Jordie Davies

The Equal Justice Initiative has undertaken a groundbreaking project: inviting the United States to remember its history of lynching. As a native of a small town in middle Georgia, I knew there was a high probability that my home county might be represented among the 800 hanging monuments at the outdoor memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. I had done a bit of searching on the Internet, and learned that lynchings had occurred in my county, but I couldn't be sure, as this information didn't come from any "reliable" sources or historical records.

When I heard about the project a few years back, I knew I would at some point want to make the pilgrimage and come in contact with my hometown's history. The Lab's Institute on Memory and Human Rights gave me this opportunity to further consider the power of monuments, an interest I first explored via the UChicago Arts, Science, and Culture Collaboration, examining how hometown history and memory can define public space.

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As we arrived at the memorial we were greeted by airport-style security, reminding us that this history, though carefully verified by the Equal Justice Initiative, is contested and preferably forgotten by some who might do harm to the site. We walked through and saw installations of enslaved people in chains and placards recounting the history of slavery and lynching. I was having some conversation I can't remember, when I told my companion, "I'm sorry" and raced ahead, holding my breath and searching for the truth about Dodge County, Georgia.

The monuments are in alphabetical order, with the Southern states most represented: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi. I passed by what seemed to be endless Georgia monuments with the names of the county where I went to college, the county where I went to church, the county where my parents owned a business. I swept through the hanging placards, trying to respect the names represented but making sure I didn't miss my home. The floor of the memorial sloped low as the placards seemed to raise higher and higher, like bodies hanging from the ceiling.

Finally, I stopped.

I saw the Dodge County monument, raised a few feet above my head. It had nine names etched into its rusted face. Jesse Williams, 1892. Ed Claus, 1903. Will Wommock, 1906. Henry White, 1908. King Green, 1909. Frank Mack, 1911. Chesley Williams, 1912.

Tears filled my eyes. Sadness filled my soul.

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As I reflect upon the visit, I am still at a loss for what to do next. The Equal Justice Initiative has duplicate monuments available to take back to lynching sites; that is, if localities are willing to complete a truth and reconciliation process. I think about how long I've been away from home, about the family still there, and wonder if there will ever be time or space to begin or (if need be) to fight for such a process. I know at the very least, I can start by speaking the names of those lost, learning more about their histories, and making them known.