

BLACK IS...BLACK AIN'T

A Facilitator's Guide

Racial identity is a difficult subject, fraught with controversy. For some, [Black Is...Black Ain't](#) challenges deeply held beliefs. For others, it airs painful material they have trouble discussing. But we believe that the film - and the discussions it engenders - can begin healing the wounds it uncovers. We hope this Facilitator Guide will help you move this process of intra-racial acceptance along.

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PROGRAM NOTES

What is Black? Too Black? Not Black Enough?

*I didn't want to write a poem that said blackness is
Because we know better than anyone
That we are not one or ten or ten thousand things
Not one poem...*

- Elizabeth Alexander, Today's News

Black Is...Black Ain't serves as eloquent visual testimony to the fact that African Americans are not, in Alexander's exacting words, one or ten or ten thousand things. This ground-breaking documentary, the last one crafted by the artful hands of filmmaker Marlon Riggs, identifies and confronts those forces that have attempted to consolidate, reduce, and

contain the lives and experiences of African Americans. By naming these forces and marshalling a powerful critique, *Black Is...Black Ain't* illuminates the complexities of black life. Riggs' film thus constructs a cinematic space for ten thousand ways of seeing and understanding blackness in America.

At first glance, the argument that blackness encompasses a myriad of experiences may seem self-evident and non-controversial. Yet ever since the first African arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 - in chains - Americans of African descent have been subject to efforts to erase their differences and in so doing, their humanity.

During the first several centuries, white people imposed their own definitions of blackness on African Americans. Insidious stereotypes alleging that all Africans were savages, even cannibals, were deemed credible. By the end of the nineteenth century, society-at-large recognized a few basic stock characters with names such as the mammy, the Uncle, the pickaninnie, and the coon. The origins and tenacity of these stereotypes which fueled anti-black prejudice well into the twentieth century were traced by Riggs' earlier Emmy-winning documentary, *Ethnic Notions*.

Because one's black identity was so often limited, distorted and made shameful by whites, asserting a new black identity became important to many African Americans. As Angela Davis observes in the film, "Perhaps we have an obsession with naming ourselves because for most of our lives we have been named by other people."

Ironically, Riggs claims, soon awkward and erroneous generalizations were being imposed upon African Americans not only by those outside the race but by black people themselves. Certain behaviors, ways of speaking, social practices, even dress began to be touted by African Americans as black while others were deemed white.

But is there an essential black identity? Is there a litmus test defining the real black man or true black women? and what has this cost us - black and non-black alike - this compulsion for a clear and singular black identity?

Black Is...Black Ain't jumps right into the middle of these conflicts over identity. It explores how racism, music, family, religion, sexual orientation, nationalism, and intra-racial class, gender, and color castes have collectively shaped the experience and meaning of blackness in America. Riggs eschews traditional narrative for a more layered and poetic strategy for representing the complexity of black identity. His camera travels across the country, from the rural South to middle class suburbs to the inner city bringing the viewer face to face with black folks young and old, rich and poor, rural and urban, gay and straight. He mixes performances by gifted artists - such as choreographer Bill T. Jones and poet Essex Hemphill - with personal testimony, commentary, and quotations into what one critic

called, a sizzling gumbo of thought and emotion. In fact, a huge gumbo pot bubbling with crab, crayfish, sausage, chicken and onions is Riggs' recurring metaphor for the richness of black culture.

But while *Black Is...* rejoices in the many flavors of what black is, it also brings us the testimony of individuals who have felt uncomfortable and even ostracized because they don't fit the mold. We hear from people whose behavior, speech, sexual orientation, class or complexion has somehow rendered them not black enough. The resulting dilemmas are supposed to be suffered in silence no matter the pain they cause, and African Americans who call attention to them are often rejected for airing dirty laundry. But *Black Is...Black Ain't* doesn't shrink from confronting several cultural institutions and ideological concepts rarely criticized in public by African Americans. Riggs challenges us to confront the sexism, homophobia and other practices which hurt and divide black people.

For example, the people and organizations who launched the Black Power movements and coined the slogan *Black is Beautiful* are often celebrated by contemporary scholars. Many of today's youth look back to the 1960s with romantic longing. In revisiting the black movements for social justice and power of the 1960s, *Black Is...Black Ain't* reveals moments of immeasurable courage - but also episodes of rampant sexism and homophobia. Because white society had so emphatically attempted to shame and enfeeble black males, the idea of reclaiming one's 'manhood' assumed prominence. Riggs brings us several women who claim *Black is Beautiful* really meant black men are beautiful and describe how the Black Power movement too-often equated blackness with masculinity and relegated women to the margins or treated them as sex objects.

