

PORT CITIES
and Our Present



SITES OF

RE

MAKING

*Bringing the gifts that
my ancestors gave,*

*I am the dream and
the hope of the slave.*

I rise

I rise

I rise.

— MAYA ANGELOU

COVER IMAGE

Kia Lenise, "Flwrs in
the Attic" 2024, Digital
Illustration

SITES OF **RE MAKING**



PORT CITIES AND OUR PRESENT

Ports — The Making of the New/Terror/Change and Adaptations

Ports and port cities are sites of encounter and exchange, of sea and land, of trade and commerce. In port cities, different cultures jostle against each other and languages mix as the local and global co-mingle to create new ways of life. Ports and their cities are sites of remaking. For hundreds of years, from the late 15th-century to the late 19th-century, many ports along the West Coast of Africa were connected to various ports in the Americas, particularly in North America, Brazil and the Caribbean. This was the era of the trade in “human commerce” – the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This trade in over 12 million African human beings became the basis of the wealth of European and American civilizations. Today, we are confronted with a critical issue – how to tell this story.

This exhibition emerges from a conference that reimagines port cities. Thus, it attempts to tell a story about the trade through an exploration of ports. Through artistic interventions, meditations, and creations, port cities are recontextualized, complicated, and reimagined, centering Black and Indigenous experiences within the global history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its present-day legacies.

The mass forced movement of over 12 million Africans to the New World during the era of the Transatlantic Slave Trade was one of the most momentous population movements in human history. The enslaved labor of Africans in the New World became the basis for the emergence of new economies, new societies and a new form of human domination – anti-Black racism. Central to this movement were the various port cities which emerged in this era. Some of these ports were ones of embarkation on the long voyages that went from Europe to Africa, then to various locations in the New World, and finally returned to Europe. Today, many of these ports are well known, such as Liverpool in the United Kingdom, where, in the late 18th-century, over 40 percent of the trade in human commerce occurred; and Nantes in France, where 45 percent of French slave and colonial trade took place. In Nantes, with

textile factories employing over 4,500 workers in the era of colonialism and plantation slavery, the port and the city became the hub of French colonial commerce. In the United States, the ports of Charleston and Norfolk were embedded within the structures of the trade. So, too, were Newport and Bristol in New England.

On the continental West African coast, Gorée Island in Senegal, Elmina in Ghana, and Ouidah in Benin were hubs in which the captured Africans became enslaved persons as they were marched onto ships. In the New World, not only were the enslaved Africans brought to the United States and the Caribbean (to ports like Kingston in Jamaica and Havana in Cuba), but the single largest number of enslaved Africans were taken to Brazil to the ports of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, Bahia. Port cities in the New World were sites of terror, with the slave market a major feature of urban life. In Africa, the African was the one who was captured; on the slave ship, they were enslaved commodities; and in the port slave market, their status as “property in person” was confirmed. For the enslaved, the ports in the New World were not only sites of sheer terror: there was absolute uncertainty about one’s future in a strange land. However, as the process of adaptation began, over time an African diasporic

population emerged. Later on in the era of plantation slavery, urban slavery emerged, and many of the port cities became locations for the relatively few free Blacks and where the enslaved could remove themselves from plantation life.

One consequence of this process was the emergence, in places like Liverpool, of an urban Black community with a long history. It is often said that cities are the markers of the modern. That idea is a flawed one. However, it is clear that from the ports of West Africa to the Caribbean, the United States, and Brazil, these port cities formed a network of global trade and were the connective nodes in the global system of racial slavery. In such a historical process, encounters (forced and otherwise) become the grounds for the creation of new forms of life.

This conference and exhibition examine some aspects of this historical process and these encounters. The viewer is faced with the trauma of the historical catastrophe of racial slavery, and they are also asked to look at the possibilities of hope in this catastrophe.

This exhibition could not have been possible without Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, Spencer Evans, Kia Lenise and the curatorial acumen of Ivie Orobaton. As is now the custom at the Center, no exhibition is possible without the

skills of Kiku Langford McDonald and Shana Weinberg. To all of them, we say thanks and deep appreciation.

