

## LAND OF LINCOLN

**T**O ENTER THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL is to enter another world. The passage begins on the east side of the building. Behind you stretches the reflecting pool, its glassy, rectangular surface reaching toward the Washington Monument, which towers above the grass and trees in the heart of the nation's city. Farther in the eastern distance rises the Capitol dome. Ahead of you, to the west, ascend broad flights of stairs, the kind that carry citizens into the halls of government or justice—or into heaven. At the top—cool, white, columned, and massive—looms the temple, an American Parthenon. Something timeless and true and powerful dwells there, and it gestures to you, inviting you to cross the boundary that separates your time and place from another realm. The air is hot, heavy, and hazy, typical for a summer day in the District of Columbia, and crowds of sweaty tourists seem to be everywhere. But none of that matters, for you are about to glimpse something unearthly, eternal, infinite.<sup>1</sup>

The initial approach is low and gentle, and you easily climb a series of steps and intervening terraces. Crossing the road that encircles the structure, you climb several more sets of steps and traverse still more terraces. About halfway up, as you near the last and steepest flights, you experience a strange sensation. Each step, repeated again and again, protracts the distance, prolongs the time, and makes you feel small. The effect is even more pronounced if you make the passage at night. Slowly, your disembodied, shrinking self rises toward the luminescent temple floating in the darkness.

At the top stand the enormous fluted columns. Touching one, you sense

the solidity and great age of the republic. Looking back, you see an urban park, but you might as well be on a mountaintop, surveying a green and misty valley. You pause for a moment as the enormous compacted weight of the past pushes down on the present. Then you step between the columns—through the portal—and into the temple.

There, huge, silent, and surrounded by shadows, a marble Lincoln presides over a land beyond time. His craggy, uneven face—“so awful ugly it becomes beautiful,” the poet Walt Whitman said—is at once stern, weary, tender, and sad.<sup>2</sup> You try to meet his gaze, but you cannot quite make the connection, for his eyes see past you—or through you—to something in the distance, something large and everlasting and more important than you.

“IN THIS TEMPLE AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION,” read the words engraved on the wall, “THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN IS ENSHRINED FOREVER.” To the north, behind a row of columns, is a chamber in which appears Lincoln’s second inaugural address and its iconic phrase “WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE . . . WITH CHARITY FOR ALL.” High above the words, so high that you almost miss the scene, a woman with giant wings—an angel or a goddess—seems to be reconciling two groups of white people. Representatives of each group, a man on one side and a woman on the other, reach out and join hands, as if in marriage. The winged woman places her hands on theirs, blessing their bond. To the south, between another set of columns, is a chamber devoted to the Gettysburg Address and its most deeply felt principle, that the United States is “A NEW NATION CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.” Above the lines carved in marble, the winged woman, reaching in triumph to the heavens, appears to sanctify the emancipation of black people.

Back in the temple’s main room, you stand before Lincoln again. It is impossible to be detached, neutral, unmoved. You are in the presence of greatness, of inevitable forces, unspeakable and omnipotent, and suddenly they lift you from yourself and carry you to a reality somewhere beyond your own. For a fleeting moment you are aware of an ultimate purpose and meaning, a higher truth, in the marble.

The wave, however, passes as quickly as it came. Your body, your physical self, now reminds you that you are more of this world than of some other. The heat and humidity are oppressive. You are tired, thirsty, hungry, a little dizzy, and your feet are beginning to ache. The other tourists—their chatter and bustle and relentless picture taking—are starting to annoy you.

Outside, sitting on the steps, you survey the trees, grass, water, and people, and your mind runs free. You think of the dedication and speeches chiseled on the walls. Why did someone choose those words and not others? You picture the newly freed men and women in the mural, their shackles broken. What are they going to do now? Why are they not at the wedding with the white folks? You notice the crystalline grain and varied colors of the marble beneath you, its chips, cracks, and seams, and in the seams, greenish dirt. You look back at the great classical columns and notice their weathered, irregular surfaces. Someone mined, cut, carved, polished, and assembled the marble. Where was the quarry? Who did the work? How and why, you wonder, did this monument come to be? You now realize that you have left behind the sublime otherworld in which the temple hovers. You are back on the ground, in this place, a capital city awash in humid air, perspiration, and imperfection. You are back on this Earth.

