

On Marlon Riggs: The Artist and His Influence

By Rhea Combs

"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...." (Marlon Riggs)¹

Diagnosed HIV-positive during the 1980s, filmmaker and activist Marlon Riggs (1957-1994) produced eight videos in as many years; four feature length documentaries (*Ethnic Notions* - 1987, *Tongues Untied* – 1989, *Color Adjustment* - 1991, and *Black Is...Black Ain't* -1995), and four shorts: *Long Train Running* – 1981; *Affirmations* –1990; *Anthem*-1991; *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien No Regret* – 1992). Riggs refused to be trapped by the fear of denying his artistic interests, or his racial and sexual identities. This conscious move by Riggs represents the empowered audacity with which he created innovative projects.

From the onset, Riggs chose film projects based upon how they could complicate the world of fixed notions of identity. He was interested in works that would best reflect the historical sweep of America. Riggs attempted to "look at history and find value and meaning and lessons."² He was also extremely aware of creating works that would "reach mass audiences in a more than intellectual way...[but a way that] empower[ed] people to think about their culture...."³ Riggs' first project was an award-winning student work titled, *Long Train Running*. The thirty-minute short he co-created with fellow student Peter Webster explored the little known history of Oakland, California and the Bay Area's Blues music scene during the 1940s when many African Americans had migrated to these regions. This topic was more than an academic enterprise for Riggs. He was drawn to the genre's themes of resilience and ingenuity that spoke to larger narratives of African American life and culture.

Tongues Untied, Riggs's second feature-length documentary, is an experimental work exploring African American male homosexuality. The film was developed for a specific audience of African American gay men, yet it is often described as Riggs' most recognized film. It is emblematic of his unique filmmaking style because of its daring bravado and in-your-face examination of a fairly taboo subject. Throughout his career, Riggs consistently produced projects that demonstrated his dynamic approach to documentary filmmaking. Motifs and formal strategies introduced in his first short reemerge in later feature-length projects such as *Ethnic Notions*, *Color Adjustment*, and

¹ Banneker, Revon Kyle. "Marlon Riggs Untied." *BLK* 2.4 (April 1990): 10–19.

² Marks, Jim. "Black Gay Filmmaker Marlon Riggs Likes to Defy Convention." *Au Courant* 13 February 1990: 13, 18.

³ Interview by Jackie Braun. N.d. Marlon Riggs papers. Signifyin' Works Collection, Berkeley, CA.

Black Is...Black Ain't. For instance, Riggs shows deference to individuals with personal experience as subject experts versus traditional academics. In addition, the use of the observational documentary mode that emphasizes an intimacy with the human character and presents everyday life experiences without interference from the camera or analysis from a voice-over commentary, first appears in *Long Train Running*, but is seen in his later works as well.

The motifs Riggs employed early in his career also appear in his short experimental pieces *Affirmations*, *Anthem*, and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret)*. By placing a human face on African American men with HIV, his films are situated within cultural conversations that agitate against the social, historical, and cinematic norms. These works also serve as prequels for ideas presented in Riggs' final film, *Black Is...Black Ain't*, which was finished posthumously by his production team and blurs the line between public discourse and private revelation with its wide-reaching exploration of topics engaging race, identity and the human condition.

Riggs's influence can be seen in works of contemporary filmmakers such as Rodney Evans, Byron Hurt, Thomas Allen Harris, and Kathe Sandler. Like Riggs, each of these filmmakers have had their works featured on public television and received high critical acclaim for their talents. Rodney Evans (*Brother to Brother*, 2004; *Billy and Aaron*, 2010) has produced narrative films that explicitly explore African American male sexuality, and he credits the style and subject matter of *Tongues Untied* for his unapologetic examination of race and sexuality. Byron Hurt's work (*Soul Food Junkies – 2012*; *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, 2006) incorporates personal narratives along with broader social conversations in his films. For instance, *Beyond Beats and Rhymes* is a highly personal yet critical documentary that challenges mainstream constructions of black masculinity and explores the hybrid experiences of manhood, directly tackling questions of hetero-normative behavior and homosexuality among African American men. According to Hurt, Riggs' films *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment* changed not only the way he watched television, but shaped the kind of filmmaker he wanted to be. After seeing Riggs' work, Hurt said: "[he] wanted that kind of impact on the minds of young people because I saw how powerful film can be in transforming people."⁴

Filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris (*Twelve Disciples of Nelson Mandela*, 2005; *É Minha Cara/That's My Face*, 2001) is another artist who credits Riggs as a significant figure. Harris knew Riggs personally, but primarily because his brother Lyle Ashton Harris was a friend of Riggs' and collaborated with him on a few projects (Lyle Harris' photography work is in *Black Is... Black Ain't*). Harris' documentary *É Minha Cara/That's My Face* (2001) a queer mythopoetic journey through the African Diaspora, represents a direct influence by Riggs. While Thomas Allen Harris also saw the work of *Tongues Untied* as instrumental in expanding conversations around black sexuality, he also found it

⁴ Dahl, Ingrid Hu. "Interview: Byron Hurt" www.youthmediareporter.org, June 6, 2008, accessed May 8, 2013.

technically astute in its use of dramatic reenactments in documentary film.⁵ Harris' use of the personal narrative, familial archival footage and sweep in his films are all techniques consciously associated with Riggs. Men are not the only filmmakers who reference Riggs's influence. At a recent Riggs retrospective in New York, filmmaker Kathe Sandler (*The Friends, 1996; A Question of Color, 1993*), also stated Riggs' use of personal narrative in *Tongues Untied* was tremendously influential in her moving forward with her documentary *A Question of Color*.⁶

When examining Riggs' *oeuvre*, one is reminded of ways in which filmmaking can explore the politics of identity and visual culture to push forward ideals that shift notions of shame and silence into acts of resistance and agency. Riggs' productivity amongst daunting obstacles demonstrates how the power of filmmaking can leave indelible impressions that present themselves in the works of others seeking to challenge the viewer and question assumptions.

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⁵ Informal telephone conversation with Thomas Allen Harris, New York, NY, September 2006.

⁶ BGLA Ordinary People Film Series: A Marlon Riggs Retrospective. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY, February 26, 2013.