

Catalyzing Possibility: The *NO!* Film Documentary as Community Accountability Technology

Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti and Aishah Shahidah
Simmons, interviewed by Alisa Bierria*

What does it look like to visually make central that which has been placed on the margins and on the periphery?—Aishah Shahidah Simmons, filmmaker (2006a)

ORGANIZING RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE THAT ARE IMAGINED AND DRIVEN BY the community requires that the situation of violence to which the community responds is legible as such. How do communities account for rape and domestic violence against black women when the construction of black women frames them as incapable of credibly occupying the category of “victim of violence from others,” or asserting an engaged subjectivity¹ within the experience of surviving violence? How are black antiviolence activisms disrupted by the political risks taken by black survivors and others when publicly addressing intraracial gender violence under the gaze of a dominant culture that relies on pathologizing black people to justify a racialized politics of perpetual punishment? Community-based accountability processes can both produce and benefit from methods and mechanisms that help us to navigate through painful fault lines in anti-rape discourse, such as skepticism about the credibility of black women, fear of racialized demonization, and the threat of ostracism from one’s community (for the person who is assaulted and the one who assaults).

NO! is a striking 2006 documentary that examines sexual violence against black women by black men. Focusing primarily on the vivid testimony and lucid analysis of black women survivors, it boldly contends with these difficult questions (Simmons, 2006b). Producer and director Aishah Shahidah Simmons, a black, Philadelphia-based, lesbian-feminist filmmaker, took 12 years to complete *NO!* and to generate the conditions needed to make the film possible. She contended with “racist, sexist, and misogynist economic censorship” in the form of rejection letters

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from potential funders, which asserted that the film's topic lacked importance. In concert with what became a global network of predominantly black women and survivors of violence, Simmons found herself conjuring space in which the film could even *exist*, materially and conceptually. Since its premiere, the documentary has had a planet-wide impact; it has traveled across nearly every continent and reached hundreds of thousands of people.

Theryn Kigvamasud'Vashti is the former co-director of Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA), a Seattle-based anti-rape organization. A black feminist organizer, scholar, and media maker herself, Theryn led the Black People's Project at CARA, which increased the capacity of black communities to develop strategies for support, safety, and accountability, particularly in the context of gender violence. In this role, Theryn organized multiple screenings of *NO!* in Seattle with the goal of instigating transformative dialogue and nurturing the potential for meaningful individual and collective responses to violence.

Having worked with Theryn at CARA, and having had the privilege of screening *NO!* many times, I was honored to engage both women about how this film is a community accountability artifact in its own right as well as a potent cinematic instrument that catalyzes critical reconsiderations of the problem, circumstances, and consequences of sexual violence against black women, manifesting the possibility for recognition and change. In the following conversation, Aishah and Theryn explore the manifold situations of violence against black women, the impact of *NO!* on engaged audiences, and the political, material, and spiritual conditions in which their work is leveraged.

Alisa: Aishah, please share with us the social and political context of the making of *NO!*

Aishah: I am a survivor of incest and rape, and a daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of women who have been sexually assaulted, raped, or molested in some form or fashion. So, it was very personal. When I first started making *NO!*, I did not think it was personal. I wanted to help all *those* black women out there because they needed help. I did not realize that in making it, I was saving myself. I made *NO!* to address sexual violence and healing in African American communities. I wanted people to see a face when they think of a survivor of rape, the image of a black woman. That was really important. Talking about eradicating racism, while very important, is not enough to make our communities safe and whole. We have to address sexism and homophobia; we cannot focus on single issues. Ending racism right now might help to make heterosexual, privileged (in terms of class) men of color safe, but gay men are not safe, women are definitely not safe, and queer people are not safe. We must deal with all of these issues. My goal with *NO!* is to show that sexual violence is a race, gender, and sexuality issue in our community.

Alisa: Theryn, the way you approach violence in black communities also uses a generational awareness. Can you talk about that?

