DISPOSSESSION AND BLACK RESTORATION IN TULSA

VIOLENT UTOPIA

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As with everything that I do, this book is for Rhys. This book is also in memory of his grandpa, Vincent Edman. Walk good, Mas' Vinny.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first went to Tulsa in August 2014, a mere couple of weeks after defending my dissertation at the London School of Economics. Still, months before, I had already begun immersing myself in the complicated circumstances of the city's residents. I had been hired by Tulsa native Charles Stafford and his colleague Rita Astuti, both anthropology professors at the London School of Economics, to join their team researching the relationship between cooperation and inequality. We were joined by another recent LSE graduate, Ana Garza-Gutierrez. Ana, Charles, and I together tried to understand the dynamic of poverty and race among Black, Mexican American, and White Tulsans. I provide this background here, as opposed to in the book's main text, because while my research extended past that summer, these individuals deserve more than serving as a background for my time in Tulsa. These colleagues helped establish the intellectual basis of my interests as material, historical, and ethical concerns, anchored by an explicit commitment to the empirics that only considerate and considerable ethnography can command. I am incredibly thankful to Charles for encouraging me throughout and for opening to me his family in Tulsa, who in turn introduced me to their city in ways that I might not have otherwise had the opportunity or privilege to experience.

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cannot find adequate words to show my love and appreciation for what they do for me daily. All I know is that their love sustains me. They each understood the gravity of North Tulsa's story. Having their love, companionship, care, and investment throughout the completion of this project was a blessing. I owe them a debt that I will forever work to pay. To my mother, Susan, thank you for your steadfast love and support and for being a reminder of what's important in this life (calling one's mother, of course).

This book was completed mainly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and primarily written from my apartment's linen closet. Amid the anxiety of the period and the complications of the daily choreography of work and first grade teaching (Rhys, know that you were my greatest teacher), I found so much joy in the intimacy of being with my family. Though my family has lost much in the pandemic, we gained more of each other. It is for that reason that I want to acknowledge all the unknown individuals during that period who helped make this work possible. I want to show my appreciation for the essential workers who could not stay home with their families and who, through their sacrifice—undoubtedly greater than was asked of me—enabled me to be home with my own.

Throughout my research North Tulsa's story has gone from relatively undiscussed to a global phenomenon. In telling its story here, I hope to provide a holistic and genuine narrative that contributes to North Tulsans' aspirations on their terms. As the hip-hop group Fire in Little Africa has noted, "North Tulsa's got something to say!" Theirs is a vast story that stretches back to emancipation and is an example of multifaceted humanity that continues to search for its fullest manifestation. This text is a very humble attempt to pay homage to that journey as a universal story, a journey to which I will forever be committed.

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INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Tulsa just a few days after Officer Darren Wilson murdered Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. Ferguson had erupted and was burning in anger and grief. Only five hours' drive away, there were no protests in Tulsa. However, the moment brought up another—and, in a way, a closer—moment of racial violence. What loomed over many of the conversations I had in Tulsa that summer was the specter of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, now known as the Tulsa Race Massacre. Over two days in 1921, after a Black man, Dick Rowland, was accused of assaulting a White woman, Sarah Page, unabashed White violence razed the Black community of Greenwood and murdered scores of its residents. Black Tulsans recounted in hushed conversations how police officers had left Greenwood's dead in the street, as Brown had been. We talked about how the price that Greenwood paid for Page's claim—which she ultimately dropped—was not merely the razing of the city and the murder of hundreds of its citizens but Greenwood's ultimate dispossession. Despite their displacement, injuries, and mourning for their dead, Greenwood rebuilt.

From early on, I sensed hesitation in these discussions about the riot. To the community members, it was almost not worth mentioning—perhaps, I thought, because their riot was one of many during the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, the Tulsa Race Riot was preceded by riots and massacres in Evansville, Indiana, in 1903; Atlanta in 1906; Springfield, Illinois, in 1908; East St. Louis in 1917; and Macon, Mississippi, and Chicago in 1919. The Rosewood massacre in Florida followed in 1923. I realized that these quiet conversations with North Tulsa's residents revealed how violence is buried within ordinary, everyday life and ongoing relationships, as Veena Das has noted.[1] Maybe the violence of the riot was too deep to recover through casual conversation. I found the riot's violence less in the words of North Tulsans and more in the archive that was the landscape they inhabited,

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which made it clear that the Greenwood riot was just the beginning of the assault on Black Tulsa.

Despite the sheer horror of that violence and the trauma of its recollection, it did not seem to define North Tulsa or its residents. Before the riot, Greenwood's commercial productivity had earned it the moniker Negro Wall Street, given it by Booker T. Washington, later becoming Black Wall Street. Following the riot, the survivors then rebuilt Greenwood back into an active Black community. It became clear over time that Black Tulsans had a deep and diverse historical and ethical reservoir from which they drew their sense of worth and the promise of their future. It was a kind of confidence that I understood was firmly rooted in a broader sense of their history.

Although Tulsa is a small city, its geographical sense is complex. I could see the effects of the highway and the racism that produced it on the city's neighborhoods, which I would learn had so much history behind that complexity. Navigating Tulsa was a disorienting experience, spatially, historically, and ethically. But the flatness of the geography provided a constant, ever-present horizon wherever I turned. Over time, I realized that the notion of the horizon would explain Tulsa, especially its Black residents' experience. The contemporary landscape of North Tulsa was like many other Black spaces throughout the country ravaged by urban renewal and Jim Crow before it.

Greenwood's commercial diversity and activity were replaced by a lack of grocery stores and poor access to everyday services, which, where available, were provided by various nonprofit organizations. Greenwood's population had been displaced further north, with the Black community no longer referenced as Greenwood but North Tulsa. The "difficult entanglements of racial encounter" that Katherine McKittrick calls the "Black sense of place" were evident everywhere.[2] *Vacant* was the only word that came to mind. I had always known Black neighborhoods as populated, active, and visible. At first, I assumed it had to do with it being mid-August, when the temperatures would reach into the high nineties but feel even hotter owing to the humidity. After getting to know many of North Tulsa's Black residents, I learned that this was the norm.

