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Conversation with Marlon Riggs in Oakland, California, August 1990

PHYLLIS R. KLOTMAN

The following interview was recorded in August, 1990, following screenings of Tongues Untied *at international film festivals, museums, and gay and lesbian venues, but before national PBS airings outraged America's "Religious Right." As such, the interview precedes Riggs' sudden elevation to black gay culture celebrity status and national notoriety. As well, it predates the bulk of published interviews and articles on Riggs' work. Significantly, the interview affords glimpses of a thoughtful, unassuming figure on the threshold of political and intellectual leadership. Still part of a loosely-knit, widely scattered community of black gay and lesbian media activists, Riggs was on the brink of emerging as a sophisticated spokesperson for a generation of culturally engaged videomakers committed to breaking down barriers between private and public pronouncements. Riggs' heartfelt, heady revelations in* Tongues Untied *continue to inspire a growing number of artist/activists passionately committed to social and personal change.*

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MR: I was born February 3, 1957 in Fort Worth, Texas. I lived in Austin for a little bit, but I spent most of my time in Fort Worth. I lived there until I was about eleven, and then moved around—my father and mother were in the military. We lived in Georgia, then Germany, and then I came back to the States to go to college.

PK: How long were you in Germany?

MR: Four years. I was there for my high school years.

PK: Was that a good experience?

MR: I would say on the whole, yes. I mean, like anything, it was different, and it always takes time to adjust to difference. Unfortunately, even now the American community there is extremely insulated and isolated from the rest of the European experience. In fact, the United States was called "the world," so that anybody who lived in Germany was considered to be living in some strange, forbidden, and unknown land, where people kept referring to getting back to "the world," meaning the United States. I think it took me about two and a half years to break out of that mind set,

because as a young person—about eleven or twelve at the time—I followed my American high school friends until I developed my own sense of independence. I wasn't doing much in terms of really getting to know what Europe was like. That was the fun part of it. I think the last two years there was really a more exciting time for me, satisfying my curiosity about the country I was living in.

PK: How old were you when you came back?

MR: I was seventeen when I returned to "the world." I had missed, actually, a lot in terms of what had been happening in the United States. This was 1970-74. Of course, that was still a period of great turmoil in the country regarding civil rights, sort of post-civil rights but still, the aftermath of all of the turmoil during the 1960s, anti-Vietnam War sentiment, Kent State, and Watergate which was just starting to happen. But all this had been so removed from me because at that time in Germany there was no American television, no English television. So all of that information that came to people through television news or documentaries, I never saw. And the periodical we had at the time was the "Stars and Stripes," which filtered everything, as it still does. So you got this very bland high school newspaper approach to journalism. It really was in some ways a culture shock when I returned because so much had happened in the States that I really had not been a part of.

PK: So, when you came back you went to . . .

MR: I went to Harvard then.

PK: As an undergraduate?

MR: As an undergraduate, yes.

PK: And what did you plan to do?

MR: I didn't know. I mean, I had inklings of wanting to be an attorney, to go into law, perhaps into politics. But I really wasn't clear at the age of seventeen about what I wanted to do, except I knew that I wanted to do something that dealt with—and I couldn't put it in those words at the time—activism, a sort of social community activism. I think I had been very much bred with a sense of giving back to the community because of my mother and grandmother. I felt, especially given the kinds of gifts that I had—I was always a good student in class, always leading this organization or that organization—that those gifts of leadership and writing should be used in the path of the uplift of our community. So that was clear to me.

PK: How did your mother and grandmother inspire you?

MR: It was in the way they lived. It wasn't so much because they kept telling me, "You have to do this," but it was more in the way my grandmother lived. She's still a very giving person.

PK: Is she still in Fort Worth?

