

"Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*"

Interview between Stuart Comer and Isaac Julien

June 15, 2022



*Looking for Langston*. 1989. USA. Directed by Isaac Julien.

In this exclusive two-week screening, watch the artist's lyrical evocation of Black queer history.

Emerging from the UK's vibrant film and video-workshop movement in the early 1980s having cofounded the Sankofa Collective, [Isaac Julien](#) was already a crucial figure in the establishment of Black independent cinema when he released the revolutionary film *Looking for Langston*. Shortly after its release in 1989, the writer and musician Greg Tate described it as the first film to consider "the historical condition of being Black, gay, silenced, and incomprehensible." Julien's lyrical meditation on the Harlem Renaissance was made at a moment when the AIDS epidemic was devastating the queer community. Willing into existence a history that had not been articulated or available to Julien, *Looking for Langston* conjures the ghost of Langston Hughes, who joins a chorus of Black queer ancestors—from James Baldwin to Richard Bruce Nugent—in the filmmaker's lush black-and-white phantasmagoria. The profound sense of yearning and loss that defined the late 1980s is also expressed in voiceovers by Julien's peers, including the writers Essex Hemphill, Toni Morrison, and Stuart Hall.

*Looking for Langston's* investigation of desire made it a hallmark of what B. Ruby Rich called the New Queer Cinema, and a touchstone for African American studies. Newly acquired by MoMA, the film helped to establish Julien's singular approach to expanded biography, reimagining historical Black figures and empowering them anew. More recent iterations of this strategy include *Lessons*

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of the Hour (2019), Julien's landmark 10-screen installation that considers Frederick Douglass, which was also recently acquired by MoMA, and *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)* (2022), a new five-screen installation, on view this summer at Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation, that explores the relationship between the collector Dr. Albert C. Barnes and the philosopher Alain Locke, often called the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance."

We wish you and yours a happy Pride month. Join us in July for the next installment in the [Hyundai Card Video Views series](#), which considers artists' engagement with a technology that has become central to our daily lives.

—Stuart Comer, The Lonti Ebers Chief Curator of Media and Performance



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Stuart Comer: Let's start with 1989, and what was going on in your head and in your life at that time. Just to put it into context, that's a couple of years before the New Queer Cinema really solidified into a movement at the Sundance Film Festival in 1992, and five years prior to the *Black Male* show at the Whitney. 1989 was also unforgettable because of the Culture Wars, in particular the crisis around [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) and the censorship of his work. I'm curious about what led you to Langston Hughes as a portal to so many important historical figures. And how did the Harlem Renaissance become something you were drawn to in the late '80s?

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**Isaac Julien:** That's a great question, because I have to go right back to 1980, when I was a student doing a pre-foundation course in East London. This work was initially called something like *How Gays Are Stereotyped in Media*, and I made it for my A-Level Communications Project, where one could make a video piece.

I remember a teacher saying to me, "It would be really great if you made a film that explored how Black gays are stereotyped in media." I remember thinking, yeah, I could have done that. But you could say that my reply took almost a decade after making that very early work, which no longer exists. In art school at that time, one wasn't really taught anything about Black art movements or the Harlem Renaissance. So when I found out about it, I was completely fascinated. I thought, there's something called Black Modernism? My partner, Mark Nash, had a job teaching at NYU, and basically I asked him to go to see if he could get materials on the Harlem Renaissance, anything moving image.

And he went to the archives at MoMA and found a song called "St. Louis Blues" by Bessie Smith. That started this whole tour—you could call it a Harlem tour—of going to different archives. Luckily, I came across a filmmaker who made a film about Langston Hughes, and we worked with the archivists. And eventually we came across an archive of instructional films in which we were able to see Black artists at work.



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Of course this was happening at the same time as the AIDS crisis, at the same time when these strong Black queer voices were emerging: Essex Hemphill, Joseph Beam, Black gay anthologies.

Did you have much connection at that stage with artists like [Glenn Ligon](#)? He was also drawing in historical figures through texts in his work. There was a growing community of young, Black, queer artists who were trying to identify and also to complicate a history that, as you said, had not been available to them.

