

## DAMAGED HERITAGE: A REVIEW

With the skilled research of an historian and the pristine language of a poet, J. Chester Johnson tells the story of his damaged heritage and its responsibility in the grievous actions wrought upon the black sharecroppers and their families near Elaine, Arkansas in 1919. His book *Damaged Heritage: The Elaine Race Massacre and A Story of Reconciliation* is a confessional story of reconciliation as well as an accurately depicted study of what might have been the worst race massacre in our country's history.

After a request by the Episcopal Church to write the "Litany of Offense and Apology for a National Day of Repentance" in which the Episcopal Church formally apologized for its role in transatlantic slavery and related evils, Johnson's research led him to an article about the "Elaine Race Massacre" written by noted historian Ida B. Wells about the massacre in rural Phillips County, Arkansas. As Johnson continued his research, he discovered that his maternal grandfather Lonnie Birch had participated in the massacre and was a member of the local KKK in Arkansas. Despite having grown up in the next county over from Phillips County, Johnson had never heard of the massacre because it was not included in the history books either locally or nationally.

This book is not just a history of the Elaine Race Massacre, though it is skillfully researched and documented. Instead it is a heartfelt project by Johnson to find some way to acknowledge and reconcile this terrible truth which affected him viscerally. His grandfather Lonnie Birch was a loving father figure for him as a child and reconciling that truth with the egregious behavior he committed was almost impossible for Johnson, in fact it may never be possible. The book is the story of Johnson's reaching out to a descendent of several of the African American victims of the massacre, Sheila Walker and the journey they committed to take together to achieve reconciliation despite the horrors inflicted on Walker's family and other black sharecropper families.

Having heard Johnson speak twice now about this book, I recognize in his tone and his delivery the familiar pain of damaged heritage. First, he must tell the true story of the massacre, then he must write a letter to the perpetrator of the damaged heritage, then he must tell his story and what he is trying to do to reconcile the damage his heritage did to others and to himself. Johnson begins with the story of the massacre, intent on making up for "the void...the silence, evanescence...of neglected history." He then follows with a "Letter to Lonnie," (though Lonnie has long since died) including questions like, "What impelled you into the ways of racism?" and "Why don't we learn, Why can't we learn, Why won't we learn?" The letter concludes with one of the most powerful statements in the book where grandson Chester says to grandfather Lonnie,

"my dear Lonnie, there is a very old adage that the dead shall rest in peace; unfortunately in the spirit of William Faulkner's view that the past is not even past, your rest must be postponed a little while longer, for I have brought, by unequivocal intention, the racism entwined in your life and history forward into this immediate conversation," and he closes his letter "With love and determination for racial equality and racial accord, Your grandson, Chester."

The rest of the book tells the story of Johnson's life and the reconciliation he pursued with Sheila Walker which ultimately led to a blending of two families, not just as friends, but in a spacious and abundant relationship of co-inherence which "constitutes the epitome of racial reconciliation." Johnson recognized that co-inherence meant being in relationship as deep as the gospel of John describes the relationship between God and God's creation... "We in him and He in us."

As David Billings, author of *Deep Denial: The Persistence of White Supremacy in United States History and Life*, said, "This is not just a Southern story, but a national one. If we can achieve

reconciliation and genuine relationships that span the racial gulf, then this book is a beacon of hope shining a light on that possibility.” This is a story about Truth and Reconciliation...egregious **truth** that must be told in order for racial **reconciliation** to happen. At the dedication of the Elaine Race Massacre Memorial on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Chester Johnson read a poem he wrote for the ceremony, and the following stanza tells it best:

Now, we gaze on the Memorial,  
Which tells of days  
That went unclaimed,  
Which tells things a hundred years  
Of the Elaine Race Massacre  
Did not care to hear: that  
All history is a struggle  
Between what we must end  
And what we must begin;

Douglas A. Blackmon, winner of the Pulitzer Prize commented about this book, “Only a poet can see this clearly, be this honest, and still hope this much.” Chester Johnson is a clear, honest, hopeful poet soul who obviously intends to spend the rest of his days using the weapon of love in the effort to achieve racial reconciliation.

This book demands attention and recognition. Read, mark and inwardly digest it, and if you are blessed enough, listen to Chester tell the story in person. His genuine pain and extraordinary commitment to racial reconciliation is contagious. He has convinced me to get to work.

~Owene Courtney