MR: Yes, and she's a very unselfish person. My mother in a much more conscious way inspired me in that the rhetoric of our home, especially with friends, was constantly about the requirements for the black middle class, the requirements of social activism among the educated of the black community, of the informed, to continue to work on behalf of the entire community and not just yourself. I just grew up with all those debates constantly happening in my home. I wasn't taking part, but I was listening. I was up 'til late at night hearing all of this, and I think in seeing the way my mother and grandmother lived—it was just inbred in me to follow in that path.

So that it was clear to me by the time I went to college that I would do something, hopefully, that was helpful for the black community. Exactly what? Again I thought—teaching, maybe law, maybe politics. As I kept meeting more of the people who were going to law school, or the people who were actually attorneys, I realized that was not what I wanted to do. Most of what I saw in that profession, in fact, repulsed me. The same was happening in terms of my understanding of politics. I thought that it would be very difficult to try to maneuver in that kind of situation. And there was a certain kind of arrogance at Harvard, a detached casual arrogance, not the kind that you see caricatured in cartoons about Ivy League people. It was really unconscious and a kind of detachment from so much of what was happening in the world. A very distorted, narrow sense of priorities and of the importance of self and the world.

PK: A kind of egocentrism?

MR: Yes. It was not just ego but also class-centrism. What was sensed to be important really occupied a very small sphere of the entire arena of social life. But because most of the people there weren't aware of why this does not touch them in any way, they were just removed. They didn't see it, therefore, they didn't care about it. What they considered to be of importance did not include most of what was important to the majority of people across the world. Even what might be considered important to themselves if they were more in touch human beings. So it wasn't really until I was in my last year there that I decided I wanted to do some form of work that really involved, at that time, television. I wasn't going to film the same documentaries, but I said, "Well, I like history, I want to teach history, but I don't want to teach it in an Ivy League setting or just within a university setting, reaching perhaps a hundred or so students a year. Hundreds, maybe, if you're lucky." How do you communicate so much of what you're learning to vast numbers of people? To me it was television history, and I thought television history meant documentary. In some ways it was an intellectual, reasoned way of arriving at a career, rather than being inspired by the documentaries. I didn't go to movies, I didn't go to see documentaries, I didn't see feature films, I didn't watch television while I was in school. I didn't really know what I was getting into! I thought that this would be a way of doing the kind of thing I wanted to but didn't have any idea of how to do it. That was a really strange career path for anyone at Harvard to be taking at the time, and I still think so. Anyone going into the arts . . . I mean most people are moving into law, business, medical school . . . it was really sort of striking out on this very vague notion of a purpose. Alone, in many ways, in the dark. And I think hitting a lot of bumps along the way. Only I think a

year or two after graduating, did I finally discover a pathway that seemed clear and relatively clean and direct as to how I could achieve what I wanted to in film and documentary making.

PK: That's an interesting way of doing it, though.

MR: I wished I'd seen more things, I wished I'd known to see more things—that was part of the problem. My cultural experience really didn't expose me.

PK: So you didn't know Saint Clair Bourne or Bill Greaves?

MR: No, I didn't know any of these names. I really discovered them late. Even once I decided to do documentaries, my discovery of a lot of the veterans and pioneers in black independent filmmaking, documentaries as well as fiction, came late because there is no teaching of that history anywhere in high school, in college, even in graduate studies.

PK: You should have come to Indiana!

MR: I never thought of the Midwest, I'm sorry! At that time, my idea of the United States was Texas and the two coasts. Anything else between seemed no man's land.

PK: I just want to backtrack a little bit and ask you a question about your mother. When you were saying that she was herself very much engaged and concerned about social issues, what was the experience in Germany like for her?

MR: I think all of us, the entire family, enjoyed living there, because in many ways—and then again, I was a young person, a typical teenager out with other peers—I think what it did was to focus, because the community was very small there and relatively concentrated and people knew each other, a lot of dialogue and discussion—in a different way than a large community or urban setting where people don't know each other. Maybe those same discussions happen and action is taken [in the latter], but it's usually within organizational contexts. [In Germany] because of the smallness of the community, a lot of things happened through the home, so black history month activities could be in people's homes; scholarship funds and drives for black students would come out of people knowing each other, rather than through an organization, per se.

