

Sir Isaac Julien.
***Looking for Langston.* 1989**

Artwork transcript

MoMA

Cast

Alex	Ben Ellison
Beauty	Matthew Baidoo
James	Akim Mogaji
Gary	John Wilson
Marcus	Dencil William
Dean	Guy Burgess
Carlos	James Dublin
Leatherboy	Harry Donaldson
Angel	Jimmy Somerville
Mourners	Alaena Adams, Michael Bailey, Guy Burgess, James Dublin, June Givanni, Guy Burgess, Cherry Smyth
Angels	Tony Knight, Derrick McClintock, Akim Mogaji, Jimmy Somerville, Dencil Williams
Dancers at the wake	Michael Bailey, Paul Bernstock, Steven Brown, Sarah Dunn, Simon Fogg, Jon Iwenjiora ,Tony Knight, Orson Nava, Matthew Scott, Cherry Smyth, Pedro Williams
Brothers in Jazz	Wayne James, Irvine Lewis, Trevor Miller
Thugs and police	John Alexander, Tommy Carlton, Pete Collins, Joe Fordham, Dave Greaves, AJ, Ian Johns, Seymour Laws, Reginald Parker
American voices	Erick Ray Evans (reading Bruce Nugent), Essex Hemphill, Wayson Jones, Toni Morrison (reading James Baldwin)
British voice	Stuart Hall
Langston Hughes	Himself (archival footage)

Credits

Producer	Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Director of photography	Nina Kellgren
Art director	Derek Brown
Gaffer	Nuala Campbell
Focus puller	Amanda Richardson
Grip	Gary Romaine
Costume designer	Robert Worley
Makeup	Hilary Steinberg
Continuity	Julia Britton
Electricians	Natasha Franklin, Simon Jones
Sound	Martin Jackson, Ronald Bailey
Props buyer	Neesh Ruben
Art department stylist	Leslie Gilda
Rostrum	Begonia Tamarit
Construction manager	David Ferris
Stills photographer	Sunil Gupta
Storyboard	John Hewitt
Casting	Isaac Julien, Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Runners	James Wolstenholme, Malcome Manning
Jobfit C4 trainee	Mary Montgomery
NEMDC trainee	Emily Mokaene
Angel wings	Bernstock & Speirs
Catering	The Good Eating Film Food Company
Studio	The A & R Dept.
Film and sound transfer	Coloour Film Services, Fire House, Siren Sound, Thomas Crooke Musical Services, Wallen and Parr, Lion and Fox Recording Inc.
Camera supplied by	Tatooist Int.
Laboratories	Rank, London; Le Jen Film, New York
Film	Kodak
Titles	Les Latimer Opticals
Research and production	Mark Nash
Script consultant	Mark Nash
Editor	Robert Hargreaves
Assistant editor	Emma Matthews
Dubbing mixer	David Skilton
Production assistant	Robert Cruz
Assistant directors	Chris Hall, Maureen Blackwood
Production company	Sankofa Film and Video Productions

Looking for Langston. 1989

16mm film transferred to high-definition video (black and white, sound), 46:29 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist. © Isaac Julien

Title card

Sankofa Film & Video presents:

A Meditation on Langston Hughes (1902–1967) and the Harlem Renaissance

With the poetry of Essex Hemphill and Bruce Nugent (1906–1987)

In Memory of James Baldwin (1924–1987)

Toni Morrison (voiceover)

You may be indeed the only people in the world who really care anything about them. When that unassailable combination of mind and heart, of intellect and passion, was on display, it guided us through treacherous landscape as it did when you wrote these words. Words. Every rebel, every dissident, every revolutionary, every practicing artist from Cape Town to Poland, from Waycross to Dublin, could memorize.

A person does not likely elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them. And there's a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind.

[Music, low piano melody]

Langston Hughes (voiceover)

Why should it be my loneliness? Why should it be my song? Why should it be my dreams deferred overlong?

Title screen

Looking for Langston

Radio announcer (voiceover)

Monday night, May 22nd, Mr. Hughes died. In his honor, Riverside radio WRVR in New York presents *In Memoriam: Langston Hughes*, a blending of memories, tributes, and his own words.

[Subway train screech]

[Smooth jazz music]

Langston Hughes (reciting poem)

[Jazz music continues in background]

Sun's a settin'/ This is what I'm gonna sing/ The sun's a settin'/ This is what I'm gonna sing/ I feel the blues a coming/ Wonder what the blues'll bring

I got those sad old weary blues/ I don't know where to turn/ I don't know where to go/ Nobody cares about you when you sink so low

[Drum sound, new song begins]

What shall I do/ What shall I say

[Fades out]

Blackberri (singing)

[Vocalizing over Hughes]

Langston I'm singing these blues for you/ Langston I'm singing these blues for you/ You love this music, God knows we love this music too

Bessie Smith (singing)

My man got a heart like a rock in the sea

My man got a heart like a rock in the sea/ My man got a heart like a rock in the sea

[Fades out]

Blackberri (singing)

[Vocalizing over Smith]

Whatever happened to the dream deferred?/ Whatever happened to the dream deferred?/ Things haven't changed much/ We still find power in our words.

