

Teaching about White Violence: History, Framing and Accountability

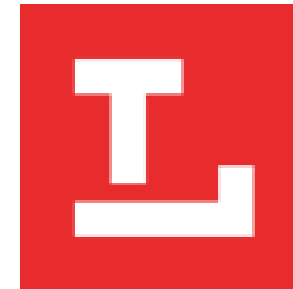
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Preliminary remarks

- We have discussed at length how to be anti-racist in the sense of being persistently reflexive as to how our racial identity impacts our being in relation to others. White people have yet, for the most part, to do this work and we have discussed many ways of engaging as educators with ourselves and with those who resist.
- This presentation is an experiment with anti-racist framing of an historical incident, most commonly known as the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. It focuses on Whiteness, not on “what really happened in the elevator” (that will make sense in the presentation), or “how many people really died?” or “did White people help Black people?” We should discuss whether the framing here is “anti-racist;” this presentation is an experiment in how to think and enact the meaning of that phrase. So I look forward to further feedback about this work.

Images from the Tulsa Massacre



Brief History of Tulsa White race riot

- Young Black man, Dick Rowland, who works as a shoeshine person needs to use the bathroom. The only bathroom available to a Black person in the White area of Tulsa in which he works is at the top floor of the Drexel office building across the street. He must use the elevator.
- Elevator operator is a White woman named Sarah Page. Upon the door opening on the assigned floor, she is heard yelling. Dick Rowland is seen running from the elevator. She alleges he assaulted her. The actual story is most likely that he trips leaving the elevator, or stepped on her toe, then reached for and maybe grabbed her arm.
- Mr. Rowland is arrested the following day and held at the jail, which is on the top floor of the county courthouse.

Greenwood, or “Black Wall Street”

- The Greenwood neighborhood in Tulsa was known as the “Black Wall Street.”
- It was not a “financial district” like the White Wall Street in Manhattan. It was/is a business and residential area in the north part of Texas.
- Black anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, among others, told Black people to head west in the 1890’s where they could have some relief from violent White reactions to any sign Black people were developing political or economic independence.
- Given rapid growth during the oil boom, Tulsa was an attractive option and Greenwood was the result. It was the kind of relatively independent Black-owned business and residential district Black activists since the Civil Rights movement have worked toward. Many Black towns sprung up in Oklahoma between 1890 and 1930.

White/Black responses to arrest and detention of Dick Rowland

- This was the headline in the Tulsa Tribune, a White owned paper, the day Mr. Rowland was arrested:

Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator

- The paper was on the streets at about 3:15 pm. Within 45 minutes talk of lynching began to circulate among Whites.
- The Sheriff took reasonable measures to protect Rowland, disabling the elevator at the top floor and placing additional guards on the top floor where the detention cells were located.
- Hearing rumors of lynching Black men armed themselves and went to the courthouse to offer help to the sheriff in defending the structure and Rowland.

- The sheriff told them to go home and they did, even while White people were mobilizing and circulating around the Courthouse.
- Black men returned to the courthouse, again in response to the massing of armed White men—now upwards of 2000. The White men had attempted to steal weapons from an armory, and when thwarted, pillaged gun shops. The Black men were once again encouraged to leave; as they were dispersing, heading back to Greenwood, a White man threatened to disarm a Black man. A shot was fired.
- This triggered the response among the White crowd and the attack on the Black community began.
- White crowds stormed into Greenwood, burning, looting, and shooting for hours. The Black community fought back as best it could.

Points of interest as one researches/teaches the Tulsa massacre

- In order to relieve himself, Rowland had to use an elevator run by a white woman. In the racialized space in which he worked, he was forced to put himself at obvious risk, to share an enclosed space with a White woman and no witnesses, to use the bathroom.
- Black communities don't only resist and protest after the fact. And it should be noted that Black violence, if organized specifically against White people as White people (as slave masters, the Klan or the police) has been, without exception, in self-defense.
- Black responses to White threats are never irrational. One year prior, 17 white members of the International Workers of the World were kidnapped from the Sheriff's custody and literally tarred and feathered and driven out of town for allegedly setting a bomb. A white man had been lynched only two weeks before Dick Rowland was arrested for allegedly killing another White man, and all of Black Tulsa knew that if White men could be tortured and lynched by White people, Dick Rowland would be a obvious target.
- White individuals will respond differently in racialized contexts. The Sheriff was trying to do his job properly. The Police Chief ignored and enabled the increasingly restive White crowd. The Sheriff was not necessarily acting in the interest of the Black community, but rather trying to sustain the very thin legitimacy of the White state that emerged out of slavery. This White state has never fully overwritten the effects of chattel slavery, not with amendments to the Constitution or legislative remedies, but those initiatives sustain its legitimacy when we talk about "progress".
- After the burning and killing had subsided, hundreds of Black families and individuals were herded into camps because it was assumed their very presence in the streets would trigger more violence. They were locked up for over a week "for their own protection" and to stop the violence.
- No White person was ever detained or charged with criminal violence. Sarah Page recanted her claims and Dick Rowland survived the catastrophic events triggered by his need to use the bathroom.

