

METRO PICTURES

Mirzoeff, Nick. "Lessons Learned at the Feet of Frederick Douglass," *Hyperallergic.com* (April 11, 2019).

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Isaac Julien, "Lessons of The Hour" (*Lessons of The Hour*), 2019 matte archival paper mounted on aluminum, 63 x 84 inches

In this dystopian moment, what are the "Lessons of the Hour"? The phrase is now the title of a transformative ten-screen film installation and accompanying photographs based on the life of Frederick Douglass, by filmmaker and artist Isaac Julien. It is by extension a call to all who encounter the project to reflect on time and temporality. Julien advances a layered, palimpsestic view of time, not as progress but as a series of lessons.

In this project mounted at Metro Pictures gallery, he addresses each viewer one by one, because it is not possible to see all the film simultaneously given the deliberate arrangement of the ten screens across the expanse of the viewing area. As you watch, your head turns from side to side to take in the panoramic view — a nineteenth-century way of seeing in itself. Some screens overlap or are at right angles, so no one will receive exactly the same lessons. This, then, is not a review. It is a note of what I learned.

Douglass himself coined "Lessons of the Hour" as his title for a powerful speech in 1861 during what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the general strike against slavery," also known as the American Civil War. Subsequently, political thinkers such as Angela Y. Davis and Michele Alexander have questioned whether enslavement has really ended, given mass incarceration and police violence. At the entrance to the gallery, Julien has placed photographs from his earlier film documenting protests surrounding the 1982 police killing of Colin Roach in London. Julien's new film is a layering of space and time across the multiple screens (to use a Photoshop metaphor) between Douglass's abolitionist moment, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, and the present crisis of racial capitalism.



Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass* installation view, 2019, Metro Pictures, New York

Julien's current installation dwells on Douglass in Britain, especially in Scotland where he was so warmly received that he gave 14 lectures in and around Glasgow alone between 1845 and 1847. Douglass muses on the then-new trains that took him from lecture to lecture that no one in the UK reacts negatively to his appearance. In itself, this ability to be invisible was a certain kind of freedom. Britain often now celebrates its role in abolition, including purchasing Douglass's freedom from Hugh Auld for £150, a circumstance paired by Julien with the campaign for the Scottish church to "Send Back The Money" derived from United States slavery. While such transnational and cross-cultural alliances are out of fashion at present, it is equally unlikely that African-American visitors today will feel the same sense of comfort and security in the UK that Douglass did.

In a time of rising, violent racism in the UK, it is also time to ask what abolition meant, beyond providing £20 million in reparations for those who owned humans as property? That money fueled the Industrial Revolution, providing former slave-owners with capital they invested in the railways and other new technologies of the time. This transfer has recently been documented by a team led by historian Catherine Hall, who herself appears in the film as part of the audience in Julien's reconstruction of Douglass's speeches. Some 14% of the population are from minorities (Black And Minority Ethnic) but BAME men and women make up 25% of prisoners, while over 40% of young people in custody are from BAME backgrounds. Institutional police racism is as widespread as it was when Colin Roach was killed.

Julien recrosses the Atlantic, as Douglass was able to do as a free person, to remind his US audience of the persistence of segregation and racism. On several screens, low resolution black-and-white drone footage appears from the 2015 Baltimore uprising following the as-yet-unpunished murder of Freddie Gray. Its contrast with the very high production values of Julien's own film provokes a set of associations. Recall that African-American artist Fred Wilson staged his landmark 1992 show "Mining the Museum" that brought the hidden relics of slavery from the recesses of the Maryland Historical Society into public display, just over a mile from Baltimore Police Department's Western District, where Gray would be taken on his fatal ride.



