

Tongues Untied

Marlon Riggs

55 minutes, video, 1989

Frameline

Description

“Brother to brother, brother to brother, brother to brother, brother to brother.” This spoken chant, heard first as a lone voice and then in chorus, begins the 55-minute documentary about black gay life, *Tongues Untied*. Against a slow-motion, black-and-white street scene montage of black men hanging out together talking, laughing, playing basketball, the chant gains intensity before the film cuts to black, then restarts with the lone voice and more montage sequences. A close-up of a chanting mouth, its color contrasting with the black-and-white scenes, dissolves up and out, and the film fades to white.

A high-five street scene dissolves up this time in color and against close-ups of black men a dynamic soliloquy begins: “Silence is what I hear after the handshake and slap of five, after ‘what’s happening!’; ‘homeboy!’; ‘what’s up, cuz?!’; ‘how you feel, girlfriend!’; ‘blood!’; ‘Miss Thing!’” The speaker muses about talking with his girlfriends, how he’d more likely discuss with them his latest one-night stand than his anger at being refused entrance into a jewelry shop because I am black and male and we are all perceived as thieves. Slow motion scenes of early civil rights strife accompany the speaker’s discourse on the anger he feels at being discounted but must still swallow with silence. The chorus erupts in agreement, discordantly crying, One hundred percent of all black men today!

As the camera slowly zooms in on a photograph of a black man, intertitles of well-known, current-day episodes of racism and hindrances to black culture cut quickly in and out: Howard Beach; Virginia Beach; Yusef Murder; CRACK; AIDS; BLACK MEN; Endangered Species? “I try to appear strong and silent,” the chorus intones, “but as I learn to mute my cries of anguish, so have I learned to squelch my exclamations of joy.” What remains is the rap. A beating heart next provides the only soundtrack against the white-on-black title frame, TONGUES UNTIED.

As the beating heart soundtrack continues, a slow-motion interpretive dance sequence by a silhouetted nude black man accompanies the speaker’s soliloquy:

“Silence is my shield. The sequence fades to a black screen, and the speaker’s voice is joined by another. Alternating, the two decry the Asilence, completing the sequence in unison with, “let’s end the silence, together, now.” A video image of the motionless dancer dissolves up from black and slowly zooms in as the speaker continues his elegiac soliloquy on loosening the bonds of AIDS (“I have mourned the passing of men,”) and the circumstances of being black (“nigger,” “boy”) and gay (“faggot,” “queer”). Now that I am free, initiate me. The dancer drops his robe; then, prostrate, receives caresses and kisses from his partner.

A ringing phone introduces the next sequence. The camera slowly pans up the leg of the underwear-clad caller as the phone voice announces “Black Chat,” a gay sex phone line.

“Press three,” the phone voice cajoles, “Don’t be shy, guy!;” then, Leave a message. Close ups of the caller’s body and the AIDS-, black- and gay-awareness literature that surrounds him accompany his reply: “Black Gay Activist 30-ish, well-read, sensitive, pro-feminist seeks same for envelope licking, flyer distribution, and hot, safe sex.” He concludes, “end the silence, baby.” We could make a serious revolution together.

A bass guitar riff with finger snaps accompanies black cartoon characters illustrated beneath the banner, SNAP! On stage, a bearded man addresses the camera with a monologue about a bus ride through which two “brothers” stridently argue over who is the other’s bitch! He snaps at the camera three times and declares, We are now entering the fifth dimension of our sexual consciousness. The ride is rough! Next, a mustachioed, balding man describes being hassled at the door of a nightclub because of his race. His staccato finger snapping underscores his anger: “*Don’t *Mess with a *SNAP! *Diva!” The bass guitar soundtrack resumes and the stage is filled with black men giving “a lesson in SNAP!” A variety of slow-motion close-ups demonstrate the different types of SNAP! used for explicit purposes: Medusa SNAP!; Sling SNAP!; Point SNAP!; Mini-SNAP!; Maxi- SNAP!; and Classic SNAP! The scene cuts to an outside interview with the “Master SNAP!” Grand Diva demonstrating his SNAP! style, then back to the stage for more SNAP! performances (“courtesy of the Institute of SNAP!thology,” reads the screen) against the chorus chanting, “Precision, pacing, placement, poise/A sophisticated snap is more than just noise!”