The moment when the magic vanishes is powerful because it subverts the temple's unearthly objectives. The temple seeks to magnify transcendent truths by minimizing the importance of the physical body. Its selective presentation of words and pictures attempts to legitimate a racial order that leaves black citizens out of the national reunion. Perhaps above all, by means of its size, beauty, and placement, the building tries to disguise the crass material circumstances of its creation. Yet it cannot completely succeed in any of these purposes. Its symbolic power notwithstanding, it cannot entirely silence a visitor's weary, emotionally spent body. Despite the elegance of its murals and the force of its words, it cannot obscure the reality of black people's experiences. And no matter how magnificent, its marble still weathers, cracks, and crumbles. Rather than culminating in a moment of mystical transcendence, your passage through the temple ends in an unsettling realization that something else—something corporeal, terrestrial, and tangible—is going on here.<sup>3</sup>

That awareness is an essential precondition to a crucially important insight: although the Lincoln Memorial is a monument to a god, it cannot rise, god-like, above its creators, materials, and environment. Even as it expresses the highest of ideals, it objectifies earthbound circumstances. All those circumstances, even conflicts over racial policies and practices, have been, and still are, grounded in a fundament so massive and ubiquitous that people often overlook the multiform ways in which it has shaped, limited, and empowered their lives. That fundament is nature—a nature that takes many forms but includes marble and other minerals; water, trees, grass, algae, and air; and even

the body's flesh, blood, and bone. More than anything else, the Lincoln Memorial encapsulates Americans' struggle to capture, use, and find meaning in the matter and energy that swirl around and through them. Like the nation that created it, the Lincoln Memorial is a monument to nature and to the efforts of citizens to shape nature in the image of their ideals.

Between 1914 and 1922, the United States Congress, the Army Corps of Engineers, planners, architects, artists, contractors, and other citizens literally made the Lincoln Memorial from pieces of the national landscape.<sup>4</sup> The transformation began with the construction site and proceeded to the marble that finally capped it. Enormous quantities of earthen fill turned a plot of marshy Potomac River bottomland into solid ground, although not solid enough for the memorial. To provide a stable foundation for ton upon ton of stone, the M. F. Comer Company drove 122 hollow steel cylinders some sixty feet to bedrock, dug out the earth inside them, and refilled them with steel-reinforced concrete. On these sturdy piers, the George A. Fuller Company erected the marble superstructure. Most of the stone came from a quarry situated at an elevation of nearly ten thousand feet in the central Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Milled into architectural components at a nearby village, the brilliant white marble, Colorado Yule, arrived at the construction site on railroad cars.<sup>5</sup> From this downward process—shafts sunk to bedrock and marble rolled from the mountains—the Lincoln Memorial rose toward the sky.

The construction, however, was hardly a simple, instrumental process of transforming nature into a building. It was not just a matter of choosing the best site and the best materials and then shaping them into a stunning piece of architecture. Central to the manipulation of nature—inextricable from it—was a politics of nature. Members of Congress and planners squabbled over the location of the memorial, and the primary designer, Henry Bacon, resisted the meddling of other prominent architects. Most important, the selection of Colorado stone snubbed other marble-producing states, particularly Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. Indeed, the politics of marble replicated the sectional politics that had resulted in the Civil War and Lincoln's rise to greatness. Proponents of Colorado Yule pointed to the stone's exceptional brightness; critics claimed it was too expensive and inferior in quality. The Bureau of Standards tested the competing marbles but found only that Colorado Yule absorbed more water and might have a greater propensity to stain. Eventually, Bacon and government officials accepted smaller amounts of stone from the other states, including some in the South—pink Tennessee marble for the interior floor and

wall base, for example, and white marble quarried in Georgia for the statue of the man most responsible for the Confederacy's defeat.<sup>6</sup>

