

“Shifting the spirit of the nation”: How one humanities project addresses slavery and citizenship

It is one of the more unlikely places – a rural community struggling to move on from its “sundown town” reputation – that a small, curious audience gathered recently at the Anna Arts Center to listen to Harry Dougherty’s freedom story.

It was told by local historian and educator, Darrel Dexter, who first learned of the African-American’s emancipation story 30 years ago while snooping in the Old Union County Courthouse archives.

“Harry Dougherty’s story is unique because we know it. I can tell you the story of Harry Dougherty,” Dexter told the all-white audience. “Thousands of Africans and African-Americans were enslaved in Illinois. At least as early as 1720 and through 1865. For most of them, we don’t know their story. We don’t even know their name.”

Dexter’s research explained that despite the common belief that Illinois was a free state, it truly operated as a slave state, even in [northern Illinois](#). Dougherty’s story demonstrates how white settlers used legal loopholes to bound kidnapped African-Americans, like himself, into servitude. Dexter’s presentation was a portion of Union County’s Civil War Weekend celebration.

Residents annually commemorate local Civil War history with presentations, re-enactments, and historical exhibits. Usually, the focus is on President Abraham Lincoln and the war battles – rarely ever slavery.



Makaya Larson and her children look at potraits and flyers about the Civil War in the Anna Arts Center in Anna, Ill. on March 13, 2021.

Though, this year was different.

After concluding Doughtery's story, Dexter introduced the "[I Was Here](#)" project. An effort to reframe the national conversation around racism and slavery.

The project synthesizes history, poetry, collage, a soundscape and augmented reality. It began as a set of archetypal Ancestor Spirit Portraits created by photographing contemporary African Americans to embody the human family. The photoshoot developed into a set of 21 "[Ancestor Spirit Portraits](#)" which mark significant locations across the country

creating a visual for an invisible history. The project aims to provoke an inquiry into how we see each other, who we are as a nation, and how we can heal the spiritual, economic, educational, and political chasm that enslavement created.

“I see these images being symbolic of the humanity of the world. And hopefully, they’ll shift the perspective in the long term, but I know it won’t happen in my lifetime,” said “I Was Here” Photographer [Patrick Mitchell](#).

One of the underlying goals of “I Was Here” is to establish a connection between citizens, the past, and the present through the physical remains of a very uncomfortable part of American history, said the Community Liaison and model for “I Was Here”, Marshall Fields.

This connection is established by using art to trigger an experience that is social, political, spiritual, and historical all at once.

The project’s approach allows slavery, a historical subject typically known through academics, to be recognized as a lived experience, he said. If it’s taken as something that was and continues to be real, people might stop avoiding certain conversations about race, or even acknowledge that racism is a problem.

Bringing forgotten history back into view to confront a never-ending problem

Avoiding conversations about race and unequal citizenship is standard in southern Illinois.

The subject of racism is rarely touched on by local newspapers and TV stations. Exceptions are regulated to certain events. Annual coverage includes Martin Luther King Jr. Day and anti-racism marches in the college town of Carbondale. It’s only when racist incidents are impossible to ignore, like when [white supremacist groups in the region put racist propoganda](#)

[on cars in community college parking lots](#), [a mixed-raced Murphysboro man is threatened by his neighbor](#), or [when a local high school group is caught with naming their Facebook group chat a racist name](#), does discrimination in the area make a public appearance.

Information on Anna's Civil War Weekend was only mentioned by [WSIL TV](#) and Cape Girardeau, Missouri's newspaper the [Southeast Missourian](#). WSIL provided preview coverage of the Civil War Weekend, briefly mentioning slavery while discussing quilts that were used as maps for the Underground Railroad. The Southeast Missourian re-published a user-generated press release.

As the discussion of race gains more momentum nationally because of [hate crimes](#) and the anti-racist response, public pressure to bring local racism to the front of the public conversation trickles into the region.

Less than two years ago, ProPublica Engagement Reporter [Logan Jaffe](#) brought the story of sundown towns and Anna's notorious anagram into national view with her article ["The Legend of A-N-N-A: Revisiting an American Town Where Black People Weren't Welcome After Dark,"](#) co-published with [The Atlantic](#).

Through her reporting, Jaffee examined this question: Is Anna a racist town?

The answer is impossible to answer succinctly because it is contradictory.

To say Anna has acknowledged and moved on from its past as being a racist community does not consider the subtle sympathy still shared among some residents for the Confederacy – an attitude that dates back to the civil war.