I met Glenn in Minneapolis, at the Walker Art Center. At the same time, in the early '90s, I also met Bill T. Jones. This was incredibly exciting, because there was a sort of intertextual conversation taking place. With my collaborator Kobena Mercer I wrote a text called "True Confessions," about Robert Mapplethorpe's photography. And I think Glenn had read that. So there was this exciting, evolving dialogue beginning among artists and theorists at that time, which we were able to galvanize into our work.

**The Mapplethorpe controversy is often recalled as a matter of "pornographic" images without acknowledging the complex racial dynamics of the work. A number of important projects in art and criticism were being made at the time—including "True Confessions" and Ligon's *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-93)—that analyzed what was problematic about Mapplethorpe's work and his legacy.**

We felt that trying to deconstruct Mapplethorpe's work was interesting in terms of one's practice, and at the same time the challenge was trying to find one's own position within that. I do think it was productive.

**There is an interesting trajectory in your work. From the early collective work with Sankofa, you made *Looking for Langston* and helped establish the beginnings of the New Queer Cinema, and then moved to multiple screen video installation. I wonder if you could talk about the climate in which you made *Looking for Langston*. How difficult was it to make such an ambitious film at that moment?**

It just so happened, through serendipity, that Channel 4 television was the beacon for independent film in the world. And so everybody came to London, because the city became a center for independent cinema. It was a place where, through numerous struggles, there was a space where innovation was being championed. So working in a workshop movement, of which Sankofa was a part, allowed for an artisanal approach to making works which would be funded by Channel 4 and other entities, a process that gave us space for a different approach.

When Channel 4 started, the whole idea was that there should be a larger space for oppositional voices. There were lots of excluded voices, and Channel 4 had to include them when it originally started. So a film like *Looking for Langston* came about because through this declaration we could be supported over a longer period and could make research time a priority. And that atmosphere enabled the possibility of trying to discover, through innovative ways, an approach to making a different kind of work, a different form of filmmaking.

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**What did it mean for you to draw a key historical figure like Langston Hughes into that very dark but also very productive moment?**

Langston Hughes is an icon, and also an emblem of the closet, a space that was enabling HIV infection, and AIDS, to become insurmountable in Black communities in America and England. Having sexuality not being articulated created terrible ramifications within these communities. And so the whole question of bringing Langston out, so to speak, really united intergenerationally with what the poet Essex Hemphill was contesting. What does silence look like? What does oppression look like in those spaces? Essex Hemphill was someone who was really at the forefront of articulating that. And my challenge was how to translate that filmically and give it a kind of space that would resonate visually.

**The film came out a year or two before *Brother to Brother*, an anthology by Black, gay male writers, begun by Joseph Beam and completed by Essex Hemphill after Beam's death, was published. It had a huge impact on the history of Black queer literature. How engaged you were with that world, and with Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam?**

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I met Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam in Philadelphia, where they both lived. These early encounters were very significant for me. Recently I came across a couple of letters that Joseph Beam had written to me from Philadelphia. There was a conference in 1986 in Los Angeles, a huge conference of gay people of color, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people. All of this became pivotal for the film, like hearing the Blackberri song "Beautiful Black Man," which I first heard it at this conference and which appears in *Looking for Langston*.

So Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, and the Black queer literary anthologies they were working on, were what I tried to expand into a visual terrain.



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**Can you talk about the filmmaker Derek Jarman and how he also impacted this film, in particular the visual language you were developing in tandem with an activist impulse?**

Derek was a model, and quite iconic, in the sense that he was one of the most outspoken people living with AIDS, and at the forefront of making work about AIDS. And at the same time, he was the most important independent filmmaker. The combination of these things made him a figure that one could rally around. I also think that his filmic language offered a possibility for developing one's own language. And Derek was important as an activist in how he married his filmmaking and

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activism, which made the development of queer cinema possible, and provided the vocabulary for a work like *Looking for Langston*.

### **How was the film received at the time?**

*Looking for Langston* arrived in New York, and in the United States, with a certain excitement. It was a work that was being made with a community in mind; there were simply not many films being made about these experiences.

In the film I was using Langston Hughes in a metaphorical manner, and his estate did not like the film, which was questioning the heteronormative aspect of how the estate had created Langston. This was something that was always contested within Black communities. And I do think the Hughes estate used copyright as a form of censorship. But when I was making the film, I was aware that I would have an encounter like that. That's where the activist part comes into play—pushing against the ways in which certain historical characters were constructed.

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