

# **The Myth of Black Women's Progress: A Conversation with Activist and Filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons**

**by Tamara K. Nopper**

Aishah Shahidah Simmons is the director of NO!, a feature length documentary that unveils the reality of intra-racial rape, other forms of sexual violence, and healing in African-American communities. It has taken Simmons eleven years to complete NO! because of a lack of support from various funders and mixed responses, including those from the Black community. But because of consistent support from some and a growing amount of support from both Blacks and non-Blacks, NO! was finally completed in 2005. Now Simmons is putting her efforts into getting the film out there. She sits down with writer Tamara K. Nopper to talk about how Black women are situated in the contemporary conversation of the "crisis facing Black men," and how this informs how Black women's experiences of rape and sexual assault are addressed.

"We can never talk about the rape of Black women. Black women's issues can't ever be central."

TN: In general, I think Black men and Black women tend to be dismissed if they talk about oppression or racism. But there's something really fascinating to me, also being in some of these activist spaces, some of the spaces you and I are both familiar with and different spaces as well – seeing how non-Black people, men and women, how they kind of gravitate towards Black men to learn what does it mean to be Black. Or what is Black oppression like from a "Black perspective"? Do you notice that?

AS: Yeah, oh yeah, definitely. Definitely.

TN: Do you think that has affected in some ways some of the non-Black support that could have been available to you or that you thought might have been available to you in terms of you know, people's fears of "Oh, are you condemning Black men?" Or people's identifications with Black men for whatever reason that might be?

AS: I think that for progressive non-Black people there's a vested interest in seeing Black men as victims. It's like the huge New York Times piece that came out. That to talk about, we tend to see things in kind of single issue topics. Yes, Black men are definitely victims to a white supremacist society but at the same time they're perpetrators in a male supremacist world. But white folks and just folks who are not of African descent, they don't want to see this, they don't want to deal with that. They kind of go, "Well, you know, Black men are in jail, disproportionate amounts of percentage of men are in jail or are Black." And yet most Black men who are in jail are not in jail for raping Black women.

And I want to be explicitly clear: I oppose the herding of Black men into prisons, I'm very opposed to the criminal injustice system. But I really get tired of how that gets used in this kind of discourse.

I've had a scholar-activist ask me at a Q&A after a screening if I am concerned about perpetuating the myths of the stereotype of Black men.

"There's all kind of concern about how Black men are being portrayed – but what about Black women?"

The stereotype of Black men is them raping white women. Nobody wants to like flip the coin, as Salamishah [Tillet] has taught me, the coin of the Black male rapist. But the other side of that coin is the Black woman whose who can't be raped. But we never address that, we never talk about that. So there's all kind of concern about how Black men are being portrayed – but what about Black women? And it's very interesting because it's how we're trained. I mean I think all of us are trained in terms of a patriarchal point of view, regardless of what race we are, to make men's issues central. I believe that's what creates this kind of gangster reality amongst the hip hop generation, the kind of these, "Well, it's so hard being a Black man"—and not to say that it's not, but what the hell, Black women are not having a picnic.

Not only are we [Black women] dealing with racism and sexism from white mainstream society but we're also dealing with sexism from our community and who we going to tell? Because nobody going to believe us and do we want to see our brother/father/boyfriend/lover/comrade get arrested?

TN: Different sociological conversations are going on where they're suggesting that Black women are having it much easier because they're not in prison or their unemployment rates are not so high, even though in some cases they are as high, right? How do you think those narratives of Black female progress that are kind of being put out there sociologically, how do you think they affect the ability of Black women's rape to get dealt with?

AS: Oh, I think it plays – I'm not saying that it's not a rough time for Black men – by any stretch of the imagination. But I do think that it still, it's the divisive way that somehow that Black women are having a picnic. And I think that as Elaine – Elaine Brown doesn't say it in NO! but she says it in the raw footage of NO! – she talks about the types of jobs where many Black women are working. And let's talk about what sexual harassment looks like at Popeye's, you know, this is not Anita Hill. Is there a sexual harassment policy at Popeye's or McDonald's? And if there are, what are they?

