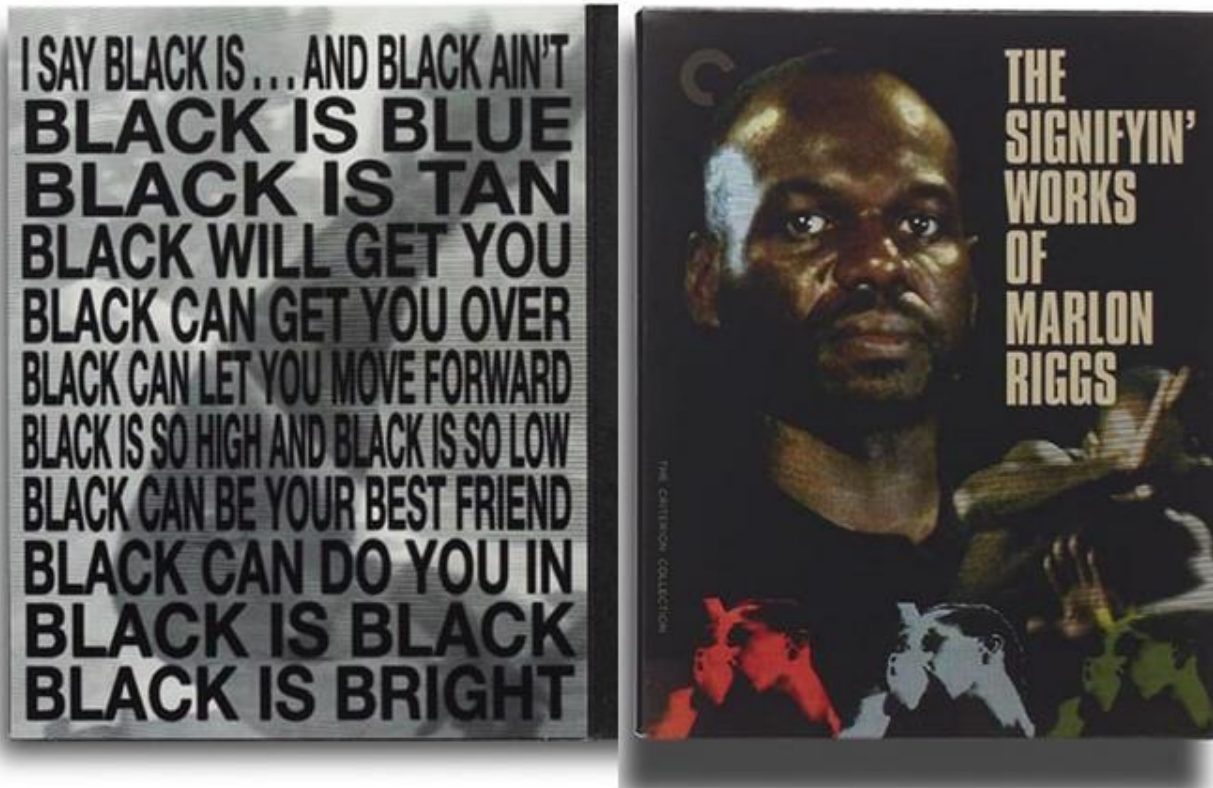


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In August 2020, responding to the George Floyd murder which forced the nation to reckon with racism in all areas of our society, the *New York Times* published an article about the Criterion Collection's lack of inclusion of Black filmmakers. Criterion has long been the gold standard in restoring and distributing important classic and contemporary movies as well as high-brow cinema, establishing a global film canon encompassing almost all the world's greatest directors. To be included in the collection is "the ultimate honor for a film's cultural merit."

The article pointed out that in its more than 1000 films covering over 450 directors, there were only four African-American directors and only four more Black directors from outside

the U.S. in the collection. Even noteworthy, celebrated filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay (*Selma*) and Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*) had been excluded.

In a mea culpa, Criterion president Peter Becker confessed to the omission and vowed to make changes. "There's nothing I can say about it that will make it okay. The fact that things are missing and specifically that Black voices are missing, is harmful and that's clear. We have to fix that."



Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill in

'Tongues Untied'

Becker is creating a "curatorial advisory group" to help identify new acquisitions and "senior leadership coaching for all our management teams in terms of anti-racist hiring practices." Becker also promised to hire more Black employees as there were none in the company's leadership positions. He concluded, "I think canons end up being defined as much by what they leave out as by what they let in."

