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Connecticut Law Review's 2021 Symposium, titled "History and the Tulsa Race Massacre: What's (the Law) Got to Do With It?" explored the legal and historical relevance of the Massacre. Following the Symposium, Connecticut Law Review Symposium Editors, Abby Booth and Joan Bosma, interviewed Professor Scott Ellsworth, a historian and leading scholar on the Massacre and a panelist at the Symposium. Professor Ellsworth provides a summary of the Massacre—including the events before and after the Massacre—and discusses the overwhelming lack of recognition that the Massacre has received in the last century.



The Long Shadow: The Tulsa Race Massacre a Century Later

An Interview with Scott Ellsworth

SCOTT ELLSWORTH,^{*}
ABBY BOOTH^{**} & JOAN BOSMA^{***}

Abby: Professor Ellsworth, could you begin by summarizing the events that led to the Tulsa Race Massacre?

Professor Ellsworth: The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre was the single worst incident of racial violence in American history. In a period of less than twelve hours, more than one thousand African American homes and businesses were looted and burned to the ground by a white mob made up of thousands of individuals. At times, these criminal acts took place with the assistance of officers of the Tulsa Police Department and local National Guard units.

Hundreds of people received medical attention, but, to this day, we don't know how many people died, nor do we know the racial breakdown of the fatalities. Reasonable estimates of Massacre deaths range from the seventies to as high as three hundred. Tulsa's vibrant and prospering African American community of Greenwood, which is often referred to today as Black Wall Street, was wiped out. Thirty-five square blocks were reduced to cinders and ashes, and more than ten thousand people were made homeless. Equally remarkable is that the story of the Massacre was buried for nearly fifty years, and it has taken us nearly another fifty years to get the story out.

Traditionally, when people talk about the Massacre, they begin with an incident that took place in an elevator in downtown Tulsa. Of course, there were a number of other factors that play into the coming of the Massacre, especially the nature of the national race relations at the time, as well as specific incidents that happened in Tulsa itself.

On Memorial Day, Monday, May 30, 1921, something happened in an elevator between a nineteen-year-old African American shoe shiner named

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Dick Rowland and a seventeen-year-old white elevator operator named Sarah Page. We don't know exactly what transpired, but we think that when Rowland walked onto the elevator, he tripped and shot out his hands to break his fall. He perhaps caught Sarah Page on the shoulder, she screamed out in fright, and he ran out of the building. A white clerk in a clothing store in the building heard Page's scream, ran out into the hallway, and saw Rowland running away. The clerk concluded that Rowland attempted to assault Page. The Tulsa Police were called, but, when they arrived, they didn't appear to be particularly upset or worried about the incident.

The police did, however, arrest Dick Rowland the next morning and lock him in a jail cell on the top of the Tulsa County Courthouse. Meanwhile, the wheels of justice seemed to be turning—albeit, you know, Jim Crow “justice.” Page refused to press charges, and Rowland was ultimately exonerated. But a reporter for the *Tulsa Tribune*, the city's white afternoon daily newspaper, caught wind of the incident. The *Tribune* then published a fantastic write-up claiming that it was an interracial rape attempt, in which Rowland had torn Page's clothes and scratched her face. There was also an accompanying editorial titled, “To Lynch Negro Tonight.” The *Tribune* hit the street at about 3:30 P.M. the next day and, by 4 o'clock, there were lynching talks on the streets of Tulsa.

Abby: As you wrote in your newest book, *The Ground Breaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre and an American City's Search for Justice*, this “seemingly innocent and accidental incident in an elevator developed into so much violence and destruction.” Do you believe that is because of the article published in the *Tribune*, or do you believe there were other factors that led to this dramatic escalation?

Professor Ellsworth: So, there are two things that we have to remember. First is the context of the time period. The years around World War I were an especially difficult and dangerous period in American race relations. This was the era of the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, which was then a national organization. This was also the era in which cities in the North, Midwest, and West started to increasingly segregate restaurants and other public facilities. African American workers were getting fired from federal government positions by President Woodrow Wilson. There was this new militant, white supremacy that was on the rise, and this was still the age of lynching. And while the annual number of lynchings had declined, their barbarity had increased. Finally, this was a period in which “race riots” were happening across the country, where a seemingly minor racial incident blossomed into something much larger—such as whites attacking African Americans in downtown areas and mobs of whites invading Black neighborhoods and looting, burning, and killing.