Isaac Julien, "The North Star" (*Lessons of The Hour*), 2019 glass inkjet paper mounted on aluminum, 63 x 84 inches

Remember, too, that Douglass lived in Baltimore as a child and worked in its shipyards before using borrowed freeman's papers to escape. In 2003, Julien made a three-screen blaxploitation homage titled *Baltimore*. The actor Vanessa Myrie who appears in that film appears in *Lessons of the Hour* as herself, silently watching Douglass speak. One of the lessons here is that the hour is not yet past when abolition is needed. It persists as one of the urgent times on the clock of the world, in the manner taught to us by Grace Lee Boggs.

Time and space intersect as we watch, not to create a singularity, or a context in which to contain Douglass, but as the means of forging association, intersection, and connection. Stuart Hall called this moment "articulation," a space of linking where the visible and the sayable engender a sense of feeling. Tina Campt calls that feeling the "haptic": a space that involves "multiple forms of contact and touch." But getting there is not easy. It's hard work, both for the maker and those interacting with the film. Like much contemporary art dealing with issues in and around racial capitalism, Julien creates what Campt calls "still-moving-images: images that hover between still and moving images ... that require the labor of feeling with or through them." All of Julien's filmmaking from *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983) to *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) to *Lessons of the Hour* (2019) is engaged in that labor. In this installation in particular, the oscillation between period photographs, present-day recreations of the past, and present-day documentary footage create a different way of seeing. It's not so much the infamous all-powerful gaze, as a "looking with" that creates a sense of solidarity.

Notably, Douglass is often seen in *Lessons* with his back to the watchers, a "mistake" in traditional filmmaking. The pose is a Black Atlantic and decolonizing rhyme with John Akomfrah's recent films. It's not "turning the back" in the disrespectful manner of NYPD cops when faced with policy reform by the city's mayor but the choice to "face forward." The phrase comes from Kwame Nkrumah's words at the declaration of Ghanaian independence, depicted in Akomfrah's 2013 two-screen installation *Transfigured Night*, screened at the New Museum last summer: "We face neither East nor West. We face forward." The "we" here are those freed from colonialism, or more exactly, those who would be free. This freedom has not been yet achieved, not in Ghana, or the UK, or the United States. In anticipation of that freedom to come, as viewers we see the backs of Olaudah Equiano in Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*, and of Douglass here, in order that they may face forward. Or perhaps, more generously still, to signify we've got their backs.



Isaac Julien, "Rapture 1846" (*Lessons of The Hour*), 2019 matte structured paper mounted on aluminum 59 1/16 x 82 11/16 inches

This positioning is generated by the river of Black British cultural studies that flows from those who worked with, and were or are, in the orbit of Stuart Hall and Catherine Hall. These people include Akomfrah and Julien, and artists like Sonia Boyce, Sutapa Bitwas and Keith Piper; scholars like Kobena Mercer and Hazel Carby; curators like Mark Seeley and Gilane Tawadros, and many more. The cross-cultural and transnational energy of the 1980s in response to a time of racialized crisis feels like another lesson across time and space, when identity politics is so charged and specific as to sometimes appear as essentialism.

For *Lessons of the Hour* is not so much activist as activating: when you leave, the lessons of the hour still layer the way you see the world. In his 1861 "Lecture on Pictures," reenacted in the film, Douglass defined the human as "a picture-making and picture-appreciating animal." As he pointed out, this formula refuted the hierarchy of the human promoted by defenders of slavery. In 1865, he went a step farther, seeing the possibility of change being the result of "the picture of life contrasted with the fact of life." In the time of Black Lives Matter, activating the facts and pictures of life in all senses remains the pivotal lesson. For those who continue to believe that freedom for all only comes when Black and Indigenous people get free, the question that remains is whether and how it might be possible to reforge the kind of abolitionist alliances led by Douglass?

I mentioned that not everyone will learn the same lesson, and I want to be clear what that means. As a person designated white by the US color line, the labor of feeling across difference is not done at will, as one does not *do* death — it does you. I can learn certain lessons that Julien's film teaches — about lynching, for example, as when Douglass is shown walking slowly among trees while his words on racialized violence are heard. I do not think that all the haptics of that learning are directly available to me. And that is itself part of the lessons.