

ments and/or theoretical paradigms that exclude gays and lesbians of color (Cohen and Johnson). The deployment of these and other scholars' work continues through the purposeful diversity of the chapters that follow.

The first three chapters in this volume focus explicitly on black queer sexuality, privileging as a subject of inquiry my own subject position as a black queer scholar. Indeed, while my sexuality is explicitly present throughout these first three chapters, this is not the case in chapters 4 and 5, where sexuality—at least my own—is less the focus. And yet the specter of my queerness lurks in these pages as well; that is, although my sexuality is not privileged as an object of inquiry in Australia or in my grandmother's living room, race and sexuality are always already imbricated in those sites. This is nowhere more apparent than in chapter 4, where the "mammy" trope my grandmother deploys in the telling of her narrative revives the discussion in chapter 3 about the ways in which black gay men appropriate and refigure the term "mother." Moreover, the conspicuous silences about my sexuality in chapter 5 in the context of Australia speak less to an exorcism of (my) sexuality than to the fact that Australian culture is less obsessed than is U.S. culture with issues of (homo)sexuality. For sure, the margins of my field notes are filled with my exploits of going "Down Under" but, alas, these tales remain tangential to gospel music performance in the land of Oz. I offer this caveat not as an apology, but rather as a way to frame the methods deployed here and to point out the ways in which blackness is imbricated in multiple identity markers.

This book is an explicit attempt to fully entwine theory and praxis. In so doing, its chapters embrace the myriad intersections of culture and politics by calling attention to the process of *doing* blackness. Performance provides a portal for this process, allowing both maladroit and skilled cultural workers to press blackness into service. Finally, however, the chapters demonstrate the fallibility of the question of authenticity. Blackness, ever residing at the site of indeterminacy, leaves the authenticator wanting, posing yet another question: "Blackness where are you?"

## THE POT IS BREWING

### Marlon Riggs's *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*

There has been a history of excluding other black folk from community to the detriment of our overall empowerment.—Marlon Riggs

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, black gay poet and filmmaker Marlon Riggs committed his life to chronicling black American life. His early works, *Ethnic Notions* (1986) and *Color Adjustment* (1991), for example, documented the history of the images of blacks in art, artifacts, television, theater, and film. His most controversial work, *Tongues Untied*, however, debuted on the PBS *Point of View* series in 1990, and it chronicles Riggs's personal struggles with coming to terms with his racial and sexual identities, and with homophobia in black communities and racism in white communities. In one of the more poignant moments of *Tongues Untied*, a collage of obituaries of black gay men who have died of AIDS flashes on the screen while the sound of a heartbeat thumps in the background. This series of pictures is preceded by Essex Hemphill performing his poem "Now We Think," which emblemizes the paranoia of contracting HIV/AIDS experienced by gay men: "Now we think / as we fuck / this nut / might kill us. / There might be / a pin-sized hole / in the condom. / A lethal leak."<sup>1</sup> Echoing the poem's angst-ridden tone, Riggs announces that "a time bomb is ticking in my blood." The newspaper clippings of those who have fallen victim to AIDS appear in succession, appearing

more rapidly as they proceed, over which Riggs narrates: "I listen for my own quiet implosion, but while I wait, older, stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustain my spirit, silencing the clock." The last image of this series of pictures is that of Riggs himself, as if foreshadowing his own death that would come four years later. The "older, stronger rhythms" that "resonate" within him and "sustain his spirit" are represented in the collage of images following the series of obituaries, the first picture being one of Harriet Tubman who, for Riggs, is an emblem of the struggle for black freedom and equality, and who Riggs invokes even more prominently in his film *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*.<sup>2</sup>

In some ways *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* is the sequel to *Tongues Untied* in that although it broadens its scope to examine black identity in all of its contradictions and contingencies, the focus of the film is Riggs's battle with AIDS, which he apparently knew he had contracted when he filmed *Tongues Untied*. Riggs thus stages the fight for his life against AIDS within the broader context of black identity politics. For Riggs, the processes by which we fight deadly diseases such as AIDS and those by which we fight over the embattled status of blackness circumscribe the process by which we come into our humanity. In other words, when we "fix" and confine our identity as monolithic, we inhibit our road both to recovery from the diseases that plague our communities and to discovering our humanity. Taking the "fact" of the diseased and "black" body as givens, Riggs, according to Martin Favor, "refuses to delineate the boundaries of blackness even as [the film's title] invokes the category as truly experienced and, indeed, necessary."<sup>3</sup> Resonating the queer theory critique of identity as ontological, the film also allows for the subject's agency and authority by visually privileging Riggs's AIDS experience narrative. Indeed, the film's documentation of Riggs's declining health, highlighted by the reiteration of his declining T-cell count coupled with his own narration, suggests an identity and a body in the process of "being" and "becoming," of identity as performance and performativity.

Insofar as identity is performed and experienced as real, it constitutes a legitimate way through which subjects maintain control over their lives and their image. But performance does not foreclose the discursive signifiers that undergird the terms of its production. Through my reading of the film, then, I will focus on the dialectic

created between performance and performativity, demonstrating why one critical trope necessarily depends on the other in the process of identity formation. *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* demonstrates just how overdetermined black identity and authenticity are by elaborating on the ways in which skin color alone is simultaneously an inadequate yet sometimes a socially, culturally, and politically necessary signifier of blackness.

In the first half of this chapter I will elaborate the process by which the film engages performativity to underscore the problematic pursuit of authentic identity claims. Although theories of performativity focus primarily on the performativity of gender, I engage a discussion about the performativity of race. One of the ways in which the film engages this critique is by pointing out how, at the very least, gender, class, sexuality, and region all impact the construction of blackness. Indeed, the title of the film—*Black Is . . . Black Ain't*—itself embodies how race defines, as well as confines, black Americans. The running trope used by Riggs to illuminate the multiplicity of blackness is gumbo, a dish whose ingredients consist of whatever the cook wishes. It has, Riggs remarks, "everything you can imagine in it." This trope also underscores the multiplicity of blackness insofar as gumbo is a dish associated with New Orleans, a city confounded by its mixed raced progeny and the identity politics that mixing creates. The gumbo trope is apropos because, like "blackness," gumbo is a site of possibilities. The film argues that when black Americans attempt to define what it means to be black, they delimit the possibilities of what blackness can be. At times, this process of demarcating blackness may be counterproductive to the flavor of the roux that acts as the base of the gumbo that is "blackness."

