



**BFI FLARE**

# Tongues Untied

*+ intro by programmer Rico Johnson-Sinclair*

What does it take to claim your rightful Black identity, as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community? Poignant yet playful, and affirming in the most important ways, *Tongues Untied* speaks to the damage Black queer men do to their sense of self in majority white and gay communities, and how to break the cycle.

**bfi.org.uk**

## **Marlon T. Riggs on ‘Tongues Untied’**

In doing documentary work, I’ve noticed there are certain safe political subjects that we, as Black filmmakers, can deal with: racism, African-American history, culture. Yet within all of the excellent works there was this glaring void, this absence, as if the history of homosexuality within the Black community didn’t exist. All these things we were talking about – our history, our legacy, our culture – excluded any mention of those relations within the context of the lives of people we consider heroes.

This void was very troubling as I watched it over time. I want *Tongues Untied* to show the multiplicity of our conditions within the Black community, and how we deal with issues of sexuality and race, gender, class, political consciousness and responsibility, and identity. Identity is a big issue. As some would phrase it, ‘What are we first? Black or gay?’ I try to invalidate that argument. My message is that the way to break loose of the schizophrenia in trying to define identity is to realise that you are many things within one person.

*Tongues Untied* is explicitly a point-of-view work. It does not attempt in any fashion to address so-called ‘balance’ or ‘objectivity’. I am a gay man. I am making this work from this perspective. There is no debate about whether my life is right or wrong – it is right, period.

## **A contemporary review**

With an editing style that often seems to be choreographed to a rap beat, Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* takes on the complacency of whites and blacks, hetero- and homosexuals, in a bravura display of controlled anger. As well as questioning the validity of the perception of Black gays by white gays – hypertrophied figures of fantasy, often enacting a kinky variation on slavery and humiliation – Riggs details the landmarks (autobiographical?) of humiliation that a black gay has to endure.

This begins with a childhood spent in the Southern state of Georgia amongst local rednecks (‘motherfuckin’ coon’), followed by confusion over emerging sexuality (‘a punk’), and rejection by his contemporaries because of educational attainments (‘Uncle Tom’). Ironically, what Riggs’ modern black gay ends up confronting is the quintessential goal of the old American pioneer: to find a place of his own and establish an identity.

That all this takes place under the shadow of AIDS hardly needs to be mentioned. At the heart of the film (which has no formal narrative) is a quest

for unalloyed acceptance, beginning with an urgent incantation of ‘brother to brother’, spoken by a group of black voices over images of African, Caribbean and American blacks (the latter in that perennial Hollywood arena of ghetto life, the makeshift basketball court). The film then tries to place these blacks within the homosexual landscape of modern America.

*Tongues Untied* is rough around the edges and often inelegant in style, but it courageously points out the woeful gaps in American cinema’s dealings with the black experience.

**Farrah Anwar, *Sight & Sound*, July 1991**

**TONGUES UNTIED**

*Director:* Marlon T. Riggs  
*Production Company:* MTR Productions  
*Producer:* Marlon T. Riggs  
*Field Producer:* Colin Robinson, Ron Simmons  
*Associate Producer:* Brian Freeman  
*Production Assistant:* Donald Woods  
*Screenplay:* Joseph Bream, Craig Harris, Reginald Jackson, Steve Langley, Alan Miller  
*Director of Photography:* Marlon T. Riggs  
*Additional Photography:* Rick Cooper, Nestor Davidson, Vivian Kleiman, Alex Langford, Calvin Roberts, Scott Sinkler  
*Graphics:* Robert Kinnard  
*Editor:* Marlon T. Riggs  
*On-line Editor:* Vince Casalaina  
*Titles/Effects:* San Francisco Production Group  
*Music:* Alex Langford, Steve Langley, Marlon T. Riggs  
*Music Performer (Saxophone):* Idris Ackamoor  
*Music Performer (Drums):* Josh Piagentini  
*Sound:* Robert Berke Sound

**With**

Kerrigan Black  
Blackberri  
Michael Bell  
Bernard Branner  
Ben Callet  
Gerald Davis  
Kenneth R. Dixon  
Larry Duckette  
Darnell Stephens-Durio  
Gideon Ferebee

Brian Freeman  
Gene Garth  
Essex Hemphill  
A.J. Honey  
Paul Horrey  
David Hunter  
Wayson Jones  
David Barron Kirkland  
Richard Medford  
Cornelius Moore  
Brian Navy  
Willi ‘Ninja’  
Michael Oatis  
Bob Paris  
Christopher Prince  
Timothy Riena  
Marlon T. Riggs  
Ron Simmons  
Taalib-Din Shakir  
Robert D. Taylor  
Britt Tennell  
Arvid Williams

USA 1989  
55 mins

**BEYOND ‘THERE’S ALWAYS A BLACK ISSUE DEAR’**

*Director:* Claire Lawrie  
UK 2018  
30 min

**REGULAR PROGRAMME**

**Experimenta: Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask + discussion**  
Thu 21 Oct 18:00  
**BFI Flare: Marlon T Riggs: Black Is... Black Ain’t + intro by programmer Rico Johnson-Sinclair**  
Thu 21 Oct 20:40  
**Relaxed Screening: Summer of Soul (... Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)**  
Tue 26 Oct 18:00  
**BFI Blu-ray Launch: Short Sharp Shocks II + intro**  
Wed 27 Oct 18:10  
**Art in the Making: The Black Arts Movement on Film + discussion**  
Wed 27 Oct 20:40  
**Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Anatomy of Wings + pre-recorded Q&A**  
Thu 28 Oct 18:15  
**Silent Cinema: Body and Soul + intro**  
Sun 31 Oct 14:20  
**20-22 Omega**  
Sun 31 Oct 14:30; Thu 4 Nov 18:10  
**Member Picks: Moonlight**  
Fri 5 Nov 18:10  
**African Odysseys: Black History Walks Presents: Cause for Concern: Equal Before the Law**  
Fri 5 Nov 18:30-21:30

**African Odysseys: A Date with the Devil: Darcus Howe’s Journey from Black Power to Broadcasting**  
Sat 6 Nov 12:00-18:00  
**African Odysseys: Travels with my Camera: Is This My Country? + White Tribe**  
Tue 9 Nov 18:10  
**African Odysseys: Trouble in Paradise + Darcus Howe: Son of Mine**  
Sun 14 Nov 15:30  
**Terror Vision: Tales from the Hood**  
Thu 25 Nov 20:40  
**Missing Believed Wiped Session 1: The London Palladium Show**  
Sat 27 Nov 13:00  
**Missing Believed Wiped Session 2: Introducing ‘The Precious Things’: Holiday Startime**  
Sat 27 Nov 15:50  
**Seniors’ Free Matinee, in partnership with African Odysseys: Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored + intro**  
Mon 29 Nov 14:00  
**Relaxed Screening: Petite Maman**  
Tue 30 Nov 18:15