Theryn: In thinking about the way in which sexual assault has played out in my family, I have been doing some genealogy around lynching. Specifically, how or when does a lynching event affect a family such that maladaptions or traumatic responses are acted out within the experience of sexual assault? Thinking through connections between myself as a childhood survivor of sexual assault, my mother as a childhood survivor, and my sister as a childhood survivor, I have always felt that it was not a random anomaly or curse, but connected somehow to the lynching of Miles Taylor, my great great-grandfather. His family was forced to witness his public murder and were threatened with lynching if they cried. As it pertains to the experience of black women, an intense silencing results from lynching stories. Though meant to protect us from racial aggression and harms, that silencing prevents us from protecting family members and descendants from the experience of rape. The story of the lynching of Miles Taylor constantly re-inscribes the way we should be moving in the world, it informs our code-switching, and it helps to create a list of spoken and unspoken boundaries that were not crossed. We did not allow people to cross with us. So my parents told us: Do not go to the houses of white folks without asking, to anybody's house without asking, definitely do not step foot in someone's house without letting us know where you are, do not let people touch your hair, and do not go to the store with your friends without telling us. Often, if the friends were white, they did not let us go. All of this comes from them growing up in the South and understanding that, as Ntozake Shange put it, "our front porch don't go from here to eternity." So the lynching story becomes a way to teach black children to protect themselves when they are in the world. But, the Miles Taylor story did not protect three girls from being *raped*. The intensity of the retelling of that story was mirrored by an equally intense *non-telling* of childhood sexual assault. This gets back to what Aishah pointed out, that ending racism alone will not stop rape.

Alisa: Aishah, you said that you made *NO!* to have a black woman as the face image of a rape survivor, which is a powerful shift from the way rape survivors are usually perceived in this country. What intervention does *NO!* make in terms of how sexual violence against black women is perceived?

Aishah: *NO!* really helps people to begin to think about black women as rape survivors. I have written that after a screening, young white women who are anti-rape activists, self-identified feminists (when I say young, I am talking about college-age undergrads), have said, "Oh, my God, prior to seeing your film I did not know black women could be raped."

Theryn and Alisa (simultaneously): Whoa.

Aishah: We can and should have a critique of that. Although not as horrified as we were, they were making a critique of themselves. In the Q & A, we talked about why this was; it was either that black women were always wanting, willing, and able, or so bad that we are going to kick your ass. So they interrogated where they learned these messages and *why* they had learned them. These were women who brought *NO!* and me to their campus and were the “anti-rape feminists.” So *NO!* really puts pressure on people. Among the things I learned from Toni Cade Bambara is that cinema asks you to experience whatever it is that you are seeing through the lens of those people. That is one reason I think it is so hard for African Americans, indigenous folks, and Asians and Latinos to tell our stories realistically. The gatekeepers do not see us and do not want to see stories that reflect our complexities. They do not want to sit for two hours and see what it is like to be a black woman, a Latino man, or a Native American sista. If they do, they want some fantasy of what that means. So, *NO!* forces viewers to think about sexual violence through the experiences of black women who have encountered it, as well as through the herstory, activism, and scholarship of expert black women and men. That there are no white experts in *NO!* is intentional. Some white folks I know could have added something to the dialogue, but I felt it was important that this was our story to tell. It says that we need to address it, and have done the research and the activism. Equally important, people see that most of the survivors in *NO!* are also the experts. It is not a matter of victim-survivors who tell their stories and academics who come in to contextualize those stories. Almost every featured survivor also appears as an expert and agent for change. That is important, particularly in the mainstream antiviolence movement, which has become so professionalized that people are encouraged not to talk about the violence that they have experienced. So *NO!* has done many interventions in terms of showing black women as experts and survivors, and black men as active in the movement to end violence against women. While we definitely hear testimonies from survivors about black men who have raped and brutalized them, we also hear from black men who are taking a stand against this type of violence.

Alisa: How has the film transformed the way in which black women survivors are perceived by black men and perhaps by other black women?

Aishah: I have yet to have a screening where there has not been at least one woman or girl (and usually more) who discloses. Each screening has been multiracial, has taken place in all kinds of environments, has been meaningful, and touched me deeply. For me as a black woman who is a survivor, however, there is always something, call it ancient, ancestral, or tribal, when I am in predominantly black spaces. In a multiracial context with white folk, I almost feel that we must acknowledge racism, because the knee-jerk reaction is to pathologize black people. As if men all over are not doing this, the implicit question is: Why do black men do this? When I am in a black space, it is usually understood that racism is alive and well. We may

have to tackle it, but we are tackling it differently when we are talking about sexual violence. What has happened for me, for black women, is the feeling that our voices and testimonies are being heard. I bring this up because of the ongoing conflict or dialogue challenging it because there are “so many women” in *NO!* with a Ph.D. Others have suggested that the film does not represent “real” black people, the black community. That disturbs me on so many levels. It is one thing for people from more disenfranchised communities to have that analysis, but usually the most critical people have degrees themselves. Unfortunately, those of us who have been able to “climb up the ladder” then buy into these white supremacist beliefs about who is really black.

