

Title: Talks & Lectures | Festival Keynote: Lessons of the Hour | Isaac Julien in conversation with Celeste-Marie Bernier

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Transcript

Sorcha Carey

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Sorcha Carey. I'm the director of Edinburgh Art Festival and we're so pleased to be returning this year with a programme of 35 exhibitions and new commissions across the city. As a highlight of our opening programme it is a great pleasure to welcome you all to our 2021 Keynote lecture. Over the years in a long running partnership with the National Galleries of Scotland and British Council Scotland we've been proud to hear from artists including Nalini Malani, Alfredo Jaar, Shilpa Gupta, Elmgreen & Dragset and Cardiff & Miller. And this year in the first digital presentation of the Keynote lecture we're delighted to be joined by the internationally acclaimed artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien and Celeste-Marie Bernier. We're honoured to be presenting the UK and European premiere of Isaac Julien's *Lessons of the Hour* as a highlight of the 2021 Festival Commissions Programme and I'm now going to hand to my colleague and close collaborator on this project Stephanie Straine, Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art to introduce our speakers.

Stephanie Straine

Thank you, Sorcha. It is my pleasure to introduce this evening's event. The first part is a specially recorded conversation filmed in the music hall at Edinburgh's Assembly Rooms followed by a live Q & A. This beautiful historic space was the venue for numerous speeches by the nineteenth century abolitionist, intellectual and self-liberated freedom fighter Frederick Douglass. Notably the occasion of 1 May, 1846 when he addressed an audience of over 2,000 people. Isaac Julien's film portrait of Frederick Douglass, *Lessons of the Hour* is now on view at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art until 10 October. I really hope you'll all have the chance to experience this work in person. It is really incredible to do so. You can book your free tickets online at nationalgalleries.org

As Sorcha mentioned we're honoured to present the exhibition in partnership with Edinburgh Art Festival as the UK and European premiere of this ten-screen film installation. It feels very appropriate to host this work here in Edinburgh, as the city where Douglass lived in the mid 1840s and also as one of the key filming locations for *Lessons of the Hour*. From his address at 33 Gilmore Place, Douglass travelled across the country to address large crowds in towns and cities as Scotland's 'anti-slavery agent'. We are immensely grateful for the collaboration of Celeste-Marie Bernier, one of the world's leading Douglass scholars and Professor of United States and Atlantic Studies and Personal Chair in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. She worked closely with Isaac Julien on *Lessons of the Hour* to construct *tableaux vivant* that reimagine Douglass' relationships to a

range of key historical figures including Anna Marie Douglass, Helen Pitts and the suffragette Susan B Anthony. On behalf of Edinburgh Art Festival and the National Galleries of Scotland I offer my thanks to Isaac and Celeste for sharing their conversation around Frederick Douglass, his legacy, his impact on Scotland and the urgency today of his activism philosophy and ways of seeing the world.

Now to formally introduce our two speakers. Professor Celeste-Marie Bernier is author of over 20 monographs, essay collections and special issues and over 35 (sorry) essays and book chapters. And she's also the curator of six American and UK travelling exhibitions. Just a few of her extensive publications include *Stick to the Skin: African American and Black British Art 1865-2015*, *If I Survive: the Anna Murray and Frederick Douglass Family Papers* and *Douglass Family Lives*. She was winner of an international African American History and Genealogical Society Maryland Book Award amongst many other honours and has delivered over 250 guest lectures and plenaries. She's held numerous academic fellowships at universities including Oxford, Harvard, Yale, King's College London, the National Centre for Humanities in Durham, North Carolina and the Obama Institute in Mainz, Germany. Celeste is currently leading a three-year international, Leverhulme-funded interdisciplinary research project titled *Sacrifice is Survival Black Families Fighting for Freedom in the USA and Canada 1735-1936*.

Professor Isaac Julien CBE RA is a critically acclaimed British artist and filmmaker. As well as our show at NGS he is currently exhibiting *Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvellous Entanglement* at CentroCentro Panorama, Madrid, which is on view until 29 August 2021. And previously this work was shown at Maxxi in Rome last year. Other recent solo exhibitions include *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour* at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts in San Francisco, *Western Union Small Boats* at the Neuberger Museum, New York in 2020, *Looking for Langston* at Tate Britain in 2019 and *Playtime* at LACMA, Los Angeles in 2019 as well. Julien's work is held in numerous public collections including Tate, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Luma Foundation, Arles, Kramlich Collection San Francisco and Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town.

Amongst the many books and catalogues published on his work are a biography, *Isaac Julien: Riot* which was published by MoMa in 2013 to coincide with the museum's presentation of his nine-screen installation *Ten Thousand Waves*. Isaac Julien is Professor of Digital Arts at the University California, Santa Cruz where he and Professor Mark Nash established the Isaac Julien Lab Santa Cruz. Finally, I would like to mention the major new publication due out this autumn. *Lessons of the Hour Frederick Douglass*, which has been co-edited by Isaac with Cora Gilroy-Ware, and essays by Celeste-Marie Bernier, Henry Louis Gates Jr, Paul Gilroy, Vron Ware and Deborah Willis.

