

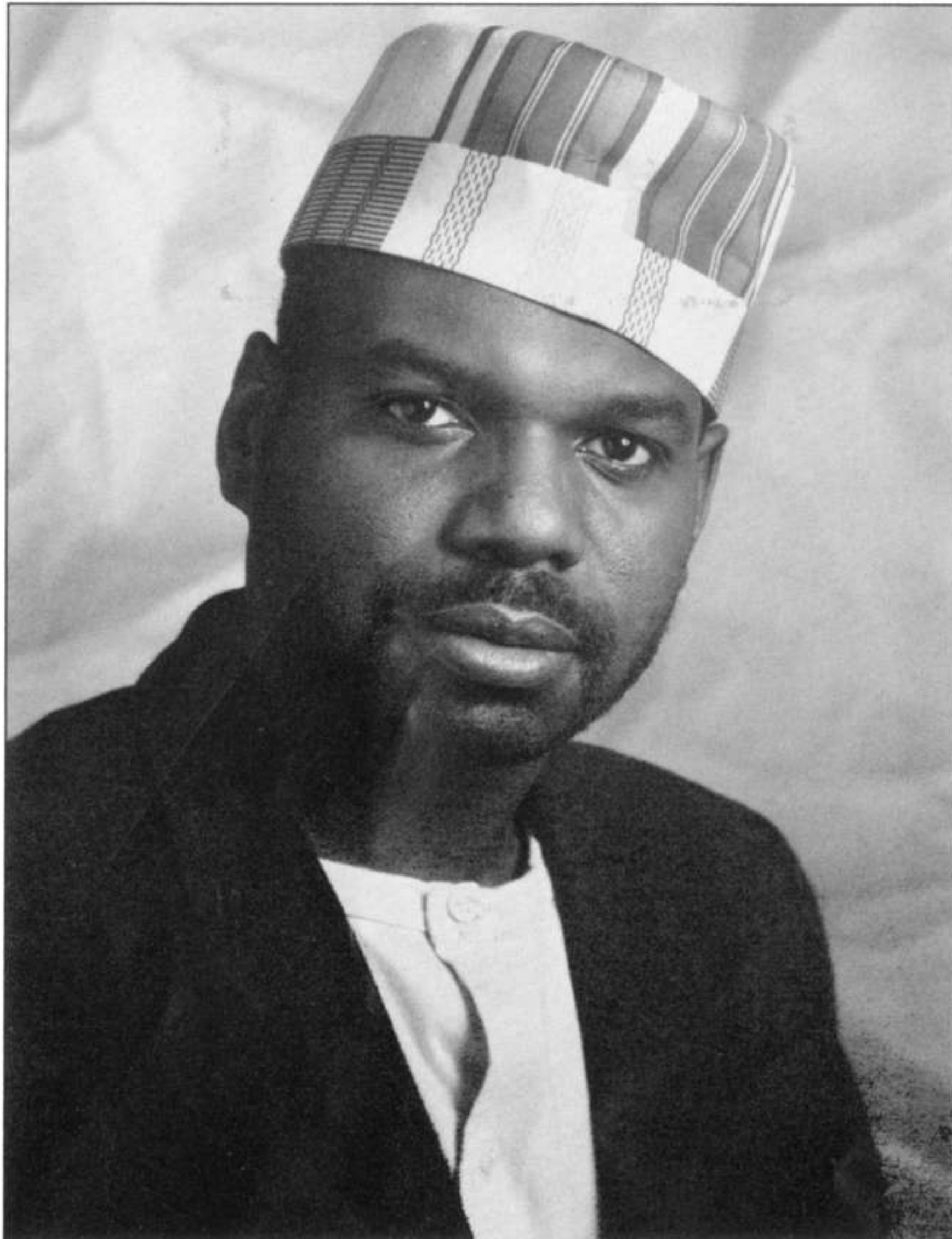
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# Marlon Riggs

By Kalamu ya Salaam



*Filmmaker Marlon Riggs.*

**M**arlon Riggs is the quintessential outsider. He is, at once, alienated from his community and, at the same time, fanatically dedicated to the upliftment of that same community, a community that often views him with unease. Riggs is an intellectual documentary filmmaker who is gay and HIV positive—not quite the generally accepted image of an important community figure.

