you're going to build a national memorial, put it in Washington. I said no, you need to come to this community that proudly identifies as the cradle of the Confederacy. You need to come to the

3 <https://eji.org/report/slavery-in-america/>.

4 Montgomery, Alabama is the site of the Equal Justice Initiative's headquarters, as well as the city in which both the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice are located.

5 <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.



Figure 7.1. Jars of soil on display. Photograph courtesy of the Equal Justice Initiative.

place where slave trafficking and lynching were epidemic. I just think that that sort of positioning is really important if you're going to tell these stories.

I went to Berlin to see the Holocaust Memorial. We have built Holocaust memorials all over the world and the museum we have in Washington is incredibly powerful. But you are safe when you're in that space in ways that you don't feel safe when you go to Auschwitz, or when you go to the places where these atrocities took place. And so when I went to Berlin, I was completely blown away by the Holocaust Memorial, knowing that I was in a space where Jewish people had been abducted and slaughtered and taken away. That relationship to place is really important. There is a power in the place to make history real, to make it resonant.

We do a project where people collect soil at lynching sites because of this idea that there's a power in place. People dig that soil, it can be really emotional and really overwhelming for people and they are surprised by it. But I tell them that's because there is power in that soil. That soil contains the sweat of those who were enslaved, it contains the blood of those who were lynched, it contains the tears of those who were humiliated during segregation. And it contains the potential for life that you have given it when you bring it into our space, because we can turn that soil into a monument, an emblem, an icon that represents a different future. (See Fig. 7.1.)

You know, when you go to the Holocaust Memorial [in Berlin], there are no words, it's just this very abstract structure. They trust people to come into that space with a knowledge of the Holocaust that allows them to have a meaningful experience with those structures; and I had that knowledge. When we built the National Memorial, I realized that we could not trust people to come into our space with a knowledge of

lynching. That was the reason why we felt we also had to create a museum—a narrative museum—to help tell the story that surrounds lynching, that contextualizes racial terror lynching, that explores slavery.

And, again, [I believe] it is necessary that people make the journey [to Montgomery]. You may have to drive past some confederate flags, you may have to see some of the iconography that people in this region have grown up with, you may have to get past the politics of the region that may not be aligned with your own and it will make you uncomfortable. But I don't think we should go to a memorial that is dedicated to the tragedy and trauma of lynching, or to a museum that addresses the legacy of slavery, and expect to be entirely comfortable.

SS: Your description of the project in which you encourage people to go to lynching sites and bring that soil back, and of why it's so essential to you that people travel to Montgomery makes me think of something you've written about: of being "proximate" with people on death row, with "the other," people we don't understand. How do we come to achieve some sort of justice? Not at a distance. It seems that this is something that is at the very foundation of the museum and the memorial.

BS: When I made this decision that we had to begin exploring history and talking about these issues outside the Court, we spent almost a year going into the Black Belt and just talking with people, being in proximity to people in Marengo County and Wilcox County and Lowndes County and Greene County. The conversations were so powerful, because people would be talking about being born on plantations and their language was rich with an understanding of this history. It's after those conversations that we felt we had to do a report on slavery. It came out of that and I believe that you hear things you won't otherwise hear, you see things you won't otherwise see when you commit to getting proximate. I think the idea that emerges from proximity is this idea of witness, and I do think it's important that we be witnesses to this history. When you stand in these places, you experience things that are critical to understanding.

SS: The history of museums is more often than not the history of exclusion and classism, the history of luxury as opposed to the history of the working person. To this day, people go into museums and feel inadequate or intimidated, or less-than, because that's the legacy. So even in founding the Legacy Museum, you are pushing back on those exclusive, excluding experiences. In insisting that people come to Montgomery and that they experience the whole of Montgomery, you are insisting that painful histories confront each other. I asked early on what you imagined or wanted people to feel in the museum. I'd like us to go back to that.

BS: Well, first of all, I do think it's important for us to recognize that museums and many cultural institutions in this country have been complicit in creating a community, a society where people are encouraged to feel good about the stratification, good about the lack of diversity, good about slavery, good about lynching, okay with segregation—all of these challenges—because they're being comforted with beauty and these kind of classical ideas that are disconnected with the suffering of millions of people, of the working



Figure 7.2. Entrance to new Legacy Museum. Photograph courtesy of the Equal Justice Initiative.

poor, of people of colour. And I think that has to change because you're not going to be engaged with these struggles if you are not in some way aware that there is a struggle going on.

