UPRISING, RIOT, MASSACRE: FRAMING, MEMORIALIZATION, AND THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE OF 1921

A Thesis by

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UPRISING, RIOT, MASSACRE: FRAMING, MEMORIALIZATION, AND THE TULSA
RACE MASSACRE OF 1921

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the development of two opposing narratives that took root in Tulsa in the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, in which Whites framed the incident as a Negro uprising, while Blacks in Tulsa’s Greenwood district placed the blame on white mob rule. Utilizing historical accounts, sociological studies, museum studies literature, and state and local history monographs, this research places the emergent public memory of the Tulsa Race Massacre into the broader context of late twentieth and early twenty-first century race politics, while investigating the scholarly and community forces at work at reframing the events of 1921.

It concludes that a chief source of anxiety underpinning white resistance to a critical reframing of the massacre revolves around the stigma that comes from the event, in light of similar experiences of stigmatization in the South. However, the examples of other stigmatized cities provide useful models for Tulsans to utilize in navigating the politics of public memory surrounding the centennial of the massacre.
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INTRODUCTION

On February 15, 2020, filmmakers Devoken Riggins and Marcus Brown screened their new film, *Black Tulsa Burning*, at the Circle Cinema in Tulsa. This screening was followed up by an enlightening question and answer panel. Before the film started, a local leader was given the opportunity to share a few words and set the tone for the evening. Cherokee Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. stood at the podium in front of the screen and provided three important facets to Cherokee public memory surrounding the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. First, African Americans and American Indians have had a shared history of marginalization in Oklahoma. Second, this massacre happened in Cherokee Nation. Third, the legacy of slavery among the Cherokee is a part of that shared history. In closing, Chief Hoskin said in no uncertain terms that the Tulsa Race Massacre is not an event that only Black and White Tulsans should care about. Regardless of ethnicity, regardless of community, the events of May 31-June 1, 1921 are history that everyone in Oklahoma should know.\(^1\) It is in the spirit of Chief Hoskin’s opening statement that this research has been undertaken.

This study examines the development of two opposing narratives that took root in Tulsa in the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, in which Whites framed the incident as a “Negro Uprising,” while Blacks in Tulsa’s Greenwood district placed the blame on White mob rule. While the existing literature characterizes the decades following the massacre as a conspiracy of silence, this study homes in on the identity which Tulsa crafted for itself in the century following the massacre, before providing background on the reemergence of the massacre in scholarly and civic endeavors from the late 1970s through the state commission at the turn of the millennium. The study then pivots to place the massacre in the context of race relations in the US, the challenging issue of race in Oklahoma, as well as local identity and
boosterism. This shift in racial politics encompasses two pivotal commissions surrounding the massacre: the state commission in 1997 provided an official narrative of the massacre which turned the prevailing White narrative on its head and recommended reparations, while the ongoing Centennial Commission focuses on education and is in the process of constructing a major memorial museum. The study then concludes with broader considerations of Tulsa’s struggle to reconcile boosterism and atrocity which mirrors Birmingham, Alabama as both cities struggle to navigate stigma. Taken together, this study aims to illustrate the ways in which Tulsa’s modernist and future-focused civic mindset made the events of 1921 a blind spot for White Tulsans, while highlighting the cumulative efforts of scholars and community leaders that brought the city’s racist past to the forefront of public perception.

Literature Review

This study of the Tulsa Race Massacre borrows from works of history and sociology that explore the challenging dynamics of public memory. Among these are the works of Amy Sodaro, Edward Linenthal, Chris M. Messer and Patricia A. Bell, whose explorations of media portrayal, governmental reaction, and broader forces at work surrounding collective violence provides a much-needed theoretical framework to tie the disparate elements together that frame the events of 1921. In addition to their contributions to broader theoretical frameworks for understanding the event and its place in history, local history literature provides insight into Tulsa’s broader identity, the events of the massacre itself, and the circumstances surrounding its reemergence as a subject of public interest.

As an example of theory surrounding that public interest, the contemporary phenomenon of memorial exhibition appears in the work *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the*
Politics of Past Violence, which provides critically important context for the shifts in society that brought memorial museums into being. Starting with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C., Sodaro traces a cross-cultural story of memorial museums, public memory, and how these institutions are born and utilized. Of particular interest for Tulsa’s story are the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum and the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York. While the subject matter between these two museums and memorial sites differs, they are unified in their role of framing the horror of the violent past for an American general audience.

As the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum came together, the demand for public victim-recognition had been an altogether new phenomenon tied to the last quarter of the twentieth century, as “victimhood attained a privileged status as previously marginalized groups sought recognition, and in doing so, they brought the negative past to the forefront of historical consciousness.”² This element of contested memory, especially between Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian interests in the museum, carried high stakes, as it ultimately carried the weight of signifying official ownership of holocaust memory. The solution ultimately came down to project director Michael Berenbaum, whose synthesis of Holocaust memory created a “Hierarchy of victims,” which recognized the losses of other groups but placed Jews at the front and center of the story.³

Alongside the USHMM, The National September 11 Memorial and Museum is among the most recent, culturally relevant, and challenging museums of its type in recent history. It is also of particular note for the upcoming Tulsa memorial museum because a planning firm involved with the 9/11 museum is assisting in creating Greenwood Rising.⁴ Thus, the most current flagship memorial museum in the United States is bound to influence the character of
Greenwood Rising, which is at the same time validating for those who demand greater public awareness for the Tulsa Race Massacre, and also concerning because of the larger hang-ups and challenges endemic to the 9/11 museum.

Sodaro’s chapter on the National September 11 Museum immediately points out some of the starkest differences between it and the ur-example of the USHMM: “Rather than a new cultural form of education and commemoration emerging -- the memorial museum -- we see the difficult process of commemoration of 9/11 resulting in the creation of the by now widely recognized memorial museum form, which in many ways is strained and changed by the complexities of 9/11.” Those complexities stem largely from the immediacy and cultural shock that resulted from the event, where conversations on memorialization followed in the immediate wake of the attacks.

Early in the design process, the importance of survivor and witness testimony took ultimate precedent, as the museum shifted away from constructing a historical narrative and focused instead on constructing its exhibits around individual memories. To this end, they utilized audio-visual technology to collate and display those experiences. This effort, well intended, appears to have backfired, as Sodaro asserts: “While perhaps the intention was to create a fragmented, “collected” memory of 9/11 from around the world, the museum instead creates a hegemonic and monolithic memory of the event that is deeply political and problematic.” In particular, she cites a segment at the end of the Historical Exhibit, titled “How Can America Protect its Citizens from Terrorism?” in which it celebrates the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, steering clear of any criticism of policy making during the period and graphically displaying other terrorist attacks around the world, for which the ongoing War on Terror is meant to eradicate.
The museum also suffers from a crippling lack of context, as it steers entirely clear of the lead up or consequences of the September 11 attacks, instead narrowly focusing on the events of 8:46 AM, September 11, 2001 through to the clearing of Ground Zero. In doing so, the museum easily crafts a story with clear heroes, victims, and enemies by simplifying the event to a strict timeline. Through this framing device, it successfully depicts the disaster as happening literally and figuratively “out of the blue,” utilizing the shock of the event without leaving room to truly investigate the history that led up to that moment. Ultimately, instead of examining the event as a causal, consequential, historical event of the recent past, its focus pivots away from context as a shrine to American collective trauma. This very trauma creates a deeply problematic interpretation of the event and its meaning, as it paints a clear line between the virtuous America against the violent outsider, and the “museum creates an evil other against which the glorious USA triumphs and will continue to triumph.”

In addition to national memorial museums, Greenwood Rising also fits into the context of Oklahoma’s larger memorialization efforts surrounding the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing. The bombing, the societal trauma that accompanied it, the varieties of individual and collective responses, and the politics of memory surrounding this event contributed to how the memorial and museum framed the attack. These factors were all explored at great length by Edward T. Linenthal, in *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* where, much like his previous investigations of memory surrounding holocaust memory, he captures the messiness of public responses to unthinkable tragedy.

Linenthal provides an important consideration for the variety of responses to the bombing, which he describes as progressive, redemptive, and responsive. The first of these responses center around constructing a more positive narrative that centers on the rescue effort
and public support for first responders and victims, which was ultimately constructed rhetorically into what Oklahoma governor Francis Keating called “the Oklahoma Standard.” This standard, referring to the outpouring of help from tens of thousands of Oklahoma in the wake of the bombing, served an important role in framing the event, taking focus away from the horror of the violence and placing it instead on the capacity of people to do good in the face of unimaginable evil.\(^\text{10}\)

The second response, the creation of a redemptive narrative, emerged from religious communities to find meaning in the midst of calamity. This event ignited a wide range of religious responses. For one, many of the memorial services attempted to grapple with the seeming senselessness of the violence and loss of life. Among Oklahoma City’s Jewish citizenry, responses ranged from an outpouring of aid to harrowing reminders of the very same hatred that led to the Holocaust persisting. Among Christians throughout the state, considerable effort went into explaining the presence of a merciful and loving God amid atrocity, and how such a thing could happen. Some cautioned against giving the bombing too great a place theologically and placing it within God’s will, with some associating it directly with the work of Satan. Others interpreted it as a sign of impending apocalypse. Still others were frank in their incapacity to understand or comprehend the event theologically, as FBI chaplain Joe Williams confided, “I have been asked on hundreds of occasions why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I can never fully answer to satisfy even myself.”\(^\text{11}\) Confronted with tragedy, people across religious sects and traditions struggled to effectively frame the events of the bombing to ascribe some sort of meaning to what had happened.

The third response centers around the raw, unfiltered suffering that persisted after the dust settled in downtown OKC. Labeled as “toxic narratives” by the author, this includes the
injuries and pain suffered by survivors, the grief felt by those who lost loved ones, and the psychological strain brought on by the impact of the attack which disrupted families and workplaces.\(^\text{12}\) While many held up the heroism of first responders, the intense stress and psychological harm experienced by them led to dozens of suicide attempts, as well as a rise in alcoholism and divorce among emergency response personnel. The darker outlook on the event also presents some of the problems in the progressive narrative surrounding the Oklahoma Standard, since the same state population that rallied in its relief efforts also included many who threatened to attempt copycat bombings at hospitals. Still others attempted cons to take advantage of that wave of good will.\(^\text{13}\) The bombing also brought out the specter of xenophobia, as early suspicions of Islamist involvement in the attack led Oklahomans to lash out against people of Middle Eastern dissent. Conspiracy theories surrounded the event in online discourse, which the \textit{Daily Oklahoman} highlighted as a significant social problem.

An important factor considering the formation of public memory is that the trauma responses guiding the formation of these narratives are not mutually exclusive. Linenthal himself vacillated between them as he conducted his research:

\begin{quote}
I moved back and forth between these narratives as I met with people in Oklahoma City. I was struck by the power of human resilience in the face of mass murder. I appreciated the great importance of the community’s religious resources. At times, however, I felt overwhelmed by the torrent of immediate religious interpretation [sic] of the bombing, as if so many words would somehow make some sense of the event. There seemed little room for silence, a kind of awe-filled, deeply silent sadness in the face of the power of such loss. And I began to appreciate, after Oklahoma City faded from the headlines, and other tragedies captured the public’s attention, how deeply the bomb’s impact would live on. Discordant but related stories continue to be lived out: a song celebrating the heroic saga of rescue and response, a prayer for transcendence amid the rubble, and a lament from those for whom April 19 is always today.\(^\text{14}\)
\end{quote}

As Linenthal captures from his experience, the complicated, interwoven, and contradictory chords of memory surrounding the bombing needed a quiet space for those intense emotions and
narratives to convalesce. With the creation of the Oklahoma City Memorial and Museum, these strands of memory would influence the experience that was created.

As the memorial and museum plans came together, its storytelling brought these threads of psychological and political responses together. The plans for the museum benefitted from the work of past memorialization efforts, as the designers modeled after the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum. The experience consciously attempts to capture the sense of helplessness and lost innocence by portraying April 19, 1995 as starting just like any other day. This mundane workday is captured at the very opening, as visitors are set in a room to listen to a routine meeting at the nearby Oklahoma Resource Board Building that was interrupted by the blast. The rest of the exhibit labored to keep the victims at the center of the story, an act that the author interprets as “in part a protest against mass death. It also makes heavy use of patriotic imagery and frames the deaths as a patriotic sacrifice. During the dedication, President Clinton framed the memorial thusly: “There are places in our national landscape so scarred by freedom’s sacrifice that they shape forever the soul of America -- Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Selma. This place is such hallowed ground.”15

This interpretation especially grated against Linenthal, as the vast majority of the victims were just that – victims. They had not made any willful sacrifice on the day of the bombing. In his words, “The landscape to which Oklahoma City is connected is not Valley Forge, Gettysburg, or Selma, but the sites of political terrorism and mass murder: the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, the McDonald’s in San Diego, and Columbine High School.”16 Here, the author identifies the trend that Sodaro’s study of memorial museums reveals in authorities reframing the violent past for political legitimacy. In this case, rather than placing the focus on the White supremacist and anti-government ideologies of the perpetrator, they
instead lionize the victims as having sacrificed themselves for some nebulous freedom. The patriotic elements of the memorial, then, heavily favor the political gains that come from a more progressive narrative of the bombing, leaving the uglier, more toxic and challenging elements of public memory off the table.

When trauma is the result of an outside invading force, as was the case of the Third Reich’s invasion of Poland and the Jewish Pale, or the 9-11 attack whose main figures came from other countries, race riots/massacres are more challenging because the perpetrators are within. While far more complicated in than memory suggested, the Holocaust and 9-11 could be framed as a time when an outsider attacked victims. In race issues in the United States, however, both parties were local, often with descendants still living side by side. When the “other” is also a neighbor, telling the story becomes a lot more awkward. Such complications arose in 1919, when a rash of race riots and massacres broke out across the entire United States, from San Francisco to Washington D.C..

