

Righting the Wrongs of History

Reparations
and the
1921 Tulsa Race Riot

By Hannibal B. Johnson Images Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” —DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. (adapted from Theodore Parker, c. 1850)

Tulsa, “The Oil Capital of the World,” shone brightly at the dawn of the twentieth century. Black gold oozed from the soil of Indian Territory. J. Paul Getty. Thomas Gilcrease. Waite Phillips. They were among the men extracting fabulous fortunes from Oklahoma crude and living on Tulsa time.

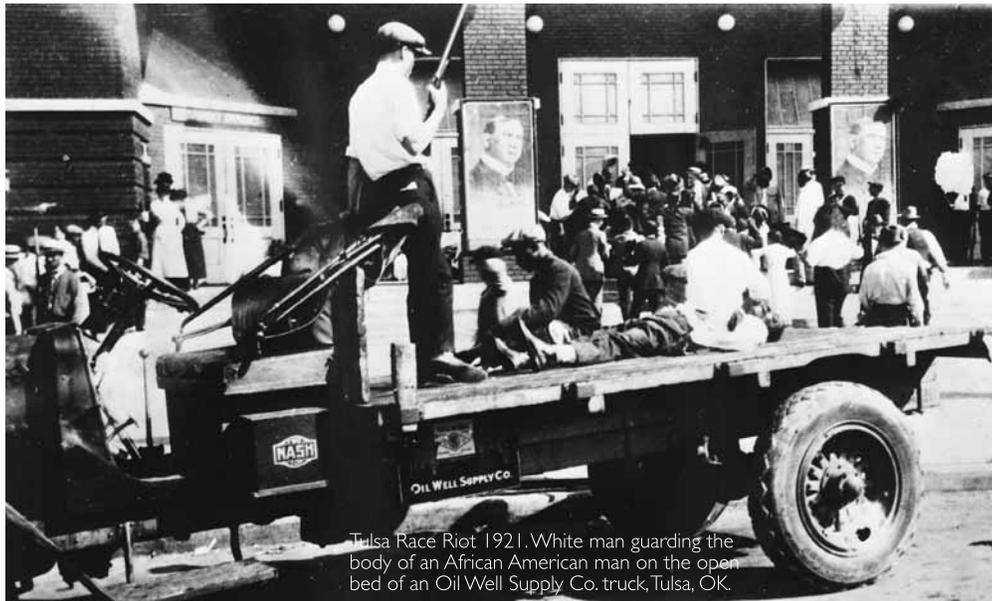
As Tulsa’s wealth and stature grew, so, too, did political, economic, and, particularly, race-based, tensions. The formative years of this segregated city coincided with the low point of American race relations—a period marked by widespread denial of black civil rights and anti-black violence.

Even amidst this “backlash,” Tulsa’s African American community, the Greenwood District, thrived. Greenwood pioneers parlayed segregation into a closed-market system that defied Jim Crow’s fundamental premise: African-American incompetence and inferiority. An insular service economy developed as African Americans engaged one another in business. Dubbed the “Negro Wall Street,” the area attracted visionaries from across America.

The success of the Greenwood District could scarcely be tolerated, let alone embraced, by the larger white community. African-American success increased consternation and friction. Black World War I veterans, having tasted true freedom on foreign soil, returned with heightened expectations, less inclined to suffer race-based indignities in silence. Valor and sacrifice in battle earned them respect—or so they thought. America had not yet changed, and Tulsa proved no exception.

The physical intimidation of racial oppression in the United States at that time is almost unfathomable today. It was open season on African Americans. In 1919, more than two dozen major race-based disturbances, labeled “race riots,” flared across America. In 1921, “the year of the Riot,” white vigilantes lynched some 57 African Americans. Despite these atrocities, the U.S. Senate thrice failed to pass measures to make lynching a federal offense.

In Tulsa, a seemingly random encounter between two teenagers, one white, the other black, was the catalyst for an event euphemistically dubbed “The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot” (the Riot). The *alleged* assault on seventeen-year-old Sarah Page by nineteen-year-old Dick Rowland triggered unprecedented civil unrest. Page ultimately recanted her initial claims and refused to press charges against Rowland; but news of the incident had taken on a life of its own. Fueled by sensational reporting by *The Tulsa Tribune* and a racially hostile climate, mob rule held sway.



