



## ‘Calling to witness: complicating autobiography and narrative empathy in Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied*’

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on *Tongues Untied*, Marlon Riggs’s 1989 documentary whose aim is to give voice to the diverse experiences of black gay men in the late 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis. I examine Riggs’s use of autobiographical storytelling and argue that his visual and rhetorical strategies during these moments evince the filmmaker’s hesitation to become his own subject and to allow viewers into his experiences. In other words, the formal strategies adopted during the autobiographical sequences complicate narrative empathy. The authorship of one’s own identity is an important thread in *Tongues Untied*, and empathetic responses may be in part a desire in viewers to participate in the authoring of or colonizing of Riggs’s represented identity. I argue that the film resists this, and, while it remains a call to witness, it is, then, a critique of viewers’ desire for narrative empathy..

### ARTICLE HISTORY

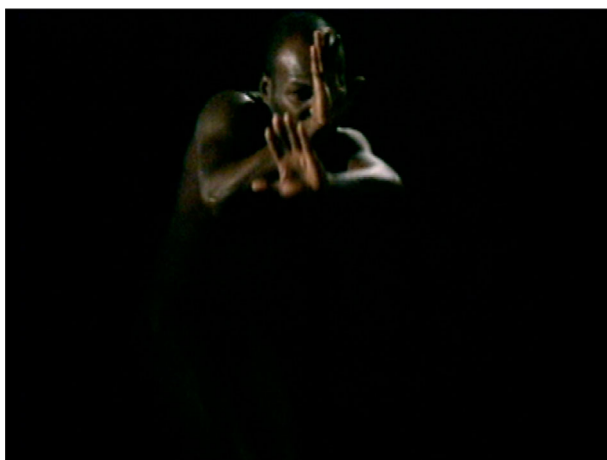
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### KEYWORDS

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During the opening credits of Marlon Riggs’s documentary, *Tongues Untied* (1989), the filmmaker’s own naked body is the sole visual feature in the frame. Crouching and bent over, and often partially hiding his face from the camera with his hands, Riggs moves back and forth across the frame. His body is largely in shadows against a black background, and on the soundtrack is a heartbeat. These images proceed in slow motion, so that Riggs’s movements are lengthened and extended and fluid (Figure 1).

This early sequence tells us a few things about *Tongues Untied*. First, the film will pay special attention to representing bodies, Riggs’s own body, sometimes naked and sometimes clothed, as well as the bodies of his many collaborators. *Tongues Untied* is a corporeal film that asks viewers to see individuals who have been rendered invisible. Second, the film will be personal. Riggs reveals himself and parts of his history to viewers; he is one of the key subjects as well as the author of the film. Tied to this, however, the film will highlight a common feature of autobiographical narrative: an ambivalent swinging between revelation and concealment. In this early scene, the filmmaker presents his naked, stylized body, but, moving and softly shadowed and often with self-protective gestures, he evinces a desire to cover himself, to hold himself back from viewers. Riggs performs his hesitation vis-à-vis personal revelation.



**Figure 1.** Riggs performing in the opening sequence.

This scene also acknowledges the presence of viewers and the ways that they might respond to or be called upon to engage. On a few occasions during the sequence, Riggs looks directly into the camera, meeting the gaze of his audience. Of these moments, Michael Renov, notes that the filmmaker ‘rivet[s] us with his fiery gaze’ (2004, 180). Even as he covers parts of his face, Riggs provokes viewers with his intention-filled looks. He asks us to look closely at his particular body, to see the individual it houses. But he also seems to ask viewers to reflect on their habits of consuming and authoring others. Riggs’s body is like a canvas. It is unclothed and ready for our impressions. We apprehend him, and the scene’s slowness and length allow us to see ourselves reading him. Riggs asks us, in other words, to look at him but also to notice ourselves looking.

Notably too, Riggs’s body is muscular and healthy; the heartbeat on the soundtrack is steady and strong. Later in the film, he will share his HIV positive status, what he calls a ‘time bomb ticking’ in his blood, but here at the outset, his body and the beating heart call attention to his health and his vigor. In an interview shortly after the film’s premier, Riggs describes the dual role he envisioned for this heartbeat. For him it is ‘a source of life and then eventually a source of death, since entwined with its ticking is the virus, a source of death. I wanted to play with that paradox’ (Kleinhans and Lesage 1991, 125). Just as Riggs will reveal his body and his personal stories to viewers in an ambivalent manner, so too will he save the revelation of his HIV status until late in the film. At that point, he includes a black and white headshot of himself, printed in the dotted inked pattern typical of newsprint that matches the montage of obituary images of the many friends he has lost to AIDS. In short, Riggs controls when and how much viewers know about him, sharing so that his viewers may witness his experiences, all the while holding back.

This early scene with Riggs’s body is only the first of a handful of scenes in *Tongues Untied* focused on the filmmaker himself or on his life story. While the goal of this film is to break the long-held silence about the prejudices faced by black gay men – to untie the silent tongues of the many men who collaborated with him here and who constituted his primary, intended audience<sup>1</sup> – viewers leave this film with a sense of having gotten to know the filmmaker, his history, his opinions, and his observations. Autobiographical

disclosures are important elements in Riggs's project. But, as this first sequence shows, Riggs's reaching out to the audience, with his story and his body, is complicated. As I hope to show, his use of autobiography raises questions related to the slipperiness of autobiographical voices, the relationship between subjects and viewers, and the limits of audience engagement, identification, sympathy and empathy.