Theryn: That’s right.

Aishah: That really disturbs me, because a certain group of black men and black people are treated as if they are expendable, and it becomes a way to excuse them. “Well, they are poor, they are on drugs, they are living in the hood.” My vision was to *challenge* the notion that you cannot commit rape because you are the highest-ranking black professional in a university or a leader in a revolutionary movement. Because we create these sacred cows it is not possible, or even when it is possible, we cannot talk about these things because of all we have been through. It is okay to demonize the least of us in the margins, but not those of us who have access to power. That was my focus in this documentary. *NO!* has shifted the paradigm. I have screened it on Rikers Island with 200 incarcerated Latino boys ranging in age from 13 to 18, and many of those boys were in jail for protecting their mothers who had been brutalized. These are children. It was very powerful to hear these young boys talk about the issues *NO!* raises and for a 13- or 14-year-old boy to see and feel like his story is being told. Folks say that it is good to see this happen in *all* of the communities, because so often these sectors of communities are demonized. It is good to see it happen in every community, because media images often demonize one sector. One question I have is why the undershirts, usually associated with white, working-class men, are called “wife beaters”? Why not call suits “wife beaters”? Because of the politics of respectability, many black women readily admit that they did not think they could talk about this, that they are not supposed to talk about these issues. This has created space for working-class women to say that *these* women are being raped, so I can talk about it and do not have to have shame. An interesting dialogue about class emerges, and we may need another mini-documentary that looks at the nuances around class. As a critique, I would say *NO!* does not contain a class analysis in a direct, hardcore way. What I am addressing in the film is that having a degree or leading a revolutionary movement does not mean that you cannot rape.

Alisa: The film has traveled all around the world. How has *NO!* been used on the ground by viewers and people in the community organizing against sexual assault?

Aishah: UBUNTU, a multiracial, multi-gender collective led by queer women of color, came together in response to the backlash against the [black] woman who [in 2007] accused the predominantly white Duke lacrosse team of sexually assaulting her.² They screened *NO!* at various times. Women of color, queer people of color, and white folks talk about it in their communities to discuss the issues it raises. When people heard about it, they were surprised because the film is about intraracial rape in black communities, whereas at Duke the case allegedly involved *interracial* rape. However, UBUNTU's position was that the issues raised partly account for the backlash to this woman, mother, student, and sex worker. I definitely believe she was sexually assaulted, based on everything that I have read. *NO!* was used as an organizing tool to educate and organize, to strengthen their numbers and do consciousness-raising in that triangle area of North Carolina. So that is a very clear-cut case.

Various radical organizations in the United States and internationally (specifically, France and Haiti) use it. It has been translated into French, Spanish, and Portuguese, and used in the Caribbean, South America, various African countries, and Canada. Men's organizations have used it. In academic settings, black Greeks—the Alphas and Kappas—have used it to talk about sexual violence. I have found that during sexual violence awareness month, and slowly but surely during black history month, there is a desire to talk about sexual violence, but few resources exist to look at it within our communities from our perspective. They have been using *NO!* to raise awareness. That way, they do not have to rely upon “universal”—read “white”—resources that do not necessarily speak to the issues in their communities. College-age students from a program called Girl Talk asked me to come and present *NO!* in black and Latino communities, specifically at the high schools. We had really intense dialogues. These young girls, 15 or 16 years old, would say, “as long as he does not hit me too much.” So we must go from “not too much” to “never” in those dialogues. The Philadelphia Student Union, a radical group of young people, came together from schools throughout the city to challenge the police state within schools. Multiracial and predominantly people of color (African American and Latino), the group definitely includes a few white, queer, feminist, and teenage members. Post-screening dialogues with these young men were particularly profound; although they had never raped or battered anyone, they discussed how they had been silent when their peers talked about it. Many of them said they would no longer be silent, or laugh at the jokes. Without romanticizing youth, I think there is a greater willingness to look at one's behavior and be self-critical. I did not approach them as a teacher with all the answers; I simply screened *NO!* and wanted them to tell me what they thought and felt about the issues. The dialogue was *real*; herstories were disclosed and a few young men talked about being survivors. Many of their parents also were survivors.

Alisa: The same students who came together to challenge the police state in school were also engaging the *NO!* film?

Aishah: The same students were doing radical work. They were addressing “zero tolerance,”³ with students saying no violence, including no police. We hear you, but we do not want to be in a police state.