Tulsa Race Riot, 1921. White man guarding the body of an African American man on the open bed of an Oil Well Supply Co. truck, Tulsa, OK.

Authorities arrested Rowland. A white mob threatened to lynch him. A small group of black men, determined to protect the teen, marched to the courthouse where Sheriff McCulloch held Rowland. Asked to retreat and assured of the young man’s safety, Rowland’s would-be protectors left the premises. But lynch talk persisted. Still concerned

about Rowland, a second group of black men, a few dozen in number, proceeded to the courthouse. They exchanged words with the swelling group of white men gathered on the courthouse lawn. A gun discharged. The Riot was on.

Soon, thousands of weapon-wielding white men crossed over the Frisco tracks, invading the Greenwood District, intent upon wreaking havoc. Some law enforcement officers stood idly by. Others deputized white hoodlums, in effect, giving them license to plunder and pillage the City’s “Negro quarter.” Despite pockets of resistance from overmatched black men, chaos, carnage, and catastrophe ensued.

Sixteen hours of volcanic violence left little unscathed. Roving gangs set fire to homes and businesses, reducing them to charred rubble, and threatened Tulsa firefighters with their lives if they attempted to extinguish the flames. They killed and maimed: scores of men, women, and children, mostly black, lay dead, dying, and wounded in what looked like a theatre of war. The

Excerpts from Events of the Tulsa Disaster
An eye-witness account of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot

By Mrs. Mary E. Jones Parrish, as published in 1923

The evening being a pleasant one, my little girl had not retired, but was watching the people from the window. Occasionally she would call to me, "Mother, look at the cars full of people." I would reply, "Baby, do not disturb me, I want to read." Finally she said, "Mother, I see men with guns."

I am told that this little bunch of brave and loyal Black men who were willing to give their lives, if necessary, for the sake of a fellow man, marched up to the jail where there were already over 500 white men gathered, and that this number was soon swelled to over a thousand. Someone fired a stray shot and, to use the expression of General Grant, "All hell broke loose."

Someone on the street cried out, "Look, they are burning Cincinnati!" On looking we beheld columns of smoke and fire and by this we knew that the enemy was surging quickly upon Greenwood.

Looking south out of the window of what then was the Woods Building, we saw car loads of men with rifles unloading up near the granary ...

People were seen to flee from their burning homes, some with babes in their arms and leading crying and excited children by the hand; others, old and feeble, all fleeing to safety. Yet, seemingly, I could not leave. I walked as one in a horrible dream.

I took my little girl by the hand and fled out of the west door on Greenwood. I did not take time to get a hat for myself or baby, but started out north on Greenwood, running amidst showers of bullets from the machine gun located in the granary and from men who were quickly surrounding our district.

I felt that it was suicide to remain in the building, for it would surely be destroyed and death in the street was preferred, for we expected to be shot down at any moment ...