I wandered as you wandered and I've seen how far you've come/
Though history's forgotten names your name will not be one/ Is there life that you've hidden/ One you felt was forbidden?/ We're seeking what's true/ Cause we want to know you.

[Song ends]

Voiceover

Langston Hughes, friend of County Cullen. Friend of Bruce Nugent. Friend of Allan Locke. Friend of Wallace Thurman. Admired for their intelligence and their art. Were they seeking the approval of the race, or of the Black middle class and the white literary establishment? Langston Hughes wrote that the ordinary Negro hadn't heard of the Renaissance, and if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any.

[Typewriter noise]

Baraka said Harlem was vicious, modernism, bang, clash, vicious, the way it was made. They could not understand such beauty so violent and transforming. But could he understand the beauty of the people with "freakish ways"? Homosexuality was a sin against the race, so it had to be kept a secret, even if it was a widely shared one.

[Siren]

[Jazz piano melody; new song begins]

Singer

Call me a freakish man: what more was there to do?/ She call me a freakish man: what more was there to do?/ Just 'cause she said I was

strange that did not make it true/ I sent her to the mill to have her coffee ground/ Cause my wheel was broke and my grinder could not be found.

[Sound of footsteps]

[Music interlude]

[Bottle slams against table; laughter]

You mix ink with water/ Bound to turn it black/ I say, you mix ink with water/ Bound to turn it black/ You run around with funny people, you'll get a streak of it up your back.

[Laughter]

There was a time when I was alone/ My freakish ways to treat/ There was a time when I was alone/ my freakish ways to treat/ But they're so common now/ You get one every day of the week.

Had a strange feeling this morning/ Well I've had it all day/ Had a strange feeling this morning/ Well I've had it all day/ I wake up one of these mornings/ That feeling will be here to stay

[Song ends]

[Sound of water gently lapping on shore]

[Ambient music]

[Bird song]

Black male American voice (voiceover)

[Ambient music continues in background]

He was in a field... a field of blue smoke and black puppies and red calla lillies. He was searching... on his hands and knees... searching among black puppies and red calla lillies... he was searching pushed aside by poppy stems. Then he saw two strong legs... dancer's legs... the contours pleased him. His eyes wandered on from the muscular hocks to the firm thighs... the rounded buttocks... then the lithe narrow waist... strong torso and broad deep chest... the brown eyes lookin' at him! His hair curly and black and all tousled. It was Beauty. Beauty smiled, looked at him and smiled and said...

Beauty

I'll wait.

[Birdsong]

Black male American voice (voiceover)

And he became confused and continued his search on his hands and knees... pushing aside poppy stems... and lilly stems... a poppy... a black poppy... a lily... a red lily...

Then he awoke. Beauty was smiling in his sleep... half his face stained flush color by the sun... the other half in shadow... his eyelashes casting

cobwebby blue shadows on his cheek... his lips were so beautiful... quizzical... I would kiss your lips. He would like to kiss Beauty's lips. He flushed warm with shame... or was it shame? His pulse was hammering from wrist to fingertip... Beauty's lips touched his... his temples throbbed... Beauty's breath came short now... softly staccato. Beauty's lips pressed cool... cool and hard... how much pressure does it take to awaken one? He could feel his breath on his nostrils and lips... Beauty's lips pressed hard against his teeth... he trembled... he could feel Beauty's body close against his... hot... tense... and soft... soft...

[Sound of lighter]

[Jazz piano melody]

[Distant conversation]

British voice (voiceover)

He said "Put no difference into your tone when you speak of his name. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Let my name be spoken without effect, without the ghost of shadow on it."

[Soft jazz saxophone]

Blackberri (singing)

Whatever happened to the dream deferred?/ Whatever happened to the dream deferred?/ Things haven't changed much/ We still find power in our words.

[Saxophone]

I wandered as you wander and I've seen how far you've come/ Though history's forgotten names your name will not be one/ Is there life that you've hidden/ One you felt was forbidden?/ We're seeking what's true/ Cause we want to know you

[Song fades out]

[Siren]

[Water lapping on the shore]

[Footsteps]

[High-pitched tone]

Essex Hemphill (voiceover)

Stalking... the neighbourhood is dangerous, but we go there... we walk the long way... our jangling keys mute the sound of our stalking... to be under the sky, above or below a man... this is our heat... radiant in the night... our hands blister with semen...