Alisa: Was *NO!* introduced in that political context? With no police available to address rape on campus, did they intend to use *NO!* to empower themselves and deal with sexual violence more proactively?

Aishah: Yes, they were. I am in favor of whatever works. If the survivor wants to press charges, I do not believe in telling anybody what to do about that. At the same time, I believe in discussing the matter. If the criminal justice system were the solution, then based on the numbers, we would not have rape. In that context, these young brothers were saying that they wanted to play a role in stopping rape. They said this after seeing the documentary, which mostly discusses acquaintance rape. In the film, there is only one instance in which someone broke into a woman’s house. Rape in the film typically covered situations in which a woman would admit to having participated in oral sex, but had not consented to vaginal sex. Upon seeing this, these young brothers and sisters would say, wow, I never thought about rape like that. For them, rape was being yanked off the street or something similar. They reflected on whether jokes with their peers were really jokes and why they were laughing or being silent. And they asked: What is my role in ending violence if we cannot bring in the police? What if we all have a role in being accountable? What would it look like?

Alisa: Let us talk about the sustained use of *NO!* in Seattle. Theryn, please give us some background on the Black People’s Project at CARA and the strategic decision to screen the film.

Theryn: When I began organizing at CARA, I was told that the landscape of possibilities was completely open for organizing the black community to address sexual assault, or supporting the black community in terms of interpersonal violence. Whatever made sense to the community should be allowed to emerge. I thought about history, particularly contemporary moments in which ideas concerning the rapeability of black bodies became ingrained in our society. Also, I offered support to the community to engage in and broaden community discourses about state and interpersonal violence. For example, if we were all at a rally to protest the wrongful death of a black man by the Seattle police department, it made sense for us to participate in these spaces as an anti-rape organization, because we are all talking about how to reduce our reliance on law enforcement. If we are going to lead discussions about how to achieve that reduction, to change our perception of the word “protection” and our reliance on the state for protection and accountability, then we must examine interpersonal violence in such a way that we brainstorm our way toward a liberatory model that relies less on the state for protection and accountability and more on ourselves.

So that means that when we're at a protest because someone has been murdered by the police, it is not alright to call a woman a bitch and threaten to harm her because she would not give you the bullhorn.⁴ It is precisely what the Black People's Project (BPP) tried to take up. The intersection of racialized oppression and intraracial gender oppression is the direction we started to move the conversation, from CARA to the black communities where CARA was sitting. So the BPP held conversations with smaller groups that we called the Community Action Team. Members of the black community brought their experience to bear on how to have conversations about our experiences with interpersonal and state violence. Of course, interpersonal violence was not limited to heterosexual relationships. There were also people who were queer-identified in a multitude of threads. The BPP held a gender conversation with which many black folks did not feel comfortable, but we kept bringing up the problem of interpersonal violence and state violence.

We created the Nat Turner Teach-In, which gave us the opportunity to talk about liberatory moments in black history. We connected resistance to violence throughout history to our present organizing strategies and experiences. When *NO!* came out, we were excited to partner with a young woman who brought the film out with a group of black folks with whom she was working. She was an activist and participant in the Nat Turner Teach-In, and I rode with her to hear Elaine Brown speak at the house of a former Panther member and was campaigning for a state representative seat. At the house, all the black girls introduced themselves. After my co-director, Eboni Colbert, said she had worked at an anti-rape organization during her introduction to the group, all the women who followed disclosed their experiences with sexual assault.

Aishah: Wow.

Theryn: It was phenomenal to watch. Ms. Brown was then able to speak to the power of some of things she had witnessed as a member of the Black Panther Party. She identified several issues, such as putting the race forward instead of talking about interpersonal violence, as well as the problematic expectations brothers had of women in the movement then. From that energy, this young woman said she had been trying to bring the film to Seattle with a group of folks who had emerged from the Panther group working in the 1970s. But nobody had her back for this project. Other women told her that it was a woman's issue, typically, and that was very hurtful to her. I said that we should get together, and that it made sense for our organization to help make this happen. She applied for a Department of Neighborhoods matching grant, and we were able to leverage funding through our relationship with the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs. Prior to this, smaller organizations were forced to negotiate contracts with larger, white-dominated organizations to serve their communities, and we became fed up with that. Because of the activism of smaller organizations working with marginalized

communities, we could negotiate funding directly from state agencies. We were able to get the support that we needed to bring the film to black communities in Seattle.