Isaac and Celeste's conversation will last through around 40 minutes after which they'll be back to join us live and take questions from the audience. Now over to the Assembly Rooms.

Celeste-Marie Bernier

Well, it's such a joy and a privilege to be here in the music hall in Edinburgh. One of the spaces and places where Frederick Douglass loved to give speeches and in thinking about Douglass as the world-leading orator that he was, a person who chose spaces and places for how they could be a platform for activism. To be in this music hall today and to understand Douglass as a speaker here joined by many more self-liberated campaigners fighting against injustices. It's a real privilege to think about Douglass in this space talking and speaking back to atrocities and abuses suffered by family members in slavery but also it was here that he really began to think about what black liberation meant and what it meant as an activist tool in understanding the history of heroism. And understanding a history of black heroism is very powerful in understanding your beautiful poetic meditation on what

liberation and the fight and the struggle against slavery is today. And especially in understanding the powerful intercutting in your film with history and political injustices in the past with political atrocities in the present and the powerful way in which you end the film Isaac around the Baltimore that Douglass knew and the Baltimore we know today.

Isaac Julien

I must say this is such a fantastic moment for me, to be able to be here with you to have a discussion about the making of *Lessons of the Hour*. Because in some ways a lot of it starts with you Celeste actually.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

You're being too kind again Isaac.

Isaac Julien

Really it does. Because I mean, I came across these amazing documents which you had been in a way always involved in, in relationship to reading about Douglass. And so many publications and kind of journals and then when I found out that you actually lived in Edinburgh I just couldn't believe it. And in a way where all these things became in a way incredibly pertinent, because of course Douglass lived in Scotland, and so to actually be here in the Assembly Rooms which is of course where Douglass spoke.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

Being here with you is a dream come true Isaac and being a part of the beautiful, beautiful poetic meditation that is *Lessons of the Hour* is a gift that keeps on giving. And you single-handedly in the thirty years I've been dedicating my life to Douglass over this period. You brought Douglass and the Douglass family and the power of the ancestral force of radicalism, resistance and fighting injustice by any means necessary back with us in the twenty-first century. And Douglass' spirit in the nineteenth century as he spoke here repeatedly to audiences was to galvanize the power of the African diasporic freedom struggle in the face of atrocity, in the face of annihilation, in the face of torture and death and so Douglass' mission in Scotland was one to enlighten, was one to tell audiences in Scotland that they need to understand that their nation is built on blood and was one of liberation. And in *Lessons of the Hour*, you speak to the lessons he taught then, and you speak to the lessons we need now, and the lessons we need in the future at the same time that they honour the freedom struggle. The intergenerational black liberation movement that was the entire Douglass family. Not just Frederick Douglass but also Anna Murray Douglass his wife and partner of 44 years and their children as a life force in the liberation movement you bring to life in your beautiful film.

Isaac Julien

You know your scholarship was really at the forefront of our minds when we were sort of undertaking the kind of initial research. And in some ways, I guess the journey begins with going to Rochester and being approached by the amazing curator John Hanhardt who with Jonathan Binstock basically commissioned me. And walking around Rochester, which was actually John Hanhardt's home, and coming across the statue of Douglass in Highland Park. I mean in a way it was just done. I mean you know, he's buried in Rochester and I was like okay Frederick Douglass, this is a project that I have to do. But I mean these kinds of beginnings of course in a way become very clouded quickly because you know he was such a kind of monumental figure you know and how does one go about it anyway? I mean really so it was really kind of that kind of wonderful, wonderful pictorial book on Douglass which you were the editor of and that I began to realise yes, I had read Frederick Douglass and come across him through the writings of Skip [Henry Louis] Gates initially but then it's really when I read your work I became really activated in relationship to Douglass. And of course, you live

here in Edinburgh, you know you are doing all of this amazing research in Edinburgh as well and so you were really our key locutor in this project. When we came here and I remember kind of for example when Ray Fearon met you who of course plays Douglass, I mean I think that meeting with you and Ray Fearon I mean was kind of dynamite. I mean I think he completely understood Douglass after your conversation.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I think he beautifully understood. I mean just how he plays Douglass and brings his spirit to life, and I think one of the key aspects we spoke about so powerfully and what you speak to now, is Douglass is the monument, Douglass is a memorial, and Douglass is a human being in the struggle. And what Douglass lived with all his life and was burned with all his life, was the public Frederick Douglass and the private Frederick Douglass. And Ray Fearon captures beautifully hypnotically and powerfully Douglass' powerful persona as the unrivalled orator, the unrivalled speaker, the unrivalled testifier to the atrocities in slavery as a way then to become a platform for liberation.

