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Exceeding the Frame:
Documentary Filmmaker Marlon T. Riggs as Cultural Agitator

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Exceeding the Frame:

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Exceeding the Frame:
Documentary Filmmaker Marlon T. Riggs as Cultural Agitator
By Rhea L. Combs

Exceeding the Frame: Documentary Filmmaker Marlon T. Riggs as Cultural Agitator argues that Marlon Riggs was a crucially important nonfiction filmmaker, whose outspoken work in African American cultural production, and "promiscuous" approach to documentary practice make him a *cultural agitator*, one who used his craft as a tool of resistance to interrogate the politics of identity, specifically the notions of masculinity, sexuality, and race constructed and disseminated in American mass media.

Between 1981 and 1994, the prolific Riggs produced eight films and videos. Before dying from AIDS-related complications at 37, he also wrote numerous scholarly articles and held interviews on identity, politics, art and censorship, African American cultural production, and documentary film practice. As the first scholarly examination of Riggs's entire body of video and film works, this interdisciplinary project focuses on Riggs in a social and artistic context, arguing for his cultural significance in relation to prevalent understandings of inter- and intra-racial identity, HIV/AIDS, and black masculinity, as well as documentary film practice, during the height of the culture wars of the 1980s and early 1990s. I analyze his more traditional documentaries: *Long Train Running* (1981)*, Ethnic Notions* (1988)*,* and *Color Adjustment* (1992); his most controversial and innovative work, *Tongues Untied* (1989); and his more hybrid and essayistic works: the posthumously produced *Black Is…Black Ain't* (1995), along with the experimental shorts *Affirmations (1990)*, *Anthem (1991)*, and *No Regret* (1992). I examine Riggs's *oeuvre* using his biography, critical analysis, and reception studies to demonstrate how his work formulates, in cinematic terms rather than verbal discourse, the vital notion of Americans' multiple identities.

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Introduction

> We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.... Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. –Martin Luther King, Jr. ("Letter")

> The cinematic challenge before us is to innovate rather than imitate. If we want to tell the trillion untold stories of our people, our film approach has to be as creative as the stories themselves. Filmmakers must use the cinema to contribute to the definition of our humanity and to further the cause of our liberation. –Haile Gerima (349)

This qualitative dissertation critically examines the complete works of Marlon T. Riggs (1957–1994), a courageous young African American documentary filmmaker who brought complicated images and stories of blackness to the screen during the height of the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Harvard-educated filmmaker drew upon personal circumstances to examine social concerns and challenge mainstream conceptions in American society of masculinity, race, democracy, and the potentially humanizing role of public media while expanding the aesthetic conventions of documentary film and creating productions that emphasized social justice and liberation. Motivated by the tenets articulated above in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Riggs pursued the ideals brought forth in the second epigraph by filmmaker Haile Gerima.

Recipient of numerous awards and top honors including an Emmy for *Ethnic Notions* (1987) and George Foster Peabody Award for *Color Adjustment* (1991), Riggs produced eight documentaries prior to his death at age thirty-seven, and I examine each of them in this dissertation. His first documentary, a half-hour short for his Master's thesis and second-place winner of the Student Emmy Award, examined the little-known history of the Oakland, California,

Blues music scene (*Long Train Running*, 1981). Due to fundraising challenges, Riggs's second documentary, *Ethnic Notions*—his first feature-length film—was produced six years later in 1987; this work has been hailed by historians and film critics as a masterfully researched piece about the damaging effects of racist and stereotypical images of blacks in the media. *Color Adjustment* (1991) is an extension of *Ethnic Notions*, exploring how blacks have been represented in television by studying popular primetime programs during critical moments in American history since the 1950s. Prior to the airing of *Color Adjustment*, Riggs completed his most controversial documentary, 1989's*Tongues Untied*, which was groundbreaking in its candid exploration of black male homosexuality. *Tongues Untied* aired nationally on public television, and the backlash that ensued from the media and right-wing lobbyist organizations catapulted Riggs into the national spotlight. Three short videos that Riggs produced—*Affirmations* (1990)*, Anthem* (1991), and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* (*No Regret,* 1992)—provided variations on the themes of *Tongues Untied*, such as sexuality, but they also examined notions of identity, American democracy, and freedom of expression. Riggs's final film, *Black Is…Black Ain't* (1995) was a personal journey of identity; the 87-minute documentary appeared on public television and in film festivals after his death in 1994. Completed by members of Riggs's production team, *Black Is…Black Ain't* explores notions of belonging and acceptance by society when one is considered an outsider for a variety of reasons, be it race, sexual preference, class status, educational background, or any other number of social markers.

With all of his eight films, Riggs was able to push against mainstream representational/moving image boundaries not only with regard to subject matter but also through the ways in which he told his stories. Riggs's influence on documentary film practice is seen in the later works of young filmmakers such as Byron Hurt (*I Am A Man*, 2002) and Rodney Evans (*Brother to Brother*, 2004), whom both have had their films broadcast on public television. Evans's fictional piece about the Harlem Renaissance and Hurt's essay style documentary both challenged

mainstream constructions of black masculinity by exploring hybrid experiences of manhood and tackling, directly, in film, questions of heteronormative behavior and homosexuality among African American men.

Surprisingly, given the extent and diversity of Riggs's work, the existing critical literature on this innovative filmmaker has neglected his short films and often discounted his achievements by claiming his work was either conventional (in terms of *Ethnic Notions*, 1987) or controversial (*Tongues Untied*, 1989) when in fact the films, like the man, were much more multifaceted and shared many overlooked continuities. Rather than offering a linear career biography of Riggs, this dissertation briefly examines Riggs's life while providing close readings of his films in order to help draw connections to his significance as an artist/activist within the fields of African American cultural production, queer studies, and documentary film practice. The example of Riggs's career offers new insights into the ways in which filmmaking can explore the politics of identity and visual culture, even as it focuses attention on a twentieth-century African American cultural figure whose life and films have been relegated to the margins.

The Cultural Context

Riggs began making films during the Reagan era of the 1980s, which promoted right wing, conservative, pro-life, Christian family values, and marginalized people of different racial, ethnic, class, and sexual perspectives. During the repression of the Reagan–Bush era (1981–1993), Latinos, Blacks, and self-identified gays and lesbians began advocating for the specific needs of their constituencies, sparking a period known as the *culture wars*. Moreover, and highly relevant to Riggs's work, the federal and state governments generally refused to address the growing AIDS crisis.

While the general contours of the culture wars of this period are well known, one particular development is of special significance for understanding Riggs's work. The philosophy of *Afrocentrism* grew in popularity during this time; led by Temple University Professor Molefi K. Asante, Afrocentrism posits a nationalist belief that the racist and systemically oppressive practices inflicted on blacks in America (i.e., Slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws, discrimination, etc.) were psychologically damaging. Afrocentrists argue that the liberation of Blacks requires an African-centered perspective, with a particular attention on Egypt (Asante). On the other hand, critics of the Afrocentric Movement such as writer and critic Stanley Clark and University of California history professor Clarence E. Walker, among others, argue that Afrocentrism relies on a universalized and imagined Africa that limits a definition of blackness, and which is fundamentally rooted in a racist, sexist, and homophobic understanding of masculinity and femininity.

One alternative to Afrocentricity that grew in popularity in American society during the 1980s was the notion of *multiculturalism*, which is an ostensibly liberal philosophy advocating mutual respect and acknowledgement of different cultures. In America, the term "tossed salad" is used when discussing multiculturalism, to imply the unrestricted ability to blend various cultural experiences together. From a public policy perspective, multiculturalism has been heralded as the politically correct position compared to Afrocentrism. Advocates of Afrocentricity often critique multiculturalism, however, arguing it does not provide enough specific attention to improving the conditions of African Americans. Critics of multiculturalism also argue that the "tossed salad" ideology is solely based on superficial and historically troubled notions of race and does not consider the notion that an individual can have multiple identities; black, male, and gay, are not considered crucial parts of someone's cultural makeup. Nor is there an acknowledgement of the function of institutional racism, which denies access to minorities based solely on their racial and cultural identity. Multiculturalism, then, normalizes whiteness, in a logic whereby everything else

is deemed Other. As a result, the solutions posited by a multicultural framework have reinforced racist notions of other cultural identities, as well as limited the understanding of personal selfhood.

By substantiating the historically racist, ethnographic approach that investigated other cultures as exotic and/or demonized "others," multiculturalism falls prey to the very notions it supposedly attempts to debunk. For instance, critics of multiculturalism argue that the essentialist beliefs of culture and race can lead to xenophobia or racism. Feminist and political theorist Susan M. Okin, for instance, argued in her 1999 essay, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" that an emphasis on cultural diversity will overshadow a conversation on women's rights. The notion of the "tossed salad," then, ended up creating fiefdoms that limited cultural identity.

Throughout the many public debates regarding Afrocentricism and multiculturalism, scholars recognized racial identity as socially constructed; it became more critical to realize that people's identities are composed of many simultaneously relevant identities. It was in this context that the documentary producer Marlon Riggs created and was committed to blurring the either/or culture arguments.

Refusing a position on either side of the Afrocentric/Multicultural debate was a sagacious move for the documentarian, because it demonstrated that Riggs did not follow popular, mainstream ideas about race and society, but instead challenged restrictive notions of culture and racial identity. While decades earlier, cultural and literary scholars such as Albert Murray and James Baldwin had posited similar values and ideals, Riggs in the 1980s and mid-1990s effectively demonstrated in filmic terms what these authors did in literature—that the vital notion of identity is a complex set of understandings. Indeed, Baldwin's exploration of sexuality and African American culture proves to be very productive in gaining a greater understanding of Riggs and situating him within a canon of other important cultural figures. In effect, I argue that Riggs's choice of subject matter for his documentaries—his direct approach to examining racism and

sexism while unabashedly promulgating a black gay identity—further challenged essentialist notions of racial allegiances and identity.

The Cultural Agitator

Film scholar Bill Nichols describes the function of a documentary filmmaker as visually representing what he believes and wants others to discover (Grant and Sloniowski 11–15).[1] The most celebrated contemporary exemplars, who also enjoy theatrical distribution, include Errol Morris (whose most celebrated work includes *The Thin Blue Line*, 1988, and *The Fog of War*, 2003), Michael Moore *(Roger & Me,* 1989, *Bowling for Columbine*, 1992, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004), and Eugene Jarecki (*The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, 2002, and *Why We Fight*, 2005). Perhaps the filmmaker who most closely resembles Riggs is the British Isaac Julien (*Who Killed Colin Roach?*, 1983, and *Looking for Langston*, 1989). I suggest Riggs was an accomplished filmmaker in the tradition of producing documentaries that mirrored his convictions, particularly surrounding issues of race and sex in America.

Riggs dedicated his final seven years to producing work that addressed the prickly subjects of race, sexuality, and their representation in America, effectively interrogating and challenging the reductive images of blacks' media representations and black gay male identity. He used his work as an activist tool, to counter right-wing politics, racism, and homophobia. Moreover, unlike Michael Moore, by circumventing mainstream commercial distribution outlets for national exposure on public television and the festival circuit, Riggs built strategic alliances with different grassroots, community-based, black and gay rights organizations. His activism extended beyond the film

circuit: Riggs also spoke vociferously against the U.S. Congress' 1989 push to deny any allocation of public tax dollars toward what they deemed as "obscene" artists.

This dissertation positions Marlon Riggs as a significant stakeholder in the cultural milieu of documentary film practice, and demonstrates that his outspoken work in African American cultural production and documentary practice make him a *cultural agitator*, one who uses his craft as a tool of resistance to interrogate constructions of masculinity, sexuality, and race. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's canonical text *Film Art,* documentary films "document some aspect of the world [and are] distinguished from fiction films because they are assumed to portray real events and show the actual people involved in those events" (107). Within this definition of documentary film, then, is their claim of a privileged relationship to social and historical reality. Riggs deliberately strove to produce work that extended conversations beyond the Ivory Tower. In his own words,

> I make films to be used, I don't make them to be seen once on television or seen once in a theater and then that's it….I make them to provoke people in some way, to be used in classrooms, to be used with students, to be used among counselors, to be used by organizations and business enterprises, in human relations studies and personal management…. (Banneker 11)

Riggs's unique film style is a critical component of his work as a cultural agitator, as is his commitment to pursue issues of personal and social relevance.

Some of the most distinctive features of Riggs's film form included a nonlinear (nonchronological) approach to storytelling, his use of personal testimony (his own, as well as that of his artistic collaborators), and the incorporation of performance (poetry recitals, dance, etc.), along with his use of editing to bring together facets of American black gay experience that one might not otherwise connect. This hybrid film style not only partakes of the autobiographical film

genre in which the filmmaker focuses on himself, but also resembles the essay film genre. According to Paul Arthur, essay documentaries incorporate a variety of stylistic approaches in an attempt to challenge mainstream notions of documentary practice; thus, Riggs's use of heterogeneous materials such as performance and personal testimony in his productions also substantiates Riggs's description of his documentary style as "promiscuous" (Kleinhans and Lesage).

While there is much debate surrounding the *auteur* theory as an adequate critical concept for analyzing fictional film, there is no question but that Riggs's singular approach to filmmaking marks him as an *auteur*. Documentary filmmaking is often more personal than commercial fiction filmmaking, and studies of documentary films, even of those released in commercial theatrical settings, understand the director (e.g., Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Eugene Jarecki) to be their author. Film scholar Ed Buscombe describes François Truffaut's original formulation of the *auteur* as "one who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of merely producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material" (77). Truffaut was writing about films that adapted literary works, and in this regard, it is important to note that Riggs planned and made independent documentary films whose scripts, cinematography, editing, and sound track were personally shaped by his style; this dissertation shows how even his ostensibly conventional productions (*Long Train Running*, 1981; *Ethnic Notions*, 1987; and *Color Adjustment*, 1991) all featured elements specific to Riggs's thematic interests and film approach. *Long Train Running,* for instance, gradually develops into an exegesis on black masculinity—an extremely relevant subject and one which appears as a theme in all his films. Riggs's daring second feature-length documentary, *Tongues Untied*, is often described as the work that best demonstrates Riggs's unique filmmaking style; however, I suggest that throughout his career Riggs produced innovative projects sharing aesthetic elements that were crucial components of his approach to documentary filmmaking.

The posthumously produced documentary *Black Is…Black Ain't*, completed by Riggs's production team after his death, might complicate any claims for his status as an *auteur*. However, I suggest that the signature elements of Riggs's film style, which include the aforementioned use of varied filmic elements (performance, poetry, nonacademic experts) demonstrate how this project was uniquely a Riggs production, in which his collaborators strove to emulate his established techniques. Moreover, the fact that all the footage was completed prior to his death with the exception of some of the dance sequences, and that he recorded on camera his goals for the film, show that even this documentary is "his" work.

Most significantly, Riggs's ability to challenge accepted notions of identity, his unique approach to filmmaking, his commitment to community, and his drive to subvert mainstream notions of African Americans, men, women, gays, and lesbians, all constitute crucial elements of Riggs's status as a cinematic cultural agitator.

Survey of Literature

As I noted earlier, there is comparatively little scholarly work on the entire body of Riggs's documentaries; therefore, this study draws on ideas from a number of fields to examine Riggs's films from an interdisciplinary perspective. To date, five dissertations have referenced Riggs in their studies, each with their own particular focus (below I discuss the three that focus the most attention on Riggs. The others, which situate Riggs in a more generalized sense, are described in the endnotes.) For example, Riggs is compared with educators, or performance artists, or positioned within a larger discussion around the subject of Black Nationalism.[2]

Monica Torres's *'Injurious Hails' and the Making and Remaking of Cultural Identity in the Documentary Films of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Lourdes Portillo, and Marlon Riggs*, for instance, studied two other important documentary producers along with Riggs, and used philosopher Judith Butler's notion of "injurious hails" as the theoretical framework. Butler's philosophy posits that there are people who have experienced hurtful or potentially damaging assaults, yet who also create complex dynamics to resist these discursive violations. Torres's dissertation shows how this triumvirate of documentary filmmakers challenges "injurious" cultural institutions, specifically the documentary form and technique—and in so doing, these artists reframe their cultural identity into something richer and more dynamic.

In the present study, I make use of Torres's insights, while solely focusing on Riggs's productions and arguing for his significance beyond a reaction of injury. I also examine the sociocultural context in which he produced his films, a context that stretches beyond textual readings of his documentary filmmaking into other areas such as gender studies and African American cultural production. While Torres addresses filmmakers marginalized by race, ethnicity, or nationality, a specific emphasis on African American studies is absent. Nonetheless, Torres's work is still relevant as a point of distinction, particularly when situating Riggs's work in relation to traditional documentary, even as it demonstrates one of the primary ways his work has been discussed.

Another dissertation discusses Riggs within a comparative context: Bill Pincheon's *Framing Culture* uses Riggs's *Tongues Untied* and Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) to show how black gay men are represented in film. Pincheon charts the development of a black gay cinema through analyzing these two films as ethnographies, as figured in racial, sexual, and gendered object discourses—claiming that these two visual projects argue for a "black gay male cinema."

Pincheon's work is helpful to the present study because of its examination of *Tongues Untied* from an ethnographic filmmaking and interdisciplinary perspective of gender, race, and sex; however, the scope of my work is both more detailed and more varied, adding to Pincheon's analysis through both a close textual reading of *Tongues Untied* and an analysis of viewer reactions to the film. Furthermore, I look at Riggs's entire range of documentary work rather than a single film, and use the lens of understanding the social conditions under which his oeuvre developed and how these mitigating factors may have affected his aesthetic choices, rather than focusing solely on the issue of black male representation in cinema. Moreover, *Exceeding the Frame* is the first scholarly work to use unpublished and out of print primary source materials from Riggs's papers at Signifyin' Works in Berkeley, California.

The dialogue of African American cultural production is also relevant to this examination of Marlon T. Riggs, particularly Gina Dent's anthology *Black Popular Culture*, which contains Riggs's "Unleash the Queen," his poetic and revealing essay, written in the form of a three-act narrative, describing an incident between Riggs and a journalist as the latter responded to *Tongues Untied*. Riggs refers throughout the essay to "performance breaks," which for Riggs means downplaying the distinction between the performance of sexual expectations by mainstream society of a black gay man and the reality of black gay selfhood—this notion becomes more relevant during his projects addressing issues of black men's sexuality. Of equal significance in this particular essay is Riggs's candid critique of the African American reaction toward his films (namely *Tongues Untied)*, and black popular culture in general, which he argues promotes false expectations of black homosexuality. Riggs calls for a more real, honest, and inclusive conversation around issues of African American cultural production and the politics of identity.

Also important to this discussion of African American cultural production, specifically film, is the work of bell hooks, particularly *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and *Art on My Mind: Visual*

Politics, in which she discusses, among other topics, reconstructing black masculinity and representing the black male body. The section most significant to this work is hooks's groundbreaking "Oppositional Gaze" essay, which outlines her theory of what she calls the *racist white imagination*, a perspective that privileges whiteness. Celebrated feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey in her canonical essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," describes how the male gaze influences the way women are represented and understood by film audiences; hooks argues that a similar phenomenon occurs when whites see blacks represented in visual culture. hooks posits that the white racist imagination is so pervasive that it is difficult to let go of the belief that anyone can be equally as smart or capable as whites; in this sense, blackness becomes a symbol that evokes fear and hatred. The oppositional gaze, then, is a recapitulation of black self-pride and love in the midst of the assaults from the white racist imagination. For hooks, the oppositional gaze becomes a form of resistance, a way for blacks to look at whites in life and society, that manifests as work demonstrating how racism has affected one's perceptions and understandings of self-worth. In this sense, hooks' theory of oppositional gaze becomes particularly relevant as it reinforces the notion of "embracing shame" brought forth by Kathryn Bond Stockton, which is explored more fully in the chapter on *Tongues Untied*.

The growing body of literature on Black Masculinity is also germane to this study. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien's essay, "True Confessions," addresses the lack of black gay male discourse within queer studies, a lack that becomes what they consider a "policing of desire" by white masculinity studies scholars. Other texts relevant to issues of masculinity include Kobena Mercer's charged *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, as well as the exhibition catalog, *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, edited by Thelma Golden. *Traps*, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall is also critical, along with *Black Men on*

Race, Gender, and Sexuality: A Critical Reader, edited by Devon Carbado; bell hooks's *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, and Thomas Glave's *Words to Our Now* are equally important.

While earlier texts in this subfield of gender studies represent an earnest attempt to effectively situate theories of masculinity in a framework that transcends and offers an alternative to a white male perspective, later books such as Byrd and Guy-Sheftall's edited volume, Carbado's essential reader, hooks' work, and Glave's texts are attempts at including culturally specific experiences. It is apparent that masculinity studies, while still a burgeoning field, has not been relegated to white scholarship on men and masculinity; in fact, a rich body of literature representing a wide spectrum of experiences and understandings of manhood exists. The aforementioned texts address the longstanding history of black men exploring questions of personal identity. Riggs's nonwhite examination of these issues makes his work not only significant but situates it within the realm of other scholars such as Byrd and Guy-Sheftall, Carbado, Golden, hooks, Julien, and Mercer. In particular, the present study adds to the discussion by examining the complexities of black masculinity within the rubric of film and cultural study, and moreover, through the lens of one cultural figure—as opposed to giving an historical overview of black male representation or producing a comparative text among several figures.

Given the controversies that arose in response to *Tongues Untied* and some of Riggs's other films, reception studies is another crucial component of this study. In the fields of Film Studies and Cultural Studies, scholarship that pertains to reception studies traditionally has been used to study how audiences and fans interpret a specific artist or a particular film or television program.[3] One exceptional work critical to this study is Barbara Klinger's *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and Films of Douglas Sirk*, in which she thoroughly outlines Sirk's significance by citing culturally important historical moments and cultural institutions such as academia, studio marketing, film reviewers, and star discourses, all of which helped to shape how his films were interpreted. Klinger

also discusses the transformations of his works *vis-à-vis* successive moments in culture and history when she writes,

> Sirk's longevity in film studies is interesting, then, for what he can tell us about the transformation of his melodramas via successive developments in the field. Once we grant this historical mutability of meanings in academia, interpretations and values appear "contingent," radically dependent on the positions and needs of those involved in institutions of evaluative authority, rather than based, as is so often claimed, on the universal givens of the text itself. (2)

I follow Klinger's model of tracing out of how cultural moments and institutions shift the relevance and meaning of a textual event as a methodology to chart significant moments in cultural history that have impacted and influenced the meanings of Riggs's work.

Also significant to this study is the work on specific black audiences, as opposed to Klinger's institutionally created meanings, by scholar Jacqueline Bobo.[4] Her groundbreaking work on the reception of *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* cannot be overlooked, because Bobo's scholarship effectively demonstrates how racial, cultural, and gendered differences impact and influence the reception of a film.

The life and work of Marlon Riggs compels the consideration of questions of representation, autobiography, reflexivity, and creating work from within and outside the margins. These questions are best addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining insights from film studies, television studies, ethnography, gay and lesbian studies, gender/masculinity studies, and cultural studies; however, the primary focus of this work is on African American representation and documentary film.

Plan of the Dissertation

The primary sources for this dissertation include Riggs's eight videos: *Long Train Running, Ethnic Notions, Tongues Untied, Affirmations, Anthem, Color Adjustments, Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret),* and *Black Is…Black Ain't*.[5] I also consulted a variety of local, national, and international newspapers, film reviews, and scholarly articles, as well as interviews with colleagues and friends of Riggs. One archival source has been critical to this analysis: the privately held Marlon Riggs papers, which is currently housed in Berkeley, California, by the Signifyin' Works production company, a nonprofit organization cofounded by Riggs with his friend and colleague, Vivian Kleiman. Access to unpublished papers, personal correspondence, and production notes gave me greater insight into Riggs's film process and invaluable access to viewer feedback on his films; this information was essential in building my argument of Riggs as a cultural agitator. To gain a better sense of the impact of Riggs's films, I corroborated the reports on audience response to his films in the Signifyin' Works archive with newspaper reviews and other commentaries.

The results of my investigation are presented in four chapters, each organized to examine similar films to provide a thread for gleaning greater insight into Riggs's work, his artistic process, and his vision as a filmmaker, artist, and activist. I explore Riggs's films and address how his work renegotiated notions of blackness, shame, sexuality, performance, resistance, documentary filmmaking, and the role of public television in America.

Chapter One, "Marlon T. Riggs: Life and Earlier Work," provides biographical information along with analyzing Riggs's earliest film, *Long Train Running* (1981). I explore questions related to Riggs's life and career in order to provide a rich picture of who he was as a man and filmmaker. For instance, by considering such aspects of his biography as how living abroad during his high school

years informed his work, what sort of discrimination he encountered growing up, and how this prejudice impacted his choices as a filmmaker as well as his coming out. I offer a better understanding of Riggs as a historical figure and of his motivations for creating his body of work. Via an examination of his very first student film, *Long Train Running: The History of the Oakland Blues*, I also emphasize a concept critical to understanding Riggs's aesthetic: the notion of historical "sweep"—the ability to address myriad topics seamlessly and simultaneously.

Chapter Two, "*Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*: Specters of Representation" pairs Riggs's most conventional documentaries (*Ethnic Notions* [1987] and *Color Adjustment* [1991]) to demonstrate that although these films were more stylistically consistent with the public television format, the content and subject matter still inflamed the cultural and political landscape by critiquing forthrightly the ways in which material culture and mass media have been instrumental in formulating the way race is understood in America. Building upon the notion that Riggs's work is relevant through its examination of history, I also demonstrate how his use of seemingly contradictory elements in his films (e.g., reenactment, performance, archival footage) enabled him to look at broad social issues like American democracy in a multifaceted way.

Chapter Three, "Un-Doing Shame and Silence," focuses on Riggs's most controversial and analyzed film, *Tongues Untied.* This chapter closely examines the impact of Riggs's revelation of and acceptance of himself as black, gay, and HIV-positive. A close textual reading of the film along with an analysis of audience reactions enables me to show how *Tongues Untied* constituted the most forceful example of Riggs as a cultural agitator. Drawing upon Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of "embracing shame" (Introduction), I show how Riggs used his HIV status as a point of strength and resilience. I argue that it was the moment of recognition of his multiple selves—African American, gay, filmmaker, HIV-positive, activist, artist, son, Harvard graduate—that greatly influenced his aesthetic choices not only for *Tongues Untied* but his future films as well.

The final chapter of this dissertation discusses how, toward the end of his life, Riggs's sense of urgency about suffering from AIDS led him to make several short experimental films (*Affirmations* [1990], *Anthem* [1991], and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien [No Regret*, 1992]) and culminated in his desire to complete his final feature-length documentary *Black Is…Black Ain't* (1995). An analysis of this posthumously completed film is paired with Riggs's experimental shorts to show how his incorporation of the autobiographical and essay forms in documentary film allowed him to use his body as a powerful basis for addressing the many misperceptions about HIV/AIDS, race, and black masculinity prevalent when those films appeared.

By analyzing all eight films produced and directed by Riggs, I fully characterize Riggs as a cultural agitator; by showing how these works were shaped by Riggs's personal history and his understanding of American twentieth-century history, I argue that Riggs's films—to borrow a phrase from philosopher Homi Bhabha—"exceed the frame."[6] I find evidence of Riggs's innovative achievements by exploring the many passionate reactions articulated by a diverse group of viewers—the press, politicians, film scholars, and African-American and gay spectators—to his work.

Situating Riggs's films within a larger sociocultural framework and understanding his films and their influence among his peers helps to anchor him as a significant twentieth-century artist. Furthermore, through an analysis of an important yet somewhat overlooked documentary filmmaker and social activist, I hope to add to the growing body of literature on filmmakers who may have received less commercial, mainstream success but who still made an indelible impact on culture, one that indeed "exceeds the frame." The interdisciplinary nature of my study, with its exploration of themes surrounding identity, sexuality, and the role of art and media will allow scholars in the fields of African American studies, documentary film practice, and gender studies to learn more about Riggs. Introducing the notion of cultural agitator is also critical to scholars

interested in demonstrating the ways that art can be used as a tool to resist cultural norms while also promoting social justice.

Chapter 1

Marlon T. Riggs:

Life and Early Work

> We live in a society in which truth often is defined by your reflection on the screen, whether it's the television screen or the cinematic screen. But you don't really live and you're not really somebody until you're somehow reflected there on the tube or in the theater. –Marlon Riggs (Banneker, 11)

This chapter examines Riggs's life and his first film, the frequently overlooked student project *Long Train Running* (1981), to show how, from the beginning, the filmmaker developed certain innovative cinematic motifs as elements of his directorial signature. In particular, I describe key elements of Riggs's early life as to their potential impact on his filmmaking and career choices later in life. Growing up in the United States and abroad in West Germany had a crucial impact on Riggs's view of himself, of black America, and of racial representation. No other film scholar has addressed Riggs in this way. This chapter provides a brief overview of his professional career prior to his first feature-length film, *Ethnic Notions* (1987). In addition, to develop the argument that Riggs is a cultural agitator, I situate him among other writers and filmmakers, such as James Baldwin and Isaac Julien who also addressed issues of race and sexuality in their works.

Marlon Riggs: A Brief Look at His Early Years

While one could argue that childhood experiences prove formative in any filmmaker's worldview, Riggs revisits many of his in several of his documentaries, providing irrefutable evidence that this period in his life helped to form his perspectives about race and class, and mold his understanding of what it meant to black in America. As each chapter below illustrates in more detail, these early understandings and perspectives became important elements of how Riggs addressed these contentious issues in his films and writings.

Born February 3, 1957 in Fort Worth, Texas, Marlon Troy Riggs grew up in a military family that moved frequently during his formative years. In an interview in *Au Courant* magazine, Riggs provided significant insight into his early years. He explained that in 1968, "friendless and isolated," his family relocated from Texas to Georgia where he attended "the newly desegregated Hepzibah [sic] Junior High" (Marks 13). Riggs started middle school the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, when racial tensions across the country—and particularly in the South—had reached a boiling point. Despite the assassination, and as one of only two blacks placed in the top class at the middle school, Riggs ruefully recalled how he "thought, foolishly, of running for student council." He said that: "It was foolish because in the school yard it was: 'look at that damn nigger over there. Who does he think he is?'" (13). Riggs explained that he did not find respite in school with fellow black classmates, either. "Because I was in this [advanced] class, the black students looked at me as if I thought I were above them, so they treated me with hostility too." As a result, he "just suffered, worked hard, and got good grades." (13)

While there is no scholarship that explicitly examines the influence of King's death upon Riggs, it is reasonable to assert that the civil rights leader's death had a tremendous impact on the director: King's image is a recurring visual and aural motif in *Ethnic Notions* (1987), *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Affirmations* (1990), *Anthem* (1991), *Color Adjustment* (1991), and *Black Is…Black Ain't*

(1995).[7] Each film prominently includes either the iconic still image of King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial delivering the "I Have a Dream" speech, or segments of his famous oration.

At the start of high school, Riggs's family moved to a military base in West Germany; as one would imagine, high school in Europe proved to be drastically different from his suburban Augusta, Georgia, middle-school experience. Riggs saw West Germany as ideal for military dependents because they could form friendships that blurred both gender and racial lines. As he explains: "[i]t was a very affirming experience to find there could be a community in which I could be myself" (Marks 13). Because of these experiences, the notion of collectivity and unity, and of holding America to its tenets as a free and democratic society became themes throughout Riggs's films and writings. The crucial irony here was that Riggs was able to locate an American ideal abroad, albeit in the cocoon of an American military base.

This passion for freedom and desire to connect across differences, I suspect, also speaks to Riggs's inclination toward what scholar Paul Gilroy identified as the Black Atlantic. Developed to challenge the notion of racial purity and to assert instead a hybridity of ideas regarding race and culture, Gilroy's theory of a black Atlantic primarily focuses on critiquing racial absolutes—which, according to the aforementioned struggles of Riggs's formative education, are precisely why he often felt like an outsider. Gilroy's search "for resources with which to comprehend the doubleness and cultural intermixture" (4) was something he found was shared in English and African American versions of cultural studies, therefore creating the theory he called the *black Atlantic*. Gilroy's theory of the black Atlantic creates room for individuals to embrace the many aspects of their identities; moreover, just as Gilroy suggested that W. E. B. Du Bois's "travel and studentship in Europe transformed his understanding of 'race' and its place in the modern world" (x), I assert that

Riggs's critical engagement and understanding of race developed from his international travel and student experiences.

After high school, Riggs returned to the United States to attend Harvard University on an academic scholarship. In 1978, he graduated *magna cum laude* with a B.A. in American History. While most biographical sketches regularly highlight Riggs's Harvard background (as he often did), very few comment further on it—it is as if the Ivy League pedigree proves his keen intellect and explains his successful documentary film career. However, Riggs's partner of fifteen years, Jack Vincent, shed a different perspective on Riggs's days at Harvard. He recalled that Riggs did not look fondly upon his undergraduate years; in fact, he often felt very lonely at Harvard. The experiences of inter-and intra-racial strife that informed his adolescence resurfaced. According to Vincent, Riggs dealt with his feelings of frustration at Harvard because he understood the tremendous value society placed on receiving a "Harvard education"; besides, because he was interested in filmmaking by the time he graduated, Riggs knew that as a Crimson alumnus he would have access to an incredible network of influential individuals who could possibly help open many professional doors. In the *Au Couran*t interview, Riggs confirms Vincent's insights:

> Harvard proved another traumatic time. I had then to confront this emerging sense of homosexuality within myself, and how that was setting me apart from the black students. Things were said about that 'faggot' … and I knew, even though I had a vague notion of what I was at the time, it applied to me in some way. (Marks 13)

In this quote, Riggs reveals that at Harvard he grappled with feelings of being an outcast, an emotion similar to his experiences as a youngster in Georgia. It also shows how he negotiated the foreboding feeling that his blackness could not be circumscribed by a set of narrow values or purist ideals. Although Riggs self-identified as black, his questioning of his sexuality, and his experience of

"the black community's" notorious homophobia meant that he could not feel strongly connected to African Americans.

To combat this barrage of emotions, Riggs sought refuge in what he knew best: books. Self-described as "short, black, very serious, and very somber," Riggs went to his "respected staid Harvard professors" and asked to do an independent study on homosexuality in American literature from the 1800s to the present (Marks 13). Riggs explained that most professors' homophobia was so visceral that they "could not get out of their mouths the word 'gay,' and would respectfully decline to lead his thesis" (13). Riggs's insights suggest that his feelings of alienation and prejudice were not only limited to black classmates, but that the discrimination toward sexuality—particularly black sexuality—arose from a broad swath of society. Riggs's realization of these dynamics of ostracism, coupled with his training as a historian, became an integral part of the impetus for his work on black homosexuality.

These experiences during Riggs's early years undoubtedly influenced his work as an artist, activist, filmmaker, and scholar. Further evidence that Riggs's formative years and traumas affected his worldview can be seen by examining the way he negotiated his career and all the life challenges he faced as an adult. Diagnosed as HIV-positive—with AIDS being, in the late 1980s, a relatively unrecognized disease and surefire death sentence—Riggs's fierce work ethic resulted in eight videos in as many years. The good grades of his youth translated into award-winning documentaries as an adult. As a man, Riggs—like the boy of his childhood—was still bold and ambitious; thematically, his work focused on inter- as well as intra-racial conflicts as vivid as the memories of his past. The impact of his suffering at Hephzibah Junior High School registers in *Tongues Untied*.

Moreover, learning about and accepting his sexuality amidst large-scale societal criticism and homophobia helped to shape a part of his directorial goals, which were to teach, or in his words, "to look at history and find value and meaning and lessons" (Marks 18). This is precisely

how Riggs framed all his documentaries: whether he focused on local blues musicians, pathological representations of blacks in the media, or identity, he always made sure to examine the subject from its roots in order to gain a better understanding of the overarching social issues. I also posit that this range of experiences, along with Riggs's desire to learn more about and eventually accept his sexuality, provided him with a certain freedom that gave him more of an unconventional and nonconforming vantage point, which registers in his documentaries.

Marlon T. Riggs: Career Choices

Like most hardworking and ambitious people, Riggs wanted to be successful and respected in his career; again, like Martin Luther King, Jr., he was more concerned with making a significant contribution to society than with getting rich (Banneker 10–11). Although he never specified how his family upbringing—specifically, both his parent's military service and his intellectual curiosity—affected him, it seems likely these factors influenced his career choices. Growing up, Riggs had a strained relationship with his stepfather, Alvin.[8] In interviews, several close friends and colleagues revealed their uncertainty as to whether Riggs knew his biological father. As Riggs's career developed, he often would provide financial support to his mother, grandmother, and younger sister, demonstrating his strong sense of family, belonging, responsibility, and accountability.

According to Marks, Riggs also "grew up hearing that those who succeed in some ways owe it to the community and they need to pull others up with them. It was always assumed [he] would be a preacher, or an attorney [who] would mobilize and lead people" (13). Friend and coproducer of *Color Adjustment* Vivian Kleiman agreed with Riggs's self-assessment: "He was something of a child preacher. When he was a kid at church he would often be asked to get up and discuss the

scripture … the sense of leadership and speaking to large groups was something he was comfortable with …" (Guthmann E1).

As a logical extension of these familial expectations (and social dynamics) coupled with the obvious talents, particularly during his critical period of self-discovery and exploration at Harvard—Riggs decided to become a documentary filmmaker (Salaam 4). Instead of leading the people from a church pulpit, he used the cinema as his platform to rally people together and promote humanity and social justice; perhaps this is precisely what some critics found problematic about his work. For some, Riggs's work is too polemical and heavy-handed, and at times, didactic (Deitcher and Frankel). However, this also may be precisely why the iconic figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. features so prominently in his films—King represents a model of humaneness, political leadership, and an attempt to appeal to people's better, higher moral self. In short, Riggs chose documentary filmmaking as a way to marry his interest in books with his need to communicate large, important social ideas to the masses.

While Riggs knew fairly early in life that he wanted to produce films, there are no indications that he ever had mainstream commercial aspirations. He also was often quite explicitly critical about filmmakers with more commercial success. His biggest criticism was directed at Spike Lee, who he thought valorized sexist and masculinist ideals through many of his films. As Riggs put it, his "problem with Spike [Lee] is that his films are often superficial. Too much is left unexplored. There's a certain immaturity in understanding sex relations, and understanding how men don't deal with a lot of issues. Spike has talent, but he has a lot to learn" (Murdoch C1).[9] Riggs's criticism of Lee grew out of his perspective as a historian and journalist: it was not that Riggs had the simple desire to create moving pictures, but instead he "wanted to reach mass audiences in a more than an intellectual way, to empower people to think about their culture…." For him that meant creating "historical television, namely documentary" (Riggs, Interview by Braun 1).

After graduation, Riggs returned to Dallas-Fort-Worth, Texas, to work at KXAS-TV; frustrated with the racism he encountered there, he decided to further his education. Upon receiving a fellowship to attend the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, Riggs left Texas without regret. Once he obtained his Master's Degree, he worked several entry-level production jobs, mainly on PBS-based programs. He was a production assistant on the 1981 short, *Two Parents, Two Homes*, about effective parenting after a divorce, and worked primarily as an editor and postproduction supervisor on industrial shorts and local cable productions. A few of the productions were award winners, namely the hour-long documentary, *How Much Is Enough? Decision Making in the Nuclear Age* (1982), where Riggs worked as Associate Editor and Sound Effects Editor. This program was designed for middle and high school students to learn social responsibility and the issues surrounding nuclear weapons.

From 1982–1988, while fundraising for *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs worked as editor, associate editor, writer, and/or director for more than a half-dozen industrial shorts. The editing experience Riggs obtained was invaluable—as a result, one of Riggs's strengths is his ability to tell large-scale stories in a concise and compelling way. In addition to his consistent production work, two Emmys, and a Peabody Award, Riggs also taught documentary film courses at U.C. Berkeley and was one of the youngest faculty members to receive tenure from the university (Vincent, personal interview). In 1993, just before his death, Riggs received an Honorary Doctorate from California College of Arts and Crafts (Cal Arts).

Riggs's illustrious career did not stop when he was diagnosed as HIV-positive, but rather blossomed—with his productions, speaking engagements, writings, and social activism, it seemed Riggs was indefatigable. In addition to the eight films he created, he also served on several professional boards, such as the Steering Committee of the Association of California Independent Public Television Producers, which later helped to create the Independent Television Service

(ITVS)—an organization that funds, promotes, and presents diverse programs on public television. Riggs had affiliations with organizations such as the Association of Independent Video and Film Makers, Bay Area Video Coalition, Black Filmmaker Foundation, and the Film Arts Foundation. He was an advisory board member at Frameline, and a member of the International Documentary Association as well as the Gay/Lesbian History Archives. In addition to these groups, Riggs was an active member of Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD). He also worked as a consulting producer for projects such as, but not limited to, *Warring Ideals: A Portrait of Henry O. Tanner* (1990). As part of the Tanner Film Group production team, Riggs helped produce a sixteen-minute video funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) that complemented a traveling exhibition about this renowned African American painter.

Riggs's practiced editing skills were constantly in demand, either by students eager to learn from him or by other artists (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview).[10] For instance, Riggs was hired to direct "the first anti-gaybashing song ever to emerge from the rap community," *Language of Violence*, by the Bay-Area-based rap duo Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, featuring Michael Franti and Rono Tse ("Hiphoprisy's 'Language of Violence'"). The song dealt with a young boy on the first day of school who is bullied and accused of being gay simply because he is perceived as different; the song never declares his sexuality either way. The lyrics show antigay, prejudiced language as being a form of male violence and a means of dehumanization. Being a person who had experienced social ostracism early on, Riggs was a logical choice to produce this video—despite his waning health and inordinately busy work schedule. As a local sensation, the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy were popular; however, the album's lack of mainstream commercial success coupled with Riggs's precarious health resulted in the video project never being completed.

During the final stages of his life, Riggs suffered from AIDS-related dementia. As he had done during his youth, Riggs retreated to work during this time of despair—Riggs believed,

according to friends and colleagues, that if he continued to work, he would stave off death. Already inclined to "say yes to everything,"[11] and concerned by mounting medical bills, financial obligations, and the desire to leave his mother Jean Riggs, grandmother "Big Mama," and sister Sascha some inheritance, Riggs was planning to direct a documentary on the "Gay Games 1994" (Brooks 1). The film's focus was "on the gay Olympics as a way of looking at gay politics and culture" (Riggs, Letter to Brooks 1). And after finishing *Black Is…Black Ain't*, Riggs was planning to produce "the definitive history of lesbians" (Kleiman, personal interview 1 Aug.).[12] Unfortunately, Riggs passed away on April 5, 1994, well before he was able to start work on this project.

This final lesbian-based project becomes particularly interesting when considered in light of readings of Riggs's work as motivated solely by what he knew first-hand, as argued, in Philip Brian Harper's essay, "Marlon Riggs: The Subjective Position of Documentary Video." Such explanations of Riggs and his work are limited, however; they do not take into consideration the various projects Riggs worked on throughout his career, and also oversimplify Riggs's motivations as a filmmaker. Riggs challenged racist and sexist language that promoted shame and isolation. He was also committed to the notion of community, but saw it as a hybrid set of ideals, not a homogenized, essentialist construction—Riggs was inspired by complicating ideals and showing life outside notions of fixed identities.

Riggs's work is significant because as a filmmaker, he was committed to reaching a broad and diverse audience, and to making videos that were both challenging and engaging. He is not alone in this act of creating substantive yet highly personal art—two artists to whom Riggs has been compared frequently are writer James Baldwin and filmmaker Isaac Julien. The comparisons with James Baldwin arise from the two men's similar stances on race and sexuality. Like Baldwin, Riggs's inclusion of himself in many of his documentaries is reminiscent of Baldwin's highly personal and political approach in his essays. Also, Riggs's commitment to address taboo subjects

and forthrightly address the political fallout is a similar to Baldwin, who often spoke adamantly about race relations in America. Both spent time outside of America and found their European experience more liberating in terms of being able to fully express their selfhood. However, there are some differences between Riggs and Baldwin; primarily, Baldwin's work centered upon homosexuality, and even bisexuality, but neglected any concentrated conversation on women's sexual choices, with the exception of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.[13] Riggs's work consistently incorporated women's voices. This important trait distinguishes Riggs from Baldwin, as confirmed by Riggs's plans for his documentary on lesbians.