Interpreting White Supremacist actions and reactions

- Since its invention during the Atlantic slave trade, Blackness has always been suspected of being innately dangerous. This is purely a construction of what I will call here European/White Master thinking.
- The fear White people have of Black people is grounded in the European/White invention of race to explain/rationalize slavery. We should remember that race and racism did not cause slavery, race was the theory that explained slavery and racism was the effect of the enslavement of African peoples.
- In creating the slave out of a human being, the Whites believed they had created a potential monster. Thomas Jefferson, famously said, “We have the wolf by the ears, we dare not let him go...” Fanon says this monster was called “native” by the Europeans.
- My earlier point, that Black violence against White people has, without exception, been in self-defense, shows that there never was a “wolf.” It was and remains a figment of the White imagination.
- After having their community of Greenwood entirely destroyed, Black families and individuals were put in detention camps in the name of social order. This was also an effect of White supremacist thinking. As victims Black people were still treated as if they themselves were the threat.

White supremacy as White fear and resentment

- White violence has been the reaction to every sign of Black empowerment or autonomy, whether it be a Black person with a gun, with a business, and, the most threatening of all, with the potential to wield political power (the vote), are grounded in fear and resentment. It is grounded in the particular kind of master/slave relationship that emerged under conditions of chattel slavery in the US.
- Georg Hegel famously told us that the master becomes more dependent on the slave for his identity than vice versa and rightfully has existential fears about the ending of that relationship. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that those who believe themselves masters in conditions of modernity are acting from a position of impotence that they call morality. They rely not just on otherness, but on the “evil other,” to have any concept of themselves as “Good.” In other words, Whiteness would not exist as “morally righteous and civilized” without the dangerousness of Blackness against which to identify itself. Frantz Fanon said that the “native,” who, in the wars of independence during which Fanon wrote, was indeed was a danger to European colonists, was the creation of the colonists. In the tradition of Hegel and Marx, Fanon showed how the colonizer created the conditions of its own violent end.
- White supremacy in the US is symptomatic of the political impotence of Whiteness as such. It requires violence and institutionalized coercion (forcing Black men by law to use bathrooms at the top of office buildings such that they literally have to put themselves in danger, in an enclosed space with a White woman). It cannot allow its “other” freedom, because it will literally disappear. The White supremacists in Charlottesville were not wrong when they shouted their fears of being “replaced”—but it would have been more accurate from my perspective to say that they will simply disappear because Whiteness cannot function without being dominant. If others become equal to it, it will disappear.

- Pointing to how fearful and impotent White supremacy is in resorting to legalized and extra-legal violence as a means to contain its “other” can help young people understand Whiteness as a house of cards buttressed by the use of violence. This is a different take on “White Fragility.” That book frames the question in terms of White people being scared of hearing about their racism. And I like that framing. But I want to radicalize it further and say that if they (even without conscious awareness of their preferences) like Whiteness and the attendant privilege it brings they have reason to be afraid.
- Whiteness cannot persist if equality emerges as a reality. **And it will have to be the first racial construction to go.** Anti-racist White people have to help other White people to understand that if they actively let go of their **monopoly** on the accumulation of wealth, their **monopoly** on the “legitimate use of force” deployed by the state, and their **dominance** in social and cultural institutions, as history has proven over and over, they will be better off. This is a hard sell...
- Plantation owners like Thomas Jefferson could not do this, the White citizens of Tulsa could not do this, in the post Jim Crow era, White voters have not done it (fear of “Obamacare” inspiring the election of Trump). Black people have been trying to prove themselves “harmless” for four hundred years, yet fear of the imaginary wolf created by slavery continues to drive policy preferences.
- Being anti-racist as a teacher means showing our students the historical truth about Blackness in relationship to dangerousness. The truth is that there is no relationship. Whiteness, however, is a danger to us all. This can be done by carefully reconstructing our textbooks and curriculum to show what Whiteness wrought in the post-slavery era of lynching, community massacres, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. Putting these at the center of our analysis of racialized historical and cultural developments in the US may help begin to undo White supremacy as a fear and resentment based construction.

Tulsa Massacre as a Lens on the Present



Resources

- Scott Ellsworth *Death in a Promised Land*, (Louisiana State University Press 1982)
- Mary E. Jones *Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (Third World Press 1993)
- B.C Franklin, “The Tulsa Race Riot and Three of its Victims” 1921
(<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-lost-manuscript-contains-searing-eyewitness-account-tulsa-race-massacre-1921-180959251/>)
- James Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and its Legacy* (Mifflin Harcourt 2003)
- Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920*, (University of California Press 2003)
- Hannibal B. Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District*. (Austin, TX: Eakin Press 1998).
- *The Tulsa Massacre of 1921: The Controversial History and Legacy of America's Worst Race Riot* (Charles River Editors).
- Deneen L. Brown, “Remembering Red Summer: When White Mobs Massacred Blacks from Tulsa to DC.” (National Geographic 2020).
- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Grove Press 1963)
- Georg Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, (Oxford University Press, 1971)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, (Vintage Press, 1989)