

# Burned Out of Homes and History

Uncovering the Silenced Voices of the Tulsa Race Massacre

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN



1921 photo of the destruction of Tulsa's Greenwood neighborhood.

RESEARCH DIVISION OF THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

I TEACH LANGUAGE ARTS, SO WHY WOULD I teach my students about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre? In language arts circles, we discuss reading as a window to the world, but in a country plagued with foreclosures and homelessness, we need to question the world we're gazing at: How are contemporary evictions a historical reach from the past? What has happened to Black and brown communities? Why do people of color have less inherited wealth than whites? The untold history — the buried stories —

reveals patterns that affect our students' current lives, from eviction notices to the hunger of deep poverty. I can wax poetic about the importance of story in students' lives, but reading literature of poverty and despair without offering a historical explanation leaves students with little understanding about how things came to be the way they are. And that's worth reading and writing about.

Jefferson High School, where I co-teach a junior language arts class with Dianne Leahy — a

wonderful teacher who allows me to keep my teaching chops alive by creating and teaching curriculum with her — is located in a gentrifying neighborhood that once was the heart of the African American community in Portland. Families were pushed out of their homes because of urban renewal beginning in the 1960s and again, more recently, because of gentrification. As the prices of homes rise in what is now called the “Alberta Arts Neighborhood,” most of our students’ families can no longer afford to live in our school’s neighborhood. They live in apartments on the outskirts of the city, and a number ride buses or the commuter train to come to school at Jefferson.

For me, learning about the history of the Tulsa Race Massacre coincided with the current economic crisis that has led to epic foreclosures and evictions. I realized that, like many people, the majority of my family’s “wealth” is tied up in our home. We drew on that wealth to send our daughters to college. They will inherit the house, and the wealth it represents, when my husband and I pass on.

The story of Tulsa may be an extreme instance of violent dispossession, but it highlights a pattern of historical expulsions and exclusions that explains the lack of inherited wealth in Black and brown communities. According to historian Hannibal B. Johnson, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 was set against a backdrop of a multitude of race riots in America. 1919 was known as ‘red summer’ because blood was flowing in the streets. There were over 25 major riots in 1919 in America.” (See Elliot Jaspín’s book *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* for more on this topic.) The complicit silence of textbooks about the history of race riots and racial exclusions that pushed Black people off their lands and out of their homes keeps our students ignorant about the reasons for the lack of economic resources in the Black community. Instead, students must imagine why their people lack wealth: Unwise spending? Bad luck?

The term “race riot” does not adequately describe the events of May 31–June 1, 1921, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Though some sources labeled the episode a “race riot” or a “race war,” implying that both

**“Our wealth is tied up  
in our homes. So what  
happens when you lose  
your home?”**

Black and white citizens might be equally to blame for lawlessness and violence, the historical record documents that what occurred was a sustained and murderous assault on Black lives and property. This assault was met by a brave but unsuccessful armed

defense of their community by some Black World War I veterans and others. During the night and day of the massacre, deputized whites killed more than 300 African Americans; they looted and burned to the ground 40 square blocks, including 1,265 African Amer-

ican homes, hospitals, schools, churches, and 150 businesses. White deputies and members of the National Guard arrested and detained 6,000 Black Tulsans who were released only upon being vouched for by a white employer or other white citizen; 9,000 African Americans were left homeless and living in tents well into the winter of 1921.

**Building Background Knowledge  
and Interest**

In class, before we began the unit, I briefly discussed the arc of our upcoming study. “We are starting this unit because I want you to think about wealth in this country. Who has it? Who doesn’t? An important study just discovered that whites have 20 times the wealth of Blacks. Why is that? When there’s a question that puzzles you, you have to investigate. For many people, including me, our wealth is tied up in our homes. So what happens when you lose your home?”

Students frequently bring up the gentrification of the neighborhood, which has rapidly transformed from mom-and-pop grocery stores to chic restaurants and upscale boutiques. Rather than describe the problem of gentrification at this early stage of the study, I move them into the history, keeping the question of homes and wealth in front of them as we move forward.

To stimulate our students’ interest in resurrecting this silenced history of Tulsa, I created a mixer about the night of the invasion of Greenwood, the African American section of Tulsa. Using sources from historians John Hope Franklin, Scott Ellsworth, and others, I wrote roles for students that

gave them each a slice of what happened that night: the arrest of Dick Rowland, a young African American shoe shiner who was accused of raping Sarah Page, a white elevator operator, in broad daylight (later, students learn that authorities dropped all charges); the newspaper article that incited whites and Blacks to gather at the courthouse; the gathering of armed Black World War I veterans to prevent a lynching; the deputizing and arming of whites, many of whom were in the Ku Klux Klan; the imprisonment of Blacks; the death of more than 300 African American men, women, and children; the burning and looting of their homes and businesses.

Because not all white Tulsans shared the racial views of the white rioters, I included roles of a few whites and a recent immigrant from Mexico who provided safety in the midst of death and chaos. These roles allowed students to understand that even in moments of violence, people stood up and reached across race and class borders to help. I invented one role, Thelma Booker, as a compilation of people I'd read about; the others were individuals whose stories I found in Ellsworth's book, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, and other materials. (See p. 8 for a full list of mixer roles.)

I briefly discussed the event before launching into the mixer. "You are going to become people who were involved in what is called the Tulsa Race Massacre on the night of May 31, 1921." I told them that Tulsa was divided into two sections — the white section and Greenwood, where most African Americans lived. We had studied Jim Crow, so they understood segregation. "I want you to figure out what happened that night. First, read over your role. Underline or highlight key pieces of information. You will need to be able to tell others about what happened to you and what you witnessed. Once you have read your role, turn over your paper and write down the key events, so you can retell them to your classmates."

After students read their roles, I handed out a series of questions to help them elicit information

from each other's roles. We read over the questions, which included: "Find someone who suffered a loss during the massacre. What did they lose? What happened?" Students found one or more questions that they could answer based on their role. Before I turned them loose, I added, "You are entering the roles of people whose lives may have been shattered on that night. Take their lives seriously. Give them the dignity they deserve."

Students circulated through the room, talking in pairs, finding out bits and pieces of what happened that night. Because this was an introduction to the unit, not the full story, they ended the activity with information, but also with questions. I asked them to write down key facts they learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre and what they still wanted to know. Their questions filled the board: What really started the massacre? Did Black people rebuild their houses? Why didn't we learn about this before? (When I guest-taught this lesson in a history class at Jefferson

a few years ago, a couple of students spontaneously pulled out their history textbooks and searched for an entry on Tulsa, but didn't find one.)

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### History and Poetry

Rather than answer their questions in a lecture, I discovered several accessible readings and YouTube clips (*The Night Tulsa Burned*,

Parts 1–4). Four short related videos, narrated by historians Scott Ellsworth and Hannibal B. Johnson and Tulsa Historical Society director Robert Powers, tell the story using historical photographs from the night of the massacre. These clips also feature interviews with three survivors: Juanita Burnett Arnold, George Monroe, and Ernestine Alpha Gibbs. I asked students to take notes that answer the questions they raised in class, but also to record details and stories that resonated for them. "You will write a poem, a piece of historical fiction, and an essay about this time period. I want you to absorb the era as well as the facts. Write down the names of people, buildings, streets, parks. Grab people's stories, their faces, and their lives. I want you to know what happened, but I also want you to try to understand

how people felt about that night. As you learn about this history, make connections to what's happening today. How does this history echo in your life?"