All told, a lot of kindling for a racial conflagration had been built up in Tulsa. What started the Massacre, however, was not so much what happened in the elevator as it was the actual write-up of the alleged incident and the “To Lynch Negro Tonight” editorial that appeared in the *Tulsa Tribune*.

Second, it’s important to remember that nothing drove white Americans crazier at that time than the idea of an African American male sexually assaulting a white female. This is what sparked the lynch mob that showed up at the courthouse, and it also led to the arrival of armed, African American WWI veterans to prevent the lynching of Dick Rowland.

Abby: You just discussed how the news and the media created a false narrative of the incident in the elevator, sparking the lynch mob. What role do you think they played in the suppression of the Massacre? Were they responsible for creating this veil of silence?

Professor Ellsworth: What’s really remarkable is that after the Massacre, after Greenwood had been destroyed, and after an all-white grand jury blamed African Americans for the violence, a curtain of silence descended quite quickly over the town. We have evidence that the chief of police sent his officers to the white photography studios in town to confiscate photographs of Massacre victims and the destruction of Greenwood. Then, fairly quickly, official National Guard reports and other official records started to disappear.

In the end, for nearly fifty years, Tulsa’s white daily newspapers refused to write anything about the Massacre at all and went to great lengths to avoid doing so. In the white community, word soon got out that the Massacre was not to be discussed. Researchers in the 1940s, and as recently as the 1970s, who sought to start studying and writing about the Massacre had their lives and livelihoods threatened.

One irony, though, was that the Massacre was not discussed in the public sphere in Tulsa’s African American community for several decades either. Greenwood’s leading black newspaper, *The Oklahoma Eagle*, avoided discussing it for decades. In fact, on the Massacre’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1946, *The Oklahoma Eagle* published exactly one sentence about the Massacre, which was buried in an editorial about the KKK. Here’s what it said: “In 1921 racial bitterness, which had been brooding for several years, culminated in one of the most disastrous race riots in the nation’s history.” The sentence didn’t even mention that the race riot occurred in Tulsa.

A good way to frame this is that if white Tulsans suppressed the story of the Massacre out of shame, then African American Massacre survivors can be compared to combat veterans who don’t want to relive their trauma and talk about what they went through. Or, perhaps more accurately, Massacre survivors can be compared to Holocaust survivors, many of whom did not want to tell their children and grandchildren about what had

happened to them. Similarly, many Massacre survivors didn't want to burden their families with their own traumatic memories.

But, beginning in the late 1960s, the story of what had happened in 1921 started to come out in a public sense—first in the city's African American community, then in the larger city as a whole. By the 1990s, it's likely that most Tulsans had at least heard of the Massacre.

Abby: Given that the memory of the Massacre was suppressed in Tulsa communities until the 1990s, how did you begin your research? Why did you want to focus so much of your career on this event?

Professor Ellsworth: Well, to begin, I was born and raised in Tulsa. My family's history in the city, however, only goes back to the 1930s, so we didn't have family members living there in 1921. But when I was a kid growing up in the 1960s, I would occasionally hear older adults discussing what was then called the "race riot." Only whenever a kid would walk into the room, they would change the subject or lower their voices. That behavior certainly piqued my interest in the event. I had also heard stories of bodies floating down the Arkansas River, which was only five houses away from the house I grew up in. I didn't have the wherewithal at the time to find out any further information about what had happened.

But, in the summer of 1966, when I was twelve years old, I was at the brand-new downtown City County Library one day with a couple of friends, and we saw something we'd never seen before: a microfilm machine. We were determined to use it, and we began fiddling around with the knobs. One of the librarians came marching over—really, she was brilliant—and, instead of shooing us away, she taught us how to use the machine properly.

There were metal cabinets nearby that contained rolls of microfilm, which happened to be old issues of Tulsa's daily newspapers. Somehow, I had heard that this race riot had allegedly occurred in June 1921. So, the first reel of microfilm that we put in the machine was for the June 1921 issues of the *Tulsa World*, and we were just gobsmacked. There were these giant headlines, along the lines of "A Hundred Killed in Race Riot," "City Under Martial Law," and the like. I knew right then that my hometown had a real secret. But of course, being twelve, I didn't have the knowledge to understand it. That didn't happen until I was a junior at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and I decided to research the Tulsa Race Riot for my senior history thesis.

