



**TELLING AND TAKING BACK TULSA:
RESISTING ERASURE AND AMERICANA APPROPRIATION**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

YES, WE CAN TAKE DUE NOTE OF ALL THE Tulsa Massacre TV specials, interviews, documentaries and other articulations; the city's compelled remembrance, PR repentance and ribbon-cutting; and the presidential promises, proposals and visit. But nothing said, done or promised can serve as a substitute, surrogate or replacement for our own voice and agency. Indeed, we ourselves must tell and take back Tulsa and righteously resist erasure and the Americana appropriation of this as an "American tragedy" instead of a *Black catastrophe* and an *American crime*. And it is important to note that this American crime consists of the racist state and socially sanctioned and executed massacre of 300 plus Black persons and the wounding of hundreds, if not thousands of others; and the wanton destruction of places of living, learning and healing, of work and worship, of play, shopping and sharing of dreams and drawing close together. They raised the fake and tired claim of injury to the White woman's honor to justify their looting, pillage and plunder, their burning, bombing and brutal killings. But we know the racist reasons for it.

This current focus of the country on this horrendous act of racist terrorism, massacre and mayhem and destruction imposed and inflicted on the Black people of Tulsa, May 31-June 1, does not come as an expression of required contrition after a century of concealment and denial. Rather, it comes as a result of the long difficult, dangerous, deadly and demanding struggle by Black people for freedom, justice and equity in this country. And recognizing this is essential, even indispensable, for any moral, meaningful and accurate understanding of this Massacre and moment. So, with this understanding, let us pay rightful homage to the victims and the survivors, and the descendants of the victims and the descendants of the survivors in primary and appropriate ways. And let us recognize that this represents a victory and vindication for them, a victory against a century of concealment and denial. Respect and praise also goes to the survivors who

would not hide what happened to them and others, for telling the truth, speaking truth to our people and the world, and to power.

And whenever there is a meeting or project or proposal, it is necessary that we consult them and those related to victims and survivors to maintain the integrity of the process and project. For there is no morality, justice or rightful reasoning that excludes them and their interests in that which affects them most. In a word, indeed in the words of survivor Nana Viola Fletcher, we must continue to "smell the smoke and see the fire." Respect and praise also must be given to those Black people such as Dr. Tiffany Crutcher, Atty. Damario Solomon-Simmons and others who would not succumb to the coerced and cultivated historical amnesia imposed by the established order to conceal and deny its diabolic deeds. Rather, they dared to struggle for and achieve the justice denied and deserved.

To tell Tulsa is to tell our own story, our own narrative and history. It is to speak truth to our people, other people and to power. It means reaffirming the history of struggle that brought us to this moment of remembrance and reflection and America's recent reckoning with its historical and current systemic racism and the massive violence, death and destruction it imposes on us and other peoples of color. This means also seeing and engaging this memory and moment as unique, but not isolated or unusual. Rather, it should be seen as the criminal and corrosive pattern and practice of racist terrorism which runs as a bright red line through American history.

Thus, to take back Tulsa is to take back our narrative and the rightful interpretation of it, to speak the truth of our own suffering, injury, massacre, denied justice, and determined resistance to erasure. It is also to regain lost ground, economic and political ground and the stolen land, to propose and pursue projects to retrieve in a meaningful and substantial way part of the generational wealth looted, appropriated and destroyed and political potential smothered by the racist ram-

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page, pillage and plunder. It means seeking concrete gains as opposed to bad-faith promises, public acts of deceptive contrition and seductive schemes of personal enrichment and appeasement.

Likewise, to resist erasure of the memories and ultimate meaning of the massacre of our people, we must not only speak the truth of our own lives and history, but we must also resist the incomplete, inaccurate and dishonest telling and interpretation of it by others. We must not allow the narrative of this particular great catastrophe imposed on us, or any of the many others, to be interpreted in any way that denies the truth and savage severity of it, the unjustifiability of it and its continuing consequences. Certainly, there will also be those who try to do these things, to develop a counter narrative and reduce it to a media money-maker and another example of Black suffering digitized and developed for White entertainment. And also, if unopposed, it can be perversely and profitably be reduced to a tourist attraction.

Finally, it is important, in the resistance to erasure, to resist an Americana appropriation. By this I mean the White appropriation of our suffering, survival and achievement against odds as a general shared American experience. The novel "Roots" chronicling the story of Kunta Kinte's life in the Holocaust of enslavement was billed as "The Saga of an American Family." Surely, by no stretch of a sane imagination can enslavement be conceived as an American saga. Not only were enslaved Africans denied citizenship, but they were also denied even their humanity. And it is a mockery of the moral and rational to name the hellish suffering, massive physical, psychological and sexual violence and general savage suppression of the Holocaust of enslavement as an American saga, an epic of an American hero, i.e., a White man. It is the epic narrative of a Black man, an African, an enslaved African in righteous and

relentless resistance to enslavement and to his erasure as an African and human being.

Even as the African Holocaust is not an American tragedy and the Jewish Holocaust is not a German tragedy, neither is the Tulsa Massacre an American tragedy. On the contrary and again, it is a Black catastrophe and an American crime. Thus, we cannot merge the situation or suffering of the victims with the criminal victimizers. These people denied our American citizenship and claimed the wealth, power and status of American as their own. In their racist resentment of our excellence and achievement, they murdered, massacred, pillaged and plundered in the name of White America. They cannot now attach a shared American status to our Massacre and thereby conceal the specificity of our death, suffering and loss and the continuing consequences. Even if the phrasing were in good faith for historical inclusion in the face of righteous and relentless Black struggle, it is still wrong, unjust and self-deceptive. For objectively, it is contributive to concealment of truth, denial of justice, and repetition of a pattern of deceptive "solving" of critical social issues by renaming them in ways that foster emotional appeals and appeasement rather than the implementation of the radical change required.

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION HAS MADE some important proposals to begin to repair this great and grievous injury and injustice. But we know from the teachings of our sacred ancestors that whatever is important and ours must be achieved and secured in and through struggle. Nana Malcolm X teaches us that "We are living in a country that is a battleline for all of us" and we must struggle accordingly. Nana A. Philip Randolph teaches us that "justice is not given, it is extracted." And Nana Ella Baker teaches us "that we who want freedom cannot rest" until it is achieved. Therefore, we must continue the struggle, keep the faith and hold the line. ☸

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