The black family has been traumatized since the first male captives were taken from their homes in Africa. Riggs shows us incorporative family structures and other strategies African Americans have adopted to overcome the obstacles to family life. But while the film clearly salutes strong, loving, extended black families, it also acknowledges the pain and gulfs that can characterize black parent / child relationships. Cultural critic bell hooks (sic) recalls the confusion and anger she felt as a child the night she witnessed her father throw her mother out of their home. Poet Essex Hemphill and Riggs himself ponder the consequences of patriarchy and the painful silences and lack of communication which too often separate black fathers from sons.

African American political leaders often emerge from the black church, and the church's contributions to the empowerment of black people are usually applauded. But in *Black Is...Black Ain't*, Riggs takes his camera crew into the sanctuary of an urban black gay and lesbian church. Here the minister invokes the old-style call and response form of worship,

and makes viewers think about how much traditional black church doctrine spurns homosexuals and fans homophobia.

Although Riggs assembled a pantheon of well-known African American cultural critics, some of the film's most profound moments resonate with the voices of more anonymous black Americans often omitted from conventional documentaries as they wrestle with their own conflicts over blackness. *Black Is...Black Ain't* introduces viewers to a group of African Americans who have constructed a West African-style village in South Carolina, to members of a Louisiana Creole family, to residents of an isolated island off the eastern seaboard, to young men and women from South Central LA, and to middle-class blacks in the suburbs.

Tying the film's many elements together is Riggs' own story of alienation as a gay, black man with AIDS. Wan and thin, tied to machines, IVs sticking from his arm, Riggs deteriorates in front of our eyes. Yet he continues to direct the film from his hospital bed in a quest for meaning and self-definition as his death approaches. In a reappearing motif, we see Riggs running naked, vulnerable, lost in the woods, yearning to break free of confining notions of identity into an open, inclusive embrace of all that black is. This motif reinforces the underlying point of the film. Riggs argues that rather than having one fixed and never-changing identity, each of us inhabits many identities and many communities and that we move back and forth between them. Like gumbo, black communities are made up of many contrasting ingredients. Savoring this rich, variegated and ever-changing infusion, Riggs asks us to reject the idea of a single model of blackness and accept and value black America as an inclusive, dynamic, and improvisatory world.

One thing more: Riggs asks, If people are like gumbo, then what is the roux, that special ingredient that binds and gives everything its unique flavor? Riggs refuses to tell us; he keeps his recipe for roux secret. Instead of offering quick and easy solutions, *Black Is...Black Ain't* constructs and enacts multiple and often contradictory positions. In so doing, the film places the viewer in the middle of a shifting, complex, and above all, rich world of blackness in the late twentieth century. From this vantage point, the viewer is encouraged to experience the many ways in which black is...and black ain't and begin a dialogue long overdue, one which will allow each of us the freedom to pursue our own special recipe for self-definition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These Discussion Questions will help you problematize the idea of black identity, uproot it from any fixed moorings, and help students reconceive their own identity as something that, at least in part, each is capable of reinventing and renewing every day. The questions are keyed to the eight segments of the film; each segment corresponds to a different theme and is introduced by a summary (the relative beginning and end times of each segment are noted to make them easy to find on the video but time codes may vary on your player). We don't expect you to pursue all the questions. But read each one carefully and select those most relevant to your group and objectives. You might want to assign some of the questions as written assignments. Some student affairs professionals divide students after viewing into groups of African Americans and non-African Americans to facilitate a more open and honest discussion. While some of the questions are oriented towards African American students, most can easily be adapted for students of all races.

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Introduction: Fighting Words

[Start of picture 00:00 to 18:31]

Black Is...Black Ain't opens with Marlon Riggs lying in a hospital bed hooked up to an IV. Riggs' battle against AIDS is a thread which runs throughout the film. He says that in this fight he draws strength from the struggles of black folks because both are struggles against the odds...in the face of possible extinction. One of the battles African Americans have fought over the years is the struggle for self-esteem and positive definition of self. As recently as the 1960s many African Americans would not call themselves black because of the negative connotations of the word. Africa, too, was associated with primitiveness and backwardness. Even among African Americans preference was given to black people with lighter skin and European features.

1. How did the images of Riggs lying in his hospital bed make you feel? Do you agree with his analogy that the battle against AIDS is like the struggle of black folks in America?

2. *Black Is...Black Ain't* uses gumbo as a recurring motif or theme. Why do you think Riggs chose gumbo as his central metaphor for African Americans?

3. Black people used to call other blacks who valued light skin over dark skin color struck. Today preference for light skin is called colorism. How is colorism reinforced through popular media, television, videos, and film? What are some of the effects of colorism in African American communities today?