Isaac Julien is another figure to whom Marlon Riggs is compared. As previously mentioned, Riggs consistently pointed to his Harvard education and time in West Germany as crucial influences on his personal and cultural identity. Yet, despite his black and somewhat middle-class upbringing, Riggs's video projects consistently addressed an urban, working-class experience; or at the very least, they comfortably crossed class boundaries. Riggs's contemporary, filmmaker Isaac Julien, stated in an interview on the 2007 rereleased *Tongues Untied* DVD that "although Riggs grew up in a fairly middle-class background, he was very comfortable in the street … [and was] consciously trying to make work that was both sophisticated and on the level." This is in contrast to Julien, who came from a working-class background in London, but who received a B.A. in painting and fine art film from the esteemed St. Martin's School of Art in London and who has been embraced primarily by the elite museum and fine art community.

As a result, while the two filmmakers are close in age (Riggs being three years older than Julien), and while both attended top-tier universities, created film production companies when they were in their early thirties, and developed award-winning videos around the same time about similar topics—specifically black gay culture—their filmic approaches stand in stark contrast with one another. Julien's work is more abstract in form and style. His *oeuvre* is wider in that it addresses

a variety of topics, and in different forms (in part because his film career continued beyond 1994), and he has created video installations for museums in addition to his more straightforward films. It is apparent, then, that Riggs's "complex fate," to use Ralph Ellison's term, was to relay stories with a particular directedness and empathy.

The First Film: *Long Train Running*

Building on this discussion of the filmmaker's biographical background and its impact on both his sense of vision and his choice of film topics, this section examines *Long Train Running* to learn more about Riggs's filmmaking process and to demonstrate how he addressed, early in his career, questions regarding identity in a more conventional documentary style. I posit that starting with his master's thesis, Riggs's works promoted community at the same time that they challenged various contradictory aspects of American culture—all important characteristics that helped to make him a cultural agitator.

When asked to describe Riggs, colleagues and friends recall he was someone who created projects that were feasible to complete, but that he was also extremely resourceful. *Long Train Running: The Story of the Oakland Blues*, Riggs's first film, which he codirected and coproduced with fellow graduate student Peter Webster in 1981, was an example of Riggs's practicality. While no records exist in the Signifyin' Works archives that directly illustrate how roles and responsibilities for the film were divided among the pair, Webster did draft the narration (Alghren, "Heyday of Oakland Blues" 58), and the film features elements of Riggs's directorial approach that show up later in his other documentaries.

Webster conceived the idea for the project after reading an article in *New West* magazine highlighting the blues renaissance in the Bay Area (Ahlgren, "Heyday of Oakland Blues," 58). *Long*

Train Running describes the birth of the "Oakland Blues," a distinctive music style that developed in the East Bay after blacks migrated to the area for work in shipyards during World War II. According to Bob Geddins' words in the film, as the "grandfather of the Oakland Blues" and the bluesman responsible for putting the particular sound on wax—it was "not very different from any other kind of blues except it was a slow, a draggier [sic] beat, and a kind of mournful sound." The Oakland Blues peaked during the late 1940s through the 1950s; while the Chicago-based version gained notoriety from people migrating north from Tennessee and Mississippi, Oakland's musicians were predominantly from Louisiana and Texas.

By using personal recollections, live and recorded music, still photographs, and stock footage, *Long Train Running* examined the unique history of the East Bay and highlighted some of the area's—and era's—most prominent venues and artists. The twenty-eight-minute documentary was finished in August 1981 and won first prize in the documentary division of the American Film Institute's 1982 National Video Festival. It was second-place winner in the documentary division of the 1982 Academy of Television Arts and Science student Emmy Awards. In addition to these prizes, *Long Train Running* was featured in the Oakland Storefront Museum's two-month exhibit of 1982, entitled "Oakland Blues And [sic] All that Jazz" (Riggs, "Long Train Running" publicity sheet).

SWEEP

In an article written in the *San Francisco Chronicle* promoting *Long Train Running*, Riggs said working on the project "seemed like something interesting to work with audibly and visually, not just the usual talking heads in a documentary. The subject had a lot of sweep" (58). When examining Riggs's style as a documentary filmmaker, the notion of "sweep" is useful; many cinematic techniques seen in his later works are first apparent in *Long Train Running*. Therefore, when Riggs

mentioned that he was interested in creating the documentary because the film had "sweep," he was explaining a filmic style critical to him: creating a project of historical import that simultaneously explored several ideas and subjects.

Riggs's interest in creating works with "a lot of sweep" was an early indication that he wanted to produce films that exceeded the frame—layered, multifaceted projects that addressed the "peculiar history" between black and white racial identity in America. In *Long Train Running,* Riggs and Webster create a visual narrative through a series of historical still photographs of the East Bay, and juxtapose these images with current shots of Oakland's urban blight. In one particular sequence early in the film, a still image of a lone black woman staring at the camera cuts to a picture of a tenement. The song "Tin Pan Alley" plays, and the photographic image fades into a present-day dilapidated hotel in Oakland, similar in design and look as the previous still photograph. The singer belts out lyrics about the area being rough, where "they start cuttin' and shootin' as soon as the sun goes down," and images of trailer homes littering parking lots during the 1940s blend into today's large, vacant lots with abandoned cars.

Other examples of the ways in which the notion of sweep is incorporated into Riggs's other films include juxtaposing the saccharine sounds of nursery rhymes with the vexed stereotypical images in *Ethnic Notions*; or the reoccurring rhythm of the heartbeat playing against the HIV-positive images of Riggs in *Tongues Untied*; as well as the consistent use of Negro Spirituals, or "Freedom Songs," in his short experimental videos. Each of these audio–visual examples demonstrates how Riggs's work is innovative and expands the boundaries of the documentary form by literally propelling narratives forward while simultaneously using sound and imagery to create cultural connotations that address larger social concerns.

NONLINEAR STORYTELLING

Throughout *Long Train Running*, Riggs and Webster utilize various types of filmmaking styles. Occasionally a more poetic approach is used; at other times, the film technique is more expository and clearcut. By exploring different segments of the documentary, the following sections demonstrate Riggs and Webster's use of different film modes.

Some colleagues have described Riggs's work as being "never linear, always nonlinear" (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview), a characterization suggesting that Riggs used the style of a *griot*, or storyteller. In the oral tradition, storytellers can use chronological or nonchronological temporal order. In a nonlinear approach, the material can feel disconnected until a narrator or variety of other voices brings coherence to the text. Riggs's associate producer and fellow filmmaker, Nicole Atkinson-Roach, argued that even when Riggs addressed a story like *Ethnic Notions* from a chronological vantage, he still used unconventional devices that moved the film away from the straightforward documentary by breaking up time sequences. By doing this, Riggs could introduce an idea and still "come back to it later and see it in a different shape, color or size" (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview). In other words, he complicated the subjects he examined by looking at his subjects from different angles and different vantage points, creating a kind of complex and refracted seeing.

I suggest Riggs used this nonlinear approach in *Long Train Running* as well; ostensibly, the film is about Bob Geddins, but it starts with five minutes of musical performances by various blues musicians. Interspersed throughout the live performances is the history of blacks migrating from the south to the East Bay, all before Geddins is introduced. This approach provides a social context for the work, reflecting the connection between the oral tradition of storytelling and the history of the blues genre (Eastman 161), while also reinforcing the program's relevance.

Assuming that Atkinson-Roach's characterization of Riggs's film style is accurate, and recognizing that Riggs was committed to creating projects of personal and social relevance, one might suggest he suffered from what film scholar Matthew Bernstein describes as "documentaphobia" (409). In other words, Riggs wanted to push the boundaries of the traditional documentary format to avoid creating "the illustrated lecture" (409), but he also did not want to oversimplify the project. As Riggs explained: "It was our idea to give more than a plain musical presentation. We wanted to give it some historical perspective, social context" (Ahlgren, "Heydey" 59)—or, put another way, "sweep" or a broad sense of history and tradition. For Riggs, there was a need to strike the difficult but necessary balance of showing intellectual rigor without sacrificing the film's entertainment value.

One of the most memorable interviews in *Long Train Running* is with musicians Lowell Fulsom and Elmon Douggar. Interviewed together, the pair sits at a table outside in the backyard of someone's home. Both are wearing three-piece suits and Fedora hats, while an ashtray, green Bic lighter, and half-empty plastic cup with a beverage resembling beer also fill the shot. As if still in a band, the two musicians play off one another as they share anecdotes about Oakland's blues history—the expressions, laughs, curious glances, and affirming head nods of one serve as the other's fact checker. This moment demonstrated Riggs and Webster's keen ability to set up shots that were consistent with the oral tradition of sharing stories, or better yet, singing the blues.

Documentaphobia: Avoidance of the Talking Head Phenomenon

The scene described above between Fulsom and Douggar worked because of its faithfulness to the subject. Whereas Riggs initially claimed he was indifferent to producing *Long Train Running*, he obviously connected with the interviewees because he created sequences like that described above showing a genuine chemistry and sincere rapport among the musicians. I posit it was no accident,

then, that the film only included a twenty-second shot of an academic (Blues music scholar, Paul Oliver); the other ten interviews were with practitioners of the art form. This choice to rely more on individuals who are not in the academy reveals another aspect of Riggs's aesthetic: the inclination to interview subjects (even in this more straightforward kind of documentary) who are speaking from personal experience, rather than academics who may have less practical engagement with a subject.

Perhaps Riggs's journalism background also influenced this uncanny ability to connect with people. As film historian Matthew Bernstein recounts Bill Nichols's notion of documentary categories, and specifically the expository mode, he explains: "Expository documentaries embody an epistemological assumption that knowledge about the world is readily accessible to the filmmaker. Such films give an impression of objectivity and of well-sustained argument" (398). The expository mode is different from observational films, which lack the authoritative voice-over and utilize long takes highlighting particular events. By using the expository mode, Riggs effectively presents the historical origins of the musical genre alongside the modern era of Blues music replete with its hybrid styles and musicians. Moreover, filmic devices such as sharp, fast-paced cuts, and dissolve fades—dramatic tools that show up in his later, more experimental works—are present here as well. While these different modes of filmmaking, the poetic style of the nonlinear technique versus the expository approach, may seem contradictory, what is most evident is how various segments of a film use different forms; Riggs's work is no exception to this practice.

Film historian Bill Nichols also explains the expository film mode as emphasizing "verbal commentary and an argumentative logic" (*Introduction* 33); Matthew Bernstein describes it as "images [that] serve as illustrations or counterpoint of the verbal argument" (398). This theory is best understood when examining the last five minutes of *Long Train Running*, which contain a moving solo performance by "Mississippi" Johnny Waters, who performs a rendition of the famous

B. B. King Blues song, "Sweet 16." Some of the lyrics are different from B. B. King's original version. In the version heard in *Long Train Running*, Waters belts out lyrics about being away from his family; his brother is in the Korean War, and his sister is in New Orleans. The chorus Waters sings, a nod to B. B. King's rendition, explains that his loneliness is compounded by the longing he has for a woman at least half his age: she is "Sweet 16, the sweetest thing he's ever seen." Riggs uses Waters' performance and the song's lyrics to cut in black-and-white still photographs of many different smiling, young, innocent-looking black women. When Waters talks about having troubles, images of Geddins's fledging radiator repair shop appear. Geddins opened this shop after being forced out of the music business by the major record labels that enticed musicians away from his company by offering them more lucrative deals. With a quick shot of Geddins' east Oakland storefront garage, the viewer is reminded of what they learned ten minutes earlier about Geddins' hardships. Also interspersed between live shots of "Mississippi" Waters' performance is archival footage of men building roads during Oakland's heyday, which is re-presented and shown alongside contemporary footage of men repairing the city's now neglected and dilapidated streets.

Showing the still archival images and buttressing them with live footage and contemporary shots of Oakland follows the expository film mode Nichols discusses because the viewer connects the lyrics of the song with visuals of the film. While it is the music that does "the talking"—rather than voice-over narration—the film evokes the personal experience of black Oaklanders intertwined with the city's history, making this an expository mode of filmmaking but also highly poetic, and therefore not expository in its strictest form.

Long Train Running opens with shots of California's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) subway train moving through parts of Oakland on an elevated track while the lyrics of "Train Train Blues" play in the background. The choice to use a modern rather than historical image of the train assumes that The Blues move along a continuum from the past to the present; the images of black

men shown in the documentary seem to move along the same trajectory. The different ages, experiences, and sounds of the featured bluesmen reflect the changing landscape of Oakland Blues music, and this old port city. The train, which facilitated the migration of many blacks from rural southern towns, is now the working-class transportation in the city.

By starting the film with a bluesman singing "hard blues" and cutting away from him to show the cityscape from the vantage of a contemporary el-train while a blues song about a train is heard in the background, Riggs effectively created a visually and aurally complex sequence that takes place in one locale, Oakland—replacing the "talking heads" documentary that he so adamantly wanted to avoid. As the subway train traverses along the Oakland streets, revealing blocks of old, ramshackle buildings, the song's lyrics are inter-cut with performance shots of different black, male, blues musicians and provide musical cues of Oakland's early blues history, its current state, and the varied (and at times precarious) state of its black men. As blues artist Sonny Rhodes explains, "a Blues Man lives it, understands it, and has to be able to sympathize with someone who has the blues. From those experiences he can take it, and write, and sing about it." Using the train as the metaphor, Riggs and Webster illustrate the interconnection between the social cultural history of the city and this unique and nearly lost art form.

Focus on the Margins: The Use of Observational Documentary

Shot on video,[14] in many instances *Long Train Running* maintains a visual quality reminiscent of the observational documentary mode Nichols articulates in his book, *Introduction to Documentary*. The observational film mode emphasizes an intimacy with the human character and observes everyday life experiences without interference from the camera or analysis from a voice-over commentary. In fact, some of the observational long takes by Riggs retain a grainy characteristic reminiscent of shots used by Charles Burnett in *Killer of Sheep* (1977), a film about a young black man named Stan

who lives in the Watts section of Los Angeles. In many respects, Stan has the blues, "that old, low-downish feeling that lingers in your mind," as Bob Geddins described the blues in *Long Train Running*. Burnett relies almost exclusively on long takes of the urban setting that make up Watts, a real nod to the celebrated neorealist and art film tradition best represented by filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica in such films as *Umberto D* (1952). Extended time passes as scenes of children playing in vacant, gravel-and-glass-filled lots take up several moments of the film, which is a stylistic device used within the neorealist film tradition.

Riggs uses a similar technique in *Long Train Running* in particular scenes, such as when the camera holds on the face of a black woman dancing in a smoky nightclub with her arms wrapped around her partner; or when the frame captures black children playing outside; or when the gaze sets languidly upon a man walking down the street, or settles on men in a smoky pool hall. These images represent a particular sensitivity to the humanity of people often regulated to the margins, a subject that Riggs examines in detail in his later works. In this sense, these sections of the film take on a vérité quality, a more observational rather than poetic or expository mode of filmmaking, therefore capturing unencumbered "authentic experiences" that through their realistic approach highlight specific moments.

One of the poignant components of *Long Train Running* is its inclusion of images of everyday black life. Riggs's archival images of Oakland represent the vibrant black life of the area during the 1940s when jobs for African Americans were abundant; they reflect that brief moment in Oakland history—before World War II ended—when the city was not grappling with overcrowding issues, housing and job shortages, and school segregation problems (M. Johnson). The footage is reminiscent of Gordon Parks' stills taken of blacks for *Life* magazine during the late 1940s—blacks full of pride and dignity. As the film's images reflect, there was a burgeoning black community in Oakland during this period that included a thriving nightlife, but people still experienced racism

and discrimination in the workplace and in their daily lives. As *Long Train Running* points out, many blacks were new to the area and naturally longed for familiar experiences; music became a logical connection to home, and to life's new, and sometimes trying, experiences.

Live Performance

While including live performance sequences in *Long Train Running* was a necessary device for a documentary about a largely unknown regional blues movement, such segments also became a distinctive part of Riggs's cinematic signature. For instance, in *Ethnic Notions* Riggs would incorporate a restaging and portrayal of the vaudeville entertainer Bert Williams, by choreographer Leni Sloan. Riggs's future project, *Tongues Untied*, also would heavily utilize reenactments, and *Black Is…Black Ain't* would include a live dance scene with Bill T. Jones. Even Riggs's short, more experimental works such as *Anthem*, *No Regret*, and *Affirmations* would also incorporate performance elements (e.g., Riggs dancing, poetry recitations, etc.).

Recognizing Riggs's consistent use of performance is important to gaining a better sense of his aesthetic while also strengthening the argument that his films were, in Atkinson-Roach's words, "never linear, always nonlinear." Riggs's use of performance in *Long Train Running*, coupled with his aversion to creating illustrated lectures, and his interest and personal acquaintanceships with poets and experimental artists, greatly influenced the use of dramatization in his later documentary videos. I posit that Riggs's work perfectly illustrates Cultural Studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson's notion that "blackness and performance are two discourses whose histories converge at the site of otherness" (*Appropriating Blackness* 7).

Johnson argues that when one examines performance practices, one sees tensions between cultural forces such as tradition and the shifting, evolving aspects of life that constitute culture. In other words, Johnson uses "performance to study black American culture, and … black American

culture as a means of studying performance theory" (*Appropriating Blackness* 7). I suggest this interconnection between fact and fiction explains Riggs's consistent tendency to incorporate performance in his documentaries (and to a lesser degree, his writings, e.g., "Reflections of a Snap! Queen").[15] From this perspective, the continued use of performance and reenactments in his documentaries allowed Riggs to challenge the fact that African Americans are constantly grappling with performing certain assumed roles within mainstream society, be that what it supposedly means to be an African American, a man, or a woman.

Personal Connection

Reviewing Riggs's *oeuvre* and its emphasis on black representations, especially in an urban setting, it seems logical that he would have produced a project addressing blues music; however, press statements he made after completing the film suggest otherwise. As Riggs explains:

> When I approached [the subject], I wasn't particularly interested….Like a lot of young black people, I didn't identify with it; it was something my grandparents did, a low-down nightclub thing—places I didn't frequent…. [A]s an "Army Brat"—I missed the Vietnam War, missed the protests, everything….But now, something drew me; I have a much more visceral, emotional affection for it [the blues], besides the intellectual appreciation. (Ahlgren, "Heyday" 59)

Riggs's initial reticence toward the subject was ostensibly based on his age and international background, which made it difficult for him to relate to the work. He explains how his time in Europe sheltered him from the racial discrimination, poverty, and limited opportunities that characterized America's tumultuous 1960s, an experience which further distanced his ability to relate to the music, culture, or people of the blues genre (although he contradicts this statement in later interviews when he recalls the prejudice he experienced during middle school; granted,

however, he was sheltered from experiencing more of it). Nonetheless, he was not actively involved in the counter-culture movement of the 1960s that predominated his generation and that, ironically, gained much of its momentum in Oakland and at U.C. Berkeley. Riggs also fails to acknowledge the longstanding deference Rock 'n' Roll musicians such as the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and even Jimi Hendrix paid to blues artists. Notwithstanding these factors, in the film, and Riggs's "intellectual interest" in the blues, Riggs still connects the viewer to the subject *vis-à-vis* his deft editing, storytelling, and observational images of this northern California metropolis, best seen during the final shots of the documentary where Riggs intersperses scenes of different blues musicians performing with various shots of Oakland.

One might also argue that Riggs personally connected with the subject as well. Riggs closes the documentary with a long shot of "Mississippi" Johnny Waters saying: "It's a poor man who puts his hand forward to do something and then draws it back. A man who starts something needs to finish. Even if he goes down dying for it." This final statement is eerily prescient considering this is precisely what would happen to Marlon Riggs during the filming of *Black Is...Black Ain't*. Consciously or not, this mantra becomes an overriding characteristic of Riggs's work ethic—and of being a cultural agitator—demonstrated best by his ability to forge ahead on projects despite insurmountable odds, and regardless of his personal reluctance. In the end, despite his initial hesitance to produce *Long Train Running*, Riggs becomes a blues man—using filmmaking as his instrument.

A Microcosm of Future Work

Examining *Long Train Running* within the context of Riggs's life and other film projects provides many keys to understanding him and his motivations. Motifs and formal strategies are introduced in this film that reemerge later in Riggs's career: the use of performance, Riggs's reliance on

individuals with personal experience as voices of authority rather than a heavy dependence on scholars, the use of the observational documentary mode to sensitively show the marginalized on screen, and the unwavering drive to create visually stimulating but practical projects. Even though Riggs produced, wrote, and edited this project with his fellow graduate student, Peter Webster, many of the filmic devices used in *Long Train Running* would become prominent characteristics of Riggs's subsequent works. This film shows Riggs experimenting early in his career with strategies of representation that would later become part of his filmic signature. As this chapter demonstrated, Riggs's subject and stylistic choices were deeply rooted in his personal experiences, and would continue to be as he developed as a filmmaker.

Chapter 2

Ethnic Notions and *Color Adjustment*:

Specters of Representation

> It is enunciation that circumscribes the marginalized positions of subjects historically misrepresented or under represented in dominant systems of representation. To be marginalized is to have no place from which to speak, since the subject positioned in the margins is silenced and invisible. The contestation of marginality in black, gay, and feminist politics thus inevitably brings the issue of authorship into play … as a question about agency in the cultural struggle to "find a voice" and "give voice" to subordinate experiences, identities, and subjectivities. (Mercer, "Skin Head" 181)

> The country's image of the Negro, which hasn't very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect, with a kind of frightening accuracy, the state of mind of the country. –James Baldwin (Riggs, *Color Adjustment*)

This chapter examines Riggs as a cultural agitator by analyzing two similar works, *Ethnic Notions* (1987) and *Color Adjustment* (1991), in an attempt to closely study Riggs's filmic vision and further demonstrate how his documentaries engaged and challenged the contested hotbed of racial, sexual, and gender stereotypes. While he did not produce these two projects in sequential order—in fact, he produced them four years apart—they share a similar style and theme, and thus merit discussion as a pair.

Riggs used various forms with his documentaries: some included more of what might be called a music video format, with quick, fast cuts; while others were longer, expository pieces. This range of filmic approaches has led many film scholars to consider Riggs more of an experimental filmmaker than a "strict documentarian," particularly with reference to his groundbreaking video *Tongues Untied* (1989), a documentary that examined contemporary black gay

experiences. As Chapter One illustrated, Riggs's tendency in this direction began with his very first film.

Yet, this chapter argues that Riggs's more conventional documentaries, such as *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*, can provide crucial insights into his artistic process and directorial approach. By performing a close reading of these two films, I build upon the argument in Chapter One that Riggs's work is significant through its exploration of a subject's sweep, or historical relevance, and by addressing—as well as challenging—notions of American democracy, which further his cause as an artist–activist. In this chapter, I analyze various segments of *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment* to demonstrate where particular visual tropes appear in his films, how they function, and what meanings they possess. I also explore how various audiences—ranging from the general spectator and the press, to film scholars—responded to Riggs's dense, multifaceted, and evocative works.

Two keynotes of Riggs's formal approach are of particular significance: his tendency to feature performance and reenactments, and his deployment of archival footage to function as elements in an argument regarding the "sweep" of history. I argue that these distinctive features of Riggs's work illustrate how his identities as a black, gay, middle-class, highly educated male, filmmaker, teacher, and son were inscribed in his films.

Historical footage has the element of authenticity within the documentary film mode, while reenactment has some authoritative positioning; however, performance contradicts relatively recent conceptualizations of documentary (often found in observational cinema) that find staging false. Nevertheless, film scholar Linda Williams' essay, "Mirrors without Memories," argues that the photograph—and by extension the moving picture—are illustrations of "the visual truth of objects, persons, and events but a manipulated construction" (380). Relating this phenomenon with trauma, she uses *The Thin Blue Line* (Morris, 1988) and *Shoah* (Lanzman, 1985) as examples to

examine the postmodern documentary, which challenges the notion of an "authentic truth." According to Williams, what is most provocative is that "these documentaries [seem] to abandon the pursuit of truth for what seems to [be a] remarkable engagement with a newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth—a truth which, from being abandoned, still operates powerfully as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition" (380). As Williams's article points out, there are instances whereby performance functions as way to obtain "authentic truths." Williams's idea becomes relevant to Riggs as another consideration of what Riggs accomplished through his continued use of staging in his documentaries.

Riggs's use of archival footage, reenactments, and performance in *Ethnic Notions* suggests a tension within the documentary form that contradicts common understandings of how the work is understood and received by critics. Conventional approaches to documentary film often foreground chronology and use archival footage as supporting elements, relying less on reenactments. Standard notions of documentary also hold archival footage and talking heads in opposition to performance and reenactments/ staging. Reenactments, as scholar Bill Nichols reminds us, "occupy a strange status" ("Documentary Reenactment" 73) in that they must be recognized as a representation of a prior event not a contemporaneous one—a delicate balance when used within a historical project. Performances offer an even more vulnerable positionality for a documentary's authority to speak about the world because as film scholar Linda Williams suggests, performance represents a new level of destabilization of any totalizing narrative, or what is perceived as "authentic truth" ("Discipline and Fun" 372). However, it is within—or because of—this destabilization that new ways of seeing occur. In the specific instance of Riggs's use of performance, and because of the mixed modality of documentary form, the viewer can have a different experience of the construction of race in America. Riggs's ability to effectively blend these various modes of filmmaking is another aspect establishing Riggs as an innovative documentary filmmaker.

Riggs is a cultural agitator not solely because he expands the aesthetic conventions of the documentary form, but also because he accomplishes something Stuart Hall identifies as essential in cultural studies: Riggs locates his work "*inside* a continuous struggle and politics around black representation, which then is able to open up a continuous critical discourse about themes, about the forms of representation, the subjects of representation, [and] above all, the regimes of representation" (448). Hall's statement provides an important insight that is relevant to Riggs and his work because mainstream discussions of blacks in popular culture have historically been limited to positive–negative binaries. And often, when issues are examined in this either/or way, a fissure occurs that challenges these parochial understandings of cultural identity. Hall's comments, while not explicitly referencing the transcendence of binary thinking, suggest movement toward independent thinking.

A 1993 article in *The Boston Globe* on black viewers' reactions to images on television highlights the issue: media specialist and author Michael Jenavin was interviewed, and explained why "positive" representations are relevant for many African Americans.

> Like any ethnic or racial group, African-Americans are concerned about how they are represented in the popular media. They want representations free of stereotypes, but familiar with accurate portrayals of their lives and situations. These are the images which often form public perceptions about groups, and sometimes how that group views itself. You can't just have images, you have to have the *proper* images. It's not enough to just have blacks on television anymore. (emphasis added; Graham 61)

It is the kind of general overarching sentiment Jenavin articulated that Riggs resists.

During the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s, when identity politics were at the forefront of academic conversations, Riggs argued through his films and writings for a complication of

prevalent notions of what constituted these identities. In other words, it was not enough for him to create work that was a "*substitution* of one kind of politics for another" (S. Hall 442); it was necessary to expand the discourse around the politics of representation. Riggs confronted the *de rigueur* practices of the cultural critics of the time. Critics from both sides of the Afrocentrism/multiculturalism debate were problematic to him: either they were creating a liberal argument for a hegemonic multiculturalism that felt it was acceptable to articulate a superficial understanding of different cultures without addressing white supremacy, or they were promoting a repressive Afrocentricity that grossly generalized and distorted the merits of Africa, which, in its own way, created restricted and constricting notions of race in America (Simmons, "Discussion on Malcolm," 36).

Not only did Riggs change the black image from object to subject in these two documentaries, but he also challenged the model of discussion by analyzing the meanings of supposedly benign presentations of African Americans in the media. This chapter explores the ways that Riggs pushed beyond the boundaries of both politics of identity and documentary film praxis, even in documentaries that appear to be, on first viewing, fairly conventional.

Ethnic Notions

The Emmy Award-winning documentary *Ethnic Notions* was Riggs's first feature-length project. The title and genesis for the film came when Riggs was hired to record the 1982 Berkeley Art Center's exhibition of Janette Faulkner's private black memorabilia collection, the first gallery show of its kind (Corris and Hobbs 428). Faulkner, an African American psychiatric social worker, began collecting what she described as "ethnic notions" during the late 1950s when she was a college student (Lee). She felt that through these images she gained an historical perspective that

strengthened her resolve to cope with racial prejudice (Corris and Hobbs 428). Riggs's initial concept for the video was a half-hour documentary highlighting Faulkner's exhibition and discussing the growing trend of African Americans who collected black memorabilia. However, "by the time funding fell through for that job … Riggs was so piqued and astonished by Faulkner's hoard of black memorabilia … that he was irrevocably hooked into the subject" (Ahlgren, "Shuffling Sambos" 25–26). Here we see a distinctly different motivation for filmmaking on the part of the man his friends called "driven to discourse" (Banneker 10)—instead of doing something for practical and pragmatic reasons as he had with *Long Train Running*, he produced a project in which he was personally invested.

As his first nationally recognized documentary, *Ethnic Notions* became one of Riggs's most important works because of its direct approach to an unpopular but important subject: cultural racism and its psychological impact on the development of race and race relations in America. Riggs's thorough and detailed analysis of the origins of racial images through an examination of material culture was disturbing yet extremely informative for a mass audience unfamiliar with how racial stereotypes have deeply influenced the formation of identities. As one press review from the *Journal of American History* stated, *Ethnic Notions* "provide[s] far more insight and sophisticated analysis than is usually found in a media documentary" (N. Grant 1107). Taking as a given that racial stereotypes have always been a "troubling underside of American society" (1107), the reviewer, Nancy Grant, felt it important to highlight that the academicians and creative artists used in the film were a critical vehicle for outlining the arguments in *Ethnic Notions*, and that they did so in a manner that kept audiences engaged in ways often overlooked by other documentaries.

OVERVIEW OF *ETHNIC NOTIONS*

The documentary *Ethnic Notions* took a chronological approach to arguing that from the antebellum period in the south through the present day, the vitriolic images of blacks produced in popular culture have profoundly affected America's race relations; equally as important, these images have also affected how blacks feel about themselves. Through detailed research and the use of historical film footage, advertisements, cartoons, animated films, music, and interviews, Riggs documented in elaborate detail how racism permeates every facet of American culture. As scholar and historian Dr. Nell Irvin Painter commented in the press kit originally sent out with the film: "Decades of studying Afro-American history did not prepare me for the devastating impact of one and one half centuries worth of vicious racial stereotyping" (California Newsreel,"'Ethnic Notions' Scholarly Comment" 1).

The narrator was Esther Rolle who acted as Florida Evans in the popular yet controversial 1970s situation comedy *Good Times*—often criticized for its perpetuation of the same stereotypes she discusses in *Ethnic Notions*. In contrast, however, her distinctive baritone voice in this important documentary gave her legitimacy and relevance as an actress that she otherwise would not have by simply just being known as the mother on *Good Times*.

Perhaps the clearest statement of the film's topic comes in this portion of the narration Riggs wrote and Rolle read: "The mammy, the pickaninny, the coon, the sambo, the uncle: Well into the middle of the twentieth century, these were some of the most popular depictions of black Americans. By 1941, when this cartoon was made, images like these permeated American culture" (Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*). The quick and disturbing series of shots of animated characters representing blacks replete with buck eyes, large red lips, and dark skin, coupled with Rolle's voice-over, tell the viewer what is operating in this film: an examination of the way the viewer sees and

understands popular culture. By contrasting these images with narration that contradicts these "notions," Riggs presents another, more disturbing, reading of American material culture.

The documentary begins with the spritely melody of a nursery rhyme and a single shot of a children's book; however, the viewer quickly learns that everything is not as naïve as it appears. A white southern woman begins reciting the alphabet in voice-over from a book that uses racist notions of blacks in its rhyme. Starting with the letter "A" through the entire alphabet, each page is filled with hateful, bigoted language. "F is fer Felix who won't do no wuk. He's lazy 'n shif'less and ready to shuk" (Riggs, "Ethnic Notions Script" 1). After this segment, the film cuts to an animated shot of a buxom, androgynous-sounding black woman standing in front of a washboard and singing about washing clothes. More animated cartoon images of black people as watermelon-eating buffoons, animalistic children, and asexual women appear in the screen.

By contrast, interviews in the film were shot against a totally black background. In an unpublished interview, Riggs explained that his use of this technique was designed to focus the spectator's attention on the subtle intonations and expressions of interview subjects without the distraction of a conventional setting. He also recognized that there was "so much happening visually" that the audience needed relief from the emotionally charged and painful images of the "notions," and that the interviews "allowed people to listen" (Riggs, Interview by Braun 1).

In *Ethnic Notions,* Riggs emphasizes the historical context in order to bolster his argument regarding the way material culture impacted social understanding of race in America. Several scholars speak in the film's opening scenes to set up the problem of incorporating these distorted images of blacks into mainstream society and to specify how long these images have existed. Given this style, from the onset and for the first half of the documentary, *Ethnic Notions* seems like a typical, illustrated, lecture-style documentary. Except for its dealing with an "outsider" topic, the format is chronological and straightforward—until the second half of the documentary.

When the film addresses minstrelsy, Riggs's filmic innovations begin to appear. The documentary shows archival scenes from D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and explains that at the turn of the century, whites in blackface were still performing black roles on stage and in films; in fact, the success of the genre was so great that when blacks did start working in the theater, they were required to perform in blackface as well. The shift in filmic style occurs after a series of archival film images of blackface performances and after scholars discuss the quagmire facing African Americans and the limited roles they had to play if they were to work in theater at that time. The film then cuts to a live, in-studio act of three men in blackface dancing on screen in unison, flailing their hands and legs while another man belts a rhythm on his thighs with his hands.

With this thirty-six second segment, Riggs moved the documentary from an illustrated lecture to a performance piece—a technique used in much of his later work as well. This shift in documentary film style is critical because it plays with time as it dismantles the strictly historical and archival aspect of the video and shifts it to one that blurs timelines. By introducing a live act of minstrel performance, Riggs makes vivid for present-day viewers what photographs cannot convey—the effect of blackface performance. He also complicates the argument that these images are merely a product of the past. The change in style also makes Riggs's point more personal; gone is the academic formality of the first-half's talking heads, if only for thirty seconds.

This reenactment is also important because it introduces the notion that blacks used these limiting roles as a form of dissemblance, which is an idea Riggs also returns to in *Color Adjustment*. According to historian Darlene Clark Hine, "dissembling" is a way of masking oneself into a prescribed role as a way of staving off harm from whites. While Hine's work specifically addressed black women, the definition applies to minstrelsy because dissemblance becomes a mode of survival, and not self-perception.[16] The narrator's voice-over explains how performing in blackface

became a doorway to other opportunities and although blackface was a perpetuation of a stereotype, it was also an evolution of a theatrical workforce for blacks.

Another possible effect of this performance is that it jars the viewer's perceptions. The break in cinematic rhythm captures the audience's attention. While it can be seen to illustrate the points of the experts in the film, watching a minstrel performance also provides another form of proof for the argument that such caricatures were extreme. Lastly, this scene provides a transition to the next major segment, which features another form of live performance, in examining the life of Bert Williams.

Williams was one of the preeminent blackface performers at the turn of the century. Williams was described as a tall, distinguished African American man who spoke perfect English but who "stooped his shoulders and learned to talk in the minstrel imitation of black speak." Shots of archival film footage of Williams performing in blackface are accompanied by the comments of folklore and performance scholar Leni Sloan, along with writer, filmmaker, and cultural scholar Carlton Moss. The pair explains the challenges black artists faced by being limited to minstrelsy.

Riggs also includes a performance by choreographer and folklorist Leni Sloan, who eulogizes Bert Williams's contribution as a folk artist. In this sequence, Riggs cuts from photographs to live performers on screen addressing their act to the camera, to more photographs, to archival footage of Bert Williams, to Sloan's monologue. The discursive shifts (from historical still images, to reenactment, back to archival footage, to performance) highlight Riggs's directorial style. As film scholar Bill Nichols suggests, instead of being seen as a conflicting element that distracts the viewer, "the reenacted event introduces a fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same event lacks" ("Documentary Reenactment" 73). In other words, the director reinforces his argument by showing the complexity of history through a range of visual experiences. Sloan's performance of Bert Williams also builds upon Nichols's theory; it is another

poignant way of introducing similar ideas—and showing Riggs's cinematic style as a cultural agitator.

The scenes leading up to the monologue establish the internal conflict Williams faces as a highly skilled blackface performer in a racist society. Sloan, performing as Williams, sits in front of a mirror with a bottle of liquor and a shot glass on his dresser. As he gulps down the drink, he explains that his performances are not the only thing he is becoming famous for—"or is it infamous." Riggs then cuts to Sloan who sets up the following scene by explaining he wanted to "finish the finale," and perform a piece that elevated Bert Williams to the class of folk artist. Sloan is wearing a mauve, button-down shirt with a white tee-shirt underneath; a yellow album cover with an image of Bert Williams is perched on a shelf next to Sloan. The next scene cuts to a wide shot of a dignified Sloan wearing a grey vest, ascot, and high collared shirt. He is sitting in front of a mirror applying blackface makeup. The camera faces the mirror, giving the viewer a shot of the man and his reflection.

This particular image embodies W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, or "twoness." In his 1903 classic study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois argues that the struggle for black Americans was a problem of the color line, and that African Americans had to reconcile the dominant society's understanding of blackness with their own notion of self-worth. Du Bois explains:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.… (214–215)

Sloan's monologue as Bert Williams portrays this conflict of double-consciousness with searing sensitivity and intelligence. It also demonstrates the interrelationship between Hines's notion of dissemblance and double-consciousness, for it is in the reconciliation between white society's understanding of blackness and one's need to survive that a type of racialized performance occurs.

The wide shot of Sloan cuts to a medium shot, and the previously jolly Williams is now more somber as he describes the isolation, loneliness, discrimination, and invisibility that he experiences being the top black performer. A tear appears in his right eye, revealing the frustration Willliams must have experienced when performing in blackface. The camera pans in to a close-up of Sloan's face, and rather than two images, there is now only one—and it is in blackface. Representing the image of blacks in mainstream society, Sloan looks directly into the camera and somberly asks: "Ain't I a responsible human being?" This question has a similar ring to the nineteenth-century feminist and antislavery speaker, Soujourner Truth who asked at a Women's Convention in 1851, "Ain't I a Woman?" She was arguing for women's suffrage and stated that as a black woman she, too, had a right to the same privileges as others—essentially the question Sloan asks as he outlines the contributions and sacrifices vaudeville performer Bert Williams endured as a black artist in a racist society.

By adding this scene to *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs enables Sloan to present a man who made his career on covering up and who had to perform a role that made whites feel comfortable. In this sense, he provides voice to the voiceless—a trait that would be critical to Riggs's later works, particularly regarding black masculinity. As a testament to its disturbing power, the Bert Williams reenactment also provoked some African Americans critics to argue that Sloan's blackface performance constituted a resuscitation of offensive, racist images and simply perpetuated stereotypes (Moore, personal interview). Sloan's monologue dramatizes the thought, talent, intelligence, and humanity that went into Williams' blackface performances, but also Williams'

anguish and his internal conflict. It was not a simple as "selling out" or playing into racist myths; instead, Williams engaged in a much more complicated self-negotiation.

The inclusion of these performances greatly enhances the quality of *Ethnic Notions* because it complicates the argument about race relations in America. It also provides another kind of research, as well as shifting the viewer's cinematic expectation of the documentary by diverging from the otherwise chronological approach to the film. As a result, Riggs accomplishes what Nichols explains as "retriev[ing] a lost object in its original form even as the very act of retrieval generates a new object and a new pleasure." The result is that "[t]he viewer experiences the uncanny sense of a repetition of what remains historically unique. A specter haunts the text" ("Documentary Reenactment" 74).

The next scene that provides a greater insight into Riggs's directorial approach occurs near the conclusion of *Ethnic Notions*. A black-and-white film clip of Ethel Waters performing as a maid washing clothes and singing "Darkies Never Dream" in the 1934 short film, *Bubbling Over*, appears on the screen. This footage succeeds segments that have outlined the myths that "Black is Ugly," "Blacks are Savage," and "Blacks are Happy Servants," notions that dominated American popular culture during the early half of the twentieth-century. As Waters describes the images of blacks as laughing, singing, and otherwise content, the hallowed voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. begins to bellow: "I Have a Dream." The civil rights leader's voice continues to explain his dream as a "nation where people will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Juxtaposed against the singing footage of Waters is a still photograph of King. The distinction between the voices and the contrast of their message is striking. The scene continues to cut between the melancholy voice of Waters and the determined prose of King. Again Riggs situates the moving image against the still photograph for a more dramatic effect, as he did earlier in the documentary during the Bert Williams segment.

A significant element of this particular scene is that it collapses one's sense of time. By showing the image of Waters and contrasting it with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech delivered at the March on Washington in 1963, Riggs remains chronological in a general way, but there is a huge leap with the timeline that allows the film to conclude in a more spectacular fashion. The effect compels the viewer's attention and complicates the narrative in order to show the real tensions taking place over time between popular culture and social history, thus giving the work its historical "sweep." While many documentaries experiment with time, for Riggs to juxtapose the image of Waters with King's speech thirty years later is a means by which he highlights the limited and limiting nature of images of blacks in the mainstream, thus drawing significant connections to the larger aim of the video. The innovation of this approach, then, is in the ability to create a powerful argument without having to rely on the commentary of academics or scholars, but instead revealing the crux of the film in a matter of seconds. Riggs moves through time in *Ethnic Notions* with deft precision.

THE CHALLENGE OF FUNDRAISING FOR AND BROADCASTING *ETHNIC NOTIONS*

Another distinguishing characteristic of *Ethnic Notions* is Riggs's ability as a filmmaker to "turn attention from what the stereotypes *don't* say about blacks to what they *do* say about whites, as their creators and consumers" (Riggs, Interview by Braun 3). Perhaps this is why there was initial hesitation in many quarters to support Riggs's film and why many questioned its value: friends, colleagues, television programmers, and foundations saw Riggs's project, as his colleague and friend Vivian Kleiman put it, as "an unlikely topic for a documentary." A program on "black lawn jockeys," as Kleiman characterized the iconography Riggs examined, did not seem to be a compelling topic for PBS to support, or for any national production grants for that matter. Kleiman also felt the film would not engage the PBS audience, nor did she see how this topic could be

visually interesting or fundable. For Kleiman, Riggs's initial description of the program—an outgrowth of a local exhibition on material culture—seemed too idiosyncratic for PBS programmers to grasp and endorse. Furthermore, the topic did not, in her estimation, yield any larger social significance (personal interview 1 Aug.).

Kleiman was not alone in her opinion—another objection others articulated was that, in the words of cultural critic Janet Ghent, the "program had no value … [and would] provoke controversy, inspire guilt and rage" (15). Riggs explained many of the reactions he received when trying to garner support for the project by saying, "Once you get past the euphemisms of 'popular black culture' and they see the racist images, and you say you want to devote an hour to this they say, 'What!!!'" (Ahlgren, "Shuffling Sambos" 26). Riggs recalled a program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) calling him after he sent an initial grant proposal and stating: "Don't even bother to send the (formal) proposal. You won't get funding here. This has no humanitarian content; it's political; it points the finger and tries to make people feel guilty." Riggs thought the NEH had missed his point, and despite their advice, spent three weeks drafting the proposal, "because [he] wanted their response in writing" (26).

Riggs's "mind of steel" and tenacity paid off (Kleiman, personal interview 1 Aug.): after resubmitting his proposal with recrafted language explaining in more detail the film's sweep, the NEH awarded Riggs a $5,000 grant for script development. In the end, Riggs used the NEH endorsement to leverage monies from other funders such as the National Endowment for the Arts, The Zeller Foundation, and the California Arts Council, along with postproduction funds from the public broadcast station, KQED, where the program first aired. In the end, it took Riggs four and a half years to produce the $250,000 program (Ghent 15).[17] Despite *Ethnic Notions'* lack of perceived commercial viability and mass appeal, Riggs still managed through a remarkable display of fortitude to bring this unsavory aspect of American history into the nation's living rooms.

Although public television's mandate is to create programming that reflects America's diverse public, the challenges Riggs faced in producing *Ethnic Notions* for public television are even more striking when one considers the fact that the predominant public television audience is white, suburban, "affluent and highly educated" (Ferguson 72). This was particularly true in 1980, as well as 1994, when this comment was made. Since the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, PBS had been criticized for its lack of culturally diverse programming, a fact which resulted in the establishment of an independent task force called the Minority Consortia in 1978, to identify producers of color to create programming for public television. Interestingly, Riggs would not receive funding from the Minority Consortia until he began fundraising for *Tongues Untied.* He was still a young, relatively unknown, ambitious producer trying to introduce a predominantly homogenous audience to a 60-minute video that indicted society's white privilege as expressed through cultural ephemera and popular culture. Either the subject matter or Riggs's treatment of it was apparently beyond the comfort zone for PBS: initially, it only aired locally on San Francisco's station, KQED. It was not until a year after Riggs pitched a proposal to PBS to screen *Ethnic Notions* during Black History Month that several public television stations across the country decided to air the program.

