05/09/22: Scott Ellsworth's The Ground Breaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre and an American City's Search for Justice

Our pop-up discussion on May 9th centered around Scott Ellsworth’s latest book, The Ground Breaking: An American City and Its Search for Justice. The Blum Center team prepared an elaborate presentation, drawing on notable quotes and central themes from Ellsworth’s book to gauge important discussion about the importance of enduring questions of Black economic progress and justice, historical memory, suppression, and erasure.

Discussion Set-Up

To provide some context, we first broke down the history behind the Tulsa race massacre of 1921, highlighting how Black Americans' experiences and voices were not acknowledged or validated but are critical to understanding our nation's racial history. We examined the how the destruction of 'Black Wall Street' impacted the future of Black prosperity, and took a closer look at the media coverage that discouraged black achievement and blamed the race massacre on the Black community.

**Tulsa Race Massacre**

**Tulsa Race Massacre: May 31st-June 1st 1921**
- Estimated 300 Black people killed.
- Estimated 800 injured.
- Over 10,000 displaced without homes.

**June 1, 1921: Martial Law Declared**
- Black survivors marched at gunpoint to “internment camps”

Greenwood was one of the wealthiest and most successful Black enclaves in the country.
- Considered the “Black Wall Street”
- Over 1,000 stores & homes
- Black banks, businesses, entrepreneurs, doctors.

**Broader HISTORICAL Context**

What was the Black American Experience?

**1915 to 1920: Great Migration**
- Nearly a half million African Americans left the U.S. South for industrial cities
- Wartime labor shortages; search for employment opportunities; racial acceptance

**1920s: Pronounced Racism**
- Race riots across United States
- Jim Crow Laws & the Ku Klux Klan

**Wealth Gap & Widening Inequities**
- Today median white family has 13 times more wealth than median black family
- Early 20th century: numerous instances of black districts of opportunity & prosperity being attacked by violence and riots.

Scott Ellsworth learned that simmering racism within Tulsa erupted into full-scale violence because of seeds planted in the *Tulsa Tribune* that encouraged the lynching of Dick Rowland in response to false accusations that he had “assaulted” a white woman.

The editorial in the *Tulsa Tribune* calling for Dick Rowland’s lynching was removed by someone who did not want the evidence of what caused the riot to become public knowledge.

Historians believe that the white resentment of the success of black businesses contributed to the Tulsa Race Massacre.

The *Tribune* editorial that demonstrated the planned violence that caused the Tulsa Race Massacre was removed from archival holdings.
Historical Newspaper Comparison

"Negro Agitators Caused Race Riot, Witnesses Say"
*St. Louis Post - June 4, 1921

EGRO AGITATORS CAUSED RACE RIOT, WITNESSES SAY

Members of Own Race Testify Irresponsible Blacks Armed Themselves and Started Tulsa Trouble.

ALLEGED NARCOTIC DEALER WAS LEADER

J. N. Gurley, Wealthy Negro, Who Tried to Dissuade Men, Lost Home and All His Property.

"Tulsa Whites Vent Spleen on Business Success of Negroes"
*Negro Star - June 10, 1921

TULSA WHITES VENT SPLEEN ON BUSINESS SUCCESS OF NEGROES

Raped White Girl a Myth

Negro Business Section And Better Home Section Laid Waste by Torch.

(By The Associated Negro Press)
Tulsa, Okla., June 10th.—Tulsa lies stricken almost unto death. The city is literally in sackcloth and ashes, and it seems like a veritable miracle that it has escaped complete destruction. Whatever it enjoyed in the matter of thrift, enterprise and a fair name has been, for the moment at least, by a wanton, fiendish mob, actuated by jealousy and race hatred, which sought to wipe out the Negroes and their section of the city for the simple reason their prosperity and intelligence development was becoming too evident to suit the wishes of a certain element of whites.

*Black newspapers reported a more accurate account.

- What parallels can you draw between the reporting of the Tulsa Race Massacre at the time and current reporting on U.S. race relations today?
- What major differences stand out between the two articles? What type of evidence does each draw on?
- Why does it matter how people narrate and interpret historical events while they are experiencing it?
- What do you think of the St. Louis Post use of the term “race war” to depict the Tulsa Race Massacre? How is this language deployed to frame the Black community in Tulsa?
"The destruction of Greenwood was the direct result of a plot by the KKK and "high government officials" to destroy a unique Black economic model of success."

How can we combat the historical erasure of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and other acts of suppression?

"To attract the kinds of industries and growth that the city [Tulsa] wants in the decades to come, a new kind of leadership would be needed, one that could not only envision a new future for the city, but attempt to cope with its haunted past. This would be no small order."

What can be done to proactively redefine leadership? How could this affect how our nation’s history is understood and remembered?

"The old Greenwood hadn’t died after all. It was living and breathing in the descendants who walked the cemetery that afternoon, laid flowers on the graves of their ancestors, and signed their names on a guest book."

Descendants and survivors of the Tulsa Race Massacre are still alive today. Recently, they’ve been granted the right to pursue a lawsuit for reparations. What would reparations look like? How would justice be served for these individuals?

“For those who have pulled ahead, Greenwood is a wonder, a living and breathing Black edition of the American Dream. But Greenwood is far more than just a land of fat wallets and bulging coin purses. It is also a mindset, a bearing, a way of engaging with the world. In an age when people of color are constantly being told that they are lesser beings, here is a community that knows that they are just as good as anyone else.”

Given the nickname of Greenwood as the “Black Wall Street” of America during that time, how did the prosperity of the city factor within the Race Massacre? How do you think the race riot affected future generations of Black entrepreneurs? How does the Tulsa Race Massacre fit into larger themes occurring in the United States now?

“I once asked W.D. Williams if, rather than use the term 'race riot', it would be better to call the events of 1921 a ‘massacre’. He looked at me as if I was off my rocker. “Hell, no” he declared. “We got as many of them as they did of us.”

What assumptions might you have made about the event based on the word "riot" versus "massacre"? How does this difference in language change your understanding of the events?