

Davis-Undiano: Welcome to Understanding Oklahoma. A series of conversations looking at the richness, but also the complexity of the cultures in the histories that contribute to Oklahoma's distinctive identity. I'm so pleased today to welcome Dr. Kalenda Eaton, who is an Associate Professor in the Clara Luper Department of African and African-American Studies at the University of Oklahoma. She's a scholar of black literary and cultural studies, studies of the American West, and black cultural history. Doctor Eaton is especially noted for her teaching and public scholarship on representations of African Americans in the Great Plains region. Recent publications include *New Directions in Black Western Studies*, *Teaching the Black West and Black Women*, *Reclaiming Western literature after it*. Dr. Eaton, thank you so much for being with us today.

Eaton: Thank you for having me.

Davis-Undiano: I just want to jump right in and ask you about the Exoduster movement in Oklahoma because I get the impression that it sets the stage for a lot of things that happen afterwards. What is it?

Eaton: Well, yeah, so we have this movement of African-Americans who are looking for a refuge. They really are trying to move to a space where there is social mobility, social equality, political equality after being in within a region in the South where there's so much political disenfranchisement, And terrorism.

Davis-Undiano: About what year, are we talking about?

Eaton: We're talking about specifically in the late 1800s. So post-civil war throughout what we would probably think of as the reconstruction period. And so, but they're not only just coming to Oklahoma, they're coming to all different parts of the plains. And so there's this movement, It's an exodus, right, a biblical Exodus. And there is a lot of recruitment. A lot of talk about what it would mean to be at a place where one could be autonomous, one could be responsible for their own destiny. And so there is kind of this very kind of biblical but also mythical way of thinking about this notion.

Davis-Undiano: So are you saying that we're talking about folks who were escaping? Their just really brutal harshness of Jim Crow laws and just impossible situations in the deep south?

Eaton: Well, not everyone was escaping in the way that you describe. So we have those who of course are newly freed slaves, right? Who are coming out of that, that legacy of slavery, anti-black racism, absolutely. And domestic terrorism act, absolutely. But you also have those who are coming from some places in the Midwest, other places in the North where their experiences might have been a little bit different. They may have already been educated and had the opportunity then to attempt to gain some sense of what they saw as power. And at that time that was land.

Davis-Undiano: So Oklahoma's one of probably quite a few destinations of this movement. Was it a prime?

Eaton: Yes. Oklahoma was definitely a prime destination. Yeah.

Davis-Undiano: So what happen with the folks that arrived here in this movement? Did it weren't Black towns actually that they - could you talk about that?

Eaton: Sure. So Oklahoma was a prime destination because of the close to 9 thousand Black people who already here, right, who were, who had already been here for close to 30, some odd years as a result of the slave holding tribes, as a result of Native American removal right in slaves who were brought over as, as a part of that, right? So they already kind of saw Oklahoma as a place where there could be possibilities for prosperity. So you had black towns that existed. You had black communities that existed with Friedmann that were already thriving in this space. And then you have the, those who were coming as a result of the, you know, obviously like the Federal Land runs in Broken Treaties and a lot of other problematic aspects of American history, right? And so you have those lands also being opened up, quote unquote, for these other people.

Davis-Undiano: Could you give me an idea of the scope of these Black towns? I mean, I can think of just a couple right now. I mean, are we talking about dozens or 0?

Eaton: Oh, there were well over 50. And they're well over 50 that existed at that time. And I mean, now we have 13 that's still do remain. But they're, Oklahoma had the most Black towns and Black communities in any state of any, sorry, any territory within the United States, what we think of as the United States.

Davis-Undiano: So you're telling a story about this exoduster movement and then the establishment of these black towns. Did that lead in some cause and effect way to the consideration of Oklahoma as a possible Black state?

Eaton: So yeah, that's a very interesting question because there was a lot of talk about colonies already, right? And especially when it came to attempting to deal with what was called the "negro problem." Whose though you had a lot of whites who were trying to figure out what to do with these millions of newly freed slaves and those other free African-Americans who were already here. And so this idea was that, okay, well maybe we should ship them off somewhere, right. And so then there was a countermovement, right? Primarily among those within the African-American community were saying, We are from here where we were born, here. We're shipping us anywhere. We're going to go anywhere. It's going to be kind of on our own accord. And so you had these conversations about what would it mean then to be in a space where there could be this kind of freedom, social, political otherwise. And so there actually was a conversation for a period of time about the twin territory's Indian territory, Oklahoma territory being some sort of kind of like a red black state, right? And then that conversation kind of, you know, ebbed and flowed a bit. And then there was also this idea that, well maybe this could be

because there were so many, again, Black people already here. It was state yet because we're still talking about Reconstruction and all throughout the early part of the 20th century. We still have territories, right? And so it's kind of like this last great hope will maybe this could be a space where we could quote unquote finally be free. And so you have someone like EP McCabe who took, who was one of the primary recruiters and was selling lands to African Americans. You have him go all the way to the president and attempt to get this idea of a black state going on, but it doesn't, it doesn't take off.