Anthony Bogues

Director, Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice

Director of Graduate Studies' Note

The idea to convene a conference around port cities as a public humanities undertaking crystallized during a Summer 2025 visit to Liverpool. Simmons Center faculty and staff have had a long relationship with the International Slavery Museum and the University of Liverpool, and now celebrate a historic memorandum of understanding between Brown and the University of Liverpool. During the trip, we also met with the Tate Liverpool, to understand the complex ways that contemporary arts institutions are rethinking how to represent the history of Liverpool, Britain's largest slave trading port.

While this conference and exhibition explore past and future connections with Liverpool, the artists and artworks included in "Sites of Remaking," are deeply a part of Simmons Center relationships in Rhode Island. Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, a 2015 graduate of the Master's in Public Humanities program was awarded the Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice Fellowship as a graduate student, and traveled to Hong Kong and South Africa to round out her impressive graduate work. In the decade since completing her degree, her work has masterfully woven in textiles, installation, animation, music,

and printmaking, exhibiting and curating work that remix legacies of enslavement and colonialism. Spencer Evans is Associate Professor at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). His recent sculpture, "Our Ancestors Come With Us," commissioned for the Bristol Middle Passage Port Marker Project, embodies a core Simmons Center priority, highlighting the interconnecting histories of Indigenous and African slavery. Finally, Kia Lenise's vivid play on imagery of Providence maps and iconic architecture, grounds us in the different historic and contemporary landmarks of slavery across Rhode Island's various ports.

I am delighted to introduce one of our first year Master's in Public Humanities students, Ivie Oroboton, in her curatorial debut. With prior experience across two Smithsonian museums, Ivie developed this exhibition as part of her graduate fellowship placement at the Simmons Center.

Elena Shih

Associate Professor of American Studies
Director of Graduate Studies, MA in Public Humanities (2025-2028)

Associate Director of Academics,
Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice

Curatorial Note

This exhibition, "Sites of Remaking: Port Cities and Our Present," was developed in tandem with the conference "Reconsidering Port Cities: Critical Commemoration of Slavery, and Transatlantic Legacies," a critical engagement of port cities across the Atlantic world as spaces of memory, representation, reconciliation and community. "Sites of Remaking" offers a place of contemplation, reflection and inquiry through multi-disciplinary art. This exhibition subverts and challenges traditional depictions of slavery and colonialism, complicating the history of the slave trade, through layered artistic practice to uncover and recover voices not traditionally included when talking about the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Spencer Evans, "Our Ancestors Come with Us" (Child, Maquette) 2024, Clay



The curation of "Sites of Remaking" was based in a collaborative process centering the artworks and artists as storytellers. These works embrace a counter-archival tradition, celebrating the modes of resistances employed by enslaved people to reclaim and reassert their humanity across time. In this exhibition, I explore past, present and future depictions of real and imagined lifetimes and universes emphasizing Black placemaking.

This exhibition is an art show grounded in history. I was drawn to art as a way to access and evoke feelings and sensations that are difficult to capture with the written word. During this curatorial process, I drew upon my training as a cultural historian to build a historical throughline to ground the work. But it is the art in its multiplicity that captures the depth of this history. "Sites of Remaking" asks in what ways is our present shaped by the legacies of racial slavery and what will our futures be?

Ivie Oroboton

Curator and cultural historian
A.M. Candidate in Public Humanities



STILL FROM MEDIA INSTALLATION BY BAO NGUYEN

Above L to R:
Christopher Roberts,
Spencer Evans, and
Jazzmen Lee-Johnson

Ports as Portals: Art and Interdisciplinary Practices

Jazzmen Lee-Johnson and
Spencer Evans in conversation with
Christopher Roberts

Christopher Roberts (CR): The occasion that brings us together today is the “Reconsidering Port Cities: Critical Commemoration of Slavery, and Transatlantic Legacies” Conference which aims to critically examine how port cities across the Atlantic world commemorate their histories related to slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This conference is co-organized by the Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice at Brown University, the International Slavery Museum, and the Centre for the Study of International Slavery at the University of Liverpool. I’m

an assistant professor at the Rhode Island School of Design. I’m primarily interested in memory and forgetting as emergent concepts in black aesthetic practices and philosophies. I pay particular attention in my studies to port cities that are enmeshed with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, both domestic and abroad. And I do have two amazing folks here with me as well, and I’ll give them an opportunity to introduce themselves.

