The city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the early twentieth century was the home of a great anomaly in American culture at the time. The black Community of Greenwood, which has been commonly referred to as the “Black Wall Street,” was one of the few places in America in the early twentieth century where African-Americans were fulfilling the American dreams of prosperity and freedom (Brown). This rare black community that had managed to flourish despite the impediments of a vehemently racist climate was robbed of its success by jealousy disguised as indignation. On the thirty-first of May, 1921, the Greenwood District was burned to the ground, and about three hundred Tulsans were killed and many more hurt physically, financially, and emotionally. The Tulsa Race Riot—also called the Tulsa Race War—was one of the most brutal mass hate crimes and the most destructive race riot in American History. However, through the use of fear tactics, knowledge of the true events of the Race Riot has been suppressed to the point of obscurity. Photographs of the Race War, although scarce, are one of the few keys to the truth about the three hellish days of violence and confusion. The story that the two photographs shown here and other documents tell is the story of how an entire community of people lost their independence, their lives, and their ability to live without fear. In addition to this atrocious hate crime, the victims have yet to be compensated for their enormous financial loss, which is another sort of crime for which the current citizens of Tulsa are culpable. When a community such as Greenwood is annihilated beyond memory, despite modest reconstruction, the inhabitants lose not only a positive perception of their own culture and their invaluable sense of worth, but also their opportunity to bring about change, even long after it is due. The two photographs shown here reveal an utter lack of respect for the black people of Greenwood—a lack of respect that lives on in the unwillingness of Tulsans to acknowledge that financial reparations are far overdue.

Beginning in 1917, a series of race riots broke out in states all over the country, including Minnesota, Nebraska, and Illinois. These riots showed a new type of racial aggression characterized by the violent invasion of black neighborhoods by whites (Ellsworth 17). A rapid influx of black and white southerners that was caused by the promise of cheap land and financial opportunity introduced a different racial atmosphere to the Midwestern part of America. The radically conservative values inherent in the Midwest—particularly the southern Midwest—created an environment that made racial violence acceptable. Bret Staples, a journalist on the subject of the Tulsa Race Riots, observes that “Tensions in Tulsa were part of a national pattern during the teens and 20s, when city after city exploded in the worst racial conflicts that the country would ever see” (4). The inflammation of racial violence in this period was brought about by sentiments in white communities that the black population was gaining too much in the
areas of civil liberties and economic prosperity, and thus threatened the white population with their newfound social stature. White supremacist groups rose up against these changes in a torrent of physical violence and intellectual outrage. Madison Grant, one such extremist, wrote a racist manifesto entitled *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1916, which provided intellectual justification for racial violence and incited many of the hate crimes committed against African Americans in the early twentieth century. Also following this national trend, membership in the Ku Klux Klan grew to a staggering four million Americans by 1920 (Frost).

With the burgeoning number of Klansmen, members became more confident and perniciously violent. The Oklahoman Klan had their greatest presence in the Tulsa area, and Tulsa Klansmen had a reputation for violence and murder that preceded them (Franklin 30).

In 1921, a tenth of Tulsa’s population was African-American (Ellsworth). Like most Tulsans of the day, black people came to Tulsa to take advantage of the economic opportunity stemming from the discovery of large quantities of crude oil in the northeastern part of Oklahoma. In the northern section of Tulsa named the Greenwood District, African-Americans built many homes, large and beautiful churches, and successful businesses, some of which were owned by black women. According to Staples, “Greenwood came into being out of necessity, when black people were forbidden by law to live or own a business in the white city” (3). This section of Tulsa became famously prosperous—an economic success that made many white citizens uneasy, angry and bitter. An anonymous informant admitted to staff at the Greenwood Cultural Center in Tulsa that he had been present at a meeting in which plans were discussed to “rid Tulsa of this blemish,” which was the flourishing black community (Brown). Whites also believed that their underclass’s newfound affluence might incite demands for more civil liberties, or even rights equal to those of the
white population. The growing white population also coveted the land that the Greenwood district occupied for its own urban development. Such was the volatile social climate that sparked the flames of Tulsa Race Riot and later prevented legal repercussions for perpetrators of the violence.

