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# **Gender in the Pan-African community**

## **Review of 'NO!' - a film on rape in the Black American community**

**By Marian Douglas**

'... we so called men, we so called brothers wonder why it's so hard to love our women when we're about loving them the way america loves us.' – the late Black American poet Essex Hemphill

On a warm spring evening in Washington, we drive past a building with a sign describing the address as a cultural center for expats from a certain African country. A crowd gathered outside the building is all-male. It makes me wonder once again about the nature of gender relations in Black communities other than my own.

As I consider my life and those of my Afro-descendant sisters throughout the Americas, often I meditate on our fates had we been born, the same colours we are today, little more than a century ago.

For the past seven years or so, the month of December reminds me not only of Kwanzaa and Christmas but also of rape. In 1854 a very young Black American woman named Celia is tried and found guilty in a US court of 'law'. She is convicted and sentenced to execution for killing Robert Newsom, her rapist and the man who has imprisoned her in an institution' called – chattel – slavery. Celia is hanged on Thursday 21 December 1854, just days before Christmas, for defending herself from repeated sexual assault.

Such is the course of American 'justice'. The fact that Celia had been raped regularly and repeatedly was treated as so 'inconsequential' that, according to Dr Melton McLaurin, Celia's biographer, the rapes were not even mentioned during her trial for murder.

Most of what we now know of Celia's brief and unprotected life is carefully detailed in McLaurin's book, *Celia: A Slave*, compiled from the historical record - mostly musty and neglected Missouri legal documents.

Her story and millions more like it form an integral but largely silenced part of what we Black Americans refer to as our 'race memory'. This memory lives within me, and even more so since my own family was enslaved in central Missouri where these events of Celia's life and death occurred.

In her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs also spills the ugly truth of being enslaved as a girl, a female, as someone's daughter and as a woman and mother. Jacobs speaks clearly of how the unspeakable - rapes, exploitation, concubinage, violence, killing and suicide - occurred not just daily but 'yea, hourly' as Jacobs writes, to Black women and girls.

This is the context in which I viewed Aishah Simmons' film about rape within the Black community. What we now need is for our families, communities and organizations to screen and begin discussing this ground-breaking film.

For more than seven years I've researched the lives of Black women and our female ancestors in the Americas, girls and women like Celia and Harriet Jacobs. This is why I want to write about Aishah

Simmons' labor of love, this documentary, NO! But Aishah's film is much more than just a movie about rape. It's also a major contribution to help us re-learn our history, an inducement to what I call 'remembering' - re-assembling, pulling together once again - the Black communities of the US and throughout the Americas, and reaching back across the Atlantic to Africa's communities, as well as the Black communities of Europe and beyond.

Because some form of sexual assault takes place regularly in virtually every society in the world, NO! is a film for all people and deserves to be shared. It also illustrates articulately how, in the Americas, Black women's and girls' historically recent experiences of systematic, collective and societally condoned rape and sexual enslavement trace back to the roots of Europe's various colonial empires throughout our region.

In 19th century America Celia was a young nineteen year old Black woman and a 'baby mother' of two, though actually viewed as no more than a 'slave'.

Sexual exploitation and gender-based violence have been the rule rather than an 'exception' in Black women's and girls' lives in the Americas ever since the slave raids across Africa and deadly trans-Atlantic mass forced migrations of our people.

The 'crime' of our 19 year old ancestor Celia, condemned to death by America's 'justice' system, was having been selected and enslaved by the ill-fated slaveholder, "the master", Robert Newsom. Newsom actually purchased Celia to supply him with sex. With the blessing and sanction of US law and custom, as a white man, his primary responsibility was to never acknowledge Celia nor his sexual relations with her, nor his children born to Celia.

NO! is the first documentary where, finally, I see and hear certain connections made between our history and our contemporary, lived experiences of gender and race.

Law professor Adrienne Davis talks of how she now realizes and refers to Black Americans' chattel enslavement as the "sexual economy" it truly was. An enormous, universe-shifting, global economy not only of 'can't-see-in-the-mornin'-til-can't-see-at-night' daily servitude and backbreaking labour, but inextricably also an economy of sex and condoned and condemned sex relationships.

'Black women's reproductive and sexual relationships were an integral part of the political economy', Davis states in the film. She asserts that American slavery '... construed childbearing by enslaved women, and their sexuality, as market and economic relationships that actually created white wealth.'