A sepia-toned portrait of a young black toddler dissolves up and out as Marlon Riggs begins recounting his formative years. “I heard my ‘calling’ by age six.” We had a word for boys like me, he says to the camera. A quick close-up of a child’s mouth sputtering the word “punk” cuts in quickly to complete the description of a child who “didn’t mind giving it away.” Continuing to recall his childhood to the camera, Riggs mimics two black boys arguing over who would “give it up” to whom while the punk shot punctuates the story. He moves on to describe his family’s transfer to Georgia and his Agraduation to Anew knowledge. The punk shot is replaced by that of an adult’s mouth intermittently spitting out the word Ahomo as Riggs describes learning how to kiss another boy. “Homo” gives way to “Punk, faggot, freak, then to mother-fuckin’ ‘coon,” “niggers go home” and “Uncle Tom” as he describes his junior high-school experience in an all-white class for gifted students. The slanders repeat at a quickening pace, and the image of Riggs progresses from medium close to extreme close-up while he poignantly recalls feeling “cornered by identities I never wanted to claim.”

A techno music beat accompanies shadowy slow motion nighttime street scenes. Hey faggot, what are you doing around here? an unseen thug whispers. In third person phraseology, the speaker recounts being assaulted and left in a bloody pool on the lonely sidewalk. Roberta Flack’s pensive “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” soundtrack fades up with a ‘70’s-era yearbook photo of a young blond male student. “A white boy came to my rescue,” remembers Riggs, “and seduced me out of my adolescent silence.” The camera zooms in on the student’s “gray-green” eyes, as the speaker describes both his joy and despair at the unconsummated love he feels for his white savior.

Immediately, the disco-beat “Do You Want to Funk?” soundtrack cuts the purity of the previous sequence over a rapid montage of 1970’s provocative pin-up photos of white men. The photos are followed by video shots of half-nude, leather-harnessed white men dancing in the streets of the famed San Francisco Castro District. The video slows beneath Marlon Riggs’ declaration of his attraction to these men, and the chorus intones asynchronously, “Lemme touch it, lemme taste it, lemme lick it, lemme suck it.” Against a thumping heartbeat the video cuts from one male body close up to the next, as Riggs proclaims, “Maybe from time to time a brother glanced my way. I never noticed. I was immersed in vanilla.”

Even so, Riggs is painfully aware of the “absence of black images in this new gay life.” “Even (in) my own fantasies Provocative photographs of white men from the covers of gay porn magazines and film festival posters flash by, then give way to images of black stereotypes: the mammy, the obese black sex kitten in string bikini; and the caricature black gay male with an exaggerated penis enslaved to his white master.” The heartbeat soundtrack resumes, and Riggs further examines his attraction to men outside his race, which, despondently, he admits has relegated him to the status of “an alien and a nigger,” still despite his simple quest to find his reflection of “love,” affirmation amidst “a decade of assimilation.” He decides to “quit the Castro,” in search of some place better.

Beneath the melancholy strains of Billie Holiday’s “Lover Man,” Where Can You Be, the next sequence presents a slow-motion video portrait of a young, diadem-ed, fingernail-painted black man affectedly smoking a cigarette. The music and visual dissolve into the mournful “Black Is The Color of My True Love’s Hair” over scenes of a lonely black drag queen dressed in a tight zebra-skin skirt, large hoop earrings and high heels sauntering from sidewalk to “waterfront curbside.” The speaker expresses his grief and longing for “his prince to come” while still “demand(ing) pay for my kisses” from “every other man.” “I’m the only man who loves me,” he concedes.

“ABOMINATION!” The Jerusalem Bible is slammed down on the tabletop. “Mankind shall not lie down with mankind!” There is no corner in God’s church for perversion! screams the evangelical proselytizer in extreme close-up. His words are tempered slightly by another bespectacled man, who asks, “They say we’re all in the same political boat,” we should be brothers, (but) where does his loyalty lie? What is he first, black or gay? The uproar abates with a close up the speaker quietly ruminating, “How do you choose?” Then: “The homosexual defiles his seed,” the evangelist screams; “We need strong black men to fortify the black family, and fags, isn’t he just part of the crisis?” opines the bespectacled man; “I don’t want him around me, or my family,” introduces a third challenger. Close ups of a silent, degraded Essex Hemphill cut between those of his detractors, until a final slander is voiced, This AIDS shit, all the innocent victims, man: mamas and babies dyin’ ‘cause of dope fiends and faggots.