Alisa: Can you give us examples of groups that attended BPP-organized screenings?

Theryn: The four full screenings took place at CARA, Seattle Central Community College, the Central District, and at Black Star Line, a home school centering on children of African descent. The audience demographic at the CARA screening was multiracial. Most people were in their 20s or late teens, with some women in their 30s and a few in their 40s and 50s. The community college screening was open to the public. Those who participated were from the community college, worked in universities, for government agencies, the county, state, or city. Only black couples attended the screening at the historically black Central District. At Black Star Line, mostly two-parent families came. For that screening, older women led gendered debriefs with girls as young as 12; older men screened the part about men's roles in *NO!* as a way to inform what they would do to lead those conversations with young men. The youngest men were around 15 or 16 years old.

Alisa: Discuss your facilitation strategy in prepping and debriefing audiences. How did you nuance the post-film discussion?

Theryn: Many of the brothers come into the conversation about rape from an understanding of women's role that was not exactly revolutionary or feminist in nature. [Laughs.] This conversation is often shut down because black men become defensive, feel accused, and think they are catching it from all sides. Many feminist literary writers have talked about this — Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade [Bambara]. I am thinking of *Passing*. There is so much that we know to be true, but that does not change the reality that the conversation always gets stalled with this defensiveness. Then survivors do something that I find irritating: they end up caretaking the people who are supporting the perpetrators by failing to hold them accountable. That is why I wanted brothers who see *NO!* to receive the critique, but for their angst to be shared with each other. It is a conversation that you have to have with folks that you identify as allies. Then you must work with those allies for some time, using the part of *NO!* that talks about men's roles. That way, they can feel grounded and situated in a particular analysis. When defensiveness arises, they can step in, and it is not left up to women who are survivors in the space. When brothers go on the attack due to defensiveness, it is not women who are trying to call it out. Otherwise, the dichotomy only further divides people and makes them less willing to accept what *NO!* is offering in terms of what a man's role can be. When I use the film, I do not necessarily have in mind the need to protect brothers. Yet in the trigger warning I give before showing clips, I say that people of African descent in the Americas have all suffered from the term "rape." We have all suffered as survivors, and as people who perpetuate and recapitulate

the very tenets of colonial conquest through sexual assault. We do not understand that that is what we are doing, and we are multi-gendered doing it. That is how I roll now. People think, well that could be me, and she is not going to call me out or put me on the hot seat in a multiracial audience by defending the position of being a black man. But in a more African audience, I work harder to get brothers to a point where they will do that work. I am not acquiescing as a black feminist to what is a winnable strategy. Instead, I am being intentional with a strategy that allows people to let the information in. During the debrief, I ask that folks allow people to speak their truth, and that when that truth strikes you in a particular way and you feel yourselves becoming anxious or feeling defensive, to sit still with that. Just to sit still with that is not a hostile conversation, but a necessary one about a devastating experience. Those feelings are legitimate, as is the anxiety, so I need to communicate that they are in a place where they will not be judged. Then people can choose to engage or not. Sometimes people take the risk and engage, and sometimes they do not.

I will speak to one incident concerning a young brother in the spoken word hip-hop artist scene. Over the years, many women had come to CARA and complained about him. Two of his friends approached CARA, and one of them said that he was noticing that women were not coming to their shows because they did not want to encounter this particular person. Thinking I might know something about that, they believed I might help by doing an intervention. I had known about it and agreed to help. These brothers came down, we talked about *NO!*, and screened the part about holding brothers accountable. We talked about how they situate themselves inside of that, and whether they have imagined themselves as perpetuating sexual assault. If they had, have they done their work? What had they gleaned from that experience? That was the starting point for moving forward. The women said they wanted us to take the stories about this guy and get rid of him. These sisters had come up through the poetry scene as DJs, rappers, spoken-word artists, and performers. Some of them asked us to leverage our support. For their part, the men who had discussed this person and *NO!* with us said they would take that conversation to him. *NO!* let these young black men hear the older black men in the film speak to them about how rape works as a device and an event. Reflecting on this information in the company of black men validated their desire to shift in such a way that their sisters could show up and feel safe doing their work.

Alisa: Theryn, we have talked about how black women are constructed in the culture as deserving the violence they experience. Can you discuss how *NO!* intervenes in this problem and addresses why black women fail to be considered credible testifiers as survivors of violence?