After watching each 10-minute video clip, we stopped and debriefed: "What questions got answered for you? What images stuck with you? Whose stories will you carry with you?"

Then I asked: "When we began this unit, I said that we were going to ask about wealth in our country: Who has it, who doesn't, and why? How does the history of Tulsa help us begin to answer these questions? How does what happened in Tulsa connect to the question of Black wealth?" As students talked, I listed their observations on the board as a reference they could return to during our writing.

Once we had images and names, I discussed two ways to write poems about the event — as a persona poem or an image poem: "For a persona poem, write from the point of view of a person or object. Use the word 'I.' For an image poem, describe what you see. Form a picture for the reader with your words." Christina wrote a persona poem from the perspective of a burned wall; she called it "The Last One Standing (p. 20):

I am just a memory of what this  
town was before the riot. [...]

I saw the glowing flames in the midst  
of this dark night and the leftover embers  
of the morning.

## Reading and Writing Historical Fiction

As we pursued the "Stealing Home" unit, Dianne and I discovered *If We Must Die: A Novel of Tulsa's 1921 Greenwood Riot* by Pat Carr. We wanted students to tap into the ways that literature can deepen history by bringing to life the mind-numbing numbers of loss through the stories of individuals. The novel tells the story of 1921 Tulsa through the character of Berneen O'Brien, a woman of "Black Irish" descent, who accepts a job at a Black school in Greenwood. She "passes" for Black during the day and returns home to her uncle, who is a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The reader discovers the racial tensions and the eruption of the massacre from Berneen's perspective.

Students kept track of historical events in their

dialogue journal, but they also took notes on the author's craft: the way Pat Carr showed how characters felt through the use of interior monologue, actions, and dialogue, as well as the strategies she used to mix historical fact and fiction. After students read a chunk of the book, they gathered in groups and created posters about the difference between history and fiction by using notes from their dialogue journals. The poster had three sections:

1. Quotes that referenced history.
2. Quotes that illustrated the qualities of fiction.
3. Their analysis of the differences.

For the third section, one group wrote:

In the novel, fiction is often very detailed and elaborated, for example, "The shoulder of his white shirt suddenly blossomed red as if he'd run headlong into a sack of crimson paint." Fact is usually subtle, using the names of people and place and events — Greenwood Avenue, Dreamland Theatre, the Drexel Building. Most events in the novel were factual — the shooting, the looting, the internment — but most of the characters and their personalities were fabricated. There are things that the author says to describe a character that couldn't be known — their body language, their speech patterns, their interior monologue.

As I teach social justice lessons, I am also teaching students how to read and write with greater clarity. We don't have to parse out the language arts skills and teach them as stand-alone lessons; they are part of the daily classroom work.

We asked students to write a piece of fiction based on their knowledge of the events, modeled on Carr's work. Writing historical fiction pushes students to learn more about the past and to more fully understand the events and the time period. Students had to go back to the documents and videos to get down the sequence of events; they had to get inside people's heads to understand why the African American World War I veterans stood up for Dick Rowland, why they were adamant that there would be no more lynchings. But they also had to learn about people's daily lives — where they lived,



where they shopped, where they worked, and details like the fact that no one watched television in 1921.

To prime students for the assignment, we distributed a newspaper article written in 2009 that describes interviews with three survivors of the Tulsa massacre — Beulah Smith, Ruth Avery, and Kenny Booker. The article reviews the events and contains quotes from the survivors:

Beulah Smith was 14 years old the night of the riot. A neighbor named Frenchie came pounding on her family's door in a Tulsa neighborhood known as "Little Africa" that also went up in flames.

"Get your families out of here because they're killing [Black people] uptown," she remembers Frenchie saying. "We hid in the weeds in the hog pen," Smith told CNN. [. . .]

Booker, then a teenager, hid with his family in their attic until the home was torched. "When we got downstairs, things were burning. My sister asked me, 'Kenny, is the world on fire?' I said, 'I don't know, but we're in a heck of a lot of trouble, baby.'"

Many students used these specific incidents in their stories. Some even used the dialogue from the article, then invented the rest of the story.

Dianne and I developed a graphic organizer for students to get them started (see "Writing Historical Fiction," p. 23). Then we spent part of a period listing potential characters and scenes that students could use in their stories: Kenny Booker, Sarah Page, Beulah Smith, NAACP journalist Walter White, Ruth Phelps. I also encouraged them to use pieces of their own lives in their stories. I told them, "In the novel I'm writing about women organizing for change on the Mexican border, I have the main character bake desserts when she's stressed. I also tap into my own desire for justice and my organizing work. I found that when I use pieces of my life, the characters come to life." Students who have experienced homelessness or evictions used

their feelings of loss as they wrote. Desiree', who is biracial, wrote her story from the points of view of two characters — an African American boy caught

with his younger sister in the massacre and fire, and the white girl who loves him. Jalean recreated his family — an older brother who lives with his mother and two younger siblings he

adores. He also created a character modeled on the security guard at Jefferson, who has been a wise elder in Jalean's life.

The student writing was stunning. Students invented backstories to help readers understand their characters' histories and motivation. They used the tools of fiction writers — character development, dialogue, interior monologue, setting descriptions.

Desiree' DuBoise's story illustrates how students used the scenes from the photos of the city's destruction, the voices of the people we studied, and the history of the time period to create their stories:

The sky rained down rivers of flame. I had always been the man of the house, but now Mama was probably long gone, too. She had gone into Greenwood to her floral shop that morning and never came back home. I was alone in the attic except for Billy Mae. I looked down into her round brown eyes and saw fear that reflected my own. Her thick black lashes were coated with tears, and the only noise that came from her was a soft keening. She was so young, younger than I had been when the Klan took Pop away. I watched as they strung him up like an animal and beat him 'til every inch of his tall frame was coated with crimson blood. That was years ago. Now my sister had to watch her own city burn, the only place she'd ever known. She could hear the screams coming up from the streets just as well as I could. The floorboards of the attic creaked as I shifted my weight. My sister looked at me then. "Kenny?" she said my name quietly. "Is the world on fire?"

Dianne and I took our students to the band

room, the only room big enough to comfortably accommodate all 42 of us, and students read their stories from the podium. The read-around took two days. As students read, those who were stuck or who couldn't get started figured out a storyline; others were prompted to revise after hearing their peers' details, flashbacks, and interior monologues. Although the students didn't directly address the loss of economic wealth through their stories, they wrote about the impact of the devastation: the deaths, the loss of photos, pianos, houses, neighborhoods. Jalean said, "I felt proud to know that there were thriving African American communities. I feel cheated that I never got to live in one."

### Reparations Role Play

To inject hope and justice into the unit, Dianne and I created a role play about the efforts to obtain restitution for the deaths and damages suffered by the Black population of Greenwood. We needed to return more directly to our theme of wealth inequality, to reinforce the idea that the injustices of the past affect the present, and that it's never too late for justice — even many years after an event like the Tulsa Race Massacre.

In 1997, the Oklahoma State Legislature authorized a commission to study the riot. After three and a half years of research, the commission delivered its report. Rather than just reading about the results of those proceedings — and a 2003 lawsuit initiated on behalf of the survivors and their descendants — we wanted students to think about what "fair" compensation for the loss might mean. We put students in the position of commission members. We asked them to determine what reparations, if any, should be made to the survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre



*Families searching through the rubble.*

and their descendants (see p. 16.)