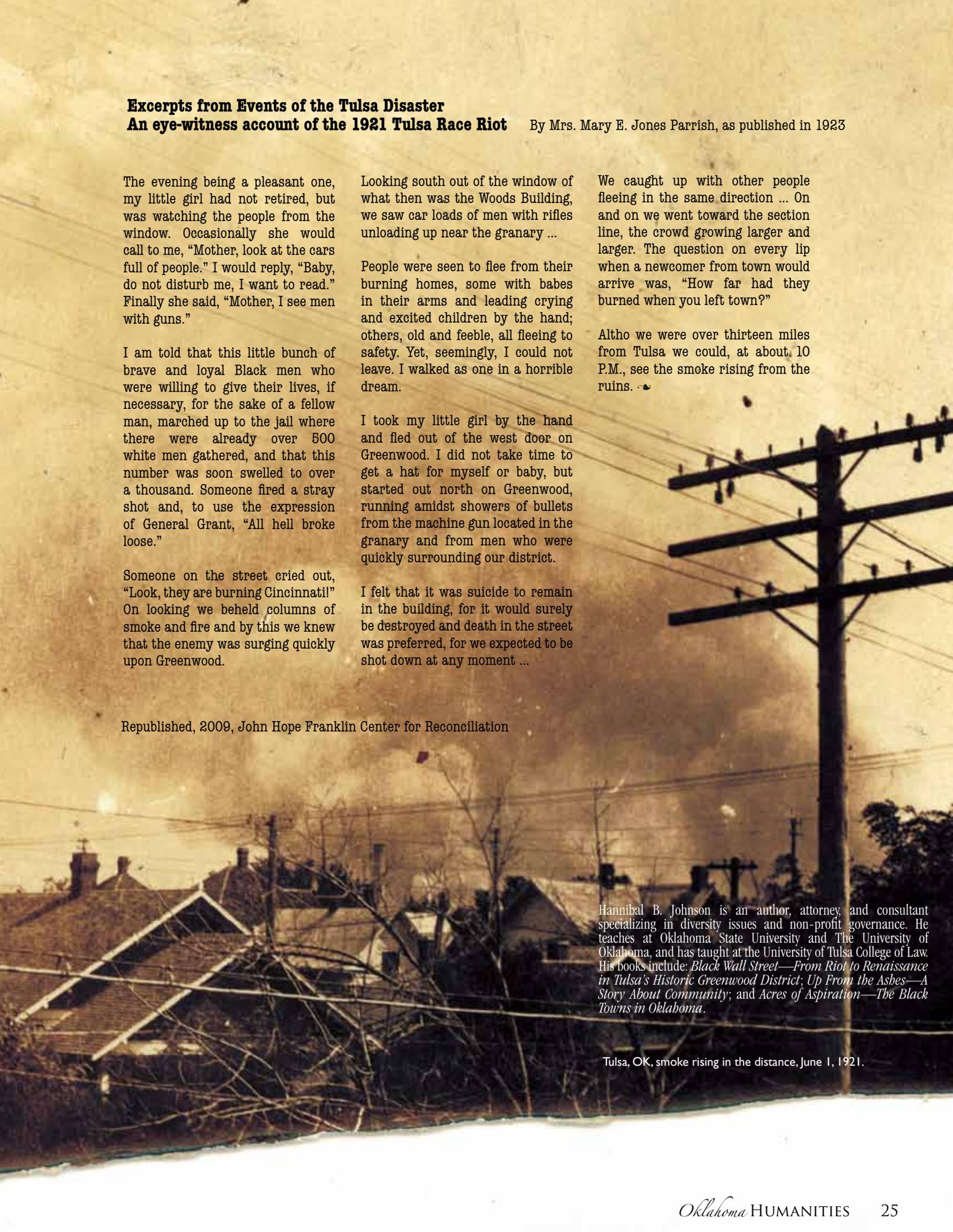
We caught up with other people fleeing in the same direction ... On and on we went toward the section line, the crowd growing larger and larger. The question on every lip when a newcomer from town would arrive was, "How far had they burned when you left town?"

Altho we were over thirteen miles from Tulsa we could, at about 10 P.M., see the smoke rising from the ruins.

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Tulsa, OK, smoke rising in the distance, June 1, 1921.



unmitigated violence forced hundreds of black Tulsans into homelessness, destitution, and despair. The breadth and brutality took an emotional toll palpable even today.

A few brave souls in Tulsa's white community showed remarkable compassion. Individuals and churches offered shelter and comfort. The American Red Cross earned the moniker "Angels of Mercy" by providing food, shelter, and clothing and, just as importantly, reaffirming the humanity of Tulsa's marginalized black citizens.

Many soldiered on after the Riot and a rapidly resurgent Greenwood District peaked in the 1940s. In the end, though, America's black entrepreneurial mecca, could not survive. Integration, urban renewal, and the aging of its pioneers led to decline in the 1960s. Twenty years later, a renaissance transformed the area into a mix of cultural and educational entities, including the Greenwood Cultural Center, OSU-Tulsa, Langston University-Tulsa, ONEOK Field, and John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park. A smattering of small businesses and two Riot-era black churches are reminders of bygone days.

THE SILENT DIVIDE

Despite its significance, some Tulsans, even more Oklahomans, and most Americans remain oblivious to this watershed event. For decades, Tulsa's Riot, the worst incident of civil unrest of its kind in American history, remained shrouded in mystery, cloaked in secrecy, and draped in conjecture. Few spoke openly of the Riot's horrors. Why? Some blame a "conspiracy of silence." Something far less sinister may have been at work: white Tulsans felt some mix of embarrassment, shame, and guilt. Some black Tulsans feared additional violence; others refused to burden their children with information that might limit their aspirations. Still others likely suffered post-traumatic stress, rendering them unwilling or unable to relive the Riot through its retelling.