[Branches rustling]

A field of flowers blossoms where we gather in empty warehouses... our seed falls without the sound or the grace of stars... we lurk in shadows... we are the hunger of shadows.

[Footsteps]

In the dark we don't have to say I love you. The dark swallows it and sighs like we sigh when we rise from our knees.

I am lonely for past kisses, wild lips, certain streets breed for pleasure. Romance is a foxhole. This kind of war frightens me. I don't wanna die, sleeping with soldiers I don't love. I want to court outside the race, outside the class, outside the attitudes! But love is a dangerous word in this small town—those who seek it are sometimes found facedown floating on their beds. Those who find it protect it, or destroy it from within. But the disillusioned—those who've lost the star dust, the moon dance, the waterfront, like them, I long for my past. When I was 10, 13, 20, I wanted candy, five dollars a ride.

[Footsteps on cobblestone street]

[Jazz song begins]

[Humming melody; vocalizing]

Blackberri (singing)

Look at me beautiful Black man I'm just like you/ You know that I face discrimination too/ Got here about ten/ I walked in this place/ Hardly nobody here would look me in the face./ You're such a beautiful Black man, but somehow you've been made to feel that your beauty's not real/ Beautiful Black man, don't you walk with your head down bending low/

[Drink pouring]

Don't you do that no more/ Beautiful Black man did they ask for ID?/ Did they want two pictures or did they want three?/ I know it's hard but sometimes we must, just walk away shake our heads in disgust/ You're such a beautiful Black man but somehow you've been made to feel that you're beauty's not real/ You're such a beautiful Black man go on put a smile on your face, be proud of your race/ I'm saying you're beautiful/ I'm saying you're beautiful/ Don't you know you know you're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful face/ I'm saying you're beautiful/ Come on now and be proud of your race

[Song fades out]

Voiceover

It was a time when the Negro was in vogue. White patrons of the Harlem Renaissance wanted their Black artists and writers to know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. They didn't want modernism; they wanted Black art, to keep art and artists in their place. By the end of the '20s Negroes were no longer in vogue; patrons found other uses for their money. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward and colored artists and writers began to go hungry. History, the smiler with the knife under the cloak.

[Siren]

[Snapping]

[Bass line begins; snapping continues]

Essex Hemphill (voiceover)

He speaks good damn English to me./ I'm his brother, Carver./ He doesn't speak that "dis" and "dat" bull I've seen quoted./ Every word he speaks rings clear in my head./ I don't suppose you ever hear him clearly?/ You're always busy seeking other things of him./ His name isn't important./ It would be coincidence if he had a name, a face, a mind./ If he's not hard-on then he's hard-up/ And either way you watch him/

[Snapping]

You want, cross over music, you want his pleasure without guilt or capture./ You don't notice many things about him/ he doesn't always wear a red ski-cap, eat fried chicken, fuck like a jungle/ he doesn't always live with his mother or off the streets or off some bitches you assume/ you appear to be concerned/ you offer him twenty dollars telling him it's cab fare and discharge him from your home./ You're paths cross the next day/ you don't acknowledge him but he remembers/ his seed dilutes in your blood./ He doesn't dance well but you don't notice, to you he's only visible in the dark.

[Song ends]

[Sound of paper crinkling]

[Sound of film projector whirring]

Essex Hemphill (voiceover)

Lowering my pants before another mouth/ the cheap movie reel rattles in its compartment while the silent color movie, for a quarter/ grinds round and round./ We pant in a dark booth./ The musk of hair burns our nostrils./ I moan as his mouth swallows me./ This is the first sound in this silent movie/ then he moans, giving the movie its dialogue.

[Projector noise continues]

Now we think as we fuck/ this nut might kill us./ There might be a pin-sized hole in the condom./ A lethal leak./ We stop kissing tall dark strangers, sucking mustaches/ putting lips, tongues, everywhere./ We return to pictures. Telephones. Toys./ Recent lovers. Private lives./ Now we think as we fuck/ This nut might kill./ This kiss could turn to stone.

[Ambient music]

British voice (voiceover)

Sometimes on the edge of sleep, these faces and others are projected against the wall of memory. And almost immediately I am back in the gallery where I first saw these faces and heard their names. Being introduced to Alain Locke at an impromptu all-boy tea party; kissing Langston Hughes and never forgetting it; being photographed by Carl Van Vechten; staging the first production of Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* at Howard University; straightening Harold Jackman's tie; not caring much for Countee Cullen's looks; hunting dark meat with Auden

up in Harlem; being loved.

