

The Power of NO!

An Interview with Black Lesbian Filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons

By Tamara K. Nopper

It has taken rape and incest survivor, activist, and filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons 11 years to complete her documentary *NO!*, which chronicles rape and healing within the African American community and relates this violence to white supremacy, slavery, sexism, and homophobia. Now that the film is finished, Simmons faces her next hurdle: getting *NO!* out to the public and navigating the politics of distribution. Although getting institutional support for a film is a normal challenge for any director, it is even more challenging for Simmons because *NO!* does what many films don't: centralizes Black women's experiences and analyses. *Clamor* talks to Simmons about this process.

Your film NO! has been recently completed after an 11 year journey. How are you feeling about that?

I'm very happy that *NO!* is finally finished and soon to be re-officially distributed, but that it's already being released into the world.

What are some of the challenges you're facing in getting it out into the world?

I finished *NO!* in August of 2005 and I submitted *NO!* to what's kind of considered the "A-list" film festivals . . . and all of them rejected me. I was kind of like – *whoa*, I wasn't expecting that and so it forced me to have to kind of just step back and think about who supported *NO!*, and who's helped to make *NO!* a reality . . . I think it just kind of *re-grounded* me And that's why I'm glad it didn't happen because fuck those people . . . as Toni Cade Bambara says, it's your *community* who you want to name you.

I noticed with some of these film festivals, and especially with liberal Hollywood, all of a sudden this big interest in having images of Africa, especially war-torn Africa or corrupt Africa. And yet you can't get your film out about Black women in the U.S., even though there are a lot of things that Hollywood would like to see, which is devastation and the kind of trauma and violence towards Black people. People have such a weird appetite for that. Why do you think there's this kind of willingness to see Black bodies going through this experience in the context of Africa, but not with your film?

I think that white people, not just Americans but Europeans as well, I think that there's this . . . to look at Black women in America is to hold white people accountable in a way in which, to talk about Africa, yeah, we all know about colonialism, but the way in which it's kind of . . . they're able to help the *other* as opposed to dealing with the situation at home. I've had prominent white feminists tell me that they couldn't support *NO!* because they were doing work in Africa – as if you can't do both. I never understood that. White American feminists tell me, "Oh, your project is very important, but you know, I'm helping Kenyan girls who are being raped." And so of course I don't want to be like, don't help them, but how can you not help me?

But I also think that a lot of African American women who are doing this work – and god knows *NO!* does it – it challenges racism in America. It challenges white feminists who've been racist, it challenges white men – they want to be the saviors. They want to . . . they see Africa as we've got to help these helpless people as opposed to, here *NO!*'s not, you know, women are definitely victimized but they're also agents of change. They're there as experts, and so even though we see them as the victims, we also see them as the survivors, as the activists, and in addition to the women who . . . the featured testimonies, we also have the scholars and activists and historians. I really think that *NO!* challenges white people, because . . . I think white people need, a lot of white people, unfortunately, want to be saviors and need to save.

I'm sure you've seen a lot of films coming out about the exploitation of Black women in hip hop. What impact do you think that has on your film getting seen?

Mmm. Well, hip hop is very sexy, you know? First of all, it's a very lucrative business. It's a predominantly *male* business. So, one of the things that I've learned from Toni Cade Bambara, as well as also from Julie Dash, who made *Daughters of the Dust*, is that what film does is it asks you for two hours, for ninety minutes, whatever, to experience what you're seeing through the lens of the filmmaker. So when I'm

looking at a Woody Allen film, for instance – and I hate to talk about the pedophile – but when I'm looking at a Woody Allen film . . .

That's what he is, yeah.

(laughs)

Oh lord, thank you.

You know, I'm asked to, you know, I'm asked to experience *everything*, so the Jewish culture, all of that, whatever The challenge of the films done by people of color is that white people – much less people of color – we're not even trained to look at a film and see people who are not, people who are not white. We're just not trained to see that. So we're so used to seeing the white savior and all that kind of historically. What's come up as a result of Spike – first Melvin Van Peebles but Spike Lee and John Singleton, so many others – we've gotten these kind of *Boyz N the Hood* films. Not necessarily Spike, but John Singleton.

So because the way in which patriarchy works is that these white men could have their *fantasies* about being bad boys, gangsters, through Black men. So there definitely . . . there's still no interest in what Black women have to say Hip hop has kind of really in some ways transcended race so . . . everybody's into hip hop. So I think that there's this kind of . . . it's *sexy*, so to speak. And then, what's even sexier is to have Black men talking about the problems with hip hop Quite a few of the films that are out there are being done by Black men.