When he pauses and holds back in one of those final moments of the film he also remembers and does justice to those who died. And what we spoke about so much was Douglass makes it out of slavery at 20 but all his life he remembers his brothers, his sisters, his mother, those who died in slavery. The power of your film in photography, in memorialization, in the way in which you have that black canvas come behind Douglass to replace that Arcadian natural scene does an incredible justice to Douglass the individual and the mortal human being. As we know, in the twenty-first century white supremacy trades in monuments, in icons, in there can be only one. And Douglass' black liberation manifesto was that there is all of us there are millions and what's so powerful in your poetic meditation is that memorialization of the struggle in the past, in the present and what we need to do in the future. And that idea of the Douglass memory, and the Douglass family, through relationships comes through so beautifully in how you think of him and how you represent and reimagine him to us as a person taking trains, as a person in pain missing his family, as a person fighting against segregation in his day-to-day existence, let alone the war and the battleground that was slavery. So, your film does beautiful justice to Douglass as that protester and what you beautifully memorialise too is Douglass in Scotland as a person who's sitting by the fire in the York Hotel, just come back from Glasgow, and satisfied writing to a friend saying Scotland is all ablaze with anti-slavery excitement. So you tell us all those struggles from the pain to the power in his life.

Isaac Julien

What was his life like in Scotland? I think sort of you know, exactly what you've just said, and the relationship to travelling and his relationship to horses, you know to animals and horses in particular. I mean this was also a very key element, and in some ways, I think it loops into a lot of debates around sort of nature and culture, around the kind of principles that Douglass was interested in terms of in the sense of different religions that he observed. The Quakerism as a form of meditation in his life, and the way in which he also I think, imbues some of these modern ideas if you like, about the way in which nature and animals in particular, have their own ecological equilibrium in relationship to humans. And I think this way I think about humans in relationship to questions which resonate around, if you like, slavery and that view of looking at animals from that perspective. Which I think in a way, challenges maybe some of the more kind of utopian ideas around sort of humans and animals in a philosophical sense. I think Douglass in a way poses these questions in a really quite amazing way and this gave me the kind of, if you like, fuel and energy to be able to pursue that as a kind of image, in the creation of the image in relationship to Douglass and imagining Douglass in Scotland. But I think the real aspect to Douglass which was really quite amazing for me and that came out of a lot of the scholarship which you have been involved in and

others is his relationship to photography. And so, I think the fact that he's writing about photography, that he's developing his own aesthetic theories about photography. That this is not something which is part of you know like, contemporary art history. It was certainly not part of you know, art history *per se*, but it's not in a way positioned in a way that it could necessarily be positioned, and I think this is where kind of if you like, Douglass' interest in art and the emancipatory aspect of photography as an apparatus for liberation becomes key in relationship to one's own practice. And how that in a way symbolises the ways in which I'm going to think about creating that. And of course, his whole commitment to journalism writing about photographers like JP Ball. The great JP Ball who took photographs of Queen Victoria or Charles Dickens. I mean we need to find those photographs somewhere whether they exist as you know photogravures or tin types. We need to find out where they are because obviously, he was such an amazing photographer but of course he worked on the underground, you know, mirrored as well you know. And so, kind of that whole aspect of sort of liberation and the kind of freedom fighter aspect of you know liberating people from being slaves into free people is where they're where they can join. So, it's not just the relationship to aesthetics but how it makes it part of the whole way in which we can have this renewed interest in photography.

Frederick Douglass (depicted by Ray Fearon in Lessons of the Hour)

The love of pictures stands first among our passionate inclinations and is among the last to forsake us in our pilgrimage here. It is said that the best gifts are the most abused.

Isaac Julien

I think one of the ways in which I was really trying to look at the archive was this whole question around the way in which of course Douglass is the most photographed by the nineteenth century as it so happened, more photographed than people like Abraham Lincoln. But of course, one of the things which I kept thinking about was really his wife Anna Murray Douglass and the fact that my interest in photography led to the fact there were so few representations of Anna Murray Douglass and so in the work what I've tried to do is to re-valorise that, and to rearticulate the archive. I guess in a revisionist manner, but I see it as being something which is fairly progressive as re-centering Anne Murray Douglass. And *Lady of the Lake* of course, the portrait is part of that, of really foreground in her role in relationship to the ways in which they as a family worked as a team. Her whole story that she was a free slave that she was an incredible organiser, and the fact that she was an incredible seamstress and had all of these sartorial skills you know and she literally in a way is making Douglass' kind of you know, reimagined self at least in a sartorial sense. And so all of that becomes really important and that's why I really focus on this aspect of sewing and that as a technology and apparatus versus that of the train and that is a kind of apparatus of modernity. These two modernities are at work and Anna Murray Douglas, her role is really pertinent for me. And so that's one of the aspects I was trying to readdress, because of course, you know *The North Star*, that was all sort of a family effort.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

