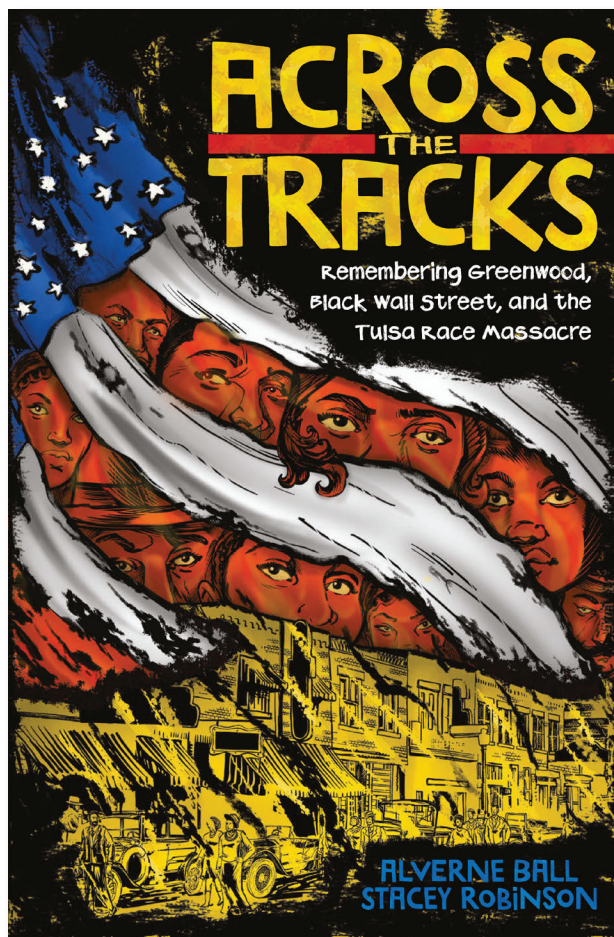


# ACROSS THE TRACKS

Remembering Greenwood, Black Wall Street,  
and the Tulsa Race Massacre

ALVERNE BALL  
STACEY ROBINSON



## BOOK INTRODUCTION

### OVERVIEW

*Across the Tracks: Remembering Greenwood, Black Wall Street, and the Tulsa Race Massacre* by Alverne Ball and illustrated by Stacey Robinson seeks to correct a historical omission of an important historical event. In vivid illustrations and prose, the author and illustrator seek to help readers understand the importance of prominent Black businessman and district co-founder O. W. Gurley's decision to create the community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for African Americans in 1906 who had relocated to the region after the Civil War. While the community, often called "Black Wall Street," thrived and became a model of African American self-

determination, Greenwood residents still had to navigate within a broader racist society. That tension came to a head on May 31, 1921, when a Black man, Dick Rowland, was accused of assaulting a white woman in an elevator. The white racial terror that followed resulted in the murder of more than three hundred African Americans and the destruction of Greenwood. As co-author Alverne Ball writes, "By the end of the massacre, 1,200 homes were destroyed, an additional 320 homes looted, over 4,000 people left homeless."

Ball and Robinson's account of the Black abundance of Greenwood, the Tulsa race massacre, and racial violence provide a powerful reminder of what was lost and the responsibility of readers to remember what happened in Greenwood—history that is only now beginning to be understood and acknowledged. It is important that teachers adopt what Dr. LaGarrett King calls "Black historical consciousness" for teaching this text and to regard this graphic novel as an opportunity to "explore Black identity through complex and nuanced narratives that attempt to get at the full humanity of Black people" (p. 337, "Black History Is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness"). Adopting this framework and some of these principles, which this guide utilizes, intends to correct a largely historical omission while helping students understand the importance of African American self-determination and success, and the perniciousness of white racial violence.

## STANDARDS

Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading Literature: Language Arts and History/Social Studies for high school curriculums, *Across the Tracks* is an appropriate selection for grades 9–12 in language arts and history classes. With scaffolding, the text could be used with younger grades as well. The following prompts provide for a critical analysis of *Across the Tracks* using the CCSS for English Language Arts: History/Social Studies. In addition, classroom activities are provided that will enhance analysis of the text.