North Tulsa

When I first visited North Tulsa, I was invested in exploring what contemporary Blackness might look like given the history of Black people's material and psychological displacement from land, oppression as a people,

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and exclusion from the benefits of citizenship during and following the Reconstruction era. Structural violence has prevented a collective recognition of Black humanity and has resulted in an alienated sense of Black individuality. Yet North Tulsa's history and geography worked to limit the effects of that form of oppression, which played out in the community's discourses.

Indeed, this Black community was like most but was also distinctly determined and defined by its geography. The ways Black people coped with repeated assaults on their being were often couched in terms of community, and that community was read through geographic frameworks. Thus, from the ethical resources that were Greenwood and Black Wall Street, Black people in North Tulsa drew strength, grounded their community identity, and secured the terms of their humanity. North Tulsa's residents had long struggled to resist external assault and remain self-sufficient through forms of community, understood as an ethical responsibility to one another. This resistance produced a palpable sense of pride in what they had achieved. Being able to locate that achievement, they sought to reproduce it. In other words, to paraphrase Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for North Tulsans, "freedom was a place," and as a place, it could be defined and defended.[3]

I wanted to understand how the historical processes of social and structural violence, the politics of North Tulsa's abandonment, and the resulting lack of material resources were reimagined at the community level as a struggle against these processes and as the basis of North Tulsans' relationships. I wanted to understand how they learned to cope with the challenges before them. I wanted to know how they sustained a sense of pride despite their circumstances. With these questions in mind, I met with North Tulsa residents to fully appreciate this process.

"If you really wanna see people, you have to visit a church or a Booker T. [High School] football game," Shameca Brown told me. Shameca was a young Black Tulsan who worked with the Center for Family Resilience at Oklahoma State University–Tulsa (OSU–Tulsa). The center was established in 2009 to serve as "a community resource focused on equipping every family to support its members in achieving their fullest personal and social potential," according to its website.[4] In practical terms, the center studies local families and translates that knowledge into programs that are driven by a commitment to fostering resilience. These programs were affiliated with or administered by local human and social service agencies. Some of these programs were staffed entirely by the center. Shameca was one of the staff members whom the center hired to work in its Promotora program. The Promotora program initially focused on the needs of the Hispanic farmworking

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community, providing lessons on health and safety as part of a research program at the center. It expanded slightly to cover the learning-gap concerns of African American families, and this was the community in which Shameca worked.

Through an affiliation with the center, facilitated by the director, Joseph Grzywacz, I quickly developed a network through the Promotoras. Moreover, through the center I got a firsthand understanding of how prevalent social programs were in the everyday life of North Tulsans, as I accompanied Shameca on her visits to several Black families in North Tulsa. Through Shameca and the Tulsans who shared their time with me, I would come to know so much more about North Tulsa's Black community than could have been gleaned from public view. I would come to know intimately the intersections of poverty, race, and gender and the way they formed from this town's history. I would see the sheer weight of the theme of resilience, which, given the postmassacre history of Greenwood, is as essential an inquiry as any if one is to understand the circumstances of Black life in Tulsa and the forces that worked to make those circumstances so.

Darrell, a master's student at OSU-Tulsa whom I met through the center, told me, "This used to be considered Greenwood where we are." We were near downtown Tulsa, at a location that straddles the border between historic Greenwood and the Brady District. The district was renamed the Tulsa Arts District in 2019, given that its namesake, Tate Brady, one of Tulsa's founders, had belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. As the Brady District became the Tulsa Arts District, the wave of regeneration that saw the former turn into a chic art and cultural zone has seen the latter fall victim to pernicious gentrification. "If you go straight that way, that's where the race riot happened. You could walk three blocks, two blocks even, that way, and that's Greenwood. It's hard to believe that right over there was Black Wall Street. . . . That's where it was."

The famed Greenwood Avenue runs alongside the ONEOK Field, the home of the Tulsa Drillers baseball team. North of Interstate 244, which callously and with much consequence cut across the Greenwood District, much of historic Greenwood is occupied by OSU-Tulsa's campus—land made available through urban renewal policies. The site houses the Greenwood Cultural Center, the landmark Vernon AME Church, and Mt. Zion Baptist Church. I had to meditate on what it meant to experience such history mediated through such mundanity. Without Vernon, the Greenwood Cultural Center, and the nearly hundred-year-old Greenwood Chamber of Commerce as landmarks, historic Greenwood would appear indistinct from

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any other small-city downtown district. The adjacent area that is the Tulsa Arts District is dotted with bars and restaurants, which over the years have become increasingly hip and chic to attract the nearby students of OSU-Tulsa, the growing workforce of an ever-increasing downtown, and the patrons of the developing art scene.

Perhaps for these reasons, to Darrell, the geographic boundaries of Black Tulsa were "kinda weird. And depending on who you talk to, it changes," he added. "So, if you're talking to someone from Fifty-Sixth Street North, deep North Tulsa, it feels far. Like it's probably a twenty-minute drive; it's not that far, but for North Tulsa it's far." So much of what was considered Greenwood had changed over the years. This transformation had everything to do with not only the shifts produced by the race massacre but the history of racial dispossession that followed in its wake. There was a sense of geographic recession by which Greenwood had become North Tulsa. The area and the culture had become a repository for Black Tulsa's history, which had been evacuated from Greenwood. Still, of Greenwood, Darrell shared, "We are very emotionally attached to it, and rightfully so," continuing, "Younger people . . . the kids who actually grew up here, are not always very familiar with its history, but it's definitely left a significant mark on Tulsa's history, and the other things that have happened since." The past of Greenwood now served to articulate and validate the present's concerns, needs, and hopes, albeit slightly further north. And so, although largely absent in a material sense, Greenwood was still present in the way that mattered most: as a geography of memory and aspiration.