One of the greatest compliments Douglass could ever pay an image was if it could speak. He said I love images when they speak to me, and in your beautiful reimagining of Anna Murray Douglass she speaks and we have few images of Anna Murray Douglass. She herself was a phenomenal orator and we have very few words that she spoke but even the very few words we have, one of them being 'why not I enjoy hardship that my race may be free' speaks to the power of her life as an activist. Douglass really believes that agitation is art and art is agitation and he believed that pictures are a power, and beautifully as you do in your film as he did, he believed in the visual mode as itself a weapon of revolution. And part of Douglass' endless tiredness was the ways in which he had to

galvanize and work with not only a white racist pro-slavery south, but a white anti-slavery racist north. And Douglass believed that art was the way out. He had a philosophy as you beautifully say Isaac, where he understood that art is agitation was the artery of his manifesto, the artery of his life existence, and it was the only way in which an enslaved person of any age struggling for survival in slavery across the African diasporic world could become a human being. As he said 'this is how we move from chatter records, to be bought and sold in white racist imaginaries, to become our own revolution through works of art'. And one of Douglass' endless phrases he says 'when you see a child looking at a work of art, tell me they are not entitled to human rights'. So, Douglass had a philosophy that art wasn't in any way an additional thing. It was an artery of activism and in his photographs as you beautifully memorialise., he's memorialising himself and his struggle but he's memorialising the struggle of millions. He survived. His struggle was to remember the suffering of those who didn't and those who continued to survive and to fight for survival whether in the nineteenth century or today.

Isaac Julien

I mean it's so interesting, isn't it? I think you know even in one's own practice I'm thinking about the ways in which technology and the moving image and photography can become albums of, in a way, trying to progress particular causes. But at the same time, I'm thinking about the aesthetics of those, as a form of giving subjectivity to, if you like, subjects who have not always had access to them. So of course, the beginning of my work begins really on that as a premise. You know it's about trying to in a way look at the sort of apparatus and look at the ways in which photography and film can enlighten subjects and enlighten people and give them a certain autonomy, agency. I think this question of agency is something which is so central to Douglass, and the way in which he views photography, and the way in which photography, indeed even to this very day, as a technology is the apparatus that is creating for example, the whole Black Lives Matter movement. The documentation of the atrocity that took place, in terms of what happened last year in that horrible murdering of George Floyd. And then the way in which basically we think about the power of that technology and in the same way it can also have its very damaging effects as well which I think Douglass is also aware of. But I think there's a way in which we don't really, I think appreciate enough the ways in which his philosophy really enabled one to really grappled with these questions in a way that are so relevant for today and I think that's what I'm trying to display in *Lessons of the Hour*. I mean of course it's a ten-screen work. It does exist as a single screen film. I don't have a prejudice against classical films, but in this installation it's a ten-screen work and it's a way of trying to utilize the new technologies and the question of bricolage and montage effects as a way of really propelling a different way of looking. And I think that different way of looking connects to that very beginning in the work where Douglass talks about the way that he's looking at nature and trees and the way they imbue a kind of very terroristic aspect to the way that he's going to look. That critical looking then becomes very much part of his way in which he examines and views the world. I think that sense of having a critical way of looking at the world is why you know I make work and why this is indeed a ten-screen work which has a certain radicality to it. A sonography in a way of trying to build into the pictures this sense of rupture and also sublimity, but at the same time to use those to cast and look back into history. A history that if you like in the twenty-first century, I would say in the West we've been resisting, but nonetheless haunts the spectre of all our actions on everything that we do and I think that's so clearly the case today.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I think that's a beautiful and powerful way of understanding and doing justice to what Douglass was doing then and what he means now. And certainly, Douglass carried all his life what he felt was a burden of representation and a burden to bear witness. And in terms of understanding slavery his

commitment was to understanding not only the legal fact of slavery, but in *Lessons of the Hour* he talks about the rise of the spirit of mastery, the rise of the spirit of slavery. And so, for Douglass slavery as a physical form of incarceration was its legal identification but its reality in white supremacy, in white racist ideology, in white racist caricaturing and stereotyping in all the violences and violations of a persecutory white racist world. As he understood it, the fight and the war was on every front. What's so powerful in your poetic meditation is Douglass' own looking and visualising at nature. One point he always returned to in all his speeches is he would tell his audiences I have been beaten far more for how I looked than what I said and so Douglass would say to his audiences tonight you will see it from the slave's point of view. So, when he is in Edinburgh, when he is in Aberdeen, when he is in Montrose, Douglass is committed to bringing as he says, these are his words, 'the slave's point of view', the 'slave's experience,' again his words, into the room, into the music hall. And in understanding Douglass' relationship to agitation and to art and thinking through especially what beauty means. Douglass had a whole philosophy that European art was based, and rooted, and made possible in atrocities committed to millions of people living in slavery across the African diaspora. So, he absolutely understood the blood money of the Western art world made possible by suffering and subjugation. And what you said so beautifully and powerfully Isaac around subjectivity, that was Douglass' whole life's mission with photography that photography and art was a way to become subjects, to walk away from the objectification of the racist world of slavery and its spirit and also a way to become the work of art and as he says to revolutionise vision. To change seeing, to change perception, and to reorder the world from the enslaved person's point of view to bring radical black subjectivities as a stimulus to revolution.