But Riggs's film does more than just stir things up. In many ways it reduces the heat of the pot to a simmer, allowing everything in the gumbo to mix and mesh yet maintain a distinct flavor; for after all, chicken is distinct from andouille sausage, rice from peas, bay leaf from thyme, cayenne from paprika. Thus, Riggs's film suggests that black Americans cannot begin to ask the dominant culture to accept their difference as Others nor accept their humanity until black Americans accept the differences that exist among themselves. Riggs's film does the work that Dwight McBride calls for: "[To] create new and more inclusive ways of speaking about race that do not

cause even good, thorough thinkers . . . to compromise their/our own critical veracity by participating in the form of race discourse that has been hegemonic for so long."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as I demonstrate below, Riggs's "critical veracity" is relenting in his critique of race-privileging anti-racist discourse such that gender, sexuality, and class constitute subject positions from which one may "speak" about race oppression.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the black body as a site of performance. Here I provide a rejoinder to racial performativity in order to intervene in what I see as some scholars' eclipsing of corporeality and materiality. Specifically, I construe Marlon Riggs's black body in the film as a site of discursivity *and* corporeality that calls attention to the social consequences of "having" AIDS and also "being" black. Rather than succumb to the essentialist/antiessentialist binary, I suggest that the "presence" of Riggs's black diseased body forces viewers of the film to confront not only the social impact of AIDS on the black community but also the impact of inhabiting a black identity in a racist society.

Before moving on to the analysis of *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*, I would like to offer a caveat about the terms of the film's production and how those terms could undermine the reading I am about to perform. As a documentary commissioned and funded by PBS, *Black Is* becomes implicated in the ideological trappings of that venue. In other words, although PBS has aired controversial programs, its reliance on public and federal funding has crippled its ability to make completely autonomous decisions about its programming. Indeed, conservatives such as Jesse Helms were instrumental in cutting funding for the National Endowment of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as PBS because these institutions were funding what the conservatives considered "indecent" art. Riggs's own *Tongues Untied* was caught in the backlash of this conservative wave during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which led some local PBS affiliates to keep the film from being aired. Thus, the fact that PBS partially funded and broadcast *Black Is* seems at odds with the fiscal blackmail under which the station now operates.

One way of reading PBS's support for the documentary, then, might be the fact that it chronicles a black gay man dying of AIDS. Viewed from this angle the film becomes an elegy for Riggs's death. The fact that the film is framed by the beginning scene of the announcement

that Riggs dies before its completion and at the end by the "in memoriam" along with Riggs's narration of his desire that the film's portrayal of his battle with AIDS helps us all see our humanity, makes the documentary complicitous in constructing a "universal" death narrative as opposed to pointing to the specificity of dying from AIDS.<sup>5</sup> Given the lack of support from conservatives in Congress for AIDS research, especially during the Reagan and Bush (both father and son) administrations, such a representation would necessarily diminish the specificity and devastating effects of AIDS on the black community, which—in light of the recent surge in the number of black Americans infected with HIV/AIDS, especially black women—cripples further the effectiveness of HIV/AIDS activism and advocacy within and outside black communities.<sup>6</sup>

An even more sinister agenda for allowing the film to air on PBS would rely on the racist logic that those viewing the film would automatically associate AIDS with blackness.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on Riggs's illness and the focus on blackness make the film vulnerable to such a reading. Although these conjectures about the terms of the film's production may appear paranoid and conspiratorial, because film lives in the realm of the representational and therefore the ideological its meaning and interpretation are contingent on its historical and cultural reception.

The possibility of such readings notwithstanding, I offer a counter-reading of *Black Is* through what David Román refers to as "critical generosity." "Critical generosity," Román argues, "is a practice that sets out to intervene in the limited perspectives we currently employ to understand and discuss AIDS theatre and performance by looking beyond conventional forms of analysis."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, my analysis of *Black Is* seeks to push past canonical and conventional forms of analysis in order to locate the manner in which this AIDS filmic performance signifies in ways that disrupt any *singular* reading of AIDS, death, and blackness. In fact, the power of Riggs's film might be in its ability to reveal the various modes of racist/antiracist discourse that circulate within and outside black culture. My reading of the film is similar to that of Teresa de Lauretis's reading of the film *Born in Flames*: "The originality of this film's project is its representation of woman as social subject and a site of differences; differences which are not purely sexual or merely racial, economic, or (sub)cultural, but all of these



together and often in conflict with one another. What one takes away after seeing this film is the image of the heterogeneity in the female social subject."<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the female social subject, Riggs specifically represents the heterogeneity of the black gay subject and of blackness in general.

My interest in *Black Is* also stems from its particularity as a filmic performance, as a genre that provides for a historiography of AIDS performance not always possible with other genres of performance. Unlike the difficulty theater historians have in documenting AIDS artistic productions because, in Román's words, "many of the artistic collaborators, producers, theatre staff, and spectators who participated in these productions and performances are also dead and therefore may leave no record of the events,"<sup>10</sup> the celluloid medium provides material documentation of such performances to which performance critics and historians may return. As another kind of "intervention," then, my analysis of *Black Is* is an attempt to keep alive and ever in the forefront the political advocacy of and discourse on HIV/AIDS education and prevention.

#### An Oreo Is Not Just a Cookie: Blackness and the Middle Class

Class represents a significant axis and divisiveness within black communities. Despite Stuart Hall's assertion that "'black' is not the exclusive property of any particular social or any single discourse" and that "it has no necessary class belonging,"<sup>11</sup> there are those who trudge forward carrying the class card they believe guarantees their membership in authentic blackness. As Martin Favor persuasively argues, "authentic" blackness is most often associated with the "folk" or the working-class black.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, art forms such as folklore and the blues that are associated with the black working class are also viewed as more genuinely black.<sup>13</sup> This association of the folk with black authenticity necessarily renders the black middle class as inauthentic and apolitical. Indeed, over the years various black scholars, writers, and activists have located authentic blackness within poor and working-class black communities, suggesting, according to Valerie Smith, that the black working class "is an autonomous space, free of

negotiations with hegemony, that contains the pure source of musical and spiritual culture and inspiration. The black middle class, in contrast, is a space of pure compromise and capitulation, from which all autonomy disappears once it encounters hegemonic power."<sup>14</sup>

Much of this sentiment stems from the belief that black economic mobility necessarily breeds assimilationists and race traitors because of interracial mixing. Moreover, there is an assumption that educated blacks are much more likely to disavow their racial "roots" than might their poor and illiterate brothers and sisters. Although this rhetoric is problematic on many counts, one of its more disturbing aspects is that it confounds class and race such that it links racial authenticity with a certain kind of primitivism and anti-intellectualism. Langston Hughes, in his famous treatise "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," for example, portrays the black working class in a Cartesian manner by reifying the body/mind split—body as linked to nature, and mind to the abstract world—and romanticizing black folk culture as the impetus for all black aesthetic and cultural production. In contrast, he images the black middle class and intellectuals as "afraid" of black cultural production:

[The] *low-down folks*, the so-called common element . . . live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! these *common people* are not afraid of spirituals, *as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were*, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself.<sup>15</sup>

Hughes's persistent references to black working-class people as "common," alongside the implications that they are lazy (e.g., "Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow") undermines his valorization of these same "folk" as the site of racial authenticity. And given that Hughes himself was a product of and lived primarily as the black middle class, he ironically presents the black middle class, by implication, as lacking creativity, individuality, and indeed, authenticity. According to Favor a move such as Hughes's was not uncommon among

some black intellectuals who, in an attempt to be “down with the cause,” found themselves in an awkward position when they aligned themselves with the “folk” in order to allay their own guilt about being middle class.<sup>16</sup>

