


Lessons From the Tulsa Race Massacre





Through education and engagement, OU illuminates a dark chapter in Oklahoma's past with hopes for a brighter future.

A century ago, a fiery cloud of racial hatred rose to blacken Tulsa's skies and took the lives of as many as 300 people. And yet, each year there are still students like Jordan Johnson who absorb the unfolding horror for the first time in a University of Oklahoma classroom.

"My reaction was, 'Why would something like this happen?'" says the Idabel, Okla., senior, who learned of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre as an OU freshman. "It's unthinkable that human beings were put through so much pain and suffering without our even acknowledging it."

The OU community has firmly resolved to not only acknowledge the history and legacy of this dark American chapter, but also to lead through education and engagement. "Remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre," a centennial commemoration, stretched from September 2020 to mid-April and featured nearly 30 special events and offerings across the University's three campuses.

"OU is viewed as the premier higher education institution in Oklahoma," says Karlos Hill, chair of the Clara Luper Department of African and African-American Studies. "If that's who we are, then OU certainly needs to be a part of telling one of the most consequential stories in Oklahoma history."

The commemoration began with a September panel discussion hosted by OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. and featured presentations by members of the state's 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission. That same evening, *From Tragedy to Triumph: Race Massacre Survivor Stories*, an exhibition of survivor photographs and testimonials, was unveiled at Bizzell Memorial Library.

"OU did two important things that day," says Hill, who curated the exhibition. "We leaned into this history and really put our institutional might behind it, and at the same time, we highlighted the stories of Tulsa Race Massacre victims, sur-

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Photos courtesy of the Tulsa Historical Society and Museum



John Wesley Williams with his wife and son, Loula Cotton Williams and W.D. Williams. The family owned Greenwood's Dreamland Theatre, which was destroyed in the Tulsa Race Massacre.

vivors and their descendants. And for me, that's one of the most important things—if not the most important thing—to do.”

Hill, author of the recently released book, *The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History*, served as co-chair of OU's centennial commemoration with Kalenda Eaton, associate professor of Africana literature, and Daniel Simon, assistant director and editor-in-chief of OU's renowned journal *World Literature Today*.

Together, they helped faculty, staff and students create a wide range of educational opportunities throughout the year, including an OU Law panel of national experts discussing financial reparations to the descendants of race massacre survivors. Another especially meaningful presentation came from the Oklahoma Archeological Survey team who, only days earlier, had uncovered a mass grave that may contain the remains of at least 12 massacre victims in Tulsa's Oaklawn Cemetery.

The commemoration culminated April 8 through 10 with *Reflecting on the Past, Facing the Future: The Tulsa Race*



Karlos Hill



Kalenda Eaton

Massacre Centennial Symposium. The symposium showcased in-person and online panel discussions; presentations by national experts on Greenwood, Black Wall Street and the race massacre; a keynote lecture by former U.S. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize recipient Tracy K. Smith; and the premiere of “I Dream of Greenwood,” an OU dance performance inspired by the personal accounts of survivors who were children in 1921.

A special issue of *World Literature Today* also was released in



The destroyed Dreamland Theatre in the days following the Tulsa Race Massacre.

conjunction with the symposium. *Redreaming Dreamland: 21 Writers and Artists Reflect on the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial* contemplates the impact of the massacre and echoes that still reverberate today.

“The charge of the university, in my opinion, is to do this kind of work, to illuminate the history of Oklahoma and connect communities,” says commemoration co-chair Kalenda Eaton. “But it’s also to bring in scholarship and research around democracy, political advancement, racial injustice and Black progress. These are huge, national issues.

“Oklahoma is very unique, and I don’t think people outside of the state understand how rich in experience and history it is and how quintessentially American Oklahoma is,” adds the professor, who studies and writes on



A dead Black man lies on a flatbed truck outside Tulsa's Convention Hall. In the background, Black men who were arrested enter the building for internment with their hands up.



Greenwood begins to rebuild. Newly constructed homes, tents and temporary shelters are visible among the fire's rubble.

