***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 in 1991, and its broadcast sparked controversy over the National Endowment of the Arts and public funding for art like Riggs' work. 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. (4 min) Start teacher-led scene analysis with screening clip. (Final scene before credits: 47:18-51:33).

1. (6 min) Discussion prep.
2. What is Riggs’ message in this scene? How does he convey this message through formal choices?

* *Message: In this scene, Riggs reveals his HIV status to the audience, and expresses the profound losses of those in his community who have already died young from AIDS. He expresses his fear about his own death, but also his sense of joy in the newfound power and inspiration he has drawn from Black liberation movements of the past and contemporary Black queer activism. Riggs emphasizes the power of his own voice (“Now I speak and my burden is lightened, lifted, free”), as well as the power of his ability to resist the internalized homophobia and racism that affected him: (“I was blind to my brother’s beauty and now I see my own.”)*
* *Sound: In this scene, Riggs’ monologue clarifies that the heartbeat sound, which has been present throughout the entire film, is partly related to his HIV status and his own impending illness and death. There is also a clock ticking alongside this heartbeat, which is quiet at first and grows louder. The heartbeat fades away over the course of the scene, suggesting an eventual death. [In an article we will read later this week, Leah Anderst quotes Riggs, who explained that this heartbeat represents “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” (Anderst 74)].*
* *Editing: As Riggs speaks into the camera, a montage of newspaper clippings of young Black men who have died from AIDS appears. The montage is slow, and gets faster and faster, highlighting the exponential growth of the epidemic and the devastation it produces. The sound of the clock ticking does not increase in pace, but does get louder, to mirror the increasing speed of these iamges. The montage ends with a black-and-white image of Riggs himself and lingers on this image, which is presented as his eventual obituary being added to this montage. On this lingering image, the ticking clock stops, and the film is briefly silent. Through this, Riggs engages the audience with his questions concerning his own mortality.*
* *Editing: This image of Riggs in an obituary-style photo fades into a clip of Riggs performing his monologue, representing his continued life in the present. This image fades into images and videos of past Black liberation activists, including Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr. etc, as well as activists fighting for Black queer liberation, including Bayard Rustin. The sound in this scene is a song that contests racism and homophobia, suggesting the interrelated nature of these movements and the intersectional quest for justice. By including clips from Selma in the 1960s fade into clips of Black gay men in the 1980s proclaiming on a banner, “Black men loving Black men is a revolutionary act,” Riggs contests the argument that these activist goals are at odds with each other, and instead presents them as part of a continual lineage.*

1. (20 min) Whole-class discussion.
2. What is Riggs’ message in this scene? How does he convey this message through formal choices?
3. What do we learn about Riggs that was not revealed prior to this scene? Why do you think he chooses to wait until the end of the film to reveal this?
4. What does he convey about the impact of HIV/AIDS on him and his community through this scene? How does he convey that?
5. Consider the sound in this scene. There are two prominent sound effects. How do they change and develop over the course of the scene? Why?
6. Consider the editing choices in this scene. How does Riggs use fades from one image to the next to convey his message? How does the pacing of his editing in montages convey meaning?
7. **Extension question:** How did you respond to this scene, emotionally? How did this scene affect you?
8. **Extension question:** Compare this scene’s address of HIV/AIDS to the way *United in Anger* addresses it. What’s similar? What’s different? What does this scene capture that *United in Anger* may miss? What formal choices are similar or different?