Before we started the activity, we reviewed the losses from that night — the deaths and the number of homes, schools, and businesses burned and looted. We gave students three choices to initiate their conversations:

1. Do nothing.
2. Repay individuals and their descendants for their losses.
3. Create reparations for the Greenwood community.

Students had passionate arguments about what should happen. Students' understanding of the long-term impact of the loss of inherited wealth through the destruction of homes and community echoed throughout their discussions. A number of students repeated Aaron's statement, "We can't change what happened in the past, but we can compensate the offspring for the loss of their property and inheritance. At least give the descendants scholarships." Some students felt that wasn't enough. Desiree' said, "Who suffered the most? Which was worse — death or property loss? The entire community suffered. We should choose a mixture of compensations: There

should be scholarships as well as compensation for the survivors and their descendants. There should be a memorial day and a reburial of the mass graves.”

Sarah was afraid that bringing up the past would open old wounds and restart the racism that initiated the massacre. Skylar said, “Who cares if it makes people uncomfortable? They are going to have to deal with it. These things happened, and we have to address them.” Vince and many others agreed. “This is not just the past. Racial inequality is still a problem. Forgetting about what happened and burying it without dealing with it is why we still have problems today.”

And this was exactly what we wanted kids to see: The past is not dead. We didn’t want to get lost in the history of Tulsa, though it needs to be remembered; we wanted students to recognize the historical patterns of stolen wealth in Black, brown, and poor communities. We wanted them to connect the current economic struggle of people of color to dynamics from the past. We wanted them



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*A Tulsa resident photographing the damage.*

to see that in many ways Tulsa and other historically Black communities are still burning, still being looted. We wanted to bring the story home. ⚡

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# Tulsa Race Massacre Mixer

**Dick Rowland:** I dropped out of high school to take a job shining shoes in a white-owned and white-patronized shine parlor located downtown on Main Street. Shoe shines usually cost a dime in those days, but we were often tipped a nickel for each shine, and sometimes more. On a busy day, I pocketed a fair amount of money. As a teenage African American man with few other job prospects, this was a good job.

There were no toilet facilities for Blacks at the shine parlor where I worked. The owner had arranged for his African American employees to use a “Colored” restroom located nearby in the Drexel. To get to the washroom, located on the top floor, I rode in the building’s elevator. Elevators in those days required an operator, usually a woman.

On the day the massacre started, Sarah Page operated the elevator. I went to get on the elevator, and I tripped because the elevator hadn’t stopped properly at the floor. As I tried to catch my fall, I grabbed onto the arm of Sarah Page, who then screamed. A clerk from a clothing store heard the scream and saw me running out of the building. He called the police and said I attempted to rape Sarah Page. The next day I was arrested. I feared for my life because in those days, Black men were lynched without trial. I did not attempt to rape Sarah Page. Later, I was acquitted when Page refused to press charges. I was cleared and all charges were dropped, but not before hundreds were killed and Greenwood was burned to the ground.

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**B. C. Franklin:** I was one of the African American attorneys in Greenwood, that’s what the Black section of Tulsa was called back then. I was sitting in the courtroom during a recess in a trial when I overheard some other lawyers discussing the alleged rape attempt. “I don’t believe a damn word of it,” one of the men said. “Why I know [Dick Rowland] and have known him a good while. That’s not in him.” But the white newspapers in town stirred up the townsfolk with a headline that read “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator.”

[According to historian Scott Ellsworth, “In 1919 alone, more than 75 Blacks were lynched by white mobs — including more than a dozen Black soldiers, some of whom were murdered while still in uniform. During the first year following the war, 11 African Americans were burned — alive — at the stake by white mobs.”]

Certainly, there was a sense that if the law was going to be upheld so that a Black man could get a fair trial, then it would be through the actions of Black men, not through official means. When Black soldiers returned from fighting in World War I, they had enough of being second-class citizens after fighting for other people’s freedom. They were willing to take action. My law offices were burned to the ground during the massacre. I reopened my law offices in a tent.



**C. F. Gabe:** I saw the massacre from beginning to end. In the beginning, I attempted to turn back cars of Black men who feared that Dick Rowland was going to be lynched. There were huge crowds of whites lining the streets and sidewalks near the courthouse, many carrying guns and liquor bottles. As a group of Black men were leaving the area, one of its members, an African American World War I veteran who had with him an army-issue revolver, was approached by one of the white members of the mob. When the white man tried to take the gun away from the African American man, the gun went off. That started the massacre.

Later, I witnessed the killings of Blacks in the streets, the lootings of stores, the burning of Black homes and businesses by white mobs. Friends came by my house and said, “The white folks is killing all of the [Black people] in town and burning all of their houses.” I stayed inside, but when they started shooting my house and pieces of my piano began to fall I believed them. At that point, I was rounded up and carried to the convention center then the fairgrounds for internment. I ended up being arrested. Instead of allowing us to keep our guns and protect our homes, the National Guard took our weapons and put us in internment camps for our “safety.” In the meantime, deputized whites looted our homes and stores and burned what was left. Then the National Guard took us to Greenwood to clean up the destruction to help pay for our food in the camp. I tell you, this was not right.

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**Sheriff Willard McCullough:** I was sheriff at the time that Dick Rowland was brought to jail and charged with attempted rape. Tempers were running high with both Blacks and whites. I was not going to have a lynch mob do the same thing to Dick Rowland on my watch. I put Rowland in the hands of deputies in a secure part of the building. I told them to take the elevator to the top floor and disable it. I also told the officers to shoot anyone, including me, who came to get Rowland. The crowds gathered.

I asked Deputy Barney Cleaver, a Black officer, and C. F. Gabe to get the Blacks to go home. I tried to get the whites to disperse as well. Before the night ended, there were about 2,000 white men gathered at the courthouse. Then a bunch of them tried to get guns at the National Guard Armory. When they didn’t get guns there, they broke into Bardon’s Sporting Goods and took guns and ammunition. Once the first shot was fired, all hell broke loose. People ask what happened. Here’s what I know. Some white man tried to disarm a Black man and the gun went off during that scuffle. Later that night I saw deputized white men burning and looting in Greenwood, the Black section of Tulsa. Those men told me they were “hunting negroes.” They went all over South Tulsa, taking Black servants from their white employees. Everyone had guns and the police seemed to be behind it.

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**Police commissioner Jim Adkison:** Things were out of control in Greenwood. It was like a war zone. People were shooting each other. There was looting and burning. We had people storming the National Guard Armory. We were outnumbered. Police Chief Gustafson called in his entire force — around 65 men — and Gustafson and I began commissioning “special deputies” — perhaps as many as 400 of them to help restore order. Remember, there were thousands of people running the streets that night — May 31, 1921. Of course, in retrospect, I should have been more careful about the selection of men we deputized and armed. But it was a very tense situation. We never told anyone to kill Black people or torch their homes. Our instructions were to disarm people and to absolutely prevent looting and burning.

**O. W. Gurley:** I was one of the wealthiest Greenwood residents. I owned the Gurley Hotel. I tried my hardest to defuse the situation with Dick Rowland and the whites coming to lynch him. I was known for fighting crime in our section of town, which was known as the “Black Wall Street.” I talked with the Sheriff McCullough and I believed him when he said that Dick Rowland was safe and he wasn’t going to let anyone lynch Dick. I told the folks back in Greenwood that there wasn’t going to be a lynching, but they called me a liar and threatened to shoot my heart out. The African American veterans came back from France with ideas about equality. And Tulsa wanted to return to the way things were before the war. They figured they fought for equality in France, and they weren’t coming home after risking their lives and be insulted in their own homes. I’ll tell you, I barely made it out of the massacre alive. I was shot at, my hotel was burned, residents from my hotel were rounded up and interned.