PK: What about the racial experience?

MR: It was very different. Again, what happens often, I think, is when Americans are in some other place where they are foreigners and are in the minority, their Americanness in some ways overwhelms their differences and that becomes more paramount. I think to a degree for the teenagers it's a very different experience because what bound us was not race, but that we were Americans who spoke a certain language and understood cartoons and television. It gave us things to talk about, in contrast to Germans where obviously there were differences. For the adults though, there was continued segregation, de facto, obviously (we're talking 1970s now). As I recall parental relationships in terms of their friendships, who they hung out with and played cards with and so forth, whites didn't intrude into those relationships much. But if

people worked together, it was relatively harmonious, compared to what was happening in the States. I think it just manifested what was generally the case in American society at large, that the races remained by and large separate, except on the work level.

PK: Okay, now, you decided you were going to do this thing—television history.

MR: Yes, that was my last year in college.

PK: And then what did you do—in terms of developing the skills you needed to get started?

MR: I came back to Texas where I actually lived for another year with my grandmother and I went from television station to television station in the area, Dallas-Fort. Worth and then Austin. I wrote to stations in other cities in Texas, asking them about how to move into this kind of work. I got nowhere. Most stations weren't doing documentaries to speak of. They did television news specials, but they weren't documentaries. Most of them were all white, and when I talked to many of them on the phone—as I later discovered—they didn't realize I was black, would invite me in because I sounded enthusiastic, Harvard and so forth, looked at me walk through the door and you could tell by the look on their faces—this total shock. It was very clear the racism in Texas was very old-style, so that when you walked through the door and started to ask questions, you were regarded very clearly as an upstart, an affront. They didn't say that, but it was in the look on their faces, and in their refusal to give you any information or to suggest that there might be any possibility of your working with them at this station.

I talked to news director after news director. I ended up working at one television station as an administrative assistant (at the NBC affiliate in Fort Worth), so it was far from where I wanted to be, but it was a way in. At least I got my foot in the door, and realized after being there for two months that I wasn't going to go anywhere. People were afraid to talk to me, that is, the whites, because a rumor had gone out that this twenty year-old was out to take over the station, this black Harvard graduate. I mean I was very naive, innocent, and curious. I asked people what they did, how they got to do what they did. People took that as my "gathering information" so that I could plot their overthrow and take over the station. So people refused to talk to me. They would sort of look down and make excuses or give me no information. In some ways it was a heart-wrenching period. Again, I was very naive, I just assumed that since I was there, I could learn, and that wasn't the case. That's when I realized that I wasn't going to advance in the career I had chosen if I wanted to follow this path. I started applying then to graduate schools of journalism that had documentary programs, and came to Berkeley out of that.

PK: And, when you got to Berkeley, it was very different.

MR: It was very different. In some ways I felt that I finally had arrived at a place where I thought I could really start to do what I wanted to. And I had wanted to come to the west coast. It was stable, I had heard about California—it had this image. I was young, it seemed free, and I'm still, I guess, relatively young, but I was a child in many

ways. It seemed free and easy and racially harmonious, though that was not the case. Once I got here, the work was challenging and I started to hone skills that in many ways still are benefitting me greatly in terms of writing and analysis, image-making, and so on, through the program at Berkeley. I really didn't get much background in black history or black filmmaking, which I really eternally regret. And I would say that that's truly the case for all of my years in school regarding African American history and culture. So much of what I'm learning now, I'm learning on my own, or by accident. It wasn't because I like Eurocentric or Anglo culture or white history if you will. It's just a matter of fact that these are the things you learn about the great painters and great political leaders. It's taken for granted that that's part of what one should know to be a civilized, educated human being in this country. None of that included the things that are now most critical to me and most inspiring within my own work and life.

PK: So that's what you're investigating on your own at this point?