Born February 3, 1957, in Fort Worth, Texas, Riggs was reared in the deep South and then attended a high school for military dependents in Germany while his father was stationed there. Riggs subsequently graduated from Harvard University where he majored in history. During his senior year there, he decided to become a documentary filmmaker.

As a result of the PBS broadcasts of his films, *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*, about African Americans and media, as well as the controversial gay-centered *Tongues Untied*, Riggs has become one of our most influential documentary filmmakers. He is the incarnation of the “witness” spirit, personified by the late writer James Baldwin, the outsider who spoke so eloquently about life on the inside.

Not just “out” about his sexuality but also actively engaged in the struggle for community upliftment, Riggs refuses to allow the prejudices and homophobia of the mainstream to exile him from the center of the community. Rejecting the gender ghetto, Riggs offers a perspective of difference that invariably leads to a questioning of, well, of everything.

**Black Film Review:** As an artist, what do you think your responsibility is in following your own vision rather than relying on your audience to validate your work—knowing that sometimes your vision may not only confuse or confound but offend the audience?

**Marlon Riggs:** Obviously, audience can't

be the sole determinant. If you allow that, then you'll end up with television.

**BFR:** You'll end up with what you wanted to be on?

**Riggs:** No, there's a difference. You'll end up with the medium as it now too often exhibits itself: all the mundane, banal, hackneyed stupidity that passes for news programming and documentary. You'll end up with that kind of trivialization of the experience of our culture because that's what people, in many ways, have been conditioned to expect from television.

So I can't let audience be the prime determinant for me in terms of aesthetics, but audience is key because, ultimately, the work is meaningless in and of itself. The work achieves meaning only through contact with the audience. Ignoring the audience would be fine for my self-expression, but that's not why I do this work. Although I may embrace the phrase documentary filmmaker, I seldom refer to myself as an artist.

I'm constantly thinking of how I will tell a story so that it will seduce but also challenge, create ruptures in the viewing experience so that you're not brought along in that passive way in which many of us are reduced in spectatorial relationships with media.

**BFR:** In music, the artist shatters the old forms in order to create the new forms, but the new form is both a rupturing and an extension.

**Riggs:** And the new forms often become the orthodoxies. That's where the cultural worker, if he or she is really on top of it, is constantly critiquing and constantly subverting.

Obviously in my work I'm absorbed with our imagery: how we are seen, how we see ourselves and how we reproduce ourselves. It is important for us to constantly critique the ways in which we get seduced by our own mythologies or those mythologies created for us which seem to, or in some cases actually do, give us pleasure. We must ask what is the nature of that pleasure? What is the collusion with the “enemy”? What is in

those representations that we have internalized that we aren't conscious of?

**BFR:** I think it's almost impossible to understand what is going on with the “new” Black cinema without understanding that there seems to be an unspoken agreement not to challenge the audience.

**Riggs:** Well, you know most artists don't challenge artists. There is a level on which we engage in silence. It's an historic pattern.

And so often, especially within mainstream media, these new films are treated as if they are documentaries when in fact they represent fictions. They are narratives delivered from a particular point of view, background and ideology, just as much as any other narrative. There is no critiquing of that because they are coming from a “Black perspective” or “the” Black perspective, and there's often an implicit assumption that there is some monolithic experience that defines us.

There's also a crying desire for representation. That's what you see when audiences refuse to allow any critique of artists. I've witnessed this personally. At one forum, Spike Lee was asked several questions by a number of people, myself included, about his representations in his movies. The audience went wild with hysterical outbursts to “shut up,” “sit down,” “make your own goddamn movies,” “who are you, this man is doing the best he can, and he is giving us dignified images, he is doing positive work, why should you be criticizing him?” I admit that there is often trashing just for the sake of trashing. But even when it is clear that the critique is trying to empower and trying to heal certain wounds within our communities, there is not any space within our culture to constructively critique.