## PRE-READING IDEAS

It's important for students to understand how to read graphic novels first. Then, it's important for them to have historical grounding in a few main ideas that will equip them to read the text.

## GRAPHIC NOVELS

Benefits of reading graphic novels abound: from accessibility for a range of readers to being able to introduce critical conversations through an inviting medium. Teachers need to spend time making sure students are familiar with how to read graphic novels. Brian Kelley, author of “Sequential Art Narrative in Education” reminds: “Though some students will instantly understand how to read graphic novels, other students may experience difficulties. Modeling how to read a graphic novel is very helpful for students who struggle with these texts” (p. 9, “Sequential Art Narrative in Education”). As an introduction to *Across the Tracks*, teachers can select a single panel from the novel and spend time asking questions such as the following to develop their capacities to analyze the longer text: “What is the story in this panel? How do we know? Is there more to this story than we’re aware of? How do we know?” (Kelley, p. 10, “Sequential Art Narrative in Education”). Teachers will also want to help students understand how images and text work together, drawing their attention to a selection of the text and posing questions around how the images support or deepen the author’s words, and the impact on the overall text. Teachers can also help develop students’ critical literacy, pausing throughout for students to think about the ways that race, racism, and other themes are depicted throughout the text and their impressions and ideas for social action about those portrayals.



## HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

The Zinn Education Project reminds educators: “The term ‘race riot’ does not adequately describe the events of May 31–June 1, 1921, in Tulsa. Though some sources label the episode a ‘race riot’ or a ‘race war,’ implying that both Blacks and whites might be equally to blame for lawlessness and violence, the historical record documents that what occurred was a sustained and murderous assault on Black lives and property.” Spend time helping students understand how Greenwood originated. Draw on the abundant resources available that mark the hundred-year commemoration of the Tulsa race massacre, especially testimonials from survivors like Viola Davis; artifacts collected by the Smithsonian: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/reflections-artifacts-left-behind-tulsa-race-massacre-180977779/>; and other primary sources including maps: <https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2021/05/tulsas-greenwood-district-exploring-the-impact-of-the-tulsa-race-massacre/?locir=ealn>.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### POWER, OPPRESSION, AND RACISM

What is the history of Tulsa that led to Gurley’s creation of Greenwood? What barriers prevented Gurley and other African Americans from establishing communities elsewhere in the United States and in Oklahoma, particularly? What racist structures and systems were present as Greenwood came into being and began to thrive, especially as related to African Americans’ ability to build wealth?

What specific elements of anti-Blackness were apparent when it came to where Greenwood was located, especially as compared to other parts of Tulsa? Where could African Americans move freely and where could they not? What did those limitations help to understand about systems of racism in Tulsa at the time?



What does the text help the reader to understand about race relations during this time and white opposition to Black prosperity? What was the specific threat white Tulsans perceived? What was the climate of the country, especially as related to the treatment of African Americans? How does what happened in Tulsa and other events, including Red Summer 1919, help to contextualize white supremacy and racial violence during this time?

Why has it taken one hundred years to tell the story of Greenwood? What has changed in America in the last century to bring about larger discussions of lesser-known accounts of racist violence in our history? How have racism and white supremacy prevented an accurate accounting of events and also an inability to prosecute anyone for the massacre?

## BLACK AGENCY, RESISTANCE, AND PERSEVERANCE

Locate all the ways O. W. Gurley worked to create a prosperous Greenwood, including the specific institutions and buildings. What was the significance of Greenwood being called “Black Wall Street”? Examine the illustrations for examples of self-determination and independence and discuss their importance. Also, look for ways the African American community worked together to achieve its goals. What do these examples help you to understand about African American agency, resistance, and perseverance, especially in the face of white supremacy?

Describe the importance of Greenwood residents “patroniz[ing] local businesses which allowed their money to circulate within the community at least twenty-three times before it left due to segregation and Jim Crow laws in Tulsa” (pp. 16–17). Explain the significance of keeping revenue in Greenwood and its connection to African American prosperity.

