

Teaching Blackness: Marlon Riggs's Place in Black (Gay) History

By E. Patrick Johnson

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, black gay poet and filmmaker Marlon Riggs committed his life to chronicling depictions of black American life. While many who identify as black and gay are quite familiar with Riggs and his work, there are still many, particularly in black communities, who have never heard of him or his films. And yet, Riggs' body of work chronicles an important swath of African American history that not only *recounts* that history, but also that *questions* that history in terms of who is included or left out of the "black" community. As a professor of African American studies whose work focuses on gender and sexuality studies, I find Riggs' work most productive as a teaching tool because of the ways in which it opens up a space to talk about overlapping oppressions, disallowing critics to position him as only a gay film maker. Indeed, it is Riggs' refusal to parse out race, from class, gender, and sexuality that makes his work so teachable.

His early works, *Ethnic Notions* (1987) and *Color Adjustment* (1991), document the history of the images of blacks in art, artifacts, television, theater, and film. When I teach my course on African American folklore I often use *Ethnic Notions* to crystalize for my students how long-held stereotypes about black Americans, such as "Steppin' Fetch it," "Mammy," "Pickanniny," "Aunt Jemima," etc. get disseminated and reinforced through material objects such as figurines and advertising for commercial products. It's one thing to talk about these images in the abstract, but it's quite another to see the evolution of Aunt Jemima from a coal-black, handkerchief head, bucktooth woman in the

late 1800s, to a caramel-skin, permed hair, woman with pearl earrings and lipstick in the 2000s, on the cover of a box of pancake mix. The film also removes the veil of innocence about the effects of cartoons on the psyches of black children, as these animated depictions suggest that blacks, especially children, are dispensable or do not have feelings when they depict black children being beaten or tossed about by whites or eaten by an animal.

Color Adjustment picks up where *Ethnic Notions* leaves off in terms of demonstrating how those same stereotypical images get disseminated through televisual media. The cartoon images of “Steppin’ Fetchit” morph into sitcoms characters like Jimmy Walker’s “J.J. Evans” on the show *Good Times* popular in the 1970s. Until they watch *Color Adjustment* my students are not convinced that such images permeate popular culture with any regularity. The film, however, makes it clear that their generation is impacted—haunted—by these images.

In the academy *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment* are two films that are readily taught in African American studies courses as relevant to black history. Less frequently taught, however, is Riggs’s most controversial film, *Tongues Untied*, which debuted on the PBS *POV* series in 1991. The film chronicles Riggs’ personal struggles with coming to terms with his racial and sexual identities, homophobia in black communities and racism in white communities. Undoubtedly because of the topic, many who teach general courses on black history don’t teach *Tongues Untied*, because they either don’t find it relevant or their own unspoken homophobia suggests that gay history and black history are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, this film is necessarily a part

of black history because of its focus on HIV/AIDS, especially since the black community was silent for so long about the effects of this disease on our communities.

While *Tongues Untied* is Riggs' first explicit examination of sexuality—and primarily his own—it nonetheless functions as a text that speaks to multiple concerns in black studies and locates Riggs as a forefather in black gay studies. Again, in my own classes I've used *Tongues Untied* to stage conversations about race and sexuality that, like the film, demonstrate the overlapping of identities and oppressions. Riggs' focus on “home” relative to “the black community,” for example, raises questions about black folks' implication in homophobia. And one of the most provocative lines in the film, “black men loving black men is **the** revolutionary act” provides a space to make connections between black male-on-male violence and black homosociality. But perhaps more importantly, Riggs makes connections between racial discrimination and sexual discrimination by including in one scene the racial epithets, “motherfuckin' coon” and “nigger go home” in the context of experiencing racism in high school and in another later on in the film of experiencing racism in the gay community when friends are asked for multiple forms of identification to enter a club.

Riggs' last film, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* (1995) is, in some ways, the sequel to *Tongues Untied* in that, although it broadens its scope to examine black identity in all of its contradictions and contingencies, the film focuses on Riggs' battle with AIDS. For Riggs, the processes by which we fight deadly diseases such as AIDS and those by which we fight over the embattled status of blackness circumscribe the process by which we come into our humanity. In other words, when we too narrowly define our identity, we inhibit our road to recovery from the diseases that plague our communities and to

discovering our humanity. And this latter point is what Riggs' life and career was about: affirming the humanity of black people. In order to do that, however, he insisted on pushing the boundaries of what constitutes the thing we call "blackness," making every moment a teachable one.