4. In *Black Is...*, Angela Davis says that black people have an obsession with naming ourselves because during most of our history we've been named by somebody else. Do you think names make a difference? What do you call yourself? Does it empower black people to set the terms for what others will call them? Why or why not?

Black Power = Male Power?

[18:31 to 30:51]

In his earlier film, *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs traced how black stereotypes flowed from white fears and attitudes towards African Americans. Earlier images of black men as harmless, playful eunuchs which justified slavery were eventually replaced by threatening, highly sexualized images that limited black men's expression of the full range of their selves. In *Black Is...*, Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Barbara Smith suggest that the Black Power movement focused on redeeming black men often at the expense of black women.

1. In *Black Is...* Cornel West says that the highly sexualized images of black men make it difficult for black men to get in touch with their humanity. Do you agree with him? What images of black men are common in the media today?

2. This section of the film opens and closes with two poems by Essex Hemphill. He begins:

*If there were seven blind men
One of them unable to speak
Unable to hear
Would be my father.*

Do you think it is difficult for men in general, and black men in particular, to acknowledge their hurt and discuss their fears? Why? Have you ever found it hard to reach out for help?

3. Essex Hemphill's closing poem states:

*Silence is
Our deadliest weapon
We both use it.
Precisely.
Often.*

What is this silence that Hemphill refers to? Silence between whom? Do you agree that silence between men can hurt them, that communicating feelings of hurt, fear or shame can be healing?

4. Some women active in the Black Consciousness movements in the 1960s and '70s claim that women were not treated as co-workers in the struggle but as appendages to men. bell hooks goes so far as to assert that black power became a "dick thing" as a male reaction against America's attempts to emasculate them. What do you think she means by this? Do you agree or disagree? How has racism historically disempowered black men? Do you think people often attempt to compensate for lack of power and control over their own lives by asserting power over others?

5. Which male behaviors are held in high regard among your peers and which are not? Bill T. Jones says that as a boy he couldn't be sensitive, couldn't cry, couldn't be afraid because of these notions I had about what it meant to be a black man. How prevalent are these pressures today? As a man, have you felt similar pressures? For both men and women: what feelings would you like to be more free to express?

6. Critics like Michele Wallace and bell hooks are accused of disloyalty and airing our dirty linen in public when they speak out about black male sexism. What is the cost to black communities of speaking publicly about sexism and what is the cost of keeping quiet? Have there ever been times when you were reluctant to bring up an issue in public?

Black Music/Black History/Afrocentrism

[30:51-42:39]

Acknowledging an African past is one way that black Americans counter negative images of blacks and Africa. African American culture, like black music, has roots in Africa, but incorporates innovations and improvisations from other cultures. Music is one path by which black creativity has reached the world. Marlon Riggs muses that without [black music] you can't imagine what music might be on this earth.

1. Why do you think Riggs includes black music in a film about identity?
2. In the film, Barbara Smith complains that we mythologize our African past... And make assertions about the past that are not necessarily true. What does she mean? Do you agree? How much of your self-esteem is due to your identification with an ethnic or racial group that has a heroic past and how much to your own efforts?
3. The African past is as diverse as the black American present. How might recognizing that diversity lead to better relations within black communities?
4. "I love kente cloth...But I don't confuse that with my identity..I can also put on a pair of jeans, and I feel just as black," asserts Angela Davis. What do you think Davis is criticizing with her statement? Do you think wearing African clothes, having an African name, or following Islamic or Yoruba customs makes you more black?
5. In the film, teenagers argue about learning history. One asks, What's Martin Luther King gonna do for you now? What's Harriet Tubman gonna do for you right now? What value do you find in black history? How have you been taught black history - as the story of famous leaders or as the on-going struggles and challenges of black people?

Sexism, Patriarchy and Homophobia

[42:39 to 1:01:32]

The conjunction of class, race, gender, and sexuality has placed wealthy, white, heterosexual men at the top of the American social hierarchy. In the face of white male privilege, many black men have demanded the same kind of power and respect. Power based only on male gender is called patriarchy, the rule of the father; discrimination against women because they are women is sexism; fear of - and discrimination against - gays and lesbians is homophobia.

1. In the film, bell hooks recalls the confusion and anger she felt when she witnessed her father throw her mother out of their home. How did you react when you heard this story? How widespread is the notion that a man's home is his castle?
2. Barbara Smith wonders if just because she is female was she supposed somehow to get stupid?. If you are a woman, have you ever felt uncomfortable exhibiting intelligence or leadership around men? If a man, do you ever feel threatened by smart women?
3. Where does sexism show itself most frequently among your peer group?