One case in point involves the 1919 race massacre in Helena, Arkansas, kicked off in response to an attempt at African American farm labor organization. A union formed in 1918 and included a wide range of fraternal practices in line with the Masons including vows of secrecy and a range of passwords and door words to protect Black unionizers. In their efforts for public outreach, “the promotive literature of the union made its appeal to Negroes to affiliate by quoting Biblical passages and asserting the need for economic justice and social equality.”17 They met with the goal of withholding cotton until they received better pay, as Whites had been forcing them to give up their products for around half the market value. Additionally, they saw as other race riots and massacres dotted the American landscape in 1919, that, to gain their rights, “they would need to protect themselves and their families, for the white man’s law would not protect
them against the abuses of white men.” They also spoke out against White planters in their meetings and were armed for self-defense, which prompted rumors of Black insurrection which could lead to the murder of local Whites. In short, the narrative surrounding the massacre is one in which underpaid and exploited Black workers attempted to get fair prices for their labor and goods and were preparing for a backlash when the riot broke out. Motivated by a sense that Black sharecroppers were planning an attack on local whites, a white mob crushed their union and murdered between twenty and over eight hundred people. In the aftermath, the local criminal justice system did not prosecute any Whites for the riot, but rather moved to place twelve Blacks on death row for alleged murder.18

One vital part of the Elaine Massacre’s story, which stands in contrast to the Tulsa Race Massacre, is the changes in historical interpretation over the years. Between the 1960s and today, an ongoing debate on the origins and blame for the riot changed drastically within the Arkansas Historical Association, with the most intense conversation coming out in the association’s journal at the height of the African American civil rights movement. Two articles from the early 1960s highlight the deep divide among academics of the era in their understanding of the nature of racial violence. The first of these articles, “The Elaine Race Riots of 1919,” paints a sympathetic picture of the situation that rural African Americans in the area faced as they were being treated unfairly for their labor, describing the nature of peonage that local sharecroppers faced as “vicious exploitation.”19 Some sharecroppers first sought legal counsel from a White legal firm in Little Rock, but others wanted to take a more active stand against their mistreatment. In Elaine, Black men would not allow Black women in the community to be put to work for Whites, in the fields or otherwise, at any price. Meanwhile, groups of Black laborers
banded together and refused to accept being underpaid; they would not pick cotton unless the White farmers paid their price for the work.\textsuperscript{20}

A year later, an article in the spring 1961 issue of \textit{The Arkansas Historical Quarterly} challenged the sympathetic tone that Roberts took on the Elaine riot. In it, the authors make a concerted effort to undermine the narrative that the last article established. J. W. Butts and Dorothy James‘ article “The Underlying Causes of the Elaine Riot of 1919” opened not with the labor situation among Blacks in Phillips County but instead by ascribing malicious intent to the local Black community: “On night of September 30, 1919, there took place at Hoop Spur, Arkansas, . . . the unprovoked slaying of one White peace officer, the wounding of another, and the wounding of a civilian. Thus began a planned insurrection of the Negroes against the Whites in that area.”\textsuperscript{21} This article calls out a claim from Roberts that Arkansas River delta sharecroppers sought legal consultation, as “absolutely false.” Further, Butts and James cast doubt on other elements of Robert’s claims, saying he knew of no evidence that Black millers took a stand for women. He also questioned the whole idea of Blacks having economic reason to organize: “The Negroes in the Elaine territory were always rather prosperous and any planter who refused to take a settlement or give a statement of account to any of his tenants was never known to me.” As Blacks were asking for more than their paternalistic planters were giving, Butts and James posit their opinion instead that “I believe that this whole thing was a money-making scheme thought up by at least one white man and one Negro.”\textsuperscript{22}

After this, the author then relies on White news coverage from Helena, the local county seat, where a Phillips County attorney claimed that the union organizers promised African American laborers that they would be given a plot of land and a mule in return for slaughtering the local white population.”\textsuperscript{23} A local inspector is also quoted, without citation, claiming that
reports existed which revealed who would be targeted by the Black unionists and who would carry out the murders. While this source is overly-reliant on local White newspapers that would have had a vested interest in defending White innocence and championing blame for Black massacre victims, Butts and James succeeded in telling a version of the riot’s history in the way that local Whites would have likely told themselves.

Though historians hotly debated the true nature of the riots in the Arkansas river delta in the 1960s, there was a greater degree of uniformity in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* by the end of the 1970s. Ralph H. Desmarais raises the issue of unreliable narration by the authorities in the summer 1974 issue of the journal as he provided primary source documents to illustrate the prejudices influencing military intervention in the area. This article, filling in gaps from the 1972 article “Riots, Racism, and Hysteria: The Response of Federal Investigative Officials in the Race Riots of 1919,” by William Cohen, states its purpose in no uncertain terms:

Cohen's thesis, which is shared by me, is that the men in military intelligence who carried out the investigations and wrote the reports were racists and that their "assumptions and attitudes shaped the nature of federal actions concerning the Negro at this time." The same attitudes were, said Cohen, reflected by Department of Justice investigators who demonstrated "a far greater zeal in seeking out cases of 'Negro subversion' than in finding cases where the federally protected rights of Negroes had been violated."

While the author admits that the inciting incident of the riot is still “shrouded in mystery and historical controversy, he agrees on the core story, that Black sharecroppers were unionizing, and the White rumor mill abounded with conspiracies of uprising in an armed attack. As the riot carried on, a few Whites, including a soldier were killed, while anywhere from twenty to over 800 Blacks were killed, while the documentation provided indicates that White soldiers alone killed around twenty Blacks. By providing military documents from the period, Desmarais states that “the army’s role in the affair was to buttress the white version of the causes and courses of
the riot and to aid in the white minority in regaining control over the black population in the troubled area.” This visible shift in perception among historians writing in the Arkansas Historical Society journal stands in sharp contrast to that of the Tulsa Race Massacre, as the latter event went largely unexamined until the late 1970s and 1980s.

Chris M. Messer and Patricia A. Bell’s article, “Mass Media and Governmental Framing of Riots: The Case of Tulsa, 1921,” provides a much-needed sociological perspective on both the outbreak of violence and its aftermath. While brief, their contribution to the literature is important as it provides a framework for better understanding how two distinct narratives persisted. Messer and Bell also recognize clear limitations in the scope of their research, which provides public historians an avenue to bolster their findings with a broader investigation of framing and contended public memory.

Through the course of the article, Messer and Bell explain that race riots, as social constructs, are defined and explained through the course of sociological framing. The core of their argument is that “immediate responses to and outcomes of riots are greatly affected by resultant frames, or interpretations, of racial conflict. Thus, riots as social constructions can be interpreted in a variety of ways, both temporally and spatially,” which they illustrate through the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre and its aftermath. They further explain that the purpose of their research is to illustrate the importance of framing activity during and after the riot, especially at a local level, to illustrate the ways that media and official framing led to negative consequences for Greenwood. Additionally, they suggest that the reparations movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and the report of the Oklahoma Commission to study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, both represent an effort to reframe the event. With this effort in mind, they argue that “perceptions concerning the causes and events of the riot persistent in 1921 worked to
prevent Black survivors from receiving justice,” as the riot was understood as a Black uprising. Further, they contend that Tulsa “is not an isolated example,” but that “episodes of racial violence are subject to interpretation and are thus social constructions that experience the phenomenon of framing.\textsuperscript{29}

Their research is reliant on prior sociological theory to make their case. In short, they mean framing to say that it involves the effort to “assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists,” “allows for the formation of collective identity and the reinforcements of shared beliefs and values,” and identifies collective injustices. They focus on framing tasks and “show that these tasks have significant implications for the aftermaths of racial violence.”\textsuperscript{30}

Their framework focuses on two key elements of framing tasks, which they identify as diagnostic framing and prognostic framing. Diagnostic framing “involves the establishment of blame or causality,” where the framer identifies the core of the issue. Applying this framework to race riots, they suggest that it “has been dominated by interpretations, or frames, that have situated blame on a particular group, or groups, and that “governmental and media assessments largely contribute to how the public, particularly at the local level, comes to interpret riots, at least in its initial aftermath.”\textsuperscript{31}

Prognostic framing follows diagnosis, as it “refers to the identification of remedial strategies and tactics, or the solution to overcome the problem. In addition, the ‘evil’ is identified and a ‘common target’ is located.” In terms of race riots, they make the case that “proffered frames may have similarities in terms of the group or groups perceived guilty, but that tactics and strategies to overcome such problems may vary.”\textsuperscript{32} In other words, even when a group diagnoses
the root cause of a problem, people can still fundamentally disagree on the best solution to prescribe.

When Messer and Bell apply this theoretical framework to the outbreak and aftermath in Tulsa, they find that White media voices and civic leaders placed their diagnostic frame around two key factors: “militant Blacks, and inadequate, corrupt law enforcement,” with Whites understanding the event as a Black insurrection. Essentially, this led officials to adopt a prognostic frame which sidelined Greenwood’s capacity to rebuild, reflecting the perception of the African American community “as a problem to be disposed of or strictly controlled.” By contrast, Greenwood residents varied in their individual framing of the incident, though the general consensus placed a greater focus on the failure of law enforcement. However, as law enforcement and the National Guard shared with the White media in framing the Black community as enemy combatants and the instigators of the violence, law enforcement and protection was not on Greenwood’s side to begin with.

This study will explore those framing tasks in greater detail through its coverage of the immediate aftermath. Additionally, this study will apply the authors’ observations on framing when exploring the scholarly and community-led rediscovery and reframing of the events of 1921, illustrating the ways in which these competing framing devices persist in contemporary discourse surrounding the public memory of the event.

Looking specifically at literature surrounding the Tulsa Race Massacre, authors Ed Wheeler, Scott Ellsworth, Alfred Brophy, and James S. Hirsch stand out as critically important early contributors to the subject. Wheeler’s 1979 article and Scott Ellsworth’s 1982 book on the topic both opened the door to broader interest in the subject, Ellsworth and Brophy both served on the State Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, and both Brophy and Hirsch
produced their own monographs shortly after the commission. Hirsch’s book is of particular
importance as it gives the broadest coverage of the forces at work in retelling the history between
the 1970s and early 2000s.

In the years since the state commission, more recent coverage on the massacre includes
that of North Tulsa community leaders Eddie Faye Gates, Hannibal Johnson, and journalist
Randy Krehbiel. Gates, a local history teacher, worked alongside Ellsworth and Brophy in the
state commission before producing her own account, which includes extensive transcripts from
oral history interviews with survivors of the massacre.37 Lawyer and local historian Hannibal
Greenwood District and 2020 follow-up Black Wall Street 100: An American City Grapples with
Its Historical Racial Trauma both provide critically important insight into the massacre, the
Greenwood community afflicted by it, and the legacy of Black Wall Street the leadup to the
centennial of the event. Finally, Randy Krehbiel’s Tulsa 1921: Reporting a Massacre provides
the most thorough documentary history on newspaper coverage during and after the massacre.

Taken together, the late 1990s through the early 2010s have produced a bumper crop of valuable
monographs on the massacre, encompassing multiple disciplinary and community-oriented
perspectives, and providing new lenses by which the events that unfolded a century ago can be
better understood.

Chapters One and Two provide a primer for this study by introducing Tulsa’s early
history, the development of Greenwood as Tulsa’s Black district, and the events of the Tulsa
Race Massacre of 1921 as established in the literature. This background provides the backdrop
from which competing narratives about the riot form.
Chapter Three deviates slightly from previous studies on the massacre by exploring how Tulsa perceives itself. This chapter examines Tulsa’s waxing and waning identity as a modern, prestigious city built by oil, while also highlighting the insecurity which Tulsa experiences on the periphery of Oklahoma’s Land Run nostalgia in the mid-century. This chapter closes with broader considerations of the city’s shifting economy, and therefore its identity, in the 1950s through 1970s, in which public relations campaigns increasingly focus on beautification and its status as an All-America city.

Chapter Four picks up where Chapter Three ends, as scholars and community leaders alike labor to pull the events of 1921 out from the shadows of Tulsa’s booster identity and shine a light on the violent past. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, historians, North Tulsa citizens, and political leaders all reckoned with the massacre and ultimately brought about a state commission that gave official credence to Black Tulsans’ experiences.

Chapter Five centers around the intervening events between the state commission and the event’s centennial, providing insight into the shifting racial politics of the 2010s and the ways in which these shifts impact centennial memorialization. Neither Tulsa’s past nor present exist in a vacuum; the massacre itself had been part of a larger story of White-on-Black race riots in the wake of the Great War. Likewise, Tulsa has witnessed mass unrest in the wake of racialized police brutality nationwide, while also contending with high-profile incidents at home. These contemporary events help shape the tenor and content of ongoing memorialization efforts, as early plans for Greenwood Rising suggests.

The study then concludes with comparisons between Tulsa and Birmingham on their navigation of a racist legacy, while comparing Tulsa with neighboring cities in terms of civil rights history. As Tulsa navigates the murky waters of difficult public memory, the city has
ample examples to learn from. A delicate balancing act exists between truth-telling and steering clear of negative stigma, and Greenwood Rising’s programming points toward leadership which is prepared to meet this challenge.
CHAPTER 1: TULSA BEFORE THE MASSACRE

The pattern of the riot was not unique. In East St. Louis, Illinois, and Elaine, Arkansas, and other towns, whites had invaded, robbed, and torched black areas. But given the commercial development of Greenwood, it is unlikely that any previous race riot had ever produced such dramatic economic losses. What’s more, no conflict had resulted in the liquidation of virtually an entire black community and the institutions that held it together. It was reminiscent of the pogroms of czarist Russia and an omen of the ethnic cleansing that would, decades hence, sear central Africa and the Balkans. What began as a “riot” or a “war” in Tulsa concluded in a massacre. 38

While the core of this research focuses on the aftermath of the massacre, the warping of public perception against the victims, and the contended memory of the event between Black and White Tulsans over the course of the last century, a primer on the events of 1921 is needed. What follows is a general history of settlement in Oklahoma, the meteoric growth of Tulsa in the early twentieth century, and the endemic problems which ultimately provided the conditions that precipitated the massacre. This provides critically important context for understanding the unfolding of events during and after the massacre, as unequipped local leadership, White vigilantism, and Black armed resistance reached a fever pitch in 1921.

African Americans in Oklahoma

Oklahoma has two competing legacies for African Americans: on one hand, the possibility for upward mobility and control of their own destiny led many freedmen and their families to seek out their future there; on the other hand, they found themselves sharing the new state with hardline segregationists who sought to extend Jim Crow’s grasp onto the state. These two sides, one seeking freedom, equality, and opportunity; the other seeking to curtail freedom for White supremacy, made up the factions in the battle for desegregation and equality that civil rights leaders like Ada Sipuel Fisher and Clara Luper would fight for.
African Americans experienced two primary means of settlement in Oklahoma: the earliest came under bondage in Indian Territory, and later an escape from the Deep South in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The first wave of African American settlers after emancipation, the Exodusters, sought refuge in Kansas in the 1870s, but land openings in central Oklahoma in the 1880s and 1890s offered a unique opportunity for freed slaves to carve communities out of previously unassigned lands. This first generation of settlement out of the Deep South carried with it the dream of creating all-Black towns that would give freedmen an opportunity, in their eyes, to prove their worth as citizens. While on one hand these settlements carried with them an idealized message of uplift, they also carried a defensive purpose; as they escaped the violence of the post-Reconstruction South, African Americans sought strength in numbers.39

Recent research uncovered the depths to which this duality of Black internal growth and self-protection went through the discovery of a group that met in Parsons, Kansas, which sought to carve out an all-Black state out of Oklahoma Territory in 1882. Then, following the 1889 land run, both White and Black boosters and promoters saw promise in the idea of setting aside lands for African Americans. The goal was laid out most clearly to President Benjamin Harrison by former Kansas State Auditor Edward McCabe: “We wish to remove from the disgraceful surroundings that so degraded my people, and in the new territory in Oklahoma show the people of the U.S. and of the world that we are not only loyal citizens, but we are capable of advancement, and that we can be an honor to those who broke down the barriers of our slavery.”40 This, coming from the founder of Langston, Oklahoma, and one of the first African Americans in U.S. history to hold a state government position, illustrates the optimism felt by some Black leaders who saw the potential of unparalleled social, political, and economic freedom for freedmen. While an all-Black state in north-central Oklahoma never materialized
and would have arguably created greater problems for integrationists in the 20th century civil
rights struggle, the possibility for African Americans to be in control of their own development
and destiny is understandably appealing for the first wave of people seeking full citizenship and
a sense of place after emancipation and Reconstruction.