Faggots aren’t allowed to look at my ass, jokes comic Eddie Murphy in a prolonged videotaped performance before a live audience. Murphy’s odious humor fades to a background level as the video portrait of Essex Hemphill returns to the screen with his own voiceover: “This is a view of our movers and shakers. Consider the millions who

follow their lead. Each joke levels us a little more and we sit silently, sometimes join in the laughter as if, deep down, we too believe we are the lowest among the low. The sequence ends with a cacophony of previous images and voices, the evangelist, the bespectacled man, Eddie Murphy, the half-seen crumpled body of an assaulted black gay man on a dark sidewalk, until Hemphill's lone visage appears. I know the anger that lies inside me, he says to the camera, we are worth wanting each other.

Next, the voices of the chorus emerge one by one as voiceovers accompanying black-and-white photographs of appropriately indignant black men. As the camera zooms slowly in on each portrait, the corresponding voices relate feelings of anger at being rejected by both the straight black community and their gay black brethren. The salve for such anger is epitomized in the following sequences of African-Americans smoking crack, drinking alcohol, even partnering with white men. The sequence ends with the chorus repeating the chant, Anger unvented becomes pain, unspoken becomes rage, released becomes violence, cha cha cha Addressing the camera, Marlon Riggs announces his intention to jettison these "fragments of identity" in hope to discover "a new place." truth. A colleague encourages, "snatch what's yours from the universe!"

The following sequence takes place at a dinner party, where black gay men discuss their status and struggles within the black community in extenso. Their experiences are fragmented, however, by the differing factions within the black gay community: one man observes, "The young black queens, New York, D.C. Each gay community does different things." With a techno music beat accompanying the calculated dances steps of a night club clientele, the speaker's voiceover announces unapologetically, Mother, do you know I roam alone at night searching for men willing to come back to candlelight? There is no tender mercy for men on color, for sons who love men like me I find freedom in this village.

The nightclub scene dissolves to slow-motion black-and-white footage of men performing choreographed dance steps in an outdoor playground. Briefly, an antiquated movie representation of a pre-pubescent black boy stereotypically hoofing in the street dissolves up and out against the playground scene, and the techno beat music is stripped of its embellishment until only the sound of a beating heart lingers. "Ironic that dance, my ticket to assimilation .. that the same steps were now my passage back home," enunciates the speaker in voiceover.

Returning to slow motion scenes of a nightclub where black men laugh, drink, and eye each other, the speaker acknowledges his own "unending search for what is precious." The elegiac music of "Black is the Color of My True Loves Hair" fades up, keeping rhythm with the beating heart, and as the soundtrack fades, Essex Hemphill addresses the camera. Our lives tremble between pathos and seduction, he recites, Our inhibitions force us to be equal I see risks. Regrets, there will be none. Let you and I know that tenderness only we can bear.

A dinner-jacketed black doo-wop quartet begins crooning AHey boy, can you come out tonight against slow motion scenes of black gay pride marchers parading across the

screen. Don't be ashamed that you are my baby, the quartet harmonizes, just take my hand, together we'll stand. The march footage accelerates to real time with the voices of the activists interjecting over the music, "We're black, black, black, black, gay, gay, gay, gay! and hey, hey, ho, ho, homophobia's got to go!"

In a declarative voice approaching tones of exultance, Essex Hemphill reappears in close-up, extolling the joy of black male love. Who dares to tell us we are poor and powerless? he invites, "Our souls can't be crushed." The heartbeat soundtrack resurfaces to accompany a slow-motion love scene between two nude black men in bed; varying close-ups of their gently caressing body parts imply their tenderness, the energetic "high-fives" of their public street camaraderie exchanged for intimate kisses. Faintly, a brisk, single reiteration, "Now-we-think-as-we-fuck" soundtrack portends the consequence of the men's passion, growing louder as its speaker eventually appears, addressing the camera in close up. "Now we think as we fuck," the Hemphill cuts in, his deliberate enunciation and clenched expression contrasting with the first man's repetitious, garbled caveat. "This nut," he forewarns, "might kill us ('Now-we-think-as-we-fuck');" there might be a pin-sized hole in the condom ('Now-we-think-as-we-fuck'): a lethal leak. As Hemphill's soliloquy recoils to interpretations of safe sex alternatives amidst the dangers of unencumbered sex, the discourses and close-ups of the two men are edited together in increasing rapidity, ultimately climaxing in a vocal simulation of orgasmic frenzy. Their energies spent, the two repeat in unison, "Now-we-think-as-we-fuck." Their emotion is silenced, the heartbeat soundtrack is reintroduced, and two black men are shown sharing an affectionate kiss in bed. A close up of Riggs dissolves up, and the filmmaker announces, "I discovered a time bomb ticking within my blood."