Blacks in the American West. Eaton notes that Oklahoma's past encompasses Black enslavement, Indian removal, Civil War battles and Western migration. "OU has a particular platform to lead the way on important conversations."

She understands just how important such conversations can be. "My grandmother's entire life was in Tulsa from about age 7 until she was an adult," Eaton says. "She had all these wonderful stories that I would hear—but nothing about the race massacre."

It wasn't until Eaton was in graduate school that she realized her grandmother's family had moved to Tulsa to live with an aunt within months of the race massacre. Her grandmother's aunt had witnessed the devastation of Black Wall Street as many residents were killed and 35 city blocks of the Greenwood District were systematically looted and burned on May 31 and June 1, 1921.

"I asked my grandmother if she knew about the race massacre, and she gave me all this information about what happened to her family. I said, 'I don't understand why no one has ever told me this before,' and she replied, 'Well, no one ever asked. We moved on. We weren't going to let them paralyze us.' It was almost a defiant attitude," Eaton says.

She acknowledges that trauma and fear made many Black Tulsans unwilling to share their experiences. Other people

purposely quashed the race massacre's history in what has been called "a conspiracy of silence."

"The fact of the matter is, at the time, there was not a true investigation into what occurred," Hill adds. "The result of the initial investigation was simply to blame Black Tulsans and not hold the white mob accountable for its violence and destruction.

"Refusing to investigate the individuals responsible was an act of suppression, first and foremost."

Suppression of evidence resulted in an Oklahoma populace deprived of its own history for most of a century, Hill says. An investigative state commission was formed and issued a formal report in 2001 to mark the race massacre's 80th anniversary. Findings were based in part on written and recorded eyewitness survivor testimonies and a 1921 Red Cross report so damning that it takes the reader's breath away.

Part of the report states, "All that fire, rifles, revolvers, shotguns, machine guns and organized inhuman passion could do within thirty-five city blocks with its twelve thousand negro population, was done."

Hill, an expert on race violence and lynching, says even he didn't realize the full scope of the Tulsa Race Massacre until coming to OU in 2016. He eventually became a member of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission



The American Red Cross Disaster Relief Headquarters served survivors for months following the massacre. In a report, a Red Cross staff member wrote, "Thirty-five city blocks were looted systematically, then burned to a cinder, and the twelve thousand population thereof scattered like chaff before the wind."

The Library of Congress accepts name change

A task force at the University of Oklahoma Libraries has succeeded in changing how the Library of Congress catalogs the 1921 mass killing and arson of Blacks and Black-owned businesses in Tulsa's Greenwood District. The Library of Congress has agreed to update its subject heading from "Tulsa Race Riot" to "Tulsa Race Massacre," changing how the attack is listed in subject headings in library systems worldwide. As part of campus-wide efforts to commemorate the centennial, University Libraries has an exhibition titled *From Tragedy to Triumph: Race Massacre Survivor*, which tells the story of the attack through a combination of photographs and vivid eyewitness accounts from survivors. The exhibition can be seen at Bizzell Memorial Library on the OU Norman campus, or viewed virtually at libraries.ou.edu/content/tragedy-triumph-race-massacre-survivor-stories.

steering committee, where he developed OU summer institutes for Oklahoma schoolteachers who are mandated by state law to teach the history of the race massacre.

"At first, I really did not understand this history to its fullest, and I certainly didn't understand it from the vantage point of victims, survivors and their descendants," he says.

Hill wants to ensure that OU students can never say the same. This year, he co-taught a Presidential Dream Course, "The Tulsa Race Massacre: 100 Years Later," which explored multiple angles of the massacre. Teaching alongside Hill were Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication Professor Meta Carstarphen, who has written about Oklahoma's African-American settlements and historical Black newspapers, and Rilla Askew, OU associate professor of English and author of *Fire in Beulah*, a critically acclaimed novel based on the Tulsa Race Massacre.

The interdisciplinary course featured virtual presentations by such writers as Scott Ellsworth, author of the seminal history, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*.