The boundless possibilities that McCabe sought to work out in Oklahoma crashed into
stark reality by the turn of the century; while scores of freedmen sought refuge from the South,
White Southerners also migrated to Oklahoma and brought Jim Crow segregation with them.
While communities like Greenwood would develop into economic and cultural hubs, and
Langston grew to become the intellectual locus for Black Oklahomans, statehood in 1907
brought some of the most restrictive state segregation laws in the country, rivaling even the
former Confederacy. While over one hundred thousand African Americans settled in Oklahoma
before 1910, white legislators quickly acted to curtail black freedoms, restricting their right to
assembly, as well as access to housing, services, and public spaces. Soon after Jim Crow
legislation passed in the new state government, James Garden suffered the first lynching, the first
of at least forty in Oklahoma’s first eight years of statehood.41

Before the Massacre

At the turn of the twentieth century, Tulsa seemed an unlikely location for a major metro
area, but the discovery of oil nearby brought an influx of workers and entrepreneurs in short
order, turning a quiet village on the Arkansas River into one of the fastest-growing cities of the
era. Tulsa recorded a population of merely 1,300 people in the 1910 census. As the blossoming
oil industry had brought field workers to Oklahoma at large, Tulsa unleashed a booster campaign
to attract railroads and manufacture a commerce-friendly public image.42 This culminated in a
public relations campaign that featured a train that carried a printing press, distributing pamphlets celebrating Tulsa’s growth and economic opportunity. One of these pamphlets stated: “Tulsa wasn’t on the map because it grew faster than maps could be printed,” a message that, paired with public shows to draw in crowds, succeeded in garnering nationwide interest in the new city. They even brought a young Will Rogers into the spectacle to perform rope tricks, highlighting Tulsa’s Southwestern identity.43

As a result of the growing industry and public campaigns, Tulsa grew dramatically, growing from less than fifteen hundred people at the turn of the century, to over 18,000 in 1910, to nearly 75,000 in 1920.44 Thus, “The careful cultivation of Tulsa’s image, where ‘the clink of one dollar against the other’ could be heard in the air, was central to its ultimate success.”45 This boosterism continued to play a central role in Tulsa’s core identity, and the city’s leaders would continue to labor to preserve its gilded image at all costs.

Parallel to Tulsa’s growth at large came the development of Greenwood, the Black district north of downtown. Records surrounding the district’s early settlement are hazy: the common story follows that O.W. Gurley, a migrant from Arkansas, purchased forty acres for African American settlement, but land records do not corroborate this story. Records on black settlement before statehood is likewise unknown. However, what is clear is that Gurley and several other Black entrepreneurs worked to establish a black community in Greenwood sometime between the Creek Nation’s cession of two blocks of land to the endeavor in 1903 and the platting of the Turley addition further north in 1906.46 Between 1910 and 1920, Greenwood experienced a boom much like the rest of Tulsa, growing from two thousand residents to nearly nine thousand. Much of this growth came from migration out of the South:

In Tulsa, they at least saw a glimmer of light. The schools were not nearly well-equipped nor the teachers nearly as well-paid as those for white, but they were better than most
available to black children elsewhere. There were plenty of jobs, and while they might not have been the best jobs, or the highest paying, they beat picking cotton or living under the thumb of a despotic landlord. And there was opportunity, maybe not the same opportunity that made white men into millionaires, but enough to fashion a comfortable life through hard work and diligence.\(^47\)

Greenwood endeavored to attain greater opportunities as Tulsa’s boom period rolled on, but the city’s endemic problems mounted in the leadup to the Summer of 1921.

While Tulsa’s growth as a commercial center was a boon for Progressive-era boosterism, it also presented a serious challenge for municipal governance, as the oil industry’s boom-and-bust cycles introduced considerable economic and social instability. Poverty conditions abounded in outlying working class neighborhoods, diseases ran rampant through hastily built shanties, and vice dominated in wealthy and poor areas alike.\(^48\)

Tulsa also faced serious challenges with regards to policing, as corruption interfered with law enforcement. A new police chief, John Gustafson, had been tasked to reform the department in 1920. Gustafson himself had a conflict of interest, as he simultaneously ran a private security agency.\(^49\) Whistleblower W.D. Clark also revealed in an investigation a rash of abuses taking place in the women’s prison, ranging from unsanitary and inhumane conditions to verbal and physical abuse, to an instance of an officer sexually assaulting an inmate. Despite a series of investigations throughout 1920 and early 1921, the city dismissed claims of the police overlooking vice, concluding that no such vices take place in Tulsa and is therefore rendered moot.\(^50\) While the city chose to ignore the lapses in law enforcement, White and Black citizens took their own measures to counteract the ineffective police force.

While White voices contended with police corruption and perceptions of Black criminality in late May, the breakdown of local law enforcement crescendoed with two high-profile jailbreaks at the Tulsa County courthouse. The first was on May 26, when a group of
inmates sawed through their cell doors and the jail windows, before lowering themselves four stories down from blankets tied together end-to-end. Despite the Police Department repairing the doors and windows, six more prisoners escaped on May 30, the day before Rowland’s arrest drew public attention and the massacre broke out. These jailbreaks further heightened the perceived need for action in the eyes of White citizens:

For more than a few white Tulsans, local conditions regarding crime and punishment were fast becoming intolerable. Frustrated over the amount of lawbreaking in the city, and by the apparent inability of the police to do anything about it, they had helped turn the city into a ticking time bomb, where anger and frustration sat just beneath the surface, waiting to explode.51

At the same time, a series of statements came out from White civic community leaders placing the blame for the city’s recent criminal ills not only on the police but also on Black vice and racial intermingling. Greenwood shouldered the public’s blame for vice, with a former judge stating the need to clear out “Negro pimps” to restore order. A local pastor, Reverend Harold G. Cooke, also made a public scene of the vice that was present in the city. He honed in on the mixing of races as a contributing factor, making particular note of Black men turning to White prostitutes for pleasure, and in the dance halls, his group “found whites and Negros dancing together . . . Young, white girls were dancing while Negroes played the piano.”52 Considering the fears of miscegenation baked into the White supremacist worldview of the era, it is unsurprising that interracial relations were fresh on the minds of White Tulsans when the massacre kicked off.

With the municipal government and police force apparently not up to task, Tulsa was remarkably prone to mob rule and vigilantism in the first decades of the twentieth century, growing in prominence up into the 1920s. The most visible form that this took was in a series of high-profile tar-and-featherings and lynchings between the Great War and massacre. During the war, a clandestine vigilante group, the Knights of Liberty, targeted groups that they assumed
were opposed to the war effort, especially labor unionists and German Americans. In another, a set of International Workers of the World unionists were kidnapped under the suspicion of bombing an oil executive’s home. Following a police crackdown that resulted in eleven arrests, the Tulsa World published an editorial advocating that these workers be lynched, titled “Get out the Hemp.” After the county judge cut the IWW workers a deal to leave town and the men were being transported to their headquarters, the Knights of Liberty ambushed the motorcade, kidnapped the prisoners, whipped, tarred, and feathered them, and ran them out of the city. The Tulsa Democrat praised the attack, spinning the ambush as the citizenry upholding law and order when the police had failed: “The peace officers can do almost nothing to prevent these depredations on the oil industry, and the men of the oil Fields—the loyal Americans—must take the matter into their own hands.” Here, the apparent shortcomings of law and order in Tulsa was a problem for which the press and public agreed was best solved by mob justice.

After the war ended, the high-profile 1920 lynching of a suspected carjacker and murderer named Roy Belton exemplified the growing spirit of mob rule in Tulsa. The incident garnered extensive press coverage, as the victim “was a recently married everyman, twenty-five years old, who symbolized the helplessness of a city under siege.” The Tulsa Tribune appealed to the public’s fear of corruption undermining the law, claiming that Belton planned on pleading insanity and was to receive assistance from a wealthy sister to avoid severe punishment. The Tribune also published a statement from the victim's widow, who hoped “that justice will be done,” and that “they deserve to be mobbed but the other way is better.” That evening, a masked mob stormed the courthouse, disarmed the sheriff, pulled Belton from prison, and lynched him. The county sheriff at the time, James Wooley, commented on what he saw as a positive externality from the event: “I believe that Belton’s lynching will prove more beneficial than a
death sentence pronounced by the courts. It shows to the criminal that Tulsa men mean business.”57 This comment is particularly telling, as it illustrates the complicity of Tulsa’s public officials in allowing, and even encouraging, mob rule to persist unabated.

As Tulsa’s white public embraced mob rule, the Black community in Greenwood also experienced growing resistance to the lacking rule of law. Additionally, the success of Greenwood as a commercial center bolstered the New Negro outlook among local Blacks, who increasingly saw the growth of White vigilantism as a call to arms. The Belton lynching drove A.J. Smitherman, editor of the Tulsa Star, to rail against the growing mob mentality of white Tulsans, recognizing that, if a White suspect can be kidnapped and summarily executed, Black citizens would never be safe in custody. Further, he openly advocated to armed resistance, arguing after a lynching in Oklahoma City that “it is quite evident that the proper time to afford protection to any prisoner is before and not during the time he is being lynched.”58 Further, he laid out the moral and ethical justification for resistance: “While the boy was in jail and while there was danger of mob violence any set of citizens had a legal right—it was their duty—to arm themselves and march in a body to the jail and apprize the sheriff or jailer of the purpose of their visit and take life if need be to uphold the law and protect the prisoner.”59 In essence, Smitherman argues that the community must act to protect the lives of the accused, even if the authorities are too weak to do so themselves.

At the core of Greenwood’s concerns was the breakdown of law. The Star articulated this well:

The New Negro, who stands today released in spirit, finds himself in America and in this state, physically bound and shackled by LAWS AND CUSTOMS THAT WERE MADE FOR SLAVES, and all of the unrest, all of the turbulence, and all of the violence that is now charged to my people, IS THE BATTLE OF FREE MEN, POUNDING UPON WALLS AROUND THEM AND THAT WERE MADE FOR SLAVES.60
The events of the Red Summer of 1919 were fresh in the minds of Tulsa’s Black residents, and Smitherton’s paper was driving home to Greenwood residents that protection under the law would not happen so long as the law itself was against them. Thus, “men living in Greenwood were primed, because of the freedom they had experienced during the war, as well as the freedom they held in Greenwood, to take action to prevent lynching. Meanwhile, White Tulsans were themselves on guard against Blacks seeking “social equality” and primed to respond to the allegations that a Black man had raped a white woman.”

Troubles Mounting

The incident that brought White and Black Tulsa to blows began on May 30, involving a young Black man named Dick Rowland and a young White woman named Sarah Page. Rowland, a nineteen-year-old shoeshiner, had left his station to use the restroom at the nearby Drexel Building, where the Black restrooms were kept on the top floor. He boarded the elevator operated by Miss Page, and something happened in that elevator that caused Page to scream. While nobody knew for sure what happened, Rowland was arrested as a suspect for attempted assault until the police could investigate the incident.

Though the story of the assault was dubious at best, Richard Lloyd Jones and the Tulsa Tribune put out a front-page editorial calling for Rowland’s lynching. The article explained he’d been arrested for trying to assault a 17-year old White girl and said he attacked her, scratched her, and tore her clothes, and characterized him as an assailant who attacked “an orphan who works as an elevator operator to pay her way through business college.” This editorial hit the streets at 3 PM, and was followed up an hour later by a call to the police commissioner that they were “going to lynch that Negro tonight, that black devil who assaulted that girl.” By evening,
a crowd of Whites came and were dispersed, but the Black community in Greenwood still feared for Dick Rowland’s life, and some took up arms as they prepared for conflict: “A consensus emerged around one idea: no Black man would be lynched that night, not on their watch.”65

After Rowland was arrested, the rumor mills in both South and North Tulsa began circulating on Tuesday, May 31. For Whites, the possibility of Rowland to attempt to accost a White woman in broad daylight was inexcusable; for Blacks, the arrest of Rowland and the accusations brought against him were dire, as such an incident would certainly draw ire from lynch-happy white Tulsans. Already incensed by the rumors of Dick Rowland’s alleged assault, it was an editorial rushed out by Richard Lloyd Jones of the Tulsa Tribune which famously mobilized Tulsa’s lynch mob to the courthouse. While the front-page article the Tribune published described the incident, numerous Black and White accounts mention an editorial titled “To Lynch Negro Tonight,” in line with the local press’s established cynicism toward the legal process and support for mob rule. Soon after the Tribune was published that afternoon, White Tulsans who received the news started gathering around the courthouse, numbering in the hundreds by sunset.66

As White Tulsans mobilized to downtown Tulsa, it affirmed the fears in the minds of Greenwood residents that a lynch mob was forming. This led several Black veterans to gather and oppose them. At Greenwood’s Dreamland Theater, community leaders gathered to debate their best course of action. With the information they had on hand, and the recent history of mob rule dominating local law enforcement efforts, several residents decided that action needed to be taken to protect Rowland’s life. At 9:00 that night, a group of Black men loaded up into cars and traveled to the courthouse to ensure Rowland’s safety. They offered their assistance to the local authorities to assist in guarding the courthouse but were turned away and started to head home.
However, the armed showing made by this group of Black veterans enraged the Whites gathered at the courthouse. While some ran home to arm themselves, others attempted to break into the Oklahoma National Guard Armory. Soon afterward, the White crowd had grown into an angry mob nearly two-thousand strong. This escalation led Greenwood leaders to mobilize, ending community events early, and gather their strength. A group of roughly 75 Black men left to meet the crowd, while the rumors circulating through the mob had already determined that the Black armed resistance amounted to a “Negro Uprising.” As the authorities attempted to disperse the crowd, a White man in the mob attempted to disarm one of the Black men, and after a shot went off, a firefight broke out.67 Young Black men went armed to the courthouse and stood at the stairs. They faced off against a motley of Whites, and when one White man tried to disarm one of the Blacks, a shot was fired which set the riot off.68
CHAPTER 2: THE MASSACRE AND THE AFTERMATH

It is impossible to make a full report of the happenings, but what I saw was bad enough, and yet I cannot tell all that I saw. When I fully realized what was happening, I saw men and women fleeing for their lives, while white men by the hundreds pursued them, firing in all directions. As one woman was running from her home, she suddenly fell with a bullet wound. Then I saw aeroplanes, they flew very low. To my surprise, as they passed over the business district they left the entire block a mass of flame.