MR: In many ways. Now it's more clear because now I know the resources and where to go so I can have some plan about it. But it really is coming through on my own, through self education, in some way making up for territory I think I should have covered in my teens. My mother got a better education, I think, than I did, in terms of Black History. In high school, she was reading stuff by black authors as well as white authors, and European authors, which I never got. I studied *Hamlet* in high school, senior year, for a full semester. Now *Hamlet*'s fine, but you should know much more than that. You should know Richard Wright, you should know James Baldwin, you should know DuBois, as well as a number of other authors. You should know Alice Walker. These are the other kinds of people you should know because they are extremely revealing as well as extremely gifted.

PK: And it's also important for white students.

MR: Definitely. These names are foreign names. Their works are foreign works as far as they're concerned. They might as well be Roman or Greek.

PK: Ethnic Notions *wasn't your first documentary, was it?*

MR: No. My first documentary was *Long Train Running: The Story of the Oakland Blues*. It is a half-hour documentary about the history of blues music in Oakland, California.

PK: Long Train Running?

MR: Yes. Based on a song called "Long Train Running," but it was the continuation of a tradition from the World War II period, during which there was intensive migration of Blacks, particularly from Louisiana and Texas, to the east bay region. So that was the first documentary, which I co-produced.

PK: Did you do that while you were still in graduate school?

MR: Yes, that was my thesis documentary. I co-produced it with another student.

PK: Was it funded through the school?

MR: We didn't actually do any fundraising. Because the equipment was supplied; all that we had to pay for was our own time and living expenses. I had a fellowship to attend the school. We had equipment, the tapes, all of the technical services provided for, so it just required our own initiative.

PK: So were you satisfied?

MR: When I was finished, I was extremely happy with it. Now I'm okay with it; I mean, you learn a lot, obviously. You see things that you could do now that I didn't even know about then. But as a first work, I think that a large measure of it stands up still to time. Again, there are radically different choices I would make because now I know so much more. This is not talking just technically, but also editorially. With your first work, you're a little naive, deferring to anyone who seems to have authority. That included not only my professors, but also the people within the industry, the music industry. We didn't have much of a sense again about the diversities of expression within filmmaking—our conditioning was with the television network documentary model. I didn't know about Bill Greaves or Saint Clair Bourne or Gordon Parks, or about different experimental styles, of different voices, so it has those elements that I don't like about it, but then, in terms of the richness of the people, that comes through. I still think that is something that I have gotten better at doing, as well as elevating our culture to the level of cultural appreciation, understanding how a people thrive and sustain themselves through culture. That I admire and am still doing in many ways.

PK: What was the date of that one?

MR: 1981.

PK: Has it been seen much?

MR: It was a thesis document, but it was considered a professional project, so, in fact, it was shown on television. It won a number of film festival awards. It travelled to different places, and it's still being shown. To my shock, it was recently shown at a film festival at the Brooklyn Museum.

PK: And Ethnic Notions?

MR: *Ethnic Notions* after I left. So I spent probably the next four, five years fundraising, doing little bits and pieces, the route that many of us independent filmmakers have to go through to find the funding for the work and doing what I could until I ran out. Working for other people, primarily as an editor, and then returning to the project until I could finish it.

PK: Was there an independent film community here like the one at UCLA, where there was a whole group that worked together like Charlie Burnett, Billy Woodberry and Larry Clark, Julie Dash—people who formed a kind of, not a company, but they helped each other in their film school years, and it's still like that in some ways?

MR: Which is great. I miss that. I think I've started to develop something like that just through my work. There was no group where I was at Berkeley. I wasn't as interested in commercial filmmaking, so I didn't consider going to some place like UCLA or NYU.

PK: Most of the people in documentary were on the east coast.

MR: Yeah. And I didn't want to stay on the east coast because I had been in Boston and I was sick of the east coast. It was in some ways a very fortuitous move, and in some ways it isolated me from the community. But in some ways I think it was empowering because the things that I most wanted to do and were most important to me I did in a way that I think might have been threatening for a number of the filmmakers that I know who are doing other work. And this relates to various areas of taboo, whether we're talking about race or sexuality.

