

Hernease Davis ([00:10](#)):

Hello and welcome to season three, episode two of the Project Space, a podcast featuring some of the remarkable artists who have participated in the Project Space Residency here at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. The Project Space residency has served both regional, national and international artists for many years, and the goal of the Project Space residency is to provide time, space, and resources to artists who are experimenting with photo, film and media art. I'm Hernease Davis. I'm a photo-based artist and an assistant curator here at VSW. For each episode, I'll be in conversation with artists to discuss their background, their practice, and how the Project Space residency has impacted their works. For this episode, I sat down with Raymond Thompson, Jr. at the end of a very busy season that included a tour that launched his recent book project entitled Appalachian Ghosts, A Photographic Re-Imagining of the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster, which caused the death of nearly 800 workers, two thirds of which were black Americans. In our conversation, we mainly focused on an ongoing series that Raymond worked on as a resident here at VSW entitled It's Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel.

([01:32](#)):

Both of these projects are very much related to one another in terms of how Raymond is approaching the North American landscape. It's both research driven and integrated with speculative and imaginary interventions. In our conversation, Raymond made numerous references to important artist scholars whose works greatly influenced his directions. Links to Raymond's work, as well as those important references are included in the show notes. Now, without further ado:

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([02:06](#)):

My name is Raymond Thompson Jr. I am from Virginia right outside Washington DC. I grew up on a military base because my dad was stationed in the Army, so always sort of felt like a transplant in places and never quite of this place, never quite of that place, but that area, sort of multicultural area of right outside Northern Virginia, outside DC is where I grew up. I was actually born in Baltimore, so that space is all... I claim, all of it. I was a resident in December of 2022.

Hernease Davis ([02:40](#)):

And then how would you describe your practice?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([02:44](#)):

That is an interesting question. I mean, I think I am a blend of things. My practice comes from this documentary practice combined with fine arts, combined with American studies and more and more geography. My practice has moved from cameraless processes to using direct observation that I learned in photojournalism, and I try combine all those things to sort of get at histories of place.

Hernease Davis ([03:13](#)):

And I am just going to say, because we've seen each other quite a bit this year. We were at Photo Fest in Houston and then went straight from there to St. Louis to the Society of Photographic Education and we were on a panel together. So I've had a lot of time to hear you speak about your work, preparing for the panel at SPE, but also your book launch at Photo Fest in Houston. Yes. And we'll talk about that towards the end of our conversation. This is another really good opportunity for me to ask you a bunch of questions about your work and how it's progressed. And so correct me if I'm wrong, but when you were at VSW, you were primarily working on one project?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([03:59](#)):

Yes. When I was at VSW, I was at this point I was still shooting for "It's hard to stop rebels that time travel", but I was at this point where I had, say, 70% of my material in the box, basically haven't had a chance to do much with it but collect it. So at VSW was the first time I got a chance to actually begin to figure out what I was doing

Hernease Davis ([04:22](#)):

And the whole title is,

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([04:24](#)):

It's Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel.

Hernease Davis ([04:27](#)):

Okay. First of all, I'm really curious about that work. It's ongoing. Can you kind of introduce that body of work?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([04:36](#)):

Yes. So "It's hard to stop rebels that time travel" is a... It's changed. First it was this project in which I was trying to understand my own connection to the landscape where my grandfather was from. So the project was me wondering what his life was like in North Carolina as he grew up in a space that was completely foreign to me and that actually was completely foreign to my family as well. He left that space with the Great Migration and even though he did travel back every once in a while, the family that he raised in Baltimore never had a connection to that landscape. So it's a very, very direct line. I was interested in ... his life, but because of how hard it is to get records for black folks, how thin the connections are, it was almost an impossible story to tell in a personal way.

([05:36](#)):

So it had to expand my looking and the sources that I was working with to try to understand this project. And from there, the historical sources I found were runaway slave ads, lynching articles, other historical accounts and books that sort of helped me understand how African-Americans existed in this space. During that time I also, I had known about Maroons for a little bit, primarily Marronage in the great Dismal Swamp, which is on the border of North Carolina and Virginia on the coast. I had read about it and I was always fascinated by this idea of this slave who would escape slavery and then go to the forest to live, go into a swamp, not to be discovered. And I was just like, how did they survive in these spaces? What kind of knowledge that do you need to survive in a swamp? Because when I go to a swamp now I'm like, man, I don't even know how, like this is a terrible place.