A similar rhetoric of racial authenticity founded on class difference also circulated during the 1960s Black Power and Black Arts movements. Members of the so-called black bourgeoisie as depicted in the scholarship and poetry of black nationalists were assimilating sell-outs, phenotypically black but politically and ideologically white—“half-white” Oreos. In his poem “Black Bourgeoisie” Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) describes the black middle class thusly:

[Black Bourgeoisie,] has a gold tooth, sits long hours  
on a stool thinking about money.  
sees white skin in a secret room  
rummages his sense for sense  
dreams about Lincoln(s)  
conks his daughter's hair  
sends his coon to school  
works very hard  
grins politely in restaurants  
has a good word to say  
never says it  
does not hate ofays  
hates, instead, him self  
him black self<sup>17</sup>

In this poem, Baraka renders the black middle-class male as a self-hating materialist whose politics, given his inclination to mimic “whiteness” (e.g., “conks his daughter's hair” and “grins politely in restaurants”), run counter to the 1960s Black Power movement's struggle against “ofays.”<sup>18</sup> And in “Poem for Some Half White College Students,” a poem whose title announces Baraka's indictment of educated blacks as being inauthentically black, “half white” black college students are associated with white film stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Steve McQueen in order to illustrate the students' sycophantic relationship to whiteness. Baraka encourages the student to “check yourself,/learn who it is/speaking, when you make some ultrasophisticated point, check yourself,/when you find yourself gesturing like Steve McQueen,/check it out, ask/in your black heart

who it is you are, and is that image black or white.”<sup>19</sup> According to the logic of the poem, then, an educated middle-class black is more susceptible to the seduction of whiteness because his or her socioeconomic status compromises his or her politics.<sup>20</sup>

Both “Black Bourgeoisie” and “Poem for Some Half White College Students” are emblematic of the discourse about the black middle class as the site of capitulation in the face of racial strife. Enshrouded by the militancy of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, this brand of Black Nationalism forecloses the possibility of middle-class inclusion in antiracist struggle. By founding blackness on a socially constructed monolithic black community, the rhetoric of black authenticity discourse before and after the 1960s confounds ideological allegiance and skin color such that radical political coalitions are forestalled. According to Adolph Reed Jr., 1960s Black Nationalism's “naïve” unself-consciousness actually deflated the political efficacy of the Civil Rights movement, reducing the movement to a “simplistic politics of unity.”<sup>21</sup> This “simplistic politics of unity” was undoubtedly forged to foreground at least the “appearance” of a unified black community, but rather than stabilizing blackness it paradoxically “gave way to opportunistic appeal to unity grounded on an unspecifiable ‘blackness’ and commodified idea of ‘soul’” (74).

In *Black Is Riggs* intervenes in this construction of the black middle class as less black by featuring a potpourri of blacks from various backgrounds. Coincidentally, the film's focus on the 1960s belies the rhetoric that positions the black middle class as racially inauthentic by seemingly locating the founding moment of politicized blackness in the 1960s among the educated black middle class. Indeed, those black figures most celebrated in the film—Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, Michele Wallace, and Cornel West—are middle-class members of the baby boomer generation. This is significant given that West has argued that the Civil Rights movement was largely “the activity of the black petite bourgeois . . . upon reaching an anxiety-ridden middle-class status in racist American society.”<sup>22</sup>

Riggs undermines the idea that “authentic” blackness belongs to the black working class by prominently displaying interviews with Angela Davis, Michele Wallace, and Barbara Smith. The life-experience narratives that these women relate in the film reveal the bigotry of black radical conservatives who, despite these women's contributions to the

struggle, tried to exclude them from the movement because of their education and middle-class status. Indirectly exposing the triteness of Baraka's "half white" poem, in one scene of the film Barbara Smith says, "I was very committed to the Civil Rights movement, but I was constantly getting the message that I was not black enough. You know how they did that in those days? They're probably still doing it. I was not black enough because I was at an elite school. I was not black enough because I spoke fairly Standard English." Angela Davis echoes Smith when she reveals that she felt "ashamed" for having studied outside the United States, the implication being that it was not something "real" black folks did. Davis explains: "There was a time when I felt ashamed almost that I had studied in France and studied in Germany, right? Because we were supposed to be talking about Africa not Europe. And I know that the way I act, and the way I talk, and the way I think reflects all the places that I've been. And I've been a lot of places." In essence, Barbara Smith and Angela Davis deny that their middle-class status and all of the accoutrements accorded that position such as education and use of Standard English compromised their "blackness" or their commitment and contributions to antiracist struggle.

Also growing out of the 1960s problematic focus on prescribing authentic blackness was the equation of "African" garb with "real" blackness. Insofar as "Western" clothing was associated with whiteness and upward mobility, one's choice of clothing implicated membership in a certain class. Not surprisingly, the more African garb one donned, the more authentically black and "down" one became. This emphasis on clothing, however, fetishizes and commodifies an ahistorical representation of a mythic African past, whereby Africa is reduced to a monolithic whole. Again, *Black Is* critiques such narrow-minded, unself-conscious cultural nationalism by allowing its "talking heads" to expose the contradictions of yoking authentic blackness to such cultural practices.

Accordingly, Angela Davis suggests that wearing blue jeans is no less black than wearing kente cloth: "I love kente cloth. I wear kente cloth and have kente cloth in my house, but I don't confuse that with my identity. Because I can wear kente cloth if I want, but I can put on a pair of jeans and I feel just as black as I did when I had the kente cloth on." And in one of his many appearances in the film, poet

Essex Hemphill expresses his concern when cultural pride as manifested through wearing African garb or giving up "the master's name" becomes fundamentalist dogma that creates a boundary around the category of blackness. Hemphill says, "Putting on our kentes and whatever cloths and importing from West Africa—all of that's really wonderful. . . . Whatever makes your spirit rise then I say, by all means, nurture it, if that's what it takes for you, if that's the affirmation it takes. But that doesn't then give you the privilege to beat someone else down just because they don't want to change their name or wear African clothes or stay in the inner city." By explicitly critiquing the notion of an authentic blackness based on clothing or naming rituals, Davis and Hemphill testify that blackness is not something one necessarily wears on the outside (through black skin or clothing) but something more ephemeral and processual—a performativity that calls attention to the slippages among biology, culture, ideology, and politics. Thus, wearing kente or acquiring an African name is one kind of black performance, but it is a no less authentic performance of blackness than wearing blue jeans or being named "John" or "Mary."