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**Mary Parrish:** I was a teacher in Greenwood before the massacre. Shortly after the massacre, I published a book called *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*. When I looked out the window of my apartment building on the morning of June 1, 1921, I saw armed white men gathering nearby. I left the building, running north on Greenwood Avenue, away from the gunfire, “amidst showers of bullets from the machine gun located in the granary and from men who were quickly surrounding our district.” I saw the airplanes coming in. “There was a great shadow in the sky and upon a second look we discerned that this cloud was caused by fast approaching aeroplanes. It then dawned upon us that the enemy had organized in the night was invading our district the same as the Germans invaded France and Belgium.” The National Guard might say they came in to protect the citizens of Greenwood, but by disarming the Black men and not disarming the white men, they allowed the destruction — the looting and burning — of our community to happen.

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**Thelma Booker:** The National Guard came knocking on our door and told us we had to leave our homes. They said it wasn’t safe and they were going to protect us. We didn’t feel too comfortable about that. Then they marched us through the white area of Tulsa, made us raise our hands in the air as we walked through as if we were going to attack someone with our house slippers. First, we were taken to the convention center, then to the ball field, and finally to the fairgrounds, like we were prize cattle. You know, they even went and rounded up Black folks who worked as domestics in white people’s homes. Oh sure, they fed us and gave us medical attention. And while our homes and businesses were looted and burned behind us, they made us stay until a white person came and vouched for us. Anyone who was vouched for received a card. Anyone without a card on the streets could be arrested. Of course, we had to pay for our food and all while we were being “protected.” We were sent out to clean up the city. We were paid standard laborers’ wages. It was by no means an easy existence, but some whites soon complained that we were being “spoiled” at the fairgrounds and by the attention given to us by the Red Cross and other charitable organizations.

**Green E. Smith:** I shouldn't have even been at the Tulsa Race Massacre. I lived in Muskogee and I was just in town for a few days to put a cooling system in the Dreamland Theatre in Greenwood. I went to the Dreamland at about 5 in the morning. I wanted to get the system installed and catch a train back to Muskogee. I heard shooting and when I looked outside, it looked like the world was coming to end with bullets. I stayed where I was. Around 8 in the morning, it seemed like things had slowed down a bit. But at 9:30 a gang came down the street knocking on the doors and setting buildings on fire. They were policemen. People keep asking, "How did you know they were policemen?" I knew because they wore badges that said "Special Police." I watched them go into one building after another and when they came out the buildings were smoking. When I left the building, I was arrested because they were arresting or rounding up all of the Blacks. I did finally get back to Muskogee, but not before I witnessed the destruction of Greenwood. One young woman was half-lying, half-sitting, her eyes were filled with misery. I asked her if she was sick. "No, I ain't sick. I ain't got nothin'." That's all she said, but she was right. These people worked their whole lives to buy a home, a piano, a dining room table, and in one night, their homes were snatched away.

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**Colonel Rooney:** I was in charge of the local units of the National Guard. I first knew there was trouble when a group of white men tried to break into the armory to take guns. We held them back. When I did hear that the National Guard needed to move in to Greenwood, I had planned to put a line of troops around the town, but I didn't have enough men to protect the line. Instead, I ordered my men to start gathering up Greenwood residents and taking them to internment centers. We figured if they were gathered together, they could more easily be protected against the mobs sweeping through Greenwood. Some Greenwood residents did not want to give up their guns, so there were skirmishes. We certainly didn't anticipate that looters would come in and burn the homes of the Black residents of Greenwood.

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**Judge Oliphant:** I was 71 at the time of the massacre. I owned rental property in the Black section of town called Greenwood. I left my part of town in Tulsa and went over to Greenwood when I heard about the massacre. I called the police department about 8 in the morning to ask for help in protecting my property. Then four uniformed officers and deputies came. Instead of protecting property, "they were the chief fellows starting fires." I saw Dr. A. J. Jackson, one of the best surgeons in the country, come out of his home with his hands in the air, saying, "Here I am. I want to go with you." Jackson was surrendering to the officers. Two shot him, and he bled to death. Then I watched them throw gas and oil on Dr. Jackson's house. The scene of destruction was unreal:

They were scattered around there, quite a large number of people looting the houses and taking out everything ... Some were singing, some were playing pianos that were taken out of the buildings, some were running Victrolas, some were dancing a jig and just having a rollicking easy good time in a business which they thought they were doing that [which] was upright.

There were men, women, and children just going into the homes of Blacks whom the National Guard had rounded up and taken to the fairgrounds. Just don't seem decent to me. I was told 1,256 homes were destroyed in that massacre.

**Walter White:** The NAACP sent me into Tulsa to see what was happening. There were thousands of whites gathered at the jailhouse. Some had left to get guns from the National Guard Armory. Others broke into a sporting goods store. The Black veterans arrived armed as well, but they were turned back. Shortly after I arrived,

I learned that special deputy sheriffs were being sworn in to guard the town from a rumored counterattack by the Negroes. It occurred to me that I could get myself sworn in as one of these deputies. It was even easier to do this than I had expected. That evening in the City Hall, I had to answer only three questions — name, age, and address. I might have been a thug, a murderer, an escaped convict, a member of the mob itself that had laid waste a large area of the city — none of these mattered; my skin was apparently white, and that was enough.

Because I am very light complexioned, I was given one of these special deputy commissions. “Now you can go out and shoot any n—— you see,” I was told, “and the law’ll be behind you.” I spent a tense night riding about the city in the company of four members of the Ku Klux Klan. I wrote an article for *The Nation* magazine about that June night in 1921.

.....

**Mrs. Jackson:** A mob attacked my home and killed my husband on the night of June 1, 1921. My husband was a surgeon, a Black surgeon, who was respected by Blacks and whites alike for his skills. My husband and I fought off the mob that attacked our home. An officer who knew my husband came up to the house and assured him that if he would surrender he would be protected. This my husband did. The officer sent him under guard to Convention Hall, where Black people were being placed for protection. En route to the hall, disarmed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. The officer who had assured Dr. Jackson of protection stated to me, “Dr. Jackson ... did only what any red-blooded man would have done under similar circumstances in defending his home. Dr. Jackson was murdered by white ruffians.”

.....

**John Hope Franklin:** I was a child at the time of the massacre. I later became a historian; my book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, sold more than 3.5 million copies. My father, B. C. Franklin, was in Greenwood at the time. We were at home in an all-Black town nearby, and we didn’t know what happened to father. By the time the massacre had ended, the damage was staggering. As many as 300 African Americans had been killed by city and state officials and deputized government agents. Every church, school, and business in Greenwood had been set on fire. Thirty-five square blocks of property was laid waste in ashes, more than 1,200 houses were destroyed, and nearly 10,000 African Americans were rendered homeless.

One of the most profound effects [of the Riot] in the long run was what it did to the city. It robbed it of its honesty, and it sentenced it to 75 years of denial ... The term “riot” itself seems somehow inadequate to describe the violence that took place. For some, what occurred in Tulsa on May 31 and June 1, 1921 was a massacre, a pogrom, or, to use a more modern term, an ethnic cleansing. For others, it was nothing short of a race war. But whatever term is used, one thing is certain: When it was all over, Tulsa’s African American district had been turned into a scorched wasteland of vacant lots, crumbling storefronts, burned churches, and blackened, leafless trees.