Theryn: One example is the [June 2010] situation of Angel Rosenthal. This young African American woman and her friend were crossing the street “illegally,” jaywalking, across from a Rainier Valley high school, which is predominantly

immigrant African and Asian. A video clip shows the fight that broke out when a cop put his hand on Angel Rosenthal's friend in the process of putting her in the back of the cop car.⁵ It is not clear whether or why he was going to arrest her. They were eventually charged with battery and resisting arrest, since somehow it had escalated to that. We see the officer, Ian Walsh, grabbing her friend, Angel Rosenthal breaking the hold, and the cop punching Angel in the face. When the world sees this, whether it is Perez Hilton⁶ or the newscast from the U.K., most interpret it as evidence of a cop out of control, abusing state power, and unlawfully touching a teenage girl. Locally, however, the former executive director of the Seattle Urban League, James Kelley, brokered an apology from this girl to this policeman. So when a *Seattle Weekly* story, "Cops Gone Wild," provided a detailed list of police use of excessive force at various events, the reporter asserted in print that Angel was responsible for the police violence she experienced, as if it were a fact. That is a consequence of this coerced apology.

The parents had not solicited James Kelly's involvement. In Seattle, mostly black women were organizing to support Angel and her friend in this event with the police. Kelly undermined the process by arranging an apology without consultation. Black women in Seattle understand that both young women were in foster care. They did not come from a heteronormative family structure and they were seen as bad seeds. Their prosecution was a testament to this. It was assumed that Angel had no business acting the way she did because what person in their right mind would act that way with the police? In short, some people said that she deserved what she got. So James Kelly suggested that she apologize to this officer. During the apology in a private setting, Angel said through tears (these recordings, by different news sources, are also accessible on the Internet) that she was sorry. The abusive cop, Walsh, then said that he hoped she had learned her lesson and would keep her hands off the police in the future. It really angered black women that Walsh had punched Angel in the face, but so did the intervention by James Kelly, a black man in leadership, whose organization is always leveraging funding to support young people in whatever endeavor the Urban League considers credible and worthy of its time and attention. Instead of supporting this young woman and protecting her humanity, he stepped in and sold her humanity out. With this event, our humanity has been subjugated to the state again, very publicly, and for what? To uphold patriarchal power?

Of course, there is cultural production that creates the idea that violence against black women is our fault rather than due to the process of state-making and a colonial project that deems our bodies to be imbued with less humanity. As the targets of this dehumanization, it is not us who need to apologize in these events, whether public or private, whether solely physically abusive or with the additional injury of sexual assault. Yet we are the ones who are expected to move aside, with our humanity pushed aside, to "move forward." In the police attack on Angel Rosenthal and Malika Calhoun, a 15-year-old black girl who was beaten by police in her cell in a

separate incident, our humanity—or rather the negation of our humanity—became the center of the conversation. Our non-humanity needs to be interrogated, not our humanity, because that is solid and upfront. Instead, we must explore why we are produced as beings who are not worthy of humanity.

Alisa: That reminds me of Aishah's comment about how one goal of *NO!* was to change the imaginary of who can be considered a rape survivor. By giving the image of a rape survivor a black woman's face, it may help to disrupt the instinct to punish and blame black women survivors. Shifting gears a bit, I would like to know how you both define "community accountability."

Aishah: I have heard about community accountability for much of my life. Both of my parents (Michael Simmons and Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons) were activists in various movements, first in the Civil Rights Movement, then the Black Power Movements, and definitely in their global work. The seed was planted, a foundation was laid, but as happens with kids and their parents, it can be like, "whatever." [Laughter.] But that seed was reawakened through my profound five-year relationship with Toni Cade Bambara. *NO!* emerged from a script-writing workshop in her class in the Scribe Video Center, where I wrote a choreopoem called "A State of Rage." Later it appeared in *Shout Out: Women of Color Respond to Violence* (2008). It was a roadmap to *NO!* because Toni kept saying, "I hear your feelings, I hear your points, but I am not *seeing* it." She basically told me not to come to her class empty handed. Being the procrastinator that I am, the night before class I free-styled, resulting in "A State of Rage." Anytime I wavered, I returned to it and it kept me on track. Toni told me: It is your community that you want to name you and claim you. Her written work was about her community.