One clear and lasting effect of that decades-long silence has been a persistent gulf of distrust between Tulsa's black and white communities. Not talking about the Riot allowed unhealed wounds to fester. The chasm still lingers, marginally diminished but no less real.

In recent years, Tulsans have begun to grapple with this terrible human tragedy. Almost a century removed, the specter of the Riot looms large. How do we heal our haunting history? How do we atone for the damage inflicted so long ago? How do we restore trust and move toward reconciliation? Our answers to these critical questions will determine whether we narrow existing racial gaps or allow the great abyss of color-based distrust to span future generations.

THE CASE FOR REPARATIONS

Providing reparations—making amends—is essential to reconciliation. Reparations serve specific objectives, namely: to acknowledge an injustice; to apologize and make retribution (make amends); to educate the community; to deter future occurrence of the injustice; and to clarify human rights. Proponents understand that restorative justice, the "make whole" aspiration behind reparations, cannot be literally realized. Lives, once lost, cannot be resuscitated. Minds, once traumatized, cannot be eased. Economic momentum, once blunted, cannot be fully recaptured. Some fear that

debating reparations, let alone offering them, opens a Pandora's Box best left buried and forgotten. *Where will it end?* they ask. Nonetheless, absent reparations, grievances magnify and multiply; present-day healing cannot occur.

To address the issue of reparations, in 1997 the Oklahoma Legislature authorized the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 to investigate and evaluate the Riot and make recommendations. The eleven-member, bi-racial Commission's sometimes-contentious deliberations drew worldwide media attention and prompted a groundswell of public interest in Tulsa's community dynamics—how the City has dealt with its past, and the impact of that past on Tulsa's present and future.

In 2001, the Commission issued its award-winning Riot Commission Report. Among its recommendations were various types of reparations, in priority order: payments to living survivors and to descendants of those who suffered property damage during the Riot; a scholarship fund; business tax incentives for the Greenwood District; and a memorial. The case for reparations outlined in the report were not random; they rested on specific criteria: compelling, documented evidence of government complicity at the city and, arguably, the state level; identifiable Riot victims and their heirs; a defined geographic community adversely affected by the Riot (*i.e.*, the Greenwood District); measurable or estimable economic losses attributable to the Riot; and a thorough record of the people, places, and events associated with the Riot.

MONEY MYOPIA

Talk of Riot reparations drew swift and vocal opposition, attributable, in part, to lack of knowledge about the Riot and an unnecessarily narrow construction of the word "reparations." Though fairly broad in scope, the Commission's recommendations exalted monetary payments to first-priority status. Cash reparations, the most contentious of its list of five, drew particular attention. The Commission's "seal of approval" for cash reparations emboldened organizations like the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, which saw it as precedent for broader monetary reparations for slavery. Sensing controversy, early media coverage of the debate dwarfed coverage of alternative modes of making amends. This near-exclusive focus drowned out discussion of broader philosophical definitions of and rationale for reparations.

Critics failed to acknowledge the scope of damage wrought by the Riot (and its lasting effects) and discounted the need for reparations. Proponents unwittingly fueled resistance by focusing on cash payments as *the* essential, if not quintessential, form of reparations. A high-profile lawsuit further coalesced media attention. In February 2003, galvanized by the Riot Commission Report, a coterie of national, star-caliber attorneys joined forces with local legal talent in filing *Alexander v. Governor of State of Oklahoma*, a money damages lawsuit on behalf of Riot survivors and their descendants against the City of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma. On March 22, 2004, a Tulsa federal district court dismissed the case, holding that the two-year statute of limitations barred all claims. A federal court of appeals sustained the dismissal, and the United States Supreme Court declined to review the case, thus ending the push for court-mandated monetary Riot reparations.

Some argued the Riot lawsuit deepened racial fissures in the City and State, if only temporarily. Critics perceived the litigation as having been instigated by outside rabble-rousers and claimed it stymied organic, community-based initiatives to memorialize the Riot and promote reconciliation. The experience raised two compelling questions: Is litigation, as opposed to, say, legislation or conciliation, a viable approach to securing reparations? Are cash payments the only acceptable form of reparations?