So, in the summer of 1975, I returned home to Tulsa and started my research in earnest. But I had great difficulties finding anything about the Massacre. Official records were missing, things were stolen or unavailable, and the librarians and archivists didn't exactly bend over backwards to help me. Near the end of the summer, I was sort of desperate because I couldn't

figure out how this seemingly minor incident in an elevator had turned into this racial genocide.

Now, at this point, I had heard about an elderly African American Massacre survivor. His name was W.D. Williams, and he was sixteen years old at the time of the Massacre. In fact, his family was one of the most prominent Black families in Tulsa. They owned the Dreamland Theater, an automobile garage, and a three-story office and apartment building in Greenwood. I called Mr. Williams and conducted my first ever oral history interview with him. At this point, I should add, oral history generally was still a little controversial, and it wasn't viewed as very legitimate in academic circles. But I called Mr. Williams, and our interview ended up being the great breakthrough in understanding why the riot happened.

Mr. Williams had read *Tulsa Tribune* that day, including the "To Lynch Negro Tonight" editorial. He had also been inside the Dreamland Theater when a black WWI veteran jumped up on stage and said "Shut this place down, we ain't gonna let a lynching happen here." He had watched the African American veterans gather on Greenwood Avenue and get into cars to go down to the courthouse. Then, on that long night of May 31, he helped reload his father's shotgun and 30-30 rifle to help protect Greenwood as the first mobs of whites tried to invade. And, on the morning of June 1, he watched the massive white mob invade Greenwood.

W. D. Williams was able to provide me, and ultimately everyone who was interested, with the dynamics of the story, especially how the Massacre began. Everything finally made sense. Three years later, when I was a graduate student at Duke University, I returned to Tulsa to turn my Bachelor's thesis into a book. Mr. Williams, along other supporters in Greenwood, connected me with other elderly Black Massacre survivors who were all adults at the time. None of them had ever done an interview before, and most had not even told their family members what they had endured. But for whatever reason, they opened up to me.

It's really because of them that we know what happened during the Massacre. Then, in 1982, my first book, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, was published. It was the first comprehensive history of the Massacre. Neither of Tulsa's white newspapers would review the book. But it had a sort of an underground existence. Doors started slowly opening, and news of what had happened in 1921 started to leak out again. But the big breakthrough happened in 1995.

Joan: Could you describe that big breakthrough for us?

Professor Ellsworth: Ironically, the key event that helped the story of the Massacre come out happened one hundred miles down the turnpike in Oklahoma City—that event was the bombing of the of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in the spring of 1995. Prior to September 11, 2001, the

Oklahoma City bombing was the worst incident of terrorism to take place on American soil. It was gigantic news. And immediately after the bombing, NBC's *Today* show flew its entire crew from New York to Oklahoma City to broadcast live for a week.

Today's host at the time was Bryant Gumbel, who was the first African American host of a national network television news program. During that week, Don Ross, an African American legislator from Greenwood, met with Gumbel and told him that, as horrible as the Oklahoma City bombing was, there was another story that had never gotten attention. Ross gave Gumbel a copy of *Death in a Promised Land* and, a week or so later, an NBC News producer called me and Don Ross to tell us that *Today* would do a story on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Massacre, in 1996. This was huge because, up until that point, aside from an op-ed that appeared in *The Washington Post* when my book was published, there had not been a single national news story about the Tulsa Race Massacre since the 1920s.

Once the *Today* story was in the works, other doors began to open, as well. Money was raised, and a Black Wall Street Memorial was erected for the anniversary. Meanwhile, The *Today* crew interviewed several survivors and me, and the story was in the pipe about two weeks before the anniversary. At that point, I decided that we could use *Today's* story about the Massacre as leverage to get other news outlets to do stories about it, as well. In a week, I convinced *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, National Public Radio, and The Associated Press to do stories on the Massacre—and they were big. *The Washington Post* published a front page, above the crease, story. *The New York Times* published a three-quarter page story. And we continued to build from there.

The real genius was when Don Ross took the national news coverage to the Oklahoma governor and state legislature and said, "Look, there's this horrible event that we've never done an official state study on," and he convinced them to create the Tulsa Race Riot Commission in 1997. I think that, in all honesty, the state government thought that they could give these Black folks a little bit of money to do a report, which they could then ignore. Now, I don't know if they actually thought that or not. But Don Ross had a different plan. His plan was to have the Commission come out in favor of paying reparations—that is, economic restitution—to then one hundred and fifty or so known survivors.