**Ruth Phelps:** Honestly, I couldn't believe what was happening in Tulsa. We lived outside of the city along the road to Sand Springs, about a day's walk north from Tulsa. We helped out the Black folks running away from Tulsa. We hid and fed about 20 Black massacre victims in the basement of our home for most of a week. We believed that the Golden Rule applied whether people were white, Black, or Native American. So when terrified and hungry Black people came to our door, we hid them in our basement. I put an extra pot of beans and sow belly on the stove. Our house became a "safe house" for Black Tulsans who were not imprisoned by the white authorities. Just like the Underground Railroad, Blacks walked through the woods and along creek beds at night. Then we hid them during the day until it was safe for them to move on. We didn't ask what happened that night in Tulsa. We knew by watching them huddle and cry in the basement that it was terrible. When we drove to Greenwood later and saw the burned-down remains of their homes, we were glad that we offered sanctuary, and they knew that God lived in some white folks.

.....

**Mary Jo Erhardt:** After a sleepless night, punctuated by the sounds of gunfire, I woke up early in my room at the Y.W.C.A. on the morning of June 1, 1921. Heading downstairs, I heard Jack, the African American porter who worked at the building. "Miss Mary! Miss Mary!" he said, "Let me in quick." He told me armed whites were chasing him. I quickly put him in the walk-in refrigerator. I hid him behind some beef carcasses and returned to the hall door when I heard a loud knocking at the service entrance door. A large white man was trying to open the door. He had a revolver pointed in my direction.

"What do you want?" I asked sharply. Strangely, those guns frightened me not at all. I was so angry I could have torn those ruffians apart — three armed white men chasing one lone, harmless Negro. I cannot recall in all my life feeling hatred toward any person, until then. Apparently my feelings did not show, for one answered, "Where did he go?"

"Where did WHO go?" I responded.

"That [Black man]," one demanded, "did you let him in here?"

"Mister," I said, "I'm not letting ANYBODY in here!" which was perfectly true. I had already let in all I intended.

It was at least 10 minutes before I felt secure enough to release Jack. He was nearly frozen, dressed thinly as he was for the hot summer night, but he was alive.

.....

**Maria Morales Gutierrez:** My husband and I had recently emigrated from Mexico when the massacre broke out. We were living in a small house off Peoria Avenue, near Independence Street. Hearing gunfire and screams from the street on the morning of June 1, 1921, I walked outside, where I saw two small African American children, separated from their parents, walking along the street. Suddenly, an airplane appeared on the horizon, bearing down on the two frightened youngsters. I ran out into the street, and scooped the children into my arms and out of danger. A group of whites later demanded that I turn the two children over to them. I told them no. It's a wonder they didn't shoot me the way they had been shooting and burning Blacks that night.

**Otis G. Clark:** I was 18 at the time of what was called the Tulsa Massacre. I grew up in Greenwood, the African American section of Tulsa, which folks called the “Black Wall Street.” “Greenwood had two theaters, two pool halls, hotels, and cafes, and stuff. We had an amazing little city ... Greenwood had 15,000 residents, a 65-room hotel, several banks, and two newspapers.”

During the night of May 31, 1921, I dodged bullets, raced through alleys to escape armed mobs, and saw my family’s home burned to the ground. “Gunfire and the blaze from the fire was getting closer, and all we had on our minds was getting out of the house before the ‘war’ got there.” I went to a mortuary, where a man was planning to get an ambulance out of the garage to help victims of the violence. “The man was just about to open the door when a bullet shattered his hand into pieces, blood flying everywhere.” I ran through streets and alleys until I saw my cousin: “I jumped in the car and we hadn’t gone two blocks before we turned this corner and ran right into a crowd of white men coming toward us with guns.”

When the smoke cleared over Greenwood, 35 square blocks had been burned to the ground. More than 1,200 houses were destroyed, along with dozens of office buildings, restaurants, churches, and schools. “It looked like a war had hit the area. Not a single house or building stood untouched. Greenwood was a huge wall of fire, the heat so strong I felt it down the block.” I fled Tulsa on a freight train headed north. I didn’t get off until I hit Milwaukee.

.....

**Don Ross, Oklahoma state representative:** I first learned about the massacre when I was about 15 from Booker T. Washington High School teacher and massacre survivor W. D. Williams. Mr. Williams said on the evening of May 31, 1921, his school graduation and prom were canceled. Dick Rowland was in jail, accused of raping a white woman Sarah Page “on a public elevator in broad daylight.” After Rowland was arrested, angry whites gathered at the courthouse intent on lynching Dick. Armed Blacks came to the courthouse to protect him. There was a scuffle between a Black and a white man and a shot rang out. A race massacre broke out. Mr. Williams said Blacks defended their community for a while, “but then the airplanes came dropping bombs.” All of the Black community was burned to the ground and 300 people died.

I didn’t believe my teacher. I said, “Greenwood was never burned. Ain’t no 300 people dead. We’re too old for fairy tales.” The next day Mr. Williams asked me to stay after class. He showed me pictures and postcards of Mount Zion Baptist Church on fire, the Dreamland Theatre in shambles, whites with guns standing over dead bodies, Blacks being marched to internment camps, trucks loaded with caskets, and a yellowing newspaper article accounting block after block of destruction: “30, 75, even 300 dead.” Everything was just as he had described it. I was to learn later that Rowland was assigned a lawyer who was a prominent member of the Ku Klux Klan. “What you think, fat mouth?” Mr. Williams asked me after I saw his photo album. When I became state representative, I initiated legislation to create the Tulsa Race Riot Commission. (*Much of this is quoted directly from Don Ross’ prologue to “The Tulsa Race Riot Report.”*)

# Tulsa Race Massacre

May 31–June 1, 1921

**Your name:**

This is a mystery. You are going to listen to a number of people discuss the night of May 31–June 1, 1921. As you interview your classmates, write down their names and key pieces of information that help you unfold the mystery of that night. At the end of the mixer activity, try to connect their stories. What do you learn about that night? What events unfolded? How did the “riot” start? Who was involved? Who were allies? What questions do you have?

# Tulsa Reparations Commission: Role Play

The city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, is haunted by a past that remains unresolved — the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. The Oklahoma State Legislature authorized your commission in 1997 to research this devastating event. After three and a half years of research — during which the commission has investigated the massacre, locating and interviewing many survivors and descendants, and searching through stacks of historical documents and records — the commission delivered their report to the governor, the state legislature, the mayor of Tulsa, and the Tulsa City Council. The commission will now determine what, if any, reparations should be made to the survivors of the race massacre, their descendants, or others.

