***Tongues Untied* (1989)**

**Film background/summary:** *Tongues Untied* was directed by Marlon Riggs, a poet, filmmaker, and activist. Riggs directed several documentaries that engage with race, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and cultural representations of identity, including *Color Adjustment, Ethnic Notions,* and *Black Is...Black Ain't*. *Tongues Untied* primarily addresses Riggs' perspective on intersectionality and Black gay identity. The film includes several monologues and poems performed by Riggs, and features poetry and monologues performed by Essex Hemphill. It includes critiques of Black religious leaders' rejection of homosexuality, as well as the racism of white gay male culture. At the end of the film, Riggs also addresses HIV/AIDS, which had, by the time of the film's production, claimed the lives of many of Riggs' contemporaries. Riggs died of complications from AIDS in 1994 at age 37. Hemphill died of complications from AIDS in 1995 at age 38.

*Tongues Untied* is perhaps Riggs' best-known film. It was broadcast on PBS, and its broadcast sparked controversy over the National Endowment of the Arts and public funding for art like Riggs' work, which some conservative politicians referred to as pornography. In his bid to run against George H. W. Bush in 1992, Pat Buchanan's presidential campaign created a [campaign ad](https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4679699/user-clip-pat-buchanan-ad-featuring-tongues-untied) that used altered footage from *Tongues Untied* to critique Bush's alleged support "pornographic and blasphemous art." Riggs wrote a [rebuttal to the campaign ad](https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/06/opinion/meet-the-new-willie-horton.html), which was published in *The New York Times.* In it, he critiques Buchanan's political strategy as "a perversion of a different order now on the rise in politics: the ruthless exploitation of race and sexuality to win high public office." Much has been written about Riggs' work over the last 30 years, and his films continue to appear in university syllabi, museums, film series, etc. *New York Times* cultural critic Wesley Morris wrote an [essay](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/arts/blackness-gayness-representation-marlon-riggs-unpacks-it-all-in-his-films.html)

on *Tongues Untied* that may be helpful to read or to share with students. Morris praises Riggs' work for "invest[ing] a television-video format with alarming complexity: montages and interjections, ghostly palimpsests and these haunting rhythmic visual chants."

**Content warning:** *Tongues Untied* contains brief nudity and racist and homophobic slurs. “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of A Snap! Queen” also makes frequent use of the term “Negro Faggotry” in its central claim. You may want to consider how to talk about this essay and engage with its claims given the violent implications of this language.

**Running time:** 55 min

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 2: Riggs, Marlon. "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen." *African American Review* Vol. 50, no. 4, 2017, pp. 781-786. [ (First published in 1991)
  + Day 3: Anderst, Leah. "Calling to Witness: Complicating Autobiography and Narrative Empathy in Marlon Riggs' Tongues Untied." *Studies in Documentary Film* Vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, p. 73-89.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading *Tongues Untied***

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (15 min) Student-led scene analysis on *Tongues Untied.*
3. (5 min) Start teacher-led scene analysis with screening clip.

1. (6 min) Discussion prep.
2. (20 min) Whole-class discussion.

**Lesson 2: Examining *Tongues Untied* alongside “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen”**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection. Choose one question to respond to:
2. Did you enjoy watching *Tongues Untied?* Why or why not?
3. Did any components of Riggs’ film resonate with you personally? Why or why not?
4. What scene, image or idea in the film do you think you’ll remember most?
5. (7 min) Discuss.
6. (4 min) Screen today’s clip: (23:21-28:00)
7. (7 min) Discussion prep.
8. What is Riggs’ argument in “Black Macho Revisited?” What lines are most important for conveying that argument?

* *Argument: Riggs argues that in mainstream media depictions of Black masculinity, from Eddie Murphy to Spike Lee, Black gay identity is routinely dehumanized and represented as “Negro faggotry.” He argues that this is due to the a belief, on the part of some artists, that this is the best way to recover Black male identity within racist depictions of Black manhood in America. He critiques this “Othering” as a solution to the problem since it reproduces much of the degradation and dehumanization at the heart of historical minstrelsy.* 
  + *Riggs’ claim that his identity is denied within “Black Macho” mainstream culture: “Negro Faggotry is the rage! Black Gay Men are not…I am a Negro Faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be Black. A strong, proud ‘Afrocentric’ Black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual…I cannot be a Black Gay Man, because, by the tenets of Black Macho, Black Gay Man is a triple negation” (782)*
  + *Othering that aids in the production of “empowered” Black manhood: “What lies at the heart….is the desperate need for a convenient Other within the community, yet not truly of the community….an indispensable Other that functions as the lowest common denominator of the abject…an essential Other against whom Black men….struggling with self-doubt…can always measure themselves again and by comparison seem strong, adept, empowered, superior” (782-783)*
  + *Hypocrisy of reproducing minstrelsy: “The representation of Negro Faggotry disturbingly parallels and reinforces America’s most entrenched racist constructions around African-American identity…Majority representations of both affirm the view that Blackness and Gayness constitute a fundamental rupture in the order of things, that our very existence is an affront to nature and humanity. (783)*
  + *The depiction of the Snap! by Black comedians takes a complex language of communication and reduces it to a dehumanizing joke, which Riggs argues is the same move made by white people who appropriated Black culture and created minstrelsy: “Instead of a symbol of communal expression, and, at times, cultural defiance, the Snap! Becomes part of a simplistically reductive Negro Faggot identity…Thus robbed of its full political and cultural dimension, the Snap!, in this appropriation, descends to stereotype” (784).*
  + *Riggs argues there is a connection in the depiction of historical stereotypes of Black men and current stereotypes of gay men because they both suggest divisions in representation on the one hand between “comic eunuchs” (Sambo and the Snap! Queen) and uncontained and dangerous sexualities that are otherwise under control (Black Brute and Homo/Con/Rapist): “The Brute Black and the Homo/Con, are but psychosocial projections of an otherwise tamed sexuality run amuck—bestial, promiscuous, pathological” (784).*
  + *Riggs critiques a lost opportunity for pluralistic representation of Black male identities: “This is the irony: There are more Black male filmmakers and rap artists than ever, yet their works display a persistently narrow, even monolithic, construction of Black male identity” (785).*
  + *Riggs states that he refuses to continue to be silenced regarding his intersectional experience of identity: “Notice is served. Our silence has ended. SNAP!” (786)*