Ross had a hand in selecting the commissioners, and a majority of them were in favor of reparations. Once the Tulsa Race Riot Commission was created, I was hired as the lead scholar for it. With the approval and urging of Massacre survivors, I then launched a search for the unmarked mass graves of Massacre victims. Of course, that "I" soon became "we," as an incredibly talented team was built. The story that we were searching for mass graves broke nationally in 1999, which brought an entirely new wave of attention to the Massacre. Suddenly, the Tulsa Race Massacre was on 60

Minutes II and *ABC News Nightline*, while journalists from England, Japan, and the United Kingdom came to Tulsa to report on the Massacre, the search for the graves, and the fight for reparations. Since then, the story of the Massacre has no longer been a secret.

Joan: Thank you, Professor Ellsworth. I would now like to return to the “curtain of silence” phenomenon in the immediate aftermath of the Massacre and nationally up until 1996. You wrote in the epilogue of *The Ground Breaking* that it was, and has been, very difficult for white Tulsans to learn about the true events of the Massacre and to talk about them. Why do you think it has not been as difficult for you?

Professor Ellsworth: Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I’m hard-headed or something like that.

I grew up in an all-white neighborhood, attended all-white schools. I was born two months before the *Brown* decision. Yet, despite the fact that the Supreme Court of the United States mandated that public schools of the United States desegregate “with all deliberate speed,” the authorities in Tulsa managed to keep my schools all white until I was in high school. I attended Robert E. Lee Elementary School and one of my across-the-street neighbors flew the Confederate battle flag on national holidays. And I grew up in an all-white church.

But, as you know, the 1960s happened, some of which I watched with my family members on the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite. When I was in the third grade, the great civil rights struggle in Birmingham took place. In the fifth grade, it was Selma and the beatings at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the ninth grade, I went to school with my first Black classmate. One year later, in the tenth grade at Central High School in downtown Tulsa, which was a well-integrated school, we had “race rioting” for three days. There were fist fights in the hall, the Klan showed up, the Black Panthers showed up, police officers were in the halls, and so on. But, even though it seemed to me that my Black and white classmates were equally culpable for the melees, I saw how the Black students were punished worse. That started to open my eyes, and that process of opening continued.

But, to get back to your question, I was so deeply impressed and moved by W. D. Williams and those other survivors and what they had endured, that I knew this was a most important and valuable story. Mr. Williams had been waiting all his life for this story to come out and to be kept alive. And I met others, white and Black alike, who had risked a great deal to get the story of the Massacre out. It was something that I felt needed to be done. It certainly could have been someone else, but I was in the right place at the right time.

Joan: So, do you think that being a white historian and concentrating on this history has affected your research or perspective on the Massacre?

Professor Ellsworth: Of course. It's important to remember that only five years before I began, there were people who had their lives threatened for doing what I was about to do. At least one gentleman, Ed Wheeler, had his life threatened for researching the Massacre. Now, that never happened to me. I've had people lie about me, slam doors in my face, and do things like that, but nobody threatened to kill me. I think that was because, when I first started, I was this skinny, twenty-one-year-old, slightly long-haired college student in a thrift store cowboy shirt. I mean, I didn't look like any kind of a threat. Nobody was worried about me. I think I kind of flew under the radar.

But, as to this larger question, it is important to remember that America has always been a diverse culture and society. That is who we are, and anyone who's going to write about American history is going to have to write about people who are different from them. That takes work, it takes understanding, but that's the way it goes. I'm sure that certain doors were open to me because of my race and others were closed. There was an elderly African American survivor who, despite entreaties by Mr. Williams and others, would not speak with me. She simply would not, and it was because of my race—although, years later, oddly enough, we became friends. But, you know, as a historian in the United States, you have to be prepared to write about people who do not look like you. That's simply part of the job.

Joan: I'd like to move forward to when you were the expert consultant on the Tulsa Race Riot Commission board. When the Commission report came out in 2001, did you think that it would lead to significant changes?