NO! was 12 years in the making, and toward the end I received grants from foundations, including a huge one from the Ford Foundation. But in the initial years, up to the eleventh hour, it was made possible by grassroots community organizing, small women's foundations and funds, and lesbians. The Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice was the first foundation to contribute even a dime to *NO!*. Many lesbians and/or feminists who were in positions of power in smaller foundations or other grant providers would green light funds for *NO!*, but they could not deliver large amounts. People, friends, colleagues, and comrades used whatever access and power they had to organize screenings. At that point, my many friends in undergraduate or graduate school had no money, but they could sponsor screenings. Those honoraria were put back into *NO!*. So, long after Toni's physical transition in 1995, I finally grasped the meaning of wanting your community to name you. In those early days, I was not receiving big funds from the PBSs, the HBOs, or the Fords. I was not accountable to their funding priorities and strategies. Instead, I was accountable to the men, women, and trans folk of all colors, but predominantly of color, who said: I do not have a lot, but this is what I have, and I want to give it to *NO!*. I became accountable to these people. They saw *NO!*

and said, we support this based on its vision, because it speaks to our politics and our activism. Therefore, I was accountable to them, and did not have to make it shipshape in somebody else's agenda.

When the big grant from Ford came through, I was able to add subtitles and provide a supplemental video and a 100-page study guide. For that I am grateful, but when I did it, it was on my own terms. I applied for it, wanted it, but did not need it because *NO!* was already done. It took *NO!* to another level, but I was not accountable in that way. If I had gotten that grant in the late 1990s or the early 2000s, I wonder what would have happened. Or if PBS or HBO had tried to tell me what the vision should be. For me, community accountability means that you have a responsibility to the communities of which you are a part. It was a contract, because I stated what I wanted to do and what I was going to do. It was mutual, because they believed in a vision, and it was not just my vision. My vision was informed by screenings and discussions from these folks, so it was this *engagement*, if you will. It was a global, grassroots, feminist-based, lesbian-based movement to make *NO!*.

This was very powerful, because once I finished *NO!*, I wanted it to appear on HBO, PBS, and Sundance, but it was not accepted. In terms of my own spiritual practice, I was really tested. I was devastated and enraged. Of course, we have a critique of that. But I thought, wait a minute, Aishah. These people did not fund it, so why would they screen it? You are accountable to the people who funded it. That really challenged me to put my principles into action. Since I was making it, I wanted it to be at Sundance! I want to be on HBO! It should have been there. Based on the politics, though, it is understandable why it was not. Equally or even more important, *NO!* is in the communities to which I am accountable. I have the responsibility to follow through on the relationship between taking people's money to further the vision and the accountability that goes with that. I always say, what happened behind the *NO!* camera is as provocative as what is going on in front of it. I was constantly being challenged, in a good way, to be principled and accountable to that which I say I believe in. I believe that *NO!* is a tool for community accountability, regarding my relationship to the film, between my community and me, and in terms of *NO!* as a tool in your interpretation of community accountability. It can serve as a road map, not the *only* way, but one key in which we can hold our communities accountable concerning how we are going to address sexual violence and hopefully heal in our communities. In the closing lines of *NO!* Janelle White asks whether we really want to rely on the criminal *injustice* system to solve rape. *NO!* lays out some intense, horrific, and painful stories and then talks about solutions that challenge the ways in which we can hold each other accountable. It is not in a utopian sense, but how we can *hold* each other accountable in terms of sexual violence and healing in the communities from which we come.

Alisa: I like the emphasis on "hold." The image is of a community holding one another, being present, and holding each other through a process, a hard time.

Aishah: Yeah.

Alisa: Aishah, of the planetary *NO!* movement [everyone laughs] that you were describing, and the people who were supporting and participating in it, would you also say that survivors were a key constituency?

Aishah: Oh, my Goddess, yes. I mean hands down, they were the first ones that stepped up. That definitely means black women survivors, but I need to say survivors *across the board*, in terms of race, class, culture, and language. Someday I would like to go through the *NO!* archives and create a book from them because there are so many stories....

Theryn: Hmm.