Black male victims of AIDS provide the visual tone of the following sequence. "Faces, friends disappear," Riggs utters, "I wait, I watch." Newspaper obituaries of black gay activists and community leaders silently dissolve up and out on the screen at an ever-quickening pace, the broadsheet portraits growing larger and larger until only the nameless faces of the deceased occupy the screen at the rate of a passing freight train. "But while I wait, older stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustain my spirit." Riggs' reference elicits the soundtrack of a black protest song ("I'm gonna keep on a-walkin', keep on a-talkin', marching off to freedom") against portraits of historic black leaders and archival black-and-white footage of Civil Rights demonstrations. These images dissolve back and forth to current-day gay pride march color video, with upraised "We Shall Overcome" flags interchanged with street-wide "Black Men Loving Black Men" banners.

In a lone close-up, Riggs returns to the screen, concluding, "Whatever awaits me, this much I know: I was blind to my brother's beauty, and now I see my own." Death to the voice that believed we were worth wanting loving each other. Now I hear. I was mute, tongue-tied, burdened by shadows and silence, now I speak and my burden is lightened, lifted, free. Riggs' visage fades out, the beating heart soundtrack resumes, and the closing white-on-black creed flashes by word for word: Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act. A final cartoon "SNAP!" figure punctuates the film.

Style/Analysis

At the most basic level, *Tongues Untied* is Marlon Riggs' personal statement of what it is to be black and gay in America. Like many documentaries that deal with class struggles, the film relies in part on the visual and aural testimony of archival footage, historical photographs, newspaper headlines and individual recollections to chronicle its tale. Yet to these filmic techniques Riggs intermingles genres of rap music, idiomatic poetry, theatrical monologues and interpretive dance, each significant artistic expressions of the black, gay experience that invigorate his call to Aend the silence through a vocal revolution. Though Riggs envisioned his film primarily as a motivator of black gays (We could make a serious revolution together) its technique compellingly challenges all audiences without subordination. Elevated from academic bystander, the viewer thus becomes a participant in this performative tableau: as a student of SNAP!thology; as a silent intermediary in the "religion vs. politics" debate sequence; or as a capable interpreter of streetwise black gay vernacular.

Tongues Untied deftly intertwines its four narrative themes black culture, white culture, gay culture and black gay culture (Petty, p. 418) through a journey of Marlon Riggs' ethnic heritage and personal experiences. Broad brush strokes of objective representations become increasingly streamlined to focus on the filmmaker's subjective stance, as Riggs strips away the outsider's perception of black existence to reveal a dynamic sub-demographic culture. Accordingly, the film's initial archival footage of the familiar civil rights struggle for black visibility generates questionable benefits of that struggle with present-day video of African-Americans discoursing experiences with racism. This Awhite on black prejudice devolves to "black on black homophobia;" then further to issue-specific hindrances B acceptance within the black straight community, respect from the white gay community, AIDS with which the black gay male must wrestle. Especially, it is the black gay male's irreconcilable image of himself, and his reflection in his gay brethren, that is peppered throughout *Tongues Untied* and emotionally seizes the heart of the film's thematic rhetoric.