[Soft train bell]

What probably seems obvious to him then would not make itself clear to me for years: we were linked by our homosexual desires. Eventually I discovered that they had broken a number of rules about the Negro by writing at all. But before I came to terms with that I would have to learn something about the terms they had set for themselves and others had set for them.

[Distant seagulls; harbor noise]

Not to discuss the moral significance of Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, choosing in the main others of their kind to love, is to emasculate and embalm their society as a whole; it erases the image of the two colored sissies kissing and producing poems and paintings for and about each other. And finally, it undermines—as so much of America’s recorded history does whenever it attempts to reconcile itself to that enigma known as the “Negro”—the dismissal of nearly everything that does not make it white. History, as the smiler with the knife.

[Jazz saxophone melody]

[Dancing footsteps]

[Muffled party chatter]

[Jazz piano solo]

[Song ends]

Essex Hemphill (voiceover)

I loved my friend./ He went away from me./ There is nothing more to say./ The poem ends, soft as it began/ I loved my friend.

[Distant subway train noise]

[Waves lapping on shore]

[Jazz saxophone melody]

Voiceover

O sweep of stars over Harlem streets/ o little breath of oblivion that is night/ a city building to a mother’s song/ a city dreaming to a lullaby./ Reach up your hand dark boy and take a star/ out of the little breath of oblivion that is night./ Take just one star.

[Music swells]

Essex Hemphill (voiceover)

You left me begging for things/ most men thought they had below their belts./ I was reaching higher./ I could throw my legs up like satellites/ but I knew I was fucking fallen angels./ I made them feel like demigods./ I believed my mission to be a war zone duty: don’t create casualties,/ heal them./ But I was the wounded/ almost dead./ Helping the uninjured./ Men whose lusty hearts weakened in the middle of the night/ and brought them to tears, to their knees/ for their former

lovers./ They could look at me and tell they did not want to endure/
what beauty love scars gave me.

[Footsteps over leaves]

So touch me now—Hannibal, Toussaint./ I am a revolution without
bloodshed./ I can change the order of things to suit my desperations./
You can raise your legs, almost touch heaven./ I can be an angel, falling.

[Soft flame noise]

[Footsteps]

[Pulsing electronic music]

[Loud screaming of angry mob]

[Electronic music continues]

[Glasses break]

[Mob shouting]

[Electronic music continues]

Voiceover (two voices)

C: I saw you last night

R: Too many occupants are never found.

C: in the basement

R: Many canoes overturn

R: of the Brass Rail

C: Your dark diva's face, a lake.

R: Lushing and laughing.

C: I hear the sea

R: Your voice

C: screaming

R: falling from the air

C: behind your eyes

R: Dancing with the boys on the edge of funk.

C: Twilight.

R: The boys danced, darling,

C: My tongue

R: touching you

C: walks

R: indiscreetly.

C: along your thighs like a hermit.

R: your body a green light

C: I have been naked with you.

R: urging them.

C: Dear Diva, Darling:

R: You were in the mirrors

C: the light

R: their arms.

C: The boys whispered about you

R: Singapore slings toasted you.

C: under the music pumping from the jukebox.

R: They were promises chilled by ice cubes.

C: They were promises chilled by ice cubes.
R: The boys whispered about you

[Two voices begin to overlap]

C: The sloe gin fizzes
R: under the music pumping from the jukebox.
C: and Singapore slings toasted you
R: you were in the mirrors
C: the light
R: their arms.
C: Your body a green light.
C: Dear Diva, Darling:
R: The boys danced darling,
C: I have been naked with you.
R: touching you indiscreetly
C: My tongue has walked along your thighs.
R: dancing on the edge of funk.
C: I have found the scent.
R: Your voice
C: Twilight.
R: falling from the air.
C: I hear the sea screaming behind your eyes.
R: Lushing and laughing
C: Your dark diva's face,
R: I saw you last night
C: a lake.
R: in the basement
C: Many canoes overturn.
R: of the brass Rail.
C: Many occupants are never found.

[Music swells; loud electronic siren]

[Loud crash]

[Electronic music continues]

[Electronic music fades out]

[Jazz saxophone fades in]

Langston Hughes (voiceover)

Looks like she could have known if she only would. He mistreated her terrible, beat her up bad. Then went off and left her, stole all she had. She tried to find out what road Dave took; there wasn't a trace, no way she looked. That woman, who could foresee what your future meant, couldn't tell to save her, where David went.

[Music stops]

[Music changes tempo]

Sun's a' rising, this is gonna be my song. The sun's a' rising this is gonna be my song. I could be blue, but I've been blue all night long.

[Music ends]

[Fade to black]