North Tulsans lived within the double wake of material privation through urban renewal and the semiotic dispossession represented in the narrative of the massacre. Today community members navigate an underdeveloped space where nonprofits provide many everyday services, and residents struggle for adequate access to quality food. But within that context, North Tulsans do what Black people have always done when deprived of their freedom, which is to plan, build, and thrive.

Public discourse on the riot was relatively quiet when I first arrived in Tulsa but has since become a flash point for thinking about the broader experience of anti-Black violence. If the murder of Mike Brown resulted in little public response among North Tulsans, the murder of George Floyd six years later saw Black Tulsans, like much of the world, respond with open revolt. Floyd's murder by Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin occurred on the ninety-ninth-anniversary weekend of the Tulsa Race Massacre, which added a more potent and poignant sense of Tulsa's relevance. The

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massacre was perhaps most publicly revived and put to use in 2019 with the release of the HBO series *Watchmen*, which used the massacre as a narrative backdrop.

Through the various forms by which Greenwood's story was mobilized and even celebrated, a nuanced appreciation is needed for how both the violence and the prosperity reflected in that story are intertwined with the history of the massacre as an event. Moreover, it must be understood how each finds its way into the structures of Black life in Tulsa and how they are at play in the broader experience of Blackness. Neglect, dispossession, and deterioration are central to the longer-term exclusion of Black Tulsans, and so an emphasis on the 1921 massacre as an exceptional event belies the fact that the massacre was but one act of disruption of Greenwood's social order. Still, it was a critical and foundational act of violence, and Greenwood's history, which became North Tulsa's, suggests that the massacre's legacy has profoundly altered the terms and conditions of Black life in Tulsa. What has been left to those who live in Greenwood today is a complicated sense of that legacy.

North Tulsans live with this past as a sense of place that, while distant in many ways, is constitutional to their present. As I show in this book, this history, as the preservation of the collective memory, has been the only mooring of North Tulsans to the promise of what Greenwood was and what North Tulsa can be. That promise has been held on to despite the city's refusal to provide compensation for damages, even though Greenwood's destruction and its recovery are increasingly becoming recognized as part of Tulsa's broader legacy, from which entities outside of North Tulsa have sought to benefit. Few surviving structures stand as material testaments to North Tulsa's past prosperity. Still, their memorialization has discursively been etched into North Tulsa's streets to stand as monuments to the community's prospects. And to fully appreciate the contemporary meaning of Greenwood, one must understand how history and memory are themselves fraught with ambivalent meanings and contested narratives when deployed as resources for collective social-political action.

Indian Territory

That history began with the failure of Reconstruction in 1877, when many southern Blacks who hadn't already fled the region as refugees during the Civil War became early expatriates following emancipation. In the early

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years, many remained on the plantation lands where they once toiled as unfree laborers. However, some sought to exercise their new freedom elsewhere. One of those places was Indian Territory, which would later become the state of Oklahoma. The first African American arrivals in Oklahoma preceded this period, starting with Indian Removal. Indeed, to fully understand Tulsa and the possibilities for freedom that Black people would make for themselves, one needs an understanding of that particular geography, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, the Dawes Commission, and its impact on them and Indian Territory.

The Five Civilized Tribes comprised the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee, and Seminole peoples, who settled in Indian Territory following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which dispossessed the groups of their lands in the American Southeast. At this same time, the first Black people arrived in Indian Territory, as removal included the Freedmen (former slaves who held tribal membership) and Black slaves who were brought by their Native owners. To be sure, Indian Territory was never a plantation society. Indian Territory should be understood as a "society with slaves" rather than a "slave society" like the antebellum South. For both Native and Black people, removal, which Claudio Saunt calls *expulsion*, had been a transformation of a "geographical relationship" that produced a "geographical segregation," whose consequences would long play out in later Oklahoma as the twin processes of expulsion and segregation.[5] Saunt argues that geographic segregation "inscribed the Republic's racial fixation on the land," which would follow the Native groups into Indian Territory in perhaps the most consequential way just over fifty years after removal.[6]

The Dawes Act of 1887, also known as the General Allotment Act, authorized the subdivision of Native tribal landholdings, which had historically been communal, into individual allotments.[7] Through creating individual and family rather than communal Native landholdings, the act claimed to facilitate the assimilation of Native people. The process was fostered by the creation of the Dawes Rolls, overseen by the Dawes Commission, which consisted of members Henry L. Dawes, Meredith H. Kidd, and Archibald S. McKennon. The Dawes Commission registered qualifying tribal members after determining their eligibility for qualifying as "Indian" and thereby their entitlement to property ownership. The commission determined this based on strict notions of blood descent. This blood-quantum formula and enlistment on the Dawes Rolls, both used as methods for determining qualification, led to the prevalence of racialization as a mode of belonging and identity among Native people.

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Blacks who were enslaved in Indian Territory were fully emancipated in 1866. Though the extent of incorporation varied between Native groups, emancipated Native Blacks received tribal membership, making them all "Freedmen," a designation modified by their tribal affiliation, such as Cherokee Freedmen and Creek Freedmen.[8] As such, the Dawes Commission enlisted them through a secondary category called the Freedmen's Rolls. Although they formed a discrete and less Native category, Freedmen's enlistment came with an allotment—also less than that of full-blooded Native people.

Following the Dawes Act, the Curtis Act in 1898 brought Indian Territory under federal control, weakening although not entirely eroding tribal sovereignty.[9] The 2020 Supreme Court ruling in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, which determined that most of eastern Oklahoma, including Tulsa, for jurisdictional purposes remained part of a tribal reservation, after nearly a century of federal presumption otherwise, proves the resilience of that sovereignty and the haphazard quality of those acts. Nevertheless, these acts radically transformed the system and method of Native land tenure and Native sovereignty through the mechanism of private property, as limiting landownership to the heads of families reinforced Western notions and structures of kinship.