I built our spaces because I just didn't see them in this country. I went to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. It was really powerful to see a place that told the story of Apartheid with an emphasis on the pain and suffering of those who were victimized. I realized there were no museums in America that do this and that failure to reckon honestly ... The closest we have is the Holocaust Museum, which is a museum about suffering and struggle, but suffering and struggles that took place someplace else. People are a little more comfortable going there because they don't feel directly implicated, and I knew that when we started talking about slavery, lynching, and segregation, people were going to be implicated.

When we were fundraising, we had a lot of donors who were saying, "well who is the architect, and who is this and who is that?" We had to finally say "look, we are not doing it that way." We're not going to have curators that have experience in these other kinds of spaces. In the same way that I've been a lawyer and I have to create an argument reaching out to a jury, that model of advocacy is the same model we're using when it comes to educating people about this history.

In Fall 2021 we're actually dramatically expanding the Legacy Museum.⁶ It's going to a space that's four times the size, we have a whole new set of exhibits and content. In working on this new museum, I've really been thinking about "museum as experience" because this museum from the very beginning until the very end is about a particular kind of experience.

You'll walk into a space that presents the transatlantic slave trade. It's a directional museum. You have to move forward. And you walk through a wall of water, you get into

⁶ A relocated, expanded Legacy Museum opened on September 29, 2021, <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/news/2021-09-28/eji-opens-new-legacy-museum-montgomery>.



Figure 7.3. Evolution of slavery. Photograph courtesy of the Equal Justice Initiative.

a space where you see what happens on the African continent during the 400 years of enslavement. You walk onto a beach where you see sculptures and we talk about the two million Black people who died during the Middle Passage who were buried on the Atlantic seabed, who've largely been forgotten.

Then you go from there into the domestic slave trade, and you walk through our [presentation of] the evolution of slavery. (See Fig. 7.3.) And then you go era by era, from slavery to lynching to segregation to the issues of mass incarceration today. It is very much a journey, an experience.

It's a story that we are telling. It has a start, a middle, and an ending. At the end of the museum, we have pictures of young children and we just straight up say that we built this museum with the hope that one day these kinds of children will live in a country where they are not burdened with the legacy of slavery, where they do not have to overcome bigotry, bias, and discrimination.

I believe that a cultural institution creating an experience that has a purpose represents something very different than cultural institutions that don't create experiences and that don't have purpose in that way. When cultural institutions have purpose that is aligned with the needs of everybody in society, not just the elite, not just the wealthy, [they are fulfilling an important mission]. We say "everybody" because we actually think it's in everyone's interest to reckon with this history, whether you're white or Black, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're a citizen of the United States or a citizen of some other country. There is a need for us all to reckon with this history and in that regard, we see this as a museum for everybody with a very specific purpose: to confront racial injustice, to overcome racial hierarchy, to eliminate bias and bigotry, to address the multiple ways in which people have been othered, and create a world where that kind of "otherization," that kind of exclusion and abuse is no longer tolerated.

SS: There has been a lot of discussion about the need for museums to open themselves up to varied experiences, to not predetermine what one individual's experience must be. In your conceptualization of a museum and a memorial that is so experiential and so reliant on experience, you have determined that perhaps there has to be—as you said—a direction for people who come to this new museum.

BS: I think that there's a need for a corrective. We are trying to respond to a dangerous deficit in our collective understanding about the role of race in American society. You know, when I give talks about this, I talk about how slavery doesn't really end in 1865 because the real evil of American slavery wasn't the involuntary servitude and forced labour. It was the ideology we created that Black people aren't as good as white people, that Black people are less human, less evolved, less capable; and that narrative of racial hierarchy, that was the evil created by slavery. So the Thirteenth Amendment doesn't address that. Juneteenth doesn't address that. And as result, slavery doesn't end, it evolves. It turns into a century where Black people are pulled out of their homes and they're beaten and they're drowned and they're burned and they are lynched on courthouse lawns, and the trauma created by that terrorism then leads six million Black people to flee the American South. People don't even understand how we have the demographic geography that we have, they don't get that the Black people in Chicago and Cleveland and Detroit and Oakland and Los Angeles went to those communities as refugees and exiles from trauma, from terror in the American South. If you don't have that understanding, then you're not going to fully appreciate what's going on in those communities. And so we do feel that we have to respond to this deficit.

