



Riggs, Marlon (1957-1994)

by Teresa Theophano

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Writer, director, and producer Marlon Riggs was an accomplished and outspoken activist whose efforts to promote black gay male visibility live on through his films and essays.

Born on February 3, 1957 into a Fort Worth, Texas military family, Riggs was raised in Texas, Georgia, and Germany. He experienced the effects of racism throughout his life; as a gay man he also became acutely aware of homophobia as well.

Riggs' experience of racism began in his segregated childhood schools but continued even at Harvard, where he studied American history, graduating with honors in 1978. He then earned an M. A. in 1981 at the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, where he later taught documentary film courses.

Riggs first gained recognition for writing, producing, and directing the Emmy-winning, hour-long documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1987), which explored black stereotypes and stereotyping. The film helped establish Riggs' career as a contemporary historical documentary producer.

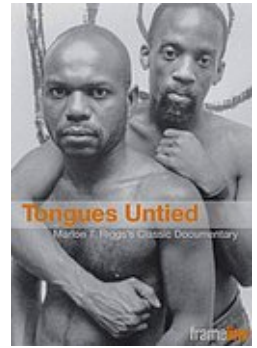
But most of his later films and writings probe the dichotomy Riggs perceived between the strong, "Afrocentric" black man and the black "sissy" gay man. As a "sissy" himself, Riggs felt deeply his status as a pariah within the black community.

Tongues Untied (1989), Riggs' most famous film, is an extensively reviewed and critically acclaimed documentary that met with controversy in conservative circles when it was aired on public television. Funded by a National Endowment for the Arts grant, it figured in the cultural wars over control of the NEA and the Public Broadcasting System.

But quite apart from the controversy it stirred when it was first broadcast, the film remains a groundbreaking exploration of black male sexuality, incorporating poetry, personal testimony, performance art, and rap as a means of exposing the homophobia and racism rampant in the lives of black gay men.

Riggs had decided to make the film after almost dying of kidney failure, which turned out to be HIV-related; the experience helped him recognize the need to address sexuality as well as racism in his work. Making the film was truly cathartic, as it allowed him to express his long-pent-up anger and guilt over the black community's treatment of him as an outsider.

With *Tongues Untied*, Riggs' work had begun to benefit *him*, rather than instructing, entertaining, or enlightening only the public. The film was screened at Cannes and at the Berlin Film Festival, and won awards at several festivals, including the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, the Atlanta Film Festival, and the New York Documentary Film Festival.



Marlon Riggs (left) is pictured with poet Essex Hemphill on the cover of the Frameline DVD edition of Marlon Riggs' most famous film, *Tongues Untied* (1989).

Later and lesser-known films that Riggs produced include *Color Adjustment: Blacks in Prime Time* (1991), which addresses images of black people on television, and *No Regrets (Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien)* (1993), which features interviews with HIV-positive black men.

His final film, *Black Is...Black Ain't*, is an examination of the diversity of black identities via music, history, and personal testimony. Released in 1995, it was completed posthumously.

Riggs' writings have been published in various arts and literary journals, such as *Black American Literature Forum*, *Art Journal*, and *High Performance*, as well as in the anthology *Brother to Brother* (1991).

His activism extended to writing on censorship issues and serving on the national PBS's policy committee and panels such as the National Endowment for the Arts. He consistently criticized both the racism of the majority white gay community and the homophobia of the African-American community.

Riggs died of AIDS complications in Oakland, California on April 5, 1994.

Bibliography

Avena, Thomas. "Interview: Marlon Riggs." *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, & AIDS*. Thomas Avena, ed. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994. 258-273.

Hogan, Steve, and Lee Hudson. *Completely Queer*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.

Riggs, Marlon. "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen." *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Essex Hemphill, ed. Boston: Alyson, 1991. 253-257.

Simmons, Ron. "Tongues Untied: An Interview with Marlon Riggs." *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Essex Hemphill, ed. Boston: Alyson, 1991. 189-199.

About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).