

## Cruel Summer<sup>1</sup>

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Popular culture is an excellent medium to critique and understand our past as well as our present realities. For example, in 2019, the Home Box Office (HBO) critically acclaimed television series the *Watchmen* (based on an American comic book maxiseries) was reimagined and set to present-day Tulsa, Oklahoma. Significantly, *Watchmen* reenacted the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot in the series' opening scene, thus resulting in a public discourse surrounding anti-Black racial violence in U.S. history (Sidner, 2019). Prior to the 1921 race riot, 15,000 Black Tulsans lived, worked, and played in a segregated, yet economically prosperous area of the city, the Greenwood District. Dubbed *The Black Wallstreet*, the Greenwood District had close to 200 businesses. These included a major hotel and a movie theater (Ogletree, 2009). Despite the economic success of the Greenwood District, the era that Black Tulsans lived in was one of the lowest and *cruelest* points of race relations the U.S. history. Two years prior to the tragedy, the nation was engulfed in widespread anti-Black race riots known as "The Red Summer" of 1919 (Krugler, 2009).

But clearly even before The Red Summer, the United States was rife with racial conflict. In 1915, D.W. Griffith had released the controversial *Birth of a Nation*. This popular film portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as the heroes and African Americans as the villains - lazy, corrupt, and rapists, and the inability to self-govern (Berquist & Greenwood, 1974). Between 1882–1968, approximately 3,445 African Americans were lynched; to put things in perspective, 2,522 were lynched between 1889–1918 (Perloff, 2000). Anti-Black violence and other forms of institutionalized racism in the early twentieth century were carried out with the clear aim to maintain White supremacy.

In Tulsa, the false sexual assault allegation lodged against Tulsa Black resident Dick Rowland on May 31, 1921, created the opportunity for its White residents to assault /kill its Black residents and ultimately destroy the Greenwood District with impunity. By June 2, the White mob completely leveled the District, leaving approximately 300 Black residents dead, and thousands of its survivors in financial ruin. Additionally, the White establishment overwhelmingly condoned this destruction and cruelty (Ogletree, 2009).

Now (2020) ninety-nine years later, the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the United States of America, as well as the global community are living in an existential crisis, where anti-Black violence and institutionalized racism remain constant. At the same time, the novel corona virus (COVID-19) has ravaged the globe. There's been divisive national leadership in the United States, supported by a following from the fringe far-right. Many U.S.

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1 In an attempt to draw historical parallels to the Red Summer of 1919, I define the *Cruel Summer* as an ongoing period beginning in late February 2020 (with the murder of Ahmaud Aubery) that was marred by racial violence, a climate of White Supremacy and right-wing authoritarianism, mass unemployment, and the intensification of COVID-19 in the United States.

citizens have embraced the idea that the virus is a hoax. But COVID-19 is no hoax, and it has vastly impacted poor and vulnerable communities. To date, the United States leads the world in total confirmed cases and deaths; and consequently, African Americans have disproportionately died of COVID-19 at alarming rates in comparison to other racial groups. Just as the political climate in the early twentieth century resulted in the Red Summer and the Tulsa Race Riot, today's institutionalized anti-Black violence and normalization of White supremacy have overlapped the COVID-19 discourse.

Leading up to the ninety-ninth anniversary of the Tulsa Race massacre, we have witnessed cruelty and horrific anti-Black violent incidents at the hands of police or White citizens. Those heartbreaking events are reflective of our current turbulent times. On May 7, 2020, Gregory and Travis McMichael, two White Georgia residents, were arrested/charged on felony murder charges for the February 23 killing of Ahmaud Arbery (a Black man). As cell phone video footage revealed, Arbery was hunted down (while jogging) by the McMichaels in their pickup truck and subsequently shot to death. A few weeks later, over Memorial Day weekend in Central Park, New York City, Amy Cooper (a White woman) called the police on Christian Cooper (a birder and Black man), who had asked her to keep her dog on a leash (per park rules). His phone video showed her claim of being threatened by him was a lie. On May 25, in Minneapolis, George Floyd, a Black resident, was murdered during an arrest by police officer Derek Chauvin. In an 8-minute video, Chauvin is seen kneeling on Floyd's neck, literally choking him to death. The juxtaposition of Floyd pleading for his life and stating, "I can't breathe," while Chauvin appears nonchalant, is a stark reminder of the nation's long, troubled history, cruelty and racial violence against Blacks.