I saw men, women and children driven like cattle, huddled like horses and treated like beasts. Thus, I fully realized the attitude of the Southern white man when he has you bested. I saw hundreds of men marched through the main business section of “White Town” with their hats off and their hands up, with dozens of guards marching them with guns, cursing them for everything mentionable. I saw large trucks following up the invaders, as they ran the colored people from their homes and places of business. Everything of value was loaded on these trucks and everything left was burned to ashes. I saw machine guns turned on the colored men to oust them from their stronghold.

Tuesday night, May 31st, was the riot, and Wednesday morning, by daybreak, was the invasion. – Anonymous. 69

After the firefight started at the courthouse, urban warfare began between the White and Black factions. As the fighting broke out, Whites started looting downtown stores in search for more guns and ammunition, where police officers distributed ‘borrowed’ firearms throughout the mob. At the same time, the police began deputizing scores of Whites out of the mob. One ‘Special Deputy’ reported being told by an officer to “get a gun and get a nigger.” 70

The Massacre

At first, the small contingent of Greenwood men held their own as they retreated across the Frisco railroad tracks, but by 1:00 AM on June 1, their defense faltered and Whites began torching businesses and homes, intimidating firefighters from intervening and stopping the infernos that they created. “By 4:00 A.M., more than two-dozen Black-owned businesses, including the Midway Hotel, had been torched.” 71
As the situation quickly ballooned out of control for the Tulsa Police Department, responsibility ultimately fell on the Oklahoma National Guard to restore order. Here, the priorities of both the police and National Guard in their response illustrates the framing already forming against Greenwood. A small contingent, around fifty strong, gathered at the armory. They had also interpreted the outbreak of the massacre as a “Negro uprising,” and acted in support of the White rioters and referring to Greenwood’s residents and defenders as the “enemy.” Further, the police and National Guard worked together to systematically arrest the entirety of Greenwood’s residents, marching them all out of the neighborhood and holding them in internment camps downtown, while also joining the rioters in holding remaining Greenwood defenders under siege. With the entirety of Greenwood’s population rounded up, the rioters ran rampant, destroying the defenseless neighborhood.

When the dust had settled on Saturday, June 1, over a dozen blocks of commercial and residential property in Greenwood had been destroyed, and anywhere from 20 to over 200 people died. Additionally, the National guard removed around 6,000 Blacks from Greenwood and brought them to the city fairgrounds. By the time that the Oklahoma National Guard regained order that afternoon, the damage was already done. Over the course of a day and a half, Greenwood had been utterly devastated.

The Red Cross reported that 1,256 houses were burned, 216 houses were looted but not burned, and the total number of buildings not burned but looted and robbed were 314. The Tulsa Real Estate Exchange estimated $1.5 million worth of damages and one third of that in the Black business district. Between June 14, 1921, and June 6, 1922., $1.8 million of claims were filed against that city and disallowed.

While the damages caused over the course of the riot are easily quantifiable, the death toll is altogether more elusive. For one, National Guard Adjutant General Barrett disallowed Blacks from holding funerals, with the argument that churches were being used to house refugees.
Estimates on the lives lost in the riot vary widely. As Maurice Willows, director of Red Cross relief in Tulsa, reported: “The number of dead is a matter of conjecture. Some knowing ones estimate the number of killed as high as 300, others estimate [it] being as low as 55. The bodies are hurriedly rushed to burial, and the records of many burials are not to be found.”

Regardless of the specific numbers, the massacre left many dead or destitute, with bodies, homes, and businesses smoldering. In the wake of the event, Tulsa endeavored to make sense of the senseless violence, assign blame, and salvage its image.

As the dust settled and the smoke cleared in Greenwood, numerous challenges emerged. First, for the survivors that returned, first-order questions of shelter and survival took precedent. Many people lost their homes and businesses overnight, so reconstructing housing and bringing in an income became a top priority. Second, for the local authorities, the wanton destruction and loss of life necessitated an investigation and response. Culpability needed to be established and an action plan needed to be laid out. Third, for the White press and public, sense needed to be made of the senseless violence that just transpired. While opinions initially differed, the White public eventually settled on a course of events which absolved themselves of blame, laying it instead on the very community devastated by racist violence. A grand jury ultimately adopted this outlook as the official record of events. This narrative, then, played a critical role in the immediate aftermath of the massacre as it influenced policy, curtailed efforts to rebuild, and placed victims in an unwinnable legal position when they attempted to get compensation for the disaster. This chapter follows the thread of White narrative-building in the press and grand jury, the obstacles placed in front of survivors as they attempted to rebuild their community, and the White supremacist assumptions that undergirded the White version of what happened.
Diagnostic Framing: Riot as Response to an Alleged Negro Uprising

At first, public opinion towards Greenwood was sympathetic. On June 2, the day after the massacre, a judge stated that the local authorities were liable, while the Tulsa World and Tribune both published articles that expressed shame and sympathy for the Black community. The Tribune provided one of the clearest calls to action, stating that “City and county officials are responsible for this distressing story and this appalling loss of property,” charging that the city, county, and citizenry needed to rise to the occasion to meet the needs of the destroyed Black district. The immediate press reaction, sympathizing with Greenwood’s plight and holding the local authorities responsible for letting the incident get out of hand, suggests a brief, fleeting moment in which a more truthful framing could have won out in the public sphere.

That public sympathy soon floundered, replaced by vitriolic race hate, placing the full blame of what happened on the Black community, adopting a stance that amounted to victim-blaming. In James S. Hirsch’s words, “the betrayal of Greenwood after the riot was as great a crime as its destruction, because it was carried out not by a faceless white mob but by the men who led the city’s most important business, political, and religious institutions.” The White public, believing the incident was a Black uprising, feared a future attack from Blacks in surrounding communities, and the police department continued deputizing citizens to give White Tulsans the impression of security.

While the police and general public suspected continued racial violence, White Tulsans quickly settled into doubling down on their racist framing. At its core, their attack on Greenwood centered around framing the call for racial equality as the core problem. They placed the role of “outside agitators” like W.E.B. Du Bois as the spearhead of this issue, with local Reverend Ed Mouzon calling Du Bois “the most vicious Negro in America,” whose message of equality
emboldened Greenwood residents to take up arms. State government officials agreed, as governor J.B.A. Robertson called on the attorney general to investigate DuBois after the massacre. The state attorney general, S.P. Freehling, thought that the message of racial equality, growing nationwide, was the key cause of the riot, saying that “as the black press urged racial equality, it began to tell its readers to arm for protection against lynching,” indicating that it is the act of self-defense, not the vigilante lynchings which Blacks were defending themselves from, which he thought this was the origin of the problem. Tulsa’s mayor, T.D. Evans, commented that he thought the riot was inevitable and was glad it happened in Greenwood, “where the trouble was hatched up, put in motion, and where it had its inception.” While early press coverage held government officials responsible, it became clear that blame was shifting more and more onto the very community which suffered the greatest.

Several factors were at play for the White attack on Greenwood. The first, and most obvious, was retribution for an alleged assault on a woman. However, segregation had created isolation and mistrust along racial lines also played a major role. Whites, seeing armed Black men downtown, assumed that they were leading an armed uprising. Those who went to protect Rowland were not looking to oust the city government, but the image of Blacks arming themselves in self-defense and in protection of their community felt to Whites like a coda of old slave rebellions. They also assumed that the militant response of sending men with guns reflected Greenwood’s desires at large, when there was tremendous disagreement as to whether a show of force downtown was appropriate.

Tulsa’s White press soon picked up on the zeitgeist of its readers, viciously attacking Greenwood and its residents in hateful editorials. Richard Lloyd Jones, of the Tulsa Tribune, contended that the massacre was the fault of lawless “bad Negroes,” who used Rowland’s arrest
as an excuse to invade downtown Tulsa and “take the law into their hands.”\textsuperscript{86} If the papers attempted to address White rioters, they framed their actions as retaliation against this Black lawless element.\textsuperscript{87} Thus, the press reinforced the diagnostic framing posited by public officials and White citizens, making the clamor for equality and call for self-defense in Greenwood the chief problem.

The \textit{Tulsa World} likewise adopted framing which placed blame on Greenwood. This emerged on June 1 as the massacre still raged on, as the regular issue and three extras throughout the day illustrates. The morning paper headlined the ongoing event by calling attention first to two white killed in the race riot, and saying that an outnumbered White contingent of 500 men had driven a group of 1,000 Blacks back into their own district.\textsuperscript{88} After the dust settled on June 2, the tone of the \textit{World} was generally sympathetic to Greenwood’s victims, called the mood of the moment “a scene of pathos,” praised the immediate relief efforts, and highlighted the 5,000 Blacks rounded up at the county fairgrounds as order was being restored.\textsuperscript{89}

The next day, the \textit{World} announced the creation of a Grand Jury to investigate the event, while also sharing the testimony of Black deputy sheriff Barney Cleaver that claimed a “Black dope-head” named Will Robinson incited the riot.\textsuperscript{90} On June 4, the \textit{World} published public statements from several White community leaders, who placed the blame for the event on Black agitators, while also presenting the emasculating anecdote of a Black massacre survivor who disguised himself as a woman to escape murder.\textsuperscript{91} This was followed up on June 15 with a statement made by the mayor to the Grand Jury. At this point, the phrase “Negro Uprising: enters the popular lexicon of events, where the Mayor claims that the blame should be placed “right where it belongs – on those armed Negroes who started this trouble and who instigated it.”\textsuperscript{92} Finally, on June 26, the \textit{World} delivered the long-awaited verdict: “Grand Jury Blames Negroes
for Inciting Race Riot: Whites Clearly Exonerated.” For White Tulsans only hearing about the event through press coverage and the hushed whispers of their neighbors, the narrative which formed in the papers provided an open-and-shut case against Greenwood.

By contrast, the Black press maintained the stance that the Tribune press first articulated in the immediate wake of the event, as they placed blame on the city officials who had utterly failed to prevent or stop the disaster. For the Black press, “the riot demonstrated the lawless behavior of the Tulsa government and confirmed that Dick Rowland was not safe. The riot itself was the best evidence to show that the police would not protect the community.” The Tulsa Black Dispatch, rebutting the claims by White papers and authorities that Greenwood should have trusted the courts to carry out justice for Rowland, states:

Fair Courts! What sort of a court would have done Rowland any good the next morning with his body swinging from a limb? . . . The sheriff of Tulsa County has permitted men to be lynched by the same gang that was at his jail door Tuesday night. But the outstanding fact which proves the contention of the Tulsa Negroes that they were without protection, followed in the absolute rule and authority of the mob during all of Tuesday night and Wednesday.

Here, a clear connection is made between the strands of White vigilantism, ineffectiveness of law enforcement in the face of White mobs, and the helplessness that Greenwood faced in the face of mob rule. As the Black community interpreted the massacre, they “understood that the veterans’ trip to the courthouse was a logical response -- probably the proper one when the community faced the threat of a lynching.”

The courts and authorities ultimately co-opted the public perception against Greenwood, which had dire consequences for Tulsa’s Black citizens. It placed blame squarely on the men who rallied to protect Rowland, claiming that there was no threat of lynching to justify their actions. “That denial of the threat was central to exculpating the Whites and inculpating the Blacks, for it downplayed the threat of lynching and made veterans’ actions look less
Rather than give credence to Black fears of lynching, the grand jury instead finds fault in “the agitation among the negroes of social equality,” and the failure of law enforcement to intervene. Since the grand jury’s diagnostic framing centered around Black opposition to White supremacy, this led them to prognostic framing which recommended more stringent law enforcement in Greenwood, rather than explore the ill deeds of the White mob.

The framing under way in Tulsa played a part in national politics, as it factored significantly into the rhetoric surrounding the Dyer Anti-lynching bill, a piece of legislation proposed by Missouri U.S. Representative in 1918 and reintroduced in subsequent years to establish lynching as a federal crime. The political debate over lynching in the wake of the massacre reveals the prognostic framing that was applied to lynching, as Tulsa Race Massacre scholar Alfred Brophy observes:

The debates... illustrate the disjunction between those who urged respect for law over lynching and those who viewed lynching as an understandable (and perhaps even appropriate) response to allegation of crime by blacks. The debates demonstrate how white fears impelled lynchings, how the fear of lynchings affected the entire community, and how lynching led to the breakdown of law. In the face of allegation that lynching was the result of the breakdown of law, the Tulsa riot was for many the result of blacks’ demand for equality.

At its core, the debate centered around the space where the letter of the law and the sociocultural issues of Jim Crow met. For Republicans supporting the bill, the issue of lynching was framed around a breakdown of law. For its opposition, lynching was justified “as a natural response to crimes, particularly rape, committed by black men.” For U.S. Representative William Chester Lankfield of Georgia, his opposition to the bill centered around White supremacy, stating that “this is a white man’s civilization and the white man is and will remain supreme.” Another opponent, Representative Bill Green Lowry, framed the issue similarly, explaining that the “prolific source of the lynching evil” rests not in violent Whites but rather the apparently
animalistic brutality of Black men, “exhibited in his reckless indulgence of physical appetites and passions, and in a trend toward cruelty, which is seen in the merciless abuse and beating of his children, and in his savage fights with knives and razors.” Lankfield and Lowry’s statements serve to explain the larger ideological backdrop for how the Tulsa massacre was framed; the supremacy of the White race was assumed as a given, which justified both the overblown reaction by the White mob and the demonization of Blacks by officials and the mass media. Lynching was justified as a necessary evil, and Black resistance was framed as a greater evil than lynching itself.

Not only had the courts and general public turned against the victims of the massacre, but Tulsa’s Chamber of Commerce saw opportunity in their suffering. As questions loomed over how to respond to the burning, the chamber’s Real Estate Exchange sought to rezone the husk of Greenwood as an industrial district and a railway expansion, judging that “the value of the property when used for commercial purposes was three times its value when used for residences.” With that, they recommended relocating Tulsa’s Black district further north, so as to broaden the color line and alleviate racial tensions. The chamber pushed for a building ordinance which forbade wood-frame construction and only allowed the use of fireproof materials, which the city zoning board passed on June 7. This started a legal and public relations battle between Greenwood residents and the city that lasted until September 1921, when the county courts issued a permanent injunction against the fire ordinance as a violation of the Greenwood residents’ property rights. While the ordinance was ultimately overturned, the ordinance amounts to the greatest betrayal of the massacre’s victims:

With the City Commission’s action, there was continuing question of when -- if ever-- the rule of law would prevail in Tulsa. The cold, deliberate restriction on rebuilding was perhaps even worse than the violent destruction of Greenwood, many thought. The worst crime of the Tulsa riot, according to the Black Dispatch was “not the burning of homes, .
. nor the wholesale massacre of black men and women.” The worst crime was the city’s ordinance, “where white men sat down and deliberately conspired to confiscate the very land and ashes where black men had dwelt.” The ordinance illustrated the breakdown of due process; the lawsuits filed to challenge it were testing whether justice could prevail.\textsuperscript{102}

The framing which justified the violence done to Greenwood also gave the Chamber of Commerce a means to rationalize the forced removal of Tulsa’s Blacks from their own district. While the ordinance failed, the framing which justified it prevailed: Greenwood was seen as a blight and a problem by White Tulsans who sought a solution through its relocation.
CHAPTER 3: TRIUMPH, NOT TRAGEDY

Tulsa’s people and its visitors who stayed any length of time learned how very special the city was. From faint and oily beginnings, the city became a regional center of national reputation for refinement as well for refining in post-World War II America. The cultural cognoscenti knew of its symphony, opera, and dance companies. Wherever paintings and sculptures were known, discussed, appraised, sold, or displayed, its museums were famed as special American treasures.