Farah Jasmine Griffin of Columbia University speaks of the routine sexual assault of our sisters, largely though not only, in the American South as having been a key yet mostly unspoken reason for the massive migration of our families and kin to the US North and West, the 'great migration' of 20th USA.

Simmons is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a city that was my home in my earlier life, that's been home to other members of my family. Simmons tells me what influenced her to create NO! was 'the value of African women's lives'.

'The doc speaks for itself. It also looks at Black women's history.'

I ask about public reaction so far. 'It's a complicated answer. There's been so much resistance to my making the documentary, but NO! has a life of her own now.'

'Audiences are now changing. There has been some resistance on the part of black men, as far as them being perpetrators as well as victims of racism.

'The Black community tends to rally behind Black men accused of perpetrating sexual assault. Mike Tyson was a big turning point for me. Lots of women castigated Desiree Washington.' She adds that 'when black men are brutalized by white supremacy, people rally around them...'

In this film nothing is romanticised in its reflections on boxer Mike Tyson's conviction for the rape of a woman named Desiree Washington. There's also footage of certain Black male religious leaders coming to Tyson's defense and even appearing to praise him. Black women still often find it difficult or still even prohibited for them to physically enter the pulpit or preacher's space in many Black churches. So it's pretty difficult to watch footage of Tyson as a convicted rapist being physically embraced by 'the brothers' right near that space at once sacred, masculinised, and often still exclusionary of women.

As if Tyson's welcome in the bosom of some Black religious leaders weren't enough, perhaps even more shocking is seeing and hearing Black Muslim leader (and former 'calypsonian') Louis Farrakhan caught on film as he berates, ridicules and derisively mimicks Black women in a speech to an audience. At Howard University, the audience emits a loud and collective gasp.

I was lucky enough to attend NO!'s November 2006 premiere at Howard in DC. It was a mostly Black audience of students and more mature folk, men as well as women. Following the film a lengthy Q&A session featured Simmons and Lori Robinson, another survivor of sexual assault, who's written *I Will Survive: The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse* (Seal Press, 2003). Robinson recounted how two strangers took her inside her home and attacked her.

The Howard screening was sponsored by the DC Rape Crisis Center, which wisely offered on-the-spot counseling during the premiere. To support the effort I buy a dvd of the film along with Robinson's book.

NO! is divided into eight parts: 'Introduction & Devastation of Date Rape', 'Weapon of History: Slavery, Freedom, Sexploitation', 'Survivors Silenced (Who is a Race Traitor?)', 'Civil Rights & Wrongs', 'Raping the Next Generation (Impact on Girls)', 'Holding Men Accountable: Campus, Clergy & Community', 'Unequal Justice Under Law', and 'Healing, Faith, & Hope'.

It begins with survivors retelling their own personal and varied experiences of rape and attempted rape. One adult survivor recalls being 12 years old shortly before she was assaulted by an older boy.

In the wake of ex-radio personality Don Imus's 'gutter remarks' about Rutgers University's highly successful women's basketball team, NO!'s critique of hip hop and 'gangsta rap' takes on greater meaning. Video features men surrounding themselves with scantily dressed young women. The film depicts gangsta hip hop for what it is: a disturbing expression of something very skewed and distorted in the perception of the female, feminine part of ourselves and our own community.

Viewing these clips makes me feel self-conscious and deeply uncomfortable. I remember earlier cultural and political gender battles waged not so long ago by the late political leader, C. Delores Tucker, who was one of Black America's leading public policy advocates. Dr Tucker raised the issue of the treatment and depiction of Black women in the music industry, not only in the United States

Congress but also in local Washington and across the US and beyond. As head of the National Political Congress of Black Women, "C. Delores", as many called her, dared to speak up and speak out.

Her articulate and valid criticism of the vulgarisation and objectification of Black womanhood in so many music videos brought her ridicule by many in the music business and so-called "street" culture.

In the film Aaronette White eloquently describes her assault by someone she describes as the then-most senior Black administrator at the university she attended in the 1980s. White also remembers that at the time, another Black man advised her not to file a complaint because, according to him, no one would believe her over her college administrator attacker.

NO! also pulls together soul-stirring contributions from the older generation of sister-activists, including Spelman College's Beverly Guy Sheftall, and Johnetta Cole, former president of Spelman and recently retired as president of another institution dedicated to Black women's higher education, Bennett College in North Carolina.