Cornelius Moore, Co-Director of California Newsreel, explained in an interview that when Riggs was fundraising for *Ethnic Notions*, Newsreel was also trying to increase their African American title base. At this time, California Newsreel was one of the two remaining offices of the nonprofit radical filmmaking collective (Third World Newsreel in New York City being the other) that flourished throughout the country starting in the early 1960s and continuing through the 1970s. The Newsreel groups' mission was always to promote activism through social-issue documentary production and distribution. It was within this context that, after *Ethnic Notions'*

broadcast debut on the San Francisco public television station, California Newsreel approached Riggs to distribute the film to their education market, which was the organization's base audience.

At the time, the majority of the titles Newsreel distributed were by filmmakers from Africa. Co-Director and California Newsreel executive producer, Larry Adelman heard about Riggs's film, knew it was excellent, and offered him a distribution deal. California Newsreel also suggested to Riggs that he consider creating a follow up to *Ethnic Notions* that examined stereotypes perpetuated by the advent of television; before completing *Ethnic Notions,* Riggs had agreed to draft a proposal for what eventually became *Color Adjustment* (Moore).

From the beginning, California Newsreel understood the value and impact of *Ethnic Notions*. And from the outset, despite the initial reluctance of others, Riggs was clear that he wanted as many people as possible to see *Ethnic Notions*. As a result, California Newsreel heavily promoted and marketed *Ethnic Notions* to universities and colleges—and not just to film and media departments. This creative and aggressive marketing expanded the documentary's audience well beyond the limits of PBS viewership.

Riggs also leveraged the support from California Newsreel to enter the documentary into as many film festivals and video competitions as possible. This grassroots-marketing tactic, and the success of expanding the audience for *Ethnic Notions* beyond the academic market, became a marketing approach Riggs would use for other documentaries, and a key reason he is considered a significant twentieth-century documentary filmmaker. After some initial marketing missteps in which Riggs relied upon and trusted his own networks to publicize his films and fill theater seats, he became extremely astute at marketing and cross-promoting his films with the help of grassroots organizations and community-based outlets. In fact, he never promoted a film again on his own, and instead relied upon partnerships with others to host film screenings of his work (Kleiman, personal interview 1 Aug.).

As of June 2007, *Ethnic Notions* was the third-highest-grossing video in California Newsreel's collection. The first two were *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Adelman, 2003)—the three part series that challenges genetic arguments that race is a biological concept; and *Blue Eyed* (Verhaag, 1995), a documentary using a blue-versus-brown eye experiment to show the impacts of racism. Those videos generated $1.3 million and $1.2 million, respectively.[18] *Ethnic Notion's* ranking as third highest in gross video sales, at $1 million, is particularly impressive when contrasted with Riggs's slow and difficult struggle for initial funding. Because of the film's unique and thorough treatment of the subject matter, Riggs's unrelenting drive to make the program available to a national audience, and the outstanding grassroots marketing skills that put the video into schools, film festivals, and video competitions across the world, *Ethnic Notions* became one of Riggs's most important works.

ETHNIC NOTIONS: SCRIPT ANALYSIS

In this section, I examine the early drafts of the scripts of *Ethnic Notions*. In doing so I seek to provide a perspective on the filmmaker's process and to illustrate how key characteristics of Riggs's filmic approach—adaptability and tenacity—became ultimately beneficial to his success. The completed version of *Ethnic Notions* engendered a range of reactions due to its provocative content, and was considered highly controversial by some scholars and funding organizations; however, Riggs's initial ideas for *Ethnic Notions* were even more polemical. A version of the film's description submitted with a funding proposal reads:

> We are proposing … an hour video documentary on the study of notions—of the utilitarian items in Jan Faulkner's collection, and of the dehumanizing conceptions of blacks such items have imprinted, and continue to imprint, on the American conscious [sic]. Hence the double meaning in the documentary's title, ETHNIC

> NOTIONS. ETHNIC NOTIONS examines, in short, the psychological indoctrination of racism through popular culture. It traces the evolution of Afro-American caricature from the colonial period to the present, and illustrates thus how black caricature and stereotype have both reflected and responded to social and political change toward racism in this country.
>
> The documentary … will not conclude on a distinctly positive note. Instead, it will cite recent reports by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and by a special task force appointed by former Governor Jerry Brown showing respectively an alarming increase in racial bias in America, and in California, long considered the nation's most liberal state, a resurgence of racial violence and ethnic slurs.…ETHNIC NOTIONS ends with a word of warning about the dangers of ethnic perceptions both in the past and in the present. (Riggs, "The Documentary" 1, 3)

The language in the proposal is charged, presumptuous, and in some cases slightly confusing. Riggs assumed that the funding officers understood and accepted the notion of "psychological indoctrination of racism," that they grasped what he meant by "political change toward racism," and that they were familiar with black caricatures and stereotypes and their relationship to social forces in America; or, for that matter, that they knew (and cared) who Jan Faulkner was. Lastly, the proposal alerts funders that the documentary would not end on a hopeful note.

From this description, it is not surprising that the NEH program officer was initially resistant to the proposal. Riggs might have thought that showing how racism has penetrated every facet of society would appeal to a national funding organization, especially by referencing the recent, authoritative Brown report, yet this rhetorical strategy may also have weakened his

argument by making it seem too subjective and divisive. The ending would be especially alarming because it would show racism's pervasiveness, even in regions ostensibly more tolerant and liberal, like California.

Creating films about representations of race in America is always rife with stylistic, financial, and commercial challenges, but it becomes even more difficult when seeking federal funds from national arts organizations that are committed to what scholar Chuck Kleinhans calls "mainstreaming." As Kleinhans explains:

> Among independent media producers, "mainstreaming" means accepting the dominant forms and values of conventional media. For those coming from oppressed and marginalized groups—racial and ethnic minorities, women gays and lesbians, the working class and poor, political radicals, youth—mainstreaming means speaking not from one's original position, but constructing a discourse within the already established system of power in order to speak effectively within a larger circle. Fundamentally it serves the goal of assimilation for both maker and group. For the outsider group, mainstreaming implies showing how one is like the dominant culture by mimicking its forms and calling on a politics of liberal pluralism. For the media maker, mainstreaming promises acceptance, larger and diverse audiences, a chance to break into the dominant system, better chances in the grant game, bigger budgets, more prestige, etc. (108)

Riggs's initial proposal was not interested in "mainstreaming"; it sought to connect nineteenth- and twentieth-century stereotyped images of blacks and the current mistreatment of many African Americans. In essence, Riggs was using a discussion of material culture to explore public policy, a choice which would prevent *Ethnic Notions* from becoming a mainstream documentary. Riggs's proposal was in fact directly in opposition to "mainstreaming."

Apparently unfazed by naysayers, however, Riggs drafted a thirty-nine page, single-spaced telescript replete with disturbing photocopied images of African Americans depicted as physically distorted and grotesque. The script included images such as a photocopy of an androgynous-looking bust that also served as a piggy bank. The eyes were extremely large and bulging, and the coiled hair closely cropped on top of the head. The large mouth protruded, showing the teeth and tongue, which were ready to accept coins as a mechanical hand raised to toss change into the open mouth. Other photocopies showed men, women, and children in equally disturbing images, often as animalistic distortions of humans. In all, fourteen images were attached with the script, which covered a broad swath of material and was thorough in its research, visual information, and narrative description.

Using the now-disfavored (in documentary film circles) "illustrated lecture" format, the script presented a chronological timeline replete with details of the history of race relations in America. For example, after the introduction in the draft script, the narrator states: "Any effort to place blacks on an equal standing with whites was placed in this light: as an effort to put the virtue of white women quite literally in the hands of lust-driven brutes" (Riggs, "Ethnic Notions Script"). From here, the script interrogates America's fear of integration by reenacting the politically contentious imaginary nineteenth-century "Miscegenation Ball," a series of lithographs produced by supporters of northern Democrats during Abraham Lincoln's re-election campaign. The publishing house, Bromley and Company, illustrated this hypothetical event attended by, as historian Jo-Ann Morgan explained, "white men and voluptuous black women whose plunging necklines, cinched waists, and elevated hemlines showed off a good amount of their ample figures" (109). The implication was that if America re-elected Abraham Lincoln, "this lustful horde of beefy strumpets would have America's white males in their thrall" (107); the tacit assumption being that blurring racial lines would ruin the union. The *Ethnic Notions* script explains it as follows: "But the beliefs

about the lustful nature of blacks did not spring full-blown out of the South following the Civil War. The notion that blacks—both men and women—were inherently hypersexual had been a part of the nation's folk thought for more than 200 years."

The script illustrates this claim in the next sequence, by beginning with a montage of black African sculptural busts while traditional West African instruments play in the background and the narrator continues: "As children often take on the values of their parents, so American colonists, as they settled in the New World, brought with them an inherited set of notions about blacks from their mother country, England."

The script's tone reads as angry. The aforementioned sections of the script, which were not included in the final version, show in detail Riggs's purpose for this film—to make sure white Americans feel that their prejudice is childish by connecting colonialism and racism, while also making them feel completely responsible for the racism that permeates America.

Riggs's draft contains a level of detail that is striking and also provides other important insights into the director's process. He outlined every sequence and scene, including the film clips and editing cues. Colleagues who worked with Riggs explained that he was extremely thorough (Freeman). For instance, on page one Riggs outlines his first and second sequence in detail. He describes the music and "chimes from a wind-up musical toy" and the video that fades in showing "the front cover of an alphabet book entitled 'ABC in Dixie' as the 'music continues softly.'"

Riggs's draft not only envisioned the film in great detail, but also described the significance of the footage he planned to use. For example, for the second sequence Riggs describes an excerpt from a Universal Pictures cartoon containing racist images of blacks, *Scrub Me Mamma with a Boogie Beat* (Lanz, 1941). He states:

> Various scenes show a huge mammy character from behind, her enormous hips swaying to the boogie beat; she turns around with her arms encircling three short,

> skinny, black men who side-by-side dance at her ample bosom. Cut to a chorus of four "pickaninnies" with thick, red lips and hair down in short, pointed braids, the ends of which are bound by multicolored bows; when the pickaninnies sing the refrain of "rub-a-dub-dub," their voices are gruff and masculine. Cut to a group of big-lipped men with round simian faces; they strut and sway while playing various instruments. Cut to dancing Topsy character with dark skin and pointed braids, then to "uncle" character with balding forehead and white tufts of hair doing a lively jig down a country road. Cut to a seated man with big, ivory teeth, who eats a hefty slice of watermelon within several beats of music. Cut back to pickaninny chorus repeating song's refrain, and to a fat mammy scrubbing clothes on a washboard in time with music. All characters above have huge, red, protruding lips, bulging eyes, and dark brown skin. Cartoon plays, with music at full volume for 25 seconds or so; as animated images continue, music dips under narration below. (1–2)

Riggs maintains this kind of detailed description throughout the script. The text for the narrator, for instance, provides directorial clues for reading and timing. As an example, the script requires the narrator to say: "The mammy…the picaninny…the coon…the sambo…the uncle:…." (2). The ellipses represent places for pause and emphasis, which were followed on the soundtrack of the final cut of the video. The level of direction presented in the above sequence was also apparent in the voice-over, digital video effects, video shots, and music selections for the documentary.

Although Riggs had drafted the script with this kind of specificity, he also understood the necessity of revising the language of this potentially contentious script in order to obtain support for producing it and for PBS to broadcast it. His note on the cover of the script explains:

> This is intended as a preliminary shooting script and will necessarily change as the documentary takes shape during rough cut editing. However, because this script provides a detailed description of the documentary's basic structure—the development of its themes, narration, interviews and images—a clearer visualization of the final program is possible. (1)

As Riggs once acknowledged in an interview, he often had to "write in a mealy-mouthed way to avoid controversy," in effect "mainstreaming" his work, in order to increase the likelihood his projects would receive funding (Ghent 15). Therefore, instead of maintaining the "us" versus "them" perspective of earlier versions of the script in subsequent drafts, Riggs recast the nation's history of ingrained racism as a collective concern. In the televised version of *Ethnic Notions*, the narrator states:

> Contained in these cultural images is the history of our national conscious; a conscious striving to reconcile the paradox of racism in a nation founded on human equality; a conscious coping with this profound contradiction through caricature. What were the consequences of this caricature? How did they mirror and mold racial tension in America for more than 100 years?

This language keeps the thesis and storyline crisp and clear, and less accusatory. By using a more inclusive language like "our," Riggs asserts not only that blacks have equal rights as American citizens, but that racism is a collective problem for all Americans. With this shift in framework, mending America's racial rift is not placed solely as a white responsibility, but as a collective one.

Just as Riggs originally envisioned a script that some felt was off-putting in its tone, he also wanted to produce a film that included a significant number of nonacademics. In a production letter addressed to "Larry,"[19] Riggs states in one of the final paragraphs:

> The last two and probably most critical problems I have with the present script is first, the lack of the "human element" involved. Besides Jan [Faulkner], who now appears only at the top of the show, there are no "regular people" to comment on these images … please note places where I might interweave reminiscences, opinions, etc., of non-academicians…. (2)

Here, Riggs describes a filmic device used in his first documentary and a critical element of his productions as a cultural agitator.

Riggs was often skeptical of the intellectual snobbery that can come with being in the academy, and that is associated with documentary filmmaking; he obviously recognized the important work of teachers and academics (he was one himself). Moreover, he thought people with diverse life experiences had important contributions to make to a conversation, and that documentaries should not use academics exclusively as "experts." Despite his intention to employ this strategy in *Ethnic Notions* as well, "mainstreaming" the production seemed to trump Riggs's original desire to include "regular people" in the video. To this end, Jan Faulkner does not appear in the film as prominently as Riggs initially envisaged; instead of being at the top of the show as aforementioned, she appears very briefly near the end of the documentary. Furthermore, the other experts that Riggs includes in *Ethnic Notions,* such as Barbara Christian, George Frederickson, Lawrence Levine, Erskine Peters, and Patricia Tuner are academics (Carlton Moss, as a filmmaker, is an exception, although he is most well-known for directing educational videos. Moss also assisted Frank Capra during World War II by writing the U.S. Army commissioned film, *The Negro Soldier* [Capra, 1944]). By placing Faulkner only tangentially in the film and foregrounding academicians as he did, Riggs followed a more conventional and mainstream approach to this documentary.

The essay, "Unleash the Queen," a talk given at the Black Popular Culture conference in New York City in 1992, best exemplifies this point about mainstreaming. Almost a decade after

Ethnic Notions, Riggs was still grappling with developing a balance between public scholarship and the academy, even as he became part of the expert class he often challenged. During his presentation, Riggs criticized his popularity among the attendees by defining himself as the "Race and Sexuality Resident Expert." He interrogated the pretense of the black educated elite by exclaiming: "Here we sit assembled, the newest of the New Negroes (the Niggerati of the Nineties?), preening and posturing in our fanciful display of cultural literacy" (103). He questioned who had been included in discussions and excluded, and expressed his distaste for the bourgeois pretense peppering discussions surrounding "black popular culture." This declaration by Riggs appeared in stark contrast to the young filmmaker reluctant to produce a documentary on blues music—Riggs's identity and position within the cultural milieu changed drastically, especially after he learned of his HIV-positive status in 1988.

By exploring Riggs's range of works and gaining a greater understanding of his creative process, one can point out moments such as the aforementioned which reveal the ways in which Riggs's ideas about inclusion/exclusion and his intraracial critique shifted over time, and how he responded to institutional forces, which in turn shaped his films. For Riggs it was critical to show that the topics he addressed were not just academic exercises, but cultural phenomena that affected all people, a fact he could document with the participation of "regular people" in the film and the availability of the film to audiences beyond those who watched PBS. Therefore, having so few nonacademicians incorporated into *Ethnic Notions* provides one key demonstration of the amount of compromise Riggs was willing to undertake in order to produce his first feature-length documentary.

Although this documentary was successful in terms of video sales, was viewed around the world, and was essentially turned into a two-part series with *Color Adjustments*, Riggs was said to have been more disappointed with *Ethnic Notions* than with all his other films (Vincent, personal

interview). No further explanation has been given for why Riggs felt this way, but one can speculate that perhaps the anxiety associated with first-time experiences—such as his uphill funding challenges; directorial compromises; and tepid reactions from funders, fellow filmmakers, and audiences toward this work—made him feel like he had compromised too much. The documentary also does not use many of the cinematic and aesthetic techniques that predominate in his later films.

It is important to recognize that while Riggs did make concessions in his work, inherent in filmmaking is the need to modify work as needed. The script is an outline that inevitably changes during the fundraising and production process. And while Riggs did fall prey to mainstreaming his work, he is far from the only filmmaker, fiction or nonfiction, who has had to make such difficult decisions. Predictably, by doing so, he gained greater distribution, national funding, and prestigious awards—recognition he might not otherwise have received if he had been unwilling to adapt to the needs and expectations of funders. The reception of *Ethnic Notions* proves equally revealing about Riggs's filmmaking process, for both were was shaped by the different reactions of funders, scholars, and later, the public. The next section examines the reception of *Ethnic Notions*.

MIXED NOTIONS: CRITICAL AUDIENCE REACTIONS

When considering Riggs as a cultural agitator, it is also useful to examine the audience reactions to both *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*. According to Larry Daressa of California Newsreel: "The political efficacy of documentary is derived from the relationship of the audience to the film—not the relationship of the filmmaker to the subject" (Renov 20). A number of questions follow from this important point regarding a documentary's impact on the viewer. What are the reactions the viewer has when watching the documentary? What connection does the viewer have to the film? How will the viewer understand the world or connect to the film's message? What actions will the

viewer engage in after viewing the film? In short, how will watching this documentary affect or shift a viewer's attitude and perceptions?

While Nielsen ratings measure a television program's popularity (just like box office sales indicate a film's success), direct audience feedback and reactions to the work are difficult to obtain for a television program since it does not benefit from the group audience reactions of a documentary with its theatrical distribution. However, in *Melodrama and Meaning* Barbara Klinger indicates that one can still glean the relevance of the television program by examining the reactions of other institutions—in this instance, academicians as well as film and TV critics in the press. The following section specifically addresses how different audiences perceived *Ethnic Notions*. Later in the chapter there is also discussion of how *Color Adjustment* has been received by varying audiences.

In his letter to "Larry," Riggs identified a "second problem" with *Ethnic Notions.* Riggs wanted to address how black people have internalized what he considered "one-dimensional representations" and show "how Blacks have coped with these images, through internalization, outright protest, and the inversion of negative symbols and images into positive features of Afro-American culture" (2). Riggs felt foundations misunderstood his intentions for the film, seeing the project as simply attempting to find fault with white America or uncover this "dark secret," rather than also seeing his determination to show the psychological effects of these ethnic caricatures. Riggs anticipated the varying opinions he would receive about this project. An earlier draft of the script addressed these concerns by asking collector Jan Faulkner why she amassed these items: is it just to "get [these troubling artifacts] off the street?" Faulkner replies:

> Talking about my collection is neither preaching nor apologizing, but simply showing what happened. And while it's painful … painful for blacks as much as for non-blacks … we have to come to terms with it, in order to understand our

> culture and the way so many generations of Americans were conditioned to see and think of black people. (Riggs, "Ethnic Notions Script" 3)

To further counterbalance possible naysayers, the script has the narrator expound upon this point by stating:

> In 1982, Faulkner's collection was put on public exhibit at the Berkeley Art Center in Berkeley, California. Since then, similar exhibitions have been staged across the country. More and more museums, public archives, and private collectors have brought their collections out of the closet … for a fresh look at a part of our cultural heritage *many would prefer to forget*. (3; emphasis added)

In this passage, Riggs tries to specifically address critics and individuals who would reject the film because the images are unsightly and difficult to watch. Unfortunately, Riggs's final version did not include this section, nor did it include any discussion of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)'s organized efforts to remove some of these damaging images from the media. I posit, however, that the inclusion of Bert Williams' monologue helps to address these issues; therefore, including Faulkner's statements as well would have been redundant.

Another significant and unique characteristic of *Ethnic Notions* is that it effectively combines Riggs's educational backgrounds in history and journalism to reveal his dedication to research and investigation. These traits are key factors to understanding his film aesthetic; and although film critics and TV reviewers recognized the subject of *Ethnic Notions* as "difficult," they were more impressed with the film's thorough research, particularly Riggs's ability to distill centuries of history into an hour program. The *Tacoma News Tribune* called it, "A rarity in television, it is intelligent, illuminating, entertaining, and socially important. *Ethnic Notions* is an artful film that has done its homework in gathering vintage examples of shameful stereotyping…." The *New York Post* wrote: "Riggs packs enough in one hour to fill a documentary three times its length…." The *Dallas*

Times Herald found the film to be "an awesome job, [and] Riggs uses the medium well enough to make up a lot of lost ground in just one hour" (California Newsreel, "What the Press Says" 1).

However, even favorable reviewers had mixed reactions to the film's thesis. For instance, *The Washington Post* TV critic Tom Shales compared *Ethnic Notions* to the critically acclaimed *Eyes on the Prize* (Hampton, 1987), calling it a footnote, albeit a valuable one, to the television milestone of the fourteen-part documentary series. This suggests that perhaps Shales felt *Ethnic Notions* provided important—yet not critically essential—historical background for the celebrated exploration of the civil rights struggle. Shales also points out the sheer volume of stereotypes and the virulence of their depiction in *Ethnic Notions,* stating that Riggs "did a fine job of making the points he wanted to make and of modulating the hour's visual texture." However, he also chastises the film for having a "flat" title, and for a script that "gets preachier [sic] as it goes on …" (B2), believing the work was at its best when it was analyzing why the stereotypes were malicious versus just stating that they were.

Without providing any reasoning to support his position, *Los Angeles Times* writer Bill Steigerwald's overwhelmingly positive review still called the sociopolitical explanation of how whites used stereotypes to justify certain moments of history—like slavery, segregation, and lynching—"somewhat debatable" (10). Steigerwald's tempered endorsement suggests that instead of seeing the complicated argument the film developed, he viewed the reasoning behind the emergence and proliferation of these stereotypical images as somewhat polemical—a criticism of Riggs's work which became quite common in subsequent years.

Other reviewers commented on the documentary's straightforward, chronological approach as too conventional. One television reviewer, *St-Louis Post Dispatch's* Erick Mink, even commented that the subject matter and research were daring and important enough to "deserve attention," but there is no "razzle-dazzle to the production techniques." As a result, Mink pays less attention to the production values, and discusses the film's argument, pointing out how the

documentary "reveals the combination of accident and intention that went to create and perpetrate negative stereotypes of American blacks." Stating that "perhaps most appalling is an account of the creation of one of the most damaging of stereotypes—that of the shiftless, lazy black male" (8D), Mink highlights that T. D. Rice's rendition of a black slave's shuffle step helped to perpetuate this longstanding and devastating image of black men. However, this analysis of the film foregrounds precisely the dense subject matter that compelled Riggs to choose not to overwhelm the audience with extensively innovative production techniques, or "razzle-dazzle," as Riggs chose to call it.

Of the nine reviews included in California Newsreel's *Ethnic Notions* press kit, five identified the program as "disturbing," "agonizing," "depressing," or "challenging" (California Newsreel, "What the Press Says").[20] Although reviewers were quick to warn spectators the material was difficult, they also saw it as important to endorse the film. This is apparent in the *Washington Post*'s comment: "Painful but important, *Ethnic Notions* airs dirty laundry for a good cause" (Shales B2). And how "in a direct way [the documentary] shows [the ways in which] white people have justified their treatment of black people in this country" (Ferriss B4).

It is one thing to discuss the history of the representation of blacks in popular culture, but it is another to link these stereotypical images with how blacks are perceived and treated in America. Presenting a program on television that tackles such bracing subject matter was naturally uncomfortable for people to accept—there is a lot of shame, anger, and discomfort attached to watching these images. This being the case, it is logical that many reviews described the film in such sobering terms. And while there were earlier documentaries that addressed black images on screen, none of the reviews referenced this fact. (The review in *Journal of American History* by Nancy Grant does reference the fact that Riggs's work drew from the published works of historians such as Winthrop Jordan, Lawrence Levine, George Frederickson, and Robert Toll). Riggs's work was often reviewed as a stand-alone project, not in comparison to other films addressing black

stereotypes, therefore suggesting that while the topic may have been "old" news, the films produced on the topic were few and far between—another likely reason Riggs struggled to secure funding for this project.

The critics in the press were not the only group with varied reactions toward the documentary. Black and white viewers had differing opinions as well. According to Riggs, blacks brought "emotional baggage" to their viewing of the film. During an interview with writer Jackie Braun, Riggs explained:

> black audiences never ask me why I haven't infused the program with more emotion. It's already there for them. I see them react, shake their heads, and sometimes I wonder if I haven't gone overboard, taken them too far, but they tell me no, it's valuable, it needs to be done, to be seen and talked about, but it brings back a lot of memories. (6)

Not surprisingly, then, some of the documentary's harshest critics (and greatest advocates) were African Americans. California Newsreel publicist/marketer Cornelius Moore recalled during an interview that when he was promoting *Ethnic Notions* and sending it to different people for comments to include in their press materials, historians generally viewed the film favorably. However, Moore said, "I remember sending it out to [a prominent literary figure] and her response and a generation of folks from that era would … shake their heads and [say], 'I guess this has some utility but because it [doesn't] show black people empowered … it wouldn't work'" (Personal interview). These viewers wanted Riggs to "set the record straight and show the positive achievements of black people, to show that the stereotypes were not accurate" (Riggs, Interview by Braun 3).

The California Speaker of the Assembly Willie Brown, Jr. echoed this sentiment of disfavor, but with even more fervor. In January 1987, Riggs planned a premiere of *Ethnic Notions* in

San Francisco at the Palace of Fine Arts, and Brown was the confirmed host who would introduce the film; however, just days prior to the film screening, Brown rescinded his offer. Brown explained his inability to endorse the film in a letter to Riggs:

> … upon seeing the film I question whether it will hurt more than it helps. The academic analysis of the history of racial caricature provided in the film was for me an ineffective counter-balance to the power of such negative imagery. I would suggest that my distaste for those images may reflect the response of many blacks who do not need the resurrection of racist icons to remind them of the history of racism in this country. (1)

For Brown and others, the information portrayed in *Ethnic Notions* was not new, nor was it news; they were well versed in the effects of racism, and questioned the value of a documentary addressing the subject. They did not see how the video promoted white culpability, nor did they consider the possibility that the film was addressed to multiple audiences, not just an African American audience. As Cornelius Moore explained, and as the correspondence from State Assemblymen Brown highlighted, for people who grew up tormented by segregation and these "collectible" images, or who were already keenly aware of these representations, *Ethnic Notions* was a vicious reminder of America's vexed relationship with race; it resuscitated racial blemishes that their work as politicians and writers had strived to diminish. Riggs's focus on the long-standing American problem without explicitly addressing the ways blacks offset these harsh images made some critics—particularly of a certain generation—question the value of the project. While Riggs was able to adjust his script to satisfy public television programs and national funders, it seems that their problem with the work was its overall premise, which for them depicted African Americans as powerless against the assault of popular culture racism.

On the other hand, there were African Americans, including Riggs, who felt that collecting the unique iconography was a sign of progress illustrating how far blacks had actually come. For example, a Washington, DC collector and dealer, Malinda Saunders, said that collectible images are "hard for a lot people to accept"; however, for her, "[i]t shows what we've had to fight for, where we've come from, how things have turned around and how far we have to go. It's a sign of progress." In the same article, Riggs stated he felt that "it is a positive sign that black awareness has spread to collecting black memorabilia" (Lee 4H).

Ironically, the varied and complex reactions by African Americans to the racist cultural artifacts were an important part of Riggs's original conception of the film. Unfortunately, this intraracial dynamic is absent from the film, even though it is clear from Riggs's correspondence with his script consultant "Larry" that he knew it would be important for him to address concerns of black viewers in the video and wanted to include ways Blacks have coped with these images through internalization and outright protest (2).

What made Riggs decide not to include the varied African American reaction to the racist stereotypes? Was it merely an editorial choice? Perhaps it was easier to sell a 58:40 time slot to PBS as opposed to a 90-minute program. Or perhaps he felt that addressing the response of black Americans might have become too culturally specific and deviated too far from the basic premise for his film, even as his communications with "Larry," early script drafts, and the funding proposal demonstrate the significance he saw in such historical reactions. Instead of absorbing the argument that the history of these racist images had damaging psychological effects, viewers may have been distracted from learning the historical timeline of events to switching between the new and disturbing material and analyzing people's reactions to it. The only real indication that this area was planned to be discussed—albeit briefly—came from the aforementioned Jan Faulkner, a segment which was discarded in the final version of the film. While addressing the topic of African-

American response may have been an initial focus in Riggs's plan for the film it was trumped by his inclination to focus on "mainstreaming" his documentary.

Another possible reason Riggs did not focus on the various and historical reactions blacks had to these disturbing images could be that he wanted to redress developments in commercial American filmmaking in the 1980s—what film scholar Ed Guerrero, in his book *Framing Blackness*, calls "cinema of recuperation" (114). Guerrero uses this term to discuss how Hollywood narrative films were restoring "America's optimistic, hegemonic ideology that has its historical origins in the country's self-confident, expansionist past" (114). Because of this "recuperation," Hollywood employed tactics that put blacks and other minorities back in subservient positions. For instance, mega-hit blockbuster films like George Lucas's *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) or Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky III* (1982) and *Rocky IV* (1985) all but erased—or placed in extremely limited positions—black characters. While neither television nor film critics have made this connection previously, I posit that in order to counterbalance this narrative, *Ethnic Notions* could be seen as showing how the racial hierarchy operating among Hollywood films of the 1980s had historical roots that dated back two centuries. Moreover, Riggs's choice to focus on larger sociohistorical factors would likely appeal to PBS perhaps more than a contemporary conversation about Black Americans' varied reactions to pernicious iconography.

White reactions, especially those of Riggs's filmmaking colleagues, were different but not unrelated; for them, the narration was not forthright enough. Riggs explains that whites told him "that the narration was too neutral, it really should take more of a stand." Riggs thought that meant they "would like to see people crying and wringing their hands"; however, he explained, "as a black … that's totally superfluous," and he "never intended to do that" (Interview by Braun 6–7). He presumed the "stand" his fellow filmmakers wanted him to make would have created a more emotionally charged film, which is still different than a film that takes a particular position. Riggs's

comments about white viewers are noteworthy considering his initial script did take a more political approach. Moreover, even with the changes to the script Riggs did make, several film and television critics commented that his position toward whites was too severe. Riggs's simple method of introducing important issues, albeit ones often considered socially taboo, in an objective way would become part of this cultural agitator's filmic signature made more apparent in his later works. Likewise, these varied responses demonstrate how different audiences could interpret the same text.

Riggs's most appreciative audience were academics, who embraced *Ethnic Notions* wholeheartedly, calling it "Downright superb!"; a "must see"; "A Classic! [sic]"; "historically accurate"; and "a factual, gripping portrayal of anti-black prejudice in America" (California Newsreel "*Ethnic Notions:* What the Press Says" 1). Most comments focused on the film's value as a teaching aid, but seven reviews all mentioned that *Ethnic Notions* helped to explain the genesis and impact of antiblack sentiments. Historian, ethnomusicologist, public scholar, and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bernice Johnson Reagon explained in a letter to Cornelius Moore: "Marlon Riggs has made an important contribution toward providing a dialogue model for viewing the visual legacy that served and nurtured racism in our society" (1). Other scholars from around the country and in a variety of disciplines—from History, Pan-African Studies Departments, and American Studies—echoed this sentiment. The bold topic and its clear treatment were seen as appropriate for educational settings because they fostered classroom discussion. And the success the film had in high schools and colleges seemed consistent with Riggs's intentions of wanting to see it used by all kinds of educational institutions, since "they likely would use it more extensively and productively than television stations" (Riggs, Interview by Braun 7).

The longstanding interest in and use of this program since it was first broadcast in 1987 shows that despite its slow start and varied critical reactions, *Ethnic Notions* is one of Riggs's most

important documentaries. With this film, Riggs gained more experience as a filmmaker; it also earned him his first Emmy Award. His peers and a national array of television critics recognized him as an important and talented director. Additionally, he learned the importance of compromise for producing externally funded and publicly broadcast documentaries, and he developed his ability to create language around projects that otherwise might be off-putting to funders, broadcasters, and audiences. Moreover, the reactions this program generated are reflective of the myriad meanings television generates.

The powerful images that many critics considered "disturbing" were so vivid that they explain Riggs's use of a simple, investigative approach to the documentary. If he had created a stylized documentary, the film's form would have distracted its audience from the impact of the information presented. Therefore, while Riggs's directorial style in *Ethnic Notions* is straightforward and conventional, the timeliness of the subject, the strength of the research, and the visceral reactions audiences have had when viewing the images reflect the significance of this project—all constitute eloquent evidence of his directorial acumen.

Color Adjustment: Between Artifice and Authenticity[21]—Exploring the Race Question

> *Adjust*: to alter slightly in order to achieve a correct or desired result. Adapt or become used to a new situation. –Concise Oxford English Dictionary (16)
>
> In the various practices and discourses of black cultural production, we are beginning to see constructions of … a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses *difference*. –Stuart Hall (446)

As the sequel to *Ethnic Notions,* the 1991 documentary *Color Adjustment* examined the representation of blacks within prime-time television. "Accept[ing], as a given, TV's fetishization of the nuclear family" (Taubin 60), this ninety-minute, $500,000 program traced forty years of

American history through the lens of broadcast media.[22] Originally envisioned as a 60-minute documentary and conceived prior to *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Color Adjustment* was produced for PBS afterwards, in part because Riggs's production company was embroiled in the controversy that ensued once *Tongues Untied* was broadcast on public television and Republican politicians used the documentary as electoral cannon fodder. After that, the demands on Riggs's work schedule increased ten-fold, making the completion of *Color Adjustment* very difficult.

Because of the demands on his time, particularly the continuous need to "[put] out fires for *Tongues Untied,"* a lot of the research and production work on *Color Adjustment* was the responsibility of coproducer Vivian Kleiman (Personal interview 1 Aug.); however, Riggs's imprint is still quite apparent. For instance, instead of only providing a chronological timeline exploring the black presence in primetime television, this documentary also creates an unwavering and sophisticated interrogation of the politics of representation and the social-cultural history in America from post-World War II through the 1980s. Although this work has a narrower timeframe than *Ethnic Notions,* the ability to address large-scale social issues is still apparent. This was one of Riggs's fortes: to show how social forces affected the life and times of blacks specifically, but also of all Americans, and to make connections that had been either historically overlooked or were virtually unknown by a broader audience.

OVERVIEW OF *COLOR ADJUSTMENT* AND COMPARISON TO *ETHNIC NOTIONS*

Color Adjustment traverses four decades of Americana in two sections, 1948–1968 and 1968–1988. 1988 is when Riggs began work on the project; both 1948 and 1968 were watershed years for the country. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman called for the integration of the United States military, created the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, and drafted a statement against lynching. As the *Color Adjustment* funding proposal

explains: "The postwar civil rights movement generated a new consensus: blacks were now entitled to all the rights and privileges of the American mainstream" (Riggs, "Color Adjustment: Blacks in Primetime" 1). In 1968, African Americans were still fighting for their civil rights, but in many cases with a more militant approach. Organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) took up the charge. Black Nationalist rhetoric predominated in both academic and mainstream arguments about how to achieve civil rights for African Americans. Colleges and universities across the nation were erupting in protest of the Vietnam War; the women's movement was gaining momentum; and, after June 1968, the country was reeling from the assassinations of both Senator Robert Kennedy and Reverend King. It is logical, then, that both 1948 and 1968 bookend this film, for the nation was forever changed with the integration of the U.S. armed services as well as the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.—milestone events of these years which in turn created a cultural metamorphosis in America, inevitably affecting television programming.

In *Color Adjustment*, Riggs and Kleiman used filmic devices familiar from Riggs's other works—inter-titles, interviews, and archival footage—and combined them with well-measured music and a minimalist voice-over. As was the case with *Ethnic Notions*, the television clips support Riggs and Kleinman's solid research and well-documented thesis; however, the voice-over narration served a different role. In *Ethnic Notions*, Esther Rolle's narration was used to place emphasis, demonstrate ironies, and convey specific messages of pride or shame; in *Color Adjustment*, the soft, velvet voice of narrator Ruby Dee served as a balm for the harsh racial realities portrayed in the program. As one film review explained, excerpts from television and newsreel footage—particularly of the civil rights movement—allowed producers Riggs and Kleiman to show their points sharply and economically (Bloom 1193). Through this approach, Riggs accomplishes what one of the documentary's grant proposals describes as:

> … a welcome chance to renew their acquaintance with "old friends" from the years when both they and television were growing up….At the same time, *Color Adjustment* will observe that important segments of black America are still grossly distorted, or missing altogether from the medium, thus serving [as a] reminder: the promise of the civil rights movements remains "a dream deferred." (Riggs, "Color Adjustment: Blacks in Primetime" 8)

By explaining that both the medium and the viewer were growing up together, Riggs identifies the audience for *Color Adjustments* as Baby Boomers; for Riggs, as with most directors, imagining and determining the identity of future viewers of his work is as critical as creating the work itself. In Riggs's case specifically, it clarified for him how he would write, produce, and market the project. No longer a novice as he was when he produced *Ethnic Notions*, during the filming of *Color Adjustment*, Riggs was a more mature filmmaker who understood the politics of filmmaking, making him more aware of the viewer and less "presumptuous" about their knowledge of the subject matter. He also had the organizational support and filmmaking acumen of coproducer Kleiman to help refine a marketing and outreach strategy.

By suggesting that the program would appeal to the Baby Boomer generation, Riggs recognized that the majority of people watching the program would be an older PBS audience. There was also a notable shift in how Riggs shaped his request for funding; unlike that for *Ethnic Notions*, the proposal for *Color Adjustment* was not so scathing that it evoked guilt or embarrassment on the part of white readers/viewers. Considering the fact that *Color Adjustment* was Riggs's third feature-length documentary, the language of his proposal seems to reflect his (or perhaps Kleiman's) increased understanding of the politics of funding. Yet, even if Kleiman was involved in drafting some of the proposals, it is still fair to assert Riggs was actively involved in the process, and keenly aware of the importance of creating projects that were not only perceived as less

controversial, but that, characteristically, promoted and strived for cultural pluralism as a fulfillment of America's potential embrace of diversity.

Along with interviews, Riggs incorporated a variety of other stylistic devices in *Color Adjustment* to strengthen his argument that network television responded to a shift in racial consciousness by trying different programmatic approaches to include blacks in America's extended primetime family (Riggs, "Color Adjustment: Blacks in Primetime" 1). Reenactments are part of Riggs's directorial approach, but unlike the method used in *Ethnic Notions*, here he creates different sets that re-present historical images of white American families watching television in their homes while images of blacks dance and laugh their way across the screen. The juxtaposition between the static and moving images becomes a powerful device that helps break up the visual monotony of "talking head" interviews; it also signifies the polarization and distance—both real and imagined—between blacks and whites that has transpired over time. Ironically, the still images of the various families watching the television set are as flat and one-dimensional as those inside the television box.

In addition to layering images by mixing still photos with moving pictures, the documentary also manipulates time and space, with the result that the film does not unfold in a chronological order. While most critics and reviewers consider this film a conventional documentary, it also seamlessly makes links between nineteenth-century images of blacks and the perceptions of blacks during the twentieth century. One particularly effective scene shows "J. J." (Jimmie Walker) from the 1970s popular situation comedy *Good Times* (Mannings and Lear, 1974–1979) traipsing his lanky frame across the screen with his arms akimbo, mouth agape, and head tossed back. Riggs slows down the frame while mixing in the program's laugh track with the loaded laughter of the vaudeville show. In the meantime, an image of a man in blackface performing a minstrel program fades into the foreground. The photograph of the character superimposed on

screen is strikingly similar to "J. J.," with the only difference being his tattered clothes. The stance and demeanor of the racist image of the minstrel character are eerily similar to those of the comical "J. J." The audience is left to acknowledge that what seems like shared laughter over the innocuous comedy in *Good Times* could quickly (and perhaps unconsciously) turn into an awful cackle and howl from that despicable era of bigotry and segregation. In this moment, Riggs's documentary has traversed one hundred years to show how these one-dimensional characterizations of blacks have imbued America's contemporary racial imagination.

Riggs demonstrates this effect again during another poignant scene when he builds into a crescendo the angst in the country at the dawn of the civil rights movement and the social provincialism of market-driven commercial media by looking at the downfall of *The Nat King Cole Show* (1956–1957). With the societal clash between blacks and whites so palpable and being shown regularly on public affairs programs, corporate sponsors were not keen on advertising their product alongside the genteel, yet integrated *Nat King Cole* program. Riggs examines this phenomenon through a series of powerful clips. A dancing, smiling, sophisticated, and well-coiffed Cole fills the screen. He introduces his special guest for the evening, white pop singer Frankie Laine; a white woman joins them to play the piano and sits next to Cole. In both racial and musical harmony, the group performs a ditty. This integrationist sentiment was not foreign to television, as many variety show hosts such as Ted Mack, Arthur Godfrey, and Ed Suillivan often featured African American performers "in a casual manner that radiated good fellowship" (Doherty 72).

Juxtaposed against the Nat King Cole musical interlude, however, is archival news footage of school-aged students in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 trying to integrate the public schools. As the narrator's voice-over explains, scenes of southern resistance to integration peppered news programs; archival footage shows mobs of white men beating unarmed black men walking down the street, and angry crowds of whites taunting young blacks who attempted to enter a school. The

tension resided between what television was accomplishing through its integrated programming like the *Nat King Cole Show* and the images appearing on nightly news of actual events. In *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, Thomas Doherty explains that television, a nascent technology in America at the time, as "shatter[ing] the walls of segregated space" by bringing African American images into private homes where blacks would never cross the threshold, and by creating images that "moved within a free-flowing, integrationist context" (72–73).

The progressive politics of television programming and the "Confederate point of view" (72), as Doherty put it, is best seen in the Nat King Cole example. Although Doherty did not use this example in his study, Riggs himself demonstrates Doherty's assertion when he shows Cole grabbing the hands of both the white female pianist and Frankie Laine and thanking them for coming on the show—all the while smiling broadly. When this happens, Riggs superimposes a close up drawing from the nineteenth-century Miscegenation Ball (which he used in *Ethnic Notions)* of a black man and his grossly distorted lips trying to kiss the anonymous yet coveted, "pure," white woman. The upbeat tune the trio had just finished playing is then replaced by ominous, haunting music, making the historical connection between the country's deep-seated racial fears obvious. By reusing this same image, Riggs again blurs historical timelines and also creates a link between this work and his earlier documentary. Although Riggs uses the maligned "then and now" approach, as one critic called this technique when referring to *Ethnic Notions*, what it provides is a link to America's fixation with miscegenation. While in certain respects television programming might have been trying to change, one underlying message was the same: integration would lead to the demise of the social order. And without Riggs having to explicitly state the reasons, the audience understands why Nat King Cole's program was only on the air for one season.

Another important component of *Color Adjustment* is the effective incorporation of the three elements of music, sound effects, and archival footage that help to carry along the narration. For instance, in one scene the saccharine image of the genteel Nat King Cole is juxtaposed with a thud heard as documentary footage cuts to showing a fist from a white mob punching a well-dressed, unarmed man as he walks down the street, and a voice-over of an angry white crowd yells, "2, 4, 6, 8, we don't want to integrate" along with "Niggers go home!" Ruby Dee's voice-over somberly explains the harsh realities facing blacks in prime time during the civil rights era by stating: "The realty of race relations had reframed television, making an otherwise acceptable image taboo."

A few scenes later, additional archival news footage continues to illustrate the tensions in American television programming, emphasizing that while prime-time entertainment television was slow to respond to diversifying its program offerings, public affairs programs examined the social climate of the civil rights movement. As mentioned previously, almost nightly, blacks were being shown on the news brutalized and tortured. Riggs demonstrates this tension through archival images of African Americans splayed across city streets and thrust against buildings by high-powered water hoses, and jailed and beaten for trying to integrate schools and public facilities. For example, through the effective use of black-and-white footage and mixed-in sound, the viewer hears the taunts and verbal assaults of a mob beating a black man while also watching a medium shot of a white man's hand punching a black victim in the face and head as the man attempts to integrate a lunch counter. The scenes resonate even more poignantly since they are seen accompanied by the black sacred song, "Wade in the Water."