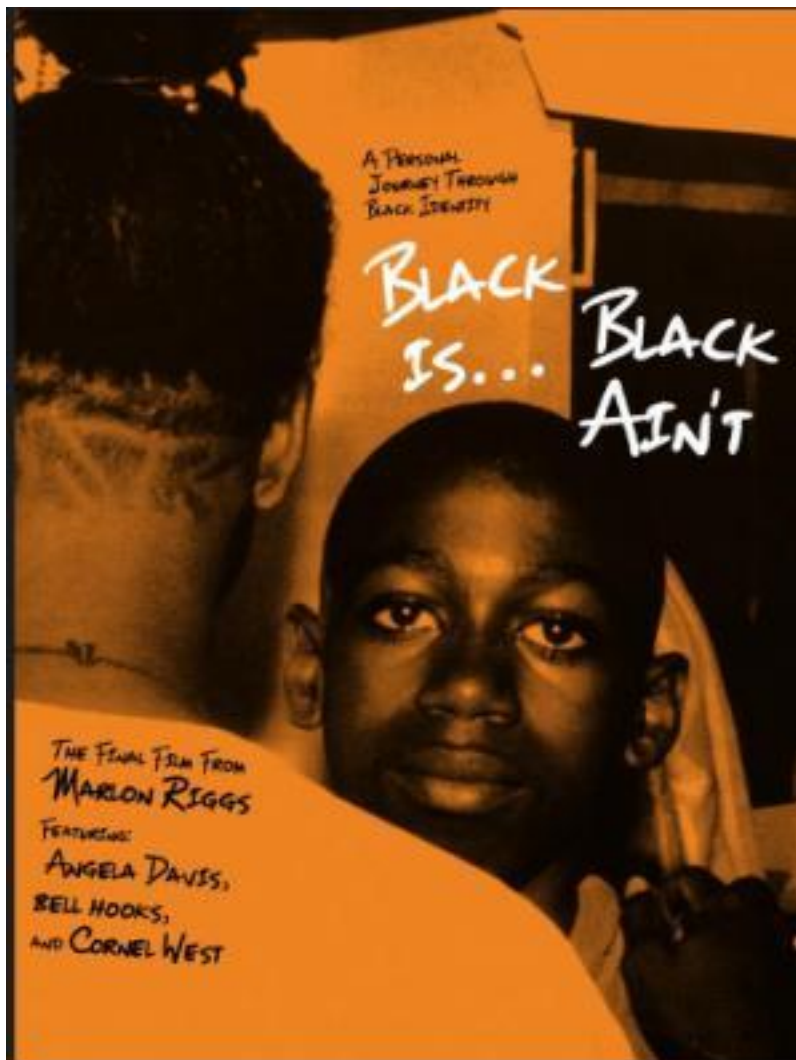
As part of this reckoning process, Criterion last June released a three-DVD special edition: *The Signifyin' Works of Marlon Riggs*, the gay Black filmmaker who died of AIDS in 1994 at age 37. Riggs would have relished Criterion's comeuppance, as his entire career was based on confronting racism and homophobia, especially in media portrayals of People of Color.

Although Criterion may have been shamed into releasing the Riggs DVD, it is an electrifying choice of a cathartic filmmaker. It includes restored high-definition transfers of

Riggs' entire oeuvre. The whole package is a vital, long overdue tribute to Riggs. Had a list been drawn of the best LGBTQ DVDs of 2021, Signifyin' Works would have been #1.

### Early accomplishments

Born in Fort Worth in 1957, Riggs attended Harvard University where he came to terms with being gay, studied history and graduated magna cum laude in 1978. He received a master's degree in journalism (1981), specializing in documentary film from UC Berkeley, submitting a half-hour video, tracing the evolution of Oakland's blues music, as his thesis (included in the extras).



Poster for 'Black Is... Black Ain't'

Riggs remained in the Bay Area, where he met his life partner Jack Vincent. He independently edited documentary features for five years. In 1987 he was hired as part-

time faculty to teach documentary filmmaking at the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley.

In 1986 he made his first documentary, *Ethnic Notions*, a deconstruction of how Black stereotypes (The Mammy, The Pickaninny, The Coon, The Sambo, The Uncle) and blackface have been used by American culture to degrade African-Americans and bolster white supremacy. It aired on PBS and won an Emmy.

Riggs was diagnosed with HIV in 1988, nearly dying of kidney failure in Germany. His illness affected the making of his next film, the landmark *Tongues Untied*, leaving behind standard documentary techniques. He puts himself in front of the camera, even singing from his hospital bed.

He mixed poetry (especially the work of Essex Hemphill), music (his use of abrupt finger-snapping to establish rhythm but also get the audience's attention), dance, and experimental filmmaking with an unconventional freewheeling structure to shatter the stigmas and shame surrounding Black gay sexuality. Participants told their own stories based on authentic experiences, both poignant and humorous.

He delineates the homophobia from other Black people, the pros and cons of white gay culture with its racism, and the painful repercussions of AIDS. It featured male nudity, explicit language, and the first kiss between two men ever shown on American TV.

Originally intended just to be screened in three gay bars, it premiered at the Castro Theater and then aired on the PBS program POV, setting off a right-wing firestorm. Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan used clips of the film to make a campaign ad excoriating President Bush for investing tax dollars in "pornographic and blasphemous art." Hate-mongering Senator Jesse Helms railed against the use of National Endowment for the Arts to fund the documentary (a paltry \$5000).