At this particular moment, a moment when scholarship on emotion and affect, on reception, and on narrative empathy has become rich and nuanced, Riggs's film is a fascinating example of a work that represents the emotions of its creator and subjects and produces emotions in its viewers. It demonstrates documentary's strong potential for viewers witnessing others' experiences, yet it also reveals some of the limitations and the dangers of narrative empathy. Experiencing narrative empathy can have a profound impact on audiences, whether viewers of film or television or readers of books. Viewers of news media or of advertising, for example, can be manipulated by representations of powerful emotions in narrative. Sympathy or empathy with fictional characters is also thought, especially in mainstream conceptions, to produce in readers greater understanding of another's perspective or positive changes in one's own thinking.<sup>2</sup> Viewers and readers, however, can engage in their own manipulation of subjects in the name of narrative empathy. Experiencing empathy, a viewer can impose her ideas or reactions onto the experiences or emotions of another in the belief that what she experiences is what they experienced. It is for this reason that Sara Ahmed calls empathy, especially empathy for another's pain, a "wish feeling," a phenomenon 'in which subjects "feel" something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels' (2004, 30). Riggs's performance in the early scene discussed above alludes to just this possibility of others imposing their feelings and ideas upon him. Riggs presents himself and his body in front of the camera and in slow motion for viewers to see, but he also looks back at them and he covers parts of himself. He offers only a certain amount, not the whole, for his audience's consumption.

My aim in this essay, then, is to unearth that ways that Riggs's use of autobiography in this film asks viewers to witness, to see, hear, and acknowledge, but at the same time complicates and frustrates viewers' impulses to acquire or colonize his experiences through narrative empathy. I will look closely at the ways that one particular autobiographical moment within this film represents the impact that others' words and emotions, others' readings, have had on the filmmaker's identity; produces emotions and engagement within the film's viewers; and asks viewers to witness but not to share in the filmmaker's story. Autobiography often invites or may seem to invite the listener or the viewer into a shared experience with the teller, and this is especially the case when that narrative recounts vividly described painful experiences. As Elaine Scarry's work in *The Body in Pain* has made clear, pain is at once something a person experiences herself with great immediacy and certainty, but to others, its representation, its expression is 'so elusive' as if 'belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth' (1985, 4,3). Pain is, in short, incommunicable in any accurate way, but, as Scarry also makes clear, 'the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain' (1985, 9). With *Tongues Untied*, Riggs visually and narratively represents his own pain, especially the pain caused by prejudices he experiences in his youth and then re-

experiences as an adult when he finds those prejudices once again in the white gay community and the black community.

The autobiographical moments in *Tongues Untied*, especially those that recount these very pains suffered by the film's subjects, may activate a strong feeling of identification with Riggs and his collaborators, and writers and theorists have attested to responding empathetically to this film. As I hope to show, however, Riggs's representational choices, precisely during moments of autobiography, instead hold viewers at a distance. He positions us as witnesses; he does not invite us to share his experiences, the pains that he can only *represent*. The film points, in other words, to the dangers inherent in empathetic feelings that Ahmed details. Riggs's objectives in *Tongues Untied* are achieved in part, then, through a defensive autobiographical presentation.

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*Tongues Untied* sheds light on some of the experiences of black gay men in America, a group that faced and continues to face a doubled prejudice, racism from whites, both gay and straight, as well as homophobia from blacks. Riggs presented the film in October of 1989 at the American Film Institute Video Festival in Los Angeles, at many other subsequent festivals, and it was aired on PBS's P.O.V. series in July 1991 (Ford 2008). Perhaps the most experimental and confessional of the eight videos produced by the filmmaker during his short lifetime – Riggs died of AIDS-related complications in 1994 at age 37 – *Tongues Untied* is a hybrid documentary: it's a fragmentary, episodic film without a single overarching narrative that mixes a number of documentary styles and discourses. Riggs himself declined to call the work a documentary, preferring instead to emphasize its differences from traditional documentary discourse, 'I even abandoned the word "documentary," seeking my own sort of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their words' (Kleinhans and Lesage 1991, 120). *Tongues Untied* has a distinctly rhythmic, poetic structure that is framed by Riggs's integration of music and poetry spoken by the filmmaker himself, by Essex Hemphill, and by other poets.<sup>3</sup> The film includes many brief stories told by individual men about themselves or about others they know, a number of musical and dance performances by groups of men, images from popular culture, and shots of men voguing outdoors in New York City. Without talking heads providing specific names, dates, or background information; without a single, unifying narrative thread, Riggs creates a collage style representation of a community at a particular moment in time.<sup>4</sup> Writing about lesbian and gay documentaries of the era following the Stonewall Riots of 1969, Thomas Waugh notes a trend of eschewing observational practices and other realist modes. Waugh calls these films 'bent documentaries,' and *Tongues Untied* fits his description well. These films, Waugh writes, 'seemed intuitively to prefer artificial and hyperbolic "performance" discourses,' and, added to this, their mixing of public and private concerns often resulted in 'the tutti-frutti compendium of performance styles that characterizes so many of them' (2011, 215, 216). *Tongues Untied* fits neatly into this category of documentary practice; it is personal and experimental, and its tone shifts fluidly between intense seriousness and light-hearted comedy. As Riggs described in an essay published after his death, the film's goal was to end the invisibility and silence he and others lived. '*Tongues Untied* was motivated,' Riggs writes, 'by a singular imperative: to shatter this nation's brutalizing silence on matters of sexual and racial difference' (1996, 185). He achieves this with the film's

anthology format that allows for collaboration, a plurality of voices and bodies, and a fruitful mixture of artistic styles.