Professor Ellsworth: I had no idea. I mean, there was a lot of politicking that was going on in the background, which is something that I write about in *The Ground Breaking*. And there was a fairly heavy skirmish between the scholars—John Hope Franklin, Clyde Snow, others, and myself, who wrote the extensive report on the Massacre, *The Tulsa Race Riot: A Scientific, Historical, and Legal Analysis*—and the members of the Commission, some of whom felt that they should be able to edit the scholars' words. We told them that they could not. We told them that these are our professional findings, and you can take them, accept them, reject them, preface them, whatever you'd like to do, but you can't change them. The scholars won that battle. But, as a result, the Commission shut down our first effort to find the mass graves. We were all kicked out at that point. We weren't even allowed to come to the press conference where our work was presented to the state government.

At that point, I was very much in favor of paying reparations and making financial restitution to survivors, which I still am. Indeed, a majority of the scholars were. But it later turned out that the state government not only

refused to pay restitution, but gave the survivors a gold-plated metal instead. I really didn't know what the effect of our report would be. I was proud when we later learned that the American Library Association selected it as one of, I think, fifteen government documents worldwide that it considered to be the most important government documents published that year. But the report has gone on to have a life of its own on the Internet.

Abby: Thank you, Professor. How has your research evolved over the decades? Has your research or outlook changed between publishing *Death in a Promised Land* and then *The Ground Breaking*?

Professor Ellsworth: Well, it has evolved in different ways. With *Death in a Promised Land*, I had a mentor at Duke, and he suggested that I go to a New York publisher. And while there was maybe some interest, I felt it was very important to have an academic press publish the book. I knew that all the evidence had to be laid out with footnotes, and I hoped that the University of Oklahoma Press would publish it. But I wrote a query letter, and they said they weren't even interested in looking at the manuscript. By then, Louisiana State University Press had already expressed interest in the manuscript, and I very happily went with them. LSU Press has kept the book in print for forty years.

Now, *Death in a Promised Land* was a young writer's book, as I was twenty-six when I submitted the final draft. It was also a first look at some long-neglected piece of American history. First and foremost, I wanted to put together a coherent story. Moreover, I've never written for scholars or, at least, exclusively for scholars. Many academics write for one another. But I've always tried to write for a general audience. I certainly had my hometown very much in my mind as I was writing *Death in a Promised Land*. But I also wanted to write something that was accessible to everyday people, and the book is relatively short in length.

Unlike the book, the report that we submitted to the Tulsa Race Riot Commission was nearly three hundred pages long. It was quite a substantial manuscript, featuring lots of new evidence that had not been readily available in the past. Some of that new information concerned the mass graves and the known Massacre deaths, but other parts addressed legal issues, insurance claims by Greenwood resident, the use of airplanes during the Massacre, and so on. But also, back in the 1970s, it was relatively difficult to access issues of old newspapers from other cities. So, with the help of an independent researcher named Paul Lee, we mined, for the first time, coverage of the Massacre that appeared in African American newspapers across the country. These stories proved to be vital to our understanding of the Massacre. We also had new white eye-witnesses come out of the woodwork and more African American survivors, who contributed valuable information.

As to my latest book, *The Ground Breaking*, I had actually planned on writing a much different book—one that had nothing to do with the Massacre. It was my literary agent, David Larabell of CAA Literary, who suggested that the larger story of the Massacre—including the cover-up and the search for the mass graves—was an important story that needed to be done. He made that suggestion to me on a Friday afternoon. I thought it over, and, by the end of the weekend, I realized that he was right. You see, simply because I've been at it for so long, I was one of the few people still alive who knew about the extent of the cover-up and who had first-hand knowledge of how we finally got the story of the Massacre out to the larger public. I realized that if I didn't write that story, then it wasn't going to be written. But I also believed that what we were doing in Tulsa wasn't just valuable to Tulsa, it was also valuable to others that might replicate the work across the country and across the world. So, in writing *The Ground Breaking*, I wanted to be able to give readers outside of Tulsa a notion of what it takes—what the hurdles are and how to get over them—when a community seeks to create a full accounting of its past. Coming to grips with a tragic history isn't easy. It's hard. But it can be done. If we can do it in Tulsa, it can happen anywhere. This notion, as well as the aim of giving credit to the unsung heroes who kept the story of the Massacre alive, is what really fired the writing of *The Ground Breaking*.

Now, if you go back to my Bachelor's thesis, *Death in a Promised Land*, the report for the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, and *The Ground Breaking*, I've written four "books" about the Massacre. I'm hoping that I'm not writing another one. But we'll just have to wait and see.