Using forms of artistic expression significant to black gay culture, Riggs designs vibrant, experiential illustrations to make his arguments, fashioning *Tongues Untied* into a performative, multi-dimensional stage for communicating the filmmaker's Ainternalized anger and ultimate celebration of male love. The incisive poetry of Essex Hemphill and his contemporaries steers the narrative through scenes of affected nightclub "voguing," a nostalgic do-wop quartet's crooning, and the jokes, gestures and jibes of the black gay community. The pervading intonations of the spoken chorus further emphasize the concept of socialized identity imperative to Marlon Riggs' insurgency. By correlating these sequences through varied editing techniques reflective slow-motion sequences, rapid cuts and gradual dissolves, portraits screened over moving images that the filmmaker aptly alternates the humor and pathos, the rage and compassion that characterize his confliction.

Tongues Untied concludes as it begins, with period civil rights march sequences. Yet the revolution sought by early demonstrators has, through the course of the film, been updated to the struggles of the black gay community. Visibility, respect and equality remain the goals, and a new statement, distinguished by the interspersed video of

present-day “Black men loving black men” banner-waving marchers, embodies Marlon Riggs’ vision of explicating the voice of the black gay male amidst the heritage that has attempted to deny and silence him.

Background on Director/Film

Born into a military family in 1957, Marlon Troy Riggs spent his childhood years in Fort Worth, Texas. Incidents of racism that marked his youth continued after his family moved to Augusta, GA in the late 1960’s, where he was refused sponsorship by his school to the state spelling bee competition after becoming his town’s first African-American champion. Another transfer relocated the family to Germany, where Riggs attended high school. He was awarded a full scholarship to Harvard University in 1974, and graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in history four years later. In 1981, he earned his M.A. in journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. Riggs’ long-standing aspiration to study and disseminate African-American historical truths through documentary film received its first widespread recognition when his graduate thesis on the role of blues music in African-African culture, *Long Train Running* won an American Film Institute award in 1982.

In early 1987, Marlon Riggs’s film, *Ethnic Notions*, which examined the perpetuation of black stereotypes in American culture, won first prize in the annual Black American Cinema Society film competition. That same year, he began teaching at U.C. Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism (achieving tenure in 1992). *Ethnic Notions* was broadcast nationally as part of PBS’s observance of Black History Month in February, 1988, and earned Riggs an Emmy for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Research.

By the time he began crafting his signature documentary in 1989, Marlon Riggs had already been diagnosed as HIV positive. *Tongues Untied* evolved as an effort to “break my own interior silence and shame and invisibility about being black and gay and HIV positive,” he said, “triple whammies in our society (USA Today, 7/16/91).” Creating the film “brought back very painful memories of racism and homophobia,” he told the *San Francisco Chronicle* shortly before the film’s U.S. premiere, but was “tremendously liberating.” “You don’t have to ponder what my message is, it is a call to action” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/11/90). The title of his film was inspired by the 1987 British anthology, “*Tongues Untied: Gay Verse*,” which included, among others, poetry by his filmic collaborator Essex Hemphill.

Initial funding for *Tongues Untied* was provided by a \$5,000 Western States National Endowment for the Arts fellowship grant and a \$3,000 grant from San Francisco’s Film Arts Foundation. Donations of equipment and crew volunteers, however, provided the bulk of the film’s \$40,000 cost. In the weeks before *Tongues Untied* was broadcast on PBS’s “P.O.V.” series during the summer of 1991, Riggs received an additional \$5,000 grant from the Funding Exchange’s newly-established *Out: A Fund for Lesbian and Gay Liberation*.

Marlon Riggs’ other films which address African-American experiences include *Affirmations* (1990), *Color Adjustment* (which garnered the filmmaker a George Foster

Peabody award in 1991 and aired nationally during P.O.V.'s 1992 run) and *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien* (1992). He was working on his documentary *Black Is, Black Ain't*, about black identity within the African-American community when he died of AIDS-related complications in 1994. The film was completed by colleagues.

Reception/Distribution

Marlon Riggs assumed that *Tongues Untied* would have a limited demographic appeal. Yet, when he premiered the film at the American Film Institute in November, 1989, and then at Berlin and other international film festivals within the next few months, he was amazed to see his film receive standing ovations by primarily straight, white audiences. Early reviewers invariably offered up the adjective *Angry* in describing the film's tone, but lauded its "no holds barred" approach to its subject matter and the diversity of filmic techniques it employed. "(It is) an intense film," wrote Sue Adolphson in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "that, though it has several provocative scenes and some strong language, ultimately is tastefully presented." Los Angeles Times reviewer Kevin Thomas called the film "stunning and original," while Sheila Johnson of *The Independent* (London) wrote, "as a piece of performance art, it's both lively and exhilarating."

