



The director of a celebrated Black gay film talks about his current and future projects

# Marlon Riggs Untied

By Revon Kyle Banneker

As producer, director and writer of the documentary *Ethnic Notions*, a history of the stereotypes of Blacks as revealed through cartoons and caricatures, Marlon T. Riggs received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the California Council for the Humanities. The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awarded *Ethnic Notions* its Individual Craft Award for Outstanding Achievement in Research in the National News and Documentary category—everybody else calls it the Emmy. More top honors have come from such media showcases as the San Francisco International Film Festival and the American Film and Video Festival. Riggs is currently working on a sequel, *Color Adjustment*, supported by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

*Ethnic Notions* did not reflect a gay focus, but Riggs's 1989 video about Black gay male identity, *Tongues Untied*, unleashed the blackened gay voices of suppressed hunger, anger, and aloneness. In making *Tongues Untied*, Riggs collaborated with a number of nationally known Black gay artists and organizations, including poets Essex Hemphill, Alan Miller, and Steve Langley, and singer-composer Blackberri, as well as New York's *Gay Men of African Descent* and Oakland's *Black Gay Men United*. The 55-minute video premiered at the American Film Institute's 1989 Video Festi-

val and was the centerpiece of the San Francisco Film Arts Festival's "Gay Lives '89" program. It has appeared at the Berlin International Film Festival as well as the Cleveland International Film Festival. It received an Outstanding Merit Award in the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame Film/Video Competition and an Honorable Mention in the Black Maria Film Festival.

A media activist, Riggs has testified before the US Senate, spoken at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and written numerous articles on the state of independent documentary production. He is vice-president of the Bay Area Video Coalition and a steering committee member of the Association of California Independent Public Television Producers.

Riggs graduated with honors from Harvard in 1978 and earned a master's degree in journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1981. A native of Texas, Riggs resides with his lover in Oakland, California, and is a faculty member at the University of California at Berkeley.

**Revon Kyle Banneker:** Is there a history of Black gay films? Or are we just seeing the beginning of it?

**Marlon Riggs:** No. I think we're just seeing the beginning. My work, I hope, will inspire others to do work like this and to explore their own experiences, to reflect their own personal

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A longer version of this interview appeared in *BLK*, vol. 2, no. 4 (April, 1990).

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biographies, their lives, their issues on the screen. I don't want to be the only one out there doing this. That gets very tiresome and lonely. In fact, what was inspiring about working on this project was the degree to which I was able to collaborate with other artists, though they weren't filmmakers—the poorest dancers, singers, musicians, composers, “snap-thologists.” That was the fun of working on this, bringing the community together on this behalf, this one project. It would be nice if this work would not only inspire collaborations like that but also encourage filmmakers who

are Black and gay or lesbian to really deal with the substance of their own lives and not have to speak in camouflage, not have to channel and sublimate things so that they won't threaten or challenge the larger community and won't threaten their own careers.

**RKB:** Do these films really change anything?

**MR:** [Laughs.] You know, you hear about people wanting to get this message across: it could be about race or it could be about economics or about allegations they couldn't prove. I think some films do change things for people. What films like *Tongues Untied* do, especially for people who have had, by and large, no images of them[selves] out there to see, is give them a visible and visual representation of their lives.

We live in a society in which truth is often defined by your reflection on the screen, whether it's the television screen or the cinematic screen. But you don't really live and you're not really somebody until you're somehow reflected there on the tube or in the theater. Things that you've thought about vaguely now come in sharp focus. Things that you've felt but never been able to articulate to yourself or to anybody else you've now got a handle on, you can talk about. There's a vehicle

for you to actually be able to discuss with somebody else something you might have felt uncomfortable talking about.

Films don't change the world, I have no illusion about that, but they do help some people understand themselves better, help them move to take some action they might not have taken before, whether it's just objecting to a joke or standing up for themselves and not feeling ashamed about being gay. Whatever the consequence might be, I think that films like this do help.

**RKB:** So I assume you definitely plan to do some more films dealing with Black gays.

**MR:** Yeah. In fact, the newest piece is *Affirmations*. It is affirmations of Black gay experiences. It takes a different form, not quite like *Tongues Untied*. There's no poetry in it as such, it's more interview, as well as straightforward documentary in some respects.

It deals with the march on African-American Celebration Day in Harlem this year. There was a large Black gay and lesbian contingent that marched during this very traditional march. It was a very powerful event and there is a confrontation at one point between a homophobic young man on the side and the Black gay marchers. The homophobic man was telling the marchers they weren't part of the Black community: “In Africa they don't do this—you're slaves, you're still slaves! You're slaves to the white man—free yourselves! You're offending our families.”

You had the back and forth and I move that into an analysis of homophobia and racism, more from the perspective of people that I interview. You hear their voices while you see images from this parade and march. It should be out by the end of February 1991.

**RKB:** Can you give us a hint about what specific aspects of Black gay experience your future films are going to zero in on?

**MR:** I know some things I would like to do: there are people who have never had relations with white people, who never went to college, who don't identify with the gay movement or

explicit gay identity. I think those people need to be heard from—what are the issues of their lives? There are people who have different kinds of experiences—people who are much more political, people who are working within nationalist frameworks. How do you reconcile that with the dominant sort of homophobia in nationalism—especially Black nationalism—today? Those are different kinds of issues that I haven't dealt with at all.

