



When I was a child I knew that my grandmother Dora held someone in low regard when she used the word trifling, or in her southern twang triflin', to describe the person. It was the first word that came to mind when thinking about hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons and the demeaning characterization of abolitionist Harriet Tubman in a "comedy" video on his new YouTube channel. The depiction of Tubman, a true hero of the Black liberation movement in America, as sexually promiscuous and conniving, is an insult to her legacy and the struggle of African-American women through time to be treated as human beings and not objects of male fantasy or manipulation. In one moment of extreme ignorance, Russell Simmons managed to take us all back to a point in time when Black women were relegated to "thing" status.

Simmons inference that he was promoting Tubman's intelligence as calculating by using her sexuality to gain the upper hand over a slave master is offensive at least, and downright ignorant at best. His bedroom fantasy is demeaning to the courage and strength of Harriet Tubman, and Black women like her, who risked their lives to challenge slavery and demand full citizenship and the recognition of their humanity. The apology Russell Simmons has offered is equally offensive due to its casualness and arrogance; suggesting that he had reconsidered without acknowledging the sheer idiocy of a piece of "art," and I use that term with limited respect, produced for an enterprise of which he is one of the owners. There is absolutely no entertainment value in the Tubman skit as the segment reverts to minstrelsy for the sake of a chuckle. The joke is not on us. The joke is Russell Simmons.

Since the emergence of hip-hop as a genre there has been an ongoing debate over free speech and the supposed boundary, if it exists, that represents the point where artists violate principles of decency. Over the decades when this tension surfaced, the benefit of the doubt has always been given hip-hop artists as fans defended them and many adults felt generationally handicapped to confront signs of amoral behavior. So, the "hits" just kept on coming. First, it was the glorification of violence defended as urban storytelling. Next, these new age ghetto Griots tried to convince us that the objectification and debasement of Black women was simply a work of fantasy comparable to Hollywood; though they failed to acknowledge that their

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Written by Walter Fields

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standard was the worst of Tinsel town, the pornography industry. We have endured endless lyrical escapades of niggers, niggaz, bitches and hos, made all the more tragic by the seeming complicity of many young Black women intent on playing the role of exploited prop.

Now, the man who brought us Def Jam Records, Def Comedy Jam and Def Poetry Jam is willing to trample on the memory and legacy of a cultural icon to make a buck by poisoning our minds with entertainment that is definitely ignorant. It appears that the peddler of the "Rush Card," a Simmons branded secured debit card that exploits the materialism of the financially vulnerable, is willing to stoop even lower to accumulate more wealth to likely insult us further.

Russell Simmons is part of the Black nouveau riche, too rich to be concerned and wealthy enough to be ignorant. In that sense he has a kindred spirit in Donald Trump. The two believe their wealth gives them a pass, absolves them of behaving within the bounds of decency, and makes us their servant class. I have witnessed far too many of this first generation of Black rich behave as if we should all be impressed and arrogant to the point of believing their own press. Simmons likes to present himself as one of the exporters of hip-hop culture, a claim that bears some truth, but his product also contains some toxins that are causing lasting global environmental damage. International perception of Black people is often conditioned by the imagery of us in entertainment and news; so when our history is mangled by the likes of Simmons we have to double-up on our efforts to have the world view us in a respectful manner. Likewise, as the telling of African-American history in classrooms in this nation continues to be missing or denied, we can ill afford a dime store historian recounting our triumphant past to children.

So, Russell Simmons has offered an apology, but speaking for myself, it is insufficient. He sounds more regretful that people found the video clip to be offensive than the fact that it is offensive. Simmons also has the audacity to admit that it took a phone call from his friends at the N.A.A.C.P. to convince him that the segment was in poor taste. Really? That's like burping at the dinner table when you were a kid and waiting for your parents to tell you the obvious before apologizing for your poor manners. You knew it was wrong when you belched but the child in you is incapable of admitting the obvious.

My disgust with Simmons behavior is the result of the carnage I see all around us. Perhaps if we had a more truthful accounting of our past, our present would reflect the amazing story of Black survival in America. Some of us might then be able to see ourselves as more than how the derogatory language of some hip-hop videos defines us. If Russell Simmons can separate his humanity from his bank account he might, just might, do more than apologize but accept full responsibility for contributing to the degradation of Black people. If not, then the observation of

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my grandmother is still relevant today.

Call it older age but I have little patience for such triflin' ways.

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