While Tulsa Race Massacre historians have rightfully acknowledged a lack of meaningful consideration of the events of 1921 into the city’s collective memory, they often neglect to consider the broader origins and evolution of Tulsa’s self-identity. The silence of the participants ensured that there was no extensive coverage of what happened except through the newspapers. Subsequent historians have faced writing from a lack of evidence ever since. Moreover, the events of 1921 faded in the wake of a much stronger alternative framing.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the memory of the race massacre drowned in a wave of oil. The city carefully crafted a self-perception as a modernist mecca built on the foundations of its oil boom. While the twenties and thirties marked a renaissance for Greenwood, it was also the period in which Tulsa at large leaned into its modernist, Oil Capital identity. Later in the mid-twentieth century, Tulsa cemented this self-perception through its own iconic imagery, as the Golden Driller exemplified the industry which built the city. This iconography also coincided with state and local anniversaries, with Tulsa’s semicentennial taking place in 1948 and Oklahoma’s in 1957. With the founding of the Tulsa Historical Society in 1963, the city’s efforts to unify its history arrived at the same moment as the height of the civil rights movement. As America’s bicentennial arrived in the 1970s, [not really sure what content surrounds this yet]. Finally, at the end of the century, an authoritative long view of Tulsa’s history materialized with Oklahoma historian Danney Goble’s *Tulsa! Biography of the American City*. Throughout
this period, Tulsa’s identity materialized around its self-perception of progress and prosperity which would come under fire in later years as the Tulsa Race Massacre’s history brought out serious questions about the truth of the city’s progress and the racial backdrop of its prosperity.

Outside Looking In: Tulsa as Outlier in Oklahoma History

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the early foundations of Tulsa’s collective identity began to materialize, as the city reaped the benefits of its status as an administrative hub for the regional oil industry. At this pivotal moment, the WPA produced a guide for the city that provides early insights into the prestigious image which Tulsa projected. The guide opens with a segment on Tulsa’s identity in 1938, proudly boasting its identity as “Oil Capital of the World,” where its modern office buildings house “a great concentration of major oil companies” and most of its residents “derive their income either directly or indirectly from the oil industry.” Even at this early stage, Tulsa struggled to square its prestige with the events of 1921: after briefly mentioning the presence of American Indians in the city, the guide explains the nature of Jim Crow segregation. This is immediately followed by a very brief description of the event, where “irresponsible whites descended upon the Negro district and laid it in waste by fire,” before making the dubious claim that “Tulsa’s citizens of both races have joined in an effort to live down the incident by working for a better mutual understanding.”

In its handling of Tulsa’s rise to its Oil Capital prominence, the author makes the case that Tulsa “was never an oil town in the sense that Oklahoma City is,” since Tulsa itself did not sit on the bulk of the region’s oil reserves. Rather, “Tulsa—its banks, civic organizations, and business establishments—stressed its advantages as a financial and operating center for the industry.” This brought both company headquarters and refineries to the city, to which the authors ultimately credit Tulsa’s exponential growth through the prior decades.
In the face of such monumental growth, the guide spotlights a few key institutions which the young city established. This includes public and private schools, the University of Tulsa (and its acclaimed College of Petroleum Engineering) as well as myriad churches and local music and art clubs.  

The end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War came at the same time as 50-year anniversaries for both the city and state. A comprehensive, multivolume study of Oklahoma’s history published in 1958, *History of Oklahoma at the Golden Anniversary of Statehood*, by former University of Oklahoma archivist Gaston Litton, reveals the messy nature of Tulsa’s role in the state. The first volume focuses primarily on the political history between Indian Removal and the Second World War, while the second volume finishes that narrative with an examination of the state’s post-war politics, while volumes three and four provide a biographical “Who’s Who” of Oklahoma history to that point. While Tulsa is largely absent from the initial narrative that Litton drafted, the remainder of the second volume’s focus on economic and cultural history and contemporary circumstances provides a space to factor Tulsa into the historical narrative. It goes on to describe the recently finished water works, wealth of hospitals, early adoption of radio broadcasting, and its wealth of transportation options, paying close attention to the rapidly growing municipal airport. Taken together, this laundry list of amenities paints a clear picture of a rapidly developing city attempting to put itself on the map as an up-and-coming metropolis.

Litton’s coverage of Oklahoma’s pre-statehood history reveals some of the historical divides between Tulsa and the rest of the state through the first volume, as it gets left out of the story of early statehood. While the first volume covers Oklahoma’s history in broad strokes from the nineteenth century to the 1940s, Tulsa only gets sustained attention in the 1920s and
1930s, in Litton’s coverage of the city’s struggle with racism and vigilantism. The author gives a brief rundown of the massacre, concluding on the incident thusly:

It has been pointed out that these were uncertain times, in which prejudices and passions plagued the thinking of many people, otherwise good and true. There was serious, perhaps justified, unrest among the laboring people. There was widespread economic trouble. None of these conditions alone or combined, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, could justify the horrible things that were done during the Tulsa race riot. It was a nightmare of needless strife, and insane savagery deeply regretted and deplored by thinking people among both races, throughout the state.¹¹⁰

Litton follows up this coverage of the events of 1921 with the exploits of Governor Jack C. Walton, who opposed the Ku Klux Klan during the height of its power in Oklahoma in the mid-1920s. Most explicitly, he highlights a period in 1923, where Walton placed Tulsa County and neighboring Okmulgee County under martial law to address “a general state of lawlessness,” which the Klan had wrought over the preceding year. He suggested that “Tulsa civil authorities were in secret sympathy or collusion with the perpetrators of ‘scores’ of Klan Assaults.”¹¹¹ These observations are telling. Even in the late 1950s, decades before Tulsa began its public reckoning with the massacre, Tulsa’s endemic and pervasive struggle with racist violence and vigilantism was already enshrined in state history. This perception of the city, coupled with its lack of connection to the Land Rush narrative capturing the attention of Wild West-obsessed mid-century writers, left Tulsa on the periphery of Oklahoma’s semicentennial state history.

The observation of Tulsa’s history as estranged from the rest of the state is summed up concisely in the preface to the 1939 book City Beginnings in Oklahoma Territory by John Alley. Oklahoma’s political history is particularly challenging because the state formed from the merger of two territories with vastly different histories. He argues that Oklahoma Territory was organized along conventional American political and civic lines, while Indian Territory remained unorganized. Ostensibly, while cities out west were founded according to natural law, under the
purview of their territorial governments, Alley argues that the beginnings of cities in Indian Territory stemmed from earlier circumstances bright by the Andrew Jackson administration, as eastern cities found their origins from tribal authority instead.\textsuperscript{112} This leaves Tulsa out of the picture for Oklahoma history, as its incorporation in 1898 fits neither of Alley’s paradigms.

Oil Capital and Beyond: Tulsa’s Emergent Identity

Tulsa may have been estranged from the rest of the state in terms of early cultural and political history, but Volume 2 of Litton’s book illustrates Tulsa’s rising prominence, where any coverage of contemporary business history placed Tulsa at the forefront of twentieth-century Oklahoma. Above all else, Tulsa took center stage in Litton’s consideration of oil’s impact on Oklahoma, invoking the city’s name no less than twenty times in a brief page-and-a-half section.\textsuperscript{113} The author also took particular care to highlight Tulsa’s preeminence as Oklahoma’s manufacturing center, rivaled only by the Oklahoma City metro in its number of firms.\textsuperscript{114} Alongside manufacturing, Litton also highlighted a few key institutions, chief among them being the Gilcrease and Philbrook museums.\textsuperscript{115} While Tulsa’s cultural advancements get some passing mention, the vast majority of Tulsa’s honorable mentions in Oklahoma’s history in 1958 centered around the Oil Capital status that the city was trying to mature past.

Tulsa’s Oil Capital identity was in flux in the mid-century, its nostalgia for its Oil Capital heyday is most visibly and iconically captured in the creation of its most grand monument: The Golden Driller. While a couple of smaller papier-mâché driller statues accompanied the International Oil Exposition in the early 1950s, the massive statue was the centerpiece for Tulsa’s new exposition center in 1966. A creation of Greek sculptor George Hondronastas, the massive statue was a product of the artist’s love for the city; he had helped with the first
sculpture in 1953, returned to build the permanent one in 1966, then chose to relocate his family to Tulsa and settle there permanently soon afterwards.\textsuperscript{116}

The Golden Driller received a makeover in 1979, with a fresh coat of paint and rebranding. While the Mid-Continental Oil Company initially sponsored the original construction, the company had since abandoned it. Instead, the company’s name was replaced on the Driller’s belt buckle with Tulsa, in bold letters. This renovation also coincided with the final International Oil Exposition that same year, marking the shift away from the petroleum industry that Tulsa had experienced over the previous decades.\textsuperscript{117} While Tulsa’s iconography brought with it a massive gold idol of its Oil Capital days, Tulsa was undergoing dramatic economic changes in the mid-century which lessened the impact of oil. Its iconography continues to be a vital part of Tulsa’s identity: city boosters layered a wrap onto the statue to change it into a likeness of entrepreneur Elon Musk, in an effort to attract Tesla electric car production to the city.\textsuperscript{118} Nonetheless, the Golden Driller serves as an important illustration that Tulsa’s changing booster identities over the course of the twentieth century were not mutually exclusive; while the city’s beautification and diversification was underway, Tulsans still held onto a sense of pride in their Oil Capital history.

While the Driller represents the value that the oil industry had in Tulsa’s development, the city also sought out other claims to fame, centered on being beautiful and quintessentially American. In his landmark monograph in the city’s history, Oklahoma historian Danney Goble structures the latter half of the city’s narrative around two post-World War II rhetorical turns, which both de-emphasized Tulsa’s established Oil Capital identity. The first centered around Time-Life editor Daniel Longwell’s praise in the June 1957 issue of \textit{Reader’s Digest}, which claimed Tulsa was a place “Where Beauty is Everyone’s Business,” and later declared it
“America’s Most Beautiful City.” Goble frames this push for beautification around a local post-war economic boom, motivated by a new generation of entrepreneurs looking to diversify the economy. He makes the case that “[younger Tulsans] contemplated not the quantity of their belongings but the quality of their lives. To their parents’ devotion to accumulating the goods of life, they added a dedication to achieving the good life.”\textsuperscript{119} This period of beautification and acculturation came at the heels of author Edna Ferber’s 1929 novel 	extit{Cimarron} and her later comments on Tulsa’s lack of culture. She jabbed at “what crude oil had produced: a crude town full of crude people,” coining Tulsa as a “cultural Sahara.”\textsuperscript{120}

The wartime and post-war years provided Tulsa the opportunity to reverse course on its singularly commercial outlook, and several prominent locals set to work creating the city’s premier cultural institutions:

Tulsa had moved by cultural leagues in the few years after the Second World War. The postwar generations of Tulsans and the city’s new residents had a range of cultural opportunities available in few American cities. They could immerse themselves in the Italian renaissance at the Philbrook, examine the Gilcrease’s copy of the first book published in the New World, walk through one of the nation’s finest rose gardens, perhaps top the day off with a night at the opera -- or at Cain’s [Ballroom]. Those inclined to read a good book had plenty to choose from at the Central Library or a branch nearby.\textsuperscript{121}

By establishing these cultural cornerstones, Tulsa cashed in on its mid-century prosperity and injected a sense of prestige into the community. More than simply a refining and manufacturing center, Tulsa utilized its resources to grow into a cultural center deserving of its relative size and regional influence.

While Tulsa was reinventing itself through beautification, civil rights demonstrations in Oklahoma City briefly brought the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre to the forefront. The Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council, led by history teacher and activist Clara Luper, staged a sit-in demonstration at the Katz Drug Store downtown on August 19, 1958. While numerous
whites threatened the group with violence, one explicit invocation of the massacre found its way into Luper’s autobiography: an older white woman confronted Luper, telling her that “if you don’t get those little old poor ugly-looking children out of here, we are going to have a race riot. You just want to start some trouble. Don’t you know about the Tulsa race riots?”

Two decades separated Luper’s demonstrations and the earliest published reexaminations of the events of 1921, yet Clara Luper’s experiences suggest that the stigma associated with the massacre were already well rooted in Tulsa and beyond on the eve of the civil rights movement.

In the latter years of the twentieth century, Tulsa embraced another identity which further cemented its shift away from oil-centricity, with a greater focus instead on Tulsa’s place in national rankings. This centers around Tulsa’s inclusion among the ranks of the National Civic League’s “All-America City” award winners in 1973. This award indicated that Tulsa had become a quintessentially American City, a reality which came to fruition in a number of ways. First, its gradual economic divestment from oil produced an economy which mirrored the rest of the country. Second, its postwar growth morphed the city’s landscape as new manufacturing plants, a wide range of commercial ventures, far-flung residential developments, and an extensive highway system brought the challenges of urban sprawl. Third, and perhaps most important, was the fits and starts that Tulsa’s urban planning initiatives experienced in addressing the city’s endemic social issues. In Tulsa’s local handling of myriad nationwide issues, Goble argues that this experience shapes the city’s quintessentially American experience:

> Theirs may not have been America’s best city, but neither was Tulsa its worst. The issues, the tensions, the plans, the successes, and the failures -- all of these were part of Tulsa’s history in precisely the same measure that they also were part of America’s history. Whatever else Tulsans had done or ever would do, they had not yet and would not ever escape their own history.

> . . .Tulsans would keep on adding their own measure to the sum of America’s hopes, of its dreams, of its successes, and of its failures. In doing so, they would make both Tulsa’s
history and America’s too. It could be no other way. After All, Tulsa was an All-American City.  

