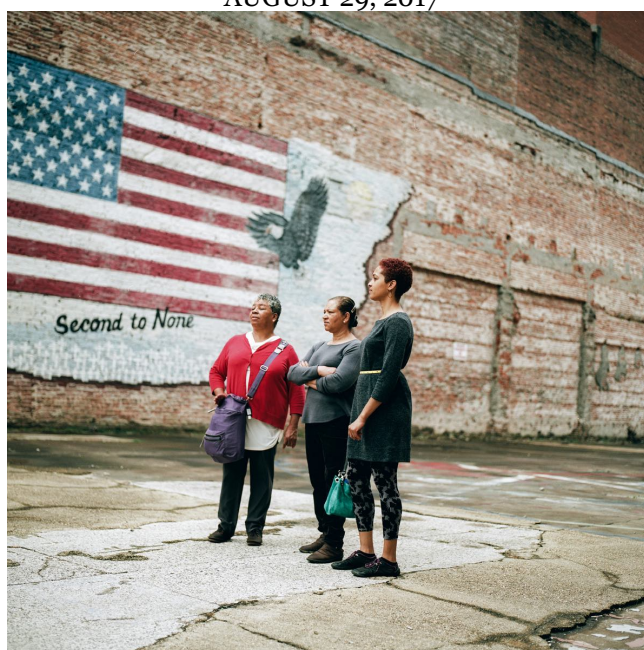


## Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror, at the Brooklyn Museum

by [SIDDHARTHA MITTER](#)

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**Shirah Dedman, Phoebe Dedman, and Luz Myles visiting Shreveport, Louisiana, where in 1912 their relative Thomas Miles Sr. was lynched. ROG WALKER AND BEE WALKER FOR THE EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE**

On the screen at the Brooklyn Museum, a man sits at a kitchen table, across from his mother. The man, Tarabu Betserai Kirkland, is already of advanced age. The table is in Los Angeles, but the family history he relates goes back to Mississippi in the early part of the last century.

The mother, Mamie Lane Kirkland, is 109 years old. She recalls how her own father returned home one night to Ellisville, Mississippi, and ordered the family to pack up and get on the first morning train. He and a friend didn't wait; they left on the spot. In 1919, the friend went back to Ellisville. The local white people shot him, then kept him alive overnight so they could hang him, mutilate his body, and burn the remains. Ten thousand people came to watch the event, which was announced, complete with planned time of hanging, in a Mississippi newspaper. "Governor Bilbo says he is powerless to prevent it," it blared.

On the Kirklands' table is another paper, a recent *Los Angeles Times*. "Trump Fires Defiant U.S. Justice Official," reads the banner, alluding to the dismissal of interim attorney general Sally Yates last January. The famous Faulkner quote "The past is never dead. It's not even past" comes to mind. In this late summer, in the wake of the blatant and deadly white-supremacist display in Charlottesville, the president's equivocations, and confrontations over Confederate memorials — which, historians remind us, went up during lynching's heyday — the national trauma feels continuous, the weave of events stifling.

The scene with the Kirklands comes from an audiovisual montage in "The Legacy of Lynching," a necessary — and necessarily difficult — exhibition that combines art, data, and oral history. The show contains six such histories, in which people and families process the lasting impact of racial terror. They are paired with interactive data displays and a selection of germane works by thirteen important Black artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Jack Whitten, Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Sanford Biggers.

The art comes from the Brooklyn Museum's permanent collection. The rest — including the photography that was commissioned to accompany the oral histories — comes from the Equal Justice Initiative, the crucial nonprofit that was founded in 1989 by public-interest lawyer Bryan Stevenson and works against discrimination, mass incarceration, and the death penalty.

The EJI is documenting the history of racial terror, and has compiled its findings in a report, *Lynching in America*. It has archived, so far, over four thousand lynchings that took place between 1877 and 1950, mostly (but not only) in the South. The project encourages acts of remembrance, like descendants collecting soil from lynching sites or towns and counties raising commemorative markers. Next year, the EJI plans to open a national memorial to victims of lynching on a six-acre site overlooking Montgomery, Alabama, where the organization is based, and a museum in the city's downtown that will connect enslavement, racial terrorism, and mass incarceration and police violence today.

These origins make "The Legacy of Lynching," which was initially slated for a five-week summer run but has wisely been extended into October, an unorthodox show. It was put together quickly, amid a sense of fast-unfolding news events, and it associates a major art museum with an issue-oriented activist organization. It follows a call-and-response method: The call is the historical record that the EJI is working to reveal, while the response is the art — or rather, the specific selection of art, since the works already existed. Through these choices, led by assistant curator Sara Softness, the museum speaks its collection into the urgency of the moment.

There are no actual scenes of lynchings in this show — neither in the audiovisual montages nor in the artworks. That's fine; the storytelling, the photos of lynching sites, and the interactive map, which you can navigate to county level, triggering short narrative clips, make the topic vivid enough. Some of the art steers close, but even Walker's steel-cut silhouette work *Burning African Village Play Set With Big House and Lynching* leaves matters to the imagination. A sculpture by Melvin Edwards, from his *Lynch Fragments* series, involves nails and hardware welded in a spherical shape, evoking a head but still abstract. Works on paper by Clarissa Sligh allude to the lynching, in South Carolina, of her uncle. In the museum atrium is *Blossom*, by Biggers, which fuses a tree and a piano rigged to play the lynching lament "Strange Fruit."

Other works here encompass facets of the larger African-American experience. Among them are four screen prints that Lawrence made in the Seventies, late in his career, and that mine his favored theme of the Great Migration. One shows migrants casting ballots in the North, exercising the franchise in the friendly jumble of a polling station on election day. Two large-format stills from a performance show artist Dread Scott subjecting himself to high-blast water drenching, evoking the tactic used to dispel protesters in the civil rights movement. A length of water hose appears in a sculptural piece by Theaster Gates titled *In Case of Race Riot II*.

Worthwhile as each of these pieces is, you get the feeling of a sampler plate that other museums could emulate with their own holdings of Black (or, for that matter, relevant non-Black) art in response to the same prompt. It could prove a bracing challenge, pointing out the pertinence of an institution's holdings to a national wound that is still raw and, in the time of Trump, reopening.

But the heart of the show is the personal and family stories. While you can find them on the project's well-designed website (produced with support from Google), the museum experience is different: It offers art as accompaniment and counterpoint, but most of all, it also ensures that you are not alone. On a recent visit, the gallery was bustling with an intergenerational crowd, sharing wonder, witness, outrage. The knowledge feels different in companionship — maybe more tragic, but hopefully also more mobilizing.

The Legacy of Lynching  
*Confronting Racial Terror in America*  
Brooklyn Museum  
Through October 8