*Tongues Untied* received a good deal of attention from the mainstream press surrounding its broadcast on PBS's documentary series, P.O.V. in the summer of 1991. From June to August of that year, many newspapers and magazines – both American and international – reported on the documentary as well as on the controversies surrounding its funding and its broadcast. Riggs did not initially conceive of *Tongues Untied* as a project for television or for a wide audience, but when, following many successful festival screenings, P.O.V. programmers offered to broadcast it, he agreed, with the stipulation that his film not be censored.<sup>5</sup> *Tongues Untied* generated a wave of ire from American conservatives who were offended by its use of explicit language, by its imagery perceived as pornographic, and by its positive portrayal of gay black men. Conservatives were galvanized as well by the public funding Riggs received for the project and by the film's airing on P.O.V., a PBS series partly funded by the American government.<sup>6</sup> Much of the press attention *Tongues Untied* received, then, focused on the controversies the film generated related to public funding of the arts and on the numbers of PBS stations that refused to air the film or that aired it in low-rated, late-night time slots. However, despite the negative articles and reviews, many reviewers gave the documentary high praise, with one reviewer calling it 'a cry for community and a manifestation of that community, a call for the end of crippling isolation' (Haslett Cuff 1991) and another 'television of high quality ... a work of high moral purpose' (Editorial 1991). Even readers chimed in to counter some negative reviews. One reader, writing in to the *St. Petersburg Times* expresses regret that the local PBS station would not air the film, writing that he 'saw this film last year and found it powerful and convincing' (Condron 1991).

Perhaps because of this attention, and in spite of the late-night broadcast spot in some areas, *Tongues Untied* had a large viewership on PBS. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the film had 'about 100,000' viewers on the Atlanta PBS station and this represented for that channel the highest ratings since Ken Burns's hugely popular documentary, *The Civil War* (1990) (Yandel 1991). Even with the many PBS stations that refused it, *Tongues Untied* aired, sometimes more than once, in a number of American cities in addition to Atlanta: New York, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Minneapolis/Saint Paul, Cincinnati, Washington D.C., and Buffalo, among others.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the attention the film received around its 1991 television broadcast, *Tongues Untied* has figured regularly in scholarly work focused on documentary filmmaking, especially experimental and personal documentaries, and on African American and queer media representations. Among this scholarship, highlighting Riggs's use of his subjective perspective is common, especially as it relates to the film's place in the history of nonfiction filmmaking. *Tongues Untied* arrived at a moment when many documentary filmmakers were moving away from observational, 'objective,' and journalistic practices in favor of films heavily inflected by the filmmakers themselves. The film is part of a larger trend, then, toward personal, essayistic filmmaking, a trend that has been much written about by both Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, two important theorists of documentary.

Nichols has been a persistent advocate of Riggs's films and of *Tongues Untied* in particular. In "'Getting to Know You ...': Knowledge, Power, and the Body," Nichols (1993) discusses contemporary documentaries that demonstrate a proclivity for evocation and

embodied knowledge rather than for strictly informative documentary realism, and he cites *Tongues Untied* as a strong example of this trend. In his subsequent and influential *Introduction to Documentary* Nichols gives Riggs's work extended attention. There he discusses Riggs's films chiefly under the rubric of what he calls the 'performative mode' of documentary. By 'performative,' Nichols does not intend to invoke J.L. Austin's use of the term in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) where Austin discusses performative utterances.<sup>8</sup> Instead Nichols draws upon acting and performance studies to highlight the importance of performing bodies in the films he discusses. 'Performative documentaries,' he explains

bring the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge to the fore rather than attempt to do something tangible. If they set out to do something, it is to help us sense what a certain situation or experience feels like. They want us to feel on a visceral level more than understand on a conceptual level. (2010, 203)

Addressing *Tongues Untied* specifically, Nichols adds, 'We are invited to experience what it feels like to occupy the subjective, social position of a black, gay male, such as Marlon Riggs himself' (2010, 204). Nichols alludes here to a viewing experience akin to narrative empathy: watching this film, and hearing the unfolding narrative within Riggs's confessions, Nichols feels himself drawn into the embodied and personal perspective Riggs presents. In this view, which is quite distinct from Ahmed's conception as empathy as a largely problematic 'wish feeling,' narrative empathy, or sharing the feelings of a subject through a narrative, is a positive way for viewers or readers to understand what others feel and experience, to in effect share those feelings with them (2004, 30).

One could take issue with Nichols's conception of performative documentary in general, and some theorists have done so.<sup>9</sup> In particular, his idea that performative films aim primarily to create feelings in viewers rather than to forward a specific argument does not square with the strongly political implications of *Tongues Untied*. While Riggs's strategies do indeed draw heavily on performance elements and on embodied knowledge, his film aims to do something quite explicitly: to remove a group of people from silence and invisibility, to give individuals a platform, and to call the audience to awareness and to action.<sup>10</sup> And, in fact, the film performs those very aims. We can call the film performative, then, partly in the sense that Nichols intends *and* in the Austinian sense. More importantly, however, Nichols's view that he has been invited to empathetically share Riggs's experiences is a flawed reading of the film. It's a reading that ignores Riggs's own portrayal of the ways that others have imposed their readings on him in the past. Nichols's reading implies that the highly particular stories of a black, gay, HIV positive man can be uncomplicatedly transferred to others who live entirely different lives and experiences.