Isaac Julien

Well, that's incredible. You know I think it's incredible that you know your kind of research and work into Douglass and how that resonates today, is extraordinary, I think. Because we're still in this particular moment, aren't we? We're still struggling in relationship to these questions around humanity, you know can black subjects be seen in this particular manner. Questions of indigeneity, all of these things are so kind of part of a whole, you know, discourse and the set of policies and practices which resonate deeply, I think, in our culture today. And I'm thinking about this of course as we're now in the Assembly Rooms, where Douglass spoke, and you probably know the lectures that he gave here right?

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I know one or two. So, in many of the speeches he gave here - you and I are sitting in this room but we need to imagine in 1846 the windows would be open. There would be 2,000 people in this room and thousands on the street outside. And Douglass started to get really weary of the white paternalist racist context he was in and his philosophy of art was very much related to his philosophy of activism which was about 'give us equal human rights'. And so, his war against anti-slavery white campaigners was his war against them seeing him as a political object and not a human subject. So, Douglass' interest in photography was reclaiming the subject, reclaiming equality and here he spoke not about himself in one of his speeches. He decides to, as he speaks about pictures and power on the eve of Civil War, he decided to speak about black heroism on an enslaving ship going across the Atlantic. And what he does is he speaks about a man called Madison Washington who's born into slavery and becomes one of the world iconic black liberating figures in US history. Douglass before the audience of thousands here would say, in ten minutes Madison Washington was master of that ship and all the crew lay at his feet. And so that word of master and mastery, and understanding what power is, and reclaiming from white power and replacing it with black power based in an

egalitarian philosophy of human rights, was Douglass' life blood and was in all the speeches he gave in places like this.

Isaac Julien

I mean it's extraordinary the way in which he also mastered language in a sense. If we're thinking about this dialectically, and the way that his interest for example in Shakespeare, propelled for example I think the performance of Ray Fearon who is a Royal Shakespearean actor. Basically, the way in which I think Ray understood what Douglass you know, was interested in. He's said 'well I can see the Shakespearean influences in the text and the work'. I think that sense of oratory but also the way in which he was able to utilise language and, in a way, transcend these boundaries into enabling a certain identification with the audience. I mean in a sense all that Ray Fearon does is to kind of in a way perform his words, but it was with a sense of oratory of course. I think there was something when we were in the Royal Academy, because we were in a sense trying to pretend we were in Scotland or in Edinburgh, but we weren't. I think in terms of the sort of architecture, the iconography all of these things felt kind of familiar. I think that was something that really became an important aspect in terms of also another way Douglass was able to create this kind of resonance. I think how that resonance continues in the performative gestures which are given into the work. And I think that also is something which is very much in our thinking and reading against the grain for example of biographies about Douglass when we think about the questions of gender and how they kind of get played out. You know because one of the things in the piece which is really important for me was really the role of Anna Murray Douglass and the way in which that she too had this incredible kind of persona and resonance.

Frederick Douglass (depicted by Rae Fearon in Lessons of the Hour)

11 days and a half gone and I have crossed miles of the perilous deep. Instead of the bright blue sky of America I'm covered with soft grey fog. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I mean the film does just such power and Frederick Douglass' spirit lives again in Ray Fearon and the power of language as you beautifully say in Douglass' life and his commitment. As a person who wrote over 7,000 speeches, narratives, and was a virtuoso of the spoken and written word. What's so powerful in how you interpret and imagine and recreate that for us Isaac, is you do justice to Frederick Douglass the freeman as he described himself in this city, and also as he remembered Frederick Bailey the slave, and these are his words. Douglass said as he's walked the streets of Edinburgh 'I feel myself a new man. Frederick Douglass is a very different man to Frederick Bailey the slave'. What's so powerful in Ray Fearon's performance and what's so powerful in the lexicon of liberation as Donald Rodney would say, in in the film that you've created is exactly the ways in which Frederick Bailey lives in Frederick Douglass. And certainly, Douglass felt all his that white supporters, even the most well intentioned, have carried paternalism and racism to such a degree that they only understood Frederick Douglass and they didn't understand Frederick Bailey. And similarly, the way in which white racist injustices play out today we know Frederick Douglass' name if we're lucky as he knew we would if he was lucky, whilst he knew that the millions who died would be 'nameless, faceless and bodyless', again, his words. But who knows Anna Murray Douglass' name? Anna Murray Douglass, his wife for 44 years. A freedom fighter, a liberator, a philosopher, an orator, a singer, a chef, a human rights activist, a seamstress, a fashion designer. A person who made Frederick Douglass and the Douglass family. They had five children who were all social justice radical activists, liberation figures. As Kenneth Morris Jr describes them the collective of liberation that was the Douglass family and so your film beautifully memorialises the struggles of Douglass as Frederick

Douglass, and as Frederick Bailey that haunted him all his life. And also, the pain he knew that his family's struggles, their liberation activism would leave no historical trace. And so, your film is an act of reclaimatory justice, in the way that you are speaking back to white racism today, white supremacy today and the ways in which Frederick Douglass, there can be only one, when the Douglass family was an intergenerational movement of liberation that reflected generations of millions of people across the diasporic world today.