4. Louis Farrakhan blames women for boxer Mike Tyson's rape conviction. Do men here on campus behave as if no means no ? Why is Mike Tyson considered a hero by many despite his conviction?

5. The Bible and ancient Africa are both invoked to justify sexism and patriarchy. What do you think of these explanations of the natural order of humankind? Can you think of other examples where nature or God has been used to justify discrimination?

6. Riggs and Barbara Smith decry the notion that to be black is to be heterosexual. Essex Hemphill doesn't believe that somehow my blackness is diminished because I love a man. Can you recount instances where people have been made to feel unwelcome in black institutions because of their sexual orientation? What is the greatest concern that your peer group has about gays and lesbians? What can you and your community do to end the exclusion of black gays and lesbians?

7. Riggs is particularly pained by the black church. He acknowledges the critical role the church has played in the freedom movement over the centuries. But he wants the black church to embrace gays and lesbians and acknowledge their contributions. He shows us a gay, black congregation singing gospel music which offers a safe and loving sanctuary for all black people regardless of sexual orientation. Do you think the church can be a site for reconciliation?

8. For several reasons, not just sexual orientation, many people feel that I cannot go home as who I am. What does this line mean to you? Have you ever felt it awkward or difficult to go home ?

Family

[1:01:32 to 1:07:20]

Black Is...Black Ain't acknowledges the pain and hurt that can occur in parent-child relationships, but also salutes strong, loving black families. Black families are especially incorporative, including a wide range of relatives and friends who care for and support each other.

1. Have you ever attended a family reunion? Describe the variety of people who are members of your family.

2. Think about your pretend or play aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters and those who are like a mother or father. How can this incorporative family feeling be extended to the larger black community?

3. In the film, we watch the St. Juliens pour libations in memory of a deceased member of the family. Discuss the rituals in your family and community that pass on African American culture and history from one generation to the next.

Acting White / Not Black Enough?

[1:07:20 to 1:16:42]

Black Is... brings us people who claim they were regarded as not black enough because of how they spoke, the schools they attended, the clothes they wore, where they lived or the money they made. But can there be a standard for measuring blackness?

1. How many different speech types can you identify among black people you know?
2. Michele Wallace claims the phrase "You're acting white" is a charge that can be leveled against any black person. Has the fear of acting white ever prevented you from doing something you wanted? Which behaviors and types are held in high regard among your peers and which are not? Why?
3. Do you agree with Essex Hemphill that the life-styles of ghetto teenagers have become the standard or definition of blackness? What are the ideal characteristics of masculinity as portrayed by rap and street culture? How have these models influenced your behavior? Why do you think so many men adopt a tough, or macho pose?
4. What are your attitudes towards successful African Americans living in the suburbs? What pressures do they face? Should they move to the inner cities?
5. How did you react when the 13 or 14 year old gang members said it's too late for them but they must teach the next generation not to follow in their footsteps? Is there anything our community can do to help inner city youth take a different path?

Multiple Identities and New Forms of Community

[1:16:42 to End]

The distinction between a community based on unity and one based on communion is addressed in the final segment of the film. Unity too often implies uniformity, while communion suggests the sharing or exchange of thoughts and feelings. Black people, like people everywhere, belong to more than one community and may have communion with many different kinds of people.

1. Do you believe that black unity is an inherently false, restrictive, maybe even oppressive, concept? Discuss the various takes on the idea of black unity presented in the film, for

instance, the barber thinks that unity is crucial but Michele Wallace worries that a circle of unity always excludes someone.

2. For many, Cornel West's statement, "There is no one grand black community," seems to defy common sense. How can you be black yet not be part of one grand black community?

3. Towards the end of the film, one man (Wayne Corbett) looks into the camera and says, Haven't we had enough of folks telling other folks what's proper, how to talk, who to love, how to dress, wear your hair, eat, drink, pray, make love, dance? Earlier, Marlon Riggs says, All black people have to reconcile themselves...to our differences and get over the notion that you can only be unified as long as everybody agrees. But doesn't the idea of unity by definition imply agreement, aren't all communities built around common values and standards? How can we adopt Riggs' credo without falling prey to an anything goes relativism?

4. bell hooks offers a way out of this dilemma of conformity vs. permissiveness, suggesting a new form of community based not on unity but on communion. What does she mean? If unity is predicated on agreement, what is communion based on? Does your campus community follow the unity or communion model? What is lost and what is gained if we move away from the goal of black unity toward a vision of black communion?

5. What does Cornel West mean when he says we all have multiple identities and that we're moving in and out of various communities at the same time? List the communities you belong to. Does your self-identity change when you move from one community to another? If so, how?