There is an effort simply to shut people up in order to reify these gods, if you will, who have delivered some image of us which seems to affirm our existence in this world. As if they make up for the lack, but, in fact they don't. They can become part of the hegemony. I find that

what documentaries can do, and actually what fiction films also can do but so often don't, is to insert that middle ground between trashing and reification so that one comes away with some critical engagement with work and with artists. Then, there is appreciation but also interrogation; nothing's accepted at face value. There's no elevation of the artist above community as a guardian of the culture, someone far loftier, more knowing and more powerful than one's self.

My position is actually a reaffirmation of our own position as audience members, as active, engaged spectators so that we are equal in the relationship of audience and author.

**BFR:** We are dealing with the difference between commerce and art. In commerce, communication matters only up to the point of getting the consumer to buy a ticket. To go beyond that point, to move the viewer as a result of seeing a film to engage in some activity or to

change behavior, is not the concern of commerce.

**Riggs:** I don't think there's a conflict between a profitable work and an artistic mission behind the work. I think it is possible to have work that has commercial value, that makes money, and yet provokes people to rethink themselves and society and by extension, rethink their relationship to that media and the artform. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* is an example. I thought *Do The Right Thing*, which to me remains the best of Spike Lee's movies, is a film which

provokes thought. Whether you like the movie on that visceral level of pleasure that we often expect from a movie is a different question. But I thought *Do The Right Thing* really provoked you to think, and, to me, that kind of provocation is pleasurable too: to really rethink your understanding of liberation politics, of community, of the politics of violence and rage, what it can achieve or not achieve. One seldom, if ever, sees that in cinema in America these days. I thought it was a quite noble achievement.

I think too often many of the young Black male filmmakers are driven most by

casting System (PBS) and your function within it?

**Riggs:** One way to look at PBS is in terms of the people who run it. Most of those people are white, heterosexual, male, middle to upper-middle class, in their mid-forties and above, have no understanding of Black people, not to mention gay people, have no understanding of the politics of difference and the politics of representation, have no clue whatsoever. They give lip service to multiculturalism, but they often mean a multiculturalism which can be easily assimilated into their worldview.

For many of those people, my work is highly threatening. I'm obviously pushing it as much as I can and playing with forms as, for example, *Color Adjustment* does. This allows for a kind of blistering critique of not only television but, more importantly, of the American dream, but a critique that seems, on a certain surface level, to be conventional. If I had gone all out and



Scene from *Black Is, Black Ain't*.

the business—the possibility of money, talk shows, women, fame. They want to represent, give them credit, some of the narratives which have not been included within the mainstream media, but there is no critiquing of the way in which their own narratives are highly myopic and confined to a highly masculinist, misogynist, homophobic perspective, in terms of what it means to be African American. That is why we always need to have so many more of us participating in the making of these narratives.

**BFR:** How do you see the Public Broad-

cast, "Fuck the dream, all of us, fuck it, Black America, we are wrong, we are mistaken," if I had just come out shouting and screaming, who would have listened to that? Who would have paid attention? It would have been written off not only by whites but by many Blacks.

**BFR:** Were you intending *Color Adjustment* to be subversive?

**Riggs:** Oh yes, from the very beginning, and subversive in multiple directions. Most people consider my critique of "The Cosby Show" most subversive because so many of us are endeared to that show.

We see it as the most wonderful kind of representation we can have, particularly those who are middle class or aspire to that as the embodiment of their particular dream. The subversion for me had to do not simply with a critique of the pleasure in that show, but a critique of the whole way we have internalized the myth of the American dream as a standard by which we measure our own individual and communal achievement, particularly after the Civil Rights movement, and how not simply the dream, but we ourselves have become part of the problem in our inability, indeed, our refusal to question our objectives. I wanted to do that in a way that would seduce you because, on one hand, these images we have seen from childhood on television seem so pleasurable. Even when we first watched them and didn't quite like them, when revisited, they seem nostalgic and therefore connote a certain sort of pleasure. I wanted to use that to undercut the pleasure and provoke a critical perspective of how easily this medium seduces.