Jazzmen Lee-Johnson (JLJ): My name is Jazzmen Lee-Johnson. I am a visual artist, a musician, composer, curator, and yeah, super interdisciplinary. I work at the nexus of animation, film, printmaking, music, dance. My

work is rooted in understanding our pasts and how it impacts us today and how we can learn from our past to make a better world and a better future. I’m very interested in archives and understanding our paths through archives and understanding our culture through archives, which could be anything from some old documents you find in the library or your playlist or your shelf of hair care products, family photos, et cetera, just to make sense of our human condition.

Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, “Free My Twin, Fuk da Law 🇵🇸🇵🇸”
2020, Screen Print
on Paper





Spencer Evans,
"Happy Sunday
(Aunties)" 2018, Oil
on Canvas

Spencer Evans (SE): Hello everyone, I'm Spencer Evans, I am a native of Houston, Texas. I am an interdisciplinary artist, one could say I'm a draftperson, I am a painter, I do some illustration as well. My work is centered in storytelling from my community. I am very much influenced by the stories of my elders, my uncles and aunties as I was growing up, telling these stories about real people who I saw every day. These stories sound like something out of a fantasy. And so having a love for that. I have, you know, taken up that mantle myself, and I use my gift in all the ways that it shows up to tell those stories for our people, but for anyone else who's watching to learn more about the ones that are around them everyday as well as those who were here and those to come, so I'm happy to be here.

CR: Where does this notion of a port, or a door, or a waterway, or some sort of threshold or transition point, where would you say these things are showing up for you as an artist? This could be in particular artworks, meaning like is there a theme that maybe carries over across mediums or in a particular exhibition or a season of your practice. Or maybe more for you as an artist in a macro sense like what's been a port or a transition to a different medium, to a different platform, to a different concept?

JLJ: I usually enter my work, it's changed recently, but I usually entered my work through an archive. I usually go in with a question around enslavement or colonialism or imperialism, which is broad, and try to get more specific in that, so. For example, being here in Rhode Island, being here at Brown and RISD and learning about the legacies of this particular place, I was really interested in, or am really interested in the business of slavery and enslavement because here we are in the North and there's always a narrative that in the North, it was different, but that is not the case.

Some work that comes up for me is thinking that there weren't slaves brought to do plantation work here in Rhode Island, but we had the textile industry where the slave cloth was produced which was the actual garments that the slaves used to make their clothing. I think about enslavement and about the trauma of that, like water also being a thing that drowns you and has a lot of trauma within it.

The work I'll be sharing as part of this conference and exhibition is thinking about the Brown family and this wallpaper that they have in the Nightingale House. That was a 19th-century wallpaper made by a French artist that never actually set foot in what is today

known as the United States, but had this idea, a romanticized idea of what it was to be here, and that's the views of North America. This wallpaper is in many places, including the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, and different country clubs and such, but also is in a building right here on campus. And I was asked to look at this wallpaper that has a lot of problematic imagery and kind of respond to it. And the wallpaper shows the views of North America. So, it's showing New York, the Hudson Bay; Boston and the ports in Boston; the West Point Military Academy where our Army was built after the Civil War and then used for westward expansion; and, looking at Niagara

Falls, New York versus Canada and finding freedom there.

I keep on going back to portals. It feels like when you say port for me, it's a portal. It's an entryway into something else, and that's what happens with my work. There's a lot of layering of like, here's what history gave us, but how do we change the view, the viewpoint, the perspective, the entryway of how we see it? And so I'm layering imagery, both contemporary and historic imagery.

SE: So, the way that ports or doorways show up in some of my own work, just kind of like my whole career, not so much as waterways, but it showed up in my two dimensional work in layered imagery that may show up through



PHOTO BY NICK DENTAMARO



PHOTO BY STEPHAN BRIGIDI

Artist Spencer Evans working in his studio on "Our Ancestors Come With Us."

Artist Jazzmen Lee-Johnson installing the "View of Boston Harbor" tapestry in the Nightingale-Brown House.

facial expression as well as bodily, physical expression in a particular moment. I had become really obsessed with the Black American ability to exist in a particular moment and experience. A ton of feelings and emotions, but also be aware of where those emotions are happening and who's in the room to see them. And in a split second, know what to show, no matter what is being felt.