Native assimilation aside, the restructuring of Native social life enacted through allotment was most pronounced in its capacity—indeed its initial intention—to produce a surplus of available land for sale. The land surplus became available to non-Native settlers under the tenets of the 1862 Homestead Act, and unassigned lands in Indian Territory were opened to settlers through the 1889 Land Run.[10] The movement to open lands in Indian Territory resulted from the demand to accommodate White settlers who had already settled in the US-owned Oklahoma Territory, which adjoined Indian Territory to the west. These two territories would later be joined to form the state of Oklahoma.

African Americans from the South migrated to Indian Territory seeking new opportunities. Post-Reconstruction racism and its accompanying violence had made life in the South much too oppressive to endure. The plantation had cast long political and social shadows within the southern geographies, and so, if only by comparison, Indian Territory represented a veritable promised land. These "Exodusters" left the South following an emigrationist impulse that, before they arrived in Indian Territory, took them to the bordering Oklahoma Territory, Kansas, Texas, and elsewhere.[11] Encouraged by Black boosters, like W. L. Eagleson and Edwin McCabe, who sought to create a Black state in Indian Territory, many African Americans took

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part in the land run in 1889. As a result, all-Black towns started to develop in Indian Territory. These new Black arrivants often bought land, sometimes in partnerships with Whites, from Freedmen, who had fewer restrictions on their property than full-blooded Native people.[12]

Whites were fearful of a Black Oklahoma as soon as Blacks rushed the land of the Indian Territory. Indeed, as African Americans imagined a new Black world for themselves, many White Sooners and Boomers (respectively, those who homesteaded the territories before and after the official runs began) sought their own racial paradise. The start of the statehood movement in Oklahoma immediately following the 1889 settlement of Indian Territory was joined by efforts to rid the region of its Black inhabitants. James Smallwood of the Oklahoma Historical Society writes, "For instance, a white mob ran African Americans out of Lexington in 1892. A year later all the blacks in Blackwell left the town when threatened with violence. Poor whites 'hounded' blacks in Ponca City, and masked raiders attacked African Americans in Lincoln County. Indian Territory, too, saw much travail, with African Americans being run out of many areas."[13]

Nevertheless, access to land and reduced, though not absent, racial restrictions in Indian Territory, given that it was jurisdictionally not part of the United States, materialized a solid opportunity to pursue the Black future envisioned at emancipation. The first among the all-Black towns was Langston, established in 1890 on 320 acres of land by Edwin McCabe, a native New Yorker, trained lawyer, and "exoduster" who had moved to Kansas.[14] McCabe would be one of the earliest boosters for Black migration to Indian Territory, which he facilitated through his Black newspaper, the *Langston City Herald*, which debuted in May 1891. The *Langston City Herald* circulated throughout the South and Southeast and regularly featured articles encouraging its readers to consider homesteading in Indian Territory. The paper published maps of available plots with headings that read, "Freedom, Peace, Happiness and Prosperity, Do you want all of these? Then cast your lot with us and make your home in Langston City."[15] In developing Langston, McCabe advanced a broader goal of making Oklahoma an all-Black state. That dream never materialized, and the paper folded in 1902, followed by McCabe's departure to Chicago in 1908. However, McCabe's legacy endured through the Colored Agricultural and Normal University of Oklahoma, which he had established in 1897, now Langston University, the only historically Black college or university in the state.

McCabe's efforts, along with others', contributed to the development of more than fifty all-Black towns by 1920, with thirteen still in existence in

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Oklahoma today. A prime example of the potential of the all-Black town is the town of Boley, Oklahoma, considered the largest of the twentieth century. Boley, opened for settlement in 1903 in Creek Nation, Indian Territory, was founded by John Boley, a White official of the Fort Smith and Western Railway, and Thomas Haynes, a Black Texan farmer and entrepreneur who was chosen as the townsite manager. The land was bought from Creek Freedman Abigail Barnett. Boley began as a camp of Black railroad construction hands but became an archetypal example of an "all-Negro" town's political and racial self-fulfillment, which in its founding and early years "furnished the material out of which the Negro may carve and shape his future destiny."[16]

Alaina Roberts, in *I've Been Here All the While*, argues that Black "connections to the space of Indian Territory were often more important than political rights" and situates the value of those rights as being primarily tied to the ability to maintain land claims.[17] Roberts seeks to broaden the understanding that Reconstruction "revolved predominantly around the pursuit of political rights by people of African descent."[18] For Roberts, Indian Territory was "a space where a different sort of Reconstruction project occurred, one that allowed for the successful pursuit of land," which Roberts frames as being concerned not with political freedom but rather with a sense of belonging.[19] Roberts uses belonging to "signal" that Black people in Indian Territory "did not always seek citizenship, the legal conveyance of certain rights and privileges upon a person by a state. Rather, they often clung to kinship networks and natal communities in locations where citizenship was an impossibility in order to possess land."[20] Roberts uses as evidence of her point that Chickasaw freedpeople, typically referred to as *Freedmen*, "were offered no tribal membership by the Chickasaw Nation after emancipation" but that "even without the prospect of tribal citizenship, Chickasaw freedpeople stayed within the nation, demonstrating that for them, kinship ties and generational connections to the space of Indian Territory were often more important than political rights, insofar as they allowed them to stake a claim to the land."[21]

However, according to the 1974 National Register of Historic Places nomination form for Boley, "Boley was portrayed as a haven from oppression and a place where blacks could govern themselves."[22] The commitment and success of Black politics in Indian Territory are evidenced by the resistance from Whites, such as in the story of Boley. In 1906, in an election in the seventy-ninth district for the representatives to the state constitutional convention, the Black residents of Boley swayed the vote and elected a Republican, against the wishes of the "county Whites," who backed the Democratic

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candidate. This display of Boley's political agency angered Whites in Okfuskee County, who set out to disenfranchise Boley and eliminate its emerging political and economic power. This, plus the depression in the cotton industry, Boley's primary agricultural commodity, interrupted Boley's goal to materialize the dream of racial self-fulfillment.