According to historical accounts, on May 30th, 1921, Richard Rowland, an African-American, tripped while boarding an elevator in downtown Tulsa, and as he fell grabbed the arm of Sarah Page, a young, white elevator operator. Ms. Page screamed as if she had been attacked, but later admitted that she had not been in any danger and chose not to press charges (Staples 4). However, the suspicion of a black man’s improper conduct toward a young white woman condemned Richard Rowland to certain death without a trial at the hands of the populace. He fled the building but was later apprehended and taken to jail. The next afternoon, an article in the Tulsa Tribune libelously portrayed Rowland as a threat to white women. The headline read, “Negro To Hang Tonight” (Ellsworth 3). Many historians blame this article for inciting the violence that ensued.

Lynching African-Americans was not an uncommon practice at the time, and authorities usually did little to stop violent white mobs in pursuit of a black person. A brigade of white men gathered around the Tulsa jail in anticipation of the lynching that was certain to take place. A delegation of black men also appeared outside of the jail in order to defend Rowland. Inevitably, violence broke out between the two groups. This was the beginning of three days of warfare between black and white Tulsans. Accounts of machine gun attacks, people and their houses being burned, and attacks involving airplanes and homemade bombs are consistently repeated in witnesses’ descriptions of the Race War (Staples 5). The white rabble—consisting of five to ten thousand people—invaded and set fire to much of north Tulsa and the Greenwood district, destroying over a thousand homes (Staples 5). To cool the violence, white authorities unlawfully interned those African-Americans that they could in the Tulsa Convention Hall and other public venues until the violence had ceased.

The photograph reproduced above documents this forced march into the Convention Hall and the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Riot. The photo was most likely taken on the first of June, when the violence had begun to subside. The scene is one of white domination. A flatbed truck fills the foreground, and a white man wields a rifle but leans causally against the retracted hood of the truck with an air of authority. This white man stands over the three black men on the bed of the truck, one of whom lies on his back, prostrated and stripped of dignity. The caption of the photograph describes this man as “dead or wounded.” This vague description of the man illustrates an element of ignorance, confusion, or distrust on the part of the writer of the caption. For the viewer, he is simply a symbol of the white rioters’ lack of consideration for black lives. The white man’s domination in this area of the photograph is as absolute as the black men’s subjugation and helplessness. This power relation is underscored by a truck that is labeled “Nash Oil Well Supply Co.” The way in which the white people’s businesses aided in the war against Greenwood reveals the economic motives for the Race War.

Several white people surround the people of color being escorted into the Tulsa Convention Hall in the background. Similar to the man with the rifle in the foreground, the white guards’ control is absolute. Several black Tulsans fearfully hold up their hands as if they are under arrest. The photograph betrays a symbolic portrayal of power relations between black and white citizens in that time period.
and location. In the photo reproduced below which depicts the same event, the caption reads, “captured negroes on way to Convention Hall during Tulsa Race Riot June first 1921.” This photograph shows black citizens walking towards the Convention Hall in the same subservient manner as the first photo. The action of “capturing” black citizens instead of interning them implies that their stay in the Convention Center was more punitive than protective.

The African-Americans in the first photo walk between two identical political posters depicting a white politician’s oversized face scowling from the wall. This image symbolizes the message that white Tulsans sent to the Greenwood community—a message of complete domination, political control, and intellectual degradation. Black Tulsans in this photo are forced to walk into a facility usually reserved for whites, under the close supervision of armed guards, while the overpowering twin images of the politician seem to emphasize the colored people’s inability to overcome legal and social discrimination. What appear to be white bystanders flank the entrance like guards and keep the agitators at a safe distance. According to Jimmie Louis Franklin, a commentator on the history of blacks in Oklahoma, “Most whites [in Tulsa] believed that the riot had been caused by lower-class blacks that were ‘worked up’ by white agitators for social equality, and by communists, so it is likely that these are Tulsa citizens looking disapprovingly at the crowd they consider to be the criminals responsible for the riot (Franklin 34). The internment of black Tulsans succeeded in bringing an end to the violence but also gave the white population the impression that black people were being justly imprisoned, thereby displacing the blame from the white rioters. The white spectators stand critically, with their hands on their hips, as though this relocation were an act of justice.