When it comes to ports or waterways showing up in my own work, I have a sculpture that was unveiled in Bristol, Rhode Island at the Bristol Harbor. It's called "Our Ancestors Come with Us" memorializing the ancestors of the Pokanoket people and the Akan



PHOTO BY SPENCER EVANS

Unveiling of "Our Ancestors Come With Us" at Independence Park, Bristol, Rhode Island.

people who were enslaved in that area known as Bristol.

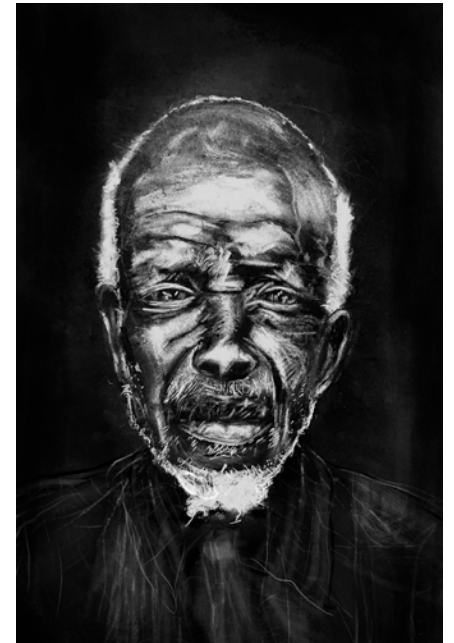
There are three figures. A femme figure, which is of the Pokanoket Nation, a masculine figure that is of the Akan people and then you have a child that represents essentially their relationship together in the future as they both still exist despite every system and direct conflict or direct intervention to destroy them. And this child shows up with complete freedom. I think of this as a portal because for one we see what represents the past but then we also see as it represents the future and it's important to talk about the past in a particular way.

I wanted these ancestors to be depicted in their true identity so that when they're seen by their descendants and also when they're seen by those who aren't their descendants. I wanted to change the question about like, oh who are these people and why are they right here? And then one must go and do the knowledge to figure out what exactly happened.

CR: Hearing Spencer, you talk about the layout of the work that you've recently done actually made me think about themes from Octavia Butlers' "Earthseed" series and this notion of thinking into the future and sort of like the ways that, Alexis Pauline Gumbs' work around "Evidence" and this character of Alandrix who's speaking back. I feel like both of you are also making work that speaks across time. Jazz for you too, the archival work is not just in the present, you know, but it's as much in the past, and in the future.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Jazzmen Lee-Johnson, "Portrait of Cudjo Lewis, who was born as Oluale Kossola" 2023, Charcoal on Paper



Artist Statements and Tours of the Artworks



PHOTO BY KIA LENISE

Kia Lenise is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, data collector, and cartographer whose work examines the relationship between epigenetics, slavery, and geography. Through collage, mapping, and spatial design, she transforms data and archival materials into visual studies of how the past remains active within present-day landscapes. Her practice blurs the line between research and creation, using maps and historical records not only as sources but as tools for generating new data, knowledge and art.

“My work began in academia. I studied Black Studies for years, immersing myself in histories of enslavement, displacement, and institutional violence. The deeper I went into the archives, the more I understood that history is not past. It lingers. Haunts. Not only as something documented in text, but an entity embedded in plain sight.

Art allows me to hold beauty and violence in the same frame. My way of carrying what I have learned without being consumed by it. Through making, I honor my ancestors — not only by remembering what was done to them, but by refusing to let their lives be reduced to silence.”

KIA LENISE **Flwrs in the Attic**

2024, Digital Illustration



Artist's Tour of the Artwork

Attic: I think about attics not as storage, but as evidence — spaces historically used to confine enslaved people, hidden within the structure of a home. Attics were not incidental; they were part of systems that depended on invisibility. By bringing these overlooked spaces forward, I aim to honor what was contained, concealed, and neatly erased.

House: I modeled the house facade on the historic Joseph Brown House, which operated as a bank in Providence, Rhode Island.

Carceral Imagery: I embedded imagery of barbed wire, tally marks, and security cameras to emphasize the persistence of surveillance and institutional regulation across time.

Silhouette: I was inspired in part by the visual language of Kara Walker, using contrast and shadow to reference historical narratives of race, power, and erasure.

Lace work: Lace introduces a domestic material associated with delicacy and care, complicating the tension between beauty and confinement within my work.