Further illustrating the import of politics to the Black imaginary of Indian Territory, Black migrants to Indian Territory, beginning with early Black pioneers like McCabe, pursued an all-Black state. There was a horizon of racial sovereignty that followed emancipation. It was the freedom represented in Indian Territory, rooted in land, and made material through political advancement. The all-Black towns like Boley and Langston and towns like Muskogee with a high Black population represented and forwarded this promise. Boley and other Black towns like it provided socioeconomic and political opportunities to acquire land and work, both of which were seen as necessary to achieve political and economic self-determination. And, to return to McCabe's intentions of forming an all-Black state in Indian Territory, Black arrivants wanted more than belonging; they wanted political power and, as I argue later in this book, sovereignty. Moreover, the emigrationist history of Black people before their arrival and during their tenure in Indian Territory signals that land was the means of accomplishing this sovereign future. The all-Black town, like Boley, would serve as the model for the geographic rendering of self-determination, which would be present in the founding of Greenwood only a few years later.

Greenwood

While not a Black town in the formal sense of being relatively isolated and predominantly rural, Greenwood in Tulsa would follow the same pattern of land acquisition—especially of land held by Creek Freedmen—and settlement.[23] Tulsa's origins, and specifically those of Greenwood, were rooted in the transformation of Indian Territory through allotment.[24] The Muscogee (Creek), in particular the Lochapoka (Turtle Clan), who had been removed from their original home in Alabama, had settled Tulsa by 1836. The city's name came from the original Creek settlement's name, Tulasi, meaning "old town."[25] Tulsa wouldn't become a White "settled" town until nearly fifty years later, when the St. Louis and San Francisco, or "Frisco," railroad finally arrived in 1882.[26] Still, the population of Tulsa wouldn't grow significantly until the discovery of the first oil gusher, Sue Bland No. 1, at Red Fork in 1901. But it was the second

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gusher well, the Ida Glenn No. 1, in the Glenn Pool Field in 1905 between Tulsa and the nearby town of Sapulpa that made Tulsa the oil capital of the world.

The promise of the oil industry drew Greenwood's early entrepreneurs to Tulsa that same year to follow the newfound and growing wealth of the city. Greenwood spanned about four square miles from the Frisco tracks north. Entrepreneurs O. W. Gurley and J. B. Stradford purchased, parceled out, and planned dozens of acres of Creek land to develop the all-Black community of Greenwood, named after Greenwood, Mississippi, with a mind toward encouraging commerce adjacent to the growing oil economy of Tulsa. The resulting development became a social hub of economic activity that would earn the main corridor, Greenwood Avenue, the nickname of Negro Wall Street.

John Baptist "J.B." Stradford was born in 1861 to a freed slave emancipated in Stratford, Ontario. J.B. was a graduate of Oberlin College and Indiana Law School. He had found some success in St. Louis and Kentucky, where he ran several businesses, including pool halls, shoeshine parlors, bathhouses, and boardinghouses. Stradford moved to Tulsa in 1899 and began to invest in real estate north of the Frisco railroad tracks, focusing on rental properties and reselling them to other arrivants. He opened the Stradford Hotel in Greenwood, which would come to prominence as one of the largest Black-owned hotels in the United States.[27]

Gurley was originally from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and was self-educated. He became a homesteader in the Oklahoma Land Rush, joining the tens of thousands of individuals who participated in Oklahoma's fourth and most significant land run, the Cherokee Outlet Opening.[28] Gurley ended up staking claim to a piece of land that would become part of Perry, Oklahoma, a town home to a significant African American homesteading population during the first decade of the twentieth century. Gurley sold his land and his Perry store and in 1906 purchased forty acres of Creek land in Tulsa, north of the Frisco tracks, that had been initially sold to white developer Giuseppe "Joe" Piro.[29]

Gurley and Stradford shared a particular vision for what Black life could be in the Territory and in the state of Oklahoma, which would form shortly after they founded Greenwood. Greenwood's growth followed Tulsa's. A decade after statehood in 1907, Tulsa's population had quadrupled to more than seventy-two thousand, and Greenwood's had grown to almost nine thousand. Despite the Jim Crow segregation that followed statehood, Gurley, Stradford, and many other entrepreneurs developed Greenwood as a mecca

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for Blacks moving to Tulsa.[30] John and Loyal Williams built the Dreamland Theater, and A. J. Smitherman would start one of Greenwood's two newspapers. Simon Berry ran a transportation network of Model T cars and buses throughout Greenwood.[31] Greenwood was a comprehensive and complete town that offered leisure spaces like a roller-skating rink, pool halls, and a YMCA; everyday services and goods suppliers like auto repair shops, beauty parlors, grocers, and barbershops; and neighborhood staples like churches, schools, funeral homes, a hospital, and a US post office.[32]

The discovery of oil, statehood, and segregation would have curious consequences for Greenwood's future. Before the state's adoption of Jim Crow, interracial economic, if not social, activity was common in Tulsa and specifically in Greenwood—mainly because it abutted Tulsa's downtown.[33] When the city formally annexed Greenwood in 1910, segregation became more pronounced, having an even greater impact on Greenwood's internal economy.[34] Segregation isolated many Black towns throughout the state, as well as Black areas in multiracial cities like Tulsa and Oklahoma City. But despite, and perhaps because of, segregation, Greenwood enjoyed relatively successful community development. Segregation made Greenwood a primarily closed economy, where each dollar circulated in the community as many as thirty times before being spent outside.[35] While Greenwood's wealth circulated within its community owing to segregation, very little of that wealth was generated within the community. Tulsa historian James Hirsch writes that "while Greenwood may have been socially and physically segregated, it was closely bound economically to white Tulsa."[36] This was because segregation and overall racism restricted Black Tulsa from directly participating in the oil industry, which provided much of the general wealth of the city. Thus, Greenwood's residents found employment in the service sector in the White parts of the city. Nevertheless, the money came north to Greenwood through their labor, and Black businesses supporting the local community flourished, providing a full array of educational, commercial, health, cultural, and social resources. The growth and diversification of the Greenwood community created an overall cycle of development, which drew more and more aspirant Blacks from the South and neighboring states.