For Riggs—and not surprisingly, given his focus in *Long Train Running*—maintaining a sense of memory through music became a critical element of his work. Shots of blacks being sprayed and tortured by water hoses are reframed through a close-up of a black-and-white television screen showing re-creations of different white families watching, many in dismay, at

what they were witnessing on television. The succession of images show young black men and women being beaten, thrown over lunch counters, and jailed, as a voice-over from a scholar speaks about the relevance of this tumultuous period in American history; in the meantime, the music changes from “Wade in the Water” to an original score by Mary Watkins.

The slow, melodic horns of Watkins’s original composition evoke a sense of bravery, promise, hope, and nobility as young people are shown being placed in a paddy wagon—extremely calm, standing upright, and well-groomed—to be carted off to jail. The music conveys a rooted, grounded tone, but the horns also provide an airy feeling of optimism, particularly as an overdub of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech plays in the background. This segment, lasting two minutes and 23 seconds, occurs a quarter of the way into the film and uses archival footage and sound, the blending of original scores with traditional songs, the mixing of analog and digitized portraits, and social commentary by men and women (Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fannie Lou Hammer) along with footage of children being buried, mothers crying, and social unrest—all vividly captured.

Initially, Riggs wanted to include two songs in *Color Adjustment* sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock: “Wade in the Water” and “Where are the Keys to the Kingdom.” However, after a series of correspondence between coproducer Vivian Kleiman, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon’s record company, and the publishers of the songs, the publishers agreed to use of the songs but Dr. Reagon refused to grant permission for the use of Sweet Honey in the Rock’s performances, stating: “you really need more consultation in the proper [use] of African American sacred music” (Letter to Kleiman 2). In response, Riggs stepped in and drafted a three-page single spaced letter to Dr. Reagon explaining his motivation for creating the work and reminding her of the ringing endorsement she gave *Ethnic Notions*, and the singular importance of African-American music: “our music and culture are critical in helping to sustain and bind us as community, interweaving past

struggles with present and giving us, in turn, a sense of historic continuity and endurance" (2). While Dr. Reagon still refused the use of Sweet Honey in the Rock in the film, Riggs did use the songs; composer Mary Watkins, who had created music for *Ethnic Notions*, performed renditions of the sacred songs.

What is most illuminating throughout this aspect of making the film, however, is Riggs's explanation of his careful and measured use of music in his documentaries. The letter to Dr. Reagon provides a greater understanding of his directorial style and method of visualizing ideas. And in his use of the series of aforementioned shots, Riggs effectively represented the tensions erupting throughout society at the time. This blending of devices helps to demonstrate the interconnection between television programming and American history, while showing the way racism functioned on multiple levels.

As Riggs showed in *Ethnic Notions*—and as scholars have explained—one by-product of America's fixation with racial identity is the many generalizations about various groups, or in this instance, the creation of a universal "black experience" (Hall 441–442).[23] As a by-product of this oversimplification of African Americans, blacks have constantly had to reconcile their own self-perception with the dominant white perceptions of blackness, which W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently explained with his theory of double consciousness. And because of this fact, as mentioned in Chapter 1, blacks often perform an act of dissemblance, presenting themselves in a preconceived role acceptable to whites. Riggs recognizes this with the double entendre of the documentary's title, which can refer to tinkering with the television set's image, but it also refers to the act of changing one's demeanor to appear less threatening to whites, on- and off-set. The title could also mean that white audiences need to adjust their understanding of color, but I suggest Riggs was emphasizing the former because, as he states through a simple inter-title on the screen: "we wear the mask," words that appear alongside a smiling, tap-dancing Nat King Cole, not-so-subtly

reminding the audience of the precarious predicament Cole was faced with in order to appear on television. Stated another way, the words alongside a dancing Cole "illuminat[ed] the mirroring that occurs in culture, the tension between stabilizing cultural forces (tradition), and the shifting, ever-evolving aspects of culture that provide sites for social reflection, transformation, and critique" (E. P. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness* 7).[24]

After the Nat King Cole scene, Riggs includes interviews with both black and white television producers and performers. Diahann Carroll, the first African American actress to star in a prime-time television situation comedy (Hal Kanter's *Julia*, 1968–1971), explains that in order to appeal to broader, more mainstream audiences and to seem less threatening (angry, sexualized, etc.), blacks had to make "adjustments." In other words, they performed a blackness that was palatable and understandable to mainstream white America. And although Nat King Cole and countless others acquiesced, it still was not good enough to sell advertiser's products, which is the litmus test for success in a market-driven industry. Meanwhile white producers, with their dreamy, adoring—sometimes misty and mystified—eyes discuss the importance of Nat King Cole while he plays piano in the background. TV producer Bruce Paltrow is the most adoring when he says: "I loved the way [Cole] sang. I loved his ease. I loved his grace; so wonderful. Wonderful musician; wonderful piano player. He looked great. Wonderful smile. I loved Nat King Cole." Bob Henry, producer of the Nat King Cole show, says he often heard feedback that there was wide acceptance for Cole by whites, "because he was a gentleman. He was the kind of guy you could welcome into your home…." The description of Cole seems one of both reverence and envy, or as cultural critic Greg Tate stated, it represented "everything but the burden [of being black]" (introduction). Such moments in *Color Adjustment* demonstrate Riggs's keen ability to point out and address the ironies that beset America's racial imagination.

Color Adjustment also examines various important television programs like *Roots* (Wolper and Margulies, 1977), *Good Times* (Mannings and Lear, 1974–1979), and the highly regarded *The Cosby Show* (Weinberger, Leeson, and Cosby 1984–1992). With these shows, Riggs challenges the longstanding question of positive versus negative images in the media; in fact, one could argue that the entire film attempts to counter this simple binary. Moreover, throughout Riggs's *oeuvre*, he transcended the model of duality by seeking to address larger philosophical questions about America and its founding principles. In *Color Adjustment*, for example, he examined the notion of the "American Dream" and how television helped to perpetuate the myth. *Ethnic Notions* explored the role material and popular culture played in American history and helped to shape stereotypical understandings of race. Despite what some critics believed, neither of these programs were fixated on placing blame using simple arguments.

Irrespective of the overwhelming success of the *Cosby Show*, Riggs argued that this program fits neatly into a venerable narrative that once its historically marginalized citizens achieved middle-class status, America's peculiar relationship with race would be eradicated—African-Americans would achieve the American Dream. In other words, racism and the solution to it are bound to class status. As Ruby Dee's voice-over proclaims: "In part, the show's success was its image of success, an image perfectly attuned to the politics of post-civil rights America." The problem, as Riggs sees it, is that this logic foregrounds capitalist notions of success and achievement as the way to eliminate bigotry and discrimination. After a sequence of archival footage shows displaced blacks, long unemployment lines, and urban ghettos littered with dilapidated buildings, sociologist Herman Grey points out that during the 1980s when the *Cosby Show* was at its peak, Ronald Reagan was president. According to Grey: "Reagan ideology was that if you open up access to corporations to make money then opportunity structures open up—but that didn't happen." Grey continues by explaining there was:

> incredible polarization between rich and poor [and] black people converged around the poverty end of that. To have then a show that mediates between that polarization, we come away with a sense that the society is fine—there is no problems—you just have to work hard, have the right values, desires, aspirations, and it'll be alright.

Furthermore, the positive reaction to the *Cosby Show* suggests that the only paradigm for a successful black television program is to soften its representation of race. In other words, as Riggs stated in the *Boston Globe*, while it was apparent the characters in the *Cosby Show* were black, "the blackness was suggested in the most benign ways, so one could experience the Huxtable world as no different from any other successful immigrant experience" (Graham 61). Despite the comments in the *Journal of American History* that *Color Adjustment* "does not have a particularly original thesis," and that the basic theme of the film is "that whites defines blacks in United States" (Bloom 1194), for Riggs to create a documentary that challenged the media's banal understanding of family, culture, and the role of the media was impressive, for it compelled thoughtful viewers to examine further their understanding of how race functions in America.

MAKING ADJUSTMENTS: AUDIENCE REACTIONS

In the seventy reviews of this film that I examined, twelve explored how the 1990s were experiencing a proliferation of blacks on television, and whether or not the images were "good." Riggs's divergent response in interviews about television representations of blacks suggests how his work was viewed and indicates that his reactions were not only controversial, but also agitated mainstream wisdom on the subject. Riggs constantly reminded journalists that he was "not interested in entertainment for the sake of entertainment, but as part of a larger matrix … [because] television sells us a way of life more than entertainment" (Feran 8A).

Several critics praised *Color Adjustment*, stating it presented its argument with "persuasive clarity" (Taubin 60) and was a "cogent and thoughtful" documentary (Maslin C15). The late filmmaker Henry Hampton, creator of the landmark documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, called *Color Adjustment* "[e]ngaging, nostalgic, perceptive and important." Film and TV historian (and former Librarian of Congress) Erik Barnouw described Riggs's filmmaking as featuring "his usual éclat," and called the work "an important ninety minutes of media self-scrutiny" ("Color Adjustment" Press Kit 1).

Others, like Elizabeth Renzetti from *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) and *USA Today's* DeWayne Wickham went further by praising Riggs's format and using comparisons of the program's relevance with current social events like the Los Angeles Riots. Taking this approach to review *Color Adjustment*, these critics demonstrated the strength and relevance of the program's thesis; they also highlighted the dichotomy between what was being depicted in television and the harsh racial realities facing most African Americans. As Wickham pointed out, Riggs "is to be credited for giving context and perspective to a body of knowledge that's been hoarded from television audiences in much the same way the Dead Sea Scrolls were kept from religious historians" (12A).

While many critics viewed *Color Adjustment* as a well researched and extremely relevant project, others thought it was too dogmatic. One particularly negative review came from David Nicholson in the *Washington Post*, who called the program "somewhat educational, occasionally irritating, and ultimately unsatisfying" (C1). Nicholson stated that Riggs failed to let the viewers come to their own conclusions, and that the narration of Ruby Dee told the viewer what to think—in other words, it was too much of an illustrated lecture with predigested material. Nicholson also pointed out that the footage in the program was open to other interpretations, and that Riggs's conclusions about how blacks and whites on television, except for skin color, have become virtually

indistinguishable is "wrong-headed and ignore[s] the real changes that have occurred since *Amos 'n' Andy* aired in 1951" (C1).

Interestingly, Nicholson's critique suggests that Riggs had fallen into the same trap that the director argued his work sought to challenge; Nicholson felt Riggs ignored "subtleties, ironies and contradictions," and articulated his wish that Riggs "had left some of the politics at home" (C1) to address more of the interconnection between blacks and whites. This, however, would have been a different project than Riggs's thesis—and by not taking the film on its own terms, Nicholson missed the point of some of the ironies and arguments the film does make, such as when Riggs blends scenes with "J. J." in *Good Times* with images of minstrels, or when he creates fictionalized scenes of different white American families watching television. Implicit in this review is a negative reaction to the fervor and reputation Riggs's earlier work *Tongues Untied* had generated.

When *Color Adjustment* was released, Riggs had established himself as a filmmaker with an agenda, especially regarding black sexuality. For some reviewers, this identification was off-putting; for others, it was Riggs's *raison d'être*. For instance, *Village Voice* film and television reviewer Amy Taubin stated: it was "nothing short of astonishing … that Riggs—the director of *Tongues Untied*—the smart, tough, and openly erotic rendering of black gay subjectivity that put PBS in a tizzy—makes no attempt to connect a critique of TV's depiction of race to its depiction of gender and sexuality" (60). Interestingly, however, the reaction from the gay press never took issue with the film's presumed heteronormativity. Instead, the *San Francisco Bay Times* reviewer drew a connection between *Color Adjustment* and gay viewers by explaining that for "a gay audience concerned with issues of negative stereotyping by the media, of assimilationist mainstreaming, or the glorification of sentimental middle-class family values as the mainstay of everyone's American Dream, *Color Adjustment* will strike a resonant chord" (Turoff 41).

Other reviews addressed the documentary's form. *Buffalo News* critic Richard Huntington took issue with Riggs's rhetorical question, "Is this a positive image?" Huntington states that "[t]his kind of phantom commentary is unnecessary," and that Ruby Dee's voice-over sounded like a "hectoring academic" (21). This commentary suggests a potential problem for some viewers with Riggs's cinematic style because of his use of effects like the aforementioned question, as well as passages from James Baldwin's collection of essays, *The Price of the Ticket,* which were interspersed throughout the documentary as intertitles. According to Huntington, these devices break up and disrupt the video's rhythm. While I argue this is part of Riggs's cinematic signature, others have found his hybrid approach awkward.

Some of the critical reactions to *Color Adjustment* may have had valid points—even Riggs admitted to "moving past," or having found himself interested in other topics (namely *Tongues Untied*) during production (Kleiman, personal interview 1 Aug.).[25] Despite this fact, and the lackluster reaction some TV critics had to this documentary, the overwhelmingly positive feedback and the numerous awards it received are evidence of the film's merits. Riggs's compulsion to create work that challenged America's precepts of liberty, truth, and justice compelled viewers to examine the cultural history of American television, an achievement not to be underestimated. As the reception of *Color Adjustment* shows, for some, Riggs's unrelenting approach to film—and his expectations of American society—were too dogmatic, alienating, and limiting. I argue instead that this approach is precisely what made Riggs a cultural agitator. Others thought that Riggs's sequel to *Ethnic Notions* was an important and welcome counterbalance to the superficiality of commercial television. Whatever the reaction to his work, it is clear that Riggs's films were an important and critical addition to the cultural landscape of the late twentieth century.

Riggs's Evolving Role as a Cultural Agitator

In this chapter I examined Marlon Riggs and his earlier, more ostensibly conventional documentaries: *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*. As Riggs's notoriety and popularity grew, he became more outspoken about the politics of representation. Riggs's work increasingly reflected this attitude, and his ability to reveal discrepancies between race relations and America's contract with her citizens—as he saw it—grew more direct with each film, particularly from *Ethnic Notions* to *Color Adjustment*. With both documentaries, black critical reactions to his work varied. Just as Riggs recognized that African Americans were not a monolith, mainstream reactions to his works were equally as divergent: while many African-Americans praised Riggs for his bravery and panache in creating socially relevant films, an equal number of black academics and white film critics saw his work as too polemical and divisive.

Textual analysis and reception study of these two films show how Riggs attempted to strike a balance between the limiting notions of a "true, authentic" blackness, and the stereotypical and racist constructions of blacks. My examination of Riggs's film in various stages of development also revealed important elements of the director's style: mainstreaming his work in order to obtain funding and reach broader audiences while constantly seeking to maintain his artistic integrity. In this examination of his early work, I also uncovered critical directorial signatures: Riggs's emphasis on history's "sweep" via archival footage and historical imagery, and the role of performance and reenactment as vital to his aesthetic.

In this chapter I sought to provide crucial insights into Riggs's role as cultural agitator within the confines of relatively conventional documentary films. The next chapter expands the notion of Riggs as a cultural agitator by closely studying Riggs's most controversial and stylistically innovative documentary, *Tongues Untied*, while attending to the ways in which that film represented

a continuation of many of Riggs's most powerful cinematic strategies from his earlier, more conventional films.

Chapter 3

The Un-doing of Shame and Silence in

Tongues Untied

> The American *ideal*, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically [sic] infantile that it is virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.
> –James Baldwin ("Here Be Dragons" 678)

> He had already realized his alienation from American society as a black; he now experienced a sexual alienation.
> –David Leeming (*James Baldwin: A Biography* 23)

> How close I, too, had come to being killed, not by the pneumonia, but by the most lethal accomplice: silence.
> –Marlon Riggs ("Letter to the Dead" 18)

Groundbreaking in its exploration of black gay sexuality, *Tongues Untied* has been described as inaugurating single-handedly the black gay film genre (Banneker 11). While the term sounds impressive, no other African American filmmaker's examples follow Riggs's narrative approach to *Tongues Untied*; this unique signification furthers the import of this work, but also challenges the idea there is a "black gay film genre." *Tongues Untied* is not the first film to explore notions of black gay sexuality; other works have addressed the subject, but no filmmaker has done so as personally as Riggs. Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967), for example, examined the life of Jason Holliday, a black gay man who not only challenged mainstream norms because of his sexual identity but also through his associations with the Beat scene of the late 1950s. Nevertheless, *Tongues Untied* was groundbreaking in many respects: from a subject standpoint, an aesthetic approach, and a political perspective—each of which is discussed further in this chapter.

Prior to the late 1980s, films often presented homosexual men as a foil to the normative understanding of the world; one such example is Mazursky's *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (1976), where a young Antonio Fargas plays a black queen amongst a group of young, white, middle-class kids pursuing a variety of dreams. An exception is *Boys in the Band* (Friedkin, 1970) whose sole African American character, Bernard, challenges the heretofore stereotypical black gay characters. Other television programs and mainstream films throughout the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., *The Flip Wilson Show* [Henry and Kiley, 1970–1974], *Car Wash* [Schulz, 1976], and *Beverly Hills Cop* [Brest, 1984]) each included the stereotypical black gay character, primarily cross-dressing, hyperfeminized, and sassy—making Riggs's work even more significant during the time of its release.

Documentaries that did explore black homosexuality—such as Parkerson's *Stormé: Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987), Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), Shari Frilot's *Black Nations/Queer Nations* (1995), Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson's *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1995), Jenny Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1996), and Yvonne Welbon's *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* (1999)—did not do so from an autobiographical perspective, nor did they debut on national public television.

Widely recognized by both academic and public scholarship as a critical film on black gay men, *Tongues Untied* has never been analyzed within the context of all of Riggs's films. Building on the work of the previous chapters and by examining the form and style of *Tongues Untied,* I first analyze the video's aesthetic and cultural significance. The final section of this chapter reviews the national press coverage of and viewer reactions to *Tongues Untied*, to show the variety of meanings audience members took from this innovative film and also to provide a greater understanding of Riggs as a cultural agitator. With this approach to Riggs and his work, I show how the

filmmaker/artist/activist used his craft as a tool of resistance to interrogate constructions of masculinity, sexuality, and race.

Uncovering Riggs's "Shame"

Riggs's second feature-length documentary, *Tongues Untied* was his personal prescription for confronting the "time bomb ticking in [his] blood" (Riggs, "Tongues Untied: Script" 13). During a holiday vacation in Germany to visit family sometime in 1988, Riggs suffered from kidney failure and nearly died (Vincent, personal interview; Kleiman, personal interview 1 Aug.).[26] Riggs recalled this moment as not only life-changing, but also as altering how he understood himself and his role within the world as a man, filmmaker, artist, and friend. In an essay, "Letter to the Dead," that he wrote as a requiem to many friends he lost to the HIV virus, Riggs explained: "when the German doctors told me that both of my kidneys had ceased to function, and that I was HIV positive, to boot? Stunned, inert, silent, yet alert, I lay in that German hospital bed, my inner eyes, at last, beginning to open" (19). He continued by adding:

> How slowly, gradually, my kidneys once again started to work, how slowly, gradually I began to see the consequences of silence, and how as a consequence of this insight, my tongue unhinged from the roof of my mouth, dislodged from the back of my throat, slipped—free. And in the hospital, like some exuberant runaway escaped from slavery, I sang aloud, with all my might: *Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom over me! And before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my grave and go home, yes! I'd go home and be free!* (19)

This passage explains how Riggs's renewed self-identity came from learning about his HIV status, and was the impetus for *Tongues Untied*. Before receiving the news of his health status, he had

been virtually silent about feeling ostracized as a black gay man; once he digested and accepted his diagnosis, his motivations and purpose for living dramatically changed. He now recognized the unspoken shame he felt about his sexuality as a higher, divine calling—more importantly, Riggs understood that he was not the only person "suffering in silence." Upon his return to the United States, and after having created *Long Train Running* and *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs recommitted himself to creating film projects that he found personally meaningful. Associate Producer of *Tongues Untied* Brian Freeman explained Riggs's artistic motivations thusly: "Riggs was already a very smart and diligent worker, but once he came back from Germany he was on a mission; he thought he was going to die and he knew he had so much more he wanted to accomplish. He felt he had no time to waste" (Personal interview). As a result, Riggs wrote, produced, directed, and edited *Tongues Untied* in nine months. It became his most discussed and critically regarded film.

Riggs's newfound enlightenment and artistic motivations run parallel to an experience of James Baldwin. Baldwin's biographer, David Leeming, frequently discusses how Baldwin's personal life was in constant upheaval, despite (or because of) his growing notoriety as a formidable writer and cultural thinker. The countless failed love relationships, numerous beneficiaries who took advantage of Baldwin's largesse, and his bouts of alcoholism and depression would all take their toll on Baldwin's writing and quality of life. As Leeming explains, Baldwin's desire to write about society's treatment of its citizens was part of his life purpose as a witness. For Baldwin, the artist's job was "to absorb and re-create not only the deeds of humanity but the motivations for those deeds, which sprung from human ambiguity and human complexity" (Leeming 65). Along with this mission came a longing for peace within his own life. However, Baldwin's propensity for excessive drinking, combined with raucous relationships with men often perplexed by their own sexual proclivities, left Baldwin tormented by his inner demons of loneliness and fear. Leeming writes that Baldwin: "was still 'fighting with [his] shame.' It was necessary to accept the paradox of himself

before he could be 'free'" (53). In this last passage, Leeming could well be describing Riggs: the loneliness and shame that Baldwin experienced were devastating emotions Riggs also struggled with, as he acknowledged in the "Letter to the Dead."

When Riggs wrote about his HIV status and the many friends who died scared, alone, and ashamed of their sexuality, he explored how the fear, humiliation, and denial by black gay men who believed they were immune to (or deserving of) catching the disease had also devastated their many loved ones. Riggs was on a mission to help stop his friends from progressing down the self-destructive path he saw them following.

Perhaps part of *Tongues Untied*'s critical success arose from Riggs's achievement of something that Baldwin felt was essential to creating meaningful art: "one's writing is a reflection of one's 'private life,' and the writer can only reveal to the world what he is 'willing to face about' himself" (Leeming 137). Therefore, when Riggs recognized he was HIV-positive and decided he would rather die proud rather than stay alive trapped by the fear of denying his black and his gay identities, in the Baldwinian sense he had finally accepted himself. As Riggs explained in a *USA Today* article, *Tongues Untied* was a way to "break my own interior silence and shame and invisibility about being black and gay and HIV positive, triple whammies in our society" (Roush 3D). Just as Baldwin's journey toward self-reconciliation infused his array of dynamic novels and essays and propelled his long-standing career as an artist–activist, Riggs's full acceptance of his sexuality informed the production, form, and style of *Tongues Untied*, and became the driving force for his subsequent films and writings. After *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs was an acknowledged filmmaker and "cultural figure," traveling across the country speaking on issues of race in America; *Tongues Untied*, however, propelled him into another dimension because of its unconventional style, form, and subject matter.

Riggs's trifecta as black, gay, and HIV-positive connects the history and debasement of slavery with the shame associated with homosexuality. This notion is consistent with the theory of "embracing shame" posited by cultural studies theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (9). Although Queer Studies has worked diligently at challenging identity politics to incorporate sexuality, one of its limitations has been the overarching absence of race analysis. To address the void, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* questions whether the "queered" notion of shame is only a concern of white men; Stockton suggests it is not. She then challenges queer theory scholars to expand their scholarship to include what cultural scholar bell hooks calls "racialized shame." Citing examples from Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*, and hooks's *Salvation: Black People and Love,* Stockton shows how shame theory is an idea productively embraced by African American theorists as well (9). Stockton suggests that although queer theory has been most associated with the ways in which Otherness can be rooted in gayness and homosexuality, black scholars and African American gays and lesbians have also discussed the concept—and more importantly, how typical notions of shame can be reframed as tools of resistance. In Stockton's estimation, "Shame itself proves exceptionally composite….There is no purely black form of debasement—nor a queer one. Only blended forms of shame. A circuitry of switchpoints, or sudden shifts, keeps associations sparking between 'black' and 'queer' …" (23). Taking up the language of both shame and debasement, Stockton explains later in the text:

> Moreover, we cannot grasp how shame moves—goes to work on people—without comprehending its composite operations. More often than not, debasements attach to a person's body, highlighting attributes of some kind of surface or calling attention to a dirty bottom depth. Even in the case of dirty surroundings, shame paints place as part of one's intimate physical sphere. Debasement, that is, takes (its) place: in a body, in a neighborhood, or in a human

> brain….For all these reasons, shame is a highly indispensable informant for queer theoretical work and black studies. It can be seen to have swallowed a host of critical issues on which it may inform us, pointing us to an archive of depictions that force a range of valuable questions on these fields (black studies, queer theory). Debasement informs us of hidden connections, cultural logics, and histories of fantasies, pain, and attractions far more telling than the weak conceptions of oppression and subversion. (24)

By highlighting the work of theorists such as psychoanalytic feminist Julia Kristeva, anthropologist Michael Taussing, and gay/feminist scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Stockton shows how notions of debasement, abjection, or shame have complex and fluid meanings beyond their ostensible negative connotation. Stockton's work is significant when closely reading *Tongues Untied* because, consistent with the queer studies literature, embracing shame places an emphasis on the body.

Julia Kristeva's 1982 book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the abject that is relevant here. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Kristeva's text discusses how the body's "abject others" like excrement and corpses can be seen as vile and filthy, but she also complicates the idea by arguing that things often considered abject can be also be a form of seduction and intrigue. She explains: "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. It is death infecting life." However, it is seductive because: "That leap [through abjection] is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned …" (1). Citing Kristeva, Stockton explains in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* that even the corpse "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us;" "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master;" and that "filth is not a quality in itself, but applies to what relates to a boundary" (12–13). Stockton then shows how writers James Baldwin and Toni Morrison use

the abject to create redemptive experiences within their black characters. Citing Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Morrison's *Beloved*, she explains how each author uses the body and "a view of shame that is unique conceptually and potent historically …" (6).

While Stockton explores the intricacies of shame, and more specifically, debasement to examine what she calls Baldwin and Morrison's "projects of sorrow and ways of creative historical knowing," and how shame "foster[s] attractions," and "aesthetic delight" (6), her ideas are extremely pertinent to the work Riggs produced about HIV/AIDS, particularly within the sociohistorical context of the 1980s. At that time, living with HIV/AIDS was extremely maligned and thought to be confined to only the "4-H's"—homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians (Gilman 87). In *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame,* Stockton emphasizes literature and a few mainstream filmmakers (such as Quentin Tarantino) who include black characters that are "shamed"; I expand upon Stockton's theories of shame by exploring the filmic text of *Tongues Untied*. Expanding on the notion of embracing shame, I also offer comparisons between Riggs and one of Stockton's subjects, Baldwin, a comparison that has not been advanced before, but which proves extremely illuminating.

With Stockton's argument in mind, we can begin to see *Tongues Untied* (1989) "embracing shame" as Riggs addresses the "ticking time bomb flowing through his blood," more specifically through the camp devices of "the snap rap" and the all-boy a cappella quartet. I also posit that Riggs takes a pleasurable experience such as sex, and shows how it can become shamed through a life-threatening disease like HIV/AIDS: "*now we think as we fuck, this nut might kill us*" (*Tongues Untied*). However, Riggs reframes this fact by accepting it; in turn, this harsh reality becomes a formidable, affirming life purpose. By "embracing shame" as part of his unique journey, Riggs creates a film that turns a personal and otherwise shameful situation into an important public discourse about HIV/AIDS, racism, and homophobia.

Furthermore, because Riggs uses black bodies in his videos on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, he moves beyond a traditional queer studies conversation to a "quare" one, to borrow a term introduced by E. Patrick Johnson ("Quare Studies"). "Quare" originates from the nuanced vernacular roots implicit in the southern enunciation of "queer." Johnson defines quare as a culturally specific positionality which is "absent from the dominant and more conventional usage of 'queer'….to devise a strategy for theorizing racialized sexuality" (2–3). Johnson's quare theory is relevant to Riggs's work, and expands Stockton's theory of shame because it:

> emphasize[s] the diversity among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world. Theories in the flesh also conjoin theory and practice through an embodied politics of resistance. This politics of resistance is manifest in vernacular traditions such as performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art. (3–4)

E. Patrick Johnson's "theories in the flesh" also expand Stockton's ideas by challenging rigid notions of identity politics that claim what "black is," and what it "ain't"; in other words, Johnson's nuanced understanding of race shows that neither blackness nor queer identity are monolithic entities. Furthermore, Johnson's work connects notions of shame, sexuality, and race to their political contexts, and highlights expressive strategies such as performance, a strategy on which Riggs relies so notably in his films. The emphasis that "quare theory" places on creating a politics of resistance also reinforces Riggs's desire to make *Tongues Untied* "a call to (personal and political) action."

Employing the theory of embracing shame and quare theory to analyze *Tongues Untied* helps elucidate the significance of this visual work. By using these theories to frame my argument, I also expand upon the thorough readings of *Tongues Untied* offered by scholars like Marcos Becquer, Alex

Castro, Phillip Brian Harper, Chuck Kleinhans, Julia LeSage, Sheila Petty, and Ron Simmons, as well as E. Patrick Johnson's specific work on the performative nature of "snapping" in "Snap!Culture: A Different Kind of 'Reading.'"

Several of the scholars in the aforementioned paragraph emphasized *Tongues Untied's* unprecedented subject matter, which is helpful for developing a critical understanding of the cultural and social relevance of this film. Other critics provided insightful perspectives through their interviews with the director about his filmic intentions, which helped me to understand key elements of Riggs's directorial style. However, I found critical reviews of the performance elements particularly illuminating and essential to relating a textual analysis of *Tongues Untied* with notions of shame. In many ways, Sheila Petty has provided the most insightful analysis of *Tongues Untied* in her article, "Silence and its Opposite." Petty provides a close reading of the film, emphasizing the way that silence is used as a politically powerful tool; however, like other critics of *Tongues Untied*, Petty neglects Riggs's recapitulation of shame.

Critics have focused on the collective yet personal nature of the film, its hybrid use of styles, and its fluidities of identity, yet my readings of *Tongues Untied* also bring into focus other readings of Riggs's "brother to brother" mantra, particularly the way he challenged the iconography of religion as well as notions of classism. Finally, framing the very personal ideas articulated in this film within the realm of a politics of resistance extends the film's relevance into public discourse by showing that Riggs's work served as a lightning rod for national debates in the press, as well as debate in academic and cultural circles over the role of art, censorship, public media, and cultural identity.

Understanding *Tongues Untied*

Besides Riggs's discovery of his HIV status, the impetus for *Tongues Untied* arose from the many black poetry groups that met in various cities, predominantly on the east coast, in the mid-1980s; Riggs found their sense of collective support around issues of race and sexuality not only enlightening but also encouraging. Riggs wanted to produce a project specific to the experiences discussed in the poetry. Initially *Tongues Untied* was to be a fifteen-minute experimental video about a black gay men's poetry workshop in New York called, "The Other Countries Workshop"; the distribution plan consisted of screening the video in three bars in Washington, D.C., New York City, and San Francisco (Kleiman, personal interview 1 Aug.). The title of the poetry group seems to be an allusion to the writer James Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country*, a daring tale about a New York-based jazz musician and his artist friends as they struggle to grasp a deeper understanding of their identities—an attempt to break through cowardly and hypocritical morality (Leeming 200). According to Baldwin's biographer, the characters in *Another Country* are on desperate searches for the self-knowledge and self-esteem—their identity—without which real love is impossible. The poets in "Other Countries Workshop" addressed comparable themes; in addition, similar to *Tongues Untied*, Baldwin's novel uses a nonlinear structure, traversing the lives of the protagonist's friends and tracing their tangled interracial and homosexual relationships.

Completed in the fall of 1989, *Tongues Untied* premiered at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles in November, and was the headlining film of the San Francisco Film Arts Festival's "Gay Lives '89" program (Banneker 10). It was also shown at the Berlin International Film Festival where it won the prize for Best Documentary. The video's title comes from a small 1987 British anthology, *Tongues Untied: Gay Verse*, a collection of poetry that includes work from project co-collaborator, Essex Hemphill. Following its international debut, the film *Tongues Untied* toured the festival circuit for the next several months, shown in both African American as well as gay and lesbian film festivals. Early supporters and exhibitors of the work included Filmfest DC, as well as

the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and the National Black Programming Consortium's (NBPC) "Prized Pieces Film Festival" in Columbus, Ohio.

Although Riggs never intended for *Tongues Untied* to be shown on public television, it aired in 1990 on stations KQED in San Francisco, WNET in New York, and KCET in Los Angeles, to minimal controversy. KQED played *Tongues Untied* April 23, 1990; KCET broadcast the program June 22, 1990 and June 18, 1991, as part of "Gay Pride" programming. New York's WNET also included it in their Gay Pride programming which coincided with Gay Pride Week in June 1990, and they aired it on February 5, 1991, as part of their African American Heritage programming (Bullert 99). With prodding by PBS's *"Point of View"* (*P.O.V.*) series executive producer Marc Weiss, who saw the piece in June 1990 on WNET as part of "Gay Pride Week," Riggs submitted *Tongues Untied* for consideration into the new season's programming schedule; from among 400 entries, it became one of a handful of programs that was part of the 1991 10-week series lineup. In fact, it headlined the new *P.O.V.* series, heightening the stakes of the program.

The "core mission" of *P.O.V.*, according to Weiss, "is to provide a platform for voices which are unheard elsewhere on public television." Weiss felt *Tongues Untied* belonged as part of *P.O.V.*'s fourth season because it was an "extraordinary and brilliant film" with a perspective "available nowhere else on television" (Bullert 100). Riggs accepted *P.O.V.*'s offer to present *Tongues Untied* only when PBS agreed not to edit or alter the film. Controversy surrounding *Tongues Untied* occurred once it was included in the national public television broadcast schedule, prompting Riggs to become an advocate for public media and a spokesman against governmental censorship of art.

Although *Tongues Untied* grew from a short, fifteen-minute experimental project into a feature docudrama, one reason the piece is so gripping is its unapologetic clarity about the film's audience. For Riggs:

> It was liberating not to have to apologize, balance, explain, over explain, and dilute the message in order to make it digestible for the uninitiated.
> I felt free to speak with rage, humor, laughter, pain, and vulnerability....
> I knew the issues of ambivalence and sexuality would resonate because my audience would already understand. ("An Outspoken and Provocative Film" 21)

Riggs did not frame the film as an address to mainstream film audiences—*as Ethnic Notions, Color Adjustment* (and even *Long Train Running*) had done—but specifically for the gay subculture. This makes this piece all the more striking and renders equally significant Riggs's willingness to submit it for PBS consideration, and then the grassroots outreach efforts he developed to combat the backlash against the film by PBS station managers and right-wing conservatives. National public television was never Riggs's original intended audience; however, when confronted with the opportunity to share this story with others, he embraced the idea. His willingness to deal with the possible unknown challenges outweighed the potential opposition the film would receive. Riggs was committed to expanding conversations around masculinity and blackness; in his view, bringing HIV/AIDS awareness to the African American community was equally critical.

From his first project, Riggs was consistently concerned with a film's impact. Specifically regarding *Tongues Untied,* Riggs wondered how he could retell the story in a visually effective way so not to reduce it to: "Yeah, poets, black gay poets, that's interesting and different, but a little boring" (Kleinhans and Lesage). It was important to make the film more visually compelling, and like his Master's thesis *Long Train Running*, the idea to create a project beyond the initial concept pushed him to develop the film as one of collective expression rather than that of a single person (be it Riggs or someone else). Therefore, although *Tongues Untied* addresses Riggs's personal experience as a black gay man, it also uses the work by the poetry collective to "quare"

understandings of homosexuality and show the fluidity of experiences and identities of black gay men.

Riggs describes the style of *Tongues Untied* as “promiscuous” (Interview by *P.O.V.*).[27] As he explains: “After a while, I even abandoned the word “documentary,” seeking my own sense of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their words” (Kleinhans and Lesage). Riggs’s desire to define his style and aesthetic is important when considering him as a cultural agitator. Part of his artistic significance comes from his ability to interrogate cultural norms and expand the boundaries of documentary—in form and content.

When Riggs produced *Tongues Untied*, his work negated many mainstream and even some noncommercial representations of black men. The most prominent example of the popular representations of gay black men on screen comes from popular films such as Spike Lee’s homophobic vitriol in *School Daze* (1988), which disparaged homosexual men through a fraternity call-and-response chant: “When I say Gamma, you say fag. Gamma (fag), Gamma (fag), Gamma, Gamma, Gamma ….” The taunt concluded with the threat, “Get back, or we’ll kick your ass.” In fact, Riggs confronts the daily verbal assaults by incorporating excerpts from the *School Daze* scene in *Tongues Untied* to show intraracial pejorative (mis-)treatment toward black gay men.

Tongues Untied also challenged representations of gays seen in commercial television. Programs often featured black gay men in stereotypical and troublesome roles; in the popular sitcom *Designing Women* (Bloodworth-Thomason, 1986–1993) Anthony Bouvier (Meshach Taylor) was the highly effeminate ex-convict who worked for a group of four upper middle-class women who owned an Atlanta interior design firm. The stereotypical representation of gay black men was also made popular by the comedy show, *In Living Color* (Wayans 1990–1994) and its skit “Men on Film,” which showed an outrageously effeminate David Alan Grier and Damon Wayans acting as film critics Blaine Edwards and Antoine Meriweather. “Men on Film” was hugely successful, and

Riggs was keenly aware of how the media perceived black gay men. In an article in the out-of-print gay magazine *Outweek*, Riggs said "Men on Film" "plays into the stereotypes the dominant culture has of [black gay men]." For him what was most troubling was that these trite representations portrayed

> gay men as misogynist and buffoonish in a way that's close to caricature—not camp, but caricature … that plays into a notion of Black *gay* sexuality held by the Black community and now being embraced by the larger dominant community. A notion that Black gay men are sissies, ineffectual, womanish in a way that signifies inferiority rather than empowerment. (Hemphill, "In Living Color" 35)

Surprisingly, images of black gay men, particularly those living with HIV/AIDS, were also misrepresented in the noncommercial market. For example, the 1985 *Frontline* program, *AIDS: A Public Inquiry*, purportedly profiled black AIDS victim Fabian Bridges. In her book *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, Martha Gerver states that the program

> portrayed [the] unemployed black, gay protagonist as a dangerous criminal irresponsibly roaming the country and engaging in sex with unsuspecting victims. The *Frontline* producers tracked the man down, pretended to befriend him in order to elicit personal information, then turned him in to the health authorities after they got their footage. (iii)[28]

While I have not come across any mention by Riggs that he was familiar with this specific program, it was a known fact that when Riggs produced *Tongues Untied* "[e]ven the national Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which pretends to take greater risks in programming, [had] taken up the topic of AIDS only gingerly" (Gerver 111). *Tongues Untied* can be seen as dramatically reframing popular representations of gay men with HIV.

As Riggs declared in the essay "Black Macho Revisited," "Spike Lee and others like him count on the complicit silence of those who know better, who know the truth of their own lives as well as the diverse truths which inform the total black experience. Notice is served. Our silence has ended. SNAP!" (296). With the images of African American males in film and television often reduced to flat, one-dimensional stereotypes, Riggs's approach to *Tongues Untied*—showing a range of different men reciting *Brother-to-Brother* in the introduction, for example—helps reiterate blackness as pluralistic and multilayered, while illustrating the universal underpinnings in his work.[29]

As mentioned in previous chapters, as a cultural agitator, Riggs was committed to high quality, innovative, socially relevant film productions that pushed their viewers to examine the world beyond the confining popular culture representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. With *Tongues Untied*, Riggs also expanded the subject matter of African American documentary films, which had historically found success by focusing on the Civil Rights Movement, exemplified by *Eyes on the Prize* (Hampton, 1987). *Tongues Untied* also expanded the boundaries of PBS, which was increasingly programming BBC productions and presentations of the performing arts (opera, ballet, symphonic orchestras). All these comparative contexts clarify how brazen *Tongues Untied* would have appeared to PBS audiences and conservative cultural watchdogs.

Close Reading of *Tongues Untied*

This next section provides a close reading of *Tongues Untied* by explicating various significant textual markers that reinforce Riggs's status as a cultural agitator. A close examination of the film's prelude brings to bear important elements of Riggs's work, to point out ways this work is unique in its stylistic approach to addressing issues of a highly personal nature to Riggs. The

following section also examines the relevance of the phrase "Brother to Brother," while exploring important themes like confronting silence and dealing with the harsh reality of death and dying.

Prelude

Riggs described *Tongues Untied* as a "call to action," and it is clear why he did so from the very opening seconds of the film. The video begins with a black screen and a voice-over repeating, "*Brother to Brother*." Other male voices join the initial announcer repeating the phrase. Images of African American men of varying shapes, hues, and style of dress—from college student and bohemian artist to white-collar executive—appear on the screen as the staccato voice-over continues. With the aural and visual clues, the viewer recognizes the primary audience for this piece is black gay men. The refrain repeats without a beat, building momentum and adding a tone of intensity to the work. "Brother to Brother" begins to sound as if it is one word, or perhaps even conjoined twins.

The notion of inseparable siblings becomes plausible when we realize that "making connections" is utterly essential to this work. Togetherness is so much a part of *Tongues Untied* that the theme even appears as part of the film's publicity images—most prominently, the iconic photograph of a stone-faced, muscular, bare-chested Riggs and Hemphill staring directly at the camera. A partial view of Hemphill's jeans appears in the shot, dispelling any question of whether or not the men are nude. The slightly shorter Riggs stands in front of Hemphill, whose right arm covers Riggs's chest and left forearm rests on his shoulder. Both of Hemphill's hands are forming fists as they hug Riggs.

One reading of this image suggests the pair is proud and defiant, but it could also imply "embracing shame." As Stockton and other black scholars suggest, the concept of

embracing shame takes a seemingly reprehensible moment and recasts it as something affirming. In this context, their sexuality compounds the connection of these two black men. The direct stare and closeness of Riggs and Hemphill as they gaze into the camera recognizes, and challenges, the disparaging mainstream representations of gay black men. Their literal posture of connection and defiance, then, symbolizes their 'embracing shame.' Hemphill's protective stance, paired with their bare chests touching, tacitly asks the biblical question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" This image and protective embrace suggests that Hemphill is indeed Riggs's keeper and guardian*,* as is Riggs for Hemphill. (It also describes the relationship these two had with one another.)[30]

The notion of protection and support that Riggs expresses in the aforementioned image reveals him to be a cultural agitator in another sense: because he challenges the Black Nationalist and Afrocentric ideals that predominated during the culture wars of the 1980s. The primary spokesmen for Afrocentricity, which grew from the Black Nationalist organizations of the 1960s, were Temple University professor emeritus Dr. Molefi K. Asante, and Dr. Maulana Karenga, the founder of the black nationalist holiday Kwanzaa and the leader of the 1960s "U.S." organization.

Black cultural nationalism gained momentum during the post-civil rights era in the 1960s when identity politics was at its peak, and Afrocentrism was an outgrowth of the Black Nationalist movement during the 1980s. Afrocentricity posits that African American liberation requires an African-centered perspective[31] and the belief that many of the challenges facing "the" African American community are residuals of systemic oppression (i.e., social, economic, etc.). In order to combat these offenses, an Afrocentric framework should be taken, which suggests there is a collective healing process and that blacks must adopt a worldview that rejects the Eurocentric, or individualist, approach to solving problems.

Afrocentricity relies on a mythologized understanding of Africa; among Afrocentricity's many limitations, one in particular is its promotion of homophobia. As scholar Dwight A. McBride

explains, black cultural nationalists often argue that gay and lesbian sexuality is "counter revolutionary" (368). Black Nationalist literature argues that homosexuality did not exist in Africa, and regards being gay as not biological, but as a pathological manifestation of the oppression blacks experience living in a racist society. According to this logic, if white supremacy did not exist then neither would homosexuality. Prominent black cultural nationalist psychologist Dr. Frances Cress Welsing argued in her 1974 article, "The Politics Behind Black Male Passivity, Effeminization, Bisexuality, and Homosexuality" that homosexuality was a "strategy for destroying Black people" (91).

Therefore, when Riggs began—and marketed—*Tongues Untied* with two proud "out" black men embracing, he challenged the homophobic rhetoric of Afrocentricsm prevalent at the time. He also was counterbalancing the hypermasculine images that were widespread in popular films of the period. In 1991 alone, movies such as *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton), *New Jack City* (Peebles), and *Straight Outta Brooklyn* (Rich) dramatized black urban male experience as violent, exclusively heterosexual, riddled with limited choices, and in dire need of repair—pointedly excluding the representations of black gay men.