Isaac Julien

Yeah, I mean I think you know it's incredible and it's incredibly moving, I think. In the work I think I was trying to, you know, just reference some of these aspects. I guess they get referenced in the scene where you have Anna Murray Douglass making Douglass' you know fabulous blue coat. Basically you get the different modernities, him on the train and the way in which that as a kind of technology is enabling him to move. You know, her sewing and how that as a technology is enabling her to refashion Douglass, and that combination in this moment. The suturing of different images, and the connections I'm trying to make across space and time and geography is connected to this question of the desire for liberation and how that looks and feels. I think that question of viscerality and the feeling of Douglass is something that becomes very important. That you need to if you're making works of art and films in this case or images, you need a certain aliveness to make that connection to these questions. Because of course you know reading a book is important but then in a way when you want to create a certain form of activism, which of course Douglass was, to realise that there's this line of activism to what's happening today in Black Lives Matter to Douglass. I think it gives a certain if you like sort of elegance or kind of history lineage with respect to those kinds of struggles which have been galvanizing for so long. Obviously this is where I think Scotland becomes very important in sharing that as a kind of legacy because I think of course Douglass chose Scotland not England to reside in you know. And today I think we can say that Scotland leads the way in relationship to thinking about certain questions in a way that England doesn't, I think. Which makes me very happy to be here too and I think there's way in which it feels very right that we have *Lessons of the Hour* making its premiere, its European premiere but its UK premiere here in Scotland. I think Douglass would have approved of that.

Frederick Douglass (depicted by Rae Fearon in Lessons of the Hour)

I am now as you will perceive by the date of this letter in Old Scotland. Almost every hill, river, mountain and lake of which has been made classic by the heroic deeds of her noble sons.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

All those 150 years ago Douglass described it as 'my life's mission is to wake Scotland up to the atrocities of slavery' and when he's in this city he's very much part of a campaign to fight against white Scottish ministers who are taking blood money from white enslavers in the US South. And he leads a famous campaign against the Free Church of Scotland and as he says 'never was a church more ironically named', the Free Church of Scotland. He said that gave hope to us in Maryland but what is your actual Free Church of Scotland. And he campaigned against them and he campaigned against their injustices and he made sure the streets of Edinburgh had the words written on them 'send back the blood-stained money' and in your beautiful film you memorialised that legacy of activism when he and white Quakers climb up Arthur's Seat and carve 'send back the money' into the land of Scotland.

Isaac Julien

In our film we used poetic license. It's, it's scrawled in the sand.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

But they both work because the scrolling in the sand speaks so powerfully. Douglass said at one point 'I saw that slogan everywhere. I saw it in Abroath at the train station. I saw it in the city of Edinburgh,' whether it's on the sand or on the mountain Douglass said that the hills and mountains of Scotland were alive with that slogan. And Douglass in all his speeches in Scotland said 'there is not a river that is not doused in the blood of the battle of the fight for freedom'. So he understood Scotland as a nation profiting from slavery but he said 'even the old dogs of Scotland know I am free'. So he also saw the possibilities of Scotland as a land of liberation and he saw both of them as a land of liberation, mired in the profits of enslavement but on the other hand a nation with the possibility of freedom. And he at every moment, in every hall whether it was here, or in speeches would crowd out audiences saying 'you can be better, you can live a new life of liberty' and that I think was something he didn't see in England.

Isaac Julien

It's so interesting and when we came across the kind of songs like the *Send Back the Money* songs. I mean those folk songs are so amazingly moving and strong. I mean I remember that when I first heard them, I couldn't really believe that there are actual songs where Douglass you know actually is the protagonist really of those songs. And you know it's so fantastic to be able to have those be in the work.

Sung in Lessons of the Hour

Send back the money, send it back
Tempt not the Negro's God
To blast and wither Scotland's Church
Wi his avenging rod
There's not a mite in aw the sum
But cries to Heav'n aloud
For wrath on aw who shield the men
That trade in Negro's blood.