Michael Renov discusses *Tongues Untied* in two contexts in *The Subject of Documentary*: films of mourning and death, and, the context that most informs my work here, post-vérité self-representation. In the post-vérité films that are his focus, Renov explains that '[a] new foregrounding of the politics of everyday life encouraged the interrogation of identity and subjectivity and of a vividly corporeal rather than intellectualized self' (2004, 171). In language quite similar to that of Nichols's and Thomas Waugh's, Renov describes a shift away from informative, objective films in favor of more personal and experiential films, and Riggs's *Tongues Untied* is key here; '[s]uccessfully fusing the

personal with the social, *Tongues Untied* is both a germinal political manifesto of its epoch and a paradigmatic instance of the new documentary subjectivity' (2004, 180). Renov continues by noting the importance of the filmmaker's body in a line partly quoted above: '[f]rom the outset, Riggs puts himself and his body on the line. In an opening sequence, Riggs, undulating and unclothed, moves rhythmically against a black, featureless background, riveting us with his fiery gaze' (2004, 180).

Nichols and Renov both make important observations about Riggs's film; both recognize the key place he occupies among filmmakers who found their personal perspectives, their experiences, and their bodies to be fruitful foundations upon which to build their films. What they do not address in their discussions of Riggs, however, are the intricate and complex ways that his self representations, his use of his body and his autobiography, negotiate and control the relationship between subjects and viewers.

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Within the diverse sequences and styles that make up *Tongues Untied*, Riggs makes frequent use of autobiography. These moments do not account for a majority of the film, but, as Riggs describes in an interview, he, his story and his body, become 'a thread throughout' the film, a through line connecting the many disparate sequences (Kleinhans and Lesage 1991, 121). Trained as a journalistic documentarian, however, Riggs made use of his own story with reluctance. Following the film's broadcast, he gave an interview for public television, and in it he describes how he came to be his own cinematic subject,

... everything within me was saying, 'No no no don't do it. Find somebody else. Find somebody else who will talk about being HIV positive. Find somebody else who will talk about being an Uncle Tom. ... But you, hold back. Because it's too much at risk here. ... Let someone else do it.' And every time I realized that I was thinking in that way, I also realized that I couldn't ask anybody to do that, that really was my responsibility. (Riggs 1991)

Riggs attests to an important indecision here. His film will break silence, but he describes hesitating in the face of becoming his own subject. The reticence that we hear in this interview and that we saw embodied in the film's opening credits will remain in the autobiographical accounts he gives of his childhood experiences. This hesitation becomes a purposeful, performed strategy for retaining his sole authorship over his story and his identity; it prompts him to create a defensive position that ultimately frustrates narrative empathy.

There are a few long-standing threads running through the theory and poetics of autobiography, some of which bear on my analysis of Rigg's film. One examines the ways that authors belonging to minority or oppressed groups avail themselves of this genre, borne from and authorized by the dominant culture, in order to tell and to preserve tales that are left out of or erased from official historical narratives. As Linda R. Anderson explains, 'autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition' (2001, 104, quoted in Rondot 2016, 528). Another thread focuses on the complex and slippery relationship between the author, the narrator, and the subject, all three of which are located within the same individual person in this genre: the autobiographer. Finally, an additional thread, borne from the previous, and which has long fascinated me, analyzes the ways that autobiographers adopt distinct voices within their narratives. Autobiography is a dialogic genre in which an individual speaks both as themselves in the present and themselves in the past,

with these two figures overlapping and meeting inside the autobiographical narrative. Most theorists name these figures the *narrating I* and the *experiencing I*, terms that I also adopt in my analysis of Riggs's film.

Françoise Lionnet, in a chapter of her book *Autobiographical Voices*, writes about two Francophone women writers, Marie Cardinal and Marie-Thérèse Humbert, whose autobiographies 'center on the debilitating sexual and racial stereotypes of their colonial past and the degree to which their narrators have internalized them' (1989, 192). In this context, she names these two autobiographical voices the 'I' or the 'agent of discourse' and the 'she' or the 'subject of history' (1989, 192, 193). Lionnet brings together narrative theory and post-colonial studies to unearth the ways that these writers exploit the varieties of voice in order to testify to their particularly fragmented lived experiences. These writers present protagonists who,

become progressively unable to cope with 'reality' as presented and depicted in the master narratives of colonialization. They are thus alienated from something at once internal and external to the self. It is at that precise moment of disjunction between inner and outer or past and present reality that the narrative text articulates a dialogue between two instances of the self, the 'I' and the 'she,' the 'I' of the here and now, who reconstructs the absent, past 'she,' the emancipation of the 'I' being triggered and actualized by the voice of the 'she' taking shape on the page. (1989, 192)

The writers Lionnet discusses adopt a form, prose autobiography, that belongs to the 'master narratives' from which stories like theirs have so far been excluded. They adopt a divided, doubled voice that mirrors the strong division between their childhood selves and their adult selves. While Riggs's film charts an experimental course largely distinct from the dominant documentary discourse of the time, his moments of autobiography nonetheless evince this internal division, this separation of his present self, his visible and heard 'agent of discourse,' and his past self, his invisible, suffering 'subject of history' (Lionnet 1989, 193).