Davis-Undiano: But it was a real possibility for awhile?

Eaton: It was a possibility for a while among certain communities, right? Certain sets. I can't say that it was something that everybody who was living within the territory, it's agreed. But it was something that people were kind of kicking around. But then after statehood and Senate Bill number 1, that idea just kind of went straight out the door.

Davis-Undiano: One of the things I think we're trying to achieve in this, in this series of segments like this, is to get beneath the platitudes that really just sort of mainstream culture about what's happened and get to the felt quality of experience, what happened to people? Could you talk a little bit about the racial climate in territorial Oklahoma and leading up to statehood?

Eaton: It was very fraught. So you have, of course, as I mentioned before, you have over 8 thousand enslaved African people of African descent, I should say, who were already here, right? You have slave revolts, right? We have the infamous slave revolt of 1842. And then the kind of crack down among slave holding tribes on African-Americans, what we now think of as African-Americans. You also have this movement in of whites in terms of the settler colonial type of movement in terms of that way. And a lot of these people are coming from the Jim Crow South bringing a lot of those ideas too. And then you have the freedmen who were already here. And then you have the, those Blacks who were coming from other parts of the United States into the territories and there's animosity there too. So you have a lot of different opportunities for there to be tension. And that definitely does exist. You also have a lot of, you know, of course, coalitions that built. But it is a very, very fraught racial climate in the pre-statehood period.

Davis-Undiano: I'm getting you to a lot of epic violence. I mean, could you talk about some of the really important historical moments of violence that maybe aren't generally known but are huge and their impact.

Eaton: Well, I will say again, 1842 slave revolt was probably one that was important because it really set the stage for what it meant to be free in Indian territory. And what it meant to kind of not be free with an Indian territory. And by that I mean, you have then a lot of crack down. Have a lot of, a lot of the neighboring tribes say, okay, we're not going to allow, right, these runaways to just kind of leave our plantations or leave our, leave our homesteads or what have you and escape. And so you have a lot of policing that takes place and people are killed as a result, people are, there's violence that's emitted upon the black slave community as a result, you also have

moving forward just to kind of give you some, some examples. Another example that I think it's very well known, maybe within the state, but maybe not so much outside of the state is the lynching of Laura and LD Nelson in Okemah. And so you have another instance where you have this lesson, right? That's kind of being taught to the local community. And this is in 1911 and this is during the time when you have a lot of this allowed these Boack towns that are thriving law, the prosperity that I was talking about before, that people were seeking out. And in you have this kind of warning, right? To those around that, you know, mobs of white men can come and take a mother and her teenage son out of the jail and hang them from a bridge, right. And then they had to toddler there was a toddler that was kind of left on the on the bank, right on. And it's not only just the actual violent act itself of the lynching, but it was the pictures that were taken, the postcards that were made, right? The gatherings of children and women and others who came to watch this happen. And so we have that record. And that tells a larger story about kind of this grotesque nature of the violence, especially anti-Black violence in the United States. And of course, you know, the Tulsa race massacre would be--

Davis-Undiano: I want to ask you about that specifically in a second. You reference the Jim Crow South. So but weren't the same kinds of Jim Crow laws in Oklahoma? I mean, it was the Jim Crow Oklahoma as well. Yes. But the sundown towns that was at more but just to kind of understanding, or is that actually legally established?

Eaton: Legally established in the fact that segregation was, was established in housing, in public spaces. Legally established in the fact that it was kind of the law of the land, right? But we also need to think about the sundown towns as being a direct response to land ownership, property ownership, and then also the attempts to move people off of lands, right? Whether these be lands that are oil producing, whether these be lands that specifically with white settlers, unless they felt that Blacks should not have any part of, even if these were lands that were allotted as a result of tribal affiliation, right? And so you had a lot of this idea that, that this particular space cannot be yours, right? And so therefore you need to move out of it. And so you have people who were, who were living in what we now know of as Norman, who were run out of Norman, right? And then Norman then becomes a sundown town after that. And so these are very restrictive laws that again be kind of become the law of the land, so to speak. And so whether or not we, we consider that to be legal to understand, right? Right. When they're enforced, you know, they kind of are.