Isaac Julien

In a sense I think for audiences in the States who have seen the work. It's been shown in Rochester in New York, in San Francisco, in Savannah, I think they have been quite astonished to kind of understand Douglass. Both in his very powerful oratory self, but to realise that he was a kind of you know transnational kind of you know freedom fighter, that he was someone who had made these amazing interventions into Scottish culture. His work was translated into German culture. This transnational Douglass which is also a Douglass I'm interested in. Otilie Assing his German translator who's represented in the work. Of course, relationship to Susan B. Anthony who's represented the work, which of course is an ambivalent relationship. But nonetheless you know there's a way in which you know before he dies, he's giving a talk right, to the suffragette movement, that's his last lecture you know so in a way. Then in the work there's also an image of Rosetta Douglass that... Anyway, we know that she's someone that is part of the Douglass family, is part of the team that's really creating this possibility intergenerationally for Douglass to live on. And going to his house in Washington. That fantastic introduction that you gave me Celeste to his house. And I just found it incredible that his house still was standing and the care and attention that was given to it in an area where maybe you know other things might not be given that care and attention. Everybody knows who Douglass is and it's incredible to have this sort of house museum that one was able to have access to, and the kind of curatorial work that was being done in that space it was just such an honour and privilege to be able to film in the space. That's when I first heard you lecture.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I remember it! What you just so beautifully summarised there is Douglass the human rights activist and you spoke earlier about an animal rights activist, and you spoke too just now about his women's rights activism. Douglass was committed all his life to all rights for all people of all nations, and as you said extended to the natural world and to animal rights and what was often spoken of when people met Douglass was his kindness first of all and how he found suffering of any kind absolutely intolerable. So, he lived his life as he spoke, he dedicated and sacrificed his life to his humanitarianism, his compassion and thinking of his transnational life here on the streets of Scotland. He spoke about slavery but his compassion was for people destitute on the streets and the cities of Scotland and so the *Send Back the Money* songs that you described as so moving Isaac, when I hear them, I hear the destitute children who follow Douglass and sing those words. And Douglass felt an awe in children who had nothing, who gave everything that they had of that nothing. Children helped him carve out his *Send Back the Money* signs. Children who were living destitute, penniless and starving at the foot of Arthur's Seat helped him. And so, Douglass believed that the world was a world of human rights. And as you speak so beautifully too about his house, where his family lived where Rosetta his eldest daughter. And Rosetta who was an intellectual, political and philosophical figure in her own right. She was blind by the time she passed because she was proofreading his work for him. She was a researcher on pictures and power, and she herself had a mantra that she lived by: 'I refuse to be tyrannised over'. So, there was a liberationist movement of radical activists within his family that the house and in your beautiful memorial to the house, you see that history and you see that legacy and in the paintings that you show in the house you see Sengbe Pieh, for example, who led the Amistad Revolution. So, it's a real testament to the freedom movement across the generations in your beautiful film.

Isaac Julien

Yeah, I think there's a way in which maybe you know that we can think about the way that Douglass resonates for an audience today, and how that is going to be such an interesting sort of moment. You know it's been so fantastic to have the opportunity to speak to you, Celeste, an honour. And also the fact that the work was invited to be shown here in Edinburgh as part of the arts festival is such an honour.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I think the honour is all ours Isaac and the beauty and the power and the privilege and the life force of your film brings Douglass to life again, and the many Douglass' that were the Douglass Liberation Movement and what they asked of society are then and what they ask us in society now. So, thank you.

Stephanie Straine

Welcome back everyone. We're live now with Isaac and Celeste to share some of our comments and questions from the audience. We've had lots of really interesting comments and observations coming in on the YouTube channel. So, thanks to everybody. Elizabeth Williams posted that she loves the way the film foregrounds Anna Murray Douglass and how important she was. And this is really echoed in Lisa Rullsenberg's comment that she feels Anna Murray Douglass was a core part of, and she puts in capital letters, the making of Frederick, his visual standing, the promotion of hearing and seeing him. The film gives us a step beyond those nineteenth century images. And Lisa then goes on to ask the question which I think I might direct to both of you. She asks: can the white supremacy of the western art world be overwritten, rewritten or reimaged by works such as

Lessons of the Hour. How can the art world embrace activism to own its history of racism? Quite a meaty question to start off with.

Isaac Julien

Well yes, it is. I mean I think you know that in a way, I guess my answer to that question would be in fact there have always been artists working for quite some time, who have been really at the forefront of really trying to pose questions which I think are connected to these themes that have become more I guess obvious in the twenty-first century. And I mean I think even if we think about the history of Britain, we can see that the legacy of modernism always had artists of colour who are working and making works. And I think there's a way in which the art world divided that world and ignored those practices, but those practices were still being made. And so of course the art world is playing catch up to some of those things or activities, and so of course on the one hand we have a Frank Bowling, but if we go back to kind of [Ronald] Moody and his amazing sculptures. Or if you think about contemporary artist like Lubaina Himid for example, such a significant artist who as a black woman artist was really quite ignored. And her incredible, powerful work which is only belatedly really been recognised, but I think was always been recognised by lots of other artist's working and critics. In a way I think that's a question that has always been there and perhaps it's just being paid a little bit more attention to, but whether or not I think the whole institutional question is one that in a way I guess the white art establishment has to in a way answer itself. It's for them to do that work. But I think you know that some of that work has really been activated and been inspired by what happened last year, and previously by those who are no longer with us. Like Okwui Enwezor who pioneered curatorially lots of I would say, possibilities in an art world context. And I think in Britain or in the UK we have some way to go on some of those things. But I think obviously you know there's *Lesson of the Hour* but there's lots of other people working and making fantastic work so it's just about conjoining all of those things and allowing all of those things to flourish and articulate.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

I think it's really a beautiful beautifully expressed Isaac and *Lessons of the Hour* beautifully emblemizes these struggles and these revolutions and mentioning Lubaina Himid who dedicates her life to memorialising, resisting, representing lives lived inside the invisible. And that whole question of millennia and no less than centuries of African diasporic art making as resistance to white supremacist power. One of Douglass' favourite things to do all on a Sunday was to go into the major white art galleries of DC and stage conversations and questions about what those paintings were doing on the walls, and would cause a revolution everywhere he went. As he saw it, his answer to that question would be yes, they must and they must do it instantly. And so, he was not only having lots of pictures taken himself but he was a philosopher and historian about the history of making and the history of black radical art making, as a fight against white supremacist power.