**BFR:** Isn't there a point where you get not diminishing returns but indeed a reversal of returns in an attempt to be subtly subversive?

**Riggs:** That's what I look at now in re-viewing *Color Adjustment*. I wanted the audience to work. That's part of what I found missing in many of the reviews. People did get the elementary critique: Oh, he's complaining that television doesn't mirror the complexities of real Black life. Well, how sophisticated an analysis does that require? I was trying to get at something which I thought was far more complicated. I believe that deeper critique was missed by a number of people.

**BFR:** Perhaps that's because the critique was encapsulated in a form that could not really carry it, a form that obfuscates that message.

**Riggs:** I think it's the form in relation to how people see it; it's not the form in and of itself. I guess I was counting on a

much more critical viewing than occurred. Even among my colleagues, I found they missed things, saw only the conventionality and didn't see the constant subverting or that by making people conscious of the conventionality I was attempting to stimulate an interrogation of the aesthetics. They simply bought into a dissatisfaction with the aesthetics without seeing that was a deliberate intent.

The use of James Baldwin quotations, for example, were intended to disrupt the easy flow of narration as well as the seamlessness of this historical, documentary compilation. The use of the questions—"Is this a positive image?"—was intended to disrupt. Even the use of the statistics about the number of people watching television at a certain time in America were intended to jolt one into the consciousness of "watching" as a sociological phenomenon.

I was really misguided in thinking that people would be much more self-aware and would be sophisticated. I realize now, particularly with the making of my new film *Black Is, Black Ain't*, that, at times, I will have to be much more explicit. I will have to play my hand much more forcefully than I did in *Color Adjustment*; otherwise, things will be missed.

**BFR:** Yes, your assumption is that the content can disrupt the television aesthetic, but television is anesthesia. It blocks pain and the empathizing with pain; so, murder can become entertainment and even funny, depending on the depiction of the act. It puts you to sleep not just

literally but morally.

**Riggs:** That was the Catch-22 of *Color Adjustment* because I was dealing with television which does precisely that. It induces one into a semi-narcotic state, mild and drowsy, so that there is nothing intensely felt, pleasurable or painful. Working with material that, in and of itself, does that in many ways presented a great challenge which I think in some ways we did not quite overcome. The narration could have gone off, but then there would have been this kind of strange emotional dichotomy between the images which seemed happy, idyllic, sustaining this extremely wonderfully cozy world and then, on the other hand, this intense emotionally charged, politically explicit narration. The two would not have meshed.

In some ways I thought that the nature of the beast, television, demanded in some ways the use of a narrative aesthetic style that partly played into it but could be disruptive. The problem was finding ways to disrupt it without seeming hyperbolic and therefore blowing the analysis and alienating people. But you live to learn and that's why I con-

tinue to think of myself as a student. Each work is a test of my vision and that vision being embraced by community.

**BFR:** Your current project, *Black Is, Black Ain't* goes directly to the question of community. This project is not about how we have been represented but rather how we see ourselves.

**Riggs:** That is its specific goal, but, as you might imagine, I am

*Most people consider my critique of "The Cosby Show" most subversive because so many of us are endeared to that show. We see it as the most wonderful kind of representation we can have, particularly those who are middle class or aspire to that as the embodiment of their particular dream. The subversion for me had to do not simply with a critique of the pleasure in that show, but a critique of the whole way we have internalized the myth of the American dream . . .*

encountering resistance. For so long, most of us have striven to maintain secret enclosed spaces within our histories, within our lives, within our psyches about those things which disrupt our sense of self. We have created narratives about ourselves in which we seem to be achieving our own dream of utopia, whether personal, social, communal or whatever. What I am trying to do in many ways is unmask us, but we are so adept at wearing the mask.

