

MoMA

"Five Things to Know about Isaac Julien's *Lessons of the Hour*"

By Erica DiBenedetto, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi

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Installation view of Isaac Julien: *Lessons of the Hour* at MoMA

Learn more about the immersive, 10-screen portrait of Frederick Douglass and the ongoing struggle to protect civil rights.

Isaac Julien's *Lessons of the Hour* is a remarkable video installation based on the life and career of the visionary African American abolitionist, statesman, and formerly enslaved person Frederick Douglass. Displayed across 10 screens of varying sizes, and fusing image, word, and sound, it depicts Douglass and other prominent figures of his time as trailblazers in the history of civil rights in the United States. *Lessons of the Hour* demonstrates a central thesis of Julien's wider practice, his "desire to reinvestigate the archive to articulate contemporary concerns."¹ As if underscoring Douglass's relevance today, Julien presents him delivering the speeches "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852) and "Lecture on Pictures" (1861) to an enraptured audience, some wearing 19th-century costume and others in modern dress."² Through Douglass's gaze, Julien offers a profound examination of contemporary political activism and the ongoing struggle to protect civil rights in the US and around the world. Below, we consider five aspects of the installation that help explain the legacy of Douglass, the power of his image and words, and how Julien has made the lessons of Douglass's life speak to our present moment.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Montage is an important technique in Julien’s nonlinear storytelling.

The 10 screens of *Lessons of the Hour* allow for simultaneous scenes and images. Julien has described this technique as “horizontal montage,” a way to explore nonlinear storytelling in the editing of the film and the spatial environment of the installation. In the film’s opening sequence, Douglass, played by actor Ray Fearon, walks through an autumnal landscape. The sound of chirping birds and his footsteps in the grass unify the audio, but he appears on two of the screens shot from disparate angles. The other screens feature repeating and mirrored images of orange and yellow leaves hanging from tree limbs. In a related sequence not long after, a lynching scene from Oscar Micheaux’s silent film *Within Our Gates* (1920) appears as grainy black-and-white footage on one screen, interrupting the brilliant color of the foliage and the false tranquility of the setting.³ Julien’s horizontal montage moves between the past and present through found footage, digital video, and 35mm film. The choice of montaged elements also alludes to one of the subjects of Douglass’s last major speech—the atrocious lynchings of Black men spreading across the country.⁴ *Lessons of the Hour* takes its name from that lecture.

Julien underscores that language was a powerful tool for Douglass.

“I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing.”⁵ This reflection from Douglass’s 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* comes alive powerfully in a voiceover by Fearon as the screens momentarily go dark in *Lessons of the Hour*. “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out.” The institution of slavery enforced illiteracy to dehumanize and reduce the enslaved to a beast of burden. For Douglass, writing his autobiography provided a firsthand account of the horrors of slavery, and a way of challenging the sense of inferiority that systems of slavery tried to impose. Douglass’s second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855 after he had become a prominent abolitionist, appears in a related sequence in the film. The same copy is on view in the exhibition.



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Southworth and Hawes. *Frederick Douglass*. c. 1845

As the most photographed man in 19th-century America, Douglass knew the medium's power.

Much of Julien's work investigates the relationship among different media technologies and the modes of representation they make possible; *Lessons of the Hour* presents historical photographic processes using film and video. Douglass is a particularly apt subject in this regard because of his prescient understanding of the political and social value of photography, which he saw as a tool to counteract racist stereotypes. The first work that visitors encounter in *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour* is a whole-plate daguerreotype of Douglass made by the studio Southworth and Hawes. Albert Sands Southworth, founder of the firm, may have donated it to a fundraiser for the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Boston in December 1845.⁶ The publication of *Narrative* earlier that year had increased Douglass's national celebrity—and endangered him. Douglass was free from slavery's physical bonds, but not yet from its legal ones. These events precipitated his 19 months abroad in England, Ireland, and Scotland, a period captured in *Lessons of the Hour*. In fact, Julien modeled his main character on the Southworth and Hawes daguerreotype, referencing the hairstyle, clothing style, and overall bearing that Douglass presents in it.⁷

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History needs to be read as an open-ended archive.

