



Part 2 - 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

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

5. There is a brief scene in the documentary in which you depict a slave owner sexually

assaulting a slave. When filming this scene, what did you do to ensure feelings of safety on set for the actress as both a woman and as a Black person?


That scene is a reality that probably almost every single Black person has in terms of their ancestral lineage. That's based on my third great-grandmother, who was raped by the man who owned her. As the director, we had many acting rehearsals and discussions. On the set, we had many kinds of holistic food. We worked with the actor who played the slavemaster. He's a professional actor who is a White gay man. There was a lot of space and conversation throughout the day because we had to do several takes. Unfortunately, what we filmed only became an excerpt in the film. However, the scene is a lot longer in terms of the raw footage. When the Black woman actor who portrayed the enslaved woman (my third great-grandmother) needed a break, we would take a break. Everybody on that set was a Black woman, so that played a role in terms of that safety. There were people with whom the actor could engage with between and during takes. She was engaging with Black women. There were Black women and one Black gay man in terms of the set designer and set decorator. The actors had the opportunity to engage and get to know each other. Then, of course, they separated so that they could get into character. We filmed in the historic Belmont Mansion in Philadelphia, whose history dates back to 1745. While I do not know for certain, I would not be surprised if there was some history related to what we filmed. I know I wanted to use that building specifically because of its historic significance in terms of the time period.

In the scene, the audience's point of view is through the victim's/survivor's lens, which means we are looking at the slavemaster. We're not seeing the slavemaster's point of view, which would be on the enslaved woman. I wanted her point of view. Too often, when someone is being raped in a film, the audience's point of view is through the person raping. So, we're looking at the person being raped. It's not often that we view the assault from the point of view of the victim-survivor. This is a powerful perspective that I believe more filmmakers need to show. Instead of looking down at the person being raped, change the view to look at the person who is committing the rape. Make the victim-survivor's point of view central.



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

6. The depiction of a sexual assault victim in television and cinema has been predominantly portrayed by a young white woman. Why is it vital to tell these stories representing people of all backgrounds, particularly Black women?

I think this question underscores why it took me 12 years to make *NO!*. It's hard for anyone to prove that they have been sexually assaulted. [The highest rates of belief are when it's interracial rape](#) , and particularly if it's a Black man who's raped a white woman. Then that's clear cut. In terms of communal outrage and response in communities of color, especially during the time period I made *NO!*, it's usually when the accused is a White man raping a Black woman, or an Indigenous woman, an Asian woman, a Latina woman, etc. It's when the "outsider" (i.e. a member outside of the community) rapes someone within the community. Essentially, it's all about viewing the person who's been raped as "property" of the community. So it's like, "You don't get to touch 'our' women or 'our' person!"

With that said and as a result of horrid sexist and misogynistic stereotypes whose origins go back to enslavement in the United States, many people, including in Black communities, don't see Black women as being capable of being raped. Years ago, people said to me, "Wow! Before I saw your documentary, I didn't know Black women could be raped. I thought they were always willing, wanting, and able or that they could kick your butt because they were invincible." So they couldn't even see Black women's humanity, their

vulnerability, their fragility. The same with Latinx women, Asian women, Indigenous women, Arab women...that it's just this kind of concept that we [women of color] are devoid of our gender. We are often viewed as always willing, wanting, and able and are thus are incapable of being raped. That was something I worked a lot on in post-production. There's one old version of *NO!* where viewers don't see the vulnerability of all the survivors. They're very vulnerable in the raw footage but not in the referenced rough-cut version. I realized that I was doing a disservice because I was actually playing a role in promoting the image of the "strong Black woman" who is not vulnerable. So, we recut the film to really show what is on the footage - the survivors' vulnerability.

I'm a survivor. I was raped in 1989 on a study abroad program in my sophomore year of college. I was sexually abused from 1979-1981 when I was 10-12 years old. Even with almost 30 years of work with trauma-informed therapists and 20 years of a dedicated Buddhist meditation practice, I still have triggers. I experience trauma-related struggles at times. Initially, I was doing a disservice by not showing the survivors' vulnerability. That's why I believe it's really important that we see a wide range of survivors on screen. *NO!* does not include disabled voices, Deaf/hard-of-hearing voices, blind voices...those are some of the things that, if I could do it again, I would definitely do differently. I would also include the voices of trans people in the film. People often ask me, "What would you do differently?" I don't want to be a revisionist of my history, that wasn't in my mindset at the time. I'm grateful for evolution and transformation. Including voices and perspectives from the margins within the margins underscores how sexual violence is committed against all humans, and it ravages all of our communities. Sexual violence is a horror that transcends everything, political differences...all of it is happening whether we talk about it or not. So it is really important that that is reflected in the films that we see.