**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 distinction does Riggs draw between “Black Gay Men” and “Negro Faggotry?” How does this relate to his claim?
4. Review 782-783. What does Riggs’ bring up about “Othering?” What is the purpose of “Othering” Black gay men?
5. Review p. 783. How does Riggs bring up the history of minstrelsy? Why is it important to his claim?
6. Review p. 784. Consider Riggs’ commentary about the Snap! Why does he bring up this example? What does it represent? How does the Snap!thology scene in *Tongues Untied* help us understand this claim?
7. Review p. 786. How does Riggs close his piece? Why do you think he chooses to close it this way?
8. What connections do you see between the article and the scene we just watched, or other scenes in the film?
9. Consider Riggs’ choice to cut between the extreme close-ups of mouths and Hemphill’s face at the start of this sequence. What is the effect of that choice? How does it relate to claims in the essay?
10. Consider the debate in the voiceover between Hemphill’s voice and Riggs’ voice. What does this debate convey to the audience? How does it relate to Riggs’ claims in the essay?
11. Consider the montage that features clips of Eddie Murphy, Spike Lee films, etc. What do you notice about the editing in this montage? What is the effect of that editing? What is the effect of featuring Hemphill’s face throughout this montage? How does it relate to Riggs’ claims in the essay?
12. Consider the choice to end this sequence with Hemphill speaking. What is the impact of this choice? How does this relate to Riggs’ essay?
13. **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 (Call Me By Your Name)”* *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) Screen today’s clip, in which Riggs describes his childhood (11:22-14:05). [**Note on an alternative plan:** Since Anderst analyzes this scene in detail, you could choose to screen and discuss this scene as I have in this plan, or you could choose another scene to examine narrative empathy. The most relevant additional scene to examine Anderst’s claim is the sequence about racism in San Francisco (16:32-19:27), but you may want to consider how your class will respond to the graphic, racist imagery presented in this scene.]
7. (15 min) Study groups.
   1. What is Anderst’s argument in “Calling to Witness?

* *Anderst suggests that Riggs utilizes a “defensive autobiographical presentation” (76) in order to share part, but not all of himself. She argues he “position[s] us as witnesses; he does not invite us to share his experiences” (76). She continues, “Riggs presents himself and his body in front of the camera and in slow motion for viewers to see, but also looks back at them and he covers parts of himself” (75). Anderst intends to “unearth the ways that Riggs’ 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” (75). Anderst suggests that this is position Riggs’ takes is because of the “dangers of narrative empathy” (75), which include that “a viewer can impose his ideas or reactions onto the experiences or emotions of another” (75). Anderst concludes her piece succinctly by drawing this distinction: “He does not wish us to have his experiences. He wishes us to witness them, acknowledge them…Riggs allows us to witness, not to take and to have” (86-87).*
* *Anderst critiques Bill Nichols’ analysis of the film, in which Nichols praises the film’s ability to enable the audience to “experience what it feels like to occupy the subjective, social position of a black gay male” (78). Anderst argues that Nichols’ analysis is flawed because it “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” (78).* 
  1. How does the scene we just re-watched, or other scenes in the film, relate to Anderst’s argument? What other details from this scene did you find interesting?
* *Anderst examines how this scene illustrates her claim about the “defensive autobiographical position” that Riggs takes in the film; she examines “his distinctive use of autobiographical voices and his exclusion 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 himself and his story and his audience” (80).*
* *Anderst close-reads the scene we just watched. She uses the distinction between the “narrating I” and the “experiencing I” to examine Riggs’ two distinct autobiographical voices in this scene. She explains that he uses the “narrating I” to provide the “present tense voice of the autobiographer at the moment of speaking or writing” (80). The experiencing I is the “represented voice of the subject in the past” (81). She examines how Riggs begins with the narrating I, uses the experiencing I to show the audience childhood play, returns to the narrating I to analyze his emerging sexuality, and returns to the experiencing I, significantly, to ask “What’s a homo?” Anderst explains that this critical interjection reveals “Riggs’ willingness to return to the experience of his childhood self” and his “willingness to speak with them rather than simply speak about them” (82). She articulates that this is a critical moment for the audience’s relationship to Riggs’ narrative, since we “anticipate the pain we imagine he is about to feel” (82); “he represents the moment when he understood that his desires would be hated by others around him” (82).*
* *However, Anderst points out that Riggs very intentionally does not continue with the experiencing I in this moment: “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” (82). Later, she adds to this: “Riggs could have presented his past in a way that allowed viewers more immediate access to [his pain]. His choices instead highlight the circumscribed space he allows us with respect to his past experiences” (86).*
* *Anderst explains that in examining the racism he experienced in school, he uses only the narrating I: “Here Riggs remains distant from his former self…Even as the camera increases in proximity to his face, the adult narrating some 20 years after this moment keeps his distance…This defensiveness acts to keep viewers from gaining entry into his experiences, his memories” (83).*
* *Secondary witnessing: Anderst argues that Riggs’ autobiographical position in this scene casts the audience as “secondary witnesses to Riggs himself as he confesses his past, as he witnesses those experiences over again” (83).*
* *Anderst points out what alternative choices that Riggs could have made to increase empathy, but that he chose not to make: “Viewers do not witness a recreation of his past, a re-enacted scene for instance; viewers witness Riggs’ re-framing the events he experienced” (83).*
* *Montage of insults: Anderst uses Sara Ahmed’s concept of “stickiness” to examine the emotional impact of repeated language that affected Riggs throughout his childhood. She explains that Ahmed argues that emotions are “movements between people” that “leave their impressions” (84), and examines how Riggs’ use of framing, repetition, editing and sound convey the sticky nature of the emotional power of the insults hurled at Riggs throughout his childhood. As Anderst points out about the editing of this scene, “The mouths and voices cut through his story, his own words, and his image on screen” (85).*
* *In analyzing the defensive autobiographical position Riggs takes in depicting these insults, Anderst points out the distance Riggs creates between himself and this language, despite the way they “cut through his story, and the way Riggs asks the viewer to engage with this language” “They do not occupy the same space where he stands and is filmed…he does not speak these worlds himself or engage the speakers…This is a contact zone that paradoxically keeps Riggs from contact but exposes viewers to it. 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” (85).*

