Noelle Petrowski

A group of 23 of us convened for the inaugural Institute on Memory and Human Rights, which consisted of a two-day workshop in Chicago and then a four-day trip to Alabama. The framing question of the Institute was how can we create platforms to tell the truth about our histories? The work of the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials—and their plans to build a public memorial to Jon Burge torture survivors as part of the city of Chicago's historic May 2015 reparations legislation—served as a local case study. Our time in Alabama would be spent going on a civil rights tour through Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham, making a specific effort to visit public memorials, to inform our process of memorialization in Chicago.

Connecting the experiences in Alabama back to our work in Chicago was a way to think about memorialization, but also to see the varied and interconnected histories of black folks in America. I think the most obvious example is the time we spent walking across and under the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. At first glance, this is an important place for the civil rights movement, the site of an attempted march from Selma to Montgomery that ended in Bloody Sunday. But there's more to it than that. Edmund Pettus was an Alabama senator after Reconstruction, and also a grand dragon in the KKK.

Below the bridge, the Alabama River lay eerily still, and that same riverbank was a place where ships of enslaved people were brought to shore. The trees along the riverbank were used as sites to lynch enslaved people who tried to escape after coming off the ships. Their bodies would be left as warnings for enslaved people in the future who might have thought about escaping.

Thousands of their descendants would also be lynched over the coming decades, and we saw them honored when we visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery. Some of their descendants would march across that bridge on Bloody Sunday in 1965. While in Selma, we met a woman who had been on that bridge that day when she was a child. Many of their descendants would also move north during the Great Migration, some to Chicago, some of whom would then be tortured by Chicago Police. Standing on the bridge, and especially standing among the trees beneath the bridge, large trees dripping with Spanish moss, it was impossible not to feel all those layers of history weighing on you at the same time.

We experienced all those heavy layers together as a group. In an alternative world, this group might not have anything in common, but together we shared a devotion to our collective work, and a willingness to be vulnerable with each other. We ranged in age from 19 to 64—diverse in terms of race, gender identity, and sexuality. We were a group of torture survivors, activists, artists, therapists, abolitionists, students, professors, formerly incarcerated folks, and many of us embodied more than one of these identities. This experience has been meaningful to me in many ways, but the most important is how it has solidified what I want to do in the world.

As a social work master's student who is focused on community organizing, my work is necessarily shaped by relationships. As organizer Mariame Kaba said, "Everything worthwhile is done with other people." It is one thing to take a class or attend a workshop together, but traveling together, getting on shuttles at 4:00 am together, being squished on planes together, having delirious group singalongs together, swimming in hotel pools together—that is a whole other story. I could say a thousand other things about the Institute: how it was good, how it was hard, how it was so hot outside in Alabama. But I am mostly thankful for the group of people who were there with me. Because of them, I feel more prepared to enact on-the-ground, future-driven abolitionist work.