Returning again to the idea of "folk" as more authentically black, I would like to end this discussion of class in *Black Is* by focusing on how it deconstructs the inner city/suburb binary in relation to authentic blackness. At the outset of the segment of the film quoted above, Essex Hemphill provides an explanation as to why the inner city has become associated with "real" blackness: "Perhaps the standard, frightening as it may be, is the inner city for defining what blackness is. That you've got to constantly be up on the changes in the hip language, the hip black language, the hip black fashions, the hip black music. You've got to use your ghetto experience as your American Express Card." In addition to the popular black intellectuals featured in the film, Riggs interviews several average black Americans from both the inner city and the suburbs to get their perspective on being black. In one particularly telling moment in the film, three young black men who live in Inglewood, California—infamously known as South Central—provide compelling narratives of poverty, "gang banging," drug dealing, and ever-impending incarceration. As one of these young men says to Riggs: "We gotta make a living the best we can. If that means by selling dope, then I guess that means we have to sell



dope. Ain't nobody rich in the ghetto. If we were rich, we wouldn't be here."

Initially, these young men's sense of themselves and their future is overwhelmingly nihilistic—a black nihilism that Cornel West says is to be “understood . . . not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive position toward the world.”<sup>23</sup> These young black urban dwellers are a far cry from the “low-down folks” Langston Hughes depicts as the progenitors of Negro artistry in “Racial Mountain.” Indeed, they do not experience a joy that “runs, bang! into ecstasy” but rather into despair. The testimonies of these young men featured in the film are in contradistinction to the romanticized folk culture depicted by those who unproblematically image the black working class and inner-city dwellers as somehow inoculated from the devastation of their surroundings, reconstructing the weary, worn propaganda that misery breeds creativity. In fact, these young men cast off the nihilism of their surroundings by at least articulating a desire to “leave the ghetto.” One of the young men explains his plan to get out of the ghetto, which, incidentally, entails acquiring an advanced degree in order to ascend the socioeconomic ladder:<sup>24</sup>

I ain't gonna be out here everyday gang banging, man. After I graduate from high school I'm going somewhere. I ain't gonna be out here everyday. Ain't shit out here but pain. Fuck this shit. . . . Right now, I be going to school everyday. Right now I do not miss school a day, cause I gotta have that education, man. Cause the white man's not gonna let you do shit. A high school diploma ain't nothing no more. You gotta master in something. High school diploma ain't nothing no more, man. You can't even work at McDonald's with a high school diploma. That's why I'm gonna try to be something and when I get up, I'm gonna try to take them up with me. You know what I'm saying? Cause I don't want to leave none of my friends or family in the ghetto.

Far from romanticizing the struggle of his existence, this young man desires a better life in which he is able not only to leave the ghetto and acquire an education and a good-paying job but also come back to the community and help his friends and family. Moreover, his nar-

rative points to the slippage between skin color and politics. The fact of this young man's blackness, then, is not sutured to his status as a poverty-stricken, gang-banging ghettoite. As his class status shifts and becomes more malleable, discursively and materially, so too will his blackness. As Favor suggests: “Those who can bend class and geographic position to their own purposes have the power to shape what ‘race’ is. By reshaping race, they add to the complexity of the discourse of black identity rather than impoverishing it with ‘false’ notions.”<sup>25</sup> One of those “false” notions is that ghetto life is the site of uncompromised authentic blackness.

*Black Is* alternately moves from the inner city to the suburbs, an editorial choice that further dismantles the black authenticity hierarchy that privileges the inner city as a more authentically black site. Juxtaposed to the interviews with the inner-city young men, for example, are clips of interviews with black suburbanites who articulate their hyperawareness of the black middle-class/working-class divide in the identity politics pool of authentic blackness. To dramatize this divide the film shows one of the black middle-class men Riggs interviewed walking up the steps to his relatively large suburban home in Fort Washington, Maryland. During the interview with this particular man, his defensiveness about being accused of being inauthentically black registers in his allusions to a phallic blackness. He quips: “I’ll pull out my blackness and you pull out yours. I have no problem in defending mine. And I think I speak for a lot of people in the African American middle class. You know, again, you can’t live in this society and not be black. You know, the society won’t let you forget you’re black. But you don’t want to forget you’re black. Being black is not about economics, it’s about values.” Although wrapped in phallogocentric machismo, the “pulling out” metaphor nonetheless accedes that blackness is contingent, malleable, performative. Rightfully, this interviewee also unhinges authentic blackness from a particular class status and aligns it with the process of valuation, which is also contingent on context, history, place, and space.

In another moment in this section of the film, a black middle-class man is interviewed: his narrative is initially heard over and intercut with excerpts from rapper Ice Cube's music video “True to the Game,” in which a black “yuppie” is kidnapped and brought back to the “hood” because he has forgotten his roots. What makes this montage inter-

esting is the irony that registers in the juxtaposition of these two competing narratives. The interviewee refuses to apologize for his middle-class status because he is a product of the ghetto: "I'm a born, bred, raised Harlemit. I knew what the hood was before most of these kids were born. And the reality is do you live your life in struggle around trying to prove a point to someone who doesn't really give a damn about your reality or do you determine what's important to you?" This self-proclaimed "Harlemit" realizes the futility in trying to prove one's blackness to those who believe that dwelling in the ghetto is a prerequisite for the "real" black experience. The "ghetto experience" is as much an ideological construct as is the category "blackness," a cultural performance with the discursive trimmings of hegemonic identity. As Stuart Hall reminds us: "There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield 'how life really is out there' as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured."<sup>26</sup>

That is not to say that there is no "real" poverty in the black inner city, but rather only that the representation of that poverty may take many discursive turns such that one might actually live in the ghetto but not necessarily *appear* to. The reverse may also be true as witnessed among rappers who sing about life in the ghetto but who themselves don't actually live there. And even in those instances where a rapper does remain "in the ghetto" his geographic location does no more to secure the authenticity of his blackness than it does to diminish the fact of his wealth.

Ice Cube, however, would have us believe that authentic blackness has everything to do with where one lives. In "True to the Game" he chastises the "Oreo" for "living way out" and "trying to be white or a Jew," and he urges him to "stop being an Uncle Tom, you little sell-out/House nigga scum." If the suburbanite refuses to heed Ice Cube's warning, it may result in his "ghetto pass" (read "blackness") being "revoked."<sup>27</sup> All three verses of the song in some way or another encapsulate all of the many contingencies on which class-based authentic blackness is founded, including interracial marriage and friendships, speaking Standard English, wearing a suit and tie, or things as trivial as smiling.