6. How do you think Marlon Riggs identified himself? A gay man with AIDS? A black male? A filmmaker? An activist? Do you think he allowed an identity to be assigned to him or did he try to construct an identity unique to himself? To what extent do you believe you're free to invent yourself, and to what extent is your identity fixed, limited by your race, your parents, and history?

7. The gumbo simmering throughout the film symbolizes the rich diversity among African Americans. But Marlon Riggs does not explicitly identify the roux that can bind together the different colors, genders, classes, regions, sexual orientations, etc. of African Americans. Why not? What do you think the ingredients for such a roux might be?

MARLON RIGGS (1957-1994)

Marlon Riggs was known for making insightful and controversial documentary films confronting racism and homophobia that thrust him onto center stage in America's cultural wars. Born in Ft. Worth Texas on February 3, 1957, Marlon graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard and received his masters' degree from the University of California - Berkeley where he became a tenured professor in the Graduate School of Journalism.

Marlon's first major work, *Ethnic Notions* (58 min, 1987), traces the evolution of the racial stereotypes which have implanted themselves deep into the American psyche across 150 years of U.S. history. The documentary received a National Emmy Award and other top film festival honors and has become a core audiovisual text in a wide range of courses.

But it was Marlon's second major work, *Tongues Untied* (58 min, 1989), which catapulted him into the debate over public funding of the arts. This highly personal, sometimes angry, always poignant documentary was the first frank discussion of the black, gay experience on television. Though acclaimed by critics and awarded film festival prizes, its broadcast by the PBS series P.O.V. was immediately pounced upon by the Religious Right as a symbol of everything wrong with public funding for art and culture, particularly culture outside the mainstream. The Christian Coalition edited a highly sensationalized seven-minute clip from the film which they sent to every member of Congress. Senator Jesse Helms was point man for the chorus of denunciation. (In a telling Freudian slip, he invariably referred to the film as *Tongues United*.) Then Patrick Buchanan re-edited a 20-second clip from the film (a blatant copyright infringement) for a TV ad hit piece blasting the National Endowment for the Arts during the 1992 presidential primary. Marlon responded with an Op Ed in the New York Times entitled Meet the New Willie Horton which recalled the notorious race-baiting ad George Bush himself used in the 1988 election. The insult, Riggs wrote, extends not just to blacks and gays, the majority of whom are taxpayers and would therefore seem entitled to some means of representation in publicly financed art. The insult confronts all of us who witness and are outraged by the quality of political debate.

It was perhaps inevitable that Marlon would become a lightning rod in this fight since he was an outspoken activist for a more diverse and inclusive media. In 1988 he testified before a U.S. Senate Committee as part of the campaign to create the Independent Television Service (ITVS) supporting controversial, independent voices on public television: ITVS is supposed to shake you up, to address areas of deep taboo no one is willing to talk about, to give voice to communities which have been historically silenced. America needs to realize the value of having a communicative institution designed to challenge us and upset us. There is value in doing something more than making culture answerable to the marketplace.

Marlon's own next major work, *Color Adjustment* (86 min, 1991), challenged television itself. It traces over 40 years of representations of African Americans through the distorting prism of prime time television, from Amos 'n' Andy to Cosby. *Color Adjustment* garnered television's highest accolade, the George Foster Peabody Award. That same year the American Film Institute granted Riggs their Maya Deren Lifetime Achievement Award.

Marlon's final film, *Black Is...Black Ain't* (86 min, 1995), is an outstanding example of the kind of committed television programming he struggled to support all his life. It wasn't easy. While in production Marlon maintained his teaching position at U.C. Berkeley, took on public speaking engagements, and continued to write. All the while, the HIV virus was ravaging his body. Hospitalized by kidney failure and other ailments, he continued to direct - even appeared on camera - from his hospital bed and the film gradually took on a more personal tone as he got sicker.

Marlon finally succumbed to AIDS April 5, 1994. He was 37 years old. *Black Is...Black Ain't* was completed by his co-producer Nicole Atkinson and editor / co-director Christiane Badgely from the footage and notes he left behind. Marlon is survived by Jack Vincent, his life companion of 15 years.

Towards the end of *Black Is...Black Ain't* Marlon looks up at the camera from his hospital bed and says, As long as I have work then I'm not going to die, cause work is a living spirit in me - that which wants to connect with other people and pass on something which they can use in their own lives and grow from. Marlon Riggs' tireless and caring spirit inspired many. We hope you too have been able to take nourishment from his last work, *Black Is...Black Ain't*, and will help pass on Marlon's critical eye and warm embrace.

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