TN: Or in sex work.

AS: Yes! Exactly! Definitely in sex work. And so I think there's this way in which clearly, here's the example, let's talk about the example of the young sister at North Carolina Central. A single mother of two, a student, and also a sex worker, somebody who's a stripper. And so nobody, we don't want to look at that she's a single mother of two – where the hell is the father of her children – I'm not saying that he's not having a hard time somewhere. And she's at school, so clearly, she didn't want to be a sex worker until she dropped dead. But clearly she's thinking about something else in addition to sex work, you know, in terms of furthering her formal education.

"Not only are we [Black women] dealing with racism and sexism from white mainstream society but we're also dealing with sexism from our community."

And yet, look at how she's being treated. I just can't even imagine if this were a Black man. I can't even imagine if a Black man were a single parent, raising two kids, managing a stripper's club to support himself/his family while he's in school, was accused of sexually assaulting a white woman Duke student, how the [Black] community would respond. I do believe that it plays a role because I think there's always suspicion already that Black women, they have it good, they're already out to get the [Black] man anyway. You know, I really think there is this way in which if Black men are guilty of rape, the overwhelming feeling in the [Black] community is that they are under siege... they can't help it...this is

what's going on. So I do think that it does create this kind of hostile environment for Black women.

TN: You were talking about the prison industrial complex and we know the statistics around Black people and specifically Black men in prison. And when I was at your event at Temple University a few years back, I saw where somebody said, "Okay, but are we going to deal with Black men being raped in prison?" And I'm sure that conversation has come up more than once, correct?

AS: Yeah.

TN: So what are your responses to that critique because it's a pretty prominent critique, right?

AS: It is a prominent critique. I think we do have to deal with prison and rape, I really do think we have to deal with that. But the question is if I'm talking about the rape of Black women, can we talk about the rape of Black women? There's always this way in which we can never talk about the rape of Black women. Black women's issues can't ever be central. We always have to look elsewhere. Black men are in jail, Black men are being raped. All of that is true, but what about Black women?

Can we talk about the violence that Black women experience? Can we talk about the rape that they experience? And it's this interesting struggle, very sobering and painful. I'm not a man, but anytime I hear about police brutality, high incarceration rates, that's perpetrated against him the by state/white supremacy, I am called to action. I'm not like, well, "What did Rodney King do, what did he do to get beat?"

TN: Or what was he wearing?

AS: Exactly! All of that. I'm called to action. Having a brother and a father and many Black men who are related to me by blood and by spirit, I worry about what will happen if they get stopped by the police.

"We're constantly told and taught and trained to think about Black men's lives at our own expense."

But that very, very rarely happens with Black women and rape, any women really, but I'm talking about Black women, that just doesn't happen. It's like, what was she doing out? She's just probably just a "golddigger," to use the language of Kanye's song. Violence against Black women is always presented in that way. So we're constantly told and taught and trained to think about Black men's lives at our [Black women's] own expense. At our own expense.

I had this conversation with this brother whom I really love and respect, and I think there's this kind of misinformation because he said something to the effect, "Part of the problem is that, you know, we've been lynched for defending your honor." But that's not true. You all [Black men] were lynched because of or in defense of white women's honor. So there's all this kind of mythology and misinformation about the reasons thousands of Black men were murdered as a result of false allegations of rape (of white women). I'm definitely not saying Black men have not fought to protect Black women. I do think that there needs to be discussions of prison and rape but not at the expense of talking about Black women and girls being raped by Black men and boys.

TN: I noticed in your film that you had a historical conversation about these issues, about lynching, about the myth of the Black male rapist, about Black women being seen as 'unrapeable' and a lot of ideas that people like Ida B. Wells helped to bring to the forefront in her anti-lynching pro-feminist work. Did you originally mean to do that or was it a response to some of these responses that you were getting? What informed kind of putting that segment in?

