

Living, teaching, and learning with the ghost of the Tulsa Race Massacre
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Little Africa on fire, Tulsa, Okla. Race riot, June 1st. Oklahoma Tulsa. United States, 1921. June 1.
Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017679764/>

When HBO's limited series the *Watchmen* premiered in Fall 2019, Tulsa, Oklahoma and the visual history of the Tulsa Race Massacre became a topic of conversation across social media platforms. For many, it was the first time that this tragic history and the people who not only created what became known as Black Wall Street but have also lived the consequences of that fateful moment almost 100 years ago, became common knowledge. And when the cameras leave Tulsa next year, when journalist stop documenting the revitalization efforts of community members working to protect their history from urban renewal programs, and researchers move on to the next town commemorating a violent past, the people will remain. But what will be left behind in the aftermath remains unknown. This is the conversation that opened up my history of race and education in Oklahoma course this year on the eve of the 100th year commemoration of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

When I arrived in 2014 to join the faculty at the University of Oklahoma, I knew very little of the history of the space. I was lucky to begin working with students who called the area home, and whose family and community histories were very much Oklahoma history. These stories became embedded in our class discussions and have led to several very exciting dissertations in the

making, a growing digital humanities project co-created with students, and a hip-hop album inspired by the uncovering of some these histories.¹ Oklahoma for them is a space experienced very differently by different groups, something well represented within our classroom. For the Indigenous students there was a constant reminder of the consequences of settler colonialism, inclusive of the erasure of their community histories and struggles within what is now known as the state of Oklahoma, a conversation alive today as is evident in the recent Supreme Court ruling in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*. For Black students, it was equally complicated. Between histories tied to the original Black population in the Territories, enslaved people brought here by some members of the Five Tribes, to the growth of Black Towns in the late 19th century in lands once part of various Indigenous tribes, Black Oklahoma history offers much for classroom discussion. But within all of these discussions, research projects in the making, dinner conversations, and conference trips, there were more questions. How is it so little has been written or even talked about regarding the history of Oklahoma? From desegregation, teacher education, print culture, and countless other topics, U.S. history, or more central to our work, education history is Oklahoma history. The Tulsa Race Massacre teaches us that.

What little has been written on the history of Oklahoma, including both the Indian and Oklahoma Territories, brilliant scholarship that I continue to uncover, is not widely known or read by a larger audience. And in many ways historians of education are leading the conversation on the history of Oklahoma, something that I find quite appealing for many reasons. The opening essay in a 2016 issue of the *History of Education Quarterly* reminds us of the potential for national impact on education policies and politics by looking at the west as a sight for further interrogation, with Oklahoma a much needed space to be unpacked as the authors remind us.² However, as I constantly remind my students, labeling Oklahoma's geographic and political identity outside of the south sometimes alleviates them from the consequences of southern white ideologies framing the states identity and politics under Jim Crow. These ideologies brought by the growing white population were instrumental in the school segregation of Black children in late 19th century Oklahoma Territory, something legally challenged by the Black community as evident in the case *Wilson v. Marion*.³ But there is much more that needs to be written about in relationship to the space, especially on the history of education and Black Oklahoma. As I mentioned to students in class this semester, when I think of Tulsa in late spring 1921, I am reminded that Black school children were excited to end their school year full of hope and joy, and instead found their community, and with it their dreams, on fire. Those stories matter.

¹ As Dr. Stevie Johnson and collaborators wrote on the making of their album *Fire in Little Africa*, the history of the Tulsa Race Massacre, and for some the generational trauma embedded in the space, has birthed the music on the album. For more visit: <https://fireinlittleafrica.com/about/>. The beginning stages of the digital humanities project can be found here: <http://docnarr.oucreate.com/>

² Beadie, Nancy, Joy Williamson-Lott, Michael Bowman, Teresa Frizell, Gonzalo Guzman, Jisoo Hyun, Joanna Johnson et al. "Gateways to the West, Part I: Education in the Shaping of the West." *History of Education Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2016): 418-444.

³ Doolittle, Sara. "Contingencies of Place and Time: The Significance of *Wilson v. Marion* and Oklahoma Territory in the History of School Segregation." *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2018): 392-419.

The tragic events of May and June of 1921 in Tulsa culminated from the racial, political, and economic politics that framed the everyday lives of white, Black, and Indigenous community members in the states then short history. The story of Tulsa does not begin in May of 1921, nor does the story of Oklahoma begin in 1907 despite attempts to frame it as such with the “land runs” local school children continue to reenact year after year. Nor did Black Oklahoma cease to exist *after* the Tulsa Race Massacre. The Indian and Oklahoma Territories were both sites of liberation and oppression for racialized bodies across the territories, beginning in the mid-19th century, with education central to that narrative. What was left in the ashes in the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Massacre, and what will be left when Hollywood and the press leave in 2021 is the need for more nuanced conversations on history’s, and by extension historians, relationship to communities and their needs today, especially in terms of schools and schooling.

When the Black community in 1921 Tulsa faced the atrocities and the fire lit by white supremacy, disrupting and ending countless lives, it was proclaimed that Little Africa was on Fire. But to borrow from the work of my former student Dr. Stevie Johnson and his collaborators, there’s a Fire *in* Little Africa, one present since the 19th century and still burning today. Historians still have work to do to recognize it, and to ensure that our work has a purpose.