Aishah: For me, it was a very psychic, spiritual experience. *Every* time I felt burned out, or that I could not do it anymore, *something* would happen. An e-mail, letter, or phone call would arrive from a woman who had been sexually assaulted, had seen a version of *NO!*, and was saying thank you for telling this story. Every time I thought I could not keep going, suddenly the waters would break, and, yes, I could go a little further. Even when I had a 74-minute rough cut—which could *stand* today, we could screen that version—I knew that it was not finished. A lot of people said, enough is enough, Aishah. But for me, it was not done. I cannot explain or articulate it, but I when it was done, I said, yes, it is finished. And after viewing the final version, all the people who had said let it go now said, yes, you were right. It was a very powerful thing, particularly for a person who had been molested as a child, had told my parents, and still had not been removed from the situation. I had trusted my gut, my instincts. I kept checking in with myself to be sure I had not gone off the deep end. I am a survivor and was living with trauma. Viewing the footage, I saw my mom, my friends, and women who I had not known before, but who became very close friends. So it was this holding, Alisa, *holding* those stories, my Goddess. Producing it was amazing, since it was a black feminist space, with all women of color on the set. We had lots of good food and talked during production. Post-production was lonelier. It can be a lonely space with the editor and that footage. I know that footage like the back of my hand, and had to live it over and over again. So, it was a very intense experience. Therefore, when rejection letters from foundations were asking, what is your axe to grind as a lesbian, and why are there no white people, I was like: fuck off. It will get done, one way or another. I am very grateful for that experience. This is not to let economic censorship off the hook, as Salamishah [Tillet] calls it. Yet, as a result, I saw what movement building means. In the context of this film, it took a village, a global village, to make it happen.

Theryn: That is right, Aishah. The first time I heard about your film, I was in Bushwick in Brooklyn, New York, with Alisa. We were at a bookstore and Angela Davis was speaking. It was our first experience of INCITE! out of state [at a 2001

activist institute hosted by Sista II Sista], and we were organizing around alternatives to the criminal injustice system. Some sista stood up and said, listen, we are all in here talking about alternatives to the police, but there is this sista who has been working on this film for eight years, trying to get it produced. She talked up *NO!*, spoke your name, and said give anything you can. That always stayed with me. When the young woman I referenced earlier mentioned it, I said, I have *heard* of that film. So, the way you grew it for so long, how word spread about it and its rich story, and everything that took place behind the scenes really resonates with me. It was in the world and making inroads long before I saw it or met you. It was a testament to how so many people from all over had your back, how you stuck with it and would not put it down, and the isolation of editing and post-production.

Alisa: So amazing.

Theryn: For me, community accountability is handlin' your business. It is what I tell my son: do not sit here and talk to me as though I did not just see you make a choice and do that thing. Mayfield, if you make a choice, then be accountable for it. If he stands up for himself and gets in trouble with a grown person, I ask him: do you regret your actions? No? Okay, then. Be solid in it. When we are handlin' our business, other folks do not have to. I envision that if my son is at a party with a bunch of men, and his friends say we are going to take a young girl to the back room, that *my* son not only calls that out, but also leaves with her to find a safe space for both of them. You know what I am saying? I am trying to *grow* a brother who is grounded in what these ideas about liberation and diaspora truly mean. You do not cause harm and you interrupt, doing so in a way that protects others and yourself, because I do not want you to get shot either. And Mayfield, interestingly enough, is *with* me. I have to hide particular artifacts that I use in my research because he goes through it. He is self-driven to look through *Without Sanctuary*, to find the DVD cover of *The Story of Emmett Till*. In my bedroom, I mounted the poster that Aishah gave to all of us. Above it is a poster of Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*. So my son is surrounded by text, visual text, which gives him information about how I am situated in feminist discourses about rape and lynching. How do I do this so it is part of his grounded, empowered sense of self? So he can have conversations at the age of seven when some boy says something messed up about some girl and he thinks that is not very nice, you cannot say that. Or someone says something sexist and homophobic about his hair, and he is resilient, holds his head up, and moves forward as though that ain't nothin' but a thang and you need to do *your* work, right? To me, that is community accountability.

Alisa: Thank you both for this illuminating conversation and for the bold and groundbreaking media justice work and community organizing that you do.

NOTES

1. By “engaged subjectivity” I mean the capacity of survivors to evaluate their experiences of violence, articulate how it feels and what it means, and/or craft meaningful, responsive beliefs and actions.
2. See <http://iambecauseweare.wordpress.com/category/duke-lacrosse-rape-case/>.
3. “Zero tolerance rules” in schools mandate severe punishments for weapons and drug offenses regardless of the circumstances, and are often accompanied by the installation of metal detectors and surveillance cameras and the hiring of police officers to enforce school discipline codes.
4. This event occurred during a community-organized direct action that responded to a police officer’s fatal shooting of Aaron Roberts, an unarmed black man, in the Central District, a historically black Seattle neighborhood.
5. See <http://www.nowpublic.com/world/cop-punches-woman-seattle-officer-ian-walsh-punches-girl-video-2629703.html>.
6. See <http://perezhilton.com/2010-06-16-not-cool-seattle>.

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