We must be careful in associating economic activity with affluence when discussing this period of Greenwood's history. The moniker of Negro Wall Street had everything to do with the former, but over the long history of what would later become Black Wall Street, the mythologizing of the latter would become more pronounced. The wealth of Greenwood's business district, referred

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to as Deep Greenwood, was limited in the extent to which it carried over into the surrounding residential neighborhoods. As Hirsch argues:

> "Black Wall Street" hardly suggests the poverty, squalor, and neglect that were common outside Greenwood's vibrant business district and a block or two of prime housing. . . . By 1920, only six blocks in Greenwood were paved; the rest were uneven dirt roads with ditches that drained the rainfall. Sewage connections were rare; bathrooms and indoor toilets were luxuries few could afford. The Colored Public Health Nurse of Tulsa reported in that year that a single outdoor toilet was used by one eleven-room house and seven adjoining houses. While the elite streets had brick homes and bungalows, many people lived in weather-beaten shacks with planks, sheds, two-room cottages, the remains of old barns, and even tents. Wood from packing crates was often used to build homes. Mangy cows roamed around the outhouses, chickens ran across scattered sand, and refuse fires burned in corner lots.[37]

Hirsch notes that the American Association of Social Workers had surveyed the miserable conditions in which many of Greenwood's residents lived and had drafted a report on this in 1920. However, he states that the report concluded that even though Greenwood was a rather "dismal picture," "the colored community has very outstanding assets—its people."[38] It was the people, not their capital—after all, in Tulsa, the world's oil capital, Blacks had neither oil nor capital—that held the most promise for Greenwood.

Greenwood's promise was also viewed as its greatest threat to White Tulsa. Increasing racial tension followed the increase in population. And since the "district was now larger than all but a few towns in Oklahoma . . . the growth of Greenwood frightened Tulsa's whites."[39] Some narratives portray Greenwood's economic activity and its resulting, albeit circumscribed, wealth as inducing envy among White, especially poorer, Tulsans. And while that may be true, particularly on an interpersonal level, what was most threatening about Greenwood's population was the political influence they might have been able to wield. This potential had precedent in all-Black towns' political and population dynamics, like in Boley. These towns were ready references in White Tulsa's defense against Black encroachment that emanated from Greenwood. Hirsch evidences this claim through reference to an April 12, 1912, lead story in the *Tulsa Democrat*, whose headline was "SHALL TULSA BE MUSKOGEEIZED?" Muskogee had been a notable Black town located southeast of Tulsa. The *Tulsa Democrat* argued, as Hirsch notes, that Tulsa was "in danger of losing its prestige as the whitest town in Oklahoma."[40]

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So the reference to Tulsa becoming "Muskogeeized" and the already circulating nicknames of Little Africa and Niggertown given to Greenwood, as seen in the press, made clear precisely what cause for concern Greenwood represented.

At play, then, was an insistence on containment. It was more than a racial preference for segregation facilitated by Jim Crow; it was an existential racial and geographic anxiety about White space. Recall that alongside the Black homesteaders who arrived in Indian Territory, White Sooners and Boomers sought their own locus of freedom, implicitly framed as a White racial paradise. A contest of space, politics, and race was present from the start and would play out in the violence of the 1921 race riot. Long after the riot, that violence would continue to mark the life experiences and circumstances of Greenwood's descendants, now located in what was figured as North Tulsa.

Violent Utopia

Based on archival work and ethnographic fieldwork in Tulsa, Oklahoma, from 2014 to 2021, *Violent Utopia* explores the juxtaposition of violence and Black freedom and progress in a direct assessment of the paradoxical circumstances of Blackness in the United States. *Violent Utopia* examines the current condition of Black life in Tulsa as mediated by that community's history through the five analytic themes of violence, inheritance, restoration, repair, and territory. The book is concerned with understanding the qualification and condition of Blackness. The argument relies on the history of Black life in Oklahoma but is not limited to or by it. Tulsa's Black history and contemporary reality have a much more universal purchase than many of the existing discussions have allowed for, which is yet another form of exception.

More than a "cultural" phenomenon, the question of Blackness at the heart of the project maintains that histories have material consequence. This book aims to advance an understanding of Black life's core geographic constitution. It draws on the structural analyses that drive the political and economic thrust of critical human geography; the foregrounding of Blackness's qualification as an analytic and a subject is the central imperative of Black studies. Also, it meaningfully draws from anthropology's ability to think through the phenomenological systems that we humans use to understand and organize our social worlds.

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With the history of Greenwood's foundation established in this introduction, chapter 1 investigates the boundaries of White supremacy and the modes of violence that police them through an analysis of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Those boundaries represented an intricate system of values, norms, and expectations that upheld the order materialized by social and geographic delineations codified as Jim Crow. The chapter advances a broader understanding of regimes like Jim Crow laws and their contemporary iterations as social and legal systems undergirded by anti-Blackness and responding to a threat to White social order. The chapter analyzes how the violence of the race riot reappeared in later forms of social organization like urban renewal. Both Jim Crow and urban renewal as formal policy and social philosophy advance and require the racist relegation and subjugation of Black populations through isolation, control, and violence.