The mask has become our defensive mechanism for coping not simply with “the man” but also with ourselves. The mask has become so affixed to us that we wear it unconsciously. It is so much a part of us that it is like a skin graft. It’s like Michael Jackson—I’m not speaking of Michael Jackson simply in terms of identification with whiteness as beauty but rather as a metaphor for the ways in which we try to change ourselves and define our sense of self so that we sustain an image of ourselves that we feel necessary in order to live with ourselves. That seems a hideous thing to say as a metaphor for how Black people have come to see ourselves.

**BFR:** Sometimes it’s not necessarily a gravitation towards the dominant, the external, the white, but rather a revulsion against what we are.

**Riggs:** But too often in this society, African Americans do tend to be dictated by the other, which is white and European, even when we are resisting it. Ultimately I believe, even in the centering of one’s self-concept and the communal concept around Africa and the Diaspora, Europe, to some degree, remains at the center because the point is to resist Europe and European dominance and all that Europe stands for. This is my critique of some of the adherents of Afrocentricity—and I stress some, because I do realize there are many different approaches to Afrocentricity. In that context, Eurocentrism still becomes a defining principle in our understanding of Blackness. There is a deep investment in the social order and the dominance of Europe

because it becomes the measure by which, in antithesis, we define ourselves.

**BFR:** Do you think we are having a significant escalation of differences around color?

**Riggs:** I think so, but it’s often unmentioned. Look at rap videos; look at the cinema. Look at the glorification of women who are light-skinned and fine-featured: aquiline noses, thin, long, straight hair. We’d like to believe that “Black is beautiful,” but in terms of the representations that are trotted out to seduce the buyer, we still have a privileging of light skin. I don’t think that color differences have suddenly disappeared because of sloganeering around “Black is beautiful” since the ’60s. Color differences may have gone underground for a moment, but it’s still there.

**BFR:** Isn’t it true that, although we may be the objects of many of these videos, we are not actually making the images? The majority of those videos are created by people who are not of the rap culture. Don’t you think that the absence of control moots the question of the subversiveness of the imagery?

**Riggs:** The absence of control of imagery by Black people in most of the cultural production in this country is a major point. But for me, who controls the cultural production process is only part of the equation. Even if Ice T, Ice Cube, Queen Latifah, Public Enemy, whoever you think is important, conscious and doing work within popular rap culture, even if they were the proprietors of their companies, if the plantation ethos were still internalized and they produced the kind of bullshit that many of them do about community, family, sexuality, masculinity and femininity, I would say there would be no fundamental difference except that they would be making more of the money from that production.

For me, the issue is not simply control. It’s not simply having Black faces in the front office. It’s what goes on behind the faces, within the minds of those people. Too often I think there’s an assumption that if Black people are in charge then we

have arrived.

**BFR:** I don’t think of them as Black videos; many of them are essentially nothing more than neo-minstrel shows. They do not replicate or critique the reality of Black life. They replicate basically mimic, a desire to “live large.”

**Riggs:** It’s the most vulgar aspects of the American dream. Even those who consider themselves revolutionary, culturally speaking—because that’s as far as it goes, and it often doesn’t even go that far—are the children, step-children really, of the American dream. They believe in it and worship at that shrine more so than someone like Dan Quayle. He simply uses it to maintain his own hegemony whereas they, in their own limited understanding, actually believe in it.

What I’m trying to get at in *Black Is, Black Ain’t* is how the legacy of the ’60s is now invoked and a mythology around liberation. So much of the struggle—not simply against white domination—but the struggles that happened within our communities around domination, around gender, around sexuality, color, class, self-degradation and self-worth, are getting erased. With the young people we talk to on this project, I’m trying to get at what they see from that moment, what they’ve taken and not taken from a moment which now defines their identities. It’s clear that something has been missed partly because of our failure to educate. We are partly responsible.

Despite my current awareness of all the contradictions of the ’60s, I still, in some ways, measure myself against the fortitude and the clarity of that moment in our history—not necessarily by the rhetoric, or the styles of protest, or the particular strategies, but the spirit. Throughout the history of Africans in the Americas, I see that spirit moving us, individuals at times, entire communities at times. I am emboldened by that spirit to continue that legacy. **B**

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