Rather than silencing rhetoric such as that enlisted in Ice Cube's song, Riggs's choice to include it and to juxtapose it with narratives by

those whom the song indicts only reinforces the notion that blackness cannot be founded on class status. If anything, the cacophony of voices featured in this section of the film resembles the polyvocality of discourses that comprise blackness. By positioning these voices against one another Riggs corroborates Wahneema Lubiano's (paraphrasing Stuart Hall) suggestion that "there is no law that guarantees a group's ideology is consistent with its economic—or, I would add, its racial—position, nor is there any guarantee that the ideology of a group isn't consistent with its economic or race position."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, *Black Is* reminds us that "middle class" is also an ideological construct as contingently constituted as other social and subject positionalities.<sup>29</sup>

#### It's a Dick Thang, You Wouldn't Understand: Blackness and Gender

In addition to issues of class and color, Riggs unhinges the link between hegemonic masculinity and authentic blackness. Beginning with his early childhood, Riggs sets the stage for what he sees as the masculinization of blackness, a black masculinity that disables communication between him and his father. Drawing on the "Silence = Death" slogan made popular by ACT UP in order to compel individuals to speak openly about their (homo)sexuality and about AIDS, Riggs chronicles the silence surrounding his sexuality, a silence that excluded him from black masculinity. As pictures from Riggs's childhood appear on the screen, including him in football gear, posing with girlfriends, etc., Riggs narrates: "To be a black man required a code of silence. You didn't express your feelings. You couldn't acknowledge hurt, pain, and rage and anger. And what that engendered was silence. No one talked to each other, because that would have been admitting vulnerability and vulnerability was associated with being feminine." This scene is followed by a performance by Essex Hemphill of his poem "Father, Son, and the Unholy Ghosts," in which the speaker invokes homosexual sex as being the "black hole" that separates black father and son. Although silence as sign of masculinity is a trope that circulates in the broader U.S. cultural context, within raced communities, and especially among black men, silence often sustains a dysfunctional denial of sexual difference and the imperialism of patri-



archy, or what Phil Harper calls the "proper affirmation of black male [heterosexual] authority."<sup>30</sup>

As explored earlier with regard to class, Riggs locates much of this black male machismo as stemming from the Black Power movement of the 1960s. As I will discuss in chapter 2 in my examination of writers such as Imamu Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver, much of the rhetoric of Black Nationalism disavows the black homosexual as antiblack in order to maintain the fiction of a coherent black male heterosexuality and to assuage the specter of the homosexual Other within. In *Black Is* Riggs presents images of the Black Panthers marching in their berets, armed as if marching off to war. These images engender the intentional militaristic rhetoric of the Black Panthers as well as the ways in which blackness and masculinity are conjoined with violence.

These images are intercut with bell hooks explaining why the strategies deployed by some Black Nationalists were misguided because the effect was the deification and resurrection (erection?) of a black phallic economy. She explains: "When we translate the history of black oppression sexually, especially through the writings of George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver, it's all sexualized into emasculation and castration. So the reclamation of the black race gets translated into 'it's a dick thang.' That's why I'm fond of saying that if the black thang is really a dick thang in disguise, then we are really in serious trouble." Her indictment of Jackson, whose misogyny is propagated in the name of saving the black family and Cleaver—a confessed rapist of both black and white women—substantiates her account of black sexual oppression as articulated in the discourse of some black nationalists. Interestingly enough, both Jackson and Cleaver penned their misogynist and homophobic invectives while incarcerated: the prison serving, evidently, as inspiration for their musings on sex and race.<sup>31</sup> Deeply steeped in the cauldron of black nationalist brew, Jackson's commentary on the "crisis" of the black family locates that crisis within the black woman and her disavowal of "traditional" African familial roles. He is less than coy while "slipping in" the dick thang for the black thang. Jackson writes:

In the society of our fathers and in the civilized world today, women feel it their obligation to be ever yielding and obedient to their men. Life

is made purposely simple for them because of their nature, and they are happy. When the women outnumber the men in the black societies, the men take as many wives as they can afford, and care for them all equally. . . . In the civilized societies the women do light work, bear children, and lend purpose to the man's existence. They train children in the ways of wisdom that history has shown to be correct. Their job is to train the children in their early life to be men and women, not confused psychotics! This is a big job, to train and propagate the race!! Is this not enough? The rest is left to the men: government administration, the providing of means of subsistence, and defense, or maintenance of life and property against any who would deprive us of it, as the barbarian has and is still attempting to do. The white theory of the "emancipated woman" is a false idea. You will find it, as they are finding it, the factor in the breakdown of the family unit.<sup>32</sup>

Jackson makes clear that the black family will only survive if traditional gender roles within the black domestic space cohere. And, similar to arguments made by other black nationalists about homosexuality being a "white disease" that has infiltrated the black community, Jackson implies that women's liberation also is a "white thang" to be rejected in order to curtail the "breakdown of the family unit." Accordingly, within *Black Is* hooks's invocation of Jackson is apropos in relation to Angela Davis's commentary, which proceeds it. Davis says in the film that "twenty-five years ago there was someone in the organization who argued that the role of women was to wear long African dresses, to organize cocktail parties, and to convince rich men to donate money to the organization. And this particular person came in and actually dismantled the whole structure that we had because he felt that the women had too much power."

The similarities are remarkable between Jackson's division of labor in the black family and the roles that black women in the movement were asked to assume by the man in Davis's narrative. Moreover, Jackson's vision of the black family unit and women's place within it turns precisely at the moment when black women's activism outside the home was at its height—their "work" proffering the race a horn aplenty. Robert Reid-Pharr reveals Jackson's paradox when he writes: "As Jackson expressed his rage, his revolutionary ardor inside increasingly small jail cells, female lawyers pressed his case, female activists kept his name before the public, and a handful of celebrity radicals:

Angela Davis, Betty Shabazz, Kathleen Cleaver, Elaine Brown were left with the mantle of Black radicalism as the men in whose shadow they had once stood either died or ran.”<sup>33</sup> Reid-Pharr’s portrait of Jackson’s sexist vision of black women’s roles versus the roles they actually played in the movement is in keeping with Riggs’s filmic presentation of Davis. In *Black Is*, Riggs juxtaposes Davis’s “radical” celebrity status as captured in a film clip from her arraignment when she was arrested on kidnapping charges during her antiprison protest days, with a clip of her narrative about the misogynist black male leader. As with the concurrent events of Jackson’s vision and black women’s activism, Riggs’s presentation of Davis’s black cultural work in the movement resists the black male leader’s attempts to diminish Davis’s and other women’s power.

*Black Is* also features gay black dancer Bill T. Jones. Regarding the critique of black masculinity, Riggs asks Jones to characterize the “woman inside” him. As Jones describes his inner femininity, he and dancer Andrea E. Woods choreograph a piece that symbolizes what Jones narrates: a black masculinity that embraces and celebrates the feminine as much as it does the masculine. Importantly, Jones resists constructing a feminine/masculine binary; rather, through the fluidity of his dance moves with Woods he suggests a fluidity of gender as well.

Perhaps the most powerful critique of hegemonic black masculinity in the film occurs when Riggs excerpts misogynist speeches by Louis Farrakhan, a Mississippi preacher, and the leader of an “African” village located in St. Helena, South Carolina. As deployed elsewhere in the film to attenuate the fixity and call attention to the process of blackness, hegemonic discourse is countered with opposing constructions. In this instance, bell hooks’s personal narrative provides the oppositional frame through which to undermine the historical equation of “real” blackness with black masculinity, a black masculinity defined by power acquired at the expense of black women and homosexuals. In her narrative hooks recalls her mother being abused by her father while her uncles and siblings stood by and did nothing:

My father used to come home from work humming a tune. And I mean that tune was like a terroristic threat. When we heard that tune hittin’ those steps, we knew we had to get ourselves in order. My dad didn’t have



bell hooks narrating her father’s tyranny.

to speak, Honey. He had to hum his tune. He didn’t have to come in, say, “Do this. Do that. I’m the ruler here.” It was all taking place.