Riggs narrates a few distinct portions of his life throughout the film. He describes his childhood and his later teenage years in the American South and his experiences as an openly gay adult in San Francisco. I will focus here on one scene early in the film in which he recounts key childhood experiences, and within that scene, on two formal aspects: his distinctive use of autobiographical voices and his inclusion of external voices into his story. These formal choices allow him to at once narrate his experiences and represent his pain while at the same time to create a barrier between his himself and his story and his audience. This childhood sequence has three parts corresponding to different moments in time: in the first part Riggs describes the sexual games of his male playmates at around age 6, in the second part he tells of his move to Georgia at age 11, and in the third part he recounts his experiences in a gifted classroom in a new middle school at age 12. Rather than re-creating or reenacting his past through scripted scenes with sets, props, and actors, Riggs simply narrates his story to his audience in his own voice. He stands against a black background, wearing a black shirt, and he looks directly into the camera as he speaks.

He begins the sequence by speaking in his *narrating I*, 'I heard my calling by age six.' This is the present tense voice of the autobiographer at the moment of speaking or writing (Riggs 1989). The *experiencing I*, on the other hand, is the represented voice of the subject



in the past, usually presented in prose as quoted dialogue or thoughts in the voice of the autobiographer's younger self. Even as he speaks in these two voices, Riggs also represents others' voices, the ways others contributed to the writing of his identity. Throughout the scene, interrupting his story, Riggs includes brief shots of single mouths speaking epithets like 'homo,' 'faggot,' 'freak,' and 'Uncle Tom' (Riggs 1989). These voices punctuate the story he tells, and they demonstrate, quite forcefully, how others' words shaped and silenced the self that is presented in the scene and in the film. They demonstrate how others have shaped and written his identity.

In the beginning of this brief childhood scene, Riggs describes his and his friends' sexual games at age six. He describes the way that he and other young boys 'played sex' together, and he speaks in the voices of these other young boys from his past who argue about which one gets to play the daddy. Riggs speaks these voices himself, looking away from the camera and changing his tone and his facial expression to transform himself into the two six year olds. Through Riggs's performance, these young boys argue back and forth about playing the daddy (Figure 2). As he returns to his *narrating I*, he once again meets the camera with his eyes, explaining that his difference from these boys at age six was that he never argued; he happily submitted to his assigned role, not the daddy (Figure 3).

In the scene's second part, where Riggs describes moving to Georgia at age 11 and his relationship with a close friend there, we very briefly hear the voice of Riggs's *experiencing I*. After describing the ways that he and his friend kissed, 'dry, wet, French,' he explains that his friend's brother, catching them kissing, called them a name: 'homo.' Taking on the voice of his 11-year-old self, Riggs says, "'What's a homo?,' I asked.' An intercut image of an older male mouth replies, 'punk, faggot, freak.' After a cut back to him, and looking into the camera, now expressionless, Riggs returns to the voice of his *narrating I* and says, 'I understood.' In this moment of his narrative, the adult Riggs returns to his childhood self, voicing aloud the words of his youthful playmates at age six as well as his own words at age 11. While the one instance of his past voice, "'What's a homo?,' is brief, it reveals Riggs's willingness to return to the experience of his childhood self and his

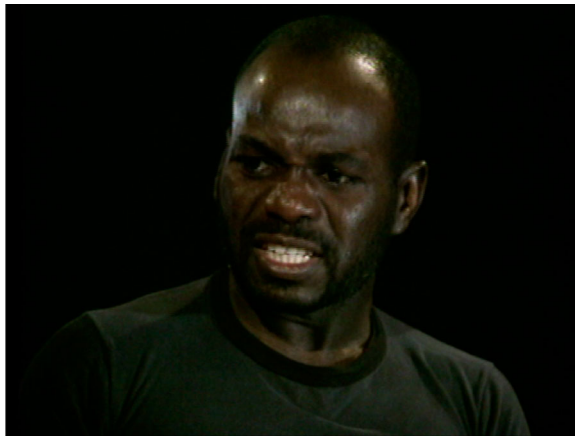
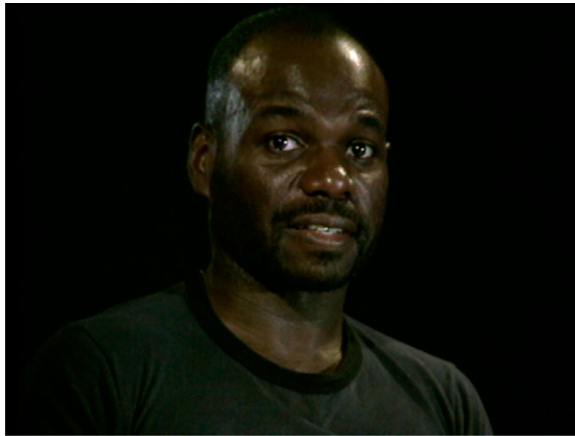


Figure 2. 'You the daddy all the time!'



**Figure 3.** ‘Not me. I gave it up. Free.’ [snaps]

childhood experiences, his willingness to speak *with* rather than simply speak *about* his 11-year-old self (Riggs, 1989).

