

## Black men in elevators



DANIEL LEVINSON  
WILK

Finally, the story of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is becoming well known. Two television series on HBO (“Watchmen” in 2019 and “Lovecraft Country” in 2020); heightened consciousness surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement; a lyric by Bob Dylan and a forthcoming book by Dr. Scott Ellsworth, who has studied the massacre for decades; the October 2020 discovery of a mass grave — in just the past two years, the tale is finding an audience that never knew of this tragic, appalling event.

Unfortunately, one piece of the story is still slighted in the telling. The encounter in an elevator that sparked the massacre is vital to understanding the racial discomfort some of us still feel in confined urban spaces.

Elevators make modern cities work. Most transportation technologies move people faster and farther so we can spread out and still remain in touch. Elevators work on the opposite principle. By opening up the third dimension, they allow us to cluster together in larger numbers than ever before. The urban density of the modern world would be impossible without them.

Urban density sometimes leads to racial tension. During the labor shortages of World War I, Black men moved North to find jobs, the phenomena now called the Great Migration. Whites moved North too, and jobs opened for women in the urban North and

South, including work as elevator operators. In the dense, confined spaces of northern and southern cities, people came into closer contact than ever before. Conflict over jobs fed racial tension, but massacres and their precipitating events usually played out in public spaces: a streetcar in East St. Louis, a street corner in Washington D.C., a segregated beach in Chicago.

The most confined spaces a city has to offer are its elevators. On Memorial Day in Tulsa, 1921, something happened in an office elevator between a white elevator girl named Sarah Page and a Black shoeshine boy named Dick Rowland. At the time, the words “girl” and “boy” were used in those job titles to demean them, but Page and Rowland really were a girl and a boy — she was 17, and he was 19. Page knew Rowland because he worked down the block and often used the Colored washroom on the top floor of the Drexel Building.

That Memorial Day, Rowland seems to have tripped walking into the elevator and grabbed Page’s arm trying to right himself. A clerk in a store on the ground floor heard Page scream and saw Rowland running away. Rowland was arrested, rumors spread in the Black community that he would be or had been lynched, and some Black men drove over to the courthouse, armed. A shootout left 12 dead, and in the following days white mobs destroyed the Greenwood neighborhood and killed a number of Black people still unknown — 55? 300? Maybe more.

Since the Tulsa Race Massacre, other tales of racial tension in elevators have occasionally been told. In his 1945 memoir “Black Boy,” Richard Wright describes an elevator operator named Shorty who, though fiercely proud of his race, played minstrel for white passengers and let them kick him in the behind for a quarter. In the 1950 film “No Way Out,” Sidney Poitier plays a doctor who

is harassed by a white patient in a hospital elevator. An urban legend circulated in the 1980s that

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Yankees slugger Reggie Jackson got into an elevator with two Dobermans, said “sit,” and two white ladies sat down.

Colson Whitehead’s fantastical 1999 novel “The Intuitionist” depicts a white supervisor kicking a Black elevator inspector in the behind and promoting him the next day. Evidently, Whitehead was not inspired by Wright. The state of the world is such that two great artists, half a century apart, independently summoned stories about Black elevator workers getting kicked in the ass.

In 2013, musician Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson told a story about riding up in his apartment elevator with a white woman who would not push a button, presumably because she feared him learning her floor. “My friends know that I hate parking lots and elevators,” he wrote, “not because they are places that danger could occur, but it’s a prime place in which someone of my physical size can be seen as a dangerous element.”

Women have legitimate fears of violence by men of all races, but since the Jim Crow era, and especially since the Wilmington massacre of 1898, fear of Black men attacking white women has been marshalled to perpetuate racism. As in Tulsa in 1921, overreaction can lead to far worse damage — murder, massacre, even ecological crisis.

In the late twentieth century, fear of Black men drove white people to the suburbs, into their cars, creating spikes in vehicular deaths, global warming and conflict between Black men and police officers: Michael Brown killed by an officer sitting in his car, Philando Castile and Daunte Wright killed during traffic stops, officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos killed in a patrol car as retribution for Michael Brown, and so many



others.

Then there is the more quotidian harassment of Black men in cars, men like Questlove. The first time, coming back from the record store with a copy of “The Joshua Tree,” a cop pulled a gun on him. Another time he sat in the back of a cruiser as the police rifled through the psychology books and Scrabble games in his trunk. Once, police let him go when he showed them a copy of his memoir “Mo’ Meta Blues,” which includes other stories of him being pulled over by cops. To Questlove, cars have not been kinder than elevators.

In 2021, 100 years after the Tulsa Race Massacre, we need to keep telling these stories to remind ourselves of a few things. Black men in elevators tend not to be dangerous. Fear of Black men in elevators leads to overreactions that are dangerous for all of us. And we can imagine a world where a Black man, tripping as he steps into an elevator, will find a white arm waiting, happy to hold him up.

Daniel Levinson Wilk is a professor of American history at State University of New York—[Fashion Institute of Technology](#).