With the negative publicity, Riggs and the film, like banned photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, became an emblem for artistic freedom. In his recent memoir *Unprotected*, *Pose* actor/singer Billy Porter reflected on how the film changed his life.

*Tongues Untied* would be on any discerning critic's list of the greatest LGBTQ documentaries ever made, as it literally opened the door for creative black queer representation in film.

### **Affirmed**

Riggs' next project was *Affirmations* (1990) a ten-minute short based on outtakes of interviews and protest footage from *Tongues Untied* that was a sex-positive confessional about anal penetration and a call for freedom and inclusion. *Anthem* (1991) is an experimental music video utilizing a blend of poetry, African beats, and provocative sexual, political, and religious imagery to redefine notions of Black masculinity.

Riggs returned to a more traditional documentary format in *Color Adjustment* (1992), a pioneering media study that continued *Ethnic Notions'* history of POCs in popular culture, by exploring how Blacks have been depicted on television, divided into two parts: "Color Blind TV (1948-68)" and "Coloring the Dream (1968-)." It showcases interviews with actors, producers, social critics, and psychiatrists plus clips from TV shows (*Amos n' Andy*, *Julia*, *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *Roots*, *The Cosby Show* among others).

It brilliantly employs TV to criticize TV's sanitized and mythologized view of race relations as well as questioning the benefits of assimilation. It postulates how racism prevented these shows from being more truthful about how they depicted Black American life.

### **No regrets**

Riggs last completed film, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien (No Regret)* (1993), again applies poetry

and music while interviewing five Black HIV-positive men to talk about the fear, shame, and stigma of the disease.

Riggs' final film, *Black Is...Black Ain't* (1995), which he didn't live to conclude, is the culmination of his life's work, asking the central question: What does it mean to be Black? He uses his grandmother's gumbo recipe as a melting pot metaphor to celebrate the diversity of the African-American experience. It features interviews with intellectuals bell hooks, Cornel West, Angela Davis, Henry Louis Gates, among others, and the role sexuality plays in defining blackness.

Employing dance, poetry, music, and personal stories, it covers a wide range of topics: gang violence, hair styles, the positive/negative influence of the Black church, and a critique of the late 1960s Black Power movement. It all builds to a climactic plea for unity in the Black community despite all its contradictory elements. The film draws on footage of a dying Riggs directing his crew from his hospital bed on how to finish the film. His closest collaborators did complete the film, which acts as a posthumous farewell to a groundbreaking artist.

### **Critical silence**

The supplements provided are extraordinary and amount to a laudatory critical reappraisal of Riggs's work providing invaluable context and insight. While they can't all be listed here, standouts include actor Brian Freeman and dancer Bill T. Jones revealing how their creative involvement with Riggs influenced their lives and careers.



A scene from 'Affirmations'

Filmmaker Cheryl Dunye (*Watermelon Woman*) and poet Jericho Brown discuss how Riggs impacted their art and what his contributions might mean for future generations. Also presented is an hour-long 1996 biographical film, *I Shall Not Be Removed – The Life of Marlon Riggs*, which includes interviews with Riggs, his family, husband, friends, and colleagues, as well as his comment that he always knew he was destined for greatness in film, a prophecy fulfilled.

One realizes that the issues raised by Riggs so long ago are as powerful and relevant today, perhaps more so after the George Floyd killing. The comprehensive *Signifyin' Works of Marlon Riggs* is quintessential viewing, not only for a glimpse into the challenges of being a gay POC, but his films as archetypes of the '90s New Queer Cinema movement, and finally as inventive aesthetic renderings of AIDS's ongoing reverberations for the LGBTQ community.

In *Rolling Stone* critic K. Austin Collins's insert essay, "Positive Images," he summarizes Riggs's legacy:

"It is Riggs's central, most urgent claim that queerness inheres in Blackness just as Blackness inheres in queerness: there's no room for either not to acknowledge the other...Blackness is a melting pot unto itself, holding a stew that includes the sum of all of us, from which we cannot be set apart because like it or not, our flavors have already enriched the mix."

One can only wonder how Riggs might have interpreted and dissected *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Pose*, *Moonlight*, *Finding Your Roots*, *Black Panther*, or the media spectacle that was the O.J. Simpson trial. It's that silence of his much-needed critical yet revolutionary mouthpiece which haunts us today almost three decades after the AIDS holocaust.

Fortunately, though late in coming, Criterion has restored that raw, lyrical, innovative voice ripe for rediscovery by younger generations. Paying tribute to his spiritual predecessor and guide, Harriet Tubman, Riggs wrote a year before his death, "As Harriet walked with me, I now walk with others. We will keep on walking and keep on talking till we get to the other side."

With this enthralling gift collection to cinema, Criterion has made Marlon Riggs's journey to the other side instructive and transformative for all of us.

***The Signifyin' Works of Marlon Riggs, DVD Edition. Criterion Collection. \$39.95***

**[www.criterion.com](http://www.criterion.com)**