During its first year of release, *Tongues Untied* toured the film festival circuit, including Filmfest DC in Washington, the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and Tampa Bay's first Gay & Lesbian Pride Film Festival. It also was featured by Filmforum at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions as part of a Black Men Loving Black Men series, and aired on public television stations KQED in San Francisco and WNET in New York.

It was WNET's broadcast of *Tongues Untied* that caught the attention of Marc Weiss, executive producer of PBS's "P.O.V." series. Weiss convinced Riggs to submit the documentary for consideration for "P.O.V.," and it was selected from among 400 entries to appear on that program's summer, 1991 schedule. By then, the film had earned Riggs over a dozen awards, including Best Documentary at the Berlin International Film Festival, Best Independent/Experimental work by the L.A. Film Critics Association, First Prize at the San Francisco International Film Festival, a blue ribbon at the American Film Institute, and an award from the National Black Programming Consortium. The accolades bestowed by such prestigious organizations, however, did not guarantee *Tongues Untied* a universally welcome transition to the national small screen, and once public television station managers learned it was slated for "P.O.V.," the film's subject matter and its use of profanity and explicit gay imagery became issues of controversy B first within the public television community, then in the very public pages of newspapers throughout the country.

In Spring, 1991, P.O.V.'s summer lineup was established, with *Tongues Untied* scheduled to air on July 16th at 10 pm, the final hour of evening prime time. Weiss, who identified it as "the riskiest of all the films we've shown" (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, 7/11/91) was prepared for some public television station managers to inveigh against the film, and his expectation was sufficiently met. In a June 13th *San Francisco Chronicle* article, John Carman offered quotes from some of the outraged programmers: "Deliberately

confrontational,' scoffed the program manager in Nashville." 'A viewer in a general audience would be totally offended,' said Milwaukee. 'Flies in the face of community values so much that there is no way I could put it on,' chimed in Wichita. Other public stations in the 50 largest television markets, such as Houston, Denver and Tampa, chose not to air it. Many stations that opted to air it announced it would appear in later time slots: 11:00 pm, 11:30 pm, even 3:00 am. In some cities where stations chose not to run it, special screenings were set up to give the public an opportunity to see the film.

Drawn into the fray, Marlon Riggs went on record to say that he didn't originally envision the film for television, that even he "didn't think prime time was ready for it" (Los Angeles Times, 6/24/91); but Riggs steadfastly conceded no apologies for its theme or content, either. In a special article for the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, he proclaimed, "this work documented the struggles of black gay men in America to break free of pervasive self-hatred, invisibility and silence - a triple burden forged by a national legacy of anti-gay, anti-black bigotry (It) celebrated a national community coming into voice: black gay men no longer willing to resign themselves to deceit, shame and the closet; no longer willing to mutely tolerate America's homophobic intolerance. For some critics, the controversy exposed the problem of public television's cloudy mandate. The Los Angeles Times' Howard Rosenberg wrote, "many inside the system have little understanding of what public TV is about, oblivious to the fact that its mandate is to challenge viewers, not sedate them."

As PBS's air date for *Tongues Untied* came and went, 174 of the 284 stations that routinely broadcast the "P.O.V." series refused the film. In the top 50 television markets, approximately one-third of the PBS affiliates refused to show it. Certainly, it remained a topic of praise and denunciation in newspaper editorials and letters to the editor, but by the end of the summer, *Tongues Untied* had returned to its film festival roots, leaving behind a roiling wake of debate that continued within public television.

Film Production Context

It's been a black gay summer across the nation, African-American performer Brian Freeman was quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle in August, 1991. In addition to *Tongues Untied*'s national television debut, another variation on the black gay experience was premiering in the form of *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary about New York City's black, drag-queen sub-culture. On television, black snap-diva film critics Blaine and Antoine, played by Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier, had become popular recurring characters on the year-old "In Living Color" FOX series. Even *Looking for Langston*, Isaac Julien's 1989 filmic rumination on the (purportedly) gay African-American poet Langston Hughes was experiencing a resurgence of interest as the gay black filmmaker was introducing his latest narrative film from Britain, *Young Soul Rebels* to American audiences.