Once I think my father heard that my mother was having an affair with somebody and he came home from work and he got his gun. And I remember my father screaming, “I will kill you.” That very night he said, “This is my house. I will not have this.” And she had to pack her bags. It’s like when you’re a kid and you think your parents are equal. But when I saw my mother weeping and packing her bags and throwing her shit into suitcases and I thought he has the power to do this. When my uncles came together—the other patriarchs—came together, I expected that there would be some discussion, that they would try to convince my father that you can’t do this, you can’t throw her out of what is her house as well. But it was like one patriarch had spoken and the other patriarchs had nodded their heads. If the woman has done wrong you gotta punish her. This man is saying he’s gonna kill our mama, who takes care of us every day, and we’re just going to go up and go to bed and go to sleep? I never forgave my brothers and sisters for a long time for the fact that they actually went upstairs and went to bed and went to sleep. I was like, “No. I can’t go upstairs and go to sleep. I have to witness this.”

This narrative regarding hooks’s mother’s spousal abuse is intercut with and undercuts Farrakhan’s sexist and misogynist justification of Mike Tyson’s sexual advances, which eventually led to his being accused of and convicted for raping Desiree Washington. The narrative also brackets the sexism inherent in the speeches given by the Mississippi preacher (“The head of Man is God and the head of woman is Man”) and the African village leader (“In every society there are roles

that men and women have to play") where the justification of the subjugation of women is based on biblical and African mythology. Musically framing this montage of narratives is rap artist Queen Latifah's performance of "U-N-I-T-Y," a song that urges black women to "let black men know you ain't a bitch or a 'ho." Riggs's choice to use Latifah's song to administer this critique is interesting on a number of levels; for example, Latifah's own public persona, as well as her television and motion picture roles, embody a highly masculinized femininity or, alternatively, what Judith Halberstam might call "female masculinity."<sup>34</sup> Thus Riggs uses Latifah's song and the invocation of her persona in the service of further disrupting hegemonic constructions of black masculinity, as well as illuminating the sexism found within the black community.

In general, splicing together competing discourses and images in *Black Is* evinces the lacuna within the logic of black nationalist misogyny, and it does this in three ways. First, the montages denaturalize masculinity from authentic blackness by exposing the amount of discursive labor required to sustain the pursuit of such an unattainable ontological linkage between race and gender. Second, the dialogic and dialectical exchange created by the montage renders blackness as a site of contestation rather than congealment. Third, this technique excavates the black misogynist's "real" agenda: that is, reinscribing black masculinity as the site of authentic blackness in the name of liberating and protecting the "race"—or, to put it more bluntly, making the *black thang* a *dick thang*.

True Niggers Ain't Faggots:  
Blackness and Homosexuality

Wherever there exists sexism and misogyny, homophobia is not far behind. Thus the ravings of George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Louis Farrakhan, and other racial purists vary only in degrees in their homophobia. If, as George Jackson suggests above, the black woman exists solely for reproducing the race and thus becomes the black man's possession and object of his desire, then the black homosexual represents sexuality run amuck—a perversion that threatens the very essence of black heteronormative masculinity.

Given the constant surveillance by whites of black bodies within the institution of the family, black heterosexual men in particular have a vested interest in disavowing any dissident sexuality in their quarters. Thus, the specter of the black fag haunts the mythic cohesive black heterosexual familial unit. "He" registers what Robert Reid-Pharr refers to as a "black boundarylessness" that must be contained such that the image of the black family, and in particular that of the black heterosexual man, appear "normal" in the eyes of whites. The discursive and physical antihomosexual violence motivated by the fear of the incoherent black subject, according to Reid-Pharr, "operates in the production of black masculinity."<sup>35</sup>

Riggs captures the various manifestations of black homophobia and antihomosexual violence through a variety of ways, including poetry, personal narratives, interviews, music, and quotations. An interview with Essex Hemphill frames this part of the film as Hemphill conjectures why black gay men are excluded from authentic blackness. He states: "This idea that somehow my blackness is diminished because I love men is purely out of that sense that black men have been chattered, black men have been lynched; black men have been shot, beaten, brutalized by the police, the government every which way, etc. So some people view black homosexuality as the final break in masculinity and don't see the love, don't see the empowerment, don't see the caring, the sharing, don't see the contributions." Hemphill's explanation for black homophobia highlights the conflation of the often-violent feminization, emasculation, and trafficking of black male bodies with black male homosexuality. Thus the "final break in masculinity" assumes a former coherence, a stasis that never existed except as a social construct. Paradoxically, the fact that homosexuality is seen as the "final" break suggests that the direct line to an original template of black masculinity was cut in spite of rather than because of homosexual identification. Nonetheless, the black homosexual becomes the site of displaced anger for the black heterosexual, the scapegoat used to thwart his own feelings of inadequate manhood. The result is a disavowal that locks the homosexual outside the bounds of authentic blackness even when the black homosexual's "caring," "sharing," and "contributions," like that of black women, stand for some of the most radical political efforts in the struggle for racial equality.



In *Black Is* Riggs seeks answers from his black queer “fathers” as to why black gay men are excluded from blackness and rendered invisible in black history. He asks: “Oh dear fathers, tell me what to do. I search for ancestral affirmation to find only this pathos or worse, historical erasure. How much longer can I walk this winding road?” This narration is followed by feature segments on civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who organized the 1963 march on Washington, and Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason* (1967), a documentary film about a middle-aged black gay man’s struggles in growing up gay in a homophobic black community. In a voice-over Riggs narrates: “How long, Jason? How long had they sung about the freedom and the righteousness and the beauty of the black man and ignored you? How long?” By invoking Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” speech given in Memphis, Tennessee—at the end of which King repeats the rhetorical question “How long?” and then answers “Not long”—Riggs calls attention to the homophobia and hypocrisy of black civil rights leaders (including King) who drew on the capabilities and leadership of black homosexuals while at the same time distanced themselves from them. Indeed, some of King’s associates convinced him to distance himself from Bayard Rustin because of his homosexuality. Here, again, the period of the 1960s is a central locus of critique in the film because of the ways in which black leadership during that time prioritized a simplistic definition of race that rawly exorcised the femaleness and queerness out of blackness.

Given that the black church was and continues to be the site of political and social activism for black people, it is undoubtedly implicated in the homophobia of the 1960s and the present. Indeed, the opening of *Black Is* with the chantlike call-and-response of black folk preaching references a communal cultural site instantly recognizable to many black Americans: the black church. But just as the black church has been a political and social force in the struggle for the racial freedom of its constituents, it has also, to a large extent, occluded sexual freedom for many of its practitioners, namely gays and lesbians. Typically, the stance taken by the black church is one of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” In other words, gays and lesbians may actively participate in the church as long as they are silent about their homosexuality. This complicity of silence maintains not only the false dichotomy between the spirit and the flesh but also perpetuates the most oppressive and re-

pressive aspects of fundamentalist Christianity.<sup>36</sup> In this context the homosexual’s “membership” in the church is contingent on her or his willingness not only to remain silent about his or her sexuality, but also to fully participate in the activities of the church in spite of being denigrated by the rhetoric of the pulpit.<sup>37</sup> In *Black Is*, for example, the pastor of St. John’s AME Church in Drew, Mississippi, says to Riggs: “God loves the individual, but God does not love the homosexual part, the sin that is involved. God does not love that, but as a person, God loves the individual.” The “hate the sin, not the sinner” and “don’t ask, don’t tell” discourses that circulate in the black church fail to accommodate the homosexual subject by making one’s subjectivity as “Christian” and “black” contingent on sealing off one’s sexuality.

