

A filmmaker unearths the sorrow of Tulsa's "Black Wall Street," site of the country's single worst incident of racial violence.

Marking a Massacre

In 2019, HBO's *Watchmen* reignited interest in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, when mobs of white Oklahoma residents murdered as many as 300 Black citizens in the affluent Greenwood District, then widely known as Black Wall Street. Many viewers had never heard of the event, which has been called the single worst incident of racial violence in America. But for Salima Koroma, director-producer of *Dreamland: The Rise and Fall of Black Wall Street*, this history has been etched in her mind for years.

"It was a story I was told when I was in college," she recalls over Zoom from her Harlem residence. "I read it in a book in one of my African-American studies classes."

But it took about a decade for her to revisit the story, which had been all but deleted from some history books — and consequently from Tulsa's current dialogues. That's why she wanted to make *Dreamland*, a sweeping

happens is, people go into Greenwood to tell this story, [and] they don't tell the story right. Or they only tell it a little bit. People in the community have said to me, 'Then you make your millions and leave. There's no reparations.' I have to treat that with the gravitas that it deserves."

She traced the origins of Greenwood, a town many formerly enslaved African Americans migrated to in the 1800s and later established as a so-called dreamland. That became the name of the town's revered live musical and theatrical venue. Koroma wasn't only interested in revisiting the massacre; she also wanted to humanize the people of Greenwood and their world before that sixteen-hour bloodbath — and to explore the trauma that remains.

"It's almost like something happens to you that is so audacious that



A historic photo shows Greenwood residents out walking.



The 1921 massacre left Greenwood destroyed and smoking.

documentary that includes the voices of historians and Greenwood tenants as well as archival footage of survivors. From LeBron James and Maverick Carter's SpringHill Entertainment and CNN Films, it premieres May 31 — the event's centennial — on CNN and will migrate to HBO Max.

Before Koroma went to the Sooner State, she equipped herself with as much knowledge as she could, knowing this devastating event was literally buried history that few in Tulsa felt inclined to dig up. "I read all the books," she remembers. "I called a lot of people. I'd done a lot of the work."

Still, residents were leery of Koroma and her crew asking questions and unearthing historical context that doesn't often get the nuance it demands. "There was a suspicion, as [there] should be," she explains. "Because what

nobody believes it," Koroma says. "Or nobody would take it seriously, or you're just supposed to move on." That's why she was adamant about featuring current residents, including one older woman who says having to revisit the event for this film is "good grief."

"It's good, because the story is finally being told," Koroma says. "And it's grief because we're experiencing it. But she says we have to tell it." The filmmaker recalls a moment during production when she gathered people from the community to talk openly about their experiences processing what happened, and what once was.

"To talk about it out loud where there were dozens of people — a lot of us cried," she says. "The trauma is still there. Not just for the massacre, but from the 100 years after." —Candice Frederick



Director-producer Salima Koroma interviews Greenwood residents.