I mean I think it's good. They need to challenge these issues. But I wonder, you know, as opposed to the films that are being made by women of color, documentary films, they *aren't* as welcome . . . unfortunately, Black feminists don't get that kind of support or that space to talk about the issues.

I see these clips on television and I notice that they often seem very gratuitous; the only way in which they can talk about Black women in hip hop is by talking about big asses and having these kind of slow-mo, slowed down scenes And there's something about it that I think is supposed to be kind of tantalizing to the viewer even as they're supposed to be kind of repulsed by it, right? And so what would be tantalizing about Black women dealing with rape and sexual assault?

I think because there is . . . the documentary does not objectify women's bodies. I mean, there is a segment where I do a brief critique of hip hop, but it's not in depth. So it's not *sexy*, if you will, in that way. And again . . . we're not trained to view Black women as experts. I've had people say, 'Where did you get all of those smart Black women from?' You know, like, I've had folks say that. And then because I look at challenging the role of religion and how that's played a role and kind of looking at key prominent Black figures, Black male figures, I think that for white people, that this is their, a way in which they become paternalistic. So it's like, "Oh, I don't want to deal with that" because "I don't want to get involved with that."

For instance, I had a potential funder say to me that she was concerned about stereotypes of Black people. I named a list of shows that her organization that she runs produced, which are completely ultimate stereotypes of Black people. And then she paused and she just kind of said, "Well, you know, I don't want Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton boycotting." Yet that's bullshit; they're not willing to go to the mat for Black women basically When I kept pushing and pushing, she said, "Let's face it. Most people don't care about the rape of Black women." At the same time I think if I were a white man, a white woman, or even a Black man, but definitely a white man or a white woman doing this documentary, it would be sexy. But somehow because I'm a Black woman who's a feminist, who's a lesbian, who's a survivor, I'm not objective.

I got a chance to watch your film, and what really struck me is that it lacked, in a good way, it lacked kind of this condemnation of Black women for being sexual or for wanting to have desire or for dressing however they want to dress. And especially in the conversation about Desiree Washington as it related to Mike Tyson, and seeing a lot of the women in the film stand up for her and say, "Nothing gives the person the right to rape somebody regardless if they went to the room, this and that." And I sense sometimes that the hip hop conversation around Black women is

still very condemning of Black women in a way where it's kind of like, "If you don't want to be violated or treated this way, then don't shake your ass," right?

Mmm. Mmm. Definitely. I completely agree that that is definitely something . . . that I refused to give into about this right place, right time bullshit.

And how do you think that's affected some of the reaction to your film, whether it's by funders, or whether it's by people who've seen clips?

I do think it's played a role. So it's going to be very interesting. For instance there's, I'm sure you've heard about the woman who was raped in North Carolina by the Duke Lacrosse team – Black woman and now, because she was a stripper, North Carolina Central University, which is a Black school, historically Black school, and she's a student there, she's a stripper, a single mom, and they don't want to claim her. It's this kind of thing where she had no business being at the bachelor party, anyway. And so . . . I'm actually going to go down there to have a screening of *NO!* I say that because many of the screenings that are happening – and not necessarily connected to that – it's going to be a different type of audience. Because in the past it's been like, "Aishah's raising money, we've got to help her finish this film." So I'm still kind of like on the edge of how *NO!* is going to be received in the world . . . What I'm hoping that *NO!* does – and this I've learned from all the screenings and discussions – is to kind of address people.

So when a survivor in the film talks about going to her boyfriend's frat house at 1 a.m. in the morning and talks about the context of all that, then we got Sulaiman Nuriddin right after she tells her testimony to say that most men think that that's *not* rape. So just to really kind of – because people are already thinking that – address it and have a *man* saying it. So I do think it is going to push people's buttons and challenge them.

So now what they're saying is that the Mike Tyson–Desiree Washington case is outdated. And yeah, it *is* outdated in many ways in terms of that there are other cases that I could use now. But the context is that we already, if we've got some women who are raped by white men – *white men*, so you would think that would cause an uproar – white men and folks who still say they had no business being at the bachelor party, Mike Tyson isn't outdated. I mean, you know, I could look at other people, but it's still the same thing as blaming the victims.

Note: This interview was conducted in March, 2006. In June, Simmons received a major Ford Foundation grant to support the educational marketing and distribution of NO!

For more info ,visit: www.notherapedocumentary.org

To order a copy of *NO!* , visit the California Newsreel website.

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