

Interview of Dr. Charles Hughes, Assistant Professor of African American History at Oklahoma State University conducted by Kennedy Anderson. Interview was conducted on Skype Friday, February 20, 2015

Kennedi  
Hello!

Dr. Hughes  
Hello! How are you?

Kennedi  
Thank you for taking my video call.

Dr. Hughes  
No problem.

Kennedi  
So at the time of the riot, can you tell me, what was the state of the mind of the country regarding race?

Dr. Hughes  
At the time of the riot, the country was going through a really tense moment as it relates to race. And specially the question to African American life. You know there had obvious been a long history of tension and problems this is era of segregation, era of lynching and violence. Also an era of a lot of assertions and resistance from African American so there was a lot going on. But specifically at this moment one thing that really influenced the Tulsa race riot is that there had been a wave of violence against African Americans in the years after WWI. Many people felt that African Americans who had fought in WWI and came back to the United States were perhaps getting to aggressive or were getting the opinion that maybe they should have full freedom and equality. You know they fought for the country and maybe they ought to have the right to vote or have the right to go to school where they wanted to etc. And many of the most really significant or nasty acts of violence were committed against black veterans who were wearing their uniforms. And there was this really widely spread wave of organized violence against African Americans in cities both in the south and the north. There was one in East St. Louis Illinois. There was one in Elaine Arkansas. These really horrible moments. And at the same that this is happening and in response to that African Americans are really, really pushing the United States government and pushing various different institutions to take black freedom seriously, saying look what's happening to us what we are facing. We are trying to survive and be treated as equal and free citizens and we are being greeted by tremendous pushback and hostility. So it was a really tense moment and it was specifically a moment in which African Americans were under attack under organized violent attack in many parts of the country.

Kennedi:  
Can you tell me about some of the things that people like O W Gurley and J B Stradford did in the community or the help the community grow?

Dr. Hughes  
Remind me of who Gurley, remind who they were?

Kennedi:  
JB Stradford had a hotel, he built a hotel that was worth \$75,000 back then. O W Gurley, he bought land and he sold it to blacks only.

Dr. Hughes:

Right, thank you. People like Gurley and Stradford were tremendously important, not only in Tulsa and Oklahoma but as a part of a wave of black accomplishment. There was a real feeling at this time that one of the ways that African Americans could in fact kind of get over these racial injustices and find a way beyond this period of challenge and hardship was through being as successful as they could. And there was this real push in the African American community saying you know we need to own land. We need to have wealth. We need to have our institutions. We need to be essentially as independent from any white folks as we can be. And it wasn't because they necessarily didn't want to have anything to do with white people. It's just there was a real wide spread sense that by having black controlled institutions and black wealth. By owning land was a huge one. But everything from hotels to doctors to funeral homes, all of black colleges etc. There was really a sense that by doing that African Americans would be able to avoid being treated unfairly and in being in some cases killed for what they were doing. And specifically in Tulsa there was a tremendously successful black community. It was known as Black Wall Street in the Greenwood neighborhood. People like the folks you mentioned and others were nationally known among African Americans. And known throughout the state of Oklahoma, black white or whoever as being tremendously successful people. And really the model of how to create an independent, self-sufficient black community that could avoid having to deal with white institutions. So they were tremendously important both in the community and as part of national movement.

Kennedi:

Do you think they modeled Tulsa after somewhere else?

Dr. Hughes:

You know, I'm not sure. I think that they modeled Tulsa. I mean in some respects there were very, very powerful and wealthy black communities throughout the United States by this point. There was a big one in Atlanta, right, Atlanta which remains tremendously important for African Americans. Atlanta was one. Memphis Tennessee had a very prominent and powerful black community. Up north as the migration starts up north, you know places like Chicago and Harlem; and you know other places like that. There were also a lot of small communities, right, like Oklahoma had a ton of all black towns, right, and had all these example of literally no white folks or white institutions involved. But in some ways I think what they were doing was modeling Tulsa after sort of an idea. They're modeling this success after the way that they believed that by community organizing. And by having a very, very independent strong black community with a wide variety of people and a wide variety of institutions; political, education, social, economic institutions. That that would help to get past the problem of the fact that white supremacist United States continued to legally and socially repress African Americans. So in some ways I think they modeled Tulsa after other places but in some ways I think they modeled it as maybe this can be a model right, this can be an idea made real and it worked, they had such tremendous wealth and success here.

Kennedi:

Do you think anywhere else is modeled after Tulsa?

Dr. Hughes:

Wow great question! I don't know for sure, but I would not be surprised. Especially because after the riot so many people leave. And I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of them go other places and say hey we really were doing well down in Greenwood and we would love, so, I don't know for sure. But boy, I wouldn't be surprised by that at all, because Tulsa was well known among the national African American community as a symbol of black success so I bet that it was influential.