"The class was not designed to make students into a walking encyclopedia about the Tulsa Race Massacre," Hill says. "The real goal is that students can have a high-level, even highly charged, conversation with someone about this history and do it confidently and intelligently."

“For history not to repeat itself, you have to learn about the ugly underbellies.”

Jordan Johnson, the OU student who hadn't heard of the race massacre until his freshman year, is a class member and shares his acquired knowledge with others. “I've had conversations with friends from Tulsa whose great-grandparents lived through the massacre,” he says. “I empathize with them about how hard it is to come to accept the truth.”

Students also learn a part of the Tulsa Race Massacre story that often gets overlooked: the renaissance of Greenwood. Denied assistance by insurance companies and the City of Tulsa, massacre survivors solicited financial help from supporters nationwide and rebuilt despite astonishing roadblocks, Eaton says. The resurrected Greenwood District thrived for decades.

“If you don't tell the story of Greenwood's comeback, then you're not really telling everything. These three parts—Black Wall Street, the Tulsa Race Massacre, the comeback—each is a story unto itself. But the three of them together are a classic American story,” she says.

This history has been passed down through generations of descendants like Danelle C. Smith, a clinical researcher in pediatric diabetes and endocrinology at OU-Tulsa. Her great-great-grandfather, John R. Emerson Sr., owned multiple businesses in Greenwood, including the Emerson Hotel and Blue Bird Cab Company.

“The race massacre was talked about in my family all of the time,” Smith says. “The businesses were destroyed, and he hid under a bridge with my great-grandmother, who was then a child, and saved their lives.” Emerson went on to reconstruct his businesses, developed many of the commercial properties in “new Greenwood,” and built several houses that still exist today.

Smith is proud that OU has claimed leadership in honoring Tulsa Race Massacre victims and survivors. But she considers the commemoration a starting point. “My hope and wish are that OU continues to make strides to keep that spotlight on and figure out ways to be progressive in creating avenues for better equity within our system.”

Kalenda Eaton agrees that OU's commemoration has been an opening for the university community and public to reflect upon the past and consider the future. “I think the Tulsa Race Massacre centennial is an opportunity to re-examine those events and really think about the democratic ideals of our country,” she says.

“Often, people don't pay attention to history. But Greenwood was such an important example of Black progress and an autonomous community, even amidst intense racism, Jim Crow laws and segregation. To see that systematically destroyed block by block really speaks to people, especially in this moment when there is increased attention to racial justice.”

In fact, the Tulsa Race Massacre draws a direct line to current events through publications and programs that are flooding popular culture, Hill says. A new slate of books on the race massacre is joined by as many as 10 documentaries currently under production. Fictitious TV series like HBO's “The Watchmen” and “Lovecraft Country” also have brought widespread attention.

“I've never seen anything like this in terms of public interest and awareness,” he says. “The Tulsa Race Massacre has become a key reference point for talking about racial violence that is still happening today.”

World Literature Today's 36-page section enters that conversation through essays, reviews of books on the race massacre and works by internationally renowned poets, including Tracy K. Smith, Patricia Smith and Tulsa native and current U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo. Hill discusses his recently published photographic history, and among the essays is a creative non-fiction piece Eaton wrote on her grandmother's stories of Tulsa and the race massacre.

“Creative writers have an ability to bring imagination and empathy to this historical moment, in looking at the anniversary and seeing what role we can play today as narrators of this drama to make change,” says commemoration co-chair and *WLT* Editor-in-Chief Daniel Simon. “This is the 95th issue of *World Literature Today* that I've worked on, and it feels like the most important one.”

As the descendant of a Tulsa Race Massacre survivor, Danelle Smith believes each of OU's yearlong commemoration efforts has had an important role in fulfilling a long-overdue mission.

“For history not to repeat itself, you have to learn about the ugly underbellies. You can't cover it up and pretend these events didn't happen,” she says. “They happened, and they're going to continue to happen if we don't confront our history.”



Photo Provided

Daniel Simon

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