

Lesbian filmmaker says 'No!' to silence

Documentary examines rape in the context of African-American culture

By **KATHERINE VOLIN**

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Black lesbian filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons has long examined her struggles through the lens of race and gender, and she's brought her personal history to her latest film, "No!," a documentary about the experience of black women with rape.

The D.C. Rape Crisis Center is sponsoring the film screening, which is free and open to the public, at Howard University on Tuesday, Nov. 14. Simmons and Lori Robinson, who wrote "I Will Survive: The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse," will hold a panel discussion after the film's showing.

According to Denise Snyder, executive director of the Rape Crisis Center, more than 90 percent of sexually violent crimes are intra-racial, which makes a film like Simmons' particularly important.

"There are so many ways in which racism and sexual violence overlap and connect with each other," says Snyder, who is a lesbian. "This film does a really good job of highlighting those connections and interplays."

The film traces the treatment of black women in America from slavery to the present day, intermingling historical assessments with testimony from women who have been raped and from men working to end rape, including the late D.C. native gay poet, Essex Hemphill.

"There is a way in that racism affects our lives," says Simmons, who was sexually assaulted by a man in college. "There's a way in which we have to protect the race and race really means men, even at the expense of ourselves."

FORTUNATELY, SIMMONS' EARLY experience with men was a positive one. Her role model of a father, whose progressive ideals helped to shape Simmons' worldview, originally initiated her coming out process.

"My dad came and said, 'I really feel like you're struggling with your sexuality,'" Simmons, now 37, says. "'I think you should speak to a black lesbian, because if you talk to a straight woman, she's going to say that you're going through a phase. [She should be] black so you don't have to choose between your race and your gender.'"

Simmons didn't come out as a lesbian then, but after doing so several years later, she began to realize the uniqueness of her parents' acceptance of who she was. This new awareness led to the creation of a short film, "In My Father's House," in 1997, a tale of a positive coming out experience. That and a 1993 film "Silence...Broken," about a black lesbian grappling with racism, sexism and homophobia, were produced under the production company Simmons founded in 1992, AfroLez Productions.

"No!" was also intended to be a short film when Simmons started it with Tamara Xavier in 1994.

"We really thought it was going to be a quick, very easy thing to make," Simmons says. The project soon expanded, however, and then funding became difficult to find.

"Part of the struggle was being young, and also there was a lot of homophobia," Simmons says. "Ending rape, that was my only agenda."

Lesbians and lesbian foundations became crucial to funding the project, because, Simmons says, they saw the link between rape, sexism and homophobia.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that the lesbian foundation for justice, ASTRAE, were the first that gave me money to make it," Simmons says. "Usually it was a lesbian program officer who made the bill [to give "No!" money]. I don't think it was because they knew I was a lesbian, I think it was because they saw it — they saw the intersection."

TWELVE YEARS LATER, the full-length, 94-minute film is being screened at film festivals and college campuses around the country.

"I started [the film] when I was 25," Simmons says, "to look at the silence in the black community around intra-racial rape, but really just feeling like there's so much silence in the community in terms of the inter-sectionalities of race and gender."

The issue of gender and power, so central to rape, caused her also to show a balanced perspective on men during the course of the film.

"It was really important to me to include the voices of black men in 'No!,' participating as agents of change," Simmons says. "All the men featured in the documentary are working to end violence against women."

Reactions to the film have shown Simmons how desperately the subject needs exposure. Some white women have approached Simmons and said they didn't realize prior to viewing the film that black women could be raped.

People suggested that Simmons consider not being out while promoting the film, but she says it was important to her to be open about her sexual orientation and help destroy stereotypes about lesbians and rape.

"Most women I know, regardless of sexual orientation, have been sexually assaulted or molested," says Simmons. "It's not about sexual orientation. So I thought constantly about those stereotypes while making this documentary. I'm glad that I was out. I'm glad that I did it."