I rejoiced to hear the voices and thinking of veteran sister-leaders, like lesbian feminist writer and activist Barbara Smith, the founder of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, and former Black Panther chairperson Elaine Brown. Barbara takes us through the early coalitions of lesbian and heterosexual Black women, fighting violence against women, especially within Black and other communities of colour. Internationally, did women's rallying cry in the US: 'We cannot live without our lives' reverberate elsewhere among our people?

All of us are called upon to remind each other of the truth of these words, and to teach our younger generations of boys and girls, women and men, who are coming up behind us.

Simmons' film is only made stronger by the contributions of several men. After all, ultimately it is men's responsibility simply to stop inflicting most sexual and other forms of violence.

Enter Essex Hemphill. In a video recorded before his death, the late gay Black American poet recites 'Conditions XXI', a poem he originally entitled 'To Some Supposed Brothers':

'You judge a woman by the length of her skirt, by the way she walks, talks, looks, and acts; by the color of her skin you judge and will call her "bitch!" "Black bitch!" if she doesn't answer your: "Hey baby, whatcha gonna say to a man..."'

Also within the film is a dialogue between Sulaiman Nuruddin and Caribbean-born Ulester Douglas, both working with Atlanta, Georgia-based group Men Stopping Violence.

Admits Nuruddin, 'How difficult it is to challenge my brother, wanting to protect my brother from the white male patriarchy... how I will collude or not talk or be silent about that which needs to be talked about.'

Caribbean native Ulester Douglas breaks it down further. 'We will protect the race at any cost, even if we're killing our sisters.'

Samiya Bashir's incredible poem, "Treason" stuns the listener, just as another young Black poetess describes going to poetry slams and how after finding her "attractive", brother poets first want to protect her, up to the moment they hear her read a poem about her love for another woman.

After this fateful poem she feels the brothers' intentions and attitudes shift.

'Manhood offended', if given the chance, she says, a few of the same men, moments earlier her friends and admirers, actually would sexually assault her, ostensibly in order to 'teach her a lesson'.

Gwendolyn Simmons, who's also Aishah's mother, paints a self-portrait of being a Spelman student in 1962 and getting involved in SNCC - the legendary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Ironically the elder Simmons' own early devotion to 'the Black liberation struggle' eventually brings her into proximity with almost being raped. She describes the would-be rapist, the type of man whom in the 1970s we called 'a movement brother'. Gwen Simmons says he was a well-known SNCC leader and 'a local Mississippian' but does not name him.

Both the poetry-slamming sister and Gwendolyn Simmons' cautionary tale remind me how often rape is very 'local'. It is most often perpetrated by males we've seen and/or know, which contributes to an even greater destruction of trust, and the equally powerful need to heal and restore our trust in ourselves and others.

The filmmaker describes NO! as her own child; now living its own life. Simmons is very aware of obstacles and perseverance. She completed the film in 2005, eleven years after starting it in 1994. She tells me the doc grew out of "knowing black women affected by sexual assault and the silence in our community - acute silence in our community - around this issue."

Aishah's company, AFRO-LEZ Productions, reflects the fact that she's also an 'out' lesbian. Her film moves to break down some of the Black community's silence about loving and accepting our own Black gay and lesbian people. Lesbians and gay men are seen and heard in this film.

From Barbara Smith to the haunting, poignant poetry read by the late Essex Hemphill, to the hilarious, insightful and deeply touching Loretta Ross and others, Aishah's work honors and includes the presence and contributions of 'all her peeps' - all of our people - to our common struggle and to this film.

More than ever, these days Aishah is still busy 'running'. Travelling and too busy for a real interview for the moment, she emails me to say that NO!'s subtitled versions should be available by fall 2007, thanks to a grant from Ford Foundation. Work also is underway on the accompanying educational guide which will be available as a download on the NO! website.

This is a film about all of us as humans. It's not only about pain, but also healing, recovery and self-discovery. While some may try to frame this film as 'controversial' or 'subversive', globally Black communities will benefit by doing whatever it takes and by any means necessary to bring this documentary to the wider audience it deserves - our families, schools, religious bodies, clubs, reunions and other organisations.

Essex Hemphill died of AIDS on 4 November 1995. This line from the film is the last line in his earlier-quoted poem. Reading it on a page isn't the same as watching and hearing him fairly spit it.

'... we so called men, we so called brothers wonder why it's so hard to love our women when we're about loving them the way america loves us.'