Davis-Undiano: One thing that was shocking to me and I just will say I didn't know this history very well. In the Henry Louis Gates' Reconstruction documentary one of the major points that was so incredible and shocking to me was that these horrific events of violence against Black people were cyclical. So there was a kind of achievement in the Black community after the Civil War and then violence and then other achievements. And the Tulsa Race Massacre, which I still wanted to talk about at more length, comes as at the end of a long pattern of very similar events, make sure that the community doesn't achieve, pass a certain point and then pull them back. And if they get that point again, pull them that, that's, that's not of really depressing pattern to look at.

Eaton: It is a depressing pattern. And one thing I've always said, and I say this to my students as well as that we have to understand that every time that there is this kind of significant period of black success, it's met with white violence, right? And so if we understand the American history in that way, then I think we have a much broader and wider picture in terms of what it means then to not be able to achieve what it means for communities of people not to be able to move forward generation after generation when they always are being kind of set back.

Davis-Undiano: That seems to be just a endemic problem that a country that doesn't know its history, It's really does repeat the past. Skip Gates' Reconstruction documentary was really powerful in that. There's a really wonderful John Oliver show called US history. That sounds kind of, you know, always just talking about US history. He talks about what's not taught. It's just a really powerful 20 minutes. It seems like we could move forward and begin to solve some of these things if we would learn our own history a little bit. I mean, that must occur to you now.

Eaton: Yes. And how we learned in the history, I guess you said right, is very important, right? I mean, thinking about like Zinn's *People's History of the United States*, right? That begins with Indigenous people does not begin with, you know, not Plymouth Rock, right? And so we actually learn the history through the actual voices and experiences of those who, who have experience it from the quote unquote ground up, so to speak. Then we have a very different understanding.

Davis-Undiano: And there seemed to be some greeting card versions of what American character is that just aren't going to survive if we ever confront our real history from the Black community and from the Native Indigenous community. Tulsa Race Massacre. That's an event that is now getting the kind of attention that I hope can make a difference. Could you talk a little bit about what it was? Then maybe what happened in the aftermath where we sort of papered it over over and maybe bring yourself to what's happening now.

Eaton: So it began with another attempted lynching. Right. So I don't know how far you want me to go back. But as far as the events are concerned, there was an accusation of an attack in an elevator to teenagers, a Black teenager who was who was male and then a white teenager. And so she and woman she was she screamed in the elevator. And so the manager of the store in which they were in automatically sees this as an attack, as an assault. The young man Dick Rowland runs out of the store. And then there becomes this kind of like the game of telephone, right? You know what the story changes each time it's told. And so then by the end of the day, you know, he has allegedly assaulted her, sexually assaulted her in the elevator. And so the events kind of play out in a way in which you have a mob, another white mob, right? Go to the jail after he's arrested, attempt to take him out and lynch him. They are met with returning soldiers, right? Veterans of World War One. Other businessmen and those who are armed from the black community are saying, no, this is not going to happen. That there would not be a lynching right, tonight or at any other night. And they were trying to protect Dick Rowland and there was a scuffle over a firearm. The firearm is discharged and then that's when they kind of say, you know, the events began. And so you have over the course of a couple of days, the destruction of the entire Greenwood community, Black Wall Street as it was known this thriving business district.

Davis-Undiano: So basically hordes, armed white people going into this prosperous Black neighborhood and trying to just obliterate?

Eaton: Obliterating it, yes. Yeah. And so 35 blocks or so burned down to the ground. From the air from the ground, people going block-by-block, but not only destroying the houses in terms of setting them on fire, but also shooting people in the street in cold blood and then also looting, right? So they're not just going and say, you know, destroying the property, they're also taking property from the homes.

Davis-Undiano: So this is from my understanding, this has got to be one of those deals where, you know, people talk about causation, somebody as skiing and they yell and there's an avalanche while the yelling didn't cause the avalanche, all the conditions did. So there was a situation ripe where there's a white community didn't want to tolerate the success of the Black community any further. There's a flashpoint, it's an opportunity to do what they've been thinking all along and they tried to take out Greenwood?

Eaton: Yes. That's basically the assessment.