PK: Well that brings us to Tongues Untied. *I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the film and the problem of the sexuality. Were you at the Whitney with the film?*

MR: No, it was just a presentation at the Whitney, but the film itself was showing at the Lesbian/Gay Film Festival, which was happening at the same time.

PK: And you did a paper.

MR: Yes, I did a presentation, which I entitled "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap Queen."

PK: I heard that it was very provocative, very interesting. What did you deal with?

MR: I dealt with what I considered pervasive homophobia in black independent filmmaking and black characterizations of supposedly black gay men within the rap music and popular music by black artists scene, and looked at not only just how black gay men are represented in music and films and tv by black artists, but also by black directors. Sometimes working for white directors reduces the black characters as with Eddie Murphy. I hope to provoke questions as to why these kinds of caricatures and stereotypes are represented over and over and over again, despite our all too intimate history as black people in general with destructiveness of stereotype and caricature as a model of dealing with the people and representing the people.

And I was looking particularly at black male artists who presented black gay characterizations in a way that was caricatured, that was demeaning. But beyond that they reflected for me a kind of psychic turmoil that Black America is facing nationwide in terms of identity, particularly male identity in the black community and how the image, as I called it, of the "Negro faggot" becomes a reassuring icon that no matter how low we go, we're not *that*. Therefore, we're still men. I wanted to show that analysis in a number of different kinds of artistic venues in which black artists are now working.

I did it with humor as well, and I played off in some ways one of the prime features of a lot of these stereotypes of black gay men, which is that we're constantly

snapping, and swishing. That's why I titled the paper what I titled it—it was in some ways a signifying that you see within the movies and the music—to redefine the meaning of the "snap" in the way that it has its diverse meanings within the black gay community. It is not just a sign of effeminacy, of weakness, of emasculation. It can be defiant, it can be witty, it can be a number of things; in other words, to reintroduce that much broader meaning into the debate, into the representation of black gay characterization.

So, it was working on a number of levels to try to undo the destructive arm of so much of the imagery that's out there and very popular now. At the same time, to question black macho in relation to a very anti-feminist stance, I think, is also related to homophobia, and also to question this way of trying to show up a very weakened and fragile and disintegrating identity that black people on the whole face in the country, which is why I see us sort of reaching so much for icons like Malcolm X that seem to provide a kind of certainty, a closure, around what it means to be black and a man, what it means to be empowered. So I wanted to deal with all those issues. I knew I was dealing with them in a forum where most people had not dealt with or heard this before. Most people within the forum had not dealt with a black gay man in a setting in which they did not have to do anything more than laugh, tease, or cajole. What I wanted to do was to suck people in with those kinds of images, which I did with the first clip. I showed a bunch of bouncing queens on the screen—people were just laughing—then returned to some of those same images at the end of my presentation. By then, nobody was laughing, because that identity that they'd had with the dominant culture, and therefore with the *misconceptions* and even very *destructive* caricatures changed. In some ways, I made them look at a different *kind* of identification—not with Eddie Murphy, but with me. Much in the way that when we see *The Birth of a Nation,* we black people don't identify with D.W. Griffith's Klansmen characters, and we can't at all with the black characters, and, therefore, we cheer when the white woman jumps off the cliff. In some ways, that's what I want to do, to redirect attention, so that when people see movies like *House Party,* or when they listen to Heavy D and the Boyz, or any of their favorite rap artists, or they see a new Spike Lee movie, they don't just laugh. They may even see what this is doing to people, and how it fits a very historic pattern of stereotyping and marginalization of people, often of the entire black community, as well as communities within the black community, mainly women and gays and lesbians.

PK: I think maybe homophobia is really the last struggle, isn't it?