Thus, in the opening scenes of *Black Is*, Riggs calls attention to the double standard found within the black church by exemplifying how blackness can “build you up or bring you down,” hold you in high esteem or hold you in contempt. Throughout the film, however, Riggs expands the traditional construction of the black church by featuring a black gay and lesbian church service. The two lesbian members of this church who are interviewed testify to how whole they feel within this church that validates their sexuality and spirituality. It is also evident from the clips of the worship service that this gay and lesbian church practices the rituals and many of the tenets of black Christianity. In one scene the pastor is shown delivering his message, admonishing his parishioners to give up pork chops, while in another scene he is shown fervently leading them in singing a traditional devotional service song, “I’m So Glad He Prayed for Me.”

Given the black church’s typical stance on homosexuality, some might view this avowal of Christianity as an instance of false consciousness. I would argue, however, that the worship service is an instance of queering blackness or creating what Michael Dyson calls a “theology of queerness” insofar as these black gay and lesbian Christians are reclaiming a tradition of which they are clearly a part. Their embrace of Christianity might also be characterized as an instance of “disidentification,” whereby queers of color perform within dominant ideologies in order to resist those same hegemonic structures.<sup>38</sup> In the end, the film intervenes in the construction of black homosexuality as antiblack by propagating gay Christianity as a legitimate signifier of blackness.

## The Black Body as Performance/Performativity

Riggs's film implicitly employs performativity to suggest that we dismantle hierarchies that privilege particular black positionalities at the expense of others; that we recognize that darker hue does not give us any more cultural capital or claim to blackness than do a dashiki, braids, or a southern accent. Masculinity is no more a signifier of blackness than femininity; heterosexuality is no blacker than gayness; and poverty makes one no more authentically black than a house in the suburbs. Indeed, what Riggs suggests is that we move beyond these categories and these hierarchies that define and confine in order to realize that, depending on where one is from and where one is going, *black is and black ain't*.

While the film critically interrogates cleavages among blacks, it also exposes the social, political, economic, and psychological effects of racism and the role racism has played in defining blackness. By adopting this dual focus rather than exclusively interrogating black performativity, Riggs offers a perspective that compels us to think more complexly about the interplay between discourse and materiality. He calls attention to differences among blacks and between blacks and their "others";<sup>39</sup> he grounds blackness and lived experience; and he calls attention to the consequences of embodied blackness. The montage of footage from the Los Angeles riots and the interviews with young black men who characterize themselves as gang bangers, along with images of blacks being hosed down during the Civil Rights movement, bring into clear focus the material reality of black America and how the black body has historically been the site of violence and trauma. It is these consequential aspects of bodily harm that I believe racial performativity fails to account for. Gender, sexuality, race, and even class are discursive categories that are subject to mediation; nonetheless, they are categories that exist beyond abstraction and function within the realm of the "real." Like Elizabeth Alexander, I believe that "there must be a place for theorizing black bodily experience into the larger discourse of identity politics."<sup>40</sup>

Riggs's AIDS-riddled black body presents an occasion to theorize "black bodily experience" because his body forces us to bear witness to this devastating disease. Although we might concede at the intellec-



Marlon Riggs, in his hospital bed, in a scene from *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*.

tual level that "experience" is not beyond the realm of the discursive, as historian Joan Scott has persuasively argued,<sup>41</sup> we nonetheless cultivate collective narratives to strive toward articulating the very real pain and oppression that black bodies absorb in order to strategize political efficacy. Thus, while we must acknowledge the salience of construing "experience" as discursively mediated, we must also recognize that the radical destabilization of experience simultaneously limits the ways in which people of color may name their oppression. Dwight McBride writes: "The danger . . . is that since the fundamental way of identifying racism is by narrating its instances, by deauthorizing the witness it could become virtually impossible to ever name 'the beast' at all. This is one reason that I think it is important that African American intellectuals continue to learn new ways of strategizing and essentializing in racialized discourse: because what is at stake is nothing less than the ability to narrate our own stories, witness our own experience."<sup>42</sup>

The value of the "evidence of experience" then, lies in its deployment by those whose livelihood is at stake if it were not available as a tool in the struggle against oppression. Moreover, although *Black Is* functions as a kind of autoethnographic account of Riggs's "experience" of blackness and AIDS, it does not "take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference," as Joan Scott warns against.<sup>43</sup> As I explain in detail below, the ethnographic gaze upon Riggs's body documents

his experience narrative in such a way that it calls attention to his body/bodily experience as discourse and also grounds and situates that discourse and corporeality within a particular historical context. Accordingly, I do not think that experience as figured in the film necessarily precludes arguing for instances where identity as evinced in experience (however discursively predetermined) can be effectively politically effectuated in a particular context and historical moment.

Nowhere in the film is a black body historicized more pointedly and powerfully than in the scenes where Riggs is featured walking or running through the forest naked or narrating from his hospital bed from which his T-cell count is constantly announced. According to Riggs, these scenes are important because he wants to make the point that not until we expose ourselves to one another will we be able to communicate effectively across our differences. Riggs's intentions notwithstanding, his naked black body serves another function within the context of the film: it is simultaneously in the state of "being" and "becoming." I intend here to disrupt both of these terms by refusing to privilege identity as either solely performance or solely performativity and by demonstrating the dialogic/dialectic relationship of these two tropes housed in and by the body.

Paul Gilroy's theory of diaspora is useful in clarifying the difference between "being" and "becoming." According to Gilroy, "Diaspora accentuates *becoming* rather than *being* and identity conceived diasporically, along these lines, resists reification."<sup>44</sup> Here, Gilroy associates "being" with the transhistorical and transcendental subject and "becoming" with historical situatedness and contingency. In what follows, I supplement Gilroy's use of both terms by suggesting that "being" and "becoming" are sites of performance *and* performativity. I construe "being," for example, as a site of infinite signification *as well as* bodily and material presence. "Being" calls the viewer's attention not only to blackness as *discourse*, but also to embodied blackness in that moment where discourse and flesh conjoin in performance.