Another aspect of Black Nationalism is its reliance on self-defense (armed protection against racist attacks) and the creation of raced-based community support networks to combat racism, two ideals that Riggs also represents in this image with clenched fists and an intimate embrace between himself and Hemphill. Hemphill's protective stance also challenges the kind of violence and hypermasculinity often depicted in the urban gangster film with its overreliance on heterosexism and aggression; it is as if he is standing in defiance of the popular image of black men and acting as a protector in the midst of heterosexist violence and discrimination. The influence of Afrocentricity on African American identity is important to Riggs, and he addresses it in *Black Is...Black Ain't*, as well as in his writings on Malcolm X. However, the opening shot and seconds of

Tongues Untied demonstrate that Riggs initiated this conversation well before his last film; its presence is evident in this press image (and in a separate press headshot of a stern-faced Riggs donning a suit and a Kente cloth hat, an Afrocentric symbol).

"Brother to Brother." Following this logic then, Riggs's use of the phrase "Brother to Brother" generates multiple meanings. The refrain addresses the primary audience for the film. By showing clips of a variety of men in various looks and activities during the opening shots, coupled with the press image of Riggs and Hemphill, Riggs visualizes the ongoing critique of Afrocentricism's belief that blackness was monolithic; these images derail limiting notions of blackness that were prevalent within Black Nationalist discourse at the time.

"Brother to Brother" is obviously an important motif in the film; in the beginning, the refrain continues for forty-five seconds total, in increments of three 15-second segments. The chant also repeats at the video's conclusion, making its fourth aural appearance in the video. The opening voice-over is so clear that it builds into a unified sound and gives the perception that out of the darkness an unknown entity is calling men to gather at attention—as if a Divine Power is assembling a congregation to witness a powerful message of salvation, or even a call to prayer. At the film's conclusion, this Divine Voice—which is actually a collective of the voices of Larry Duckette, Gideon Ferebee, Essex Hemphill, and Christopher Prince—provides a redemptive sermon that proclaims:

> Brother to Brother. Brother to Brother. Brother to Brother. Black men loving black men. A call to action. A call to action. An acknowledgment of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the nights grow cold and silent. These days the nights are cold-blooded, and the silence echoes with complicity.

The mantra "Brother to Brother" functions as a mission statement that declares pride and resolution between one's sexuality and racial identity.

When the viewer first hears the "Brother to Brother" refrain, the screen is black. The film then cuts to a black-and-white close-up of the back of an anonymous man's bald head. The African American man is wearing headphones as if he is oblivious to the call for his attention. This image brings to mind Riggs's essay, "Letter to the Dead," where he wrote: "Black gay men have fooled themselves into believing they are immune [to getting AIDS]" (18). In the essay, Riggs recalls when he was in denial about AIDS. Writing about the time he noticed a large blemish on his calf and went to the dermatologist who explained the lesion was a mole, but added "moles don't usually grow that fast….Have you taken the [HIV] test—to be sure?" Riggs admits that he curtly answered no. Adding "[t]hat kind of certainty, then, was not what I was seeking" (18). Therefore, when the young man in *Tongues Untied* listens to his headphones as "Brother-to-Brother" repeats and his face never appears on the camera, Riggs shows how some men impassively refuse to hear the call to embrace their identity.

The next fifteen-second refrain includes images of men in the park mingling with one another, playing basketball, or simply walking down the street. Some men are dressed in Afrocentric attire—dashikis and Kente cloth hats—while others don fraternity jackets and casual clothes, reflecting the diversity of black men within the cultural landscape. After the fifteen-second shots of various men, there is another break where the screen cuts to black. The third call to the "brothers" repeats, now with some black men looking directly in the camera as if they are responding to the announcement. The call begins over the blank screen and continues as different images of men appear on the television.

After this last segment, the screen goes white, and when an image reappears, the scene has changed from black-and-white to color, giving the impression of real time. Four men embrace,

shake hands, and greet one another on a basketball court. Riggs's use of the basketball court is noteworthy in the sense that cultural studies scholars suggest sports reflect a "hegemonic masculinity." In other words, sports—particularly in America—become spaces for ideological strongholds for social meanings of race, gender, and sexuality (Bourdieu; Carrington). Riggs demonstrates this phenomenon with a voice-over that contradicts the initial visuals of the four men greeting one another with a smile and embrace. As the voiced-over poem says:

> Silence is what I hear after the handshake and the slap of five, after: what's happenin/homeboy/what's up/how you feel girlfriend, blood, Miss Thing. When talking with a girlfriend, I am more likely to muse about my latest piece or so-and-so's party at Club She-She than about the anger and hurt I felt that morning when a jeweler refused me entrance to his store because I am black and male, and we are all perceived as thieves. I will swallow the hurt and should I speak of it, will vocalize only the *anger*, saying: I should have bust out his fuckin' windows! (emphasis added)

Following the long shot of the different men are extreme close-ups of each male. The men look different from one another, again reflecting the diversity of male experiences. Each man varies in hue and height; some have facial hair while others are clean-shaven, and each dons a range of aesthetic styles and adornment. The initial smiles and levity that the men met with on the basketball court quickly transition into shots of frustration. The tight, close-up shots of their faces reveal the solemnity of the "black male experience," and visually express what occurs within the minds of men. By using this poem, Riggs explains that many misperceptions and generalizations of the black man as angry or violent are incorrect and simply are reactions of being hurt, angered, and silent.

The scene dissolves from the close-ups of the men's faces to show a riot scene; by dissolving from the close-up shots in the "safe space" of a basketball court to show news footage of a

1989 Virginia Beach uprising where white police officers in SWAT gear beat up bare-chested black men, Riggs unveils the fragile location at which black men of all ages are situated. As this thirty-three second scene plays, the poem continues:

> Some of the anger will be exorcised, but the hurt, which has not been given voice, prevails and accumulates. Silence is a way to grin and bear it. A way not to acknowledge how much of my life is discounted each day—100% OFF ALL BLACK MEN TODAY—EVERYDAY!

The emphasis placed on being disregarded recalls the work of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* by showing how black men have suppressed the frustration and pain they have had to endure over time. Also, by juxtaposing the emotional scene of these two young, unarmed, bare-chested black men, as they are trying (unsuccessfully) to escape the taunts and jousts of the police baton stabbing their torsos and beating them to the ground, Riggs highlights the longstanding and difficult challenge of fighting the powerful institutional authority of the state. Through this scene, he sets up the social problems many black men face, regardless of their sexual orientation.

The film cuts from the violent fight scene to a black-and-white still of gay activist, writer, and Riggs's friend, Joseph Beam. Beam died from AIDS-related causes at age 33, two days after Christmas 1988 and three days before his birthday. Beam published the first black gay anthology, *In the Life,* in 1986. Inspired by the work he saw black lesbian writers producing, Beam created this anthology as a way to build community for black homosexuals. In response to the excited reception the book received from the gay community, Beam started creating another anthology, but died before it was completed. With the support of Beam's mother Dorothy, Essex Hemphill completed that anthology, *Brother to Brother,* in 1991.

Motivated in part by Beam's story, Riggs created *Tongues Untied* also to ensure that in addition to the literary, a cinematic legacy was left. With this shot of Beam, Riggs not only pays

homage to his friend, but he also eulogizes racially motivated incidents that have aided in the premature death of black men. Across the screen, while the shot zooms closer into Beam's face, the poetry proclaims: "I strive to appear strong and silent. I learn to ingest hatred at a geometric rate and count (silently) to 10 … 10 thousand … 10 million. But as I have learned to mute my cries of anguish, so I have learned to squelch my exclamations of joy. What remains is the rap." Capitalized, white, type-faced words are intercut with Beam's image as if they were subliminal messages: "Howard Beach, Virginia Beach, Yusef Murder, Crack, AIDS, Black Men, Endangered Species?" These words, stripped from the headlines of newspapers, provide commentary on the social conditions that affect the lives of black men. By doing this, Riggs positions himself as an advocate, "placing black gay men within the overall historical context of black struggle in this country" (Kleinhans and Lesage). The sharp cuts and quick pacing Riggs uses in the first two minutes of the documentary reveal the passion with which this piece was shot, and preview his formal innovations and tone of the remaining fifty-three minutes of the film.

Confronting Silence. Once the scene ends, the words "Tongues Untied*"* appear on the screen. The poignancy of this title and its status as a "call to action" have already been established in the film through the pacing, the montage of images, and the poetry. The title dissolves to reveal a nude Riggs in an all-black studio. The medium shot of Riggs partially covering his face and moving back and forth in and out of view of the camera, opens to the sound of a heartbeat. The rhythmic pounding of a heartbeat throughout the scene serves as a metaphor and is crucial to the film. It reflects the tension occurring within the film. As Riggs says, "[he] wanted to constantly recontextualize things so they would mean something different each time [they were] heard" (Kleinhans and Lesage). In one instance, the heartbeat represents Riggs as alive; later, when he confesses there is a ticking time bomb inside, it reminds the spectator of his precarious health; and

it also reflects death—death by AIDS or death by silence and hateful homophobia. The heartbeat also represents a love of being gay. And it has a specific rhythm—a subjectivity—which he moves to, like the men in the opening shots who move to the poetic meter of the phrase "brother-to-brother."

In slow motion, a naked Riggs moves side-to-side, and his hands cover his face and body as he moves on and off screen. The stiff-arm action represents both an offensive and a defensive posture. In voice-over, Riggs and Hemphill recite the poem together, taking turns with the lines. Hemphill begins: "Silence is my Shield." Riggs retorts: "It crushes." Hemphill: "My cloak." "It smothers," says Riggs. "Silence is my sword," Hemphill responds, and Riggs admits: "It cuts both ways." Together they remind the spectator that: "Silence is the deadliest weapon."

The interplay with the duality of the voices, the rhythm of the heartbeat, Riggs's movements, and his stolen glances when he looks at the camera create a tension within this segment. In one sense, Riggs is responding here to the earlier scene of archival footage of the riot—as if in conversation with the men brutalized by the police, he protects himself from the assault by covering his face with extended arms. He is also in dialogue with the poem he recites with Essex Hemphill, which challenges the silences that he says serve as a shield, cloak, and sword.

The scene that immediately follows begins with a blank screen with only a voice-over of two different men speaking in turn and asking questions, with additional comments coming from the background:

> What legacy is to be found in silence?
>
> How many lives lost
>
> What future lies in our silence?
>
> How much history, lost
>
> So seductive its grip. This silence. Break it.

(Our silence).

Loose the tongue!

(Testify.)

Let's end the silence, baby. Together? Now?

By keeping the screen black and not showing the men reciting the poem, "Now," Riggs makes the audience engage with the language aurally, without visual distractions just as he did at the very beginning of the film when "Brother to Brother" is heard for a few seconds prior to images appearing on screen. He also highlights the invisibility that comes along with being silent. As noted in Chapter Two, according to Riggs, he used the black background because he wanted more emphasis to be placed on the voice and in its expression, without distractions of other visual elements (Interview by Braun). Although when he said this he was speaking specifically about his aesthetic choice for *Ethnic Notions*, the use of the blank screen is obviously relevant when discussing *Tongues Untied* as well. While recognizing the similar device used, I suggest that this approach functions more powerfully in *Tongues Untied*, given the urgency of the situation the film references. Overall, *Tongues Untied* is a more insistent film than *Ethnic Notions*; however, this stylistic choice creates a visual consistency between the films.

The all-black screen also reiterates the film's emphatic tone and illustrates the undeniable connection that silence(s), both lost and found, have to legacy and history. This simple device immediately brings *Tongues Untied* in dialogue with Isaac Julien's 1988 visual meditation, *Looking for Langston*, which examined the life of black homosexual men during the Harlem Renaissance using poetry by Langston Hughes and others (including Essex Hemphill).

Riggs achieves something similar with *Tongues Untied*. He uses darkness as a visual metaphor for the silence referenced in the poem, in a way comparable to the biblical idiom "out of the darkness, and into the light."[32] The silences in the *Tongues United* poem reflect the bleak social

issues facing black people, namely the rising rates of African American men with HIV/AIDS, as well as addressing the fear and ambivalence of accepting one's gay sexual identity. Riggs is suggesting that "silence equals death;" darkness is a tool in the film as well as a concept, one that alludes to death. The script's emphasis on loosening the tongue implies the urgent need to release oneself from such mental, spiritual, physical, and metaphysical shackles. Moreover, this passage's insistence on stopping the silence is strikingly similar to a minister proselytizing to his congregation about the immediate need to save their souls.

The Urgency of Now. Tongues Untied not only focuses on the interdependent themes of race, gender, and sexuality, but also raises questions about the urgency of collective actions through the continuing use of back-and-forth tension established in early shots, such as when Riggs and Hemphill remind the viewer that silence "cuts, shields, and cuts both ways." In the script, the words "Together? Now?" from the aforementioned poem are punctuated with question marks. However, they appear in the video as a statement, a declaration, spoken in unison by Hemphill and Riggs, reflecting another characteristic of Riggs's work as a cultural agitator: his emphasis on collective community action.

In the same poem about silence is the word "future," followed by the word "lies."

> What legacy is to be found in silence?
>
> How many lives lost
>
> What future lies in our silence?
>
> How much history, lost
>
> So seductive its grip …

These specific word choices conjure multiple meanings. "Future" is a nod to the next generation, as Riggs addresses the growing number of young gay men dying from HIV/AIDS and the homophobia

prevalent within African American communities, which renders it unwilling to address the problem. Although the word "lie" is associated with deception, mistruths, and missed opportunities, the verb also suggests a possible future for the black men depicted in the film, similar to that of a corpse.

From these various meanings generated by this sequence, one wonders: What will unfold in the future if society remains silent and continues to ignore the severity of this health crisis? The question is being asked as Riggs recites the poem with Hemphill off screen. Although Riggs's body provides the visual through-line for the film, he presents the voice-over with Hemphill. On the soundtrack, then, the personal experience becomes a shared one—among brothers. By blurring the authorship of these statements, Riggs creates tension through visual and aural clues, which is the larger purpose of the film—challenging fixed constructions of sexual identity.

After the black screen and voice-over poem that asks to end the silence, a full-body shot of a stone-faced Riggs standing alone fades in. A black cloth covers Riggs's small, muscular frame as he stands in front of a black backdrop. The narrative switches from communal, overlapping voices to a solitary, subjective position, still reflecting the film's tense and urgent tone. African drums beat in the background while the voice of poet Reginald T. Jackson recites "Initiation," a poem about death, fear, masculinity, racial pride, sexual preference, AIDS, and the complexity of all these identities. The camera slowly zooms into a tight close-up of Riggs's face as Jackson's voice calls out:

> Now
>
> that I have
>
> sat up with death
>
> held its hand
>
> rocked it

grieved to its giggle

mocking me to stone

too big to pass

alone.

The voice-over and rhythmic beats continue.

Three images are superimposed onto Riggs's face: a(nother) head shot of his late friend/poet Joseph Beam, pall bearers carrying a casket (presumably of someone, perhaps Beam or one of Riggs's countless other friends who passed away from AIDS), and a man dressed in drag. The voice-over explains:

Now that I have shed shades of nigger

boy for pigments of faggot

queer gender blender blur

Then there is a quick cut to a full-body shot of Riggs. And, as if another invisible force is present, the cloth from Riggs's body begins to fall.

In this sense, the black cloth, along with the voice-over, represents what W. E. B. Du Bois calls "the veil," a metaphor for discrimination and segregation reflecting how blacks were "shut out from their [white] world by a vast veil" (2). With the poem "Now" as voice-over while the camera focuses in closely on Riggs, it appears he is confronting the shroud that he has worn most his life. At this point, his dissemblance is no longer an albatross that he tries to negotiate; he has accepted his identity(ies). Standing alone, still and naked, he says: "Now that I am fairy freaky free/initiate me."

Synchronized with the music, Riggs's head and body arch backwards as if he is being baptized. He emerges renewed; in the next scene, Riggs appears in the arms of a black man whose face we never see, and who slowly caresses Riggs's stomach and face, bending down to kiss him while the voice-over declares:

Paint wars

on my cheeks. Anoint me with coco oil

and cum

so I speak in tongues

twisted so tight

they untangle my mind. Hold my head in hand. Bless it. Slice it. Leave a cross on its tip, mark of the rite.

Initiation

to the fight.

Riggs's prostrate posture, coupled with the religious references of speaking in "tongues"—an utterance in a language unknown to the speaker and listener, considered to be evidence of being possessed by a higher being, either holy or unholy—along with being "bless[ed]," and "leav[ing] a cross on its tip," give the unidentified man onscreen a god-like presence. Moreover, the poem's first-person narrative reads like a prayer. Through words like "tongues/twisted so tight," Riggs acknowledges that he has been silent. But he also recognizes—or asks for—a release from the mental fear that has kept him quiet for so long. For instance, before taking on this important and monumental task of messenger to/for the black gay community ("Initiation./To the fight."), he asked for a "blessing" ("Bless it.") to indicate his actions are valid. Strikingly, the language for religious ritual practice and sex blurs in this passage (also seen in his short video work, *Anthem* [1991]). The sequence freezes at the point where Riggs and the unseen man kiss. This scene concludes the film's "prelude" (Petty 418), exposes the politics of silence, blurs the notion of fixed identities, and reveals the film's agenda for the remainder of its running time.

SWITCHPOINTS

The following scene takes a different tone that reflects the dialectical logic of the film, which switches between monologues and reenactments. *Tongues Untied* also switches between individual and collective concerns to suggest they are interchangeable, and should be identical. The themes of urgency and tension persist as well, because Riggs takes the viewer through a meticulously personal journey of being black and gay in the United States.

After the five-minute prelude, the scene begins with a telephone ringing, and a recording starts while the camera slowly pans up a black leg wearing "Prince" tennis shoes. The mise-en-scène includes a bedroom and a man's hairy legs and torso as he sits in his shorts, while an anonymous deep male voice from a "chat line" booms in the background. Sneakers, posters of black men lovingly embracing, cultural books, and gay 'zines and activist fliers, as well as a "Silence = Death" AIDS activist t-shirt popular during the late 1980s are also part of the shot. The 90-second scene reflects the ideas of the video—loneliness, the need and desire for black-on-black male love, the removal of myths that promote fixed sexual categories, and the creation of positive, life-affirming choices which require speaking out against self-loathing, homophobia, fear, and anger.

The voice-over explains: "You've reached 'Black Chat,' your hot line to the best black numbers. Want to connect with a Bangie-Boy, press 1. For a versatile Butch-Queen, press 2. Or looking to commit mind and body to a BGA, press 3. Don't be a shy guy. Make a choice, and meet that special man." The man presses the number 3, and then hears: "Good choice. Now leave a message—you have a minute—after the beep: …." Riggs describes himself as a "BGA, Black Gay Activist," who is "30ish, well read, sensitive, pro-feminist…," rejecting the first two categories and calling for an end to the silence through collective work and cooperation. With the selection of an option that was not part of a fixed, stereotypical identity, but something more complex and fluid, Riggs "advocates the construction of an 'open-ended black sexuality' that is in a constant process of

(re)negotiation" (Petty 417). Admittedly, however, the whole idea of a phone menu choice of sexual partner is itself incredibly reductive, in addition to being humorous as it satirizes the ludicrous nature of oversimplified identity markers.

SNAP!: A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

The renegotiation of identity that Riggs undertakes here, however, requires a new lexicon, which the next segment of the film provides. There is a cut from the previous scene to a color illustration of a black man with a high-top haircut and a red shirt. His right arm extends as he snaps his fingers. Another cut reveals a different drawing; this time the dread-locked, black, male figure has on a pink shirt and blue pants, and his penis slightly bulges as his right arm is akimbo and his left fingers snap. The word "Snap!" appears on the screen above the drawings. In the essay "Black Macho Revisited," Riggs explains that "SNAP! contains a multiplicity of coded meanings." He continues: "The snap can be as emotionally and politically charged as a clenched fist, can punctuate debate and dialogue like an exclamation point, a comma, an ellipse, or altogether negate the need for words among those who are adept at decoding its nuanced meanings" (294).

The variety of meanings that accrue to "snaps" is similar to the range of experiences within the black gay communities. In *Tongues Untied*, Riggs further demonstrates the importance of the gesture through a reenactment called the "Snap Rap." A collective of men participate in the ironic and comical "Institute of Snap!theology," showing different uses of the language. Through two monologues, the viewer learns how these certain codes of gay culture "legitimize identity" (Petty 420), along with the various struggles other black men have with homosexuality. As Riggs explains in an interview by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage:

> Some people are ashamed about snap because they look at it and think, "Oh, we knew he's a gay man." Yet, snap is also a form of resistance, a form of saying, "Yes,

> I'm different and I'm also proud of it."…[By] embracing shame, you need somehow to affirm those gestures which the dominant culture looks down upon and considers inferior or reflecting a flawed personality or a flawed culture. We take that [in the "Snap Rap"] and reverse it in a way, so that it becomes a virtue rather than a vice or flaw.

In this sense, the "snap" is a way of embracing shame.

This gesture, which Riggs demonstrates is a language—through his performance and introduction of the "The Institute of Snap!theology"—also serves as a form of resistance because it accomplishes something Baldwin wrote about in a 1979 Op-Ed on the subject of black English: "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate" ("If Black English" E19). Even in the documentary, *Portrait of Jason* (Clarke, 1967), the subject Jason Holliday uses the snap gesture. And when asked through the director's voice-over about its meaning and significance, he cunningly says—while looking in the camera: "I'll never tell."

RIGGS: IN THE BEGINNING

After the snap sequence, *Tongues Untied* then turns from a collective experience to a personal one, as a sepia-toned image of a young Riggs as a child, smiling and wearing a three-piece suit appears on the screen. Riggs's testimony takes the viewer on a journey toward a greater understanding of his sexual identity. The notion of fixed identities is challenged, again, when Riggs reveals that by age six he had "heard his calling"—the term often used by ministers who suggest their professional choice is a divine purpose ordained by a higher power, but used by Riggs as a metaphor to describe his sexual identity. Riggs explains: "We had a word for boys like me (Punk). Punk not because I played sex with other boys—everybody on the block did that—(punk) but because I didn't mind

giving it away." With each invective there is a quick cut away to an extreme close up of a person's mouth. A young African American boy calls him a punk; and as Riggs grows into adulthood, the verbal assaults of "punk," "faggot," "Uncle Tom," "Motherfucking Coon," come from both black and white men. Riggs represents each verbal thrashing with cuts that continuously bring the camera closer into his face. By the end of the scene, the cacophony of assaults takes over, and when Riggs's face reappears, the extreme close up reveals only his eyes, nose, and mouth in the shot. It is as if the spectator is peering into the soul of a shamed and isolated man.

This "subjective position" (Harper) explains Riggs's sexual journey, as well as the confusion and frustration he and many others have experienced over the years—especially for participating in interracial, homosexual relationships. By telling his story, Riggs exposes many secrets—childhood sexuality, racial and class assaults from inside and out of the community—he does this not for the purpose of sensationalism, but to "lift the lid and speak" (Kleinhans and Lesage). And by collaborating with performance artist and poet Hemphill, and incorporating other lesser-known writers and gay men, Riggs shows the universality of their experiences.

HOMOSEXUALITY: THE POLICING OF DESIRE

In the next sequence, Hemphill, through voice-over, recites a poem as a man beaten by strangers appears on the screen. Riggs also addresses the harsh reality of racism within the gay community when he exposes how mainstream, white, gay media often reinforce stereotypical notions of blacks. By showing a series of still images and magazine covers that use nineteenth-century images of black men dressed as mammies, bucks, or slaves, Riggs demonstrates how stereotypical images of blacks in the media have affected the gay community's psyche as well. Other images include illustrations of nude white men with erect penises and leather whips, as they "capture" a nude black man whose buttocks are in the air, and who has a noose around his neck. As he did in *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs

points out these representations are reminiscent of popular media images that showed blacks as wild, savage, and beastly.

What Riggs explicates in *Tongues Untied* coincides with the argument made by cultural critic Kobena Mercer and filmmaker/artist Isaac Julien in their essay, "True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality." They characterize the absence of holistic images of black gay men as a "policing of desire," and posit that representations of black male pleasure and sexuality are virtually absent from gay discourse and imagery because it would challenge white phallocentric anxieties and fantasies. *Tongues Untied's* weaving of truth, fiction, fantasy, fact, history, and mythology represented a significant shift in Riggs's work that blurred the lines between history and fiction. As Riggs shared with Chuck Kleinhans in an interview, his perspective on history was evolving. Riggs explained, "Changing my mind about traditional history has been part of my evolution. Before I considered history and mythology, fact and fiction as separate and obviously discreet. Now I don't think so…." (Kleinhans and Lesage).

As this "meditation on race and sexuality" continues, Riggs uses shots of two different transvestites walking by a dock, sitting on park benches smoking cigarettes—contemplative and alone. The blues of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone are heard. In the first transvestite scene, Holiday's song, "Lover Man," plays in the background:

> I don't know why, but I'm feeling so sad
>
> I long to try something I've never had
>
> Never had no kissin'
>
> Oh, what I've been missin'
>
> Lover man, oh, where can you be?
>
> The night is cold and I am so alone
>
> I'd give my soul just to call you my own

Got a moon above me

but no one to love me

Lover man, oh, where can you be?

With the absence of a voice-over, and only a song playing in the background, the video shifts more into an ethnographic mode. The women are seen primarily from a distance, and as opposed to the other obviously staged and performed scenes where men speak and share anecdotes about their gay experiences, this segment stands out as more observational. The shot holds on the lonely transvestite sitting on the park bench smoking a cigarette while the music changes to the androgynous-sounding voice of Nina Simone singing "Black is the color of my true love's hair." Wearing a black-and-white zebra-print dress, fishnet stockings, black pumps and a wig, the woman walks alone down urban streets and waterfront parks.

Simone's song continues as Hemphill's voice-over is foregrounded. He recites a poem about perils of loneliness and selling one's body in haste and hope of eventually finding true love; again, these are themes reminiscent of Baldwin's writings about his quest for love, which he saw as the real meaning of life. By juxtaposing these images against the preceding footage, Riggs dispenses with the chronological biographical narrative and plays with visual expectations. For instance, he takes classic Holiday and Simone songs, typically understood to be heterosexual in their expression of longing, and makes them gay/transgendered.

The appearance of transvestites also jars the visuals from a personal story to something more removed and distant. Riggs explained this segment "[a]s a transition in the tape" that does not follow a conventional narrative (Kleinhans and Lesage). By not speaking in these scenes, the women appear separate or marginalized from the rest of the gay experience(s) expressed up to this point. Their backgrounds and story are unknown, with the exception of what the soundtracks/poem suggest, and they are not included as part of a monologue. According to Riggs, he hoped the viewer

would see the humanity even in someone "obviously rough-looking, not someone elegantly dressed with fine coiffured [sic] hair and makeup" (Kleinhans and Lesage). That aside, this segment illustrates the range of gay experiences; and more importantly, a feeling that within homosexual communities that there is a hierarchy, with transvestites occupying the lowliest space. Riggs even admits:

> Lots of men, even gay men, are repulsed by drag queens, consider them inferior and look upon them as caricatures, not seeing anything beyond the surface. That means looking upon transvestites in the way the straight community looks upon black gays or all gay men. I used this music to try to overcome that distance, to make these people real and their grief, longing, and needs as respectable and noble and as sympathetically felt by an audience as what was understood from my own story. (Kleinhans and Lesage)

However, by not providing context or giving voice (except through song) to the transvestites, another reading of this scene is that Riggs alienates these women from the rest of the film. Furthermore, by including cross-dressers who are not impeccably dressed but instead look hardened and rough, he perpetuates stereotypes about gay culture as deviant while reinforcing prejudiced notions of gays as deserving of mistreatment because they are so outside mainstream understandings of black masculinity. In this sense, the "policing of desire" that Mercer and Julian discuss becomes a possible reading here as well. That said, however, the alienation the two transvestites experience connects to the next scene, in the sense that it explores how group forces choose to ostracize people perceived as Othered within the community.

SILENCE AND INTRARACIAL VIOLENCE

The tension and urgency continue as the video cuts from the transgendered figures to an extreme close-up of a man slapping his hand down on a Bible and yelling out: "Abomination! Mankind shall not lie with mankind for it is an abomination in His sight!" This is followed by the rants of different voices spewing homophobic cultural nationalist rhetoric questioning black homosexual's commitment to the race. The introduction to the scene ends when an anonymous man asks: "what is he first, black or gay?" The camera slowly zooms in and holds on a mid-shot of Hemphill's somber face, representing Hemphill's personal thoughts. Through a voice-over, Riggs answers the question by saying: "You know the answer, tha [sic] absurdity of that question. How can you sit in silence? How do you choose one eye over the other, this half of the brain over that? Or in words this brother might understand: what does he value most—his left nut or his right? Tell him!"

Now, instead of being shamed by the racism and isolation brought forth by whites, Hemphill experiences abuse by black churches, black cultural nationalists, and upper-middle-class blacks. By showing only the mouths of these individuals representing particular groups, Riggs reveals that the holy trinity of spiritual, cultural, and economic-minded identities—when spewing homophobic ideas—are vehicles of oppression within mainstream society. To offset the hate mongering, the viewer hears Hemphill and Riggs in voice-over reminding the viewer that silence is his shield. "It not only crushes" and "smothers," but also "cuts both ways," phrases Riggs also uses in the beginning of the film.

By pointing out that silence "cuts both ways" Riggs reminds the viewer that venomous words not only hurt the victim, but also wound society by excluding and alienating those segments that do not fit the constrained (and conflicted) ideals of blackness. This point, and use of the exact language from earlier in the film, also connect the scene of Hemphill to the "prelude"[33] segment of a nude Riggs moving side-to-side with his arms extended in a defensive and offensive position as the

same refrain about the effects of silence is overheard. This notion of being naked and "baring all" also becomes a theme that Riggs continues in his last film *Black Is…Black Ain't*, which explores the definition of blackness even more thoroughly.

ANGER

Still focusing on Hemphill, the film then intercuts scenes from Eddie Murphy's standup comedies, *Delirious* (Gowers, 1983) and *Raw* (Townsend, 1987) and their homophobic monologues, as well as Spike Lee's *School Daze*, which each spew homophobic verbal assaults that freely toss around the F-word with things such as "Faggots aren't allowed to look at my ass while I'm up here," as was recited in *Delirious*; the chant, "Gamma, Gamma, Fag, Fag" in *School Daze*; and *Raw's* particularly vile statement: "There's nothing like having a nation of fags coming after you…." Just as cartoons and caricatures of the nineteenth century were central to the argument in *Ethnic Notions*, here Riggs includes contemporary film footage to further reveal how even black artists within the mainstream media have perpetuated not only racism, but homophobia as well.[34]

The scene cuts back to Hemphill who, through voice-over, talks about ingesting silence until it becomes anger. His experience is shared by other black gay men whose still photographic images appear on screen and whose voice-overs corroborate feelings of being a social pariah due to sexual orientation. The collective poem confronts the perils of silence and the side effects of homophobia. A voice-over explains: "Your silence is suicide." The voices are still heard as the camera reveals a pensive Riggs cloaked in a black cloth, in a shot identical to the image of Riggs early in the film with the same earlier visions of pallbearers carrying a casket in the background. The personal and societal assaults build to a crescendo, and the viewer is reminded: "Anger unvented becomes pain unspoken becomes rage released become violence, cha, cha, cha…." With the visual reminder of the casket in the background, "cha, cha, cha," signifies the seen but

unspoken: death. However, instead of dwelling on this somber note, Riggs discovers that beneath the "layers of delusion, pain, alienation, silence" is a rhythm beat—a heartbeat—that propells him to a place of truth where self-loathing is unwelcomed.

VOGUEING

From here, *Tongues Untied* makes another tonal shift, from the journey of shame and loneliness to one of empowerment. It is here, as well, that the outdoor shots become more affirming. For example, the shots of men dancing in an elaborate, highly exaggerated way called "Vogueing" become important because they follow a series of other empowering conversations. One is a discussion that several gay men have in a restaurant about refusing to internalize society's limited and pejorative understandings of gayness, and the other of a dolly shot of two black gay men who walk and point out the differences between gay men who "vogue" in Washington, D.C. versus New York. These distinctions, coupled with the various forms of dance displayed during the "Vogue" scene, continue to show the rich diversity within the black gay community.

This form of affirmed expression, away from the silence, humiliation, and ostracism, provides a fruitful example of a pattern that forms the logic of this film. Riggs determines or diagnoses the problem, then provides an antidote to resolve it—functioning similarly to the way the film *Tongues Untied* operated within Riggs's life when he was diagnosed HIV-positive and used the film as a way to empower himself against the feelings of isolation and alienation.

The footage of the dancers appears spontaneous, as if Riggs is capturing a moment as it occurs; fixed gender identities are challenged as the spectator watches men who perform as women putting on make-up and walking the catwalk. By including this scene in the film, Riggs accomplishes several things. First, the footage of the dancers reveals the thin line between artifice and actuality, and continues to show the range of experiences within the gay community that Caryl

Flinn referred to when discussing the popular documentary, *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990). Flinn wrote that within "this menagerie" resides "the constructed—indeed performative—nature of the world around us" (429). And finally, as critic Marcos Becquer mentions:

> The practice of vogueing can … be drafted into a project of subversive mimesis, in as far as its play with image and reality calls into question the Platonic correlation between representation and represented which informs traditional rationalist constructions of "Being," "Truth," and "Knowledge." … the manner in which vogueing is deployed in *Tongues Untied* at once celebrates the liberatory aspects of such a project and calls attention to its limitations. (11)

Becquer's assessment suggests that the performative nature of this work shows the fluidities of identity as one performs the act of imitating someone else, in this case women or traits that are easily identified as feminine. But he also points out that this subversive act of reaching beyond restrictive societal roles can also reinscribe a set of stereotypes. Ascribing the term "subversive mimesis" to Riggs's inclusion of the vogue dancers recalls the scene in *Ethnic Notions* where Riggs includes the live performance by the mime troop. Like the Vogue dancers, this group is—as folklorist and choreographer Leni Sloan points out in *Ethnic Notions*—imitating a popular understanding of black culture in order to move up a particular social ladder. But just as these vogue dancers are imitating a role of women in many of their movements to question notions of "truth," "being," and "knowledge," these performative acts can also reinforce particular perceptions of either blacks or, in this case, gays.

Directorial Techniques

The effective blending of audio and visual cues to create irony remains one of Riggs's most powerful directorial techniques, present from the beginning of his career. For example, towards

the end of his first production, *Long Train Running*, Riggs presents a montage of various black men singing blues songs about manhood and lost loves. Riggs intersperses images of Oakland's "father of the Blues," Bob Geddins, in his ramshackle store-front mechanic shop after he was forced out of the business he loved by the major record labels. In another instance, during *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs uses the heart-felt singing of Ethel Waters performing "Darkies Never Dream" and juxtaposes it with the voice-over of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to emphasize the sobering history of blacks in America—from slavery and segregation/white supremacy to the civil rights movement. As another example of irony, *Ethnic Notions* is a documentary about stereotypical images of blacks, yet Riggs uses one of the most well-known representations of a mammy during the late twentieth century, Esther Rolle from the television sitcom *Good Times*, as the narrator. With *Color Adjustment* one cannot help but notice the use of still, flat images of whites as they watch the animated television set of blacks being brutalized during the civil rights movement, highlighting the ever-present chasm between the two groups.

These devices, which appear in his earlier works, also mark some of the most powerful moments in *Tongues Untied*. Irony is present in *Tongues Untied* when Riggs shows dancing (something Riggs personally enjoyed) as a redemptive and empowering action, yet one that dissolves into the scene of a caricatured image also used in *Ethnic Notions*, showing a black person dancing in a "shuffling" fashion. What is significant is that Riggs decides to draw parallels with this distressing notion during a moment in the film that is supposed to express a sense of pride; although there is a loose connection to *Ethnic Notions*, the more revealing fact is Riggs's ability to draw correlations that provide self-reflection and self-critique.

Moreover, Riggs uses wordplay in *Tongues Untied* more overtly than in any other film. To complement the important and careful use of language throughout the video, Riggs creates a scene that includes an all male, four-part harmony a cappella doo-wop group, ripe with the multiple

meanings that come along with a title like, "Hey Boy, Can You Come Out Tonight?" Riggs's use of a boy band is especially noteworthy. While the lyrics tell one story, the representative images of men who vary physically yet are dressed similarly, coupled with the polyphony of their voices, shows that different types of people—when speaking the same language—can still work together.

Music scholar Barbara Bradby, writing on the cultural significance of the doo-wop group, explains that the "dual voices of the vocal group represent the male subject of the 'I' as split in two, albeit harmoniously" (64). In this sense, Bradby's dual voices refer to the lead singer and its backup, and the men in the background serve at once as "the memory of an 'other' male self, *and* the 'response' of the woman we conventionally hear this love song as addressing…." In addition, using the example of the song, "In the Still of the Nite" to make her point, Bradby writes "… this relationship is that of a man to his male peers, as the chorus provides the steadying beat and rocks the lead voice along the musical performance." Bradby suggests that this desire for comforting a woman also serves "as echoing cries of mutual male desire" (64–65). This notion of duality further reinforces the double-consciousness Riggs addresses in *Tongues Untied*, and it confronts the notion that men feel they must choose between their sexual and racial identities.

The song in *Tongues Untied*, which literally asks "Hey Boy/Can you come out tonight?," uses the title's rhetorical double entendre to suggest a transformation from fear and shame to that of pride. Various street scenes of men parading through the streets of New York and D.C. shouting affirmations of being black and gay are inter-cut with shots of the doo-wop group and serve as form of call and response. The singers, unified in song, croon about the joys of coming out and sharing love, just as the men of all different complexions, ages, sizes, and styles gather in the streets extolling their racial and sexual pride. It is also apparent these images are in conversation with each other when the quartet sings at the end of the song, "Do what is right!/Oh, do what's right!/Baby, come out tonight." The scene cuts to men chanting, "we're black black black black, gay gay gay gay,

and hey hey ho ho, homophobia's got to go…" In an interview, Riggs explained that by including the singers he wanted: "… to take those things which in some ways have become very much enshrined in traditional popular culture, black American popular culture, and infuse them with something just a little bit different. In this case, a black gay aspect. Viewers can be simultaneously hooked and repulsed" (Kleinhans and Lesage).

It is because Riggs exposes so many conflicted notions throughout *Tongues Untied* that the video is so poignant. Riggs creates such scenarios as using music typically considered heterosexual in scenes with transvestites, showing victims of verbal and physical assaults, and showing people looking and longing for love—so that the viewer, whatever their sexual orientation, might feel compelled to question their own perceptions of society.

The next sequence again utilizes the call and response form to create a rhythmic beat when Hemphill and poet Wayson Jones recite the poem, "Now We Think." Jones intones, almost inaudibly, "Now we think as we fuck." And Hemphill explains: "Now we think as we fuck this nut might kill us. There might be a pin-sized hole in the condom. A lethal leak." The film cuts between extreme close-ups of Hemphill and Jones's facial expressions making gasps and sounds of oohs and ahs, as the poem continues to pick up pace with the words. The pair end in fast-paced unison with the "Now we think as we fuck" refrain that started the sequence. The camera first holds on Jones's face until he releases an "ah" sound then cuts to Hemphill who responds in kind, ending the scene with gasps, sounds, and facial expressions that simulate an orgasm. In a very simple two-person intercutting, the video candidly and effectively addresses the sobering, threatening fact of AIDS, and without ever saying the word.

The use of the f-word in this sequence became one of the major points of consternation for conservatives, as well as for public television station managers. The term seemed even more extreme and surprising coming from a filmmaker who, up to that point, created work that many

perceived as conventional in its style and approach. As Riggs saw it, however, the harsh and frank tone and the language use were indicative of the black gay life as he knew it, and the language was not offensive (Harding 23; Hoctel 35). The use of the term was also reflective of the force and fear of the AIDS threat *vis-a-vis* sexual desire.

The intensity that builds with the poem performed by Hemphill and Jones continues when a shot of Riggs reveals that he has "discovered a time bomb ticking in [his] blood." The ensuing montage of obituaries of black men recalls the photographs of the anonymous men shown earlier when Riggs warns about the perils of silence. Here, the newspaper clippings become the response to black men choosing to continue their silence. As the images show, first slowly then rapidly, there is silence; no music plays in the background. Riggs explains that he "listens for [his] own quiet implosion," while the final photograph is an extreme close-up of him.

THE PAST IS PROLOGUE

Instead of concluding *Tongues Untied* on a down beat, Riggs makes the connection that just as he is part of a community of men with HIV, he is also part of a rich history of activists who have fought for social justice and equal rights for all of America's citizens. Riggs explains: "But while I wait, older, stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustain my spirit, silence the clock." The Negro Spiritual "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" begins, and within thirty seconds, Riggs's effective editing shows the history of black American resistance from slavery to the civil rights movement. Riggs's "heroes from the history" (Kleinhans and Lesage) are seen through the images of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr. By following these images of freedom and justice with shots of black gay men marching in the streets and young people protesting during the civil rights movement, Riggs shows how his racial and sexual identity are connected.

The effectiveness of *Tongues Untied* is that the urgency and tension of the opening scene continue until the film's conclusion, culminating with the video's call to action: "Black Men Loving Black Men is the Revolutionary Act." An illustration with the word "snap" emblazoned across the screen follows this declaration. The gesture is a punctuation mark signifying that "authentic blackness" must reconcile notions of masculinity with the realities of homosexuality—and recognize the variance that describes "black is" and what it "ain't."

CLOSE READING: FINAL THOUGHTS

Tongues Untied is a unique and innovative film because of the varied methods Riggs incorporates in the film. Riggs's attentiveness to the evocative details of the sound and image tracks, particularly his colorful, frank, and insightful use of language, demonstrated his panache and his abilities as a filmmaker. In addition, the economy of style and production costs, deft editing, deeply personal and biographical approach that still managed to incorporate multiplicity in oneness, confrontation of notions of loneliness and belonging, and use of varied footage and methods in the film (dance, poetry, performance, biography, anthropology, history)—all demonstrate how Riggs pushed the boundaries of documentary filmmaking practice with this piece. His ability to stand firm, ensuring that the documentary maintained its integrity and was presented on PBS as he originally intended, cannot be overlooked either.

It is fair to argue, then, that *Tongues Untied* is the most emblematic of Riggs's work as a cultural agitator. Riggs embraced his shame through this highly personal video, which was created to reconcile his fear and anxiety about being HIV-positive. Originally created for a small community of friends and like-minded individuals, it inspired a range of reactions that grew rapidly into a national discussion of public media and the role of public art. The following section examines

various audience reactions and further illustrates Riggs's significance and impact as a cultural agitator.

Audience Reception

> While I know many people, including people within our industry, have claimed public broadcasting is an alternative, it is not a choice of terms that I use. We choose to broadcast programs that have potential for smaller audiences .... Public broadcasting came into being to present "high quality" cultural, educational and informational programming. A commitment was not made in those early years to provide an outlet for controversial programs. Someone must be the gatekeeper and we have the right and obligation to perform that role. –Paul Stankavich (Letter to Weinkauf 1)[35]

> I turned on the television and there was a negro [sic] talking about putting a penis in his rectum and I am extremely angry about the kind of stuff I have been seeing on Channel 9 [KQED] lately. –*Tongues Untied* viewer comment to KQED (San Francisco, 19 July 1991)

> The M. Riggs show [*Tongues Untied*] was great, congratulations. I'm not Black or gay, but it was talking about something more greater than that. It was talking about speaking out and honoring what we are. Its [sic] an important message. –*Tongues Untied* viewer comment to WGBH (Boston, July 1991)

On July 16, 1991, *Tongues Untied* was broadcast on national public television amidst a public relations whirlwind. The varied opinions in the quotations above reflect a sampling of some of the arguments that ensued about the film before and immediately following its national public television premiere; they also reveal how different audiences understood the role of PBS.

Prior to the Christian fundamentalist lobbyist groups' angry response to the film, reviews of *Tongues Untied* were overwhelmingly positive—with most journalists hailing it for its technical merits and social significance. There was no mention of the language or the film's "eroticism" (Simmons, "Other Notions" 21). The film had been screened around the world at festivals in Edinburgh, Copenhagen, Dublin, Montreal, and Melbourne; it had already received numerous top awards at the Berlin International Film Festival, the San Francisco Film Festival, the Los Angeles

American Film and Video Festival, and the New York Documentary Film Festival, as well as others. Before the national release of *Tongues Untied* on PBS, it had also aired on public television without a glitch in London on the BBC; in Barcelona, Spain; and locally in the major markets of New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Other screenings of the film were primarily, but not limited to, local gay and lesbian film festivals, and the reviews addressed the work in terms of its artistic merit.