Litigation was, arguably, counterproductive, particularly if the ultimate aim is *community* reconciliation. Litigation, by its very nature, leads to adversarial relations, not the rational dialogue needed for reconciliation. Moreover, securing monetary damages in courts of law for events like the Riot (and there were many such events in the early twentieth century) would require a sort of national reckoning. Courts would have to open our history to examine the effects of racism, then acknowledge injustices and prescribe remedies. Decisions in such cases would affect not just individuals, but cities, counties, states, and even the federal government. Is the judiciary equipped to carry out this kind of re-examination of our past and, assuming it is, how likely is it to do so?

EXPANDING CONVERSATION

Of late, the conversation has broadened. Data gathered and compiled by Chad V. Johnson, Ph.D., his University of Oklahoma colleagues, and community partners suggest widespread support for reparations of some sort. The ambitious community-wide survey investigated knowledge of the Riot and attitudes about race relations in Tulsa. Two-thousand respondents engaged in the process. By overwhelming margins, respondents agreed: the Riot adversely affected social and economic dynamics in Tulsa; the Riot story has not been adequately shared; all Tulsans should know about the Riot; the Riot should be taught as part of public school curriculum; and race relations in Tulsa rank only as poor to fair, and amelioration will require dialogue and other programs or actions. Locally, most citizens support a variety of reparation measures. Monetary reparations, however, appear to be less important and more contentious.

Other approaches to making amends exist, forms more likely to be accepted and implemented by broad community consensus—for example, the Commission's recommendation for a Riot memorial. Both the City of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma have embraced a passel of non-monetary reparations without labeling them as such and without formally admitting culpability for Riot-related offenses. Former Tulsa Mayors M. Susan Savage and Kathy Taylor offered public apologies for the Riot during their respective tenures. The Oklahoma Legislature created several vehicles to address the Riot Commission's recommendations: the Tulsa Race Riot Memorial Reconciliation Design Committee (out of which emerged the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation, charged with creating a Riot-related memorial); the Greenwood Area Redevelopment Authority (charged with reinvigorating businesses in the Greenwood District); and the Tulsa Reconciliation Education and Scholarship Program (charged with creating education scholarships tied to Riot remembrance). The Oklahoma Legislature also awarded medals of distinction to several Riot survivors in a 2001 State Capitol ceremony.

But the Commission's recommendations did not include perhaps the single most powerful and enduring mode of reparations imaginable: curriculum

reform. The generation-spanning potential of education to transform race relations in Tulsa and beyond is enormous. Like Holocaust curricula, the idea behind Riot curricula is straightforward: it is imperative to examine our past so that we may learn from it. To paraphrase Maya Angelou: *Our history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived; but, if faced with courage, it need not be lived again.*

No matter what else we may do, we will not be whole unless and until we own our past, process it, and integrate its lessons into our present and our vision for the future. Teaching and learning are essential to this process.

Educational reparations have been pursued. The Tulsa City Council passed a Riot-related resolution in 2008 supporting curriculum to ensure the Riot is adequately covered as an historical event. Similarly, the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation is working with Tulsa Public Schools to make curricular materials on the Riot widely available to educators. Progress is being made.

Despite these limited advances, the need for curriculum reform remains urgent. The Riot appears on a list of the State's Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) topics about which students *should* know something. But these measures are aspirational, with no effective means for evaluation. The inclusion of Riot history in textbooks remains scattershot and shallow. Moreover, textbook inclusion alone does not guarantee the teaching of that material. Infusing Riot history, systematically, in the core curriculum so that Oklahoma students *will*, not *may*, be exposed to it is a necessary step forward.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

A thoughtful, vigorous, and productive dialogue on reparations requires an understanding of the promise, possibilities, and parameters of these ameliorative measures. Most Tulsans agree that reparations are essential if we are to triumph over our tragic past. Indeed, we have begun making amends. Striking the appropriate balance—creating the right mix of measures that will help us heal our history—remains a challenge. So, too, does following through on our good intentions.

When considering reparations, we are left with a question of morality and justice: As a civilized society, what actions must we take to salve the wounds of our own making? We accept the benefits that accrue across generations. We must likewise accept the burdens. If amends are to be made, if injustices are to be remedied, if wrongs are to be righted, the ultimate responsibility rests upon each of our shoulders. ☹️