It was in this historic moment, where Tulsa faced the universal challenges of sprawl and urban renewal, which coincided with the popular emergence of alternative narratives surrounding the Tulsa Race Massacre.
CHAPTER 4: SILENCE BROKEN

The riot was not an inexplicable act of nature, as some whites suggested, but was triggered by the blacks’ intent to stop a lynching. Williams told him about the Tribune editorial, “To Lynch a Negro tonight,” about the chaos at the courthouse, and about the invasion of Greenwood. Ellsworth had read about some of it, but hearing the words made the event more authentic. . . . As the afternoon wore on, the riot was no longer a blur of anonymous figures but a tragedy that took the lives of actual people and destroyed a real community. Williams did for Ellsworth that he had done for Ross -- convinced him of the importance of the story and inspired him to keep it alive.124

While the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre lived on quietly in living memory, the lack of public acknowledgment led the event to fall into obscurity. It took over fifty years for younger generations of Tulsans to lead the charge to bring the massacre back into the limelight. The first efforts at telling the story may have received limited attention, but a series of research projects and public awareness campaigns ultimately led to memorialization and a commission by the state government to investigate the incident. While those efforts came together, a wide range of memorial museums emerged across the country and around the world, memorializing and educating on a wide range of atrocities. As Tulsa continues in its efforts to uncover the truth of what happened in 1921 and construct a memorial museum in Greenwood’s honor, this chapter highlights the emergence of the scholarly and memorial reframing of the event, the broader context surrounding memorial museums, and the current circumstances guiding Tulsa’s particular reckoning with the past on the eve of the centennial.

As the events of the Tulsa massacre slipped from living memory, authors, scholars, and North Tulsa community leaders began the work of reclaiming the historical narrative. Starting with Senator Don Ross’s advocacy, Ed Wheeler’s article and Scott Ellsworth’s seminal work, *Death in a Promised Land*, working through the process of establishing a new, official narrative during the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, and unpacking the
efforts to reframe the story in the years since then, this chapter investigates the effort to reintroduce a contested interpretation to a forgotten, if not actively suppressed, fixture of Tulsa’s history, before drawing comparisons between the efforts to memorialize and retell this history with a similar efforts at memorial museums throughout the United States and across the world.

Ed Wheeler

The first major effort to tell the story came from an unlikely source: local radio D.J. Ed Wheeler. Wheeler was a prototypical conservative white Tulsan working at KVOO, producing and broadcasting well-received historical drama segments. When he was approached by Chamber of Commerce magazine editor Larry Silvey on topics that he would be unwilling to tackle in his broadcasts, Wheeler singled out the Tulsa massacre. He explained that much like the hysteria caused by the Orson Welles “War of the Worlds” broadcast, he feared that it would induce panic. Silvey then asked him to write an article for the Chamber magazine instead, which Wheeler agreed to do.125

As Wheeler dug into his research, he was sorely disappointed by the primary sources available to him. He found that both the police department and Oklahoma Military Department were both conspicuously missing their records from 1921, while White newspapers progressively spun more and more biased accounts against Greenwood. After speaking to Whites who participated, he made the discovery that the event mirrored a pitched battle rather than a disordered riot. As he gathered photographs and accounts of what happened, he constructed a map of the incident before estimating that three hundred lives were lost in the fight.126

Word traveled quickly as Wheeler uncovered the event, and in early 1971 he began receiving threats from other Whites in Tulsa. Some threats came in the form of threatening
phone calls or in-person encounters, but after coming across a message written on his car that he had “best look under [his] hood from now on,” he opted to move his family out of the house to stay with relatives. Even though the event was fifty years in the past, there were still some in Tulsa who did not want this story to come out, and were willing to threaten life and limb in order to intimidate Wheeler from moving forward.

After his article was finished, Wheeler faced considerable challenges getting it published. While Silvey had plans to factor his article in with broader coverage of improving race relations in the interim, the rest of the chamber leadership met to discuss the article, ultimately deciding not to publish it. When Wheeler demanded an answer for why they refused, the figurehead for the chamber explained that they feared that publishing the story would incite another race riot.

Ultimately, the White press in Tulsa refused to accept it, but Don Ross accepted it for his new magazine, Impact. The article was a hit in Greenwood, and Ross considered the run a triumph, as they “broke the race riot story.” Wheeler’s article, then, represents the first high-profile attempt by a White Tulsan to grapple with the warped framing surrounding the Tulsa Race Massacre, and Don Ross was instrumental in giving his work an audience.

Scott Ellsworth

Soon after Wheeler’s article, young White historian Scott Ellsworth’s research grew to become the key, seminal work on the topic of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Ellsworth’s early experiences with race relations came with school desegregation when he was in high school in the late 1960s. Initially, he was enrolled in a private school to steer clear of desegregating schools but rejected it in favor of the new environment forming at Central High, where a far more diverse gathering of students came together. He witnessed a race riot at the school, where
the solution in the aftermath was to separate students by race, where “blacks and whites didn’t talk to each other, and racial tensions were to be resolved, somehow, by keeping them apart.”

When Ellsworth moved on to Reed college in the 1970s, he began investigating Tulsa’s racial history, where a summer job introduced him to a Greenwood resident named Bill Skillern who piqued his interest in the massacre. As he sought out a thesis topic, he found that he could not find any books on the events of 1921, so he decided to take on that challenge.

His choice to study the incident put him in conflict with family, others in the local history world, and civic leaders alike. He was denied access to Tulsa County Historical Society records and “former neighbors and friends expressed remorse about his new interest.” He found assistance from others such as Ruth Avery Sigler, a woman with church connections with his family, provided a copy of Wheeler’s article. But it was an interview with Don Ross’s former teacher W.D. Williams, that made the greatest impact on him More than anything else, this meeting with Williams humanized the event, while also convincing Ellsworth of the importance of telling the story of what had happened.

When Ellsworth attended graduate school at Duke University, his arrival coincided with the development of an oral history program that provided greater historical authority to marginalized voices and accounts, especially those whose perspectives were left out of traditional sources. So, at twenty-four years old, Ellsworth found that the events in Tulsa were ideal for such a project:

The official history had been preserved in Tulsa’s white newspapers and government reports, but the black history had been handed down through stories told on Greenwood’s porches. Ellsworth wanted to record those narratives on tape and use them to turn his thesis into a book.

By authoring *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*, Ellsworth attempted to fill a vacuum in the historical literature, so he returned to Tulsa in 1978 to carry out oral history interviews with the survivors.
The book, published in 1982, while not selling well, provided an essential resource for future researchers as an “evenhanded, heavily documented account of events,” and the first of its type to be widely available in libraries nationwide.\textsuperscript{134} With its relative accessibility, it also provided immediate opportunities for challenges to crop up. He expected the work to be most offensive to Whites, but then discovered that it had revealed disagreement among Black Tulsans on how to interpret it. On one hand, he had tacit support from John Hope Franklin, who wrote the introduction to the book, but his moderate assessment of events did not mesh with some Black readers who wanted his narrative to validate some of their more extreme stories, such as suspicions of conspiracy by Whites, aerial firebombing, or the higher casualty estimates that had been rumored.\textsuperscript{135} While his narrative did not satisfy some Black readers, its strategic use of oral histories allowed Ellsworth to craft an even-handed first attempt at a cohesive, alternative framing of the event.

Don Ross

Among the first public figures to bring greater public attention to the Tulsa Race Massacre was, fittingly, a North Tulsa native in Senator Don Ross. Ross was introduced to the massacre by his teacher, then introduced to another survivor. As the story goes, Ross was introduced to the story of the massacre in his yearbook class, where Booker T. Washington High School history teacher, W.D. Williams, shared the event with his students. Ross, in disbelief, challenged his teacher’s story, and Williams had him stay after class to introduce Ross to an album that documented what had happened. As it turns out, Mr. Williams had been a survivor. He was six years old when the massacre began, and his father had been one of the men defending Greenwood. He was then introduced to other survivors, who introduced Ross to the breadth of
suffering, as well as the pride that Greenwood had in rebuilding despite the obstacles put in their way.\footnote{136} After graduating, Ross served in the Air Force before returning home, attending the University of Tulsa, and beginning a career in journalism which gave him an early platform to bring attention to the events of 1921.\footnote{137}

One important element of Don Ross’s development in his early journalistic career was a growing political sense that would be crucial in challenging the old White supremacist framing of the massacre. He had become renowned for his wit and biting political commentary writing for the *Oklahoma Eagle*, maintaining a column called “From the Ghetto Line,” which gained him renown in the community. Through his notoriety as a crack journalist, he used that position to leverage himself against Tulsa’s Jim Crow establishment, utilizing rhetoric to “scare the white people first, then use their fear to get something you want.”\footnote{138} Establishing himself as a pragmatic dealmaker for Greenwood, he often worked with fellow Black activist Homer Johnson, who would raise an emotional scene at civic leaders before Ross would step in, serving as the more measured representative. He would carry this strategy into a successful political career, ultimately leading to a state commission to challenge the framing of the 1921 massacre.\footnote{139}

In the meantime, Ross’s early writings indicate an early intent to reframe the riot and attain reparations for its victims. He produced three columns in the heat of the civil rights movement in 1968, leveraging the contemporary battle over segregation to explain the massacre. These efforts largely fell on deaf ears, however, as Whites did not read the *Eagle* and “even most blacks saw little to gain by dredging up painful memories while they were seeking public accommodations, fair housing, and other basic rights,” though he did find comradery with Black historian John Hope Franklin, who planted the idea in Ross’s mind to advocate for reparations.\footnote{140}
While the public battle over reparations would not take place until the late 1990s and early 2000s, the foundations were already being set in the mid-century for Don Ross to lead the way in bringing the massacre into public consciousness.
CHAPTER 5 : FROM COMMISSION TO COMMISSION

The Greenwood District pioneers parlayed Jim Crow into an economic advantage. They seized the opportunity to create a closed market system that defied Jim Crow’s fundamental premise: African American incompetence and inferiority. From movie theatres to professional offices, from grocery stores to schools, from beauty salons to shoeshine shops, the Greenwood District seemingly had it all.141

The effort to memorialize the Tulsa Race Massacre center around the establishment of three spaces: The first came in 1997 with the creation of the Greenwood Cultural Center. The second came in 2009, in the form of the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park. The third effort, centered around the massacre’s centennial, is Greenwood Rising. These compounding efforts to reframe and memorialize the events of the massacre fit into a larger global effort to wrestle with difficult memory, placing museums at the heart of that cultural reckoning. This section will first set up the context of memorialization and memorial museums at large, before exploring the origins of these efforts to memorialize the massacre and the common threads, stated goals, and political trappings that surround Tulsa’s reckoning with the trauma of its violent past.

The Road to the State Commission

It was not until the mid-1990s that real opportunities to challenge the official narrative on the public stage came. That opportunity arose from another, contemporary, tragedy in the form of the Oklahoma City Bombing. In Don Ross’s perspective, the mass media attention that the bombing received was a key motivating factor in raising the heat surrounding Tulsa’s experience 75 years before: “While the tragedy was heartbreaking, it was not, in his view, the country’s deadliest terrorist attack or worst urban disaster. Those designations belonged to the Tulsa race
riot, and he was now in a position to do more than write a column about it,” since he had ascended into the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 1982.  

First, Ross planned a local commemoration to break the long public “conspiracy of silence” in the leadup to the 75th anniversary of the massacre. He enlisted the help of a local Jewish lawyer, Ken Levit, who envisioned a memorial to the event in the hopes that it would be remembered. His early career brought him into contact with Ellsworth’s *Death in a Promised Land*, while his academic interests in law school brought him to examine similar atrocities. When he returned to Tulsa, he had already cultivated an interest “in the issues of memory, history, and reconciliation,” which would be pivotal in assisting Ross in this project. When they met at the newly built Greenwood Cultural Center in the summer of 1995, Levit brought in ideas for commemoration, as well as fundraising connections.

Though Levit had utilized his connections well, the project ran into cost overruns, as well as the theft of a beam from the demolished Mount Zion Baptist Church that was meant to be incorporated into the exhibit. The memorial, finished on June 1, 1995, provided the first contemplative space of its kind for the events of the disaster.

Even more important, however, was the rhetorical boost which the memorial provided: Don Ross called it the Black Wall Street Memorial, which, while John Hope Franklin thought was anachronistic, served an important function in elevating the image of Greenwood as a prestigious place where “in effect, Greenwood had completely reversed its persona. In the days following the riot, the newspapers mitigated the destruction of “Little Africa” by describing it as a cesspool of blight and disorder. Now, Greenwood’s gilded image made its devastation seem all the more unspeakable.” This name stuck, and the commemoration helped drive nationwide press coverage, while also motivating the Tulsa *World* to publish a series of articles on the Black
experience in Tulsa. Through Ross and Levit’s efforts, the public attention given to the events of
the massacre had shattered the community’s collective silence. In the wake of the
commemoration, Ross sought to carry that momentum into demanding reparations for North
Tulsa.

The Rhetoric of Black Wall Street and the State Commission

In the face of such massive efforts to reclaim the historical narrative, a variety of voices
have openly contested these changes under the fearful specter of historical revisionism. The
reasons for such vocal opposition are many, ranging from fears that retelling and memorializing
the event will harbor further racial tension, to the belief that such an unflattering local story is
best left in obscurity, to the perception that the revised account of events is reliant on survivor
testimonies that were misremembered at best or outright lies at worst. Finally, in all the above
cases, implicit and racial biases become clearer as those raising these challenges engage with the
history and their own contemporaries.

Identifying and highlighting these responses to contested public memory is necessary for
public historians trying to tackle difficult history, as the efforts to uncover that history are often
framed not as a pursuit of truth, but rather as an effort to rewrite history to shame contemporary
audiences and fit a particular political agenda. Those responses come from both an emotional
pushback against challenging narratives, and concerns about the quality and motivation of
research. While this chapter may not offer a concrete solution to these challenges, it does try to
express and interpret them to understand the present challenge in engaging with the general
public on matters of race, both historical and contemporary. This chapter concludes with an
examination of a book written in response to the commission’s report, which articulates the
original framing of the massacre as a Black uprising, before providing considerations on the legacy of competing framings.

The historiography surrounding this period is scant, seeing as it was so recent. However, James S. Hirsch provides a lens into the community figures most vocally opposed to the commission, their stances, and an inside look into their interactions with commission members. Here, they utilize rhetoric in a similar spirit to White Tulsans soon after the massacre, as their biases against North Tulsa’s Black residents bleed through their language. Their reflexive responses to the pursuit of truth surrounding the events of 1921 are telling, as many of the same rhetorical devices were originally used to obfuscate the true events as they happened nearly a century prior.

Some of the most visible public pushback against the reframing of the Tulsa race massacre surfaced during the state commission from 1997 to 2001. This moment was especially controversial, as it fundamentally challenged the persistent White narrative of events. This opposition came from a cadre of older White Tulsa men including Beryl Ford, Bill O’Brien, and Bob Norris. Ford was a local history enthusiast, whose work background was in structural engineering. He amassed a large private collection on Tulsa history, one of the largest of its kind, which “existed because Ford wanted to preserve the community he loved.” He had a long history with the Tulsa Pioneers Association, made up exclusively of people whose family had been in Tulsa since 1907. This organization had long served as the torchbearers for Tulsa’s proud local history, and Ford’s fierce opposition to the reframing of the massacre was, in part, “to tell their stories, to defend their honor, and to defend their good name.”

