



Part 1 - NO! The Rape Documentary: A Visionary Black Filmmaker Reflects on the Journey to Open Up the Conversation on Sexual Violence Experienced by the Black Community

□ November 10, 2023

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Note: NO! The Rape Documentary is the 2006-released, Ford Foundation-funded, groundbreaking feature length film that focuses on intraracial rape of Black girls and women, healing, and accountability through the first-person testimonies, scholarship, spirituality, activism, and cultural work of Black people in the United States.

This is the first excerpt of a two-part interview. Be sure to read the second part [here](#).

1. In 2006, you released *NO! The Rape Documentary*. Was it difficult to get a documentary like this made and distributed in this time period? How was it received at the time and has that reception changed since its debut?

I started working on *NO! The Rape Documentary* in 1994, and it took me 12 years to make the film. Seven of which I worked full-time on the film. So it was a really long journey to make the film. At the time I was working on the it, very few people wanted to talk about sexual violence in Black communities. I mean, we weren't talking about sexual violence at the level that we're talking about it now, and definitely not in terms of looking at intraracial rape (rape within a race) in Black communities. I was working on *NO!* when, just a few years previously, the Clarence Thomas hearings had happened with [Anita Hill](#) being subpoenaed to testify about sexual harassment that she experienced. Anita Hill is a hero now, but in 1991 there were many who were questioning her loyalty or her allegiance to [Black communities](#). There were definitely Black feminists who were very clear in their belief of Anita Hill. I was one of the signatories in the famous '[African American Women in Defense of Ourselves](#)' ad taken out in the New York Times on November 17, 1991. That was the backdrop when I started working on *NO!* Another backdrop to *NO!* was former heavyweight boxing champion [Mike Tyson's conviction](#) for raping Desiree Washington. I started working on *NO!* in the fall of 1994, and the [O.J. Simpson trial](#) was in 1995. As a Black feminist lesbian, making a film about sexual violence in the Black community during a time when Clarence Thomas, Mike Tyson, and O.J. Simpson were all headline news stories in the emerging 24/7/365 news cycle felt like climbing Mount Everest with bare hands.

It was a really, really hard journey. There were writings about sexual violence in Black communities out there in the world by Black women writers including [Alice Walker](#), [Barbara Smith](#), and [Ntozake Shange](#) that greatly informed and influenced my vision for *NO!*. However, to talk about sexual violence, especially Black men raping Black women, was viewed as treason against the Black community. So that's what I was coming up against in the mid 1990s. Additionally, when you factor that I am a Black feminist lesbian and a rape

survivor, the default was, “What is her agenda?”. It was as if I had a secret agenda other than wanting rape to end. I believe that’s why it took so long to make the film.

The bright side to the 12-year journey is that I became accountable to the community who would come and see *NO!* as a work in progress, and support the making of the film. I didn’t get major institutional funding right away, so it was a hardcore journey to make the film. I was able to create a grassroots international community of survivors, feminists, white women, women of color, queer folks, and folks who didn’t identify with either gender, who were all supporting the making of *NO!*. By the time that *NO!* was completed in 2006, there was already an audience out there. This is a different era now with social media. Present-day, you can have an idea and just start posting about it and build momentum, but in 1994 there was no internet like we know it now. I mean, email was just kind of coming into existence. So, the big challenge for a lot of filmmakers when they finished making their films was, “Ok, the film is completed. How do I build an audience?” For me, I had the exact opposite because I was always doing educational fundraising, screenings in multiple cities across the U.S. and also throughout Europe in France, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary and Croatia. I was raising awareness and people were donating money. Folks were already simultaneously translating *NO!* when I would do screenings. We weren’t even using subtitles. They would literally have a microphone and I would give them the English transcript of the works-in-progress, and they would translate it in Italian, in French, and in Dutch to make it accessible in their communities. When we think of Europe, we think white Europeans. Without question white Europeans were involved, but also many people who were also European citizens but whose ancestry is in Africa, Asia, and South America were intricately involved as lead organizers. It was really a global experience, and I always try to imagine what that would look like in our current social media age.