PHOTO BY LIVIA RADWANSKI

Jazzmen Lee-Johnson is a multimedia artist working primarily in mediums of printmaking, animation, video, painting and music. She is propelled by the plights of Black people by the vestiges of slavery and colonialism that have falsely professed a people as less than human. She is driven to remix and recoup the history of the African diaspora by transmuting historical archives, art collections, and research into contemporary cultural forms relevant to a mobile-technological generation.

She traverses the subjects of critical race theory, the Atlantic slave trade, Indigenous philosophies, Black feminist theory and physics to inform her work and to develop a vibrant interdisciplinary practice that explores the cultural assemblages of our society to illuminate their connections/fragments and provoke creatively critical, intergenerational, and active spectatorship. She strives to create pathways for future ancestors to grow and build upon.



PHOTO BY JESSE BANKS III

Nightingale-Brown House, Main Hall featuring "Vues d'Amérique du Nord" wallpaper, marked up by Jazzmen Lee-Johnson.

"Not Never More."

"View of Boston Harbor" was part of a series called "Not Never More." This artistic engagement was from Jazzmen Lee-Johnson's reaction to the 19th-century French wallpaper "Les Vues d'Amérique du Nord" (The Views of North America) created by Jean-Julien Deltil in 1834. Deltil depicted North America and its inhabitants from a romanticized perspective, his imagination of the landscape conceals the history and realities of colonialism,

slavery, genocide, and capitalism. This wallpaper is still in print today and adorns many notable buildings in the United States like the Nightingale-Brown house (Providence, Rhode Island), the White House (Washington, D.C.), and the Acorn Club (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) among others.



JAZZMEN LEE-JONHSON

View of Boston Harbor

2022, Screen Print on Voile Sheer Textile

Artist's Tour of the Artwork

Dances of the African Diaspora:

I drew dances both traditional and contemporary throughout the African Diaspora.

Phases of the Moon:

I illustrated phases of the moon to speak to the ways which the moon creates the ocean's tide and how the tides impacted slave ship voyages.

Fish: I included fish both to articulate this tapestry as an ocean, but also thinking of what it means to be a fish out of water as an African captive forcibly journeying the Middle Passage to a life of enslavement.

Flute Player: I drew an Ojà fute player to evoke ancestral spirits.

"Remake of the Slave Trade" Broad-side, 1789: I remix this imagery of the plan of an African slave ship as the backdrop or dance floor of contemporary people and dances the African Diaspora in contrast to captivity unfettered and freeing dancing.

Swirl Patterns: These West African textile swirls patterns act as arrows and directions in my tapestry, a metaphorical guide to freedom.

Bubbles: Just an indication of water.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN PITTS-WILEY

Spencer Evans is a figurative draftsman, painter and sculptor who aims to tell detailed stories through the layered imagery of specific moments. The aim of Evans' work is to contextualize the relationship between the human soul and its external circumstance based on his life experiences and generational verbal histories. He specifically uses clothing, poses, and facial expressions to reference the shared experiences rooted in the culture and intersectional identities of his community. He views Black expression

as a heroic form of communication from one generation to the next. Evans recognizes its heroism in the form of overt revolutionary acts as well as survival-based assimilation and everything in between. He attempts to depict the human psyche within a world of expressions in each work—from the subtly nuanced to that of the completely polarized. Evans also uses his work as a form of ancestral veneration by reaching for alignment with the ones who came before him as a way to connect each generation that views it.

SPENCER EVANS “I Come to You as One, But I Stand Here as Many”

2025, Oil on Canvas



Artist's Tour of the Artwork

Symbols: I created this iconography inspired in part by Adinkra symbols, capturing the visual and symbolic language of the African Diaspora.

Masks: I was inspired by the masks worn by Odo-Kuta dancers. These dancers embody communal magic which helped the ancestors retain and develop complex systems of communication, culture, innovation, and resistance while enduring generations in bondage.

Young Boy: The young boy in sneakers is a reference to present-day generations who, like their ancestors before them, seek the same protective magic to help them thrive in a hostile society while maintaining their knowledge of the lineage from whence they came.

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Ivie Orobato

EXHIBITION AND CATALOG DESIGN

Erin Wells

EXHIBITION INSTALLATION

Ben Kaplan

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Ruth J. Simmons Center for
the Study of Slavery & Justice

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