I come from a faith tradition that recognizes that it doesn't lead to redemption, it doesn't lead to recovery if you deny, if you don't acknowledge that you have to repent, that you have to confess to get to redemption and salvation and all that good stuff. Abuse survivors have learned in the last quarter-century, half-century that you can't just not talk about that abuse, it doesn't allow you to get to a healed place if you are required to never acknowledge [it]. What we now realize is that we have to talk about it, we have to work through it. We have to get on the other side of it to actually get healthy, and I feel collectively, as a society, we have to do the same thing. We've practised silence for so long in this country when it comes to the legacy of slavery, we have practised avoidance and denial for so long that [at EJI] we're not comfortable creating a cultural experience where avoidance, denial, and silence are options.

SS: This is a kind of augmentation of your notion of how critical it is to be in the place. My guess is you may have visitors from other countries who are more open to making the journey and making it fully than you do visitors from this country.

BS: I've actually been genuinely encouraged by who's come to the space. Even within the Black community, a lot of us have felt like that's too painful, can't talk about that, can't deal with that. But I've seen older Black people come into our memorial and have these moments of clarity and awakening. It's emotional and you'll see people wrapping their arms around those monuments and sometimes weeping because for the first time they're seeing lives lost [being] acknowledged.



Figure 7.4. Memorial to post-1915 victims of lynching. Photograph courtesy of the Equal Justice Initiative.

I was driving down the road just a couple weeks ago and there was a beautiful “Story Corps” presentation from the daughter of a man who was lynched here in Montgomery.⁷ We created a dedicated monument for victims of lynching after 1915, and in 2019 we had the dedication for that monument. We invited the family members and they all came. This young woman talked [in her “Story Corps” interview] about her mother describing the day when her father left. She said she would watch everything he put on, the colour of his pants and his undershirt, and she would watch him get dressed. He left that day and these men abducted him and they threw him into the [Alabama River]. Her mother had to identify the body, which they didn’t find for a long time. She could identify it because she knew the colour of every stitch of clothing this man had on. When this young woman got married, her mother told her “Don’t ever let your husband leave the house without knowing what he’s wearing.” That legacy was so evident in this woman’s life and, you know, she became emotional at the end, but she was able to say that those people who killed [her] father did not win, they did not succeed. And then she said “[This man] is on monuments,” and she was referring to the monument that we

⁷ <https://storycorps.org/stories/almost-65-years-after-fathers-lynching-two-daughters-are-still-looking-for-justice/>.

have. (See Fig. 7.4.) That memorialization has the power to restore the dignity and the value of a human life. And that's what I've seen within the Black communities, people embracing, recognizing our power to actually restore, to give meaning and honour and significance to these lives that were crushed by bigotry and violence.

For many of our white visitors, what we've seen is a kind of reckoning. People will say "I just didn't know." I've seen that happen, when people are visibly shaken by what they're learning, what they're understanding, and it's like discovering something that you didn't know you needed to discover. But I think people leave changed and that's the goal. And while we envision these sites for everybody on the planet, we especially want people who are directly implicated by this history. People who live in this country, people who are Black, people who are white, people who were immigrants, people who have lived the reality of exclusion and discrimination, to come to the sites because we think they will be able to take something with them that will better prepare them to create a world where bias and discrimination don't exist.

SS: *You've spoken about envisioning the new museum as a corrective. One goal of this collection of essays is to provide models for those who are coming up in the profession, for people who go to museums, to think differently about them.*

BS: Well, I do think if a museum has the power to educate, to inspire, to challenge, it can play a central role. In our civil rights era [section], we emphasize white resistance to integration because I think if you only focus on Black courage and heroism to advance civil rights you understate the larger problem, which was all of these elected, empowered white people who were adamantly opposed to integration. While Dr. King and others were singing "we shall overcome," the majority of white people was saying "no you won't." We have a whole exhibit of governors and chief justices of state courts and the ugly things they are saying throughout this era. We think people need to understand this in order to appreciate many of the issues that we are seeing today.