Isaac Julien

I mean I remember coming across a wonderful article in the Frederick Douglass newspaper, where he writes about James Presley Ball, JP Ball which of course in the work I really tried to visually simulate his photographic studio and his practice. But I mean of course Douglass was really I mean he was really there writing about in a way a black artist at work, you know and I think that's incredible. And of course, we have our writers who have been doing that work. I mean Eddie Chambers is someone who's been doing that work. But you know I think also we've had you know the work that you've done Celeste and many other critics who have been really sort of at the forefront of really making this kind of way of looking, and just really eliminating these sort of art practices which have been sort of there for some time.

Stephanie Straine

Thank you both. On the question of Celeste's scholarship, we have two further questions. The first from Elizabeth Williams who asks Celeste, she'd love to hear more about Douglass' complicated relationship with the legacy of Robert Burns.

Celeste-Marie Bernie

That's a powerful question, how long do we have? In the brief window of time that we have, Douglass was a lifelong admirer of Burns and loved Burns and saw Burns as a portal to what Scotland could be and needed to be. At the same time that he viscerally, emotionally in his very heart's core understood the problematics of Burns as a figure who was connected to and understood as brilliant scholars working in this area, somebody who had a very problematic relationship to white enslavers in Scotland, white enslavers in the Caribbean. And Douglass never lost an opportunity to inform audiences with powerful figures like Burns who created beautiful songs to tie it up to a revolutionary manifesto of protest and human rights. So, Douglass always juxtaposed the reality of a person with a mythology of what they could be in the freedom struggle. And Burns was a touchstone for how Douglass on the one hand celebrated and eulogized Scotland as a land of liberty. At the same time, he understood Scotland steeped in a tradition built on the profits, as he described it, of the bodies and souls of women men and children. So, Douglass always understood the complex relationship and always held white figures accountable whether they were popular figures working in protest songs and traditions. He nevertheless held them to the jugular vein of what their human rights was in practice, let alone what it was in myth and memory.

Stephanie Straine

Thank you so much Celeste. If we have time to do this, I'm gonna squeeze in one more question to you and then a final question to Isaac. So, we'll run just slightly over but I hope you agree it's definitely worth it. So, Lisa Rullsenberg also asks Celeste, do you think that Douglass has become understood differently in light of Black Lives Matter? Has the response to your scholarship, Professor Bernie and this film, Isaac, changed and is it changing and if so, how?

Celeste-Marie Bernie

Depends who you speak to and when and where. That's another beautiful, powerful question. Just before he died, the day before he died Douglass said 'my heart burns to see the people that I struggled for dying at the hands of police brutality being persecuted at the hands of white supremacist ideology'. And that was the day before he died and he said 'I despair for my people'. And so, understanding Douglass and audiences now, Douglass' life was lived by the responsibility, the accountability and what work we were gonna do to improve an unfair, a racist and a persecutory world. So the activism of Douglass, the artery of the activism of *Lessons of the Hour* is as it was for Douglass then as it is for us now, a revolutionary call to arms and Douglass' film that Isaac Julien creates is beautifully in that powerful call to arms tradition.

Stephanie Straine

So, this is a question from Alice H to you Isaac. She asks, with such a monumental and important figure as Douglass were there any particular challenges in selecting or narrowing down the focus for the film itself.

Isaac Julien

In some ways in terms of how I make works not so much in the sense that when I'm shooting I basically shoot in a way of stream of images and it's only really in the sort of editing process that we begin to kind of focus, but we're focusing on the basis of a kind of deep visual research and also a research which involves a certain scholarship which Celeste was so generous to share with us in the work. So, I think in a way it's very much about trying to think about Douglass and how he can be rearticulated for a new generation. And to bring that out within the trajectory of his own activism and to connect that to today's activism. But I think in a way I'm interested in the process of aesthetic reparation or reparational aesthetics, as a way of trying to link and build this question of a legacy which has to bring about a certain aesthetic revolution you know which can aid a political radicality in art. So, I mean these are sort of course visual aspects which I think Douglass was interested in. And in my own practice I want to just bring those questions to the foreground.

Stephanie Straine

Thank you so much Isaac. I think that's a beautiful way to wrap up this evening's event and I'm afraid in the interest of time I have to draw the questions to a close but I know there were many other great questions and comments. Thank you to everyone in the audience for contributing to this evening's discussion and also to my colleagues working behind the scenes at Edinburgh Art Festival, Isaac Julien's Studio and National Galleries of Scotland who made both this keynote and the exhibition itself possible. And finally, of course our warmest thanks go to Isaac and Celeste for welcoming us all into their collaborative dialogue which has been a real privilege to witness and learn from. Thank you all for joining us. Goodbye.