The second of these men, Bill O’Brien, had a military background. He had served in the Marines, while his father was a part of the American Legion at the time of the massacre. His
narrative of the events of 1921 held that White authorities saved the city, and that the recent efforts to reframe the event were dishonoring that effort. The cadre’s third member was Bob Norris, a lawyer and military history buff who sought to exonerate the National Guard, and who was not shy about his racist attitudes as he believed the aim of reframing the riot was “therapy for neurotic Negros.” These three men worked together to put the original framing of the events of 1921 into words, ultimately culminating in O’Brien’s *Who Speaks for Us?*, which is given further consideration later in this chapter.

Much of this opposition came to a head on January 5, 2001, as a series of meetings at the Greenwood Cultural Center late in the process brought the conflict between the commission and its opponents to a fever pitch. At this meeting, Ford challenged the commission’s positing that aircraft were used to bomb Greenwood, sparking an argument with commission member Vivian Clark-Adams, who believed that Ford’s criticisms and doubts were coming from a place of racial bias. Ford’s defense led a Black audience member, Karen Simpson, to interject angrily, as his denial made her mother and grandmother liars. This led into further arguments about the ethics of rounding Greenwood residents up, before it crescendoed with O’Brien’s claims that Black militancy caused the riot. When Clark-Adams pointed out that he always focuses on White people getting hurt when he makes those comments, O’Brien retorted back: “That’s because you people started it. You initiated the action, you started the shooting, and only after the whites got organized could they contain the Blacks,” which led to volleys of “you people” statements from both sides.

While tempers flared throughout the late stages of the commission report, Ford, O’Brien, and Norris sought to give a parallel account of events. What follows is an examination of the product of their work.
Who Speaks for Us?: An Oppositional Response to Reframing

With the context surrounding the combined community and scholarly effort to reframe the events of 1921 established and exemplified in the 1997 commission, one of the fiercest opponents to the commission produced his own manuscript on the events of the disaster. Over the course of around 150 pages, William O’Brien attempts to lay out an alternative account of the riot that reinforces the familiar framing of Black insurgency. The following is an examination of O’Brien’s key claims, the ideological motivations that he provides in his introductory and concluding sections that undermine his efforts, and a reflection on how continued racial tensions motivate some to hold onto past framing devices.

To give O’Brien credit, his monograph does manage to identify critically important context for both the leadup to the massacre and the broader politics of memorialization at play. While O’Brien is not a professionally trained historian, he is nonetheless correct in identifying White supremacist influences on the state’s early history, as well as the tension that it caused for those Black Oklahomans who moved there to find freedom. He also correctly identifies contemporary trends surrounding the politics of memory identified by Sodaro, particularly the role of victimhood. As evidenced by the unfolding of Holocaust memory, victimhood has allowed some to attain a privileged status as previously marginalized groups sought recognition. In so doing, they brought the negative past to the forefront of historical consciousness.” By attempting to rebut the politics at play in the reframing of the massacre, O’Brien provides an unvarnished example of the opposite side of that debate over contested memory.

However, his work is fundamentally flawed by his bad-faith criticism of Tulsa’s contemporary Black community and historic Greenwood alike, as his explicit bias undercuts
much of the credibility that his complaints might otherwise carry. This is most visible in his forward, wherein he contends with Black political activism. He explains that he was introduced to the racial politics of the moment during a visit to an NAACP forum in 1996, when he was running for public office. He commented that, aside from one young woman, he was the only White at the event, while most of the audience was made up of Black men. He noted that:

As [the moderator] proceeded with the forum the temperament of the crowd became very hostile toward whites. When I was asked to comment, I was regularly interrupted. I had never experienced such a vicious display of racial bitterness. At the time, I had no idea why these Negroes felt and acted with such open contempt toward the white race. I lost the election but never forgot the raw hatred I had witnessed at the NAACP forum.

It was amidst these circumstances, Black opposition to his political ambitions, which framed his introduction to the Tulsa massacre.

While his explicit racial bias undermines his credibility, so does his sourcing. O’Brien’s work could easily serve a vital writing example for why historians must caution against over-relying on newspapers and governmental sources, especially when dealing with contended memory. When discussing the events leading up to, during, and after the massacre, his account relies primarily on White newspaper coverage contemporary to the event. His notes in sections 3 through 6, are built almost entirely from newspaper coverage, with a sprinkling of secondary sources throughout. Section 6 is most egregious, where nearly every citation in his coverage of the immediate aftermath centered on coverage from the *Tulsa Tribune, Tulsa World,* and *New York Times.* Historians and sociologists alike have overwhelmingly judged the White Tulsa papers as wholly unreliable narrators for the events of 1921, whose racist framing was central to the dominant narrative of the time. By centering his narrative around these racially biased papers, O’Brien effectively debased his own work in the eyes of the broader historical community.
By characterizing Greenwood as acting in bad faith, the narrative that O’Brien creates is in nearly perfect lockstep with the story that White Tulsans told themselves immediately after the massacre. His first section provides a backdrop to the event, highlighting the early history of Oklahoma and growth of Tulsa up to 1921. He frames the tension building in Tulsa through the economic, social and technological changes ongoing nationwide in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Among the sea-changes of the post-Great War years, he includes post-war inflation, growing adoption of electricity and automobiles, a glut in the work force after veterans returned from the Western front, the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the First Red Scare, and prohibition all reflecting a nation struggling with change at multiple levels. He also provides a survey-level coverage of the African American experience in early Oklahoma. He characterizes the pre-Civil War presence of African Americans in Indian Territory, the social and political gains that Black migrants sought in Oklahoma Territory, and the race politics employed by the Democratic party surrounding statehood which greatly curtailed Black Oklahomans’ civil rights. O’Brien tries to condemn the segregationist policy making surrounding statehood, even recognizing that Black citizens protested, turned to the courts, and actively resisted segregation. Summing up the ratification of Jim Crow laws in the Oklahoma constitution, the author observes that “the election results demonstrated that the white voters of Oklahoma had embraced the Democratic doctrine of white supremacy.” Unlike much of the rest of O’Brien’s narrative, he is far more sympathetic to the Black experience here, recognizing the White supremacist politics which had constricted Black Oklahomans. This makes the rest of his narrative all the more frustrating since the author fails to meaningfully connect this historical moment to Black resistance in later years.
This lack of understanding vis-à-vis Black resistance to Jim Crow rears its head when O’Brien attempts to factor the Red Summer of 1919 into his narrative. He first rails against the influence of W.E.B. Du Bois, calling him an “active racial protester with a combative spirit.” He then explains that, as racial tensions flared, “Whites across America would not tolerate Negro agitation,” before explaining briefly that race riots spanned the entire country, mentioning the Chicago riot by name.\textsuperscript{156} As the earlier chapter in this study on the Red Summer shows, the circumstances surrounding the Red Summer was far more complicated than merely a white reaction to so-called “Negro agitation.” By choosing such a simplistic framing to explain diffuse, nationwide racist violence, O’Brien sets the tone for the rest of his rebuttal, where even when he recognizes the circumstances that led to Black resistance to Jim Crow, he chooses to understand the course of events from the perspective of White supremacist sources instead of understanding the Black narrative on its own terms.

In his consideration of the Red Scare, O’Brien likewise employs official framings, bringing Du Bois’s socialist sympathies and the foundations of the African Blood Brotherhood into the narrative of the Tulsa massacre. By his estimation, the ABB formed the core of Black radicalism in Tulsa, linking Greenwood’s willingness to resist Jim Crow to Communist Party influence.\textsuperscript{157} Here, much like contemporaries to the Red Summer, O’Brien’s narrative centers around a White supremacist trope of linking Black civil rights demands to communist agitation. This is crucial to understanding how his narrative of the riot comes together: Greenwood’s resistance is explained not just as opposition to an oppressive racial regime, but as manipulation from communist agitators. This is far from the first instance of Whites preferring communist conspiracy to explain away racial tensions, but this ideological framing will play an important role in directing the rest of his narrative. Also important in this first section is the emergence of
vigilantism in Tulsa among Whites and Blacks, where O’Brien places the Knights of Liberty and the Ku Klux Klan on the same plane as Black resistance exemplified by the African Black Brotherhood.158

His second section focuses on the overall mood of Memorial Day, May 30, when the incident between Rowland and Page transpired. The way that O’Brien handles the day before the massacre is reminiscent of the narratives surrounding the day of the Oklahoma City Bombing, as he focuses on the normalcy of the day, providing the rhetorical leverage of innocence lost.159 After painting a picture of what Memorial Day in Tulsa had been like, he provides the established narrative surrounding the altercation between Dick Rowland and Sarah Page, as well as Rowland’s arrest soon after.

Section three centers around the growing tensions on May 31. From this point, O’Brien brings his most fervent opposition to the existing historiography to bear, as he paints a radically different picture of the massacre’s outbreak. For one, he challenges the commonly cited Tribune editorial, where Richard Lloyd Jones allegedly called upon White Tulsans to lynch Rowland. He rebuts the claims made by virtually every other narrative that includes this detail, noting that this text can be found nowhere, stating that “no one has ever found a copy of the implied original, but this omission has fueled all kinds of imaginary, theories and conspiracies [sic] accusations over the years.”160 To this point, the author identifies one element of Tulsa Race Massacre historiography that is challenging; the existence of this editorial is of critical importance to the revised narrative, but scholars have had to rely overwhelmingly on oral histories rather than concrete evidence. O’Brien considers this historiographical problem big enough to debase the entire narrative, stating that “unsubstantiated claims and poor research represent almost everything that’s been stated about the cause of the [sic] what happened in 1921.”161
Having rejected the presence of an editorial inciting a White lynch mob, O’Brien instead frames the conflict building on May 31 as a justified White response to a militant Black invasion of downtown Tulsa. He again challenges the established narrative, where “a group of 40 to 50 responsible Negro men took up arms and without consideration to their personal safety did nobly and bravely proceed to the Tulsa County courthouse. . . to help guarantee the safety of Rowland from a fanatical lynch mob numbering in the thousands.” Instead, he describes an angry Black mob gathering in Greenwood, as well as “black armed militants” spreading throughout downtown. He even provides a map, which illustrates a systematic encirclement of downtown, forming a pincer that converged on the Tulsa County courthouse. This, according to the author, justified the White reaction:

The frenzied gathering of men and arms in the Negro section and the massing of armed Negro crowds would have caused serious concern to those whites watching. This concern would have become panic when segments of armed blacks began moving through the bordering white neighborhoods on their way toward the courthouse, or staging areas, about 8:00 or earlier.

From this point forward, O’Brien’s account of events characterize the White attack on Greenwood as a just reaction to this invasion.

After the dust settled on the events of the massacre, O’Brien turns to the Grand Jury as the chief authoritative voice on what happened and who was most at fault. While agreeing with the findings of the jury, O’Brien went a step further to justify blaming Greenwood for the riot:

“The findings of the Grand Jury placed the blame for the riot on the Negroes because of what happened at the Tulsa County Courthouse. In reality, the shooting at the courthouse was only one of a series of criminal acts that clearly establish the actions of a Negro minority, that began hours before what happened at the courthouse, was a rebellion against the white civil authority of Oklahoma.

While other authors take issue with the Grand Jury’s miscarriage of justice in failing to hold White rioters responsible, O’Brien instead takes issue with their failure to punish Black
community leaders for allegedly instigating the riot, claiming that “the innocent black majority who were swept up in the ambitions of the few were left to face the uncertainty, fear, and suffering, caused by the failed ambitions of a few of their own race.” Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the author asserts that it was Black militancy that ultimately brought destruction to Greenwood.

His closing summary, perhaps more than anything else, exposes the true motivations of O’Brien’s rebuttal. In examining the circumstances surrounding recent community and scholarly efforts to change the narrative, he describes the totality of scholarly work on the topic “a sensationalized-fictitious story,” which paints the Black survivors as “victims of unjustified acts of mayhem of the White population,” while completely leaving out the alleged Black militancy that justified the retribution that befell Greenwood. To that point, he takes particular issue with the case being made for reparations to the survivors. In order to explain the changing narrative, O’Brien says the following:

“What’s happening is called revisionist history, and in this case represents a biased interpretation by a select group of people to the exclusion of all others. In this case the instigators of the conflict are now identified as freedom fighters who were only representing their people in their attempt to overthrow the injustice of separatist laws. The whites and blacks, who came forward and stopped the black militants [sic] aggressive threat their Tulsa of 1921, by these so-called freedom fighters, are labeled aggressors, or worse a raging mob driven by “riot fever” to destroy all the Negroes of Tulsa.”

This statement, above all else, conveys O’Brien’s true motivation for his lengthy narrative of the massacre. O’Brien, in opposition to the revised narratives that place Greenwood’s experience at the center of the events of 1921, explicitly sides with the rioters and looters who tore through Tulsa’s Black district, holding them up as heroes who put down a Black uprising. Further, he even condemns the refugees of the massacre, regaling a story from the Oklahoman that described hundreds of homeless children who were in the Red Cross’s care. The presence of these
homeless children justified, in his eyes, a character assassination of Greenwood’s refugees who allegedly left those children behind, asking whether they can “be believed when they are attributed with charges of inhumanity against the very people who saved their children?” By framing the crisis of mass homelessness and separated families as a moral failure of Greenwood’s victims, the author betrays a deep contempt for Tulsa’s Black community. Not content to place blame on the supposed militants, O’Brien reserves some of his worst venom for the parents who were either murdered, driven from the city, or marched to a detention camp apart from their children.

Taken together, O’Brien’s defense of the original official narrative of the massacre dovetails neatly with Messer and Bell’s study on framing, as the authoritative word of White Tulsa continues to reverberate in his version of events. This book also provides an important foil for examining the politics of memory described by Sodaro. While the content of O’Brien’s rebuttal is frequently undermined by his own racial bias, he also helps illustrate the process of memorialization from someone fundamentally opposed to the message placed before him.

Greenwood Rising: Tulsa’s Memorialization in Context

The memorialization of the Tulsa Race Massacre faces distinct institutional and social challenges on the eve of the event’s centennial. Much like the Holocaust, Oklahoma City Bombing, and September 11 attacks, the Tulsa Race Massacre carries an inherent shock value, which complicates the history’s retelling. Additionally, the ebb and flow of Tulsa Race Massacre memory has been influenced by the shifts in racial politics of the past thirty years. Finally, peculiarities in contemporary state and local politics both assist and hinder the effort at commemorating and retelling the story of the massacre.
Though the events of the Oklahoma City Bombing are much more contemporary than that of the Tulsa Race Massacre, this memorialization effort is relevant for understanding Tulsa’s contemporary efforts. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Oklahoma representative Don Ross was motivated by the public reaction to the bombing to seek out options for memorializing the Tulsa Race Massacre. Additionally, because of the proximity of the Oklahoma City Memorial and Museum, it is the closest geographical example of the memorial museum movement. As the largest museum of its type in Oklahoma, the OCMM’s political message and its difficulty in juggling extremist violence and mass murder, and its experiential design, all set a benchmark of local expectations for memorial museums that the Centennial Commission will need to navigate moving forward.