Davis-Undiano: Do we even know how many people were killed in the Black community?

Eaton: There are estimates, but there's not an exact number. A lot of the archaeological research that's being done now in terms of uncovering the mass graves that will hopefully move us closer.

Davis-Undiano: Which is a 100 years later and we're still trying to figure out happened. So really over 300. We know that for sure at this point,

Eaton: That's what people say.

Davis-Undiano: So this happens at community is just wiped out, is devastated. Why isn't this the crime is essentially what happens at right after that?

Eaton: Well, right after that there are a lot of lawsuits. There are a lot of attempts to lawsuits from members of the African American community and they're attempting to get some sort of a payment from their insurance claims and they're denied left and right. And so you have then the legal fight that's happening. But at the same time you have this example of resiliency. And so you have then those who are in the community who vowed to rebuild. So you have what's known as the renaissance. And so you have this rebuilding that takes place in the immediate aftermath of then also throughout the years. And so you have about a 30 or 40 year period of this renewal within the community.

Davis-Undiano: So what's happened in the immediate past to create this new awareness where we really want to know the truth of what happened?

Eaton: Well, I mean, one thing I can say is that people have always been talking about the race massacre, whether it be in Tulsa, whether it be in Oklahoma, whether it be in other parts. But in terms of what has made it popular, right? Well, we have the centennial this year. So we had that 100 year anniversary, so to speak. But even prior to that, there had been a lot of documentaries that have taken, that have taken place over the past few years. You have popular culture kind of grasping onto that with shows like *Lovecraft Country* or *Watchmen*, right? That really drew attention. But even before that, you have Ta-Nehisi Coates in his *Case for Reparations* where he calls out Tulsa specifically, and he introduces this fight, ongoing fight for reparations to the larger American public in ways that at least this particular generation may not have been aware of.

Davis-Undiano: Well, and just to give credit where it's due, Kevin Matthews, Kalenda Eaton, Carlos Hill, you all, from my office, Daniel Simons, you all have done a lot to a lot of hard work to push this out and get discussions going so that the culture as a whole begins to understand what would happen. I want to ask you about the response historically the Black community to violence in the US. I've heard so many times Cornell West or Van Jones or somebody saying, it's a terrible history. We've never responded in kind. It's just not us. Would you talk about the Black response to violence?

Eaton: Never responded in kind is a bit of a general term. There have been examples of African-Americans within communities who have been very serious about protecting their communities.

Davis-Undiano: Malcolm X.

Eaton: Now, in terms of self-defense, even prior, right? I mean, he's a very good example, but even prior to that, and so this the, the, the idea of self-defense as being an option is something that's always been a part of African-American experience. I think that sentiment of never responding in kind has to do with kind of the, the hatred, right? And kind of terroristic violence that many, that, that, that the African American community as a whole, I should say, has always kind of had to live with. And so there's always been this attempts to navigate, right? That hatred with and negotiate with love or hate with, with compassion. But at the same time, understanding that people have to protect themselves when they are faced with this type of violence. And so there's been kind of an uneven, I should say response. I mean, you have those who are members of the African American community who are very, very serious about their Second Amendment rights, right? And then you have others who say that there must be another way. So there's not one way of thinking about that response.

Davis-Undiano: What we've talked about is, as people really take it seriously, is it's going to take a lot of processing. There's a lot of very powerful information here. What two or three takeaways would you like people to kind of chew on and stay with as a result of this conversation?

Eaton: Well, I think understanding that Oklahoma is a very, very unique space. It's a very beautiful space, a very wonderful space. And you have a lot of coalitions. You have a lot of fabulous communities, right? And a lot of people working together in ways that people

outside of the state and the territories even before that, probably don't even really know or really understand. It was always seen as an opportunity for those who were, for African-Americans, I should say, um, who were denied opportunity at every level. And so what that means then for say, Indigenous people who were here, right? And people, First Nations, people in, and Native Americans who are thinking about, you know, of course, white settler colonialism and what that relationship then means or can lead to when it comes to these Black people who have, who are in this space, whether by choice or by force, is also something that is a rich conversation that also needs to kind of play out. And I think it's a, it's a takeaway that I think is very important. But also, I guess the other thing I would say is that there's so much beauty and so much possibility that gets overlooked within these conversations that yeah, I think that's very important.

Davis-Undiano: Thank you so much for the work you're doing. It's very important. Thank you for visiting with us here today. Thank you for being with us. Make sure to catch other segments of understanding. Oklahoma. You Take care.