## Statement of Endorsement

GUIDED by our commitment to justice and the findings and recommendations of “The Tulsa Race Riot, a Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” submitted to Governor Frank Keating, the Oklahoma State Legislature, Tulsa Mayor Susan Savage, and the Tulsa City Council on February 28, 2001, and

WHEREAS the Tulsa Race Massacre is consistent with a pattern of white, riotous assaults upon African American communities throughout early 20th-century America; and

WHEREAS according to the commission’s report, the following events occurred on May 31–June 1, 1921:

- On May 31, the *Tulsa Tribune* ran a story covering the arrest of a young Black man jailed for assaulting a white elevator operator based on accusations that were later recanted.
- The *Tribune* edition also contained an inflammatory editorial that not only suggested but incited that there would be a lynching. Following release of the paper, frenzy spread across the white Tulsa community in anticipation of a lynching and across the Black Tulsa community in defense of one.
- In the presence of approximately 2,000 white Tulsans, 75 African Americans, some of them World War I veterans, met the sheriff at the courthouse, offering to assist in protecting the prisoner.
- A struggle ensued between a white Tulsan seeking to disarm one of these veterans and rioting began as a result of the gun being fired.
- The City of Tulsa Police Department deputized 500 white Tulsans, many of whom were largely responsible for the damage suffered by the African American Greenwood business and residential community.
- The state of Oklahoma mobilized a unit of the Oklahoma National Guard that subsequently received a machine gun from the city police that was mounted on a flatbed truck and used against the men, women, and children of Greenwood.
- Through the night, fires were set and fighting continued as Greenwood’s war veterans and citizens



defended their community from the white attackers, inclusive of men dressed in State National Guard uniforms, City of Tulsa Police uniforms, and under the specially deputized badged authority of the Tulsa Police Department.

- At daybreak, Greenwood faced an overwhelming assault and massacre by 5,000–10,000 white Tulsans covered by a second machine gun, airborne gunfire, and/or the dropping of incendiary devices, whom prominent and youth members of the Ku Klux Klan probably helped to mobilize.
- The organized whites emptied homes, detained residents, murdered those resisting or found to be armed, looted homes and businesses and set them ablaze; and

WHEREAS according to the commission's report the 18-hour event resulted in:

- Around 300 deaths, according to the Red Cross official report, accounts of credible witnesses, eye-witness accounts of “bodies of Blacks stacked like cordwood on Tulsa streets, Black bodies piled on trucks, and on trains” and with circumstantial evidence from renowned physical anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow, a member of the Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot that points to the existence of mass graves;
- 40 square blocks of 1,265 homes looted and then burned to the ground, including hospitals, schools, and churches owned primarily by African Americans;
- 150 businesses leveled also by fire and, in some instances, incendiary devices thrown from the air in the Greenwood district now popularly referred to as the “Black Wall Street” of America;
- 6,000 Black Tulsans involuntarily arrested, detained, and released only upon being vouched for by a white employer and/or citizen;
- 9,000 homeless and living in tents well into the winter of 1921 and;
- An entire generation's inheritance robbed of a people who dared to “lift themselves up by their bootstraps” and live the American dream, only to have it rendered an eternal nightmare.

## Menu of Choices

**1. Do nothing.** Acknowledge the terrible, horrific events that unfolded from May 31 to June 1, 1921, in the Greenwood section of North Tulsa. Acknowledge the deaths, the loss of buildings and homes and businesses, acknowledge the pain and suffering, but move on. This event happened in the past. Most of the people who were hurt during this tragedy are gone. Nothing can be done to help them. This is history. Picking at the wound and reopening sores only prolongs the suffering. Let the past heal. You can't change the past, we can only learn from it. Rehashing the past just creates resentment from blacks to whites. New resentments build out of the smoldering embers of the past. Let it be. Acknowledge that it happened, then move on.

**2. Repay individuals and their descendants.** People who say this happened 80 years ago are wrong. The racism that started the Tulsa Race Massacre is still happening today. The crime was the impoverishment and dispossession of a generation of Tulsan African Americans and their descendants. Whites own 20 times more wealth than Blacks today. This is the direct result of historic dispossession from white invasions into Black communities

where Black businesses, homes, land, and personal wealth were stolen.

Therefore, the survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre and their descendants are due compensation in the same way that survivors of the much smaller community of Rosewood, Florida, received reparations for a similar event that occurred on January 1, 1923, when a white mob attacked Black citizens and burned their homes and businesses to the ground. Japanese Americans were also given reparations after World War II because the federal government forced them to sell their possessions — businesses, homes, land, as well as furniture, dishes, etc. — at a great financial loss and forced them into prison camps during the war years. Both of these cases argue that there is historic precedent for the reparations to individuals and their descendants who suffered loss of their businesses or homes during the Tulsa Race Massacre.

**3. Create reparations for the Greenwood Community.** Few survivors remain, but as stated above, the inherited wealth created in “Black Wall Street” by hardworking African Americans was stolen. Their legacy was burned down during the race massacre on May 31–June 1, 1921. Besides the individual wealth, the wealth of the community was stolen on those nights. Families were destroyed as fathers, mothers, and children were murdered; neighborhoods were burglarized, taking more than family heirlooms — a community’s sense of safety was also stolen. Many African Americans fled, never returning to the site of so much bloodshed and heartbreak. Is compensation necessary? Absolutely. But we must think about the collective scars on this community, and use these reparations to heal those.

Instead of individual reparations, create reparations that benefit the community today. Establish scholarships for the young African American women and men who live in Tulsa. Create a memorial for the dead and living: Rebury the dead who lie in unmarked graves and give them a proper burial, and create a living museum to teach the history of those nights, so they will not be repeated. Develop low-interest loans to rebuild the Greenwood business community. Establish healthcare plans for those residents who cannot afford this basic right. Fund artists whose work helps illuminate both the history as well as the underlying problems that contributed to the disaster in Greenwood.

## Group Directions

Your group will attend a meeting with the governor, the state legislature, the mayor of Tulsa, and the Tulsa City Council. The question before the legislature is: **What, if any, reparations should be made to the survivors of the race massacre, their descendants, or others?**

1. Read over all materials. Determine on your own what reparations, if any, should be given to the survivors and their families. You might also think about alternatives or additions that you want to add. Think about *why* you believe this is the best option. Have evidence to support your position.
2. As a commission, you will need to come to an agreement about reparations that you will present to the governor, the state legislature, etc.
3. How will you run your meeting? Here are possibilities:
  - You could select a chairperson who would then call on individuals to speak and propose when votes might be taken.
  - Perhaps you might raise hands, with the last person to speak calling on the next speaker, and so on.
4. Once you have determined your reparation, be prepared to also answer “Why is this the best option?”

# Tulsa Reparations Commission: Persona Writing

You will attend a meeting with the governor, the state legislature, the mayor of Tulsa, and the Tulsa City Council. The question before the legislature is: What, if any, reparations should be made to the survivors of the race massacre, their descendants, or others?

Create a persona: Who are you? Are you a descendent of one of the participants of the race massacre? Have you moved to town recently? Are you a business owner? A teacher? A retired city council member? A member of the clergy? Create your identity.

You have been asked to testify before the state reparations committee. Using your persona's voice, write your testimony. Use evidence from the "massacre" as well as your persona's understandings and perspectives.

You may choose one of the options above or craft one of your own. Determine on your own what reparations, if any, should be given to the survivors and their families. You might also think about alternatives or additions that you want to add. Think about why you believe this is the best option. Have evidence to support your position.

## Sample Tulsa Persona

Good morning. My name is Florence Parrish. I am Mary Parrish's granddaughter. My grandmother, Mary, was a schoolteacher in Tulsa the night the Tulsa Massacre happened. My grandmother wrote about that night, and over the years, that story was handed down like an old quilt — from my grandmother, to my mother, and now to me.