With that shared, I had a lot of single digit checking account days. It was a very difficult journey. I’m grateful for it, because at the end of the day I have a film that is still used almost 20-years after its world premiere. There are some things I would change, but for the most part when I completed it in 2006, *NO!* was what I wanted, not what funders wanted. It was what communities wanted based on the feedback that I received from the numerous work in progress screenings across the U.S. and in Europe for over a decade before it was completed.



Dr. Charlotte Pierce-Baker, Joan Brannon, Gail M. Lloyd and Aishah Shahidah Simmons. NO! Production Still photographed in 2000 by Wadia L. Gardiner, courtesy of AfroLez® Productions

2. This documentary focuses on sexual violence experienced by Black women throughout history and today. What inspired you to make a documentary that emphasized the **intersection of sexism and racism** within a Black woman's experience of sexual violence?

When I first started making *NO!*, I thought it was going to be in a specific time period, the contemporary time period (which was always shifting because it took so long to make). I received comments that implied that racism only happened to Black men. It was as if racism didn't also happen to Black women. Based on this, I realized that I had to go all the way back to the time of enslavement of African people in the U.S. I needed to lay down a visual foundation to exemplify that sexual violence was something that happened during enslavement - slave masters **raping enslaved people**. That definitely happened without question. And, there was also **intraracial rape**  that happened and was enforced by slave masters during enslavement. Interracial and intraracial sexual violence also occurred after enslavement at the turn of

the 20th century. It happened to Black women who were very much a part of Black communities working, loving, and caring about Black men and children. Black women who [engaged as leaders](#) in radical racial and social justice movements including Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party, and others were also being harmed and abused. It is important to note that one of Clarence Thomas' famous lines during his hearings was that the investigation and questions around Anita Hill's subpoenaed sexual harassment testimony were a "[high-tech lynching](#)". I don't advocate for lynching of any kind by any stretch of the imagination. However, it's important to note that no man has ever been lynched historically for raping/sexually assaulting Black women. Black men were repeatedly lynched for allegedly raping White women. So I thought that it was important to address this history in order to talk about the contemporary moment in *NO!*. I thought it was essential to remind communities of racism both historically and contemporarily; and that we are still not safe if we're not addressing sexism and also homophobia. In *NO!*, I talk about how rape is used as a weapon of homophobia against Black lesbians. We must have an intersectional approach to addressing sexual violence. Black feminist legal scholar and author, [Prof. Kimberle Crenshaw](#) coined the term "intersectionality" and has written extensively about this. Before that, there was the [Combahee River Collective](#), a Black feminist lesbian socialist organization whose 1977 statement explicitly addresses the impact that having multiple marginalized identities in one body has on the lives of Black women. Black women are not just Black. We're not just women. We're not just queer. We're all of these things. So, it is of the utmost importance that we address all of the "isms" because single issues will not liberate us.

Personally, I would say that *NO!* is almost two documentaries in one. It is about sexual violence, healing, disrupting sexual violence, and it's also an overview of Black women's history alongside the examination of sexual violence. In order to talk about disrupting sexual violence in Black communities, we have to look at sexual violence, race, gender, and sexuality, from the beginning when this country was founded.

3. Throughout the documentary, you showcase slam poetry, interpretive dance, and book readings that pertain to sexual violence within the Black community. In this documentary, which is your art piece, why was

it important to you to incorporate these displays of art as well? What power do you think art has in telling the story of someone's sexual assault?

For me, I know that there are many ways to talk about sexual violence, and I didn't want to only use talking heads talking to the screen. I think that there is so much power in poetry. So much can be conveyed in one poem that I thought it was really important and powerful for people to experience testimonials through poetry. One of my co-collaborators, Co-Producer of *NO!* and the Director of Choreography, Dr. Tamara L. Xavier, really pushed for dance and movement. She really helped me to understand that there are people who can't express in words what has happened, but they are able to show and express what happened through movement. Tamara, for me, was one of the first people who really talked to me about, "How do we visually show the somatic response?" Initially, I was really reticent to this idea, because I'm an in-my-head, almost to a fault, type of person. But I'm really grateful that Tamara was unwavering with pushing for the inclusion of dance in *NO!* In the film, the movement and the dances give space and breathing room, as does the poetry. The poetry can be intense, but it also just gives the mind another way to engage with this heavy topic that ultimately transforms into healing. Before we get to the healing, you're in the fire with these testimonials, so I think the dance and the poetry allows for space and offers viewers an invitation to think about or experience stories of sexual violence and healing through different mediums.