Another especially important link to these other museums for Tulsa is in its planning partnership with Local Projects, who served a pivotal role in creating the September 11 museum. The plans that they have laid out for Greenwood Rising are much in the same vein as those of previous memorial museums, placing Tulsa’s museum into the same continuum as that of memorial museums’ past. This museum, planned to open by the centennial of the massacre, aims to utilize the most current design principles in memorial museum exhibit planning to share the story of what happened in 1921. Its stated goal is to “develop an exhibition space that will tell the remarkable and resilient story of Greenwood and its community by finally bringing this story to vivid life on the very site where Black Wall Street used to stand.” In order to see that mission through, Local Projects plans on installing exhibits revolving around the following: an introduction to Greenwood’s early history; a Hall of Fame for Greenwood’s most prominent leaders; a recreation of a barber shop to immerse the visitor in Greenwood’s glory days; a broad overview of racial violence in America; a comprehensive exhibit on the events of the massacre;
followed by exhibits on the neighborhood’s rebuilding efforts, later decline, and a mission of racial reconciliation which serves as the moral backbone of the museum. This museum plan reflects the ambitious efforts to provide a flagship memorial museum which will solidify the reframing efforts of the previous decades.

Another critical factor in the memorialization efforts in Tulsa is the shifting character of contemporary race relations in America. While the circumstances surrounding the state commission at the turn of the twenty-first century centered around reparations, a greater focus on racialized police violence has dominated American race politics in the leadup to the centennial. While African Americans have faced racial violence for decades, the high-profile shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 set off protest and unrest that has waxed and waned in the years after.

The contemporary debate over police brutality includes a 2016 incident in Tulsa, where Officer Betty Jo Shelby shot and killed Black Tulsa resident Terence Crutcher. The footage of Shelby killing Crutcher fits into the broader trend of police brutality being caught on camera and sparking public outcry. In response to the growing regularity of filmed police shootings, the New York Times collated the shooting of Crutcher with numerous others over the preceding years. The web article points out that the pervasive footage of killings has sparked nationwide protest, investigations, and changes in policy making to address the issue. However, in Tulsa’s case, Shelby was ultimately acquitted, and on January 27, 2021, District Judge William LaFortune expunged her involvement in the officer-involved shooting from her record. At the same time, an ongoing civil rights lawsuit against Shelby and the Tulsa Police Department places the 2016 incident into the larger context of racialized police violence in America.
The public frustration surrounding these incidents finally burst in the summer of 2020, as the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota spread across social media, drawing a pandemic-weary public into mass unrest. Tulsa’s experience of the Black Lives Matter protests was unique, both because of the ongoing memorialization efforts for the Tulsa Race Massacre, and because of a planned campaign rally for Donald Trump at the height of the nationwide protests. As Trump supporters gathered at the Bank of Oklahoma Center, Black Lives Matter protesters gathered outside.\(^{172}\) Black Lives Matter supporters in the weeks following the rally utilized Tulsa Race Massacre memory in their protests, as they painted the phrase onto Greenwood Avenue, right in the historic heart of Deep Greenwood. In response to the city trying to remove the street mural, activists unified the present and the past with a series of temporary headstones for victims of the 1921 massacre and contemporary police violence. Terence Crutcher’s twin sister, Tiffany Crutcher, commented on the symbology of the tombstones, saying that “I felt like displaying the names of the victims of police brutality and the names of the victims of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre would help people understand why we say, ‘Black Lives Matter,'”\(^{173}\) This illustrates the reality of difficult memory among Black Tulsans: the 1921 massacre is not simply an aberration of history, an unimaginable catastrophe of the past. Rather, this element of the protest suggests a continuum of racist violence which is still costing Black lives.

This nationwide reckoning with racist violence underpins the educational and memorial efforts of the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission. While distinct from the 1997 commission in its context and intent, the Centennial Commission is also fundamentally shaped by the racial politics of its historic moment. Among its major impacts in the leadup to the centennial, the commission has led the way toward reframing the event as a massacre, rather than
an uprising or a riot. In November 2018, State Senator Kevin Matthews announced the commission was dropping the word riot from its name in exchange for massacre. Matthews justified this rhetorical turn, saying that the event was initially framed as a riot to prevent insurance claims. This change came after one of the last remaining survivors of the massacre, Dr. Olivia Hooker, passed away, and her personal efforts to reframe the event as a massacre motivated the commission to adopt the change in her honor.\textsuperscript{174}

The Centennial Commission, like the 1997 state commission, is comprised of historians, community leaders, and state political figures. As previously mentioned, Senator Kevin Matthews serves as committee chair after a varied career as a firefighter and later a local entrepreneur. Another local entrepreneur and nonprofit chairman, Phil Armstrong, serves as project manager. Under their leadership, the rest of the commissioners come from a broad range of stakeholders, from U.S. Senator James Lankford, Governor Kevin Stitt, and Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum to North Tulsa lawyer and Race Massacre historian Hannibal Johnson, to representatives from the state historical society, Department of Commerce, universities, and the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation. Together, they operate on two sets of stated goals: first, they aim to “leverage the rich history surrounding the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre by facilitating actions, activities, and events that commemorate and educate all citizens,” and, more specifically,

The projects of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission will educate Oklahomans and Americans about the Race Massacre and its impact on the state and Nation; remember its victims and survivors; and create an environment conducive to fostering sustainable entrepreneurship and heritage tourism within the Greenwood District specifically, and North Tulsa generally.\textsuperscript{175}
Far from the relative obscurity that the events of 1921 used to be, the Centennial Commission comprises a broad base of political, scholarly, and social interests across ideological, racial, and party lines for the state and city.

Alongside the ongoing turmoil surrounding contemporary racial injustice, the City of Tulsa has taken an increased interest in the memorialization of the massacre, with Mayor G.T. Bynum serving as the figurehead for a city government that is choosing to take an active role in the process. This started in 2018, when Bynum announced that the city would open an investigation into mass graves, treating it as an unsolved murder. In a public statement, the mayor said that “If you get murdered in Tulsa, we have a contract with you that we will do everything we can to find out what happened and render justice. That’s why we are treating this as a homicide investigation for Tulsans who we believe were murdered in 1921.”176 While the search is still ongoing, forensics experts hit paydirt in October 2020 when they discovered a mass grave containing twelve unmarked coffins at Oaklawn cemetery. This discovery corroborated documentary evidence of a potential mass burial site, one of many leads still being investigated.177

With these factors in mind, the upcoming memorial museum for Greenwood faces a mix of local and national circumstances that influence its immediate future. For the museum professionals and community leaders planning the museum, a decades-long legacy of memorial museum practices informs the process currently under way. With an established lexicon of design language in tow, the assistance from Local Projects in creating the exhibit makes Greenwood Rising the next big, high-profile memorial museum to follow in the footsteps of the USHMM and September 11 memorial. Meanwhile, the explosion of civil unrest in response to racialized police violence on the eve of the centennial illustrates both the timeliness and the
political backdrop of the museum’s creation. Local political leadership, well aware of the ongoing civil strife, have much to gain in strategically supporting the reframing effort: for Mayor Bynum, he has a unique opportunity to help frame the events of 1921 by allowing the exhumation of possible mass graves as a murder investigation. While that willingness to assist in uncovering the bodies may be valuable in and of itself, the political circumstances of other memorial museums warrant caution for a racially conservative city that still struggles to contend with its past. In the face of mass unrest surrounding racialized police brutality, it is telling that an event as horrific as the Tulsa Race Massacre has become a comparatively safe issue to tackle in local, state, and national politics. Over the course of the last twenty years, the massacre has shifted from being an event still shrouded in taboo that required a great deal of political currency to be reexamined by state officials, to one which draws a great deal of attention and intrigue in a nation reeling from contemporary racist violence.
CONCLUSION

Much to the horror of mid-century boosters, a current google search on Tulsa and History shows almost exclusively a list of books on 1921, as do the Tulsa Public Library’s local history reading lists, which features the massacre prominently. As the twenty-first century carries forward and public perception mounts surrounding the massacre, Tulsa faces a reckoning. The city’s long-established self-identity as the prestigious Oil Capital of the World faces the risk of stigma, as the events of 1921 become the defining event in the national and global media.

Tulsa is far from the only city to face stigmatization for past scandals, as Jonathan Foster’s *Stigma Cities: The Reputation and History of Birmingham, San Francisco, and Las Vegas* illustrates the ways in which these cities have been impacted by national perceptions of place. In this study of urban stigmatization, Foster makes the case that “although self-proclaimed sensitive and tolerant individuals of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century might never have considered the deliberate use of stereotypes to describe a race of people, they continued to do so unwittingly about place.” In Birmingham’s case, his study traces the initial enthusiasm for the city’s industrial boom and its subsequent loss of face as society’s views on racism changed.

Throughout the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, in a time when industrialization was prized and racism largely accepted or ignored, Birmingham’s positive image as the forward-looking steel center of the New South held sway. Yet, in the changing context of the mid-century -- and helped along by the local power structure’s violent reaction to the civil rights demonstrations of 1963 -- Birmingham found itself recast as a national pariah.

In the face of this stigma, Birmingham has repeatedly struggled to regain some of its diminished prestige, vacillating in its willingness to contend with the difficult memory of racial violence which has recasted the city’s reputation. Like Tulsa, Birmingham leaned into civic pride in the
1970s when they received the All-America City Award, but the trauma of racist violence returned with the officer-involved shooting of Bonita Carter. The political backlash surrounding this incident of police brutality opened the door for the city’s first Black mayor, Richard Arrington, who took office in 1980. Under his leadership the city began workshopping the idea of installing a memorial museum, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, in 1982. The institute then opened in 1992. Later in 2008, public discourse again became wrapped up in civil rights era memory after the proposal to name the city’s airport after local civil rights organizer Fred Shuttlesworth. Among the public comments on social media, one commenter expressed frustration about Birmingham’s inability to shake its racialized legacy, saying that “it’s always 1963 in Birmingham.” to which another replied:

- Is it always 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
- Is it always 1863 in Gettysburg?
- Is it always 1941 in Pearl Harbor?
- Is it always 1776 in Philadelphia?
- Is it always 1838 on the trail of tears?

History is part of the fiber of these places and important events in history should be preserved and learned from not forgotten and ignored.

This sentiment sums up the public tension surrounding racial history in Birmingham and Tulsa alike. Despite the stigma that comes from the violent past, both cities are trying to decide why and how their history should be remembered.

By contrast, neighboring Oklahoma City and Wichita have had a radically different experience in incorporating their own racial history into their larger stories. While they both experienced racial segregation and violence, they were also home to two of the earliest attempts at lunch counter sit-in demonstrations. The first took started at the Dockum drug store in downtown Wichita on July 19, 1958, led by Carol Parks-Hahn and Ron Walters and a small group of other Black youths. After nearly a month of sustained protest at the lunch counter, the
owner caved in, telling his employees: “Serve them. I’m losing too much money.” On August 19, eight days after the Dockum sit-in ended, Oklahoma City NAACP youth leader Clara Luper brought a group of thirteen young children to the Katz Drug Store downtown. By contrast with Wichita’s experience, the Oklahoma City sit-in only lasted three days before the franchise desegregated all its locations in several states. Both the Wichita-Sedgwick County Museum and the Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City installed exhibits on their respective sit-ins, demonstrating civic pride in their communities’ little-known status as early testbeds for successful desegregation protests.

While Tulsa does not have an easy way to spin the massacre positively, the story of Greenwood’s entrepreneurial history meshes well with Tulsa’s broader business-centric narrative. This appears to be the route that recent memorial efforts have taken in Tulsa, culminating in the creation of the Black Wall Street memorial, the coinage of Black Wall Street as a nickname for Greenwood, and in the programming planned in the upcoming Greenwood Rising memorial museum. By juxtaposing the horrors of 1921 with the resilience and entrepreneurship of Greenwood’s citizens in the face of tragedy, their cumulative memorial efforts more easily square with the city’s historic enterprise-centered mindset. The concept brief on Local Projects’s webpage about the museum’s last section also fits with both the ongoing racial politics of reconciliation and on Tulsa’s future-focused outlook. Titled “Journey to Reconciliation,” the brief states:

“This section offers visitors an opportunity to transcend divisions and create an unflinchingly honest acknowledgement of biases and understanding of others. Acknowledgement of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and lasting racial disparities is not sufficient — action must be taken by political and community leaders. Visitors will be encouraged to explore prompts with strangers that can open up dialogue, such as “What could our country look like if there was no hierarchy of human value?” and “Describe an experience that shaped your view of community.”
Unflinching honesty, then, encapsulates the end goals of the Centennial Commission’s efforts at community engagement. This explicit message of racial reconciliation serves as a new framing device for the massacre, working under the assumption that their institution will serve an important role in holding leaders accountable for historic wrongs.

As Tulsa experiences an ongoing reckoning with past and present experiences of racist violence, the branching narratives surrounding the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 are of critical importance. From the outset, White and Black Tulsans formed fundamentally different perceptions of what had happened. Whites framed the event as an unjustified Black uprising, which led to the assertion that Greenwood itself was a problem that needed solved. Blacks, by contrast, saw White mob rule and official complicity as the chief problem, compounded by the antagonistic stance that the city’s business and political interests took towards Greenwood’s rebuilding efforts.

From 1921 until the turn of the twentieth century, two Tulsas, one White and one Black, continued to tell themselves radically different stories about what had happened. While Black Tulsans labored to rebuild and withstand the challenges that came from the massacre, then desegregation and urban renewal, White Tulsans were in the midst of defining (and re-defining) the city’s identity as an industrial and cultural center for the state and region. It took nearly fifty years for Tulsa to begin reconsidering the events of 1921, starting with scholarship and community activism, given credence through a state commission’s adoption of the Black narrative, and continued efforts into the event’s centennial.

As Greenwood Rising takes form, the experiences of past memorial museums should be heeded: memory is political, and memory surrounding the violent past even more so. The centennial of the massacre coincides with lingering questions of police brutality against African
Americans, placing additional pressure on the museum to confront the racist past in a racially conservative city which remains deeply segregated. Time will tell whether Greenwood Rising achieves its goals, but the effort mirrors historian Danney Goble’s hopes for twenty-first century Tulsa in his closing statements in *Tulsa! Biography of an American City*:

> If Tulsa is lucky, that historian will record that its people entered the second century of their history as others had its first. They saw a Tulsa rich with opportunity. The pioneer generation that opened cattle trails, lured railroads, and built oil pipelines had been succeeded by a later generation. That one had built an avenue to the sea, sent shuttles to the moon, and turned rusting old pipelines into conduits for fiber-optic communication. That generation had bequeathed to succeeding generations a whole history to be appreciated and to be carried forward. Like all the pioneers before them, the pioneers of Tulsa’s second century were builders too. They kept building bridges, never resting until they built one city with one history.¹⁸⁷

As Tulsa reckons with and finds meaning in Greenwood’s history, one can hope that such bridges will be built, and that Greenwood Rising will symbolize “one city with one history.”
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