Although each of Riggs' "triple whammies" the black experience, the gay experience and the AIDS experience had, for years, been subjects of documentarian exploration, *Tongues Untied* offered a groundbreaking filmic incorporation of these themes into one tableau. Regaled at film festivals, yet censured by many public TV station managers for

its explicit scenes and language, the film became a topic of debate over public television's programming directives. No doubt, arguments over freedom of artistic expression in the public forum that had been waged during the previous two years helped incite the 1991 *Tongues Untied* controversy.

In Spring, 1989, the National Endowment for the Arts was under criticism by Republican Senator Jesse Helms for its funding of a North Carolina artist whose works the senator deemed offensive to members of the Christian faith. Fearing similar condemnation, the Corcoran Gallery of Washington, D.C. in June cancelled an in-progress touring exhibit of the late Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, a small number of which had been labeled homoerotic and/or sadomasochistic. Despite the Corcoran's effort at pre-emptive measures, Helms and other members of Congress denounced the Mapplethorpe exhibit and added it to their cache, citing the imprudence of the NEA in funding the exhibit's organizer, the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Arts. That year, the senator proposed legislation that would have significantly restricted the NEA's funding decisions, but by late 1990, Helms' attempt at regulating the NEA was reduced to a provision by the government that the NEA require of its grantees A general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public (New York Times, 10/27/91).

The criticism over *Tongues Untied*'s PBS debut was another cross the NEA had to bear. Not only had the organization bestowed Riggs with a \$5,000 grant for the documentary, it had also underwritten almost one-quarter of A.P.O.V.'s \$1.1 million budget for the 1991 season. Once again, the issue of using taxpayer money to fund Aquestionable art was thrust onto the headlines, with the Rev. Donald Wildmon, head of the conservative American Family Association, leading the charge. Amid the early summer 1991 melee, Wildmon actually urged PBS stations to broadcast the film, a strategy he hoped would accordingly arouse the public's anger toward NEA funding policies.

Although the controversy over *Tongues Untied* abated after the film's national television premiere, right-wing organizations reserved the NEA grant recipient as ammunition in their Atraditional values arsenal. In fall, 1991, the Christian Coalition culled seven minutes from the film to create a causative videotape distributed to members of Congress still considering funding restrictions for the NEA. The following February, conservative Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan invoked it as an example of the Bush administration's misuse of taxpayer money to fund Aobscene art: in a Buchanan campaign commercial aired before the Georgia primary, scenes from *Tongues Untied* illustrated the announcer's warning, "This so-called art has glorified homosexuality, exploited children and perverted the image of Jesus Christ" (Boston Globe, 2/27/92). Riggs responded in a special article to the New York Times a week later, calling the Buchanan ad a "ruthless exploitation of race and sexuality to win high public office" (New York Times, 3/6/92).

The eloquent marriage of artistry and theme substantiates this film's groundbreaking role in the history of autobiographical documentary. Yet, *Tongues Untied* will be remembered as the lightning rod in the sturm und drang that enveloped public television, the NEA and

politicians in the culture wars of the 1990s.

Discussion

What are the narrative themes of *Tongues Untied*, and how are they interconnected in the film?

Tongues Untied has been categorized as performative art: Describe the narrative devices that support this description. How does Marlon Riggs use the attributes of black gay culture to support the socialization of identity? How does the use of racial and homophobic epithets underscore the text of Riggs' autobiographic monologue? In the film, Eddie Murphy's comedy routine ridicules faggots for the sake of laughter: Should a public performer draw the line at offending an oppressed minority group? In the Los Angeles Times, Howard Rosenberg wrote: 'The Love Boat' had more sex and, on any given day, your favorite daytime soap opera is infinitely more sizzling, yet *Tongues Untied* was to some measure condemned for containing provocative scenes bordering on the pornographic: Which scenes elicit this criticism, how do they differ from Rosenberg's observation, and why do they create such controversy? How are the black civil rights demands of yesteryear the same or different from today's black gay demonstrations? How does Marlon Riggs propose sending the silence in his call to action? Does the film end on a positive note?

Further Reading

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For articles and bibliographies pertaining to filmmaker Marlon Riggs, consult the following websites: www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/riggsBib.html and www.current.org/prop/proggay.html

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