Nature itself sometimes obstructed the efforts of the memorial's designers and builders. The building site and materials resisted manipulation. To save money, the approach steps and the upper terrace retaining wall were constructed on spread-slab foundations that rested not on piers rising from bedrock but on soft soil. Eventually the foundations began to sink, damaging the steps, the retaining wall, and the concrete deck underlying the terrace. Contractors removed the foundations, steps, wall, and deck, dug shafts down to bedrock, and then built a massive substructure to support the enormous weight of new architectural components. Organic nature was not fully cooperative, either. To enhance the memorial's timeless look, its site plan called for mature trees and shrubs, species such as yew, boxwood, holly, and magnolia. Yet a search in and around the capital turned up only enough aged specimens to cover the ground on one side of the structure.<sup>7</sup>

The effort and energy necessary to manipulate stone, soil, and plants into art required the labor of people, a human nature that consisted of the minds and bodies of workmen. High in the Colorado Rockies, laborers braved rock falls, bad weather, avalanches, and runaway railroad cars to cut marble blocks from a mountain and then shape them into neoclassical building components. At the construction site, other laborers excavated soil in preparation for the mighty piers that would hold the edifice. The men hand-dug the shafts for the foundation of the steps and terrace, wrote the architectural historian Christopher Thomas, "a job the discomfort of which in Washington's hot, humid summer can be imagined."<sup>8</sup> By such means, human work blended with earthen materials to produce a monument imbued with a powerful, unearthly symbolism that could not admit of sweat and dirt.

In one other way the Lincoln Memorial objectified a struggle over the form, function, and meaning of nature. At the heart of American civilization lay competing assumptions about humankind. Were all people members of the same human family, with the same (natural) propensities, capacities, and potentials? Or were groups of people, identified by their racial characteristics, inherently (that is, naturally) different from one another? The Lincoln Memorial embodied the tension between the two positions. For the most part, the building acknowledged a universal human nature ("ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL") and a unified democracy ("IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION"). Yet the structure also alluded to division and

difference. Jules Guérin's murals contradicted the memorial's universalism and wholeness. *Reunion* (which might have been titled *Reunion of a Race*) left blacks out of the national marriage and confined them, in a kind of aesthetic segregation, to *Emancipation of a Race*. The fracture was more than just symbolic, for the construction force that erected the memorial likely was divided by race and ethnicity, with different groups assigned to particular tasks.

The tension between universal and particular human natures even appeared in the first rituals held at the memorial. At the dedication ceremony in 1922, African American dignitaries sat in a roped-off area apart from other participants, witnesses, and spectators. Robert Russa Moton, president of Tuskegee Institute and the only black speaker at the event, was seated with his white peers, but he addressed the issue of segregation nonetheless. Standing at the top of the steps, he asserted that emancipation was Lincoln's greatest achievement and that it "vindicated the honor of a Nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Most white Americans ignored Moton and continued to harden the color line across the capital. Racial segregation rested on specious assumptions about the nature of black people—abstract prejudices that had no basis in material reality—yet segregation was a material practice literally grounded in the national landscape. It denied black citizens equal access to the spaces, environments, and resources that offered them the means to a better life. African Americans like Moton, refusing to accept either the assumptions or the practice, continued to assert their equality, often from the Lincoln Memorial's steps. Clustered in front of the portal, their marble patron sitting behind them, they proclaimed their full citizenship in the land of Lincoln.<sup>9</sup>

Surprises, not just transcendent truths, inhere in the temples of American history. The very marble that enables a visitor to intuit an ultimate purpose also manifests the complicated, contested experience of a messy biophysical world. And the environmental surprise within the Lincoln Memorial is but one example of similar surprises latent in the entire American past.<sup>10</sup> Within every famous icon, turning point, movement, or moment is a story of people struggling with the earthy, organic substances that are integral to the human predicament. Focusing on stone, soil, sweat, and other forms of nature makes familiar historical accounts seem strange. That sense of strangeness enables the visitor to see the past with fresh eyes and, in the process, to recover the forgotten and overlooked ground on which so much history has unfolded.