There are issues of dressing in drag which I really don't deal with. You see people who are drag queens in the video, and I think that is something to be dealt with. Hustlers and so forth, people who are sort of on the margins, even of the gay community—transsexuals. I think there is a lot to be explored. I know some of Essex Hemphill's work has dealt with that. I've already told him I would like to do a sort of experimental biographical piece based on his life and work. He has just covered so much territory!—not only gay but just generally Black male, regardless of sexuality as well as inclusive of sexuality.

**RKB:** Have you been pretty much involved in Black, gay organizations, as opposed to mainstream gay organizations?

**MR:** No, actually I've been a part of an informal discussion-support group in the Bay Area, Black Gay Men United, for about three years now. I even hesitate to call it an organization—we do call ourselves a "group" for good reason, in that we don't have a hierarchy or structure. It is a group of men who get together regularly to discuss ideas and experiences as well as to support each other through personal kinds of experiences.

With the exception of that, my participation in other organizations is giving money to different groups—political aims I support—AIDS organizations who are doing work. I give money to them, but I'm not an active member.

**RKB:** Since you identify rather strongly as a Black gay man, has the nature of your relationship with your white lover ever come up in any of the other things that you've done?

**MR:** Well, no. That's sort of the interesting thing. I have done work with Gay Men of African Descent in New York. I am a member of Black Gay Men United. We've done political events and so forth. But I'm very open with my relationship—it's not something that I keep under cover. These groups define love much more broadly—they see acts of love as having to do with more than acts of sex or who you live with. They're more concerned with acts of serving the community and what your work does on behalf of educating those inside as well as outside the community. They look at that as paramount, and I think people who know me and who know *Tongues* see that, too. They see that *Tongues* was coming out of a spirit, a desire to affirm Black men's relationships with other Black men, a need to build and nurture each other. I think it's very clear.

But I do know that within the community there is definitely an ideological split—people who consider anyone who has a relationship outside of the race as somehow being a traitor or less than really Black. I don't want to go too long on this, but I find it very divisive that our community constantly comes up against barriers like these: we excommunicate people because they're too light-skinned or they're too dark-skinned; they're not Black enough or they don't talk right; they talk too "white" or too Black; they're not Black enough. Or they're educated or they're not educated sufficiently.

We build so many structures to divide and define categories of people as somehow not belonging to our in-group. I think it ultimately defeats our chance of salvation and of lifting ourselves from the problems that we face. This for me is just one more of that kind of syndrome that is very historic in our community.

**RKB:** Has your consciousness as a Black, gay

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documentarian or filmmaker changed over the years?

**MR:** Oh, yes, definitely, in a number of ways. One, my consciousness as a documentarian, then as a Black documentarian, and then as a Black, gay documentarian—you've got many levels there to deal with.

I know that the voices and the tones that I've heard were generally and still are feminine—I think that's something peculiar to my nature as a gay man; it's something that I've come more and more to embrace in terms of the subjects that I'm willing to explore now. Before, my films dealt with more traditional things associated with African-American life and culture—with racism and the ways in which our people have built and survived in our community and nation. Now I'm looking not just in terms of general race issues, but at specific issues of sexuality mixed in with issues of gender and class and color. All of which are things that confront our community as problems.

**RKB:** Do you have any feelings on the "Black gay" versus "gay Black" controversy?

**MR:** Sure. That's what *Tongues Untied* expressly deals with, in part; the notion of hierarchy, of what makes us whole. Many of us try to divide ourselves up into part-Black and part-gay and then arrange these parts in some formal kind of hierarchy and decide, "Which am I first?" I think it's a very silly thing to do, because one cannot divide up one's character just so. Also, it's a very dangerous and self-defeating thing to do because one of the ways in which we've been oppressed and marginalized—not only by the majority white culture, but by the majority Black mainstream culture—is by our buying into this schizophrenia, this further internal marginalization of our sexuality. Because our sexuality has been treated as something without significance, without a history (that is, our community has no history because what we do and what we value in terms of our sexuality has not been affirmed by the majority culture), we ourselves treat it as something that doesn't need to be affirmed,

doesn't need to be valued. We really buy into that entire process and devalue our personalities and character.

There is no way to divide myself—I am whole, all of these things are complete and virtuous to me. Let people respond how they may! I don't buy into that question or the marginalization that answering it often entails. Nevertheless, the schism remains. Some Black gays want to maintain separate Black gay organizations, while others feel Black gay organizations are counterproductive, that segmentation is wrong, that it makes much more sense to build from within white gay organizations with the goal of just being a gay organization—not white, not Black.

If you ask, "Should there be Black gay organizations?" I give a resounding "yes"—I think there are many issues that we as Black people first need to deal with each other on, before attempting to build coalitions and bridges across racial and multicultural boundaries. There are all kinds of hostilities among ourselves that we have not resolved but must before we seriously try to branch out into other organizations.

I understand criticisms of that kind of effort, though; what tends to happen with all kinds of organizations, not just Black gay organizations, is that they tend to forget the lessons of oppression and become just as chauvinistic as those they were set up to be an alternative to. Rather than embracing diversity, multiculturalism, and respect for difference, people tend to set up their own particular kind of culture, trait, look, ideology as the perfect and only virtuous ideology, skin color, trait, culture. That is the danger.

In the context of so much violence, internalized anger, repressed emotions, and detachment, learning to love one another, to nurture one another would not just be a revolutionary act but *the* revolutionary act for Black men in America. Above all, that is what I hope comes across and what people will learn from *Tongues Untied*. ▼

*Revon Kyle Banneker was the pseudonym of a deceased BLK staff writer.*