1. (15 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. What is Anderst’s argument in “Calling to Witness?
      1. Review p. 75-76. What is narrative empathy? What are the dangers of it? How does Anderst argue that Riggs responds to these dangers?
      2. Review Anderst’s explanation of Bill Nichols’ analysis of Riggs’ work on p. 78. What does she say is flawed about his argument?
   2. How does the scene we just re-watched, or other scenes in the film, relate to Anderst’s argument?
      1. Review p. 80-81. What is the narrating I? What is the experiencing I? On p. 81-82, how does Anderst explain Riggs’ use of these two voices in this scene?
      2. Review p. 83. What is “secondary witnessing?” Why does Anderst argue that we act as secondary witnesses in this scene?
      3. Review p. 83. What alternative choices does Anderst point out that Riggs could have chosen to make, but didn’t? According to her, why did he make that choice? Do you agree with her claim?
      4. Review p. 85. According to Sara Ahmed, what is “stickiness?” According to Anderst, how does Riggs convey the “stickiness” of insults through this scene? How does Riggs position himself, and the audience, in relationship to the sticky power of these insults?
   3. **Extension question:** Do you agree or disagree with Anderst’s argument? Why?

*Answers may vary. Students may take Nichols’ position using a few critical moments in the film, such as Riggs’ asking “What’s a homo?” with the experiencing I, or through the scene we close-read in yesterday’s class that helps readers imagine what Hemphill must feel like upon seeing media stereotypes.*

* 1. **Extension question:** Consider the closing shot of this scene. What do you notice about the lighting and the cinematography? Do you think these formal choices support or challenge Anderst’s claims?

*The camera slowly zooms into Riggs’ face, and the lights dim as it zooms in. One could argue that the extreme close-up the scene ends on is intended to draw the viewer into Riggs’ vulnerability and share in his emotions. One could also argue that by dimming the lighting as he does this, Riggs limits the audience’s ability to fully see him, which supports Anderst’s claim.*

* 1. **Extension question:** Consider Anderst’s summary of the controversy surrounding the PBS broadcast of *Tongues Untied* in 1991. Does this controversy surprise you? Why or why not? Do you think this film would generate similar controversy if it were broadcast on television today? Why or why not?
  2. **Extension question:** Anderst close-reads a single scene of this film, lasting only two minutes, for about five pages. What does she include in this close-reading? What can this text teach us about how to effectively write about film?