In relation to Riggs's body, therefore, I wish to suggest a more nuanced reading of "being." In the first instance, if we look beyond Riggs's intent to "expose" himself to encourage cross-difference communication, we find that his nakedness in the woods functions ideologically in ways that he may not wish. For example, his nakedness may conjure up the racist stereotype of the lurking, bestial, and vir-



Marlon Riggs running through the woods  
in *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*.

ile black male threatening the white race that became popular in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American imaginary. His embodied blackness in the woods and in his hospital bed also indicate a diseased body that is fragile, vulnerable, and a site of trauma, a site that grounds black discursivity materially in the flesh. This counter-narrative is represented through Riggs's voice-over announcing his declining T-cell count, his desire being to expose his diseased body to make his blackness and sexuality visible. That very visibility, however, performs double duty. On the one hand, Riggs's visible black male body is exposed as fragile and vulnerable, but on the other it also synecdochically stands in for a larger body of racist discourse on the black male body in motion. This trope of black bodily kinesthetics is manifest in various forms: in the vernacular-laden expression "Keep this Nigger-Boy running,"<sup>45</sup> in the fugitive slave, and even in contemporary hypermasculinized images of black athletes.

Racist readings of Riggs's black male body are made possible by the context in which his body appears: the woods. Within this setting, blackness becomes problematically teleologically fastened to nature, reinscribing the black body as bestial and primal, while whiteness becomes fastened, indirectly, to the life of the mind. This imagery works against Riggs's intentions—namely, running naked in the woods as a way to work through the tangled and knotty web that is identity. Indeed, those images signify in multiple troubling ways that cannot be contained by either Riggs's authorial intentions or the viewer's gaze.



As Elizabeth Alexander reminds us: "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries. The history moves from public rapes, beatings, and lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing. . . . White men have been the stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles I have mentioned, but in one way or another, black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked, I believe, at contemporary sites."<sup>46</sup> Riggs's naked body imaged running through the woods thus is implicated in the historical racist spectatorial practices of antiblack violence. Moreover, there is a way in which the representation of his AIDS-infected body is implicated in the ways in which the homophobic gaze already equates the gay body with AIDS. Riggs's foregrounded body, then, may also be read as a "spectacle of contagion" that further disseminates the linkage between AIDS and the homosexual body.<sup>47</sup>

The beauty of "being," however, is that where it crumbles under the weight of deconstruction it reemerges in all its bodily facticity. Although Riggs's body signifies in ways that constrain his agency, his embodied blackness also enlivens a discussion of a "fleshy" nature. Whatever his body signifies, the viewer cannot escape its material presence. Accordingly, Riggs's body as a site of corporeal trauma may incite a "collective historical memory" in the contemporary crisis that AIDS has created in black communities. This spectatorial experience may serve to asseverate not only the traumatic bodily history that black Americans have survived but also the current contagion ravishing black bodies—a contagion, I might add, that is not disconnected from both old and contemporary forms of institutionalized racism.

Riggs's body is also a site of "becoming." He dies before the film is completed and his body thus physically "fades away," but its phantom is reconstituted in our current discourse on AIDS, race, gender, class, and sexuality. His body discursively rematerializes and intervenes in hegemonic formulations of blackness, homosexuality, and the HIV-infected person. As a filmic performance, *Black Is* resurrects Riggs's body such that when the film is screened at universities, shown to health care providers, viewed in black communities, or rebroadcast on PBS where it debuted, the terms and the stakes for how we think about identity and its relation to HIV/AIDS are altered. Indeed, the film be-

comes part of a body of performances by gay men that serve as what David Román calls "acts of intervention."

In the final scenes of the film and those last recorded before Riggs's death, he recalls dreaming about Harriet Tubman during the peaks of his illness. An unidentified source off screen asks Riggs to recall the dream and describe its significance.

Riggs: This is when I was feeling really sick in ER. Just her [Harriet Tubman] coming and standing by me, not saying anything so I had become aware of her presence and then just looking into my eyes and then looking into the river in front of us.

Camera Operator: Where were you?

Riggs: I don't know. Some dark foresty place with a river running through it and the river running pretty fiercely. And she didn't say anything, she just looked at me and we started walking. Harriet and I walked across the river.

Camera Operator: What do you think that dream was about?

Riggs: Overcoming the current crisis. I know there will be more. I know that I'll be laid up in the hospital again. But as long as I have Harriet and *Black Is* . . . *Black Ain't* to go traveling with, I'm gonna cross that river. If I have work then I'm not going to die. Because work is the living spirit in me—that which wants to connect with other people and pass on something to them that they can use in their own lives and grow from.

I believe that Riggs's dream allegorizes the process of birth. The "dark foresty place" metaphorically images the crowning of a newborn's head in the vaginal opening, while the "fiercely" running river suggests a woman's water breaking. In this case, however, the process of birth is paradoxically and simultaneously the process of death.

In this way, Riggs's dying is similar to Toni Morrison's character Sula, whose deathbed scene also allegorizes a "birth into death." Morrison writes: "It would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always."<sup>48</sup> Sula's rebirthing is symbolized by her assuming a fetal position and traveling down the birth-

ing "tunnel." Like Riggs, Sula believes she is dreaming when in actuality she is experiencing a transition into the afterlife: "While in this state of weary anticipation, she noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. . . . Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead" (149). Once she has crossed over, she realizes and acknowledges her living spirit when she thinks to herself, "Well, I'll be damned . . . it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (149).

Riggs dreams of a similar journey through water with Harriet Tubman, who serves as a midwife cradling his head at the tunnel's opening—"some dark foresty place"—helping him make the journey across the river. Once on the other side, Riggs, like Sula, lives on and also makes good on his promise to return through his "living spirit" captured in the film. Although we know that Riggs is physically dead when the film opens, he does not realize he will not live to complete the project. He rebukes death in the name of the work that he feels he must do. Indeed, Riggs is still the authorial voice, the auteur, from beyond the living world as he posthumously directs the editorial decisions. Near the end of the film he says, "I hope they keep those clips of me running through the woods." Ultimately, then, the residual traces of Riggs's body become embedded in the ideological battle over identity claims and the discourse surrounding the disproportionate number of AIDS-infected people of color. His becoming, then, belies our being.

Ultimately, *Black Is* performs what its title announces: the simultaneity of bodily presence and absence, being and becoming. Although Riggs offers his own gumbo recipe that stands in for blackness, he does so only to demonstrate that, like blackness, the recipe can be altered, expanded, reduced, diluted. At the same time, Riggs also asks that we not forget that the gumbo (blackness) is contained within a sturdy pot (the body) that has weathered abuse, that has been scorched, scoured, and scraped, a pot/body that is in the process of becoming but nonetheless already is.

*Black Is . . . Black Ain't* provides a space to bear witness to the ways in which blackness is produced, appropriated, politicized, and experienced. I particularly find the gumbo metaphor apropos on this accord because it draws our attention to the discursive constitution of the

recipe for blackness and celebrates its improvisational aspects as well as the materiality of the pot. The film accomplishes this by discrediting but not silencing the voices of those whose recipe for blackness leaves out as much as it adds by sieving out many of the ingredients contained inside the pot. Riggs's recipe, however, promises to reduce the spillage, allowing the various and multiple flavors to coexist—those different flavors that make it spicy, hot, unique, and sumptuously "black."