There's a patch in the quilt that tells the story of white men trying to lynch Dick Rowland based on a fabricated rape story. And there's another patch that shows white men with torches setting Black homes and businesses on fire. Over here, in this worn-out spot, is the patch showing the number of Blacks who died between May 31 and June 1, 1921. And here, these stitches, those are the train tracks that took my family out of that town.

But I came back to Tulsa to testify today because I believe that what happened that night cannot be buried.

"Fifty years after the terrible spring of 1921, W. D. Williams had a message for young Black Tulsans: 'They must remember that it was pride that started the riot, it was pride that fought the riot, it was pride that rebuilt after the riot, and if the same pride can again be captured among the younger Blacks, when new ideals with a good educational background, with a mind for business, 'Little Africa' can rise again as the Black Mecca of the Southwest. But it is up to the young people.'" (Ellwood, *Death in a Promised Land*)

**Death Toll from Tulsa Race “Riots”  
Estimated Between 300 and 3,000**

*by Katharine Johnson*

What is the difference made by one zero,  
One digit placed to the right of a collection,  
One circle, one nothing,  
one absence of quantity?  
What legacies linger in the void  
between 300 and 3,000?

What little girls, hair  
plaited for sleep,  
cool, white nightgowns  
for a hot Tulsa night  
slipped through the hole in that zero?

What grandma rests  
somewhere around 2,186  
clicking her tongue along her teeth  
rocking and moaning,  
“Not again, Lord, not again.”

Which young man, framed  
by a tiny house and soot-soaked camellias,  
his legs wide, arms cradling a rifle  
is silenced by the denial of 892?

Whose brother waits at 1,753  
for someone to call his name,  
etch it into a slab of solid marble  
and set his soul free?

Is there a Bernice lost to history at 2,127  
or the restless ghost of a Walter  
still searching at 582 for safe harbor, for freedom?

Whose last moment of terror  
is secreted away in the yawning chasm  
of one wide zero?

Whose final act of courage is rendered  
invisible by such a grave miscalculation?

How can a soul, told it never existed, find peace?

How might one zero bring them all home?

**Last One Standing**

*by Christina*

I am the last one standing.  
Nothing lives within me.  
Nothing remains.  
All around me are ashes of what used to be.  
I am just a memory of what this  
town was before the riot,  
before my family was taken from  
the shelter of my walls.  
I felt the others burning down  
on my left and right.  
I saw the glowing flames in the midst  
of this dark night and the leftover embers  
of the morning.  
Bodies scattered about,  
blood on my stoop.  
I am the last one standing.  
I am the remains of this race riot,  
never written in a textbook,  
but holds one of history’s darkest truths.



## The Night the World Caught Fire

by Desiree' DuBoise

### Prologue

The sky rained down rivers of flame. I had *always* been the man of the house, but now Mama was probably long gone, too. She had gone into Greenwood to her floral shop that morning and never came back home. I was alone in the attic except for Billy Mae. I looked down into her round brown eyes and saw fear that reflected my own. Her thick black lashes were coated with tears, and the only noise that came from her was a soft keening. She was so young, younger than I had been when the Klan took Pop away. I watched as they strung him up like an animal and beat him 'til every inch of his tall frame was coated with crimson blood. That was years ago. Now my sister had to watch her own city burn, the only place she'd ever known. She could hear the screams coming up from the streets just as well as I could. The floorboards of the attic creaked as I shifted my weight. My sister looked at me then.

"Kenny?" she said my name quietly. "Is the world on fire?"

I looked away. Outside, a thick black fog hung in the air, rising noxiously from thick fingers of smoke that danced and clawed their way toward the sky.

"I don't know, Billy. But we're in a heck of a lot of trouble." I looked to the window again. The last thing I would try to do in this world was protect my only sister.

"Billy, when we hit the street, if I fall, you run. No matter what, you keep running, OK?"

She nodded at me, tears streaming down her round, ebony-hued cheeks.

I grabbed her up and took the stairs two at a time. Around me, the world was aflame. Pictures of my family burned. My mother, a stunning shot of her in her white wedding dress, was torched black, an eerie sight. I turned toward the front door, felt the hot breeze gusting through its gaping frame.

I stepped into what used to be Tulsa. Where it should have been loud, there was silence. Where my neighbors' homes once stood, there were only ashes. No more screams could be heard. A shiver ran through me. I turned toward the fields, where the river was, and beyond that, land unknown to me.

I ran, we ran, and didn't stop. I wouldn't stop until Tulsa stopped burning. And then, I would keep running.

### Kenny

As I sprint through the inferno, I think about those who didn't make it out. I think about Mama and Pop, and how Billy Mae will never see her mother again. But then I think about the girl that no one knows about. I think about Molly Sue.

"She's faring just fine, most likely," I think to myself. She was probably safely hidden away within the confines of her father's estate in the hills outside of Tulsa. I know the smoke is all she sees outside, and I know she's afraid. I wish I could hold her now, and tell her everything will be brighter once the sun rises.

I feel guilty, thinking about Molly Sue's blue eyes while my people are being killed by hers. My mother has worked for her father since Molly and I were kids, before we knew that color defined us and that our love could never exist in this world so full of hate.

Molly Sue is a white woman whose father owned Blaque Elegance flower shop before my mother bought it from him. Our families have been connected ever since.

When we actually realized that our love was more than that of friendship, I'm not sure. But it was a discovery of great happiness as well as sorrow. Wonderful, because we had found that one that completed us so early in life. Terrible, because our connection could get us killed.

### Molly Sue

I woke up to chaos. Instead of my maid waking me with a soft hymn like usual, the shouts of men from the floor below startled me into consciousness. Outside my window, it was still dark, but no stars could be seen. An ominous cloud of smoke seemed to encase the entire sky. Lower in the valley, the buildings of Greenwood were ablaze. I blinked, trying to rid the image from my mind that I knew could not be real. The flames were still there. My head swiveled toward my door as I heard it swing open.

"Molly!" my father shouted. His usual gentle expression was replaced by a scowl I'd never seen him wear before. He held a gun loosely in his hands. Something must have gone very wrong for him to

look so angry.

"Daddy, what's happened?"

"A n—— was caught with a white woman in an elevator today. He raped her."

N——? That word had never left my father's lips. My mind refused to accept the information.

"There was a riot, and fighting. A gun went off in a n——'s hands," he continued. "The Klan is burning Greenwood. I'm going down to keep an eye on Rob."

He spoke as if he himself were in a dream. Rob, my uncle and my father's only brother, had been an outspoken Klan member as long as I can remember. I did not know of any man more foul or ignorant. My brain was still foggy from sleep and my mind still spinning from the sight of the blaze. That's when I thought of Kenny. My gasp was audible.

"What's the matter?" my father asked.

I tried to gather myself. "Oh nothing, it's just such a scary sight down there."

"Oh, well it's all going to be done with soon, sweetheart. I'm going out now, you stay here. I've got a few of the guys downstairs that are gonna make sure no one tries to mess with the house."

I nodded as he kissed my forehead. My feigned innocence worked, but I could only keep up my facade for so much longer. The door shut, and I dropped onto my comforter. My breathing hitched with sobs and my chest seemed to be being ripped apart from the inside out. Kenny was probably dead, either caught by the flames or the Klan. I covered my mouth to muffle a hysteric scream. No, he wasn't dead. Kenny was fast and smart. He would have made it out. But what about Billy Mae? I thought about her brown eyes that glowed when she laughed, and a whimper escaped from my lips. No, Kenny would have got her out of Greenwood. But Mama Geena was probably gone. No one could have torn her away from her flower shop; it was her pride and joy.