Convergences between these two autobiographical voices such as in this example can reveal an autobiographer’s empathy with himself in the past. The autobiographer creates a character of his former self, enters into that former self’s voice and perspective, and re-experiences the moment and the attendant feelings *with* his past self. As part of a visual, performed mode, Riggs’s adult, present-tense body never escapes us as we hear the child-like voice coming from his lips. He is at once the body of the *narrating I* and the voice of the *experiencing I*. This move may quite powerfully affect viewers because we hear that younger self who, in this case, we sense is entering an emotionally traumatizing moment. We anticipate the pain we imagine he is about to feel. It is in this moment that he first understands how others will view him and his desires before they know him. Instances such as this, instances of an autobiographer’s own empathy with himself in the past may serve as a conduit for the audience to also empathize with the autobiographer’s past self.<sup>11</sup> Nichols’s words about Riggs’s film, his notion that the viewer ‘is invited to experience what it feels like to occupy the subjective, social position of a black, gay male, such as Marlon Riggs himself,’ describe a very powerful connection with the autobiographical self Riggs represents (2010, 204). It may be this scene, particularly the brief moment of Riggs’s *experiencing I*, and others like it that prompt the empathetic feeling Nichols has in response to this film. Riggs puts himself into a position to re-experience a painful past, he represents the moment when he understood that his desires would be hated by others around him. Riggs is very careful, however, to restrict the viewer. He keeps us mostly with him in the present as he reports on his past self rather than providing extensive access to the voice and experiences of his past self. He shows us that other voices have attempted to author him, naming him ‘punk, faggot, freak,’ so now here in the present autobiographical moment of his film, he limits the access he gives to viewers. Riggs seeks witnesses, but he defends himself against allowing viewers too much of his story and experience.

As the scene continues, the *experiencing I* drops away entirely, and we hear only from his *narrating I*. The words he speaks in this present tense voice are brief but moving,

The whites hated me because I was one of only two blacks placed in 8A, the class for Hephzibah's best and brightest. The blacks hated me because they assumed my class status made me uppity, assumed my silence as superiority. I was shy. I was confused. I was afraid and alone. (Riggs 1989)

Although powerful in its description of the hatred Riggs faced from all sides and his reaction to that hatred, this is a short and un-illustrated account of Riggs's middle school years. There is no thick description, no words spoken by him to others at age 12 or by others to him. We have only short, punchy, informational lines mixed within the intercut mouths hurling insults, which I will look at more closely in a moment. Everything he says at this point is in the voice of his *narrating I*, and his *experiencing I*, battered by the insults shrinks into silence. Riggs has no words to speak from his past voice in this period.

Whereas a brief moment of self-directed empathy featured in his telling of his 11-year-old experience, here Riggs remains distant from his former self. He does not let viewers see or hear the 12-year-old boy he used to be. Even as the camera increases in proximity to his face, the adult narrating some 20 years after this moment keeps his distance. He does not verbally re-experience this past. He does not reveal empathy with his former self. His choices in this third part of the scene mirror the hesitation to use his own story that Riggs speaks of in the interview cited earlier. They mirror the hesitation seen in the film's opening credits when his body is at once on view yet partly covered. This hesitation, this defensiveness acts to keep viewers from gaining entry into his experiences, his memories.

Writing in *Reframing Bodies* of the cultural trauma of the AIDS crisis of the late twentieth century, Roger Hallas examines forms of witnessing in queer films and videos. While Hallas analyzes in detail Riggs's short film *No Regret* (1992), produced shortly after *Tongues Untied*, he does not address *Tongues Untied* itself in depth. His remarks, however, especially as it pertains to the interplay and exchange involved in witnessing, bear strongly on this film. 'Bearing witness,' Hallas notes, 'involves an address to an other; it occurs only in a framework of relationality, in which the testimonial act is itself witnessed by another' (2009, 10). Riggs's continued attention directed toward the camera in this scene, and in other scenes throughout the film, his meeting of the viewers' eyes while he speaks in the voice of his *narrating I*, assumes an audience, a witness to his story. Riggs bears witness to his past, and he calls upon his viewers to witness his act of bearing witness. Hallas continues, 'The ethical address' of a person witnessing his or her own past 'entails a request to listen, to acknowledge, to affirm, and to share the experience of the event, in other words, to bear witness to the witness, to become a secondary witness' (2009, 12). This scene in *Tongues Untied* works just this way. Riggs places viewers in a position to become 'secondary witnesses' to Riggs himself as he confesses his past, as he witnesses those experiences over again. In other words, he allows viewers to share in the experience of this present tense moment. Viewers do not witness a recreation of his past, a re-enacted scene for instance; viewers witness Riggs's re-framing the events he experienced. He recreates the experiences in a highly mediated way, a way that both subjects himself to and partially shields himself from those past pains. Riggs asks for witnesses here, not for co-authors.

Riggs's own voice(s) are not alone in this brief autobiographical sequence. The filmmaker represents four additional voices alongside his narrative. These voices are perhaps the most commanding aspects of this sequence, and they point to what Ahmed

describes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* as the ‘stickiness’ of certain words, signs, and emotions passed between people. Ahmed conceives of emotions, such as hate or fear, as social and cultural practices, movements between people, rather than as things inside us. She explains,

It is not simply that the subject feels hate, or feels fear, and nor is it the case that the object is simply hateful or is fearsome: the emotions of hate and fear are shaped by the ‘contact zone’ in which others impress upon us, as well as leave their impressions. (2004, 194)

Ahmed explains that certain words, due to a ‘stickiness’ acquired through repeated usage, words like ‘faggot,’ ‘nigger,’ and ‘Paki’ leave a strong impression indeed. Riggs’s portrayal of these four hate filled mouths and the sticky, repeated words they speak seems to anticipate Ahmed’s ideas. Each of the four mouths bestows a name upon Riggs at different points in his childhood; they hurl these words at him, and they stick, rendering him silent and scared for many years. And importantly, these four mouths, disembodied from their persons, name him often before he is able to tell his own story. These names, in other words, are there in wait for him even before he arrives. Riggs’s autobiography incorporates these others’ characterizations of him, and in effect, he confesses their misdeeds in the same moment that he calls on viewers to witness his past. His narrative here, like his overall film, is polyvocal.