However, after the national press announcement that PBS would air a documentary "about black gay men" and that the film had received federal funding, the negative reactions received more ink in the papers. The press, general public, and PBS station programmers all weighed in on the question of whether or not the program should be broadcast on television. The arguments by naysayers primarily either condemned the fifty-five minute video for its use of explicit language and overt discussion of sexuality, or cited it as offensive to their viewing community. Nearly all PBS affiliates aired a "warning" disclaimer, and of those stations that chose to show it, many restricted it with a late-night airing several hours after the 10:30pm primetime allocation; Seattle even regulated it to television's graveyard hour—3:00 a.m. (Beck, "Television" sec.). During the height of the controversy, the conservative *Washington Times* described *Tongues Untied* as "verbal smut" (Kowet E1). And Maynard Orme, former president of Portland's PBS station (KOAP), refused to present the video, calling it "pornography" and adding, "this film does not treat black homosexuals in a dignified way—they treat each other like slaves, like a meat market" (S. Bernstein 9).

Supporters of the program felt PBS's mission justified airing the program. An editorial printed in the public television trade publication *Electronic Media* immediately following the *Tongues Untied* ruckus at the annual Public Television Conference felt compelled to remind station managers that PBS is an "alternative voice" that "has a mandate to be more than simply educational; in hard, complicated times, when other networks want only stability and high ratings, PBS is the network

that has to be gutsy, to take risks, to offer viewers those aspects of reality that are unavailable anywhere else on TV" ("Don't Silence PBS' Voice" 14).

As the press coverage increased for *Tongues Untied*, and Riggs continued showing it in film festivals and on college campuses across the country, the video also became the exemplar for right-wing conservative groups arguing that the federal government should decrease allocations for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and PBS. Not surprisingly, then, the meaning of *Tongues Untied* shifted from a small, noncommercial personal video to a national art piece that argued against cultural repression.

When examining the reviews and cultural context surrounding *Tongues Untied*, one cannot overlook the irony of having cultural watchdogs and political lobbyist groups try to repress a film preoccupied with "breaking the silence" of shame, guilt, homosexuality, and marginalization. This section examines how various institutions—PBS, press, and local audiences—discussed and generated discourses that in turn affected PBS and public debate of the film, and art in general.

The existing literature on *Tongues Untied* has closely examined the controversial reception of the film. Useful here is B. J. Bullert's *Public Television: Politics and the Battle Over Documentary*, which devotes an entire chapter to examining press reactions to *Tongues Untied*. Patricia Aufderheide's 1992 unpublished conference paper, "Controversy at Issue: The Press and *Tongues Untied*," and her essay in *Journalism Quarterly*, "Controversy and the Newspaper Public: The Case of 'Tongues Untied'" are also helpful tools in discovering how the press covered this cultural debate. Both pieces discuss how the fallout from *Tongues Untied* made both the programmers and PBS executives examine what they understood the value and mission of the organization to be, and where their station(s) stood in a changing, heterogeneous society. As Bullert states: "Programmers and managers had to reexamine their understanding of and commitment to public television's original mandate to 'give voice to the voiceless'" (91).

Little work has been done on actual audience responses, however, particularly those of blacks and gays—the two groups that most concerned Riggs. Admittedly, obtaining information about viewer reaction is challenging, unless that viewer has written a letter expressly identifying herself as black, or writing as a representative of an African American organization; the same applies for viewers who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual. Examining a sampling of feedback from hundreds of callers from throughout the United States, however, provides another layer of insight and context into the significance of *Tongues Untied*; this information is available primarily in the Marlon Riggs papers.

This section examines the genesis of the culture wars, explores the trajectory of the press coverage of *Tongues Untied* and the controversies surrounding it, and examines how the fissure among PBS executives about the organization's purpose played out in the newspapers. An examination of feedback from the viewers who actively responded to the controversy further illuminates the impact of this film and Riggs as a cultural agitator.

CULTURE WARS: THE CONTEXT

The controversy surrounding *Tongues Untied* arose in part from the social climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1989, Republican Senator Jesse Helms attacked the NEA for funding an exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina that featured Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, which Helms felt was offensive to the Christian faith (Koch).[36] (*Piss Christ* is a red-hued, cloudy image of a crucified Christ submerged in urine; the piece was partially funded by a $15,000 NEA grant.)

It was also during this time that the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia received $30,000 from the NEA to create a retrospective exhibition of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's work. The exhibition, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment,* included seven photographs labeled

by several art critics as homoerotic or sadomasochistic. Many of these images were photographs of nude children, or seminude black men. Serrano's 1989 photograph, *Piss Christ*, was also included in *The Perfect Moment* exhibition.

One image that received considerable attention, and that Helms identified as particularly disgusting to him, was *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980). As writer Essex Hemphill describes it, the photograph "presents a black man without a head, wearing a business suit, his trousers unzipped, and his fat, long penis dangling down, a penis that is not erect" ("Imperfect" 2). The racial and sexual implications of this particular photograph reinforced for some critics, like Hemphill, the firmly held stereotypes about the black man as a sexual predator or "brute." *Man in a Polyester Suit*, along with several other photographs Mapplethorpe had taken and displayed, sparked long and heated debates about the role, nature, and value of art, and were at the center of the culture wars of the 1990s. Helms and other members of Congress scoffed at the exhibition, and often referenced these two artists' works to justify the imprudence of the NEA's allocations.

In this angry social climate, Riggs produced *Tongues Untied* in approximately nine months (from conceptualization to completion; he shot and edited it in four months) (Bullert 97). Its $30,000 production cost came primarily from in-kind support;[37] however, partial funding came from a $5,000 fellowship Riggs received from an NEA regranting organization, the Western States Rocky Mountain Film Center, along with a $3,000 personal works grant from the Film Arts Foundation. Perhaps more problematic than the nominal funding Riggs received from the NEA was the support the NEA had given to *P.O.V.* ($250,000 of the organization's $1.1 million budget for the 1991 season came from the NEA).

EARLY PRESS COVERAGE OF *TONGUES UNTIED*

In March 1990, *Tongues Untied* opened at the Castro in San Francisco and at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. A March 1990 review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "a compelling look at conditions faced by black gay men .... [that used] a variety of genres and film techniques, among them documentary footage, personal testament, poetry, music and rap .... [to] fashion a movie that is lucid and provocative ..." (Stark E8). Another reviewer writing in the March 1 *Artweek* called *Tongues Untied* "a stunning and innovative piece which breaks cultural barriers, challenges formal conventions, and questions the meaning of gender roles, video and life in one big poetic, celebratory mélange" (Stoe n. pag., a clipping in the Marlon Riggs collection). The *St. Petersburg Times* described the film as "a stunning aesthetic, historical and social document."[38] And an August 3, 1990 article in the *Boston Globe* considered *Tongues Untied* "a documentary with flair and edge" (Gilbert 29).

The international press also hailed Riggs's groundbreaking subject matter and style. In Canada, *The Globe and Mail* called *Tongues Untied* a "lyrical work about black gay men," saying that in addition to being technically proficient, it is a "rich blend of the subjective and political .... impressive, both as a documentary and as a stylistic experiment" (Lacey). And one month before the PBS debacle, a film review by Sheila Johnston in London's *Independent* newspaper emphasized the uniqueness of the subject matter and its production, calling *Tongues Untied*

> introspective, not analytical, containing many an observation of the "snatch what's yours from the universe" variety, and not much about AIDS, or the absence of positive role models for black men in a culture where James Baldwin is overshadowed by Superfly. [sic] But as a piece of performance art, it's both lively and exhilarating. (18)

Johnston questioned Riggs's experimental approach, calling for more analysis regarding the growing public health concern over AIDS and the lack of balanced representations of black men. However, Johnston felt that Riggs's handling of the sensitive subject was an artistic expression versus a talking heads approach. Instead of dismissing the film's merits or simply criticizing the film as a pornographic or lewd, Johnston recognized it as a commendable performance project.

None of these early reviews of *Tongues Untied* in mostly liberal papers and arts magazines commented negatively on the language or questioned the merits of the subject; instead, the film was considered a laudable and artistically credible film that showed black men, an important and unknown aspect of the homosexual lifestyle. However, when publicity launching *P.O.V.*'s fourth season was distributed to media outlets, *Tongues Untied* was included in the preview feed, and it was then that the tone of the press coverage changed dramatically. This shift likely occurred in part because the favorable reviews had already been written and papers were not reissuing them. On the other hand, critics with different, more negative, perspectives on the work were now watching and commenting on the film, and in turn creating overwhelmingly negative press coverage.

WHEN THE STORY BROKE: RIGGS, PBS, AND THE NEA

Concern over using public money to create art specifically addressing homosexuality was not a news angle in most of the early reviews. However, when the press learned that *Tongues Untied* was being shown on public television, with its broader reach than local film festivals, the dominant discourses surrounding the film transformed to emphasize its "controversial" nature.

Tongues Untied was scheduled to debut nationally on public broadcasting stations, unedited and uncut, on July 16, 1991 during the primetime 10:00 p.m. slot, nearly two years after the film's debut at the American Film Institute. The earliest indication that *Tongues Untied* would become ensnarled in a public debate over publicly funded art was from *Palm Beach Post*'s staff writer Paul

Lomartire's 8 June 1991 story entitled, "Explicit PBS Film on Black Gays Could Reignite NEA Controversy." With its attention-grabbing headline, the article stated that both the film and the PBS series benefited from NEA money and that "some PBS programmers describe the work as 'abrasive' and 'reprehensible.'" The story continued by pointing out "*Tongues Untied* contains sexual street language rarely heard on television, as well as full frontal nudity and drawings of male genitals" (E1).

Syndicated by Cox News Service and often reprinted verbatim, the article included quotes from program managers opposing the film. For instance, the Wichita, Kansas, station manager felt that "[*Tongues Untied*] flies in the face of community values so much that there was no way [KPTS] could put it on" (Lomartire E5). Others said that the repeated use of language to describe sexual intercourse was "insurmountable"; the subject matter was presented in an "offensive manner"; and segments of the film were "deliberately confrontational" (E5).

This story, printed six weeks before the scheduled viewing, grew and festered into a public debate about racism, sexism, and the value of public, noncommercial art. It also framed public meanings around *Tongues Untied* by sparking a barrage of local, international, and newswire coverage. This groundswell of reporting also testifies to the news media's tendency to gather around a given topic as opposed to diversifying its content—in other words, all outlets will focus on the same issues when a film is deemed controversial.

The connection of *P.O.V.* and *Tongues Untied* to public monies made right-wing critics seethe over the use of tax-dollars promoting "pornography." The Mississippi-based Baptist reverend Donald Wildmon, the head of the conservative American Family Association, admitted even before seeing the video that he "hated it" (Knott), and led the charge against *Tongues Untied*—calling it "filthy," and asking the public to watch so they could "see firsthand what kind of 'art' his or her dollars [we]re paying for" (Kowet E1).

The wide-reaching press coverage coming on the heels of the heat the NEA endured for the Mapplethorpe exhibition and the funding of controversial artists like Andres Serrano placed this film, and its filmmaker, in the midst of the perfect storm of culture wars. *Tongues Untied* was no longer considered an obscure festival film; instead, it now signified the demise of America's moral fabric.

Press coverage switched emphasis from the significance of the subject and its groundbreaking insights and cinematic merits, to the number of stations not showing the program and why, furthering the already skewed public understanding of PBS and creating the perception of the video as controversial and offensive. Even if the controversy surrounding *Tongues Untied* had not arisen as a major issue, it is difficult to believe that the mass media would have been able to appreciate *Tongues Untied* on its own merits; the complexity of the subject matter and its multifaceted aesthetic was too much for mainstream media to grasp. Regardless, Helms and the other right-wing lobbyists removed whatever slight possibility might have existed for the video to be seen any other way than disgusting and offensive.

THE CONTROVERSY: PRESS COVERAGE AND PUBLIC RESPONSE

From June 8, 1991 to August 8, 1991, articles on the controversy surrounding *Tongues Untied* appeared in more than three hundred national daily newspapers, including feature stories, syndicated columns, interviews, and editorials, as well as published letters to the editor (Bullert 103). By the time it aired in mid-July on public television, 174 of the 280 the stations that carried the *P.O.V.* series had refused to show the program—just over sixty percent of the PBS market (Engstrom C1). And in Riggs's home state of Texas, only four of the twelve PBS stations in Austin, Dallas, El Paso, and San Antonio decided to show the film (Silverman 11A). Among those who decided not to air the program, most cited the language (although they were never specific about

what particular words were offensive) as too off-putting for broadcast television. Those who supported the program often agreed with the sentiments of Carlos Freymann III, spokesperson for San Antonio's public television station, KLRN, who explained that the station does not "encourage censorship," and instead wants to "provide the widest range of expression," which he felt was "essential to maintaining [their] stance for public broadcasting" (12A). Such comments revealed a rupture within the ranks of PBS over the meaning and purpose of public broadcasting.

The most atypical response for rebuffing the film came from Noel Smith, program manager of the public station in Killeen, Texas, who originally planned to air the *Tongues Untied* but then refused after previewing it. Smith said he decided to shelve *Tongues Untied* because it did not use a "traditional documentary format." Because of this, Smith felt the language was "gratuitous," and not a reflection of "street language," but more a reflection of what "the producer chose to say" (Silverman 12A). By making this claim, Smith's argument challenged Riggs's oft-cited position that "[t]he language and the images [we]re simply a part of black gay life as [he knew] it" (Harding 23). Smith's comments were unique in their explicit and public dislike of the film's form, and clearly suggest a conventional approach to documentary film practice—at least when it came to broadcasting on PBS. Smith's perspective about what was appropriate for PBS stations was an indication of how Riggs's latest work had agitated the cultural landscape.

Tongues Untied Airs Nationally: African Americans React

Transcripts of call logs from viewers phoning into public television stations in Boston, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, the Twin Cities, and Denver show the range of reactions *Tongues Untied* generated.[39] The station that received the most negative comments, seventy-six of its 113 calls, from July 15–19, 1991, was the Twin Cities station KTCA. The station with the most positive feedback was Boston's WGBH, which received 429 calls, of which 379 were positive.

Negative comments fell into several broad categories. Topping the lists were religious arguments against homosexuality, and PBS' failure to fulfill its mission as an educational and family-based broadcasting entity. For some, *Tongues Untied* reflected the moral decay of the country, as proven by the film's profanity and nudity and its airing on public television. It was not uncommon to read comments similar to the following, from a Denver caller who said he and his wife were, "… appalled to hear such language, and to see such images on public t.v." ("KBDI-TV" 3).

Reactions by Black audiences ranged from ambivalence, to concerns about the film's negative impact on families (with small children), to homophobic rants. One chief concern arose from a heightened anxiety over the impact this film would have on the ways whites perceived African Americans. A Denver-based caller said: "In a world where blacks are trying so hard to overcome discrimination, [this program] set them back about five years …." ("KBDI-TV" 6). It is unclear what progress had been made since 1986 for the majority of African Americans, especially during Reagonomics, that this caller felt *Tongues Untied* threatened by appearing on public television. Nevertheless, this person was not alone. A caller in Boston explained that he did not think the program was "for public consumption" because "[i]t adds to the idea that Blacks are less than humans …." (WGBH Research Department 29). The assumption here was that one's humanity was determined solely by sexual orientation. Calls from Minnesota and San Francisco, respectively, saw the program as undermining the "good, hard efforts of the black community" (KCTA 3) and a "disgrace to the black race" (Kay 3). Interestingly, this argument plagued Riggs throughout his film career; he also heard it from some blacks when he created *Ethnic Notions.*

Other comments by blacks expressed dismay over exposing audiences to this taboo subject. As an example, a black woman in San Francisco called the station and said the program was "disgusting." She added that "black children could have been watching and they don't need this stuff" (Kay 6). At the heart of these criticisms seemed to be a jaw-dropping reaction to the brazen

sexuality of *Tongues Untied*—specifically homosexuality—which was entirely foreign for public television at the time.

Other reactions by African Americans specifically couched their aversion to *Tongues Untied* as concern for the "already so maligned" depictions of black men (Kay 5). The *Seattle Post-Intelligence* wrote a feature about the process the local PBS station went through when determining to air the film. The reporter gathered reactions from eight individuals who were part of a larger community advisory panel that the station's administration selected to preview the program. One community leader, Robert Flowers, voiced his "strong concern that it was sort of degrading to African-American men and just represented a small segment of the population" (Kay 5). Situating racism as more relevant than homophobia, and seeing these as mutually exclusive problems, Flowers did not feel the program was suitable for public television. He questioned the relevance of devoting time to the topic, commenting that it only appealed to people in the gay community. The subtext of Flowers's dismissive and homophobic comments suggested that he did not believe there were black gays, or more importantly, did not believe that their experiences should matter.

But the comments from another Seattle community advisory board panelist may provide better insight into Flowers's reaction. Jeffrey Hedgepeth, an administrator at the University of Washington and a self-identified black gay man thought "some of the viewers [watching the preview] … had a sense that if [*Tongues Untied*] is shown [on PBS], people will start thinking of black people and gay [men] as being cross-dressing, finger-popping whatevers" (Engstrom C1). Hedgepth's personal experience obviously influenced his perspective on the film because he followed up his comments by adding: "This film is about one man's life. It is not going to upset the balance of the world very much" (C1). Hedgepeth's attitude was in the minority not just among the Seattle-based panel, but elsewhere as well. Even the program series' copresenter, Mable Haddock of NBPC, felt some initial reluctance toward *P.O.V.* choosing *Tongues Untied* as its first major work

to present on PBS, particularly with—as she explained—so many other issues plaguing the black community (Bullert 101–102).

The complicated reactions *Tongues Untied* elicited among African Americans were reflected best in the comments by black, female, KCTS (Seattle) producer Lissa Mitchell, who was particularly troubled by the program. She told the *Seattle Post-Intelligence*:

> I felt extremely negative about "Tongues Untied" on a real visceral level. I was quite upset. I didn't have a sense, at the end of it, that [Riggs] liked either me as a female or himself as a gay black man ….
>
> Women are not often mentioned, and when they are, it's 'bitch' and 'ho.' And then there is what I considered a remarkably odd scene of a man cross-dressed. I had a real problem with that because if your perception of women is 'bitch' and 'ho,' then why do you want to dress up like them? It was very confusing.
>
> I think as a personal journal it works well. But as a personal revelation, I don't think it belongs necessarily on public television. It's more appropriate as a theatrical release. I think "Tongues Untied" is something people should pay to see.
>
> As a southerner, someone who lived a lot of what Martin Luther King, Jr. was doing in Selma, I had a real problem with a scene that dissolves from the march at Selma to a gay pride march. It bothered me quite a bit ….
>
> I think we, as African Americans, as a people, as a race, are pretty homophobic ….
>
> I think we, as African Americans, on some level still tend to be ignorant or uninformed about homosexuality. So it's good in the sense that this guy has done this, but don't ask me to like it.

> It bothered me that here was another dysfunctional black male on television. We see them beaten by cops, going to prison right and left, and here's another one going around naked and kissing another man. You had two huge taboos in society staring you in the face.
>
> On a personal level, I don't want to see it on TV. But I work in the industry and don't think any interest group should dictate what we should or shouldn't see on the air, unless its pornography.
>
> If it had been gay whites, I would probably not feel as defensive .... (Engstrom C6)

Mitchell's comments were problematic for a variety of reasons. Admittedly, she was confused about the film, and seemed to have missed its point. She often contradicts herself, while also admitting her homophobia and racism, particularly when she claims she would not have had a problem if the filmmaker were white. As an autobiography, the film's emphasis is on black gay men; Riggs did not produce it for some sensationalized "personal revelation," as she describes. While Mitchell recognizes the work as autobiographical, she discounts it by saying *Tongues Untied* does not belong on public television. Mitchell also fails to see a connection between the civil rights movement and gay rights; in fact, she is offended by Riggs placing them on a continuum. Although Mitchell recognizes homophobia as problematic, she admits her own prejudices and then justifies them by stating the film does not help improve the already maligned image of black men. Perhaps one can overlook the fact that she never identified Riggs by his name, calling him "this guy"; but as a media professional, and with the tremendous press coverage the film had already received, it seems likely that there was some derision associated with her inability to recall his name.

Moreover, *Tongues Untied* was about black gay men; women were not central to the topic, which is why they received little attention in the film. Mitchell's analysis lost its footing when she

misconstrued how Riggs identified and discussed women. Nowhere in the film were women identified as either "bitch or ho." The one scene where a man says "bitch" was in the first quarter of the film, and it examined the complicated and shamed response many black gay men have when they appear amongst flamboyantly gay men who argue in public. The monologue used in the film was a response to the stereotypical perceptions of black men—it was not about disparaging women. And quite contrary to Mitchell's belief that Riggs disliked women, Harriett Tubman and Nina Simone were his muses, so it is ironic she misunderstands him as much as she does. Although one cannot presume Mitchell was aware of how important Tubman was to Riggs, perhaps Mitchell's homophobia is what blocked her from being able to actually watch the film instead of creating a narrative that did not exist in order to justify her dislike of the program. And as for Simone, Riggs used one of her songs on the *Tongues Untied* soundtrack, in part because he felt her androgynous-sounding voice was a metaphor for his belief in the fluidity of identities (Kleinhans and Lesage).

Mitchell is correct that homophobia was rampant among blacks; however, she felt no contrition when conceding her prejudice toward his work. As a result, her visceral distaste for the film prevented her from recognizing that the fight for civil rights and gay rights are on a continuum. Furthermore, when Mitchell admitted that her response to *Tongues Untied* would be different if Riggs were white, she reinforced the alienation and frustrations that prompted him to produce the film. What Mitchell also demonstrated through her comments was a form of self-policing, or what scholars Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall identify as "traps," notions that constrict the meaning of blackness to one that does not address fully the complex and complicated realities of identity (xiii).

With very few exceptions, black film critics and the black press failed to cover the national debate surrounding Riggs and *Tongues Untied*. During the height of the ruckus, however, program

director Cheryl Fabio-Bradford of the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, a "nationally recognized non-profit dedicated to sorting out negative images of people of color" (1), wrote a letter of support[40] to *P.O.V*'s Marc Weiss. The missive provided some insight into some perspectives of African American film curators and media specialists. Describing the reactions of some jurors during the screening selection for the annual film and video competition, Fabio-Bradford explained:

> As part of the competition process each film/video program must be screened in its entirety. So without notice, the panel watched this blunt, sometimes explicit, video of an aspect of the Black community that is seldom, if ever, given media attention. Reaction was varied.
>
> Confronting the issues of Black Gay Men is often uncomfortable for our community leaders .... the Black community was still "in denial!" while AIDs [sic] ran rampantly among these mothers [sic] sons.
>
> "Tongues Untied" makes the experience of being a disposed [sic] community, originating from an oppressed ethnic group a fairly tangible experience. Conversation was heated bordering on homophobic at one extreme to confession at the other .... Discussion from the tape had opened up an awareness of the community of Black Gay men and our denial of them.
>
> No one on the jury was looking for erotic pleasures, some were in fact offended by the language and some of the visuals, however, the outcome of this very intense debate was that this film brings a voice to a community shunned. It addresses a broad range of concerns confronting the community of Black Gay Men. It speaks directly to their sensibilities but allows us into this seemingly private conversation.

> Our Jury decided on a "Special Jury" award for "Tongues Untied" and thus became one of the first awards it received.
>
> Although, [sic] Donald Wildman [sic] may be correct that "Tongues Untied" will be uncomfortable viewing for some—the uncompromising merit of this program is that it brings the gift of self respect [sic] to a population dying in our midst. (2)

Unlike the aforementioned comments of Barbara Christian, which discounted criticisms against Riggs as being indicative of one's repressed homosexual inclinations, Fabio-Bradford admitted that the film was not easy viewing for everyone. This balanced summation of the selection process for these African Americans media specialists illustrated how challenging *Tongues Untied* was within African American communities, and society at large. Fabio-Bradford's reactions also counterbalanced the statements made by Lissa Mitchell because they demonstrated an understanding of the film's thesis, and refused to blame the victim(s) or rationalize homophobia. Fabio-Bradford acknowledged the impact the film had on the jury, and admitted that the film's relevance resided in the fact that it specifically addressed a segment of African American communities that for centuries had been ignored and ridiculed.

The NBPC "Prized Pieces" film festival also awarded *Tongues Untied* its top documentary honors, but as then-Executive Director Mable Haddock admitted, the organization was "deeply divided" about doing so. They did it because the program was "well-produced, innovative, compelling, and because it looked at a part of the African-American community that hadn't been looked at before and had the potential to bring in new audiences" (qtd. in Bullert 101). These conversations occurred behind the scenes, and both organizations presented both Riggs and *Tongues Untied* honors without mentioning anything that would have undermined the distinction. These statements by both Fabio-Bradford and Haddock show, however, that while African American film

festivals recognized Riggs and his work, these marks of distinction were mitigated by the community's deep-seated misgivings toward homosexuality, thus, complicating the meanings of the honors.

The approval *Tongues Untied* received within the African American film festival circuit was not lost on Riggs who warned in an early, unpublished interview: "I'm going to *raise hell*, particularly among the black festivals, if they don't show [*Tongues Untied*]" (Riggs, "Tongues Untied"). African American festivals held much more cultural cache during that time than perhaps they do now. Riggs understood that this work not only rattled the status quo of documentary filmmaking practice, but also addressed an important—yet unspoken—subject within many African American communities. And as he said, he wanted to "rip apart the cloak of invisibility and silence that obscures black gay life in this country" ("Tongues Untied" interview). The conscious attempt to question injustice was indicative of Riggs fulfilling the role of cultural agitator; however, one cannot ignore the fact that this candid approach—which became more ardent over time—did not suit everyone's sensibilities. Ironically, as Riggs's health waned and his political agenda rose, he came to care less about how his work was perceived by others.

African American reporter Courtland Milloy spoke to this point when he admitted in a *Washington Post* article, "Film on Black Gays Is Bold, But Ignores the Big Picture," that "the sight of men having sex with men [gave him] the willies" (C3). Milloy said that, "by ignoring the heterosexual audience, the film misses a chance to contribute to changing the hostile climate that keeps black homosexuals in their closets. Achieving that goal should have been a priority" (C3). Milloy's unapologetically heterosexist attitude ignored the point of the film for Riggs, who initially made it specifically for a black gay audience, but it did suggest that when the program reached a mainstream audience through its national telecast, Riggs should not have been surprised nor offended by some in the African American community who found the subject matter off-putting.

Again, Milloy's point demonstrated just how new this was film was for public television. *Tongues Untied* was bold and brash, and nothing in *P.O.V.* programming—and perhaps no film or video was available anywhere—had prepared them for it.

REACTIONS WITHIN THE GAY COMMUNITY

Tongues Untied did not provoke mixed feelings solely from the African American community; the reactions among gays were equally diverse. While most self-identified homosexuals who called in to PBS stations about *Tongues Untied* responded positively to the show, saying the program was helping to "heal the nation's homophobia" ("KBDI-TV" 7), some gay viewers were more critical. Their primary concerns were questions about the film's authenticity, and preoccupation with the "burden of representation." One Rhode Islander who watched the program from the Boston PBS affiliate station WGBH simply called the program "dumb," saying it did not depict the lives of gays (WGBH), while another gay white male in Boston who called to express his disappointment said:

> The media all seem to show a stereotypical segment of the society. The program depicted the parades and drag and that reflects only one small segment of the gay community. I associated with the anger shown, but I'm concerned with how society views the community. Believe it or not, not all gay people are fascinated by jus [sic] the sex, and a lot of us don't feel the need to shout about it. (WBGH 28)

This caller, similar to some of the African American critics, was commenting on the issue of respectability for gay Americans. The comments expressed a concern with the burden of representation, an issue with which many African Americans were all too familiar, having watched Hollywood films from the 1920s through the 1970s, when the predominant black characters on screen were either maids, butlers, strumpets, villains, drug addicts, or libidinous superheroes. In this case, however, the Boston-based caller addressed the representation of gays in film. The

overarching concern was that there were so few images of gays portrayed on television. As the examples of *Designing Women* and *Men on Film* discussed earlier in this chapter indicate, the few gay characters that did make it to the screen were often reinforcing negative stereotypes. The caller was concerned that while aspects of the program such as anger toward societal discrimination were germane, the film's emphasis on sex and the use of highly charged language further skewed people's perceptions toward gays. This was similar to the concern many African Americans had as well.

The irony in the representation argument is that both African Americans and gay white men essentially made the case for the same point, except they highlighted their specific interest group. This battle for recognition lies at the crux of the difficulty of Riggs's personal and political agenda, which was to be recognized as both African American and gay.

The Cultural Agitator and the Community

Weiss, Riggs, and other high-ranking PBS officials anticipated an outcry from affiliate stations when they decided to include the program, uncut and unedited, as part of their *P.O.V* series. To offset the disturbance, they created an iterative approach, which included announcing that the film was part of the 1991 line up three months before the airdate. They sent letters to stations alerting them of two "preview feeds" in March and April, an opportunity to view the program and decide whether or not to show it (Bullert 102). The letter also included thirteen anticipatory questions addressing why *P.O.V.* placed *Tongues Untied* in their season lineup. Responses in the press kit included statements from station managers who had already shown the program, quotations from various high-profile reviews, and a letter from Mable Haddock, the executive director of the program's copresenter, the National Black Programming Consortium. A

"detailed memo" (102) that highlighted every instance of foul language, nudity, and potentially offensive gesture was also part of the packet sent to the PBS stations.

One month before the program aired on television, Weiss conducted an informal poll of the top fifty markets, which included New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Tampa, Denver, and Portland, Oregon, among others; at least a dozen refused to air the show (Bullert 102). The reasons: language and nudity. It seemed either the press coverage had helped to skew these station manager's perceptions of the film, or their personal prejudice against Black men or homosexuals, or both, was conveniently masked by this argument.

With many major markets denying public television viewers the opportunity to see *Tongues Untied*, Riggs launched a grassroots letter-writing campaign that challenged the newly emerging conservative cultural landscape of public television. Riggs's staff at his Signifyin' Works production company identified local stations that chose not to air *Tongues Untied*, and Riggs sent letters to their station managers, as well as to organizations in areas presumably sympathetic to his cause, such as WITF (Harrisburg, PA), WKPC (Louisville, KY), WEDU (Tampa, FL), and the Wellness Services organization in Flint, Michigan, among many others.[41]

In a June 24, 1991 letter to the station manager in Tampa, Florida, Riggs said that he was "appalled to learn that [the] station ha[d] decided not to broadcast this work." He explained that "public television had finally developed sufficient maturity, it seemed, to become a vital forum for cultural and communal expression that was not diluted, drained and sugar-coated for mainstream consumption." And because of this bravery, Riggs felt "public television was beginning to live up to its moral and legislative mandate to be a true alternative, not a genteel, upscale imitator, of commercial TV" (Letter to Elsie Garner[42]). After explaining what he understood to be the mission of PBS, he challenged the station's decision not to show the program, stating that "[t]he action of [WEDU], however, ha[d] provided yet another sad example of public television's knee-jerk

avoidance of controversial programming," and "ha[d], in effect, chosen to operate as a gatekeeper—a censor—silencing not just [his] voice but the voices and visions of diverse nationwide communities." He ended the paragraph by curtly notifying the station that their refusal to air *Tongues Untied* had made them "an accomplice in this form of repression."

The urgency in Riggs's prose reflected his anger, his passion for the subject, and his mission: to push the boundaries of filmic expression and mainstream America's parochial understanding of Black gay identity. Riggs's discursive stance toward the press marked a significant shift from the public image of Riggs since the initial broadcast of *Ethnic Notions*. With that film, Riggs was considered more of a conventional documentary filmmaker; while the subject matter may have been new to many, his heavy reliance on academics and more chronological approach did not make public television—or film critics—question him as a filmmaker or question public television's mission (at least not publicly). That said, and as the previous chapter on *Ethnic Notions* indicates, earlier versions of that script showed Riggs had a predilection to be an in-your-face cultural producer who tackled unpopular ideas and challenged traditional notions about identity politics in an unconventional way—or at least in a way that was unsettling for PBS.

In addition to letters to the television stations, Riggs also sent notices to social justice organizations, such as a group in Tampa called FREEE (freedom, rights, equality and empowerment for everyone), along with gay and lesbian organizations like Dignity, "an organization of lesbian and gay Catholics and their friends and the oldest lesbian and gay organization in central PA, founded in 1975" (Loveland, "Letter to 'Lesbian and Gay Leader'"[43]). Riggs's letter to Dignity was sent a week prior to the broadcast on *P.O.V.* as a preemptive tactic, because Riggs understood some station managers were still deciding how to "handle *Tongues Untied*." To this point, Riggs urged groups to "let [their] voices be heard *now*" by calling or writing the station and encouraging "them to make the right choice, to demonstrate leadership in becoming

a forum for *enlightened* public discussion on questions of racial/sexual identity" (Riggs, General letter).

In his letters to organizations and individual contacts, Riggs expressed his belief that the mission of PBS was to take risks with works that "some in the mainstream" (Riggs, General letter) might find offensive. He then asked people to help his efforts by copying and sending his letter "to friends, relatives, and organizations to spread the word and increase polite pressure on the stations" (Riggs, Generic letter). Organizations responded to Riggs's request and started to put pressure on the stations to show the film. For instance, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a postcard campaign and a demonstration in front of the station was being planned in case the show was banned from the airwaves (Loveland, "Letter to Riggs"[44]). Protests and public screenings organized by church groups and local citizens also occurred elsewhere, such as in North Carolina (Whiteside[45]).

Academicians also started using their influence in the community to help ensure the program made it on television. The late scholar of African American literature, Barbara Christian wrote letters endorsing the film. In her correspondence to the *P.O.V.* series executive producer Weiss, Christian insightfully tapped into the unspoken anxiety circulating around the film. Explaining that the public outcry from "those who found it offensive" might be more concerned about "their own fears about homosexuality than … about public 'morality,'" Christian also argued that "Mr. Riggs' piece on black male homosexuality is a major contribution in the visual arts towards our better understanding of this 'invisible' group in American society." It is unknown whether Christian's endorsement of the film was solicited or not, but it did directly address the subtext circulating around negative reactions toward *Tongues Untied.*

In a rare case, the grassroots outreach efforts helped sway the mind of a program manager at WPSX, Penn State's PBS affiliate, who decided to show the program after receiving a letter from a Penn State Associate Professor of Human Development, Anthony D'Augelli. Although an

advisory committee composed of community members "unanimously advised" the station to show *Tongues Untied*, the general manager said "D'Augelli's letter was a factor in the decision-making process" (Kokoska). While a copy of D'Augelli's letter to the station is not in the Marlon Riggs papers, correspondence from D'Augelli to another central Pennsylvania station, WITS, sheds light on the arguments he may have advanced for showing *Tongues Untied*.

In his letter to the station manager at WITS, D'Augelli explained that the station's "refusal to show [the program was] remarkably insensitive, given the large African American population in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] and surrounding areas." D'Augelli placed emphasis on the public mission of PBS and suggested to the station's general manager that programs should properly reflect the diverse population of the area. In addition to showing that there was an audience for the program, D'Augelli also appealed to the general manager's personal responsibility, stating that he (D'Augelli) "would assume [the general manager] would feel the obligation to inform people about the problems experienced by gay men in their communities," adding that "[i]t is very patronizing to suggest that they cannot appreciate the film." He continued by writing that not showing the program was "a serious insult to many, many viewers, as well as a misunderstanding of the point of the POV series." He ended by switching from the station manager's personal responsibility to suggesting that *Tongues Untied* reflected the people and principles upon which Pennsylvania was founded, and that a rejection of the program was "an embarrassment to the Commonwealth and to its capital" (Letter to Keck). Here D'Augelli, like Christian, began challenging the press coverage that emphasized sensationalist ideas like language and nudity, instead exposing the film's universal themes of oppression and discrimination—and thus prioritizing the democratic principles that were foundations for both PBS and the United States.

Riggs understood the power of creating a groundswell of support for his work; his grassroots, word-of-mouth strategy to promote his previous films had yielded positive results. In

this case, where the outcry occurred on such a large scale, Riggs developed a national letter-writing campaign to offset the many voices dissenting *Tongues Untied*. By using the assistance of LGBT organizations as well his connections in the academy, he forced national conversations about socially taboo subjects.

Tongues Untied: The After-Shock

Once *Tongues Untied* finally aired on select stations, it earned some of the highest market-share ratings for several PBS affiliates. When tallying the ratings of major markets, the average was 1.8/4 shares, which is "about average of 'P.O.V' documentaries" (WGBH 1). Stations like WCET in Cincinnati had an extremely high rating of 4.1. Atlanta's PBS station WGTV also had a high rating for its station, coming in at 2.5. Other cities with the highest market viewing included Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., and Sacramento, California (WGBH). High-rated stations in some markets helped compensate for the cities that did not show the program. It seemed that the press coverage, despite its negative spin, created tremendous visibility and interest for the program, as well as increased support for PBS, at least in certain areas.

And despite the controversy, when *Tongues Untied* aired in select markets, the majority of the viewer reactions were positive and considered the program "courageous," an "eye-opener," and "worth-while."[46] This suggests that after learning about the controversy over *Tongues Untied*, only the people who wanted to see the film watched it, or were inclined to call and show their support in anticipation of a barrage of negative responses. Another possibility is that such people simply liked the film. Several stations did comment in final report documents to PBS, however, that after the national screening the firestorm dissipated. (The fury surrounding the film had gotten so bad that in some markets, stations hired security reinforcement to protect their building.)[47]

Although most public television stations quickly recovered from the press coverage and the *Tongues Untied* hullabaloo, one entity nearly lost funding: Georgia's public television station, a nine-station network. GPTV had aired the program an hour later than its 10:00 p.m. primetime slot and a few days after the national broadcast, with an "added cautionary announcement before and after the program, and a 'viewer discretion' crawl that appeared every five minutes during the broadcast" (Bullert 115). A few months after the broadcast, however, the state legislature threatened to cut program funding in response to the station airing the show. Georgia's Council on Moral and Civic Concerns, a Baptist organization, launched a letter-writing campaign that encouraged parishioners to contact their representatives and condemn the use of public funds to "promote homosexuality"; over 300 letters were sent (Waltson C6). The complaints argued that $6 million dollars went to GPTV, and that taxpayer money should not promote programming they found offensive (Bullert 116).

On October 17, 1991, GPTV executive director Dr. Richard Ottinger had to appear before the Georgia state legislators about his decision to show *Tongues Untied*. The "tongue lashing" (Waltson C6) he received came from several statesmen. House Appropriations Chairman Terry Coleman (D-Eastman) said the program was "very offensive and inappropriate for public television," adding that Ottinger "screwed up" by deciding to show it. Scrutiny also came from House Speaker Tom Murphy (D-Breman) who urged that GPTV to stick to family programming (C6). The House Speaker Pro Tem Jack Connell (D-Augusta) reiterated the station's need to maintain family programming by threatening to cut GPTV's funding if it veered from their mission again.

While the staunchest attacks and opposition for *Tongues Untied* stemmed from southern conservatives, the criticisms reverberated throughout strongholds in the Midwest. The FCC received thirteen formal complaints against public-television stations in Indianapolis, Indiana

(WFYI); Grand Rapids, Michigan (WGVU-TV); and Kalamazoo, Michigan (WGVK), claiming that showing the program violated the Communications Act and "the indecency enforcement standard" ("PBS Show" 70). Nothing materialized from the complaints.

However, the protests showed that while PBS is a noncommercial entity, it sponsors controversial programming at great risk. A PBS program can be insightful and informative, but cannot challenge the way people understand and operate in the world; the forthright depictions of sexuality were too much for PBS. Even Riggs noted: "Black men loving Black men is *the* Revolutionary Act" (*Tongues Untied* [1989]). What the press, select PBS program managers, and right-wing conservatives were suggesting with their barrage of criticisms was, in the infamous words of African American poet and social activist Gil Scot Heron, that "the revolution will not be televised" (Scott-Heron).

Naturally, press coverage subsided after the public broadcast, but that reprieve did not last long. In the fall of 1991, the Christian Coalition edited a seven-minute highly caustic videotape that they distributed to every member of Congress encouraging them to restrict funding to the NEA. Presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan even extracted an unauthorized twenty-second clip of *Tongues Untied* for a commercial he aired during his run for president in 1992. He used clips of the film to argue that the George H. W. Bush administration was misusing taxpayer money for "pornographic and blasphemous art" (Loth 14). In a commercial that aired before the Georgia Republican primary, scenes from *Tongues Untied* showed white, leather-clad, pierced men prancing in the streets of the Castro in San Francisco as a voice-over warned: "This so-called art has glorified homosexuality, exploited children and perverted the image of Jesus Christ" (Loth 14).

This unauthorized act by Buchannan shifted the meaning of Riggs's work again. Firstly, it erased the film's thesis by focusing on a miniscule aspect of the documentary. Secondly, because the

clip used was documented footage and not a staged performance, it provided authority to Buchannan's argument.

Riggs was apparently undaunted by the never-ending controversy, and in March 1992, he responded to the vitriol with an Op-Ed in the *New York Times*. Riggs entitled the editorial, "Meet the New Willie Horton," which referred to George H. W. Bush's 1988 Presidential campaign ad against Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis that featured Horton, a convicted murderer who escaped during a weekend furlough granted by the Massachusetts prison system while Dukakis was state governor. While on the run, Horton murdered a man and twice raped the man's fiancée. The Bush campaigned used this ad to suggest that Dukakis was soft on crime. In his Op-Ed, Riggs claimed that Buchanan's "anti-quota race-baiting has now fused with a brazen display of anti-gay bigotry," and that "the persecution of racial and sexual difference is fast becoming the litmus test of true Republican leadership."

The same day the piece appeared in the paper, Buchanan received legal notice during a campaign stop in San Antonio, Texas, for copyright infringement. In a press release, Riggs explained that he demanded immediate cessation of broadcasting the ad, claiming: "[Buchanan's] television campaign ad attacking public financing of controversial art is in willful violation of Federal copyright law." Riggs charged that Buchanan's ad "stripped away the film's original voice-over, then colorized and rearranged images for sensational effect," which was "an outrageous distortion" and "a gross violation" of his rights and his work ("Filmmaker Charges Buchanan" 1).

When exploring this particular history of *Tongues Untied*, some scholars have argued that the debate over Riggs's film highlighted the "ill-defined" mission of PBS (Aufderheide, "Controversy at Issue" 3). However, there was more beyond this assault than simply misunderstanding the purpose of PBS. Riggs summarized it best when he wrote:

> I never expected my work and George Bush to be associated in the same sentence, in which he is being portrayed as my benefactor. On a certain level, this is comically absurd, but on a more serious note, this episode displays the depths to which political debate in this country has descended, where gross distortion, misappropriation and outright falsification seem utterly irrelevant in arch-conservatives' quest for power. ("Statement" 1)

For Riggs, Buchanan was symptomatic of a societal intolerance against sexual difference, and he saw it as his mission to challenge the rampant and outlandish homophobia. Buchanan pulled the advertisements from television and did not broadcast them during the Texas primary, as he originally planned. Meanwhile, Riggs, under the advisement of his legal team—they felt a lawsuit would be too costly and distracting—did not continue pressing charges against Buchanan (Kleiman, personal interview 2 Aug.).

Controversial Filmmaker, Social Advocate

By analyzing the form of *Tongues Untied,* I have shown how Riggs "embraced shame" and used his HIV status and feelings of alienation as a mode of resilience and liberation. Riggs included deeply personal experiences in *Tongues Untied* with the use of irony and wit, which denude the perils of silence that historically have impeded marginalized groups from fully accepting their identity.

Moreover, the film is queer not only because of the subject matter, but also because its form challenges the traditional documentary style. Riggs's self-admitted "promiscuous" filmmaking incorporates a multiplicity of voices and stories, and a nonlinear timeline, along with reenactments, poetry, and verité footage to challenge to the documentary film form. Riggs's consistent ability to

effectively and smartly challenge, critique, and push the cultural boundaries beyond what was socially acceptable made this work relevant among several discursive domains.

From 1989–1991, Riggs's highly personal, festival-circuit video became a national political statement on race and sexuality. The stir Riggs and *Tongues Untied* caused during the PBS debate also raised questions concerning public funds and art, bringing to the forefront questions concerning First Amendment rights and censorship. Positive reactions to the film came from those who appreciated how *Tongues Untied* addressed universal issues of silence and oppression, and how it portrayed heretofore underrepresented dimensions of humanity. Critics worried about the social significance of its being the first widely viewed film to address such socially taboo subjects. Interspersed throughout all these perspectives are larger questions, for black and white, heterosexual and gay audiences, about what black masculinity means; this film helped some and hindered others from developing a greater cultural understanding of this broad and diverse group.