But to claim Anna is forever bound to being racist overlooks Dexter's work and [the Black Lives Matter Protest that took place in the town over the summer](#).

“Darrel is a testament to the fact that there are truth-tellers and truth-seekers in communities that might not prioritize the most truthful version of their history,” Jaffe said in an interview with the GJR. “He’s read every obituary. The entire newspaper, from the beginning. He transcribes things and he gives people like me and you, and the public, access to information that he takes it upon himself to do. And I think that is radical.”

Anna and the neighboring towns of Jonesboro and Cobden are interesting because, despite the low population, there are plentiful resources and spaces for rich storytelling, Jaffe said.

“The more attention you can pay to diversify the narratives that exist within a community, it changes the way a town tells the story about itself over time,” Jaffe said.

Continuing to tell the story of the Civil War as battles with heroes and losers avoids dissecting the reason why the war happened in the first place, she said.

Reframing the discussion on the wound of the Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade

That reason – the mid-Atlantic slave trade and the trauma it sowed into the nation’s foundation is the focus of “I Was Here”.

“If you were to cast a shadow within the U.S. and America on every place that was impacted by slavery or all of the subsequent unequal citizenships that happened, it would be a very dark continent,” Fields said.

America’s inability to atone for the trauma of slavery is due to avoiding the discussion of the uncomfortable subject, Fields said. “I Was Here” is very susceptible to be misunderstood as “another project about slavery.”

As Community Liaison for the project, Fields' task is to ensure "I Was Here" is perceived for what it is – a project intent on reshaping the essence of the nation.

"It has to do with shifting the spirit of the nation by talking about a lived history and the things that stem from that." Fields said.

This place-based approach to interacting with history through our environment earned "I Was Here" several honors including an award of excellence from the American Association for State and Local History, a [2020 CODAwards](#) in the Public Space Budget Category, and a [grant by the National Endowment for the Arts](#). Installations are planned for the [Dyckman Farmhouse Museum](#) in Inwood New York, at the Octagon Museum in Washington DC, and a template for Illinois high school history students is being created.

Through the support of the local Market Manager, Region, and Diverse Clients Segments Team, Syndy Deese of Wells Fargo was able to work with the Wells Fargo Foundation to provide a grant to kick off the project in 2018. Deese volunteers her considerable administrative skills as a volunteer for the project.

Originally, the project was intended for Lexington, Kentucky, home of Cheapside – the largest auction site for the enslaved west of the Alleghenies.

Cheapside Park is now called the Henry A. Tandy Centennial Park after it was renamed in August of 2020. Henry A. Tandy was a successful Black entrepreneur in Lexington during the Reconstruction Era, said Mary Quinn Ramer, CEO of VisitLex, Lexington's tourism organization. Tandy's stonemasonry business helped build the Old Fayette County Courthouse that sits next to Henry Tandy Centennial Park.

[Marjorie Guyon](#) is the collage artist who spearheaded the "I Was Here" project in 2016. Quickly, she realized the project's

central focus, to heal the wound that enslavement created, was national.

“You know, that’s just how these spirits work. They move people together,” said [Jim Embry](#), historian for “I Was Here” referencing the Ancestor Spirit Portraits symbolic meaning. “First of all, that’s how we use the word ‘ancestral spirit’. That’s what ancestors do. They help guide and help mentor us. They help point the way.”

Once the project is requested for a historic site, an installation of Ancestor Spirit Portraits is carefully planned, Fields said.

A central element to “I Was Here” is its focus on the dignity of the enslaved and the wound that enslavement created in the American subconscious.

The subconscious is often said to be a source of [implicit bias](#), a term used to explain how people can act with prejudice unintentionally. Biases are programmed through the culture people are raised in and consume and the beliefs they hold dear.

“Can you badger people into thinking differently? Probably not. Can you shame people into thinking differently? It probably won’t work, but can you spirit shift them? This is the question,” Guyon said.

Racism is a way of thinking that can be internalized by people and perpetuated, explicitly and subtly, by institutions and cultures. It affects everyone but in very different ways.

By default many people harbor racism simply because they were raised in a racist society and not taught how to not be racist, Fields said. To be able to free oneself from a racist default mode of navigating the world is to shift the subconscious.

"I Was Here" Installation writer Barry Burton told GJR in an interview that he hopes "I Was Here" can be a platform that will improve Americans of all races and their interactions with each other.