The horrific murder of Floyd by officer Chauvin resulted in a pivotal political, social, and popular cultural moment in the United States and on the global stage. Floyd's televised death legitimized a once-polarized #BlackLivesMatter movement and sparked a worldwide movement committed to dismantling anti-Black racism and White supremacy. From a popular cultural perspective, murals dedicated to Floyd and other forms of iconography can be found internationally, in places such as Syria. #BlackLivesMatter signs can be seen in White, gentrified neighborhoods of San Francisco. The protests and pressures applied to institutions and corporations, with the aim to support the Black Lives Matter movement, resulted in small and symbolic victories. Confederate monuments as well as monuments dedicated to racists and other problematic individuals have been removed or are coming down. For example, in Denver Colorado, the residents of the (Benjamin F.) *Stapleton* neighborhood voted to rebrand its name to Central Park (Tabachnik, 2020). Stapleton was the former mayor (1923-31 & 1935-47) of Denver and a member of the Ku Klux Klan (Goldberg, 1982). In Springfield, Virginia confederate general Robert E. Lee High has been appropriately renamed to honor the late congressman and civil rights icon John R. Lewis (Martin, 2020). Furthermore, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) has banned the flying of the Confederate battle flag at racing events (Macur, 2020). Finally, companies such as Quaker Oats retired the racist mammy archetype image from the Aunt Jemima brand and the National Football League's Washington Redskins retired its controversial "Redskins" name (Kesslen, 2020; Sanchez, 2020).

Most significantly, the death of Floyd has shifted the discourse surrounding anti-Black violence to Black women as well. Like Floyd, Breonna Taylor (who was shot and killed by Louisville, KY police on a no-knock warrant on March 13) has emerged as an important cultural symbol during these perilous times. Thanks to robust activism on social media platforms supported by popular hashtags such as #SayHerName & #JusticeForBreonnaTaylor, the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) has dedicated its 2020 season to Breonna Taylor (West, 2020). Additionally, Taylor will be featured in the September issue of the Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine* (O The Oprah Magazine, 2020). To date none of the officers who were involved in the shooting death of Taylor have yet to be charged or arrested. Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding her death as well as Taylor's iconography serves as a daily reminder to both the Louisville Police to arrest these officers.

It also serves as a reminder of the invisibility of Black women who fall victim to police and anti-Black violence.

However, the commitment to White supremacy, cruelty, and anti-Black violence persist in the wake of Floyd's death. U.S. President Donald Trump, who has refused to unequivocally condemn White supremacist rhetoric (this includes his policies) throughout his term, hosted a political rally on the weekend of Juneteenth (an African American holiday commemorating the end of slavery in the United States) in Tulsa, thus reopening old racial wounds of years past and perpetuating a *Cruel Summer*. Days later at a political rally in Phoenix, AZ; Trump referred to the corona virus as the "Kung Flu" with the insistence of a majority college-aged audience (Blum, 2020). It was at the same rally where Turning Point USA ambassador Reagan Escudé shared a gross misrepresentation of Nancy Green's legacy (the original Aunt Jemima) in an attempt to defend the use of the racist Aunt Jemima /mammy archetype. The subtext of her speech in essence, was rooted in the defense of White supremacy offering a rebuke to the Black Lives Matter movement. She concluded her speech thanking Trump for "never apologizing to the [liberal/cancel culture] mob" (President Trump Delivers Remarks At Student Convention – Aunt Jemima (2020).

Yet, the outright rejection of and resistance to White supremacy has intensified despite the racial violence from Trump, his supporters and other White supremacists. *Blackish* actress Jennifer Lewis eloquently noted in a July 6 podcast interview that the current political climate has permitted White supremacy and cruelty to flourish resulting in the televised murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police (Hill, 2020). She further noted that people from all walks of life are waking up to this reality, "taking to the streets," and are saying "No more!" (Hill, 2020).

2020 has been one of the most eventful and consequential years in the United States as well as around the world. Along with COVID-19, the sociopolitical climate that has allowed White supremacy and cruelty to thrive consequently resulted in a *Cruel Summer*. As we reflect on this *Cruel Summer*, popular culture can serve as a powerful lens to understand history as well as our contemporary world. We must remain vigilant and use our scholarship to push back against anti-Black racism and White supremacy. I look forward to your thoughts on this issue and hope you enjoy, *Engaged Popular Culture and Pedagogy: Awareness, Understanding and Social Justice*

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Travis D. Boyce is the Chair and Associate Professor of African American Studies at San Jose State University. His areas of research interest are contemporary African American history and popular culture. Boyce's publications have appeared in edited collections *Campus Uprisings: Understanding Injustice and the Resistance Movement on College Campuses* (2020), *Racism and Discrimination in the Sporting World* (2019), *Documenting the Black Experience* (2013), and *Before Obama: A Reappraisal of Black Reconstruction era politicians* (2012), as well as the journals *The Radical Teacher* and *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* among others. He served as a guest co-editor for the *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture* (Special Issue: Whiteness and Race in Popular – 4.2/2019). He is also co-editor of the book *Historizing Fear: Ignorance, Vilification and Othering* (2019) published with the University Press of Colorado.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

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Boyce

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