

A civil rights pilgrimage through the eyes of Congolese refugee teenagers

We began to understand why James Baldwin called US history “more beautiful and more terrible than anyone has ever said about it.”

by [Ashley Makar](#) in the [April 21, 2021](#) issue



Refugee teens from Congo visit Montgomery, Alabama (Photo courtesy of Laurel McCormack)

“Some histories are brutal,” Gladys Mwilelo said. “Doing the beautiful takes forever.”

Two summers ago, my coworker Laurel and I, White women from the South, went on a civil rights pilgrimage with 12 young women who can’t go home, mostly Congolese teens who resettled in New Haven, Connecticut, with their families.

On the bus, Lola Mwilelo led us in singing “Freedom Is Coming,” a song from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, as we passed exits for cities where armed vigilantes still defend Confederate monuments. Lola’s sister Gladys told me what the song means to her, in light of their family’s experience as refugees. “You’re

constantly promising yourselves that something brighter is coming,” she said. “You have to keep practicing.”

Growing up as a Congolese refugee in Burundi, Gladys prayed every day that she would get to go to school someday. She’s now a senior at Central Connecticut State University. All of the young women who went on the trip have made it to college. But they’re not living the myth of the American dream. They’re witnessing the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade while they navigate racism as women of color in America.

Laurel and I were chaperones on that tour through the Black freedom movement, but the refugee teenagers were our guides. On that journey to the South we began to understand why James Baldwin called American history “more beautiful and more terrible than anyone has ever said about it.”

An interactive exhibit at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta takes the form of a simulated sit-in. The exhibit asks, “How long can you last?” As you sit on the diner stool, you put on a pair of headphones and lay your hands flat on the table. First you hear menacing voices, then plates breaking. The taunts escalate, fury at your back. You feel a whack on the counter, then a simulated kick. A bolt of adrenaline and fear in the gut and up the spine. I almost didn’t make it through the minute and 48 seconds of the track.

When I stood up, Mariame Kazadi gave me a hug. “I had no idea sit-ins were so scary,” I said. “You can really feel the—” I paused, still shaken.

“Aggression.” Mariame gave me the word.

English is her third language, the language in which she wrote, “As much as I loved home, home didn’t love me.” Mariame and her family had to flee after her dad got death threats for monitoring elections in the Congolese capital, Kinshasa.

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We spent two nights in the house where my coworker Laurel grew up, in Cumming, Georgia, a town where White residents chanted the N-word and hurled rocks at activists who were marching in 1987 to raise awareness of its history of racial cleansing. One morning before the girls woke up, Laurel and I went for a jog. We

crossed the two-lane street where her subdivision ends and started down a gravel road that turned to dirt and high weeds. Laurel looked uneasy. She told me she knew a lynching had happened near there. She was worried some of the young women might go for a walk or a jog, too. We'd better head back, she said. This was almost two years before Ahmaud Arbery was shot jogging in a Georgia subdivision. Laurel and I, both White women, had the privilege of forgetting how hazardous it is to be Black in America.

In Birmingham, we visited the 16th Street Baptist Church, where youth organizers planned the Children's March and just months later, four girls died in a KKK bombing. At the church's exhibit, we walked down the stairs to what had been the ladies' room, where the girls had been primping after Sunday school. We saw slabs of the wall that had caved in on the girls. We saw a broken stained-glass window, shard-shaped holes where Jesus' face and heart had been. We saw a photo of one of the survivors, bandages on both of her eyes; she was blinded by shattered glass the day her sister died. We saw pallbearers carrying four caskets out of the church to a hearse. We heard verses from the spiritual "O, Freedom": "And before I'd be a slave, / I'll be buried in my grave / and go home to my Lord / and be free."

"The Christian life is not a smooth ride," Mariame told me on the bus that evening. "You have to be a warrior for love."

The young refugee women had not heard of lynching before the trip. In school, they'd learned the broad whitewashed strokes of the history of racism in America: slavery, emancipation, the civil rights movement. "But we didn't learn the hurtful part of those stories," Gladys said. "All of us build history. That's why it's so important to tell the truth, even if it is painful," she said. "Telling the ugly truth gives people the responsibility to do their part to build the future we need to build. History holds people accountable."

"As newcomers, we are not part of the roots of American history," Mariame said. "But we are the branches."

The Montgomery-based Equal Justice Initiative, led by Bryan Stevenson, works to engage communities in truth telling about the roots of racial injustice in this country. In 2018, EJI opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, America's first lynching memorial, and the Legacy Museum, which make the compelling case that "slavery doesn't end in 1865; it just evolves"—into the era of lynching that took over

4,000 Black lives and into our current time of police violence and mass incarceration.

At the Legacy Museum, we saw a postcard from a lynching in Mississippi. You only see the victim below the knee: ragged pants, ankles, and feet. Below, there's a White crowd. People on what appear to be family outings. There's an old man with a hateful contortion to his face. Next to him, there are kids. One boy's eyes look stunned and unfazed at the same time.