I sat up. I needed to calm myself if I was going to get out of this house and down to Greenwood. I had already made the decision to go; there were no other choices than to find Kenny. I looked at my hands, soft, ivory-hued, delicate. These hands had never seen a day's work. My slip was that of a French damsel, the fabric shipped in from Paris and stitched together by the best of American seamstresses. My

legs were lean but surprisingly muscular, and could carry me for countless miles. I could make it there, easy, but making it out past the Klan members downstairs was going to prove difficult. But I knew this house better than they did, and this was not my first time sneaking away from this house.

I pulled out my darkest trousers as well as my warmest cloak. I pulled back my long blond curls and tucked them into my collar. I looked at my reflection in the oval mirror my mother gave me before she passed. It was warped around the edges, and the frame was constructed of bronze roses. I saw my blue eyes, the only thing my father gave me. I always wished that I had inherited his big heart and easy attitude. But I was born with my mother's fire, and her refusal to accept the world as it was. That's one thing that kept me loving Kenny, not giving a damn about consequences, not worrying about the laws of the land, and just disregarding everything that I had been taught was right for me. Kenny was a Black man, and I was a Southern-bred white woman. Loving each other was never an option, but it happened anyway.

I looked down at Greenwood one last time. I knew the buildings were crumbling under the heat, and the Klan were probably trampling the homes of the Blacks that lived there, but all I saw was Kenny. I drew the hood of the cloak around my face, and prepared to leave behind all I had ever known.

### *Kenny*

We reached the river right as dawn broke across the sky. Billy now lay on a cushion of flattened grass, and the air was warm enough for her to stay uncovered. I stood slowly, each joint popping as my body stretched. There was nothing left of Greenwood but charred cinders. The sky was chalky gray and peppered with flakes of ash that fell like snow over the smoldering ground. Anyone caught in the blaze wouldn't have made it out. The river gurgled and bubbled, and carried on as if the night before was only an echo of a nightmare. I sank down to the soft earth, sleep threatening to overtake me. We were still dangerously close to town, but the spot I had chosen was well concealed by heavy brush. I glanced at Billy Mae's sleeping form, and prayed before I let myself recline and my eyelids slide shut. The last thing I thought of was Molly Sue.

# Writing Historical Fiction

## HANDOUT

Character

Potential scene

Nouns — street names, building names, items from homes, etc.

Mrs. Leo Warren

Students in basement making signs for the protest, trying to figure out what is going on.

Williams Avenue, NAACP office

# rethinking schools

This lesson was previously published in [Rethinking Schools](https://rethinkingschools.org) magazine.

*Rethinking Schools* is an award-winning quarterly magazine, featuring articles portraying some of this country's finest social justice teaching. *Rethinking Schools* is a must-read for everyone involved in education — first-year teachers, veteran teachers, parents, community activists, and teacher educators.

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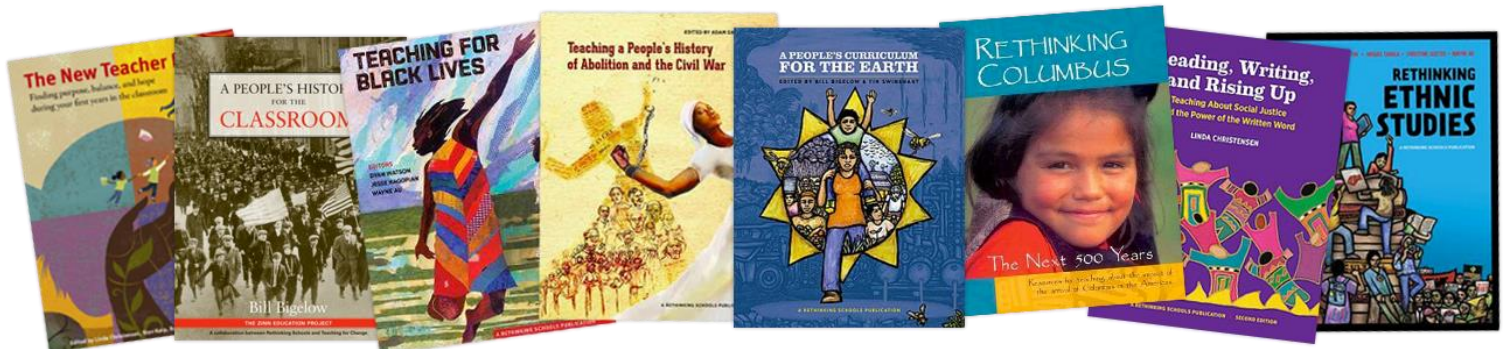
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**As a teacher and researcher, I rely on *Rethinking Schools* for information, insight, and inspiration.**

— **Sonia Nieto**, Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts Amherst

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## Use the online role assignment template for remote instruction.

Click [here](#) to make a copy of the Google Doc, pictured below, with links to the online materials. Copy the Google Doc “Role Assignments for Remote Instruction Template,” enter your students’ names in the left column, and the class will be able to access their roles online by clicking on the linked names to the right.

The screenshot shows a Google Doc titled "Role Assignments for Remote Instruction Template" from the Zinn Education Project. It includes a link to the materials for the lesson "Burned Out of Homes and History: Unearthing the Silenced Voices of the Tulsa Massacre, By Linda Christensen". The document contains a table for assigning roles to students, with 20 rows and two columns: "Students/Participants' Names" and "Link to Role Assignment". The roles listed are: Otis G. Clark, Don Ross, Oklahoma State Representative, Maria Morales Gutierrez, Mary Jo Erhardt, Ruth Phelps, John Hope Franklin, Mrs. Jackson, Walter White, Judge Oliphant, Colonel Rooney, Green E. Smith, Thelma Booker, Mary Parrish, O.W. Gurley, Police Commissioner Jim Adkison, Sheriff Willard McCullough, C. F. Gabe, B.C. Franklin, Dick Rowland, and Otis G. Clark.

Students/Participants' Names	Link to Role Assignment
1. Student name	<a href="#">Otis G. Clark</a>
2. Student name	<a href="#">Don Ross, Oklahoma State Representative</a>
3. Student name	<a href="#">Maria Morales Gutierrez</a>
4. Student name	<a href="#">Mary Jo Erhardt</a>
5. Student name	<a href="#">Ruth Phelps</a>
6. Student name	<a href="#">John Hope Franklin</a>
7. Student name	<a href="#">Mrs. Jackson</a>
8. Student name	<a href="#">Walter White</a>
9. Student name	<a href="#">Judge Oliphant</a>
10. Student name	<a href="#">Colonel Rooney</a>
11. Student name	<a href="#">Green E. Smith</a>
12. Student name	<a href="#">Thelma Booker</a>
13. Student name	<a href="#">Mary Parrish</a>
14. Student name	<a href="#">O.W. Gurley</a>
15. Student name	<a href="#">Police Commissioner Jim Adkison</a>
16. Student name	<a href="#">Sheriff Willard McCullough</a>
17. Student name	<a href="#">C. F. Gabe</a>
18. Student name	<a href="#">B.C. Franklin</a>
19. Student name	<a href="#">Dick Rowland</a>
20. Student name	<a href="#">Otis G. Clark</a>

Role assignments for lesson [Burned Out of Homes and History: Unearthing the Silenced Voices of the Tulsa Massacre](#)  
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Then, share the specific materials you want to use with your students for synchronous or asynchronous learning.