The white authorities funnel the black citizens through the open entrance of the conven-

Photo Courtesy of the University of Tulsa Library Special Collections and University Archives
tion center in the photograph. Ironically, this is an entrance that they would be forbidden to use under normal circumstances. Despite this temporary privilege, the forceful way in which the dominant whites drive their prisoners into the building looks similar in nature to the Nazi internment of Jewish Europeans that occurred later in the 1930s. The imagery of crowds of a minority group who are utterly subjugated by a dominating, racist force brings to mind photographs taken of concentration camps and the concept of cleansing an area of an entire race of people is not unlike Nazi ideology. Even the flatbed truck in the foreground that shows a corporate role in the violence brings to mind the state sponsorship of the extermination of Jews in Nazi Germany. Both the Holocaust and the Tulsa Race Riots had economic motives. In both situations, the minority group that was eradicated had financial stability that the opposing group resented. Although these comparisons are disturbing, the contexts of the two sorts of violence are not actually dissimilar.

After the riot ended, the task of the Greenwood residents was to take stock of the damage and find a way to rebuild with very limited resources provided by the City of Tulsa. The devastation was atrocious. Photographs from the days after the riot show charred skeletons of buildings that resemble the ruins of World War Two air raids. Among the most grievous damages to the Greenwood district was the incineration of the Mount Zion Baptist Church. The church had a reputation as "one of the most beautiful buildings of the Southwest" and was worth $84,000 at the time of its destruction (Franklin 34). It was a symbol of the affluence and independence that the black community had enjoyed in the period just before the Race Riot. By burning the church, white rioters communicated contempt for any amount of financial success achieved by the black population. In addition to rebuilding, the City of Tulsa recognized that at least minimal compensation for the damage was due to the victims for property and personal damage. Staples comments that the municipality of Tulsa "told the outside world that it would provide a generous rebuilding fund—and actively discouraged money-raising efforts that had begun all across the country" (5). In actuality, the City of Tulsa provided very little in the way of rebuilding efforts, postponing an almost complete reconstruction of the Greenwood District until 1925 (Brown). Instead of rebuilding, the city aided blacks who wished to settle elsewhere. Much of the black population acquiesced and moved away from Tulsa. After the immediate rebuilding efforts were completed, the community undertook a policy of silence concerning the Riot. As Staples observes, "the riot was soon banished from newspapers, television, and civil conversation, so that most Tulsans born just 20 years later grew up with no idea it ever happened" (1). The actions of the municipality undoubtedly demonstrate that one of the intents of the white rioters was to cleanse Tulsa of its black population by eliminating their prosperous community and their sense of security. Legally, Tulsa did not repent, nor did the community take any actions to reform its social structure or to eliminate tension between the white majority and the black minority. As Franklin notes, "Tulsa was not a penitent community; as official documents reveal, it forgave the lawlessness of the white mobs who killed and burned" (34).

Tulsa has made insufficient efforts to compensate for the injustices committed against the residents of the Greenwood District, although financial compensation could not truly make right all the wrongs of the riot, the gesture of acknowledgement is an important one. In 2001, on the eightieth anniversary of the riots, the few remaining survivors and their families filed a lawsuit against the City of Tulsa in order to gain monetary compensation.
for the survivors of the riot (Martin 9). The lawsuit accuses the city of allowing its officials to fail to stop the riot, of participating in the violence, of providing insufficient reparations, and of threatening the black population to discourage them from filing lawsuits immediately after the riot. An estimated $2.7 million in property damage was caused by the Race Riot, but so far none of the survivors have received any compensation for their losses (Brown).