1. What connections do you see between the article and the scene we just watched, or other scenes in the film?

* *Editing, shots: This scene cuts between extreme close-ups on the mouths of two figures—one religious and one not—who question or critique the existence of Black gay men. After several cuts back and forth between these mouths, the scene cuts to a close-up of Hemphill, sitting in silence and pondering. Riggs’ voice asks, “How can you sit in silence?” The dichotomy established in cutting back and forth between the mouths and Hemphill’s face echoes the dichotomy between constant repudiation of “Negro Faggotry” in culture and the “complicit silence” (786) of Black gay men who have been unable to speak. During this shot, Hemphill begins by looking off to the side, but turns his eyes directly towards the camera. This suggests a move from object to subject, from silence to speech.*
* *Sound: This scene creates a dialogue in the voiceover track between Riggs and Hemphill, engaging in a debate about speech and silence. Riggs urges, “Tell him,” and Hemphill, looking at the camera and not speaking, is heard on the voiceover: “Silence is my shield.” Through this voiceover, and its connection to the image of Hemphill, Riggs suggests that the absence of Hemphill’s response to homophobia is not due to agreement, but due to fear. Riggs responds, “It crushes,” challenging Hemphill’s claim. Similarly, Hemphill’s voiceover states, “Silence is my cloak,” and Riggs’ responds, “It smothers.”*
* *Dialogue: One of the close-up mouths explains, “Yeah, like this AIDS shit, all these innocent victims, mommas and babies dying, because of dope fiends and faggots.” This piece of rhetoric is part of what Riggs critiques in “Black Macho Revisited” by linking 19th century pseudoscientic discourse to 20th century critiques, since both present a villain who is “diseased, promiscuous, destructive—of self and others—our fundamental nature, it was widely assumed, would lead us to extinction” (785).*
* *Sound/editing: Riggs cuts between clips of Eddie Murphy performing homophobic jokes to a laughing audience and the clip of Hemphill, looking at the camera. By overlaying the laughter of the audience with the image of Hemphill, Riggs points out the dehumanization and erasure of Black gay men in the media. This is similar to his point in “Black Macho Revisited” that images of Black queerness in the media places Black gay men to the position of being “a game for play, to be used, joked about, put down, beaten, slapped and bashed….by many of Black American culture’s best and brightest” (782). By significantly featuring Hemphill in these clips, Riggs highlights the harm of these representations, which is often invisible in mass culture.*
* *Sound/editing: This sequence ends with a montage of homophobic references from Murphy, Spike Lee, and actors filmed by Riggs, and the pacing of editing becomes very rapid to produce a torrent of homophobic comments. The scene ends with a final cut to Hemphill, who sits silent, but eventually speaks, slowly stating “I know the anger that lies inside me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit.” The breaking of silence in this moment is similar to the closing lines of Riggs’ essay, in which he proclaims, “Notice is served. Our silence is ended. SNAP!” (786).*

1. (25 min) Whole-class discussion.
2. What is Riggs’ argument in “Black Macho Revisited?” What lines are most important for conveying that argument?
3. **Additional questions, if needed:** Review p. 782. What does
4. What connections do you see between the article and the scene we just watched, or other scenes in the film?
5. **Extension question:** What representations of Black gay manhood have you seen in the media? What do you think Riggs would think of these representations? Do you think Riggs’ critique is relevant today? If yes, why? If not, what has changed?

*Answers may vary. One could argue that films like* Moonlight *and music videos like Lil Nas X’s “Montero”* *illustrate that there are now pluralistic depictions of Black queer manhood. However, “Montero” sparked profound controversy, perhaps highlighting the continued relevance of Riggs’ critique.*

1. **If time, extension question:** Review the scene from *Disclosure* that addresses some of the same themes Riggs raises (12:41-14:21). What are the similarities between Cox’s explanation and Riggs’?

**Lesson 3: Examining *Tongues Untied* Alongside “Calling to Witness”**

1. (5 min) Students write – compare/contrast. Choose one question to respond to.
2. Which of the films in this unit did you enjoy watching the most? Why?
3. Which of the films in this unit do you think you’ll remember most?
4. What connections can you identify between *Tongues Untied* and *Disclosure, The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson,* or *United in Anger?* In what ways do the formal elements or themes of these films differ? In what ways are they similar?
5. (7 min) Discuss.
6. (3 min) Teacher-led analysis begins. Screen today’s clip.
7. (15 min) Study groups.
8. (15 min) Whole class discussion.