Reviewing *Tongues Untied* and its varied meanings, this chapter further examined the significance of Riggs as cultural figure. Ultimately, *Tongues Untied* catapulted Riggs into national prominence and helped define him as a controversial filmmaker. It also provides the strongest example of how Riggs's work exceeds the frame of documentary film practice—and was the exemplar of Riggs's status as a cultural agitator.

Chapter 4

Riggs Exploring The Body as Text:

Affirmations, *Anthem*, *No Regret*,

Black Is…Black Ain't

> Charcoal wool WilliWear jacket. Mapplethorpe T-shirt; the image is of a nude black male, face hidden behind tucked-up knees. Even the clothes on Marlon Riggs's back are a complicated political statement, a triple whammy of affirmation—racial, sexual and medical. –David Mills (C1)
>
> Gaze upon me. Gaze upon this deviant, defiant, diseased Other. T-Cell count less than 150. The collapse of kidney function imminent from interior ravaging by multiplying microbes. Disease consumes me. Gaze upon yourself. Dis-ease grips you as well. We are mutually bound, sick, trapped. Except you, many of you, persist in the illusion of safe, sage detachment. –Marlon Riggs ("Unleash the Queen" 105)

In this chapter, I examine Riggs's three short, experimental works and *Black Is…Black Ain't* to further understand Riggs's film aesthetic and demonstrate how this final major work, although finished by others, was distinctly his own. The second epigraph above was written by Riggs, the self-appointed "conference queen," during the DIA Center for the Arts Black Popular Culture conference, and effectively summarizes Riggs's final documentary, *Black Is…Black Ain't* (1995).[48] Both statements at the start of this chapter illustrate how Riggs's body became a visual metaphor to "broaden and illuminate our understanding of black subjectivity" (hooks, "Feminism Inside" 129). Using the corporeal as a point of departure for this documentary, Riggs continues his life's work: he challenges the politics of identity by exploring "the discourses of authenticity that seek to exclude the black queer subject…" (Dunning 7). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states, "the body is

not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated" (139). In *Black Is…Black Ain't*, with his body as the text for which the documentary's narrative is established, Riggs reckons with the ways in which AIDS threatens his health and his abilities; as a result, he questions what it means to be an insider/outsider—or, as he aptly states in *Black Is…Black Ain't*, "who is in the community and who is not."

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Riggs's production of *Tongues Untied* (1989) was motivated by his learning of his HIV status; soon thereafter, he created a triptych of short films addressing the subject of African American gays and AIDS. These shorts were a departure from Riggs's earlier and ostensibly more conventional documentaries such as *Long Train Running* (1981), *Ethnic Notions* (1987), and *Color Adjustment* (1991), and they are crucial to examining Riggs's later, more autobiographical and essayistic documentary, *Black Is…Black Ain't* (1995). With the trilogy of *Affirmations* (1990), *Anthem* (1991), and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* (*No Regret*, 1992), Riggs continued agitating the social and cinematic terrain by placing a human face on HIV.

What becomes apparent when juxtaposing Riggs's experimental short films to *Black Is…Black Ain't* is that they serve as a prequel to ideals examined in the longer documentary. For instance, like *Black Is…Black Ain't* (discussed in detail below), *Affirmations* also challenges schisms within black identity by addressing homosexual affection. And Riggs's decision to address the taboo politics of gay intimacy during the height of the AIDS epidemic cannot be underestimated. Ideas about the physical changes and challenges of living with a chronic illness were being addressed in literature on men's health (e.g., Sabo and Gordon's *Men's Health and Illness: Gender, Power, and the Body*) and in white gay men's literature, but these discussions neglected the topic of black gay men's intimate relationships.

AFFIRMATIONS: A CLOSE READING

The opening shot of *Affirmations* is a black background and white lettered intertitle: "A sensitive man is terrible for your nerves."[49] The next scene consists of a close-up shot of a young black man standing outdoors speaking directly into the camera about his first homosexual experience. (This man also appears in *Tongues Untied* as "The Grande Dame of Snap.") His story is separated by intertitles highlighting different points made during the retelling of the encounter. In ninety seconds, the provocative and at times very humorous story dispels myths about "homo sex" as deviant (the young man admits on screen that his intimate meeting was "probably the best experience I've had so far"), simply by bringing an affable, articulate, and young African American face to the screen.

Upon completion of the young man's testimony, an intertitle introduces the next segment: "African American Freedom Day Parade," which shows the Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD) participating in the Harlem based parade. At this juncture, the film moves from an individual's intimate account of homosexuality to a communal demonstration in support of one's individuality. Different shots of men and women marching appear, along with images of men and women walking in the parade holding a banner that reads: Minority Task Force on AIDS. As the GMAD march in the street chanting: "We're black black black, and gay gay gay," the footage takes on an anthropological gaze. Shots reflect the age and diversity of the men marching in the parade, as well as the all-black crowd of spectators who show support through smiles and waves while others look on with a distant and disbelieving stare.

Chanting freedom songs inspired by the civil rights movement, the men in the parade are verbally assaulted by a spectator watching from the sidelines. As the men chant, "hey hey, ho ho, homophobia's got to go," a stranger repeatedly and adamantly yells from the crowd: "Our children are here! You are not part of African tradition! You *have* got to go. You are still slaves!" The men in

the parade continue chanting, which creates a call and response between the angry spectator and the GMAD participants. This short, twenty-second segment is resonant because it epitomizes the discrimination that Riggs's work fights against. Moreover, the members of GMAD in the street and the spectator on the sidewalk are symbolic of the chasm among African Americans: rabid homophobia fueled by a Black Nationalist agenda denies homosexuality as part of an "authentic" black experience, creating a rift among African Americans as real as the distance between the parade participants and the angry spectator gazing from the sidelines. Furthermore, this scene between the angry spectator and GMAD demonstrates the irony of an African American "freedom day" parade that rejects people promoting freedom of speech and sexuality.

The next segment of the film changes from the outdoor group scenes to become more personal, even autobiographical. Although Riggs is never seen on camera, he inserts himself with an intertitle that reads like pages ripped from his journal:

> I dream a world
>
> where homo sex
>
> desire affection no longer
>
> invite persecution.
>
> I dream an end
>
> to silences
>
> that kill.
>
> I dream
>
> a slave song
>
> a freedom anthem
>
> voices
>
> ancient

yet alive

lifting

my life

yours

to new visions

of liberation.

I dream of freedom

No longer needing

To ask

Or witness:

What happens

To dreams

Deferred

?

The rhetorical reference to dreams reflects Riggs's affection for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his "I Have a Dream" speech, which Riggs here revises. The passage at the end references African American poet Langston Hughes' famous 1951 poem, *Harlem: A Dream Deferred*, where Hughes writes: "What happens to a dream deferred?"

Riggs's connection to and continued fascination with King suggests that, like King when he gave the now famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Riggs recognized his days on earth were limited. Riggs, too, was committed to the principles of social justice and humanitarianism that King's philosophy espoused. It is in this sense that King was an inspiration, and as such, Riggs used his seropositivity to pen feelings of hope articulated by one of his heroes in order to inspire change among others.

In *Affirmations*, Riggs first raises the idea of a "communal self," an idea later articulated in *Black Is…Black Ain't*. In the short film, after the intertitles, images of men marching in the parade reappear. A voice-over of a man shares his need for affection and desire for togetherness in the community; then, the voices of different men chime in with their hopes for a better society, describing notions such as eradicating patriarchy, being more tolerant of difference, building coalitions among heterosexuals and homosexuals, and removing discrimination in society. Each of these ideas were introduced in *Tongues Untied*, and are addressed in further detail in *Black Is…Black Ain't*; in this sense, *Affirmations* and Riggs's two other short documentaries (discussed below) can be seen as a series of video essays highlighting Riggs's thinking during this important stage in both his professional and personal life, as well as "sketches" for the longer film.

UNDERSTANDING *ANTHEM*

Anthem's fast-paced editing and heavy reliance on music resemble an MTV video: in the short, eight-minute piece, a highly energetic, spritely, bare-chested and muscular Riggs dances and moves in a determined and high-paced rhythm, with agility and determination. His image belies the infirm, bed-ridden body seen later in *Black Is…Black Ain't.* Reading *Anthem* and *Black Is…Black Ain't* against one another makes the progression of disease even more apparent, and it as if Riggs is dancing in *Anthem* to defy the bodily devastation to come.

In structure, rhythm, and tone, *Affirmations* starts with a static interview of one man and ends with sharp, fast cuts and the voice-over of various different men; conversely, *Anthem* starts fast and ends more subdued. The first half of *Anthem* includes quick, sharp cuts and layered images of Riggs, footage of African men performing a ritualistic dance, and symbolic images such as the American flag and the crucifix. The different visuals contrast one another while techno-laced rhythms of House music provide the film's audio. During this first half, Riggs dances around a

studio that has a white sheet in the background. On the sheet are spray-painted names of men who have recently died (e.g., Joseph Beam, whose poetry was included in *Tongues Untied*) and phrases such as "Silence = Death." Intercut with these images are archival shots of bare-chested African men dancing in unison, as if performing a traditional African ritual. Their moves coincide with the rhythm of the music, as well as Riggs's steps, symbolizing the connection to African tradition (unlike the assertion made by the stranger from the African American Freedom Day parade in *Affirmations*). Other shots include the American flag and the red, black, and green colors of the pan-African flag. The iconographic colors of the pan-African flag, which was established in the 1920s by the Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey, represent the notion of universal blackness and unity among the race (Nelson, *Look for me in the Whirlwind,* 2000).

Images of the crucifix and men kissing are juxtaposed to these images of the African men and the red, black, and green. The crucifix becomes symbolic of Riggs's grappling with death, his own as well as those of countless men whom he felt sacrificed a life of happiness by being silent about their homosexuality; it also reflects his belief in salvation, that black men loving one another openly and freely will dismantle the hatred and marginalization homosexuals experience in society. Evoking the Christian symbol of the crucifix is also a way to include black gay men into a faith and religious conversation that often wants to ignore their presence. Among the symbolism and music is a voice-over that says:

> In America, in America. I am fairy, freaky, free. Freaky. Free. Paraded proudly—flaunt it like a man. Pervert the language. Revolution. I must remake my history. Rewrite. Revolution. Pervert the language. Re-arranging syllables is like revolution. Re-write history. Redecline a past, conjugate a future, reinvent etimology [sic], grow new roots….No immunity in this procession of dying. Holy ghost bearing plastic jar of Vaseline like a relic, like an icon, like a cross. To love

> you like a lesbian, like a man. To make love to you like worship. Taste you where it burns. My tongue discovering cracks and crevices. Inhale colors. May love worship what's the matter.[50]

The rhythm of the music and the phrasing of the poetry work together to resemble the urban sounds of rap music, but instead of perpetuating the homophobia often associated with the genre, the music serves as a form of resistance by emboldening a black gay aesthetic.

In Riggs's production notes for *Anthem*, he again evoked King's principles within his work when he wrote:

> A Wedding vow which begins:
>
> In America
>
> Place your ring
>
> On my cock
>
> Where it belongs…
>
> The same vow ends by invoking "The Dream," both signifying and radically redefining Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision and American's [sic] latent promise. Each image, each sound forms part of a dense, relentless kaleidoscope of Black gay expression—in verse, dance, and song—exclaiming a vision of America that celebrates Black <u>and</u> Gay liberation together. (Riggs, "Anthem" 1)

In this passage, Riggs is explicit in stating not only how King's words have influenced his work, but also how he is reappropriating the civil rights leader's words to serve his mission of pride in both his racial and sexual identities.

No Regret: A CLOSE READING

The black gay aesthetic is further seen in *No Regret* (1992), a 38-minute documentary that explores how five different African American men experience and address being HIV-positive; however, unlike his other projects addressing black homosexuality, Riggs is not present in this film. The documentary was part of a Fear of Disclosure Project, which was conceived in 1989 by the late New York-based artist and filmmaker Phil Zwickler, who died of AIDS in 1991. The project was designed to explore how different cultural groups were coping with living with AIDS, and *No Regret* was one film in the four-part series produced by Video Data Bank and Women Make Movies.

Structurally, *No Regret* is nearly forty minutes of talking head interviews that relay one story after the next about how each man learned they contracted the disease, how they told their families, and what it means to be HIV-positive. The pacing and rhythm is very different from the kinetic movement of *Anthem.* Throughout *No Regret*, the narrative moves from individuals expressing their fear and shame about their HIV status to feeling empowered as they "embrace shame." In the end, the men discuss the ways they reconcile their HIV-positive status through community activism and self-awareness—themes discussed at greater length in *Black Is...Black Ain't*.

Riggs breaks up this potentially repetitive visual scheme by not revealing the face of the speakers at once, and by interspersing different stories at various times. He begins the film by showing only different men's mouths or eyes; the stories are also broken up with interstitials such as poetry and Freedom Songs, or family photos of the men as teenagers, young men, adults—and in some instances—cross dressers. As some of the men discuss their tales of coming out, or their reactions when they learned of their seropositivity, their entire face appears on the screen.

By not simply reporting the information, and instead using—for the first time—this device of slow visual revelation, Riggs suggests a unity among the men. While each man has his own individual story, by initially making their faces indistinguishable, he shows that the various

experiences represent a communal rather than individualized experience; in this sense, the men are all part of the same face, body, and voice. In other words, Riggs foregrounds a collective aspect of living with HIV-AIDS before describing individual stories—this community aspect is a characteristic important to Riggs's filmmaking style, which is also reflected in *Affirmations* when the short film makes connections between the individual and the group.

Since *No Regret* deals specifically with living with AIDS, the revelations are often detailed, candid, and reflexive. As one man explains of his HIV status: "It was the most depressing thing I had heard in my entire life. I thought I would die within the year. All the stereotypes of the disease came up for me. I had a real time dealing with it at first." Another man retells the impact his illness had on his family. He explains:

> My mother has had a rough time because there is an element of shame. I'm from Haiti. And although AIDS is epidemic in Haiti, we're not supposed to talk about it in the kind of social class that [my family] come[s] from in Haiti. But I'm—like I said—open. It's not something that I am going to be made to feel ashamed of. It's a medical problem. It is a virus. People are not made to feel ashamed of cancer or when they have [a] heart attack, etc. etc. No! I am not going to be ashamed. This is a virus. Let's deal with it from that fact.

No Regret is a significant part of Riggs's *ouvere* because this project adresses—with candor and sensitivity—many of the untold and daily experiences critical for people who, because of AIDS, had been cast aside as social pariahs.

Themes from the Trilogy of Short Films

The overarching theme for Riggs in all three short, experimental documentaries was to convey a sense of resilience, complexity, and humanity familiar to anyone who has ever been ill or has seen a

family friend suffer from chronic illness. And he wanted to do this with panache—in production notes for *No Regret*, Riggs pointed out that it was important to avoid the "'Gnostic' tradition of transparent documentary journalism" (David [last name unk.]).[51] This idea that Riggs wanted to avoid an all-knowing sense of the traditional documentary film format seems to reinforce Bernstein's previously discussed notion documentaphobia, and instead follow the remarkable, unconventional approach Riggs used in *Tongues Untied.*

The titles of the short films, *Anthem, Affirmations,* and *No Regret* also reinforce another theme present throughout this dissertation—that of "embracing shame," as discussed in Chapter Three. To this point, Riggs stated in an interview with Roy Grundmann,

> I realized there are many productions coming out of HIV/AIDS activism that really privilege activism, about being in the streets and confronting officials, rather than dealing with issues of shame and self-loathing.... I thought it was necessary to address many of the core issues that many black gay men in this country dealing with HIV confront and try to avoid. There's not simply the externalized conflict with homophobic institutions and family and so forth, but accepting and confronting the virus oneself. (122)

While there was no specific discussion found in the Marlon Riggs papers about the rationale for choosing theses titles for his shorts, the names seem to represent the larger ideals that Riggs articulated with his films and other writings. *Affirmations* works as an idealized envisioning of the society Riggs wanted to experience, where intimate relationships are healthy and positive, and individuals, despite sexual orientation, are accepted. With this in mind, *Anthem* becomes the song for that idealized nation. *Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret)* is the title from a song popularized by the performance of French songstress Edith Piaf, and reinforces the philosophy Riggs wanted for all people living with HIV/AIDS to embody.

The concerns that the men disclose in *No Regret*, as well in Riggs's other AIDS-based shorts films, are also emphasized in *Black Is…Black Ain't*: classism, activism, xenophobia, AIDS symptoms and fear of intimacy, marginalization, depression—and hope. Riggs's structure for the film, however, reflects his philosophy of creating complex tales of human experiences. With *Tongues Untied* and *Black Is…Black Ain't* as bookends, these three short documentaries fill in some of the chronological gaps of Riggs's life as he lived with disease. As Riggs explained, his "work was intended for a broad, multicultural audience: African Americans to be sure, but also other peoples of color, gay men, bisexuals, lesbians, politically transgressive artists and others whose lives and opinions challenge conservative-fundamentalist attempts at social control" ("Anthem" 3).[52] This approach to documentary filmmaking is one that openly subverts the status quo. By placing at its center a constituency that has historically been ignored, and making films in a way that used a variety of stylistic approaches, Riggs demonstrated his commitment to the essay film by challenging the prescribed notions of conventional documentary film practice.

Black Is…Black Ain't: Context and Process

Toward the end of 1991, in the midst of the seemingly never-ending *Tongues Untied* controversy and while battling countless AIDS-related health challenges, Riggs started drafting an outline for *Black Is…Black Ain't*. Often working from his hospital bed or in between dialysis treatments, Riggs developed ideas and scenes for this personal documentary account of his journey to recognize his own black cultural identity; however, Riggs's premature death left his production team (Nicole Atkinson-Roach and Christiane Badgley) with the heavy-hearted task of completing the project.

Fortunately, Atkinson and Badgley had worked with Riggs on several other projects. Initially, Riggs hired Atkinson as a production assistant for *Color Adjustment*; she was also the Associate Producer and editor for *No Regret*. He later hired her to be an Associate Producer for *Black Is…Black Ain't*, and she eventually assumed the roles of coproducer and codirector. Badgley's film experience was a bit more extensive, and she had worked directly with Riggs on his projects about sexuality; specifically, she was assistant editor on *Tongues Untied*; codirector, editor, and art director for *Anthem*; and editor of *Affirmations*.

Other members of the production crew, such as cameraman Bobby Sheppard and still photographer Lyle Ashton Harris, also had previously worked with Riggs—part of Riggs's distinct aesthetic, then, was his ability to work quickly, usually on multiple projects simultaneously, and continuously hire the same people for his projects. As Sheppard mentioned in an interview, "Riggs was very creative and easy-going, easy to get along with, yet extremely precise and clear about his shot selections. At the same time, he also hired people he knew were competent and he trusted would make good suggestions."[53] Most of the work for *Black Is…Black Ain't* was complete when Riggs died, including all the filming; armed with detailed notes outlining his vision for this documentary, the crew was able to overcome the seemingly insurmountable odds of finishing this project during such a heart-rending time.

Atkinson explained that *Black Is…Black Ain't* was a constantly evolving project, just like the very notions of blackness themselves that the film explores, and as a result, Riggs planned numerous versions of the film. Therefore, this documentary's production process differed from Riggs's earlier works, where the finished films more closely followed the final script drafts. One reason *Black Is…Black Ain't* developed so differently was the enormous amount of time it took to complete the documentary due to the ever-evolving changes in Riggs's health. A "*Black Is…Black Ain't* Progress Report" written by Riggs indicates that by August 1992, most of the footage was

completed. Riggs wrote: "we have shot in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Northern California, canvassing a cross section of African Americans about their perceptions of self and communal identity" (1). He continued by explaining:

> Additionally on the East Coast … we have spoken with critics bell hooks, Cornell West, Molefi Asante and Michele Wallace. At this point, nearly all of the interviews and verite portion of the project has been completed. Except for the trip to Britain to interview black British cultural critics and scholars on their take on African American identity, we are now proceeding to the performance elements of the project…. (3)

During the last week of August 1992, Riggs traveled to England where he shot footage of London's Notting Hill Carnival (an annual Caribbean festival), and conducted a group interview session with scholar Paul Gilroy, filmmaker Isaac Julien, and artist Ingrid Pollard (Atkinson, Letter). While their specific interviews were not included in the final version of the documentary, many of the topics they discussed were: notions of home, Afrocentricity, and the effects of poverty on identity ("Hall, Pollard").[54] Notably, however, Riggs and his posthumous collaborators ultimately chose not to incorporate themes regarding blackness on a global scale, although early in the documentary Riggs states the purpose of his work as emphasizing the universal perspectives on blackness.

As Riggs's health declined, he suffered from AIDS-related dementia. Additional staff were hired, deadlines were blown, and the scale of the production expanded considerably; although Riggs had written extensive production notes, the discussion topics constantly changed and morphed in his mind (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview). Atkinson-Roach explained the daunting task the production crew faced in attempting to complete this film after Riggs's death. In

addition to grappling with their grief, she explained, finishing *Black Is…Black Ain't* relied upon people's conversations with Riggs because the documentary was conceived more in the form of spoken word than a simple, linear script.

Critical to the success of the project was Atkinson-Roach and Badgley's commitment, along with many other friends and colleagues from the production crew, to honor Riggs's filmic vision. Riggs began filming *Black Is…Black Ain't* in May 1992, and died in April 1994; as Riggs's health waned, Badgley spent considerable hours by Riggs's bedside filming him in the hospital, in addition to receiving editorial notes about how to craft the film in case Riggs was unable to complete the documentary himself (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview).[55]

Produced for PBS by Independent Television Service (ITVS), and distributed by California Newsreel, *Black Is…Black Ain't* was a project of Riggs's nonprofit organization, Signifyin' Works. At the start of the project, Riggs (cofounder and Executive Director of Signifiyin' Works) and Vice President Vivian Kleiman discussed the merits of Riggs producing *Black Is…Black Ain't* as an individual artist, or as part of an ITVS grant issued to a nonprofit organization. Riggs decided "he wanted to do a Signifyin' Works project," which turned out to be an extremely prescient decision (Kleiman, personal interview 2 Aug.). If Riggs had produced the project as an individual artist, for instance, upon his death all the production rights would have been forfeited to ITVS, thus leaving this important film either unfinished or assigned to another director. Instead, Riggs's production team completed the project.

When the documentary was finally finished, the original $250,000 budget had swelled to $562,000, and the production timeline had ballooned to an unfathomable thirty-three months (Kleiman, "Financial").[56] Despite these tremendous challenges, *Black Is…Black Ain't* won the Filmmakers Trophy at the 1995 Sundance Film Festival—an award granted by fellow filmmakers and the audience (Levy 51).

Scholar E. Patrick Johnson correctly posits that in many ways *Black Is…Black Ain't* is a sequel to *Tongues Untied* (*Appropriating Blackness* 18). In *Tongues Untied*, Riggs states he has a "time bomb ticking inside his blood"; in the opening scenes of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, we see that the bomb has detonated. From an inter-title at the documentary's onset, the viewer learns Riggs passed away before the project was completed, making his presence throughout the documentary a defiance of the linear, inexorable progression of this devastating illness. We learn, for instance, that the state in which Riggs is portrayed—prostrate in the hospital—is not a new experience for him. When an off-camera interviewer asks Riggs how he was coping with being in the hospital again, he responds that he is not happy to be back. He states: "It's hard. It's boring. It's like one week of it and I'm just bored. I'm wondering how I endured six months of it last year; from November to May or so…" (*Black Is…Black Ain't*, 1995).[57]

Throughout *Black Is…Black Ain't*, the viewer witnesses Riggs's body in various forms of decay. Still photographs reveal his gaunt chest with stints, and Riggs explains through voice-overs how his body weight has dwindled below 120 pounds while his T-cell count has reduced to single digits. Images of Riggs in the hospital as friends gather around him also show tubes protruding from his body as oxygen masks aid his failing lungs. Riggs explained in an early draft outline and proposal for *Black Is…Black Ain't*: "Since *Tongues Untied* my HIV infection has progressed: I now experience chronic inflammation of the eyes which, without medication, would threaten my vision; my T-cell count diminishes; I was recently diagnosed with HIV-related progressive kidney dysfunction."[58] For a man who was "agile and always stayed in good shape" (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview), indeed, who danced energetically in *Anthem*, witnessing one's own body fail could have been a point of shame and embarrassment. However, Riggs decided not to focus solely on his ailments, and instead engaged in "the act of self-interrogation" which he felt "remains a virtue: for through such

interrogation we come to assess—perhaps even embrace?—all of who we truly are and have been."[59]

Tongues Untied used the heartbeat as the primary metaphor, with several different significant meanings. Riggs explained that he wanted to "constantly recontextualize things so they'd mean something each time [they were heard]" (Kleinhans and Lesage). In some instances, the heartbeat represented anger and frustration, and in other instances, life; but because the heartbeat was related to a disease, it could very easily stand for death as well.

Riggs's decision to structure a film around an expansive metaphor also informed his conceptualization of the eighty-seven minute *Black Is…Black Ain't*. Here, the primary structuring concept was the southern dish gumbo, which we see Riggs prepare in his grandmother's kitchen at various points in the film, and which relies on a wide range of ingredients. The roux in gumbo reflects the mixture of ingredients essential to the successful development of the southern dish. As E. Patrick Johnson says, "The gumbo trope is apropos because, like 'blackness,' gumbo is a site of possibilities….when black Americans attempt to define what it means to be black, they delimit the possibilities of what blackness can be" (*Appropriating Blackness* 19). Gumbo, then, is an image that allowed Riggs to avoid the trap of labeling. The gumbo allegory also allowed Riggs to include various voices and experiences into his discussion on race in order to demonstrate how personal concerns are universal.

In *Black Is…Black Ain't* Riggs emphasizes "the communal self," which is integral to his work as a cultural agitator because it demonstrates how his work is part of a larger societal struggle, and not something unique just to him. By including into the discussion the voices of feminists as well as gay and lesbians, Riggs effectively demonstrated the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This connectivity is also envisaged in his original desire to have *Black Is…Black Ain't* resemble, "in style, tone and visual/vocal expression … [his] grandmother's quilt,"[60] although the

choice to use food instead was a more visually alluring and sensory example. Production notes illuminate his intentions:

> Themes in this work will be threaded into an interlacing patchwork of poems, visual essays, first-person narratives, verite vignettes and dramatic skits. This eclectic, nonlinear form is intended to underscore the nonlinear nature of the subject; the evolution not of one but multiple black iden*tities*. This structure will contain, therefore, a number of seemingly disjunctive interruptions: stories and sequences will sometimes abruptly shift; new stories, new sequences will unfold, which in turn weave back into stories and sequences witnessed before. What emerges in the end, I envision, is a story of stories, a meta-story, if you will, on African American concepts of the communal self. (Riggs, "Black Is…Black Ain't: An Experimental Documentary," 2)

Black Is…Black Ain't fulfills Riggs's initial vision. Consistent with the essay style format, the documentary explores myriad topics, sometimes seeming to stop abruptly to start another conversation on a different theme, and at other times connecting to the prior discussion. This documentary thus fulfills what Paul Arthur explains as "a series of stylistically diverse fragments—"discursivity" in the original meaning—whose individual codes seem familiar, yet when bunched together subvert documentary's privileged, transparent aura of control" (59). But what holds *Black Is…Black Ain't* together is Riggs himself—the filmmaker, and his perceptions.

The documentary addresses broad topics such as the color caste system, black music, language, black masculinity, feminism, cultural nationalism, religion, classism, and homophobia. A script outline dated September 1993, for instance, has the film divided into ten different segments, along with an Introduction (Arthur 59). The ten parts included: Creole, Feminism, Silence, The Body, Speech, Acting White, Church, Africa, Music, and a Closing, each with numerous subtopics,

including a discussion of Black British culture. While many of the sections, including interviews with major scholars, remain in the final film version of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, several were either removed or consolidated for reasons that remain unclear. Speculation suggests pragmatic considerations, such as the danger of expanding the eighty-seven minute running time even further, making it nearly impossible to schedule it on public television. Also, Riggs's waning health immensely complicated production. In the end, however, the film—like gumbo—comes together, as a smart critique and analysis of racial identity.

At the time *Black Is…Black Ain't* was made, Riggs was not alone in exploring his personal perspectives on race and ethnicity. Many Black British cultural scholars posited blackness as a confluence of factors, not simply part of one restrictive nationalist paradigm. Through their writings on the hybridity of cultural identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Hazel Carby, Kobena Mercer, and Riggs's contemporary Isaac Julien, were challenging the Black Nationalist logic that excluded conversations about homosexuality and the contributions of women. As Sterling Stuckey summarizes this body of thought, blackness can be defined as:

> [A] consciousness of a shared experience of oppression at the hands of white people, an awareness and approval of the persistence of group traits and preferences in spite of a violently anti-African larger society, a recognition of bonds and obligations between Africans everywhere, an irreducible conviction that Africans in America must take responsibility for liberating themselves—these were the pivotal components of the world view of the black men who finally framed the ideology. (6)

Riggs can be seen addressing all these ideas in BIBA.

Indeed, Julien and Riggs both attended the aforementioned Black Popular Culture Conference held at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1991; the themes and ideas raised there were

part of the development of *Black Is…Black Ain't*. At the conference, Julien presented a talk "Black Is, Black Ain't: Notes on De-Essentializing Black Identities" and cited his films *Who Killed Colin Roach* (1983), *Territories* (1985), *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), and *Looking for Langston* (1989) as examples of how one discusses notions of race, memory, and the closeted desires within black culture (Julien, "Black Is"). At the same conference, Riggs gave a talk, "Unleash the Queen," which addressed his ambivalence toward the conference, pointing out how groups (in this case black cultural scholars) often fall prey to the politics of exclusion. In other words, the same select few scholars had become the spokespersons for a set of sanctioned causes, while a host of other thinkers and activists were not included in these discussions. This theme of insider/outsider, aligned with the ideas about race, class, and sexual orientation brought forth by Julien at the same conference, eventually became critical notions explored in *Black Is…Black Ain't*. In March 1992 Riggs began jotting down notes for an outline of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, and in May 1992 production started on his "magnum opus" (Atkinson-Roach, personal interview). In other words, the conference was in some sense a springboard for Riggs to make what would become his final film.

Black Is…Black Ain't: The Genesis of the Project

Examining definitions of black identity was not something specific to Riggs, or to British scholars for that matter; for decades, literary figures and scholars had addressed the contested and complex topic. Ralph Ellison's 1952 classic novel *Invisible Man*, for instance, complicated the cultural argument that the races were distinctively different; in addition, Albert Murray's 1970 text *Omni-Americans* examined the complicated relationship between blacks and whites.

In fact, a section from the prologue of *Invisible Man* inspired the title of both Julien's 1991 essay and Riggs's final film. In *Invisible Man,* a minister reads from his text, the "Blackness of

Blackness." When the congregation responds: "…blackness is most black, brother, most black…" the minister then extols:

> "In the beginning…"
>
> "At the very start," they cried,"
>
> "…there was blackness…"
>
> "Preach it…"
>
> "…and the sun…"
>
> "The sun, Lawd…"
>
> "…was bloody red…"
>
> "Red…"
>
> "Now black is…" the preacher shouted."
>
> "Bloody…"
>
> I said black is…"
>
> "Preach it, brother…"
>
> "…an' black ain't…"
>
> "Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"
>
> "Amen, brother…"
>
> "Black will git you…"
>
> "Yes, it will…"
>
> "…an' black won't…"
>
> "Naw, it wont!"
>
> "It do…"
>
> "It do, Lawd…"
>
> "…an' it don't"

"Hallelujah…"

"…It'll put you, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the Whale's Belly."

"Preach it, dear brother…"

"…an' make you tempt…"

"Good God a-mighty!"

"Old Aunt Nelly!"

"Black will make you…"

"Black…"

"…or black will un-make you." (Ellison 9–10)

Both Julien and Riggs used this passage as inspiration to situate their work. Julien referenced the work in the introduction of his paper when it was his turn to present a talk at the Black Popular Culture conference. Whereas, Riggs was "outré, a bit dramatic and flamboyant" (Wallace 379), and performance became an essential and integral part of his documentaries; therefore, during the prologue of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, Riggs reinterprets the preacher's sermon and embellishes it as if creating an addendum to Ellison's original text.

Reading from an early draft of the project proposal and outline provides useful insight into Riggs's logic for including Ellison's minister's sermon in *Black Is…Black Ain't*. Riggs wrote:

> Using a classic oratory style of the African American church, the documentary will offer a soul-stirring sermon on the "exegesis of blackness," inspired by a passage in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. During this short but lively call-and-response sequence, the face and voice of the preacher will change: from man to woman, then woman to man, from dark-skinned to light-skinned to brown-skinned face and back. ("*Black Is…Black Ain't*: An experimental documentary" 2)

The final version of the script essentially follows this direction. From the onset, Riggs serves as the voice of the preacher; the congregation and other "preachers" include a woman and man. By interspersing the voice of the preachers as both men and women, Riggs creates a layered text that demonstrates how both genders are complicit in creating myths around blackness. The sequence can also be seen to show how gender is a fluid identity that is situated on a continuum. With a healthier-looking, round-faced Riggs speaking at the beginning and end of the segment, he is aided by two others that preach, sing, and explain:

Black is…and Black ain't…

Black is…and black ain't…

Black is blue…

Black is red…

Black is tan…

Black is light…

Black will get 'cha…

And black will leave you alone…

Black can *get you over*…

Black can set you down…

Black can let you move forward…

And black can make you stumble around…

Black is *so* high…

And black is *so* low…

Black can say yes!

And black can so no…

Black can be your best friend…

Be cozy as the night…

Black can do you in…

Make you cuss, and fuss and fight…

Black is black…

And black is blue…

Black is bright…

…Black is you! (*Black Is…Black Ain't*, 1995)

The original script called for this section to provide a longer, detailed description of blackness, replete with reactions from the congregation, including additional embellishments that placed emphasis on the different understandings of blackness. For example, as originally written, the congregation responds after "Black is blue!" with: "So blue! So Blue!" They also point out that black is "Bloody red!" and "Light as white!"[61] In this version of the script, the background chorus serves to complicate the text further with its red, white, and blue reference, which conjures the iconography of the American flag, therefore demonstrating the undeniable relationship between blackness and American identity.

In *Tongues Untied* Riggs alludes to having disease, but the exact nature of his sickness is unclear; by the time he started production of *Black Is…Black Ain't,* it was apparent that he had AIDS. Starting the documentary with a naked, soft focus Riggs walking through a wooded area, the scene cuts to a voice-over of Riggs reciting his T-Cell count. The numbers "225" and "110" appear on the screen as Riggs explains, "My weight and T-Cell count are the same. What is happening to my body?" Still photographs of a doctor taking Riggs's vital signs as he lays prostrate in the hospital bed are mixed with live footage of Riggs in the hospital. In this sequence, space and time are blurred. The images of the doctor attending to Riggs, various photographs of him lying in bed attached to a respirator with shunts coming from his arm, and black and white photographs of his

bare chest covered with IV tubes allow the camera's gaze to serve as a voyeur, an intimate and painful portrayal into the life of a dying man.

SITUATING *BLACK IS…BLACK AIN'T*

Just as in *Tongues Untied*, with its "expansive amalgam of documentary and expressive modes of individual and collective voices" (Harper 71), *Black Is…Black Ain't* is an essay documentary incorporating a variety of styles including performance, talking head interviews, archival footage, spoken word poetry, and photography. Utilizing Riggs's self-description of his filmmaking in *Tongues Untied*, this documentary is "promiscuous" in its style. Yet, for all the heterogeneous materials in *Black Is…Black Ain't*, Riggs himself is the central, essential part of the documentary—this effect reinforces Riggs's "subjective position of documentary video," as Phillip Brian Harper identified Riggs's aesthetic. In other words, by identifying as an African American homosexual with AIDS and filming this process, he challenged a particular articulation of black identity, namely the rhetoric espoused by a Black Nationalist ideology that promotes heteronormative understandings of blackness. Riggs's onscreen presence serves as a challenge to the underlying homophobic narrative that was and remains part of the American cultural and political landscape; his role in the documentary confronts the experience of being Othered. As a result, he becomes part of the film's aesthetic and epistemology.

The approach to documentary film production that Riggs presents in *Black Is…Black Ain't* fits into two stylistic categories: the autobiographical documentary as posited by Julia Lesage in "Contested Territory in *Finding Christa*," and most aptly, the essay documentary genre best described in Paul Arthur's article, "Essay Questions from Alain Resnais to Michael Moore." Although Lesage's work deals specifically with independent women filmmakers, her definition of

the autobiographical subgenre of documentary also applies to *Black Is…Black Ain't*. As Lesage explains:

> Autobiography asserts other kinds of subjective presences in the world than those ordinarily acknowledged. In particular, diaries, journals, and autobiographies fill a special need for people living in adverse circumstances. Those removed from social power use these vehicles of first person expression to articulate the ways that they and others are kept from living a full life….the autobiographic mode also affirms the ways that wounded subjectivities can be survivors' subjectivities, resistance subjectivities….In these works, reflections of self are usually placed in the context of interpersonal relations. In addition, … artists often explore the self's personae, fragmentation, ambivalence, layering, contradiction, and complexity.

While Harper's analysis of Riggs's work explores the importance of the subject matter vis-à-vis the use of video as the medium of expression, Lesage's description of the autobiographical documentary explains the relevance of Riggs's content. During the making of *Black Is…Black Ain't,* Riggs was dying in a California hospital. His examination of multifarious meanings of blackness epitomized the fracturing and layering put forth in Lesage's definition, and further represents the ways that Riggs's work "embraces shame" (Stockton).

Black Is…Black Ain't also lacks a chronological structure; its blending of timelines includes, for example, a sequence that examines the cultural politics of the 1960s with footage from the 1960s, and also discusses sixteenth-century definitions of blacks, with ethnographic footage from an unknown period of children playing on farms. In the film, there is the integration of footage of Riggs during various stages of health and sickness, showing a manipulation of time and demonstrating that this film can be classified as an autobiography, as stated by Lesage. But more

importantly, this filmic approach reinforces the notion discussed in Chapter One regarding Riggs creating projects with historical sweep.

Despite the autobiographical qualities of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, the most appropriate definition of Riggs's filmic approach may be what film scholar Paul Arthur considers the essay genre. Arthur describes the nonfiction, essay film thusly:

> [T]he essay [film]offers a range of politically charged visions uniquely able to blend abstract ideas with concrete realities, the general case with specific notations of human experience. The filmmaker's onscreen presence…, [is] an acknowledgment that what goes on in front of the camera bears the imprint of a distinct shaping sensibility behind it….Essays typically pile up a series of stylistically diverse fragments—"discursivity" in the original meaning—whose individual codes seem familiar, yet when bunched together subvert documentary's privileged, transparent aura of control. That is, essays confound the perception of untroubled authority or comprehensive knowledge that a singular mode of address projects onto a topic. Which does not imply that the brunt of argument in essay films is inevitably confused—although it may be—but that the rhetorical focus is at once directed outward to concrete facts and inward to a realm of mercurial reflection. Argument must proceed from one person's set of assumptions, a particular framework of consciousness…. (58–60)

Arthur's description of the essay film genre aptly describes Riggs's approach to *Black Is…Black Ain't*, as well as the three short videos that preceded his final documentary. According to Arthur, essay films are "process-oriented, rhetorical journeys in which neither an exact route nor final destination are completely spelled out" (60). Essential to this process, then, is the ability to collapse time, and purposely use a variety of idioms such as vérité, poetry, and archival footage

within the same film. Particular to this approach is the ability to exploit discrepancies in terms of what is seen onscreen versus what is being spoken, and make the "personal as political" (60), as Riggs does in *Black Is…Black Ain't*.

Black Is…Black Ain't is also more of an essay than autobiography in its blurring of the lines between public discourse and private revelation. According to Arthur, essay films "may segue between separate styles, tones, or modes of address. In doing so, they fracture epistemological unities of time and place associated with documentary practices …" (59). To this end, *Black Is…Black Ain't* moves, for example, from general conversations about black identity and mythologized notions of African culture as the "authentic" black experience to personal revelations about Riggs's failing health. As an example, after various scholars discuss Black Nationalist notions of manhood that did become part of Black Nationalist discourse surrounding group identity and what was considered "acceptable" black behavior (not expressing feelings of vulnerability and instead focusing on a reclaiming the "emasculated" male identity), Riggs immediately appears on screen in a close up, explaining that:

> Six months ago I weighed 140-145 [lbs]. I weighed 110 [lbs.] when I went into the hospital. My T-cell count … was around 125-135, which is low, but … made me feel I had a little meat to my T-Cells. I've dropped to 10. Then I just stopped counting because it became irrelevant and more important was, how do I feel.

This confession by Riggs reads like a journal entry and marks time by explaining how several months earlier Riggs was healthier; it also provides insights into how he coped with his inevitable death by refusing to obsess over T-Cell counts and choosing instead to live in the moment.

From Riggs's personal revelation, the documentary shifts to a discussion of sexism. Footage of a rant by the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan, in which he is justifying Mike Tyson's behavior when he was being accused of rape, contrasts with scholar bell hooks explaining how she witnessed

her father instill terror in the household and once even threaten to kill her mother based upon the assumption she was having an extramarital affair. Throughout this sequence, artist Queen Latifah's song, "U.N.I.T.Y." is heard in the background, reinforcing the paradox between a collective group unity among men and women as described in the song, and the visual images. What Riggs shows us is male privilege, and includes clips of half-nude women in music videos and footage of Mike Tyson judging a dance contest while he takes liberties touching contestants. The segment concludes with a dance performance by Bill T. Jones as a voice-over by Riggs explains:

> Its not so much, for me, manhood that we're trying to reach, that we're emulating, it's rather human and all the complexities of being human, which includes being feminine; that when men can be feminine as well as manly, whatever those terms mean to you, but when you can be both comfortably, then you've achieved what it is I think it is to be a man, which is to be human.

This sequence of images and varied use of film devices—from performance to talking head experts to the inclusion of fast-paced hip hop music videos—reinforce the notion that *Black Is…Black Ain't* is an essay documentary.

In another scene near the end of the documentary, Riggs is particularly pensive about his health and offers a description of how he views his legacy. An off-camera interviewer asks him about his dreams and their significance, particularly the dreams where Harriet Tubman is present. Riggs revealed that he saw these dreams as:

> Overcoming the present crisis. I mean, you know, there's going to be more, I know that. I'm going to be laid up in the hospital again. But as long as I have Harriett [Tubman] and *Black Is…Black Ain't* to go traveling with, I am going to cross that river. If I have work, then I am not going to die, because work is the living spirit in me; that which wants to connect with other people and pass on

> something to them that they can use in their own lives and grow from. I know there'll come a time and I won't be able to get up out of this bed, and all we'll be able to do is take me home and let me lie in my bed and look out the window. And it might come a point where I can't even open my eyes, and I am just lying there. I want my mother, grandmother, and [life partner] Jack [Vincent], to be there to hold my hand and rub my feet. And let me die….
>
> The statement I would like to leave as my own personal legacy is one of faith. To have faith in each other that we will come through adversities, whatever they might be. And here our adversity is really our ability to maintain a sense of communal self. My faith is that we will achieve that. Against all odds, we will come through.

In an essay about writing, time and AIDS, scholar Clara Orban quotes cultural critic Christina Baldwin's explanation that the "journal's capacity to track down what is happening with our lives increases our sensitivity to our needs" (138).[62] Both monologues by Riggs accomplish what Baldwin describes as the value of a journal, and allow the viewer entrée into Riggs's thoughts. His public revelations about his very private thoughts constitute a form of therapy for Riggs, as well as for the viewer who witnesses the advancing spread of AIDS across his body; at the same time, this exposure shows how Riggs had a penchant for connecting his most intimate, personal thoughts to larger social ideals. In so doing, he discusses his personal life as a black gay man and interweaves it into a sociological discussion of America's definitions of manhood.

By situating Riggs's work within several different filmic categories, I foreground a notion Riggs used once to describe *Tongues Untied*. During an interview with film scholar Chuck Kleinhans, Riggs explained that he was not married to a particular film format, and instead described his style of filmmaking as "promiscuous"—in others words, he used whatever stylistic device he felt best

conveyed the message he wanted to relay. As Riggs explained to Kleinhas: "Somebody who came in once during my editing the rough-cut [of *Tongues Untied*] said, 'That looks like MTV!' I answered, 'I don't care if it looks like MTV. If it works, that's fine for me'" (Kleinhans and Lesage).

