

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

INFORMATION

How did learning about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 make you feel?

Does knowing about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre change/inform how you experience *Greenwood*?

PERSPECTIVE

How does *Greenwood* and the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre connect to events today?

What does *Greenwood* say about the importance of weighing multiple perspectives?

ACTION

What does the relative silence around the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre say about us and the systems and institutions that surround us?

What can you do to bring light to this (and other) untold parts of American history?

Please share your thoughts about *Greenwood* on Ailey's social media channels and/or tag [#alvinailey](#). in your own social media posts about *Greenwood*. Visit [AlvinAiley.org/blog](#) for more information.

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

HEALING HISTORY

BLACK WALL STREET & THE 1921 TULSA RACE MASSACRE



Smoke billowing over Tulsa, Oklahoma during 1921 massacre. Image Courtesy of Library of Congress.

An audience discussion guide for Donald Byrd's

GREENWOOD

WHAT HAPPENED IN GREENWOOD IN 1921

by Hannibal B. Johnson

Early in the twentieth century, Tulsa, Oklahoma's African American community, centered around Greenwood Avenue, emerged as a nationally renowned entrepreneurial center, dubbed the "Negro Wall Street of America," later, simply "Black Wall Street."

A talented cadre of African American businesspersons and entrepreneurs plied their trades in rigidly segregated Tulsa, catering to a black community largely shut out of the mainstream economy of this soon-to-be "Oil Capital of the World." The architects of the "Greenwood District" parlayed Tulsa's Jim Crow regime into an economic advantage, devising a closed market system that defied the myth of African American mediocrity.

Post-Civil War land allotments awarded to the "Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes" – the Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole – helped fuel the economic engines of black communities throughout Oklahoma, including the Greenwood District. Land ownership by these black Native Americans, particularly in an agrarian economy, provided access to money for investment and consumption.

Fear and jealousy swelled within the white community as African American economic successes, including home, business, and land ownership, mounted. Land lust set in. White corporate and railroad interests coveted the land on which the Greenwood District sat. The Ku Klux Klan made its presence known. Media fanned the flames of racial discord. In America, systemic racism continued unchecked.

A chance encounter between two teenagers lit the fuse that ignited the Tulsa tinderbox and set Greenwood District alight. The alleged assault on a white girl by an African American boy triggered unprecedented civil unrest. Propelled by sensational reporting in *The Tulsa Tribune*, resentment over black achievement, and a racially hostile climate in general, mob rule held sway.

Authorities arrested the boy, Dick Rowland, and held him in a jail cell atop the courthouse. A burgeoning white mob threatened to lynch him. African American men raced to Rowland's defense, marching to the courthouse on two separate occasions.

Conflict ensued. A gun discharged. Chaos erupted. Soon, thousands of weapon-wielding white men, some deputized by local law enforcement, invaded and decimated the Greenwood District.

Property damage ran into the millions. Hundreds of people died, with still more injured. Some fled Tulsa, never to return.

Dubbed the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, this man-made calamity might more accurately be labeled an assault, a disaster, a massacre, or any number of other ghastly descriptors. The Tulsa tragedy would remain a taboo topic for decades.

Bloodied but unbowed, Tulsa's African Americans rebuilt the community. By the early 1940s, the Greenwood District boasted more than 200 black-owned businesses.

In subsequent decades, integration, urban renewal, and a host of social, political, and economic dynamics spurred a second decline. Still, Greenwood District denizens held fast to hope. Preservation, restoration, and reconciliation became watchwords as healing history took center stage.

Buoyed by its powerful past, the Greenwood District still lives. No longer a black entrepreneurial mecca, its new iteration melds business, education, recreation, culture, and entertainment in the place that birthed the Black Wall Street of America. Copyright © 2019 Hannibal B. Johnson

Hannibal B. Johnson, a Harvard Law School graduate, is an author, attorney, and consultant specializing in diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, human relations, leadership, and non-profit leadership and management. He has taught at The University of Tulsa College of Law, Oklahoma State University, and The University of Oklahoma. Johnson serves on the federal 400 Years of African American History Commission, a body charged with planning, developing, and implementing activities appropriate to the 400th anniversary of the arrival, in 1619, of Africans in the English colonies at Point Comfort, Virginia. He chairs the Education Committee for the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission. His books, including *Black Wall Street*, *Up From the Ashes*, *Acre of Aspiration*, *Apartheid in Indian Country*, *Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District*, and *The Sawners of Chandler*, chronicle the African American experience in Oklahoma and its indelible impact on American history. Johnson's play, *Big Mama Speaks—A Tulsa Race Riot Survivor's Story*, was selected for the 2011 National Black Theatre Festival and has been staged in Caux, Switzerland. He has received numerous honors and awards for his work and community service.