"Those children, are they still alive?" Mariame asked.

"What a cruel place," Gladys said.

I don't remember when or how I first heard of lynching, but I didn't know much about it before that trip to Montgomery. In my mind, lynching was an unspeakable blip in American history, carried out under the cover of night by Klansmen who had nothing to do with me. Until that summer, I had no idea people were pulled out of hospitals and worship services to be lynched. I had no idea how long the torture lasted or how badly Black bodies were desecrated. I grew up in the Bible Belt, but I had no idea that lynchings were often planned for Sunday afternoons, so families could watch the torture and executions after church.

Near the Legacy Museum's exit, there are shelves holding mason jars full of soil. Each is etched with a place, a date, and a name: Rufus Lesseur, Lillie Cobb, Will McBride. The quart-sized jars are part of EJI's Community Remembrance Project: people from all over the United States are invited to go to lynching sites throughout the South and dig up soil. Participants are equipped with trowels—tools to excavate decades of pain—and the jars to hold it up to the light.

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"There is history in that soil that needs to be resurrected if we're going to really be free in this country," Stevenson said on the *Ezra Klein Show* last summer. "The sweat of enslaved people is buried in this soil," he said in another interview. "The blood of lynching victims is in the soil. The tears of people who were segregated and humiliated during the time of Jim Crow is in the soil."

Collecting the soil is a way of honoring the dead. Liberation is a matter of slow work in the dirt. Soil is where you bury and sow seeds. It holds living history, like the rings of a tree.

Time seemed to thicken and slow down as we moved through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. We began outside, in what felt like a graveyard where it was hard to get my bearings, steel rectangles staggered like headstones, each the size of a casket and etched with the names of people who'd been lynched and the county where it happened. Many of the lists of victims repeat the word unknown, over and over. You hardly notice how the ground slopes down as you walk into an open-air warehouse—until you realize the monuments inside are suspended from above and you are the witness, looking up.

“It bleeds rain,” Mariame told me. Rust comes down from the rafters when it rains, she'd learned from one of the docents. The floor is made from trees that were used in lynchings.

Near a ceiling corner, I found Walker County, Alabama, where half of my family is from, but the monument was too high for me to make out the names of the murdered. Laurel found her county, too. She stood there saying the names, quiet as a prayer.

Near the end of the memorial, in a transparent display case the shape of a coffin, we saw more soil from lynching sites. We stood looking at that glass casket full of dirt. Mariame gravitated to some soil that had fallen to the floor. She knelt down to touch it. I did likewise. It felt right to follow Mariame's lead: a refugee whose home country is full of mass graves, a teenager who had to learn too early how to honor the unnamed dead.

Lola wrote down a quote she saw on one of the walls. “With no protection from the constant threat of death, nearly six million black Americans fled the South between 1910 and 1970. Many left behind homes, families, and employment to flee racial terror as traumatized refugees. Lynching profoundly reshaped the geographic, political, social, and economic conditions of African Americans in ways still evident today.” These young women know what it is to have to leave your home, only to find violence in the place where you're seeking safety.

As we were leaving, our feet moving across the wood of lynching trees, Lola started singing: “Oh, freedom. / Oh, freedom. / Oh, freedom over me.”

Back in Connecticut, the Glastonbury MLK Community Initiative invited us to speak about our trip in a community conversation. We got a tricky question from one woman in the audience: “As refugees, you’ve been through so much,” she said. “Why would you take a trip to visit the ugliest parts of American history? Why not go to Disney World?”

“The ugly past matters,” Gladys said. “We need to know it, so we can have a beautiful future.”

I spoke to Gladys the week George Floyd was suffocated by Minneapolis police.

“Sometimes I find myself going numb,” she said. She froze when she read President Trump’s threats to protesters. “It reminded me of that terrible moment on the bridge.”

She was talking about the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, site of Bloody Sunday in 1965, when armed police attacked civil rights activists with tear gas, whips, and clubs, fracturing the skull of 25-year-old John Lewis.

Last year, when Lewis’s casket was being processed through Selma and Montgomery to honor his lifetime fighting for civil rights, my mom told me a dark part of our family history. A cousin of ours was probably one of the Alabama state troopers on that bridge. When I found out, I watched the footage again: police on horseback trampling and gassing marchers; police on foot beating people; young men and women on the ground, unconscious. Somewhere, on that bridge, on the wrong side of history, was my own family member.

People often asked Lewis how he endured so much violence. “When people ask these questions, they perceive that I was being abused, when in reality, I was being freed,” he wrote in *Across That Bridge*. “No one had the power to injure me. I had taken that power away by experiencing the worst they could do and discovering it did not diminish me.” Just weeks before he died, Lewis wrote a letter to the millions of people who are rallying for racial justice today. “I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me. You filled me with hope,” he wrote.

I think of young Lewis, with a fractured skull, marching for the Beloved Community, long as it takes. I think of old Lewis encouraging the present and future generations of the movement.

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A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “From Kinshasa to Montgomery.”