Julien notes that in this work, "there's an aesthetic challenge to how to present information, stories, or histories in order to signify that they can be read as open-ended."⁸ A bespoke wallpaper designed by MoMA in the exhibition's first gallery gives one sense of what Julien means by reading history as open-ended, or as an archive from which one can select information, find myriad complexities, and then find many paths for interpretation. This wallpaper reproduces several original sources that Julien, along with his close collaborator, Douglass scholar Celeste-Marie Bernier, used as the film's spoken and sung words. Viewers can find a broadside with the lyrics to the Scottish song "The Free Kirk and her boy Tammy," inspired by a campaign Douglass waged against the Free Church of Scotland, in which he urged them to "send back the money" they had accepted from American enslavers.⁹ The wallpaper also includes copies of handwritten correspondence from Douglass's time abroad, including a letter that he wrote in 1846 to Boston abolitionist Francis Jackson and a letter that Anna Richardson sent the same year to Douglass's enslaver offering to pay for his manumission.¹⁰



Wallpaper for the exhibition *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour*

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621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
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Installation view of *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour*

Julien shows how women played a key role in Frederick Douglass's story.

Lessons of the Hour provides an expanded view of Douglass through important figures in his life, especially the women who were his interlocutors, confidants, or partners. Among them are Anna and Ellen Richardson, English Quakers who purchased Douglass's manumission from his enslaver, allowing him to safely return to the United States from Great Britain. The film also imagines Anna Murray Douglass, Frederick's first wife and an Underground Railroad conductor, posing for her portrait in the studio of J. P. Ball, one of the first renowned African American photographers. Frederick can be found in Ball's salon with historical figures such as the suffragist Susan B. Anthony; the social reformer Rosetta Douglass, Frederick Douglass's daughter and editor and proofreader of his work; and feminist and abolitionist Otilie Assing. In another scene, Helen Pitts, Douglass's wife after Anna's death, looks through his second autobiography at the Douglass family home, Cedar Hill. Whether publicly or privately, all these women participated in the struggle for racial and social equality alongside Douglass.¹¹

Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour is on view at MoMA through September 28.

1. Jennifer A. González, "Poetics of Attention: An Interview with Isaac Julien," in *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass*, eds. Isaac Julien and Cora Gilroy-Ware, with Vladimir Seput (London: Isaac Julien Studio; Rochester: Memorial Art Gallery; Saratoga Springs: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; New York: DelMonico Books, 2021), 241.

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2. The individuals in modern dress include members of the Royal Academy of the Arts in London, where these scenes were shot, as well as friends and close colleagues of Julien's. Those in period costumes are characters in the film.
3. Kass Banning and Warren Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama: Isaac Julien, Frederick Douglass, and *Lessons of the Hour*," *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass*, 220.
4. The speech is *Address by Hon. Frederick Douglass, delivered in the Metropolitan A. M. E. Church, Washington, DC, Tuesday, January 9th, 1894, on The Lessons of the Hour: In Which He Discusses the Various Aspects of the So-Called, but Mis-Called, Negro Problem* (Baltimore: Press of Thomas & Evans, 1894). A reprint can be found in David W. Blight, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Speeches & Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 2022), 725-757.
5. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 42.
6. John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 3.
7. In conversation with the artist, May 12, 2024.
8. González, "Poetics of Attention: An Interview with Isaac Julien," 243.
9. "The Free Kirk and her boy Tammy" (Edinburgh: Sanderson, printer, 36 Cowgate-head, Edinburgh, 1846), Special Collections, National Library of Scotland.
10. See Frederick Douglass, Dundee (Scotland), to Francis Jackson, January 29, 1846, Rare Books Department, Boston Public Library, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/5h740c92g>; Anna (Henry) Richardson, Newcastle on Tyne (England), to Hugh Auld, August 17, 1846, Frederick Douglass Collection, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries, <https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/items/e1309029-a9de-4040-9963-c64152895520>.
11. Valerie Edmond plays Anna Richardson, Clare Yuile plays Ellen Richardson, Sharlene Whyte plays Anna Murray Douglass, Ukweli Roach plays J. P. Ball, Amanda Lawrence plays Susan B. Anthony, Joan Iyiola plays Rosetta Douglass, Cara Horgan plays Otilie Assing, and Charlotte Emmerson plays Helen Pitts Douglass.