## BLACK JOY

What do the specific businesses and institutions of Greenwood help readers to understand about the importance of African American cultural traditions that defied racism and racist structures? Why does the first half of the book spend time establishing all the ways that African Americans built robust businesses and cultural institutions?

Identify all the places in the text where African Americans demonstrate joy. What are African Americans doing? What do their expressions of joy help us to understand about their experiences in Greenwood prior to the massacre?

## BLACK AND TRIBAL EXPERIENCES

Read the essay “In Search of Our Fathers’ Gardens” by Dr. Reynaldo Anderson and Dr. Collette Yellow Robe in the book’s appendix and analyze the opening illustration of the Indigenous tribal nations that first settled in Tulsa (p. 1). How does the treatment of Indigenous nations parallel that of the treatment of African Americans? What are the similarities and differences in their struggles for justice, and what is the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of these struggles?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

The book ends with Greenwood residents “forgiv[ing] their attackers by reminding themselves of the old Negro tradition . . .” Is forgiveness enough? What are the residents of Greenwood owed? Using the article “Tulsa and the Fight for Reparations” from *Rethinking Schools* (see Resources) and drawing on interviews with Tulsa survivors (including recent testimonies from Viola Fletcher, Lessie Benningfield Randle, and Hughes Van Ellis), engage students in a discussion about reparations as a way to address what happened to African Americans. Further, engage students in discussions about justice, especially around the fact that, as reported in the *New York Times*, “to this day, not one person has been prosecuted or punished for the devastation and ruin of the original Greenwood” (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html?searchResultPosition=3>).

# ABRAMSCOMICARTS MEGASCOPE • GRAPHIC NOVEL TEACHING GUIDE

Artist Crystal Z Campbell's exhibition *Flight* "incorporates archival material with digital video, digitized 35-mm film footage, three-channel sound, and vinyl." Visit the exhibition online and read Campbell's artist statement. How can Campbell challenge us to think about the importance of art and artists for documenting and remembering history? Exhibit: <https://oklahomaccontemporary.org/exhibitions/current/crystal-z-campbell-flight>.

What is the Greenwood District like now? What are local residents and broader communities doing to educate people about what happened and link to the present? Visit <https://www.tulsa2021.org/> to find out more and encourage reflection on current events to support responses.

Using *Across the Tracks* as the start of a discussion, conduct research on some of the following topics as way of deepening students' understanding of issues that have directly impacted African Americans and the ways that white supremacy have sought to curtail positive outcomes. Topics can include redlining and the racial wealth gap.

Compare the Tulsa race massacre and the destruction of Greenwood to other African American self-governed communities that were also destroyed by white supremacists, such as the East St. Louis Riots of 1917, riots during the Red Summer of 1919, and the 1923 Rosewood massacre. Encourage students to illustrate what they have learned through creating a graphic novel representation similar to ones in *Across the Tracks*.

## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Christensen, Linda. 2000. "Burned Out of Homes and History: Unearthing the Silenced Voices of the Tulsa Massacre." Zinn Education Project. <https://www.zinnproject.org/materials/burned-out-of-homes-and-history-the-tulsa-massacre/>.

Kelley, Brian. 2010. "Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, and Comics." *SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*, vol. 1: Iss. 1, article 10. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol1/iss1/10>.

King, LaGarrett J. 2020. "Black History Is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness." *Social Education*, 84(6), 335–341.

"Racial Massacres and the Red Summer of 1919: A Resource Guide." 2021. Library of Congress. <https://guides.loc.gov/racial-massacres-1919?loclr=ealn>.

"Special Note on Teaching the Tulsa Race Massacre." DBQ Project. <https://www.dbqproject.com/dbq-project-library/special-note-on-teaching-the-tulsa-race-massacre/>.

"Tulsa and the Fight for Reparations." Rethinking Schools. <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/tulsa-and-the-fight-for-reparations/>.



## ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

Dr. Kimberly N. Parker is the director of the Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard University. She taught English in a variety of school settings for nearly two decades, is active in the National Council of Teachers of English, and is a cofounder of #DisruptTexts. Dr. Parker holds a PhD in curriculum and instruction from the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign.

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