Joan: In reading *The Ground Breaking*, it was apparent how much history can teach us about ourselves. You do draw a few parallels to the Holocaust and how much the world has learned in its wake. What do you see as some of the most important lessons that this piece of history can teach us, specifically young Americans?

Professor Ellsworth: The Tulsa Race Massacre is a chilling example of how racism has tragically poisoned life in America. It shows just how vicious the results of racist thought are and where that can lead. That's important. Moreover, the Massacre is an event of national significance, and it's one that needs to be taught. I also think that enclosed within the history of the Massacre are a few different kinds of stories, as well. The saga of Greenwood is also a great and hopeful story about human perseverance and determination. What Tulsa's Black community did in terms of creating Greenwood, fighting for it, then rebuilding it again, is an amazing story of human accomplishment. It's one that can inspire us all. The Massacre is also a story about the power of the media. There's no question that the media

played a central role in launching the Massacre, covering it up, and ultimately uncovering the story. I think that that bears lessons for us, as well.

But the murder of George Floyd during the late spring of 2020 changed the nature of discussions about race in America. How long that change will go on remains to be seen. But, in the wake of his death, many Americans became more open in general to trying to learn more about our past, both the good and the bad. And the United States, for such a young nation, has given incredible gifts to the world. There is much in our history that we should be incredibly proud of, and those parts need to be taught. But there are also some long dark chapters in our history that we need to not dance around. They need to be taught, as well. The murder of George Floyd opened the door to some degree, requiring us to more seriously examine our past. That is both necessary and long warranted. But it should be added that there are also new efforts to keep the full version of American history from being taught at all.

The fact of the matter is that our history can teach us, but it can only teach us if we don't sugarcoat it. We need to teach the whole thing. The Massacre is an incredible example of an important piece of our history that was literally and deliberately buried for a half century. In truth, we're still dealing with it right now. William Faulkner famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." That applies to the Massacre, too. The shadow of the Massacre is still very much in place in Tulsa. In some ways, it's not even over.

Joan: In reading your book, I was struck by the resilience and courage of the Black Tulsa residents in trying to rebuild in the aftermath of the Massacre, and succeeding to some degree, despite some of the empty promises that were made by white people about helping to rebuild Greenwood. The Greenwood community's determination is one of the most powerful elements of *The Ground Breaking*.

You did speak, just now, to how the story of Tulsa melds with some of the greater national conversations we're having such as George Floyd's murder. Have you seen national conversations informing or affecting the movement to excavate the graves and to seek reparations in Tulsa? In other words, have the national movements either made it easier or more difficult to propel action forward in Tulsa?

Professor Ellsworth: Well, that's a complicated question. Let me give it a little historic context, then we'll build from there. I grew up in the white community, and I have lots of friends who are still in town. But, over the years, I have witnessed a certain sea change in the white community in terms of dealing with this event. There are people, of course, who still want to keep the Massacre buried, and there's new legislation that was passed in Oklahoma, and other states as well, intended to discourage public school

teachers from teaching subjects, such as slavery, that they claim will make white kids feel bad about themselves or some other nonsense. It has been shocking for white Tulsans to have been taught one thing about their history, then to learn something completely different. It would be as if we went to Stuyvesant High School in lower Manhattan today and asked the students about 9/11, and they said, “What’re you talking about? Nothing like that ever happened.”

I know that some white Tulsans are deeply ashamed about what happened in their city one hundred years ago. There is some guilt, and there is some empathy, too. Back in the 1970s, when I would approach a White city official—say a receptionist or an assistant manager in a city department—while trying to locate records about the Massacre, people often replied, “No, we haven’t got anything like this here,” or “I’ll have to check with my supervisor.” If they could, they’d brush me off. By the 1990s, however, during the era of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, we would run into people who clearly weren’t super happy about having to go and look for long buried records. But they would do it. During these last few years, however, I’ve worked with white supervisors—professional employees of the City of Tulsa—who have bent over backwards to help us in any way possible. There’s no question that there has been a change in consciousness.

But, in terms of what’s going to happen moving forward, it just depends. The fact of the matter is that, as to our ongoing search for the graves, much of that credit—not all of it, but a significant portion of it—goes to the current mayor of Tulsa, Republican G.T. Bynum. I interpret his interest in this as being reflective of his deep Catholic faith. I know that he was greatly disturbed upon learning that Black Massacre victims were buried without funerals, without any sort of religious service, in unmarked graves, and that even their families weren’t told where they were buried. When Bynum was a city commissioner, he tried to get the current mayor to reopen our investigation, but that effort was shot down. Now as mayor, he has brought back the search. And we’ve received solid support from the city for our current efforts. But there are also areas where there has been fairly little progress, notably with gaining wide support within the white community for financial restitution for survivors or, more importantly, or more accurately, for their descendants. So, it’s a mixed bag.