In the first part of his narrative, when Riggs describes his 6-year-old memories, an image (Figure 4) is repeatedly intercut as Riggs tells the story of playing sex with other boys, a close-up image of the mouth of a young boy who says the word ‘punk.’ The image only ever lasts as long as it takes the mouth to speak before a cut returns to the adult Riggs standing and continuing his story. In the second part of his story, Riggs says, ‘At age 11 we moved to Georgia. I graduated to new knowledge,’ and immediately following this, an intercut image of an adult mouth derisively says, ‘homo.’ Like ‘punk,’ this new name is there for him even before he describes kissing his best friend, before he asks in his *experiencing I*, “‘What’s a homo?’”, and becomes aware of the word’s meaning.



Figure 4. ‘Punk’.

The same is true in his narrative about going to a new school when he was 12. In this case, before he begins telling the story about being ‘one of only two blacks placed in 8A, the class for Hephzibah’s best and brightest,’ a mouth belonging now to a white teenager, again in extreme close up says in a southern drawl, ‘mother fuckin’ coon.’ Directly following this first white mouth, Riggs explains his experiences at Hephzibah junior high. In this third part, these mouths and voices, reach a fever pitch and finally overwhelm Riggs’s attempt at authoring his own story. The two white voices say ‘mother fuckin’ coon’ and ‘niggers go home’ while the two black voices continue as before with ‘punk,’ ‘homo,’ ‘faggot,’ and ‘freak,’ but now with the addition of ‘Uncle Tom.’ These mouths repeat and disrupt the narrative Riggs tells viewers.

As the scene nears its end, we see only the images of these four mouths and voices repeating their ‘sticky’ words over and over. Riggs himself is momentarily absent from the scene, seemingly covered over, buried by these hateful voices. When the visual and sonic crescendo of mouths and voices ceases and Riggs returns to the scene, he says, ‘[c]ornered by identities I never wanted to claim. I ran. Deep. Hard. Fast. Inside myself.’ As Ahmed explains, ‘signs become sticky through repetition; if a word is used in a certain context again and again, then that “use” becomes intrinsic ... This repetition has a binding effect’ (2004, 91–92). With this vivid illustration, Riggs shows how these words, this hatred, had a ‘binding effect’ on his identity. These words and the attached emotions stick to his childhood self, taking an important role in determining that self, a self that withdrew from the world, a self that remained in silence. Commenting on this very scene, David Gerstner writes, ‘Riggs deliberately builds the rapid and rhythmic montage around sound and image so as to elicit the violent effect of the rhetoric of hate, the cut, on his body’ (2011, 197). This ‘violent effect’ is apparent in the visual and narrative style of the scene. The mouths and voices cut through his story, his own words, and his image on screen. These voices silence him, tying his tongue.

In the present tense moment of the film, though, these voices are external to Riggs, apart from him. They do not occupy the same space where he stands and is filmed, and apart from his question about the meaning of the word ‘homo,’ Riggs does not speak these words himself or engage the speakers. Ahmed notes that the movements of emotions occur in the ‘contact zone’ between people. Here, Riggs keeps himself away from that ‘contact zone’ with these voices. Rather than together occupying a physical space, the black box setting where Riggs speaks for instance, here the ‘contact zone’ is a metaphorical one created through editing. This is a ‘contact zone’ that paradoxically keeps Riggs from contact but exposes viewers to it. Viewers come into contact with these voices in a way that Riggs performing on screen does not. Viewers are exposed to these words and these emotions that retain their sticky power. These words, then, finally implicate the viewers, asking them to consider their own positions, to become aware of where they stand.

Viewers witness Riggs’s telling of this episode from his past. We witness his revisiting of his childhood voice when he asks what the word ‘homo’ means. We witness and experience the way that he represents others’ ideas and words about him, their names for him, and their emotions directed toward him. We must feel a strong emotional and even perhaps physical reaction in response to the crescendo of voices coming at us from the screen. Riggs places us in a kind of contact with these voices, and what we feel in response will depend on our own experiences as well as on our cultural, social, and historical

context. As Kleinmans describes, though, the scene has enormous affective power no matter what our background, and, as he explains, its effect is to allow viewers ‘imaginative acceptance’ of Riggs’s adolescent self,

The effect of this sequence for all audiences is very powerful, for almost everyone in the audience can recall facing anxieties and doubts in adolescence. Many sympathize with the eighth grader facing hostile schoolmates shouting racist comments, but the compounding of the identification by adding homophobic terms calls for a new leap of imaginative acceptance for many. This sequence demonstrates how Riggs uses first person voice. Stylistically and politically it provides a formal possibility for documentary to fulfill an increasingly necessary (on practical, theoretical, and political levels) demand to express gender/ sexuality, race and class issues simultaneously and in their fully articulated complexity. (1991, pp. 9–10 of 19)

Riggs’s own voice as a filmmaker and as an autobiographer is no longer silenced. As Lionnet says of the post-colonial writers she describes, his voice is ‘emancipated’ in part by its return to the silenced experiences of his past self. We witness that voice coming free. What we do not take from this film, however, is the pain or experience he represents. Riggs could have represented his past in a way that allowed viewers more immediate access to it. His choices instead highlight the circumscribed space he allows us with respect to his past experiences. He does not wish us to have his experiences. He wishes us to witness them, acknowledge them.