"We have to fix it. Or, if America doesn't fix it in the end, we all lose. It's just that simple," he said.

Although the project has received awards and a warm reception by many, racism that kept Africans and African-Americans in bondage for centuries still remains, Burton said.

"I realized America is still not ready to change. It still will not let loose of its hold on Black people," he said. "It puzzles me. What it is that America refuses to relinquish because I don't know what type of power they're after or what they're afraid of?"

Why a subconscious shift is necessary to heal slavery's wound and affect change

For as long as the country has existed racist beliefs initially established by slavery have been reiterated for generations in more pervasive and elusive ways to maintain America's stratified society, Fields said.

"When laws change, people don't necessarily change," Fields said.

If individuals who make up society are not persuaded to support a law, they'll simply find loopholes around it. Harry Dougherty's life story proves this to be true. What allowed Dougherty's original white owner, Owen Evans, to continue enslaving him was a law created in 1805 that circumvented the [Northwest Ordinance of 1787's](#) ban on slavery and involuntary servitude, keeping Dougherty in enslavement for 31 years of his life.

For there to be a cultural change, there must be a massive

shift in the collective subconscious that draws in everyone. Education can help start it. But education alone will not sustain the change.

[Fordham Law School Professor Tanya Hernández](#) said education left to its own devices can not dismantle invisible but powerful racist systems and structures.

“People can still choose to not be aware of the knowledge if it is not paired with trying to have concrete reform on the ground,” she said in an interview with GJR. “To make an institutional change, people can be brought on board by seeing the change is actually to their benefit.”

[The fight to abolish legal clauses in several state constitutions that still permit slavery as a punishment for a crime](#) is a current example of how America is still shedding its layers of being one of the biggest actors in the mid-Atlantic slave trade.

For persuasion, people first need to be engaged, Hernández said. Art can engage people in a conducive way that creates the space in an individual’s thinking habits for change.

A possibility of progress

After Dexter’s presentation at the Anna Arts Center, some of the audience members said they found Dougherty’s story interesting and that they are open to learning more about slavery in the area. Some mentioned openly that their interest in this subject is partially attributed to having direct ancestors who fought to keep slavery.

“I think it’s fascinating to learn about a slave that worked and lived where we do,” Makaya Larson told GJR. “You think Lincoln gave the emancipation proclamation and then slavery was over, but that’s not what happened. There is still so much rebuilding to happen.”

Larson is from Buncombe, Illinois, a small village very close to where Harry Dougherty lived. She is teaching her kids, who are homeschooled, about the civil war, she said. Larson said teaching local history about the region's role in slavery and its past with racism in schools and the community is difficult, particularly in southern Illinois.

"There are still a lot of feelings on both sides in this community. I don't know that they could teach it in an unbiased way," Larson said. "There are people who have a family legacy connected to this, and that requires them to ask themselves tough questions about it."

She said that self-interrogation can start with the powerful visuals presented in "I Was Here".

Larson echoes what ProPublica reporter Logan Jaffe believes is holding towns like Anna back.

"A timeless answer, a fear of change and racism," she said.

Dexter, an Anna-Jonesboro life-long resident himself, knows well the tradition of discrimination and disdain for change in the region.

But, he also knows through his historical research that things can change. The world that Harry Dougherty lived in is no longer today's. However, Dougherty's and other kidnapped African-American's stories are testaments to the long struggle for freedom in the country that was founded in the ideals of liberty and inalienable rights.

"Harry didn't let the circumstances that he was born into overcome him. I think that's something that I and everybody else can learn. That whatever your circumstances at birth were, whatever family you were born into, there's a lot more you can do with your life," Dexter said. "You don't have to be bound by that."

Dougherty's story turns towards freedom on Christmas Day in 1835.

His lawyer, John Dougherty, freed him after Dougherty was under his "ownership" for two years after Dougherty sued for his freedom. In 1837, Dougherty married in Madison County, Illinois, bought 80 acres of land and started a family. Two of his sons fought in the Civil War in the U.S. Colored Troops. Dougherty's granddaughter Alice Dougherty was one of the founding members of the NAACP in Madison County. She marched in Selma, Alabama, and in Washington D.C. with Dr. Martin Luther King.

Dexter met Dougherty's descendants in 2016. Some still own the land originally purchased by their ancestors.

"This wasn't just someone I saw in a record, but somebody I can see, touch, and hear and is a direct descendant from that person – flesh and blood," Dexter said.

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