Joan: Thank you for giving us more insight into the local attitudes and their evolution. It’s interesting to hear that, although consciousness was raised, the newfound knowledge wound up producing different results for different people.

Professor Ellsworth: There’s a difference between having your consciousness raised and being willing to pay money to people.

Abby: Moving to the idea of reparations and legal “solutions,” what do you, as a historian, see as the role that lawyers can play in bringing about justice for the Greenwood community?

Professor Ellsworth: You know, that’s a great question. There was a lawsuit filed by Professor Charles Ogletree of the Harvard Law School in 2003, seeking to win financial restitution for the then one hundred and fifty known survivors. That case was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but it was not taken up. There’s a current legal effort now on behalf of the three survivors and their families and other groups, seeking restitution from the city, state, and several entities. I’m not a lawyer, so I don’t know what its chances are.

It should also be pointed out that there are stark differences today between the life experiences of African Americans in Tulsa and many of their fellow white residents. African American men in Greenwood are said to have a lifespan that is ten years shorter than that of their white counterparts. There are other substantial disparities, along racial lines, in employment, education, poverty, and other social indicators. This past spring and summer, *National Geographic* did a study to try to determine how much generational wealth would be in Greenwood today, had the Massacre not occurred. The study concluded that it would be \$630 million, which is a huge amount for such a small community. That represents generations of down payments on houses, seed money for new businesses, college tuition, elder care, and childcare. All of that.

I don’t know whether this stark reality of how the shadow of the Massacre still hovers over the city adds up to some opportunities for lawyers or not. I would hope so, but I don’t know. But there’s also a larger issue here. Historically in the United States, we’ve only had two eras—not counting this one, the results of which are yet to be determined—where, as a nation, we’ve made significant, paradigm-shifting progress in terms of race relations and racial equity. Those were during the Civil War and during the Civil Rights Movement. In both of those eras, you had an interracial movement pushing for change. These were Black people and white people working together to effect change.

Slavery was defeated by the slaves, who had fought against it. It was defeated by white Union soldiers from across the North who died by the hundreds of thousands. It was defeated by Abraham Lincoln, who turned the war into a war against slavery. Slavery was defeated by an abolitionist movement that was both Black and white. In a similar sense, the Civil Rights Movement defeated legalized segregation by ultimately having people of different races working for a common cause.

That’s how it works in the United States. That’s how you have massive change. If reparations are to be successful in Tulsa or anywhere else, an interracial coalition must be built. I believe that paying financial restitution to

the survivors—and, more realistically, to the descendants of survivors—is something that could be done. We have a decent idea as to who was living in Greenwood in 1921, and, while there's never going to be enough money to pay for what happened, it's likely that we can identify descendants of the Massacre with a relative degree of accuracy. The Massacre is not all that distant of an event. Something needs to be done.

Abby: Thank you so much. As a last question, are there any recent updates that you can share about the grave excavation? We know that the timeline was pushed back due to COVID-19, and it has been a difficult process. So, we are curious if there have been any recent updates that didn't make it into *The Ground Breaking*.

Professor Ellsworth: The search for the mass graves is certainly ongoing. I'm hopeful that we'll be able to go ahead and do a new excavation this summer. There are also a couple of sites that I think we might be able to do some early testing at in terms of using augers and other equipment to see if the sites hold promise.

I should add that these graves were not only unmarked, but knowledge of that and of where they were, was suppressed for decades. It has taken us a long time, and the contributions of scores of individuals in Tulsa white and Black alike—to help us identify these sites. We've been at it now, off and on, for more than twenty years. This is going to go on for a while, but I'm confident that these graves exist, and I'm also hopeful that we will be able to locate and recover the remains of these people who were thrown away. They are all murder victims. We need to rebury them with honor, and we need to memorialize them with honor. This is important for Tulsa as a city. But it is also important for us as a nation.

Abby: Thank you, Professor Ellsworth, for participating in *Connecticut Law Review's* Symposium and for continuing the conversation in this interview.