Viewers who have had very similar experiences to those Riggs describes, other black gay men whom Riggs counted among his originally intended audience, very likely have a strong sense of recognition here and throughout film; viewers who have not (and I count myself among this latter group) may feel a strong sense of sympathy from witnessing this act of self narrative and from the contact with those voices. But ultimately, Riggs keeps his story, his experience, for himself. He has shown us that he has already known others writing his identity, others claiming they know him even before he can tell his story.

In an interview given after *Tongues Untied* had screened for several festival audiences and school groups, but before it had aired on PBS or generated commentary in the mainstream press, Riggs describes his surprise at the wide variety of people the film had positively impacted. Riggs had accompanied the film and presented it before many of these audiences, essentially watching how his viewers received his work. ‘*Tongues Untied* has transcended my expectations of who would understand it, who would be moved by it,’ he explains to his interviewer, ‘I had intended this work specifically for black gay men. ... Something that I thought was very personal and specific to the community reached beyond that and touched people of diverse backgrounds and experiences’ (Anbian 1990, 5). That the film opened eyes and minds, that it penetrated audiences unanticipated by Riggs, speaks to its strong success at conveying the messages Riggs and his collaborators intended. The film became a vehicle for diverse audiences to witness the experiences of black gay men at a time in recent American history that was distinctly unfriendly toward their stories, their experiences, and their bodies.

That this is the case, however, that this film touched many of its viewers, this viewer included, does not mean that we have known or have experienced what Riggs or his collaborators experienced and represented in the film. To witness, to feel sympathy, and to have gained insight into another’s experience is not to have had the experience. While empathy, and narrative empathy in particular, may be a ‘wish feeling’ as Ahmed describes it, autobiographers, filmmakers, and writers can present their work in ways that tend to

promote audience empathy. Riggs, however, would very likely agree with Ahmed. Personal control over self-inscription is a key component of this film's intertwining themes. His goal is partly to present his experiences, authored by him alone. Riggs allows us to witness, not to take and to have.

## Notes

1. In multiple interviews, Riggs described *Tongues Untied* as a film primarily intended for a small audience of other black gay men, 'Since my intended primary audience was really focused on black gay men, I didn't mind if everybody got it. ... If others understand, fine, but making sure everyone understands was not my prerequisite in making this' (Kleinhans and Lesage 1991, p. 7 of 12).
2. For example, a *New York Times* op-ed from 17 March 2012 explains recent research in neuroscience that suggests 'that individuals who frequently read fiction seem to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and see the world from their perspective.' In her extensive study *Empathy and the Novel*, however, Suzanne Keen (2007) reviews many studies on the connection between narrative empathy and altruism, and she demonstrates that the purported beneficial effects of novels on their readers have not been proven.
3. Sheila Petty's article, 'Silence and Its Opposite: Expressions of Race in *Tongues Untied*,' published in *Documenting the Documentary* (1989) analyzes the film's overall structure against the structure of symphonic form.
4. Chuck Kleinhans, in 'Ethnic Notions, *Tongues Untied*: Mainstreams and Margins,' details the differences between the experimental style of *Tongues Untied* and Riggs's earlier documentary, *Ethnic Notions* (1986), which takes a more conventional, PBS style approach to explaining and surveying the negative stereotypes of African Americans that have proliferated in American culture.
5. Phil Kloer in 'Voices in *Tongues*' Echo Filmmaker's Experience' published in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* quotes Riggs as saying,

I didn't envision it for TV, because I didn't think TV would have the courage to show it,' he said. ... 'To sanitize the language would be to eviscerate it--the passion, the rage, all it means to be black and gay in America would be denied. Those words are the reality of the slurs against us. (16 July 1991)

6. P.O.V.
 

received \$250,000 of its \$1.1 million budget this year [1991] from the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition to his regional endowment [NEA] grant [of \$5,000], Mr. Riggs received \$3,000 from the Film Arts Foundation, a private group in San Francisco. But he said that most of the film's \$40,000 cost came from donated equipment and volunteer help. (Priol 1991)
7. 'The series producers of P.O.V. estimated in the early 1990s that the program could attract an audience of several million nationwide, mostly in the coveted eighteen-to-forty-five category.' Bullert (1997), 30. (Quoted in Hallas 2009, 130).
8. In Austin's book, performative utterances are those words that, when spoken, *perform* an action. For instance, when a wedding officiate says, 'I now pronounce you ...' those words perform the action of marrying two individuals. For Nichols, on the other hand, a key feature of the performative documentary mode is its lack of doing something specific in favor of producing feelings in viewers (2010, 203).
9. Chris Cagle summarizes some of the reactions to Nichols's taxonomy of documentary modes in his article, (2012), 46.
10. A number of elements of the film point to its status as a political manifesto and to its goal to call its audience, and especially its primary audience of black gay men, to action. The chant-like 'brother to brother' heard on the soundtrack early in the film and again near the end,

speaks specifically to black gay men, asking them to work together, to acknowledge one another, and to show greater love for each other.

11. Anderst (2015) describes the ways that autobiographical narratives can engage readers' empathy much in the same ways as fictional narratives, the more common subject in research on narrative empathy.

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