We have an image in our contemporary section, a picture of a little girl during the Baltimore uprising just a couple of years ago. She's making a sign and she's like five years old, and what she's writing on the sign is "Black kids matter." I just want people to think about what it means to live in America today where five-year-old, precious, little Black girls feel the need to write the words "Black kids matter" on a sign and go someplace and have to hold that sign up. When you see that and understand that, you begin to have a different relationship to what's happening in our country, and I think this is what we can do with cultural spaces.

We're actually opening an art gallery, our first foray into fine art. When you see Glenn Ligon's series "The Runaways" after having walked through an exhibit that presents the actual iconography that dominated the era of slavery, where the word "runaway" is used to describe a Black person who's escaped, it just has a different power, it has a different meaning. We have Gordon Parks's "I Am You" series, and the photographs that he takes about this effort by Black people to overcome segregation in the 1950s and 1960s—I think it just has a different meaning when you've actually been through a space that has documented the intense resistance to integration. That's the power of art and the power of a cultural space to create something dynamic that not

only tells a story but responds to the moment. That’s what I hope becomes more of a norm in the American museum.

SS: *Let’s go back to where we started, the path you followed to this moment. As you move forward, how does the work of the museum, the memorial, your work in disrupting the status quo of the justice system: how do those things travel together?*

BS: I’m more persuaded now than I’ve ever been that narrative work is going to be essential to how we create justice in this country. Our institutions of justice, many of them, are failing because they don’t have narratives that have fostered a healthy relationship with the communities that they’re trying to serve. If you’re a police officer who thinks of yourself as some kind of warrior and the people you police as the enemy, then you’re going to engage in the violence that we see. If you’re someone who thinks of yourself as a guardian, as a caretaker, as a supporter of people in the community, you’ll have a very different relationship. If our courts and our legislators and policymakers think that we can put crimes in jails and prisons, we’re going to create very harsh punishments for these crimes. If you realize that you can’t put a crime in prison, that you put people in prison and that people are not crimes, then you’re going to have a very different relationship to what it means to be just, to be fair.

And so the narrative work that we’re doing at the Museum and the Memorial is, for me, directly linked with the justice work we’re doing in the courts. I don’t think that work will get easier if we don’t do this narrative work, and the narrative work doesn’t exist in a vacuum. We want people to leave our sites motivated to do things that advance justice in their own communities, that correct the problems in their own communities, that seek to remedy the legacy of these issues that they have now experienced in this very dramatic way. And that’s where, for me, it’s very connected--the work we do in courts with the work we do outside of courts is the only way forward if we’re going to get to the kind of just society that so many of us want.

SS: *So that’s another model in itself. One of the things that arts organizations have experienced during the pandemic is the presumption that their work is mere icing on the cake rather than potentially providing essential—at times life-changing—services within communities. What I hope people who read our volume will take away from this interview is that the work of museums can and should be inextricably intertwined with social justice.*

BS: Absolutely. I think art institutions, museums, we undermine the power of the content of the creative, of the artistic when we shy away from the obligation to be engaged in social justice, to be engaged in the struggle for full affirmation of human rights and human dignity. Our cultural institutions have to be more engaged, more aware, more committed and more searching of the ways in which that intertwining that we’re talking about is made real.

SS: Brian, let's conclude with this question: why is it important for museums to focus on experience?

BS: When you live through something, when you experience something, it just has a reality that it can't have when it's imagined. I am much better prepared for the moment that I am in because I've been surrounded by people who have taught me really important things about struggle, important things about being honest, important things about perseverance, important things about resilience. They've shown it to me and that experience has become really powerful as a form of modeling. And so if we can create museums that provide experiences that model things for people, that help them live, help them navigate complexity, help them overcome, help them get past trauma and struggle, then I can think of nothing more important we can do. And so I feel really privileged to be in a place where we maybe have a chance of creating that kind of experience that empowers and energizes and inspires.

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