7. In recent years, works like *12 Years a Slave* and *I May Destroy You* have been brought into the world by Black creators and illustrate the effects sexual assault has on Black women. How do works like these make you feel as a Black creative with an interest in sexual violence education and advocacy? Do they give you hope for a much-needed evolution in the conversation surrounding sexual assault in and outside of the Black community?

Yes, they really do. *I May Destroy You* I think is such brilliant work. I also just loved it as an African American woman, to see it through a Black British lens. Just to see Black culture in the U.K. Same with *12 Years a Slave* in terms of the depiction of enslavement. I see their work as part of a continuum of the work of others. I think that they're taking it to a whole other level, and I think it's really a gift.

8. What advice would you give to the Black artists of tomorrow who want to elevate this issue?

The advice I would give is to really be true to your vision. Do not sell out your vision in exchange for fame or fortune. If those avenues that you think should give you the funding aren't giving you the funding, look elsewhere. Show the complexities, and even some of the contradictions, because that's part of the human experience. Equally as important, envision that which may not exist. It's critical to talk about the problem and the challenges facing us. However, in order for us to move out of what is, we must envision how we're going to transform it and change it. Some of that may not even be possible in this contemporary moment, but it is possible as long as we think and envision it. My ancestors, at some point, kept saying, "My people will be free." That could've

been an ancestor from the 1700s! So, if we envision it, we're putting it out there into the universe. That's what I encourage. Definitely talk about the problems and challenges, but also envision and share solutions.

9. If you made this documentary today, would you do anything differently?


If I were making this documentary today, I would definitely include members of the disabled community because they are always left out of so much, and it's so critical. So, what does it mean to be raped if you're literally dependent on someone in terms of your access? What does it mean to be raped if you're Deaf or blind? So, specifically the Black, disabled community, I would want to include those voices. I would also include the voices of transwomen, transmen, and nonbinary people who have been sexually abused in the community to open our understanding that sexual violence knows no gender. While it happens to all of us, look at the margins of the margins within the community. It would still be Black and still be intracommunal. I would still only want Black experts talking about it, Black creatives involved in terms of poets, dancers, etc... that wouldn't change. In terms of the voices that would be added, those voices are who I would want to include.



Salamishah Tillet and Schaherazade Tillet. NO! Production Still photographed in 2000 by Wadia L. Gardiner, courtesy of AfroLez® Productions

10. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I think the thing is to move from viewing people as monsters and start thinking about their acts. I don't believe people are monsters. People commit

monstrous acts, and unfortunately, there are too many bystanders who allow these acts to flourish. When we all first arrive on the planet, we are innocent babies. Life's circumstances create a whole bunch of realities, some of which are wretched. I do not share this to excuse or condone any form of violence and harm, sexual or otherwise. I just want us to invite us to see the humanity of others and not ever at the expense of the immediate survivors. I want us to remember, if not recognize, that [violence is on a spectrum](#) . While we are addressing sexual violence, and that is the center in this conversation, we should also remember that there are so many ways that people commit harm. When we see that, I think that it enables us to see the acts and hold folks accountable, without question. I invite all of us to think about, "How can we hold folks accountable without relying on carceral justice?" I believe that there are ways to do it through communal accountability, [restorative justice](#), and transformative justice. We have to be willing to have those conversations. I think it's really important that we continuously explore how we can act humanely in the face of the inhumane. Again, I do not suggest this at the expense of the immediate survivors. I believe people who cause harm need help, and they need to be held accountable, hopefully without relying on carceral justice.

NO! is available for streaming rental with English captions and Spanish, French, Portuguese, and German subtitles. <https://NOtheRapeDocumentary.org>
The conversation also continues with my 2020 Lambda Literary Award-winning anthology, *love WITH accountability: Digging Up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse* (AK Press) <https://lovewithaccountability.com>

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>.