BLACK IS…BLACK AIN'T: CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE

While scholar E. Patrick Johnson argues that *Black Is…Black Ain't* is the sequel to *Tongues Untied,* I suggest it is a culmination of Riggs's films. Many of the cinematic devices and themes Riggs used in his earlier work appear in this final documentary.

Momentary pauses where Riggs speaks about the desires he has for the documentary's final product give *Black Is…Black Ain't* a definite sense of urgency; this "fierce urgency of now" (King, "I Have a Dream") differs from *Tongues Untied,* which was more poetic in its style. One of the introductory shots of *Black Is…Black Ain't* has Riggs explaining that

> AIDS forces you—because of the likelihood you could die at *this* moment—AIDS forces you to deal with that and to look around you and say, "Hey, I'm wasting my time if I am not devoting every moment to thinking about how can I communicate to black people so that we start to look at each other, we start to *see* each other."

In *Black Is…Black Ain't* Riggs is direct and explicit about his desires and motivations, and the rest of the documentary attempts to address this urgent deadline. The pacing and range of topics thrown into the "pot" are then quick glimpses at the components of a vast and historically complex tale. For the viewer, knowing that Riggs is no longer alive and that others completed the documentary, it is as though *Black Is… Black Ain't* is Riggs's last will and testament.

Black Is…Black Ain't is not only a culmination of Riggs's ideas about identity, but is also indicative of his filmic vision; familiar devices and themes from his previous films include the use of chants and the use of performance footage. The verbiage during the opening seconds, the chant of

"Black Is, Black Ain't," is reminiscent of the "Brother to Brother" recitation heard in *Tongues Untied*. While the "Brother to Brother" chant was more of a call to gain the attention of its intended audience, "Black Is…Black Ain't" sounds more like a declarative statement. The imagery associated with the "Brother to Brother" chant in *Tongues Untied* includes black-and-white images of African American men in different settings, while "Black Is…Black Ain't" is recited over a black screen and white text explaining that Riggs's motivation as a documentary filmmaker is to challenge racism and homophobia, and that he died during the production of the documentary—in both documentaries the chant serves as a motif to introduce the film. In addition to chants, *Black Is…Black Ain't* also includes footage of blues musicians, which conjures up the imagery of performers in *Long Train Running*.

Other stylistic traits adapted from previous documentaries include Riggs's desire to include ordinary people in his documentaries. In several scenes in *Black Is…Black Ain't*, Riggs and his production crew speak with residents of Louisiana's different parishes, for instance; additional examples include interviews with shopkeepers about being Creole, talks with gang members after the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, and interviews with young teenagers about the meaning of manhood. These people's stories and recollections are essential to the documentary, just as much as the insights offered by scholars Angela Davis, bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, and Cornell West.

Riggs also incorporates performance in this documentary, similar to the aesthetic approach in *Ethnic Notions*. The dance performance by Bill T. Jones helps demonstrate Riggs's perspectives on manhood; the poetry of Essex Hemphill is also used, just as it was in *Tongues Untied*. And media footage from Eddie Murphy's caustic comedy show "Raw" is included in *Black Is…Black Ain't*, similar to the footage used in *Tongues Untied*. Furthermore, a segment thirty minutes into *Black Is…Black Ain't* includes the contributions black music has had on American culture. Within that

segment, Riggs, from a hospital bed, sings into the camera, performing a brief timeline of "black music."

Riggs's own performance creates a break from the archival footage of different musicians and artists, and shifts to focus on the filmmaker. While in *Tongues Untied* Riggs spoke directly into the camera and revealed how he struggled with shame about being gay, in *Black Is…Black Ain't* Riggs seems to have a certain freedom of expression. He sings Spirituals and Freedom Songs, performs Jazz, and creates his own musical rendition of the Blues, Opera, R & B, and even the eclectic sounds of Avant Garde (labeled in the documentary simply with a question mark). This "performance" segment by Riggs reflects the progression of black music and serves as an indicator of the range of experiences black people share, but it also reveals a different perspective on Riggs. During this sequence he is not the somber and shamed character from *Tongues Untied*, or the articulate authority addressing his perspectives on identity and blackness—as seen in various other segments of *Black Is…Black Ain't*. Here, he is simply a fun-loving individual. This discursive break in the documentary shows Riggs in a way that also reveals the complexity and nuance of an individual, which was another critical theme for Riggs and *Black Is…Black Ain't*.

Finally, *Black Is…Black Ain't* incorporates the notion of the "sweep of history" that was such an important component of Riggs's previous documentaries, from *Long Train Running* onwards, and which he used to contextualize his arguments. In the segment immediately following the black music discussion, the image of flowing water appears and the music of R & B group Arrested Development's song, "Washed Away" plays quietly in the background as a young man's voice is overheard discounting the value of history. The scene cuts from the water to a mid shot of a young man talking to what we later learn to be two other teenagers. While the young men tend discount the value of history, the young woman argues its merits. Interspersed within the dialogue among the teens are still photographs of leaders Riggs admired (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.; Harriet

Tubman; Malcolm X; and Bayard Rustin, the architect of the March on Washington who was marginalized by civil rights leaders because he was gay).

In addition to these familiar elements from past films, *Black Is…Black Ain't* is characterized by the way time references intermingle throughout the documentary between past and present. One of the first shots of gumbo includes an ashen, gaunt Riggs putting a portion gumbo on his plate and stumbling into the dining room to eat with friends and family—his shoulder and back bones protruding from his pink turtleneck. The next scene shows Riggs, apparently healthier and with more weight, recalling—in a highly performative mode—a story of his youth when he staved off a physical altercation with a classmate over color prejudice. A few frames later he is seen incapacitated in his hospital bed.

Later still, Riggs directs how he envisions the film's story being told when he says on camera:

> When you see the scenes of me naked in the woods, and I hope you will use [them] in abundance, it is a powerful image that reflects my searching. Searching through clutter in my life. Searching through the clutter of the project. Searching through attempts by society-at-large to cover you and confine you so that you're not seen for the naked truth of who you are. Because I see parallels of being lost in woods and a community confined and lost by its limiting notions of identity. That's not a great leap for me.

This quote by Riggs in *Black Is…Black Ain't* further supports the notion that this project served as his final word. His "personal journey through black identity" further aligns this film with the essay film genre, which Arthur explains "is the inscription of a blatant, self-searching authorial presence" (59).

Another interpretation of the forest sequence suggests that by exposing his body in the woods as it continues to break down, Riggs creates brutish, stereotyped images of blackness as pathological. As E. P. Johnson explains in his essay, "The Pot is Brewing":

> Racist readings of Riggs's black male body are made possible by the context in which his body appears: the woods. Within this setting, blackness becomes problematically teleologically fastened to nature, reinscribing the black body as bestial and primal, while whiteness becomes fastened, indirectly, to the life of the mind. (*Appropriating Blackness* 43)

Despite Riggs's stated intention to address how notions of identity that are "still life affirming and empowering"[63] can also incorporate states of crisis and affliction, his act of running naked through the woods conjures up the complicated labyrinth of racial politics in America.

The naked images of Riggs in the woods are different than the nude shots of him in *Tongues Untied*. In *Tongues Untied*, Riggs has a muscular physique, and in the scene his body is barely visible, inside a studio moving from left to right against a black backdrop. Between his complexion and the lighting, his naked body is obstructed. However, in *Black Is…Black Ain't*, Riggs's body in the woods and shot during the day, is more exposed and evidence of his ailing condition is apparent. He is significantly slimmer. As Riggs explains in the film, he wanted to include these scenes of him running through the woods to suggest that only through exposing ourselves to one another will our differences become points of reconciliation.

Moreover, we can see *Black Is…Black Ain't* as a sequel to *Tongues Untied* insofar as his nudity serves as a form of resistance to the silence and shame associated with being black and queer. Furthermore, watching Riggs moving through the woods as opposed to being inside a studio supports Riggs's argument that *Black Is…Black Ain't* is a personal journey.

RIGGS, HIV, AND THE BOD(IL)Y FUNCTION IN *BLACK IS…BLACK AIN'T*

Riggs's discussion of HIV in both *Tongues Untied* and *Black Is…Black Ain't* expands the literature surrounding black queer identity. In support of E. Patrick Johnson's suggestion of a connection between *Black Is…Black Ain't* and *Tongues Untied*, Riggs also saw a link. As Riggs explained, he used his autobiography as well as his "perception, questions and insights [to] function as a narrative bridge for many of the stories and discussions in [*Black Is…Black Ain't*] (similar to some degree to *Tongues Untied*)."[64] With this in mind, the notion that *Black Is…Black Ain't* is a glimpse into the musings of a dying man makes the exploration of his ailing body in the film more compelling.

By witnessing Riggs's process of dying, the viewer can see how death challenges the spectator to grapple with their limited understandings of the AIDS disease. As Riggs explains in an early draft proposal:

> I do not intend … to address the specifics of what it means to be a black gay man living with HIV (though such work is desperately needed), but rather what happens to an identity historically perceived as "pathological," then threatened with the very real fact of obliteration—a metaphor, I believe, for the identity crisis of African Americans throughout history, yet even more so today.[65]

Although Riggs includes many other voices in the documentary and others finished the film for him, *Black Is…Black Ain't* is a "personal journey" that explores "the unique struggles of an identity that has become synonymous with degeneracy and death—an identity both communal and personal. [And as a result, Riggs] draw[s] in this regard upon [his] own life [for the documentary]…."[66] The spectator gains access to Riggs's thoughts, as though reading his journal.

Exploring the genre of the diary and its structure, specifically as it relates to novels, scholar Harry J. Berman explains that

> [d]espite the many variations within the form, what diaries have in common is that they are written in the first person as a discontinuous series of more-or-less self-contained responses to the writer's present situation and recent experience. The diary format has the capacity to fixate subjective experience in a way that approximates the actual passage of the future into the past. (37)

Although Riggs uses documentary essay film as his platform as opposed to the written journal, there are spots in *Black Is…Black Ain't* that can be seen as fitting into Berman's definition, namely when Riggs talks about his dreams of Harriet Tubman helping him in his transition to the afterlife. The other disclosures about his lowered T-cell count also give the perception of pages ripped from Riggs's journal.

AIDS gave Riggs a sense of urgency to make the film; the illness became the impetus for Riggs's colleagues to complete the film, a fact reflected in the scenes that show how the disease affects Riggs's body. By showing those images, Riggs placed a human face upon a disease that had been, until the time the film was completed, silently ravishing the black community. In the late- to mid-1990s, the denial, fear, and homophobia associated with HIV/AIDS, often exacerbated by religiosity (particularly among African Americans), had all but erased the growing epidemic from public discourse. Riggs not only knew this, he understood it. And as if reading lines from a journal, he says in the film: "Dear fathers, tell me what to do. I search for ancestral affirmation to find only this: pathos, or worse, historic erasure. How much longer can I walk this winding road? I can't go home as who I am." Knowing that Riggs dies in the process of making this film, the statement of returning home is layered for the viewer. One wonders whether Riggs was speaking about his literal home or the metaphysical home often spoken of within black churches, referring to heaven as home and death as a "homecoming."

BLACK IS…BLACK AIN'T: CRITICAL REACTIONS

Critical response to *Black Is…Black Ain't* was mixed; however, the general sentiment from film and television critics was a positive reaction toward Riggs's final work. As *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden explained: "although rambling in places, [*Black Is…Black Ain't*] is [Riggs's] most accomplished work" (C18). And Emanuel Levy of *Variety* called *Black Is…Black Ain't* "…not just an eloquent tribute to Riggs and an insightful discussion of black consciousness, but a major contribution to the exploration of how we develop our identities" (51). Overall, critics recognized the large sociological questions Riggs was attempting to answer in this sweeping documentary, and instead of casting these lofty ideals aside, critics acknowledged this as a tremendous task for the documentarian.

In nearly all of the dozen reviews of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, the critics recognized the film for its unconventional style, but it was precisely this lack of a traditional documentary approach that engendered the most criticism. While New York's *Daily News* film writer David Kehr recalled the film being "loosely structured work" and "at once a sober social documentary on a highly specific theme…." (Kehr 39), *Philadelphia Inquirer* movie critic Carrie Rickey considered *Black Is…Black Ain't* a "lively mosaic" (E02). Meanwhile the conservative *Washington Times'* film critic Gary Arnold called *Black Is…Black Ain't* a "documentary mishmash…that stray[s] from the contradictory impressions anticipated by the title" (B6). Arnold continues by stating that "[b]edside interludes with the dying filmmaker give 'Black Is' a morbidly split personality," and that "Mr. Riggs' failing condition tempted everyone to make his reflections from a hospital bed the "subplot" of the finished film," which Arnold considers " an incongruous subplot" (B6). Not surprisingly, this was the harshest criticism of the documentary.

The varied descriptions of the work demonstrate this film was not a conventional documentary. The critical reactions toward Riggs's sickly presence and the format of the documentary were as wide-reaching as the subject matter. Overall, the various reactions to the content and style reinforce the notion that the film fits into Arthur's framework of the essay documentary. The range of descriptions of the cinematic style reinforce the genre-blending approach of the essay film, which as Paul Arthur explains, "offers a range of politically charged visions [that] blend abstract ideas with concrete realities" (59).

Gaining a Final Understanding of Riggs as Cultural Agitator

The final works discussed in this chapter demonstrate how Riggs addressed issues of identity. Scholar Clara Orban could have been describing Riggs when she wrote, "AIDS literature is writing for the present, attempting to free itself from constraining cultural frameworks" (14). As colleague and coproducer Nicole Atkinson-Roach explained:

> Marlon [Riggs] was always testing the boundaries and … he wasn't afraid. And I think, you know interestingly enough, [his documentary's are] going to separate into two different types. There were the films that were distributed by California Newsreel … that … include *Ethnic Notions, Color Adjustment, Black Is…Black Ain't*, and then there were his "gay" films [which] were distributed by Frameline, [a distribution company specializing in gay and lesbian films]….I think that, in and of itself, tells you something. That the gay and the black was not connected. But in him, it *was* connected. But in the exterior world, there was a disconnect.
>
> I think when [Marlon Riggs] came up with the idea for *Black Is…Black Ain't* [he] had experienced a life, which quite a few, I think, African-American or people of

African descent sometimes experience in the [United States], where you are ostracized, or … not considered black because you don't talk a certain way, you don't dress a certain way, … you don't have a certain sexual preference. And I think in his choosing to do this piece about black identity, because he had explored so many other issues related to black culture and history with *Ethnic Notions* with caricatures and stereotypes, which were really about external viewpoints about black people; and then *Color Adjustment*, which is a furthering of the external, that I think he now needed to say let's look at some issues that are coming from *within* the black community, how we stereotype amongst ourselves and say who's in and who's out….

[Riggs] was considered out because he was an educated black man [who] went to Harvard, did well, got all these degrees. And he was gay. So for him, I think, [*Black Is…Black Ain't*] was an opportunity to really begin to confront this dichotomy in terms of how we were dealing with identity in the black community. And in the black community, this was something that nobody ever talked about. It's like, yeah, you might have had a gay brother or a gay son, or sister, or whatever, and there is some sort of ostracism but nobody ever talked about it; it was like business as usual.

I think with Marlon's film it was not so much about telling you what to think, but forcing you to think and generate conversations, and … by putting it in the context of where [black people are] based on questions. We have defined ourselves based on our economic levels. We've defined ourselves as to who's black based upon how you talk … and [who] your sexual partner is, that by putting that [in]

> context … he was able to really allow people to see [the various nuances of blacks]. (personal interview)

This detailed response by Atkinson-Roach provides significant insight into Riggs's motivations—as an individual and as a filmmaker. Individually, her statement helps to understand why this documentary was created with such urgency, for he knew he was dying and saw this as his final project. In terms of his cinematic choices, Atkinson-Roach's comment that Riggs envisioned this documentary as part of a "conversation," also help reinforce the notion that this was an essay film. In addition, Riggs's choice to include heterogeneous devices within the documentary (e.g., verité images, archival footage, and talking head experts) was deliberate; the various stylistic approaches were indicative of the complex and far-reaching topic he chose to examine.

Black Is…Black Ain't, with its essay-style format, incorporates many critical filmic elements—such as emphasizing the "sweep of history," using both academicians and laypersons as experts, and incorporating performance and poetry—used in Riggs's earlier projects, not only to release the film from the constraints of the conventional documentary genre, but also to address the different ideas Riggs was grappling with prior to his death—and to serve as his lasting legacy. In *Black Is…Black Ain't,* Riggs uses his life as the narrative bridge to address contested ideas regarding identity.

Black Is…Black Ain't, then, becomes a culmination of the artist's approach to documentary film. By examining *Black Is…Black Ain't* alongside his three short documentaries *Affirmations, Anthem,* and *No Regret*, this chapter has demonstrated how each of Riggs's documentaries served as building blocks for his filmic vision and documentary film technique. In addition, this chapter showed how particular traits of Riggs's—such as emphasizing the humanization of homosexual relationships, stressing the notion of the "communal self," placing himself in front of the camera,

and incorporating an eclectic array of aesthetic approaches to his documentaries—all reflect Riggs's uniquely promiscuous film style.

Conclusion

The relatively young field of film studies still lacks thorough examinations of African American works, especially documentary filmmakers. As film scholars Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler wrote in 1999 in *Struggles for Representation*: "African American documentary has been largely neglected. Scholars and critics have yet to consider fully the groundbreaking body of nonfiction productions that offer privileged views of American life" (xiii). The works of Marlon T. Riggs constitute one such neglected example.

Riggs's impact during the late twentieth century at the height of the culture wars has all but been forgotten by American Studies scholars; virtually erased is his impact on what are now considered everyday aspects of identity (the notion of intersectionality, and more diverse concepts of black masculinity and homosexuality). By discussing Riggs's filmmaking style and analyzing his films and the arguments that they generated, I sought to demonstrate Riggs's contribution in the field of cinema, and to argue for a greater acknowledgement of his influence in the fields of masculinity studies, documentary film practice and, most broadly, African American cultural production.

While Riggs may be best remembered for the innovations of—and firestorm resulting from—*Tongues Untied*, it is likely that most film scholars are unfamiliar with the breadth and depth of his work and the particular aesthetic choices and strategies across it. Throughout this project, I have examined Riggs's corpus of films and illuminated selected writings and interviews to demonstrate how he created work that placed race and gender at the center of national debates about issues of identity, and how his work was received, understood, and debated. This

dissertation has stressed Riggs's importance as an artist–activist, but also (re)introduced his films to scholars in order to situate Riggs among the many other important artist–activists of the same period—Isaac Julien and Robert Mapplethorpe, for instance—who have received more recognition.

By grouping Riggs's films into his more conventional documentaries (*Ethnic Notions*, *Color Adjustment*), his most controversial work (*Tongues Untied*) and his final project (*Black Is…Black Ain't*) plus the three experimental videos that preceded the latter, this study has stressed formal and stylistic tendencies in Riggs's work, while emphasizing that all of these films were deeply rooted in Riggs's personal experiences as a gay African-American artist who came of age in the 1960s and who spent many formative years outside of the United States.

Chapter One provided biographical information about the filmmaker's childhood and early adult life as a point of reference in order to better understand Riggs's motivations as a filmmaker. This account surfaced the importance for Riggs of Martin Luther King, Jr. as an iconic figure and symbol, since Dr. King articulated the tenets of human rights, freedom, and justice that were essential motivating factors for Riggs's work. In this light, it is not surprising that Dr. King became an iconic image throughout nearly all of Riggs's films.

Chapter One also examined Riggs's first documentary, his graduate project *Long Train Running*, and introduced a concept essential to Riggs's later projects: the historical importance of "sweep." For Riggs, historical "sweep" referred to the history of a host of subjects related to, supporting, and challenging American ideals of liberty, justice, and equality. Riggs did not want his work to become, in documentary filmmaking parlance, an "illustrated lecture." As a result, many of Riggs's films did not adhere to a strictly chronological timeframe; instead, in many instances, they played with time, since for Riggs, the past and present, the heyday of the civil rights movement centered on Dr. King and 1990s struggles for gay rights, are inextricably imbricated.

Chapter Two focused on Riggs's two more typically conventional documentaries, *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*. While these films were conceived as a two-part series, they were produced four years apart—with several projects being produced prior to the completion of *Color Adjustment*. Nevertheless, these two works share similar themes and styles. In this instance, these works followed the more conventional mode of filmmaking many viewers expect from a program that airs on public television. The critical elements of this chapter explored particular stylistic devices brought forth by Riggs, which were key to his development as a filmmaker, such as the use of performance and reenactment. These features constitute a distinctive, recently revived trend in documentary film production. Film scholars argue that while reenactment may have some element of historical authority, performance is considered less authentic and detracts from the viewer's understanding of truth and actual historical moments. But for Riggs, the inclusion of both of these approaches within his "promiscuous" style was a formal strategy designed to allow the viewer various ways to understand race relations in America.

Tongues Untied, the focus of Chapter Three, is without question the most-discussed, critically acclaimed, significant, and best-remembered of Riggs's films. Produced between *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*, this autobiographical documentary is hailed as an exemplar for its filmic innovation, its brazen subject matter that unapologetically explored black male homosexuality, and its challenge to the role and function of public television, which typically scheduled performing arts programming and BBC productions, as well as conventional historical documentaries such as Ken Burns' five-part television series *The Civil War*, which aired in September 1990. Furthermore, Riggs utilized multiple stylistic devices in this work that were unique for public television documentaries. These aesthetic choices were elements critical to his signature as a filmmaker and cultural agitator: collectivism, irony, and autobiography.

While some of Riggs's aesthetic choices may have been a departure from his more conventional documentaries, his agenda remained constant—namely, addressing the histories of marginalized groups, be they blacks or homosexuals or both. Chapter Three reveals Riggs as a cultural agitator at his most fervent by examining *Tongues Untied* via Kathryn Bond Stockton's notion of "embracing shame." *Tongues United* remains the strongest example of Riggs's ability to push mainstream cultural boundaries beyond socially acceptable norms to best reflect his role as a cultural agitator.

Affirmations, *Anthem*, *Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret)*, and *Black Is…Black Ain't*, as argued in Chapter Four, demonstrated the filmmaker's use of his AIDS-stricken body as the text to which he addressed both personal and sociopolitical issues. Although these concerns were first raised by Riggs in *Tongues Untied*, this was done with even more candor and urgency in the films that followed—by categorizing Riggs's work as I did, I was able to demonstrate how his work shifted over time. As Riggs's health situation grew more dire, so did the need to "tell all" in his films.

As I have argued, Riggs's three shorts coupled with the posthumously produced *Black Is…Black Ain't* place a human face on the tragedy of HIV/AIDS, and attempt to dispel common misunderstandings of the disease. As in his longer works, the notion of the community is also a prominent theme of his short work. Pairing these works together illuminates how, over the years, part of the filmmaker's distinctive formal/stylistic signature included creating personalized projects that were still able to address larger social concerns.

Not only were Riggs's works relevant from a film studies perspective, but their importance within the field of African American studies cannot be underestimated. As the self-described "race and sex expert," Riggs examined topics considered unmentionable within African American communities. By addressing issues of homosexuality in the midst of a resurgence of Black Nationalist rhetoric masked as Afrocentricity and privileging male sexist ideology, Riggs became

somewhat of a social pariah in many Black Studies circles; nevertheless, his desire to change the way people understood and engaged with Americans at the margins was unrelenting.

Undoubtedly, however, being gay and African American, Riggs was able to analyze the world from the margins, which was fundamental to his aesthetic and development as a filmmaker. Riggs helped ignite public discourse surrounding the role of public media by making the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality central in his documentaries, even when his films took on an ostensibly conventional approach in their formulation. His desire to pack myriad topics within a short documentary was Riggs's forte, in large part due to his keen editing abilities. Riggs's ability to connect historical moments with contemporary race relations thrust him into the center stage of the culture wars and furthered his reputation as a cultural agitator whose films and writings formally addressed subjugated perspectives of race, culture, and sexuality. As a result, he created projects that other documentarians were either unwilling to produce or unsure about producing.

As other scholars in queer studies, masculinity studies, film studies, and African American cultural production begin to resurrect the films and writings of Marlon Riggs, more critical work is needed to show how Riggs helped expand the representations of black male images in mass media. More critique, as well, can be done on his handling of transgendered individuals. Of greatest import would be exploring how Riggs's work as a cultural agitator has helped develop and influence the work of younger filmmakers who examine questions of race, gender, and sexuality. A few examples would include filmmakers Rodney Evans (*Brother to Brother*, 2004) and documentarian Byron Hurt (*I Am A Man: Black Masculinity in America*, 2002*; Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, 2006*; Barack and Curtis: Manhood, Power and Respect*, 2008). Other areas for future research to explore would likely include how Riggs's work fits into a global discussion regarding feminist and postcolonial filmmakers, who often address similar dimensions of marginalization and oppression in their films.

Evans' film *Brother to Brother* (2004) provides the most direct link to Riggs and his lasting influence. Also a black gay filmmaker, Evans stated in an interview with the public television production company, ITVS, Marlon Riggs has influenced his work the most (Independent Lens). *Brother to Brother* aired on public television as part of the Independent Lens 2004 fall season. Explaining his style, Evans stated in the Independent Lens interview that *Tongues Untied*—with its subject matter and the way the story unfolds—was inspirational for *Brother to Brother*. *Brother to Brother* is a narrative as opposed to a documentary, and explores two black male artists from different generations. However, dispersed throughout the film are archival footage and reenactments of poetry from the Harlem Renaissance era. Using the life of black, gay, Harlem Renaissance poet Bruce Nugent, as a launching pad, the film's protagonist, Perry, learns about different artists who were part of the Harlem Renaissance while also reconciling his own sexuality and personal identity.

Riggs's particular approach to filmmaking—addressing questions of cultural memory and race relations in America (*Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*), or exploring more personal topics such as his sexuality or HIV status (*Tongues Untied, Affirmations, No Regret, Black Is…Black Ain't*)—made him vulnerable to criticism and political ridicule by right-wing conservatives and individuals who did not share his values or perspectives on American history, public media, or art. His choice to produce these sorts of films also limited people's understanding of his work as a filmmaker and cultural thinker. As a cultural agitator, Riggs was, most significantly, able to shift notions of shame and silence into acts of resistance and agency. In other words, the historical feelings of isolation and despair that Riggs (and so many others) felt as a result of being "Othered" in society were negated through the creative form of filmmaking. This example he set is, perhaps, his most important legacy.

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Endnotes

[1] In the introduction, Bill Nichols outlines a quasi call to action for documentarians that details the role and function of documentary film practice.

[2] Sheril Dawn Antonio's dissertation, *Contemporary African American Cinema*, is particularly concerned with the independent film market over the last century and refers to Riggs, along with other contemporary independent filmmakers (e.g., Robert Townsend, Reginald Hudlin, and Julie Dash), to argue for a shifting position among African American film and mainstream Hollywood films. And a 1997 U.C. Berkeley dissertation by Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall, *"Unspeakable Things" Spoken: Toward a Syllabus of Multiple Marginalization*, was created as a guide to study the way a wide range of artists, including Riggs, use issues of multiple marginalization. Pincheon's study, along with Maurice Stevens' dissertation, *Troubled Beginnings: Trans(per)forming African American History and Identity*, which focuses on historiography, faith, and psychic development in contemporary African American cultural production activities—both serve as informative indications of the various ways Riggs has been studied and understood since his death. Stevens' examination, while helpful, is primarily an analysis of reconstructed African American histories, and the bulk of his study is on the films *Sankofa, Panther,* and *Malcolm X*.; Riggs is incorporated into a later discussion among other performance artists to demonstrate other ways some filmmakers have used film to illustrate their nationalist resistance to American social injustice.

[3] Reception studies and audience reactions to television programs have been extensively researched, primarily fans and the way they receive artists, with scholars arguing for the culture and nature of television as a constant interactive process. John Fiske's work on the reception of Madonna is an example of the ways reception studies have been used in the past to examine how meanings are derived (e.g., *Television Culture*). British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's work on cultural studies and television is also relevant; see David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* which provides relevant discourse and context for this particular research.

[4] Jacqueline Bobo has written several books and many articles on the significance of the black audience, with much of her work examining black women as cultural readers. Some of her publications include "Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*," "'The Subject is Money': Reconsidering the Black Audience," "*The Color Purple:* Black Women as Cultural Readers," and *Black Women as Cultural Readers*.

[5] The terms *film* and *video* are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation. Film tends to produce a different quality in its look and feel. It is also a more expensive format than video, and is less portable than using a simple, hand-held video camera. The techniques in post-production are different as well. However, for the sake of this project, I switch in between the term video and film for clarity of prose, and because Riggs often produced his work on video and later transferred it to film in order to be able to compete in the many festivals that required film submissions.

[6] This term comes from philosopher and cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha in his essay, "Interrogating Identity" (6), where he describes identity as something that "exceeds the frame of the image, eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and—most importantly—*leaves a resistant trace, a strain of the subject, a sign of resistance"* (emphasis added). I argue that the significance of Riggs' collection of work exemplifies Bhabha's notion of identity.

[7] At the time of King's death, Riggs was eleven years old, yet in interviews and writings, he spoke of being in Junior High School. He must therefore either have started school early or skipped a grade, but no written evidence corroborates either theory. There is also no indication as to how important or relevant King was in

Riggs's life when he was a pre-teen; however, while Riggs was grappling with his own mortality, King's image or voice appeared in nearly all his films.

[8] This information was gleaned from interviews with close friends and colleagues of Riggs who mentioned that through Riggs's numerous hospitalizations, Alvin never appeared. Riggs also briefly discusses their relationship, and the silence that shrouded it, during a voice-over in *Black Is…Black Ain't*'s segment on black masculinity. An interviewer who asked to be anonymous regarding this particular topic recalled Riggs stating with disdain that his father was "useless. A useless man." Furthermore, correspondence in the Marlon Riggs papers between Essex Hemphill and Riggs found the pair often discussing through letters the strained relationships both men shared with families—particularly surrounding their health. (While Riggs's original letters to Hemphill were not present among the files, Hemphill's missives would often refer to various professional and personal topics discussed by the two men.) Another indication that the relationship among Riggs and Alvin was estranged was gleaned from reading through hundreds of cards and correspondence Riggs kept and that are housed in the Signifyin' Works archives in Berkeley; not one was signed by Alvin—not even those sent from his mother.

[9] Also, Riggs's handwritten notes in the margins of school newspaper*, The Daily Californian* (April 28, 1993: 1, 3-4) on the day that Spike Lee attended a forum and film screening of *School Daze* at U.C. Berkeley, point to Riggs's frustrations with the filmmaker. Riggs also wrote of his discontentment of the homophobic vitriol spewed throughout Lee's film in the essay, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen:" 292–6.

[10] Atkinson-Roach, Riggs's former student-turned-colleague and the coproducer of *Black Is…Black Ain't*, consistently referenced Riggs's strong and quick editing skills, and the emphasis he placed on editing during his documentary classes she had with him while a graduate student at U.C. Berkeley.

[11] In interviews with me, Riggs's friends and colleagues often mentioned his untiring personality and willingness to take on more work. My research in the Signifyin' Works archives also uncovered numerous files and fax letters of Riggs agreeing to meet even the smallest requests to speak with students or organizations, or to be present at a film screening. See also Banneker's extended interview of Riggs.

[12] Kleiman pointed out this fact in an interview with the author to show how Riggs's values were shifting. According to her, when she and Riggs started Signifyin' Works in 1991, it was to produce and distribute educational media in all formats that examine past and present issues, with a particular focus on the African-American experience. Kleiman encouraged Riggs to take the specific racial component out of the mission, because it would be too limiting; Riggs refused. Kleiman said that Riggs later realized that as certain film projects and documentary ideas emerged, he was running into problems trying to fit them into the Signifyin' Works' mission; his documentary which he said would be "the definitive work on lesbians" was emblematic of this growing tension (personal interview).

[13] I must thank and acknowledge film scholar David Gerstner with whom, after a conversation about my research and the significance of Riggs as a cultural scholar, I was able to make the distinction between Riggs and Baldwin, along with identifying the significance of Riggs's final project idea. The assessment of Baldwin's treatment of his female characters is also addressed in *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* by Trudier Harris.

[14] From the onset, video was Riggs's preferred medium for creating his work. He declares, "video is the future!" in Calvin Ahlgren's article "Heyday in Oakland Blues." It is not surprising, then, that all of Riggs's projects were shot on video; for him it was a more efficient and expeditious way to produce visual work where he could experiment with new filmic approaches.

[15] Many of Riggs's writings included or referenced the trope of the 'snap,' a nonverbal performative act that has been affiliated with black gay men—it literally involves snapping fingers. One of his most well-known essays is entitled, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," and his essay "Unleash the Queen" in *Black Popular Culture* included what Riggs identified as "performance breaks." I discuss 'snap' in Chapter Three.

[16] Hine explains this theory in more detail specifically around the work of black women as domestics during the 1930s.

[17] Riggs explains that *Ethnic Notions* cost $250,000, "if you include time without pay," and $140,000 in cash (Ghent 15). Early budget projections put the video costs at $188,000 with $25,000 being in-kind. The final budget indicates the program cost $141,000, and $11,540 was in-kind (Riggs, "Ethnic Notions Budget"). Much of the in-kind fees came from U.C Berkeley's production facilities, which Riggs heavily relied upon for all his projects.

[18] California Newsreel has had exclusive distribution rights of *Ethnic Notions* for over 20 years. To date, *Ethnic Notions* has grossed $932,000. From January–June 2007, it sold 290 copies, primarily to individuals. Repacking Riggs's works onto DVD has given them "a new life." The other two films by Riggs that California Newsreel distributes, *Color Adjustment* and *Black Is…Black Ain't* are both in the top ten of gross sales for the company (Moore, Interview, "Riggs Research," "RE: Riggs Research").

[19] No surname is included in the letter, but considering the date and other context clues, it seems the letter is to Lawrence Levine, who was in the documentary as a resident scholar and also served as a consultant on the project. Levine is also a respected, well-known historian in African American History at U.C. Berkeley.

[20] These quotations were taken from the *Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Philadelphia News,* and *Dallas Times Herald.*

[21] This is a concept Contemporary Art Museum in Houston curator Valerie Cassel Oliver uses in her article, "Between Artifice and Authenticity: The Black Female Body in Performance," in the exhibition catalogue, *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded*. In the chapter, she charts the history of black female body and examines the ways in which women's images been fictionalized, and how several visual artists have created work to counterbalance this prejudiced perspective. This is a concept I suggest Riggs uses as well in *Color Adjustment*.

[22] The final financial statement sent to CPB shows the total expenses for *Color Adjustment* to be $575,792.97, with $103,300 in funding coming from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The majority of the funds for the project ($326,467.97) came from other philanthropic organizations not specifically listed on the document (Riggs, "Color Adjustment as of 12/31/91", 2).

[23] E. Patrick Johnson also explains in *Appropriating Blackness* how "blackness and performance are two discourses whose histories converge at the site of otherness" (7).

[24] The mirroring that E. P. Johnson refers to also reminds viewers of the scene in *Ethnic Notions* where Leni Sloan, acting as vaudeville performer Bert Williams, applies blackface makeup in the mirror. The monologue shows Sloan explaining the conflict Williams faced as he attempted to reconcile the traditional racist perspectives of society with his ascension as an in-demand minstrel artist.

[25] In a personal interview on August 1, 2006, Kleiman talked about the difficulty of completing *Color Adjustment*. The film was produced after *Tongues Untied*, during a time when Riggs was more involved with issues regarding HIV/AIDS and black masculinity.

[26] In an interview, Jack Vincent, Riggs's life partner, could not recollect the exact date that Riggs had taken the trip to Germany, but he did note that it was after *Ethnic Notions* was completed, and it was in the winter, during Christmas break, and in the mid-to-late 1980s. Considering this, along with the completion date of *Ethnic Notions* and when *Tongues Untied* was produced, I deduced it was during the height of the AIDS epidemic in America that Riggs was diagnosed with the disease. According to Vincent (personal interview), when Riggs returned from Europe, he was changed, and while his focus naturally shifted to his health, he was "completely preoccupied with making *Tongues Untied*."

During the August 1, 2006 interview with the author, Vivian Kleiman also confirmed accounts that Riggs got very sick during a trip to Germany to "visit his mom, [and] he became deathly ill; almost died." He already been approached by California Newsreel to produce *Color Adjustment*, and had even started some of the work, but after he came back, and made various trips to the hospital for different ailments, his focus and priorities had shifted to this unrelenting desire to produce *Tongues Untied*.

[27] He describes his documentary similarly in Ron Simmons' "Other Notions" and Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage's "Listening to the Heartbeat."

[28] See pages 109–126 for a history of PBS's problematic representation of HIV/AIDS.

[29] In *Framing Blackness* (207), Ed Guerrero points out that the African American audience is far more complex and diverse than the Hollywood industry has believed, and he points out and that African American filmmakers and filmmaking has become much more dynamic in its approach to appealing to its different audiences.

[30] From my research in Riggs's papers, as well as through interviews with Riggs's colleagues and friends, the relationship between Riggs and Hemphill was like that of a brotherly mentor. They were close in age, with Riggs only two months older, and both HIV-positive; however, Hemphill had been engaged in the black arts and community scene longer than Riggs. They often corresponded through letters, and many of the lengthy, personal missives penned by Hemphill to Riggs show the support and love they had for one another. Both experiencing health challenges and equally committed to their work as artists, they often sent each other copies of ideas and prose they were working on. Hemphill was also instrumental in helping Riggs formulate his responses to the conservative backlash against *Tongues Untied*. In some correspondence I read, I noticed argumentative logic penned by Hemphill later used by Riggs in interviews, for instance.

[31] The work of the late controversial Senegalese historian and anthropologist, Cheikh Anta Diop is most affiliated with this theory, which other Afrocentric scholars also embraced. Diop's theories can be read in his many journals and books, such as *The African Origin of Civilization* and *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity*, among many others.

[32] In the Bible, darkness often expresses a depressed, beleaguered, or negative period, perhaps even a spiritual death. As in, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous [sic] light" (*Holy Bible* 1 Peter 2:9).

[33] A phrase used by Sheila Petty in "Silence and Its Opposite" (418), as she described *Tongues Untied* resembling a symphony.

[34] Since *Tongues Untied* has become such a timeless piece over the years, one sees a prescience and irony on the part of Riggs when he incorporated clips of Murphy's homophobic rants into the film; years later, after becoming well-known for such homophobic and lewd comments, Murphy was stopped by Los Angeles sheriff deputies for picking up a transvestite prostitute in a "prostitution abatement zone."

[35] Paul Stankavich, President and Station Manager, wrote to PBS member David Weinkauf, August 9, 1991, regarding WQLN's decision not to air *Tongues Untied*.

[36] A less-specific reference to Helms finding offense to an NC-based article can be found on page 10 of the article "*Tongues Untied*" by Bob Connelly and Pat Aufderheide.

[37] This budget amount was culled from budget spreadsheets attached as part of grant proposals Riggs submitted to various funding entities (Marlon Riggs papers, Signifyin' Works Collection, Berkeley, CA). Other research sites the budget at $40,000, with a total of $8,000 from grants by organizations with NEA funding and $32,000 as "donated in-kind services for production and postproduction at the journalism department of the University of California, Berkeley" (Bullert 99).

[38] A quote from Vito Russo, author of *The Celluloid Closet*, speaking to the *New York Times* about the recent influx of gay and lesbian film festivals (Lipper 11).

[39] The call logs are part of the Marlon Riggs papers, Signifyin' Works Collection, Berkeley, CA. This information is based upon of reactions of viewers who called into WGBH, Boston; WGBY, Springfield, MA; KUED, Salt Lake City, UT; KQED, San Francisco; KTCA, Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN; and KBDI, Denver, CO. KBDI is one of two PBS stations serving the Denver area; the other Denver station, KRMA, refused to air the show. WGBH received 450 comments and WGBY had 163 calls to the station. Salt Lake City's station drafted a memo explaining they received 363 calls; however, the attached log only reflects 32 calls, which were recorded from 12:30 a.m.—1:00 a.m., immediately following the program's airing. KQED aired *Tongues Untied* twice, April 23, 1990, and July 19, 1991: the first viewing garnered 85 comments and the latter 44. KBDI in Denver recorded 97 calls. KCTA documented caller reactions the week of the *Tongues Untied* air date, from July 15–19, 1991.

[40] Cheryl Fabio-Bradford's words to Mark Weiss, explaining why the organization supported Riggs's *Tongues Untied* and discussing the negative press coverage and the lobbyist groups trying to challenge PBS stations from airing work the right-wing organizations thought did not promote the community's values.
[41] I was able to access copies of the letters sent to these stations, many of which are part of the Marlon Riggs papers located at the Signifyin' Works Collection, Berkeley, CA
[42] Riggs wrote this letter to challenge Elsie Garner's decision not to show *Tongues Untied.*
[43] This outreach letter was written on behalf of Riggs to encourage Harrisburg, PA station, WITF to screen *Tongues Untied*.
[44] Loveland sent this letter with attachments to Riggs, discussing the organizations' plans happening around getting *Tongues Untied* on television.
[45] Tom Whiteside wrote this letter to Marlon Riggs, alerting him of the fervor that ensued in the Raleigh-Durham area after the North Carolina PBS station refused to air *Tongues Untied*.
[46] This language is stated repeatedly throughout the photocopies of viewer call logs I read from stations, KTCA, KQED, KUED, KBDI, WGBH, and WGBY (Marlon Riggs papers, Signifyin' Works Collection, Berkeley, CA).
[47] "WGBY Springfield, Massachusetts," n.d., a document written to PBS as a final report about the station's response to the "'Tongues Untied' situation," explains: "On the evening of the broadcast, the station hired a security guard to protect the building." And in a document written to the PBS headquarters entitled, "KUED Salt Lake City, Utah," the station avoided any possible backlash by editing "what it felt were the most controversial parts …" and "did not go to the press with these announcements or the problems it anticipated, because they wanted to keep the situation low key."
[48] Riggs gave himself this title. In his essay, "Unleash the Queen," he wrote: "In the last two years I have become a conference queen. Not with much deliberate intent, mind you. But my video, *Tongues Untied*, in a way I frankly never envisioned while making it, has catapulted me into a society of theory divas and culture queens—and yes, my het-brothers, that includes you too, you especially—a society I must admit I barely knew existed three years ago." (102).
[49] All quotations referring to *Affirmations* come from the film short (Frameline Distribution, 1990).
[50] This quote is taken from the written script and production notes for *Anthem*. The script also included additional description and phrasing that was not included in the video. Phrases that were excluded include: "So tell me honey what's your antibody. Think negative, be testy. Horizontal stripes are in. A chain of tongues unchained" (Riggs, "Anthem Status Report" 1).
[51] In a fax to Marlon Riggs from David [no last name], 21 September 1993, Riggs's philosophy about documentary filmmaking is discussed. The author states that in order to avoid this "Gnostic tradition," the production team will "attempt, therefore, to use a complex form to counter the stereotypical notions of what is expected for a series about the lesbian and gay movement" (1).
[52] In his production notes for *Anthem*, Riggs discussed his audience and approach for distribution of his independent film projects.
[53] This comment came during a telephone interview with Sheppard when I was curating a Riggs Retrospective at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture, New York, NY, August 24, 2004.
[54] This information is gleaned from the transcript of the several hour-long interviews Riggs conducted with the artists/scholars.
[55] The film includes part of the process of Badgley asking Riggs about how he was feeling, what he had been dreaming about, for instance, and getting clarity from Riggs—on camera—as he describes what he hopes will be included in the documentary.
[56] As Executive Director of Signifyin' Works, Kleiman sent this report to National Endowment for the Arts on December 21, 1994. The total outlay equaled $562,979.97; $50,000 was from federal funds.
[57] All quotations hereafter are from the film.
[58] Riggs, "*Black Is…Black Ain't*: An experimental documentary" 4.

[59] Riggs, "*Black Is…Black Ain't*: An experimental documentary" 4.
[60] Riggs, "Black Is…Black Ain't Script Outline."
[61] Riggs, "*Black Is…Black Ain't*: an experimental documentary" 2.
[62] Orban quotes Christina Baldwin from her book *One on One*: *Self-Understanding through Journal Writing* (New York: M. Evans and Co., 1977), 7.
[63] Riggs, "*Black Is…Black Ain't*: An experimental documentary" 4.
[64] Riggs, *"Black Is…Black Ain't:* Progress Report" 3.
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