MR: Yes. Exactly. It's so taboo, people don't even want to talk about it. And as usual, the comments I got more often came from women. Even those who feel uncomfortable with the subject are more willing to articulate their discomfort, rather than the men, who will just sit there and stew. I find this at screenings of *Tongues Untied* when I'm doing it in mixed settings. The men sort of sit there, or if they do chance to speak, get hostile, defensive, and very threatened and angry.

PK: It sounds like a pretty brave thing to put out there now.

MR: Well, I didn't look at it as bravery, I just looked at it as an imperative. I was just so sick of images, of words, of music, of history being written in which I was constantly written out—that is, my community. To me the parallel to what American culture has done to black people was so strong, and the need to break that pattern through voicing of our experience through declaring ourselves and therefore affirming our distance was the only way to break that pattern. I saw no other alternative. And partly because the time was right. It's not just me by myself, there is a community out there, as there has been a community from way back to Africa. That's something a lot of nationalists do not want in any way to entertain, that homosexuality was not a white creation. You can go to every culture and find homosexuality as well as bisexuality, and you will find it in Africa, as well as in India, as well as in Asia, as well as in America, as well as in South America. So it was in many ways breaking silence, it was taking the "Act Up" dictum silence = death and extending the meaning, so it's not just in relation to AIDS, but more in relation to the entire existence of the community and the historical legacy of the community.

Bisexuality, in particular, is so pervasive in the black community. It's really amazing. Married men with girlfriends have a boyfriend on the side and nobody knows about anything, or there are some people who are very open with their wives and children about their bisexual relations. It's sort of like the great secret: people know if we don't talk about it, we can pretend it doesn't exist. And yet, that has led to so much distortion of who we are and defensiveness about who we are, that I see homophobia, as well as misogyny, the last battleground in the black community before we can achieve any true sense of liberation. Liberation of black people means more than the liheration of black heterosexual men.

PK: What's the tentative title of the new film?

MR: *Color Adjustment* is the one I'm working on now. It's a history of black representation in prime time entertainment television from Beulah and *Amos 'n' Andy* to *The Cosby Show.* And looking at not so much what we have done in television as black people, but rather looking at what the representation of black people in prime time entertainment television has signified in terms of perceptions, of race relations, of racial attitudes, of the viewing public, the racial sensibilities of the producers and creators of these shows, who often wield the power, and not the actor. It's to show how there.has been evolution, regression, or both in terms of the representation of black people in the media. It's very fascinating. I've talked with some people who created *I Spy* and *Julia,* to Stephen Boccho, to Norman Lear. I've talked with network entertainment people, as well as actors and producers like Tim and Daphne Reed, Denise Nicholas, and it's really interesting and provocative to see how very competing notions of what television entertainment should do or be about come into play when black people become a part of this medium in a very meaningful, more empowering way, as opposed to just figures to be exploited for their comic value. That's the tension that this documentary is exploring.

PK: And you have the same group of people working with you on this?

MR: Some of the people are the same, but much of the crew are different. There's other black gay work that's in the making too, right now. One's a short that I finished actually back in February called *Affirmations.* It's a ten-minute video work that explores black gay desire and dreams of political embrace by the larger African American community. There's a new work, which is as yet untitled, that deals with notions of black gays counterpoised against the anti-gay, anti-black, anti-feminist hysteria, in some ways unleashed and exploited by Jesse Helms.

PK: The NEA?

MR: Yes, but it goes beyond the NEA. It's surfacing in so many ways now, whether it's 2 Live Crew, or NEA, or Kid 'n' Play. It's not as if I defend all of these people and everything they do, but there's a general hysteria in terms of trying to impose a certain kind of social control and social values that's led to very pervasive censorship. It goes beyond NEA and the country right now. He [Jesse Helms] is in some ways the most salient, most horrific manifestation of this censorship hysteria, but he's definitely not it.

PK: But I think what he does is so obvious, that he plays into all of it—he's the focus.

MR: Exactly. Exactly.

PK: Many of these things seemed very underground to us before, and now they're out there. But how it will play, finally, is frightening to contemplate.