Nearly a century after the massacre, chapter 2 examines the afterlives of the violence of 1921 and urban renewal in contemporary North Tulsa, marked by the scars of structural impoverishment. Greenwood's past commercial activity has been replaced by austere public service and a devastating lack of commercial life. The consequence, framed as an inheritance, of the terrorist act of 1921 is social instability; a restrictive, if not arrested, local economy; and intergenerational poverty. The community's difficulties accessing necessary goods have led many state agencies, churches, and nonprofit organizations to intervene in North Tulsa's poverty. These interventions and the policies that facilitate them weaken the state's obligation to provide care and services to these communities and dampen the community's ability to provide for themselves. The chapter shows how these programs, which function not as catalysts of mobility but rather as mechanisms of dependence, are tied to, arranged by, and underwritten by underdevelopment, which complements the violence of community destruction in 1921.

North Tulsans recognize the devastation of their circumstances and seek to develop resources for self-determination, as they did a century ago. Chapter 3 focuses on community organizing around food access, specifically the lack of a grocery store in North Tulsa. What becomes clear is the centrality of restoring Black Wall Street in the community's self-narrative. The chapter traces how the community works to reconcile their circumstances with their history, framed as how they, the inheritors of a legacy of prosperity, have found themselves incapable of sustaining their community with essential services. The chapter begins to examine the racialized notion of community through the multiple ways its development has been articulated around community revitalization through commercial ethics and activity. Studying

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how North Tulsa pursues community based on this longed-for legacy, the chapter advances that this process yields both aspiration and frustration, which becomes mobilized in various assessments of Black Tulsan life in impoverishment.

Chapter 4 contends with the conflict inherent in North Tulsa's politics of recollection as restoration. In doing so, it examines the full scope of possible reconciliation in the face of community challenges founded on the poverty of community dispossession, beginning with the 1921 race massacre. As African Americans continue to face systemic and overt violence, they are required to continuously seek to make a world worth living in and for. The chapter illustrates how that process unfolds in the North Tulsa community, based on Greenwood's narrative, revealing a reparative framework based on restoration. The chapter traces active attempts to mobilize the narrative power of Greenwood by the local North Tulsa community, politicians, and other Black communities leading up to the 2021 centenary of the massacre. The chapter illustrates how Black Tulsans' articulations of repair extend beyond common slavery-based reparations. The destruction begun in 1921 is formally framed as a "nuisance" that has caused the systematic dispossession of the community over the past century and requires reparation.

The fifth and final chapter examines the conditions that made Greenwood possible and thus served as the basis for contemporary Black Tulsans' efforts to restore its legacy. It traces back to the decades following Reconstruction and describes how the emancipated sought to reorient their relationship to the country by migrating to Indian Territory. The chapter looks to this moment of "post" freedom to analyze and clarify the central role that geography played in that freedom's articulation. Through an analysis of this history and the popular notion of Indian Territory held by inhabiting Blacks, the chapter advances a novel but material notion of Black freedom, centered on the meaning and operation of land, sovereignty, and futurity. Examining the possibilities for freedom, organized by this notion of territory, the chapter engages the complication that is Black settler colonialism, providing a meaningful engagement in the debate on Black and Indigenous relations through placemaking. The chapter ultimately argues against the working notion that Black place is already and always contingent and determined by existing racist structures. Through Black settlement in the territory, the chapter considers racialized geography as providing the terms and conditions for a material freedom dream.

Violent Utopia concludes by recognizing that the narrative of Greenwood for Black Tulsans is a horizon that is situated in the past but that they use to

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navigate and overcome North Tulsa's contemporary poverty. Using the massacre as a means of seeking reparations for the history of violence, North Tulsa's residents' current activity and ambitions might provide a basis for determining what repair and reparation might be. As a reparative framework, Greenwood urges looking to moments in Black history for alternatives in articulating freedom. This process for North Tulsans was inseparable from the seeking of redress for the massacre. Thus, in North Tulsa the repair of reparations takes on a much deeper meaning than compensation. Instead, restorative justice engenders a utopic rendering of Greenwood, by which the utopian promise of Greenwood anchors North Tulsans' ideas of who they are to become. Thus, community formation becomes tied to the desire for a utopian future, which will remain complicated if the material means of its accomplishment fail to be achieved through a reparative reordering of Tulsa's racial political economy.

Riotous Massacre: A Brief Note on Limits

Throughout *Violent Utopia*, the terms *riot* and *massacre* appear interchangeably to refer to the terrorist attack on Greenwood between May 31 and June 2, 1921. In 2017 the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission was formed to develop programs, projects, and events to commemorate the loss of life and community over those two days and the community's resilience in rebuilding both. The commission was initially called the Tulsa Race *Riot* Centennial Commission. It later changed its name to use *massacre*, "based on community input" and "to shed the name given by the offenders and reclaim the narrative of our history."[41] That decision also reflects that calling the event a riot allowed insurance companies to forgo paying out on property policies that many of Greenwood's Black residents held. It's also crucial that we recognize that in the United States, any significant ethnic conflict has historically often been categorized as a race riot. The Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, on their page on "the 1921 Race Massacre," give the following definitions for the public's consideration: "RIOT: a tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with common intent" and "MASSACRE: the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty."[42]

In my first few years researching Tulsa, beginning in 2014, North Tulsans exclusively used the term *riot*. For many of my interlocutors today, it is

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still the term of choice. However, acknowledging the public use of the term *massacre*, though certainly not agreement on it, I use it in identifying Black Tulsans' experience of the event. Because while many Tulsans fought and were by no means massacred, the longer-term process of dispossession that Greenwood and North Tulsa faced was a slow massacre of their community. To that point, when I speak about the White engagement in that violence, I use the term *riot* because the White perpetrators were rioting and, as I argue in the first chapter, revolting against what they saw as a perceived threat to their power. The US Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, is a contemporary example of the belligerent violence of so-called self-defense of order perpetrated by Tulsa's White mob in 1921.