Dr. Aaronette M. White. *NO!* Production Still photographed in 2000 by Scheherazade Tillet, courtesy of AfroLez® Productions

4. In addition to being the director, you interviewed the survivors and experts who were featured throughout the documentary. Why is it an asset to have Black voices and perspectives on both sides of the screen to tell Black stories, particularly when it surrounds a subject matter as sensitive as sexual violence?

It's so interesting to have this question, and it's such an important question because now, in 2023, so much has changed! I've just witnessed radical change around filmmaking and behind the camera. We know about Ava Duvernay's bold move with only hiring women directors for *Queen Sugar*'s 7-season tenure on television. Many of those directors are women of color. What Ava did with *Queen Sugar* was both groundbreaking in Hollywood for episodic television and wonderful. When I envisioned making *NO!* in the mid-1990s, it was really important that the front matched the back. The way in which I conducted the interviews with the survivors was first to ensure that with the predominantly Black and women of color production team, we co-created a safe space. I wanted the survivors to see faces on set that represented them. As a filmmaker, I wanted to hire and pay Black women filmmakers for their expertise. It was so important for me to work with Black woman filmmakers including the Director of Photography Joan Brannon, Co-Producers Gail Lloyd and Tamara Xavier, Associate Producers Joan Brannon, Salamishah Tillet, and Amadee Leila Braxton, Production Manager Wadia L. Gardiner, Assistant Director Nikki Harmon, Set Decorator Kia Steave-Dickerson, and more production personnel. The Editor, Sharon Mullally, is a white lesbian who is award-winning and a generation ahead of me, which meant decades worth of experience editing documentary filmmakers. Sharon and my generation's differences provided really wonderful opportunities for post-production questions and conversations we had with each other about the framing of the documentary. The production team, however, was almost always all Black women, if not women of color. That, for me, was intentional. I wanted to create a safe space behind the camera lens as well as honoring and supporting the expertise of filmmakers, who at the time, weren't valued the way many Black women filmmakers are valued contemporarily.

In the 1990s it was really hard to be an independent Black woman filmmaker who didn't always want to be in the director's chair but who brought so much expertise through framing, lighting, sound design, and more. I can't underscore enough that my first impetus was to co-create a safe space on the sets for the survivors. Everybody in the film is not a survivor, but a survivor-centered safe space was really important for me. This included having really good food and a space where people could feel a warm, homely, and secure environment. I can't speak for the featured survivors, but I believe the co-created safe space enabled them to revisit the terror, the trauma, and share it on camera with the understanding that their uninterrogated testimonies would be seen and heard over and over again. Here we are in 2023! I released this film in 2006. Some of the survivors I interviewed in 2000. They have moved on with their lives, but through *NO!*, they are forever telling their story. So I wanted the filming of their testimonies to be as holistic for them as possible.

This blog post was published in The Resource 2023 online magazine special issue on [Racial Equity in the Movement](#).

About the Author:



Aishah Shahidah Simmons is a Black feminist lesbian survivor-healer, Buddhist practitioner, trauma-informed Mindfulness meditation teacher, and award-

winning filmmaker and author. Her groundbreaking 2006 released film, *NO! The Rape Documentary* and her 2020 Lambda Literary Award-winning anthology, *Love WITH Accountability: Digging Up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse*, break silences, offer healing paths for trauma, and provide distinct visions for compassionately disrupting the inhumane epidemics of childhood and adult sexual violence. Since 1993, Aishah has screened her work, guest lectured, taught university-level courses, and facilitated workshops across the North American continent and in several countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Learn more at <https://linktr.ee/afrolez>.