The City of Tulsa created the Tulsa Race Riot Commission in 1997. Its purpose was to investigate the riot and propose an allocation of funds to repay some of the cost of the damages to private property. Reparations for a similar but less destructive race riot in Rosewood, Florida included a scholarship fund for descendants of the victims of the violence instead of direct monetary compensation (Staples 2). In 1999, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission proposed a settlement of $33 million, a scholarship fund for black Tulsans like the one in Florida, and payments of up to $150,000 to the individual survivors who lost property (Morris). However, reparations for atrocities committed so long ago proved difficult to obtain. Many Oklahomans oppose direct financial reparations due to an already depleted budget and a lack of understanding of the sort of violence that was committed in the Tulsa Race War. In 2001, as a response to a proposals of the Tulsa Reparations Commission, Governor Frank Keating contended that “state law prohibits Oklahoma from making reparations for any past mass crime committed by its officials or on the state’s behalf” (qtd. in Martin). Despite these setbacks, the case for reparations will soon be heard by an international court of law. However, after over eighty years of silence, the issue is losing prominence.

As a native of Tulsa, I am inclined to agree with Mr. Staples’ characterization of the historical treatment of the Tulsa Race Riot as a “conspiracy of silence” (2). The local public schools’ cursory mention of this long repressed part of local history is enough to merely inform students of the existence of racial violence in Tulsa’s past, but in no way sufficient to allow students to grasp the gruesome and appalling nature of the Race Riot. My knowledge of the riot prior to individual investigation was grossly misguided. Whether to spare students the details of the violence or to prevent discussion and subsequent disorder, my teachers led me to believe that the Tulsa Race Riot was not unusual for its time, nor were many people hurt or killed by the brief interlude of disorder. When I later discovered that the Tulsa Race Riot was one the most destructive race riots in American history, and that the death toll was close to three hundred people, I felt I had been lied to. As a student in a mostly white and moderately affluent public school, I theorized that my education about the Tulsa Race Riot was lacking due to the conservative persuasion of the district in which I lived. However, I learned in conversation with Mechelle Brown, a native of Tulsa and an expert on the subject of the Race Riot, that teachers do not discuss details of the Tulsa Race Riot even in predominantly black schools. Education about the riot was not limited because any one group thought it unimportant, but because the truth was a sensitive and painful subject for people on both sides of the riot. Today, the descendants of the white perpetrators of the Race Riot are ashamed of their families’ involvement and afraid of what the knowledge of such violence would do to their reputations. To some extent, the fear tactics used to keep the black victims of the riot from speaking out against it directly after the event are still working to ensure their silence. The black population of Tulsa still has much to lose in the way of property and culture; if silence ensures peace, then most of the current residents of the Greenwood area are willing to quiet their indignation. The fear of more racial tension keeps both parties from
bringing too much attention to the gory details of the Tulsa Race War.

It is of great importance that the citizens of Tulsa know what really happened on May 31st, 1921. Without help from an informed and compassionate community, survivors of the Tulsa Race Riots and their descendants will never receive the compensation they deserve. Furthermore, those who were responsible for the violence still have an active role in local Tulsa politics. Under the façade of a deeply religious, conservative, peaceful community lies the blemish of racism. By attempting to erase history, those responsible for the events of the Tulsa Race War have robbed Tulsa’s citizens of their historical context, and this is a crime that cannot go unpunished much longer. The photographs reproduced here portray a moment in the past, but the plight of the people in it is still relevant. As conscientious citizens of the world, Tulsans cannot let the suffering of an entire generation of Tulsans be buried under the dust of apathy and silence. Knowledge of the Tulsa Race Riot is important aspect of history and should bear influence on the city’s course of action in the future.

Works Cited