AS: Yeah, I realized that in order to talk about rape and sexual assault in African America, I had to address Black women's herstory in America. Because really when it came up was during the Clarence Thomas hearings when he said this was a 'high tech lynching.' I remember being with my brilliant friend at the time and how Thomas' ahistorical statement stopped her dead in her tracks.

And so it was an ahistorical thing so I realized and in talking to my mother (Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons) and talking to Beverly Guy Sheftall and Elsa Barkley Brown that there was this need to address the history of lynching in this country. Because it was not only just to say hey, there have been no Black men lynched for raping or sexually assaulting, allegedly or otherwise, Black women. But more importantly or equally as importantly that Black women were at the forefront of the anti-lynching movement, because there's this way in which Black women are "traitors" to the race.

"Why aren't Black men who rape Black women traitors to the race?"

So what I realized what I need to do was lay down a Black feminist foundation – hopefully, a solid foundation – of Black women's herstory in this country, being enslaved, being raped by white men, you know, fighting for equal rights and Black rights in this country, while still being assaulted. So it was just this way of kind of saying, who is the fucking traitor here? 'Cause you know, to quote my dad (Michael Simmons), the traitor is to have a rapist in our community and not warn anyone. Why aren't Black men who rape Black women traitors to the race? You know, why is it that Black women who come forward are traitors to the race? I had people say, "How you gonna lynch another brother with that documentary? How you gonna talk about these issues when Black men are doing so bad?" And my response is, "Does that give them the right to rape me or any Black woman because they're doing bad? Why not bring an end to white and male supremacy?"

TN: Switching gears, I want to ask you about your thoughts about Hurricane Katrina and how the issue of rape was dealt with. Among activists, there's been this kind of emphasis on trying to challenge images of Black people that were being circulated by mainstream media and the most famous of course being the "looting versus finding debate." But do you think that contributed to the invisibility around sexual assault and rape in the way that those conversations were getting framed by activists?

AS: Oh, I definitely think it. I think it's in response to racism in this country, we keep having this knee jerk reaction. So definitely Black people were not looting, I mean in the way in which the media was saying they were – they weren't shooting at the helicopters in the same way. But then we go, "They weren't raping." It's like, again, it goes back to NO! where Aaronette White says in the film, "Black men are not the stereotypical rapist and they're not the only rapist. But at the same time Black men are raping. They're not raping more than white men, they're raping period." But there's this way where we feel like we have to say, "But they weren't even raping."

And it's like, that's not true, there are Black women victim survivors who have disclosed that they were sexually assaulted during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And again, the discourse is always geared to the defense of Black men. Painfully, Black women aren't really in the equation in many ways. I think that we have to be able to talk about the intersectionalities, as so many Black feminists – Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Kimberle Crenshaw – have written and lectured about. We're not all good, we're not all bad, we're complex. You know, my dad always says that "equality is the right to be mediocre." Black people don't have to be the best people on the planet. We do a lot of good and we also do a lot of bad. We, like the rest of the human family, are complex individuals. So we do a tremendous disservice to say there were no rapes going on...

I feel as a community we're always trying to stop a lynching. And as a result we can't even sort out the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, because we're just trying to save somebody, almost always a Black man, from being lynched, metaphorically, by the media or even literally, by the state/white supremacy.

This is exactly why NO! is all Black and I addressed racism, while addressing sexism and homophobia in our non-monolithic community. I'm very much aware of racism, but at the same time, we're going to talk about sexism, goddamnit, in this documentary. And we're going to talk about how it impacts Black women's lives.

Tamara K. Nopper is an educator, researcher, writer, and activist living in Philadelphia. She is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Temple University and a volunteer for the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO), a national anti-war and counter-military organization. She can be reached at [tnopper\\_at\\_yahoo.com](mailto:tnopper_at_yahoo.com).

For more info about NO! and to purchase a copy of the documentary, visit: [www.notherapedocumentary.org](http://www.notherapedocumentary.org). For more information about Aishah Shahidah Simmons, visit: [www.myspace.com/afrolez](http://www.myspace.com/afrolez).