



Rape and Race: We Have to Talk About It

April 10, 2008 -- Remixing the racial rule of silence.

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TheRoot.com

Updated: 12:29 PM ET Apr 9, 2008

I witnessed something truly astonishing on Monday night: a public discussion of black women's experiences of sexual violence at the hands of black men. It was an intergenerational group of black men and women, gay and straight, survivors and perpetrators, all grappling with the legacy of rape and race.

The experience was unusual because black people rarely talk about sisters being raped. We talk about all kinds of things: trivial, critical, humorous, serious, political, painful and frivolous. But as we observe Sexual Assault Awareness Month in April, I am reminded that there are things we don't talk about.

We are silent about black women as victims and survivors of sexual assault by black men.

In African American communities rape narratives are not women's stories. They are men's stories. Rape is tied to the historical legacy of white terror. Strange fruit hanging from Southern trees has led to a legacy of disbelieving women who report sexual violence and intimidation.

Black women raped by black male perpetrators often remain silent because they are alone. They don't want to confirm white racial stereotypes; their own families and communities tell them to shut up; they have little reason to think that authorities will take their cases seriously; they fear the devastating ramifications of a manhunt in black communities if they are believed; and in the history of lynching white women have been adversaries, not allies, on the question of rape.

Recovering from rape is burden enough without having to shoulder this vicious legacy.

I do not want to diminish or deny the pain, agony, recovery and triumph of survivors who are not black women. I do not want to claim that all black women survivors have parallel experiences or that all black women experience the same traumas in the aftermath of rape. I only want to claim there is often a

different dynamic that operates for black women who have been violated by black men.

As a sexual assault survivor and advocate I know the debilitating effects of silence. That is why I was so moved by Monday night's gathering in Brown Memorial Baptist Church in Brooklyn, NY. Together we watched Aishah Shahidah Simmons' [NO! The Rape Documentary](#). Then Simmons, who is herself a rape and incest survivor, talked with us and answered questions to help us process the grief, anger and confusion that her exquisite film provoked.

But here was the most surprising part of all: the gathering was organized by a community group called [Black and Male in America](#). Under the leadership of writer, activist and [Congressional candidate Kevin Powell](#), this group of men arranged a screening of Simmons' powerful film. Let me say this again. A group of black men arranged for an honest, difficult, intense, public discussion of intra-racial rape.

Filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons revealed that it has been difficult to find wide distribution for her film because so few people want to grapple with black women's sexual victimization. Simmons was joined on the panel by Kevin Powell and Quentin Walcott from [ConnectNYC](#). Sitting next to these men, Simmons acknowledged that brothers from the hip-hop generation, a generation that has been critiqued as universally commercial and misogynist, have been among her strongest supporters.

Simmons said, "It's also very important for me to note that this and many other community-based screenings that have been organized by Black men are men from the hip-hop generation. I share this because there are many justifiable critiques of hip-hop. However, hands down, the overwhelming majority of the men who have supported NO! and spread the word about NO! are from the hip-hop generation."

Organizer Kevin Powell is certainly a central figure of the hip-hop generation. As a first season *Real World* cast member, Powell helped usher in the age of reality TV. As a writer and poet he has reflected on and critiqued hip-hop. Powell also has his own difficult past as a perpetrator of domestic violence. But rather than being silent and demanding silence from others, [Powell has written movingly about his own awakening from violence](#). On Monday night he and other men of this Brooklyn organization helped provide space for sexual assault survivors to speak and be heard.

We are right to focus on and criticize the elements of hip-hop that are complicit in the violence, abuse and degradation of black women. But we are also compelled to acknowledge the possibility that some men of the hip-hop generation just might have something to teach their elders about passing the mic and being quiet while sisters share their stories. Maybe, just maybe, this generation of men will create a different path.

Reflecting on what this new path might look like Powell said, "What we've found in our work with black males is that many of us brothers are completely clueless about what manhood should be. So we swallow whole what society, our communities, our families, our fathers, and, yes, our mothers, tell us it is, even if that definition leads us to hurt or destroy black females or other black males. Or ourselves. There is a growing recognition, now, among many hip-hop generation black women thinkers, leaders, and artists, and a growing number of us black male counterparts, that if we do not deal with the multiple insanities we as a community have internalized, then we are doomed as a community. It is really that serious."

Monday night's event helped us to remember that rape is complicated by race. For many black women there is a sense of betrayal that exists alongside the personal humiliation, pain and fear. Intra-racial rape can feel like a rift between a woman and her people. The survivor is cast into silence not so much as by a desire to protect those men who perpetrated, but to protect the black men in her life who she

loves, respects and trusts. As Simmons' NO! reminds us, survivors often feel that by fingering the attacker we might somehow accuse our own fathers, husbands, friends and sons of possessing this same capacity for violence.

So it makes a huge difference for black men to stand with us and encourage us to tell. The Brooklyn gathering was a model of how black men can help create safe spaces for us. It was a reminder that men can exert power and reclaim manhood by standing with black women, bearing witness to our stories and holding one another accountable. It was a testament to the reality that men can stop rape by saying NO!

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