North Tulsa has endured several wakes from the violence initiated by the race massacre of 1921. This claim is the central argument of this text. As such, I have decided not to reproduce any of the images of those two violent days or their immediate aftermath. The circulation of that destruction has been wide. Moreover, during my visit to Tulsa during the massacre centennial, I had the opportunity to interview some of the descendants of the Williams family, who owned the Dreamland Theater in Greenwood. In that conversation the family shared how they struggled to reconcile with the fact that their family history, tragedy, and images were now part of the public domain. That framing was both personally and ethically impactful and gave me a newfound respect for the sanctity of their relations to each other and the memory of their families, despite the wide and decades-long circulation of their images. I do not want to contribute to the repeated cycle of harm, of dispossession of the Williams family, the same cycles that are at play and critiqued in the broader narrative of this book.

Further, I also do not show images of Greenwood before the massacre, which are widely available and now also part of that troublingly cast public domain. Instead, I share photographs taken by photographer colleague Joel Wanek and me, with additional images licensed from local Tulsa photographer Joseph Rushmore, of contemporary Greenwood/North Tulsa residents who consented to be photographed.

Last, at the heart of the current efforts toward reparations and community healing is the location and excavation of the mass graves of the victims of the 1921 race massacre. The purported sites and the bodies contained therein have been the subject of much media attention. That recovery is taking place for the first time in earnest, and too little is formally known about the recovery process yet. In this text I briefly mention the search for the mass graves and show an image of a group gathered to memorialize the victims.

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However, I neither speculate nor theorize about the lives lost. Instead, I extend my respect and reverence to the families who have been in suspended mourning for a century. Indeed, those families and the Black community of Tulsa continue to struggle to demand dignity for those lost lives. I offer the descendants of those victims compassion rather than conjecture. To some, this may present as a compromised analysis, but there are limits to commitments to analysis and empirics, and we must recognize them.

While this text resists romanticizing the history of North Tulsa and Greenwood as exceptions and extensively discusses and represents some of the challenges of life in contemporary North Tulsa, its objective is to convey the resilient spirit that has long sustained this community as they work to ultimately secure their repair. For this reason, this book is only a minor contribution.

Justice for Greenwood.

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INTRODUCTION

1 Das, *Life and Words*, 8, 11.
2 McKittrick, "On Plantations," 949.
3 Murphy et al., "Role of Geography," 178.
4 Oklahoma State University–Tulsa, "Center for Family Resilience."
5 Saunt, *Unworthy Republic*, xvii.
6 Saunt, *Unworthy Republic*, 317.
7 Named after Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts, it was also known as the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887.
8 Emancipation took place in 1866 when the treaties of 1866 between the Five Civilized Tribes and the federal government brought both freedom and tribal incorporation to those formerly enslaved.
9 A. Roberts, "Who Belongs in Indian Territory?," 337.
10 The Homestead Act of 1862 provided that a legal settler could claim 160 acres of public land, and those who lived on and improved the claim for five years could receive a title.
11 Painter, *Exodusters*.
12 Bittle and Geis, "Racial Self-Fulfillment," 250. It was understood that "[Negroes] operated under the same restrictions as did the Whites in their quest for Indian lands, but they had as little difficulty in eventually alienating these lands from the Indians through circumvention of existing statutes."
13 Smallwood, "Segregation."
14 The town was named after John Mercer Langston, a US congressman from Virginia and an advocate of freed Blacks' equal rights.
15 Oklahoma Historical Society, "Langston City Herald."
16 Haynes, quoted in Stuckey, "Boley, Indian Territory," 495.
17 A. Roberts, *I've Been Here*, 6.
18 A. Roberts, *I've Been Here*, 6.
19 A. Roberts, *I've Been Here*, 6.
20 A. Roberts, *I've Been Here*, 5.
21 A. Roberts, *I've Been Here*, 5. In *I've Been Here All the While*, Roberts uses what she calls "a mixture of historical creation and historians' interventions" (3) to elect the gender-neutral *freedpeople* instead of *freedmen*. However, I chose to use

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and capitalize the historical reference *Freedmen* as the result of consultation with Freedmen group organizers and members in Oklahoma.

22 National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, September 27, 1974, https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NHLS/75001568_text.

23 Slocum, *Black Towns, Black Futures*, 17.

24 Field, *Growing Up with the Country*, 146. While not for the same reasons, Kendra Field shows perhaps a different set of challenges to the narrative of all-Black towns, writing that "the vast majority of the celebrated 'all-black' towns of Oklahoma were in fact built upon Indian allotments—and publicized by motivated white railroad investors, who hired African-American men as town promoters to recruit black southerners."

25 *Tulasi* is the same word from which Tallahassee, Florida, takes its name.

26 The St. Louis and San Francisco Railway had entered Indian Territory by 1871. However, owing to Native opposition, the line wouldn't extend to Tulsa until 1882.

27 Madigan, *Burning*, 8.

28 Allen and Leonard, "How Many Rushed?"

29 Krehbiel, *Tulsa, 1921*, 21.

30 The 1907 Oklahoma Constitution did not call for strict segregation out of fear that President Theodore Roosevelt would veto the document. However, once Oklahoma had joined the Union, the Oklahoma Senate's Bill One made segregation the state's official policy.

31 Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 108.

32 Krehbiel, *Tulsa, 1921*, 23.

33 Buck Colbert B. C. Franklin, Greenwood leader, lawyer, and father of historian John Hope Franklin, noted, "In the beginning, there was no segregation or apparently any thought of segregating the races" within the city of Tulsa. Franklin, *My Life and an Era*, 199.

34 Tulsa would continue to develop by incorporating surrounding territories to the east, west, and (mainly) south. It was as if the city sought to flee its northern association with Greenwood.

35 Gara, "Baron of Black Wall Street."

36 Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 45.

37 Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 44.

38 Quoted in Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 44.

39 Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 38.

40 Quoted in Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 38

41 Marshall, "Tulsa Race Massacre."

42 Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, "The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre."

CHAPTER 1. VIOLENCE

1 *Tulsa Tribune*, "Nab Negro."

2 Scott Ellsworth notes that what the Tuesday, May 31, 1921, issue of this newspaper said may never be known fully, because when the early issues of the *Tribune*

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