([06:38](#)):

Not terrible... especially from my outsider's perspective, I don't understand the landscape. It is wet. There are all different types of animals that are there to get you. Yeah. So from there I began to look at these different stories. I read about survival techniques that Maroons would've used, but then also really started to look at runaway slave ads that were specific to the county surrounding where my grandfather was from in North Carolina. And that really kind of grounded me in a place-based practice because I understood from my family that oh, he was most likely growing tobacco or cotton or corn. I was able to look at the census documents and to be able to see extensions of family in different spaces. But of course the information on those records are super limited. But I was able to pinpoint a county. I was able to then used the runaway slave ads to pinpoint actual, like more, other geographic locations within the area and I wanted to sort of connect with those spaces. I wanted to go look at landscapes and imagine Maroons moving through those landscapes. So that was I think the initial emphasis for the projects. Pretty much it finished in that way too, but towards the end I realized it was much more about me.

(08:01):

That became an important framework for me because also I didn't want to put all my baggage on the people in the landscape who were there ... because I don't know everything. I've come to realize that I was definitely an outsider. I didn't know where I was going. I am just kinda rolling through spaces, moving, taking pictures, functioning with the observational techniques I learned through photojournalism, but realizing that I can't, it's me, it's my eye and that I need to tread carefully and not to project my baggage necessarily on the landscape or the people who live in that space. So that also informed how I ended up sort of feeling like this project moved into a more personal space.

Hernease Davis (08:42):

Yeah, that's a really interesting and also very, I find that a very difficult line to toe, to be aware, very aware of your individual situation. And I remember speaking with you in your studio about your family and about how little information you're able to get from them. And so when you're walking around with a tenuous connection, but there is one, and dealing with this distance from information, but you're in a place with people who are more relatively close and your connection is very much hidden from you in a way. So then I'm curious about how your time at VSW and the work that you're able to do there was connected to feeling that out. Also, if you can talk about the difficulty of working in this very thin, I'm using the word tenuous a lot, but this very precarious space.

Raymond Thompson Jr. (09:39):

It's a good word. I think one answer to that last question first, a lot of my work actually is about that tenuous connection in which you have these threads. That threads may be from the same cloth, but they're from different sides of the cloth. They come from the same space, but they're just dangling and not touching. But in between them there's this energy that you make up in your head, that this used to be whole. And a lot of my work is about that. It goes in-between spaces, between threads. So I'm not trying to weave it, but I'm trying to acknowledge the gap. I think that's where a lot of things... how I am dealing with some of these things are? Some of the things that sort of brought me to thinking about this was how difficult it was to simply to work in these locations. So one of the first things I did before going to New Bern and Dover North Carolina was to go to Google Earth Pro and just to look at the landscape. And while I was looking at Dover, North Carolina, which is a really small town in between Kinston, North Carolina and New Bern, North Carolina, I saw this is the kind of town that has a stoplight, maybe two.

(10:54):

So I could see street names. And I found the surname of my family, Kennedy on the street, and I was like, alright, I need to go to that street. And so eventually when I got there, I went to that street, knew no one, stood like a weirdo on the side of the street. ...the street sign that said Kennedy and then some woman, there's a house right there. She came out and asked me what I was up to. Then I explained this project to her and just like, oh, you should walk down the way to the end of the street where the house is and knock on the door, I'll call down there and tell him that you're coming. And I walk down the street and the door opens and here's this man who's probably 15 years older than me but looked dead-like one of my cousins. And I was like Kennedy. And then we had this conversation and I was trying to discover the connection between us. His grandmother was my essentially grandfather's sister. And that connection was super interesting and I was hoping there'd be more there than was there, right? I mean, I'm still a stranger. I'm still showing up in the door. They're still like, what do you want?

Hernease Davis (11:58):

Yeah, yeah,

Raymond Thompson Jr. (12:00):

Come on, we're blood.

Hernease Davis ([12:02](#)):

I know...

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([12:03](#)):

it didn't happen in that way. He did tell me about a few locations, but I tried to connect other times and I didn't get a lot of feedback or response. And that happened to other spaces, not necessarily with family, but with folks in the community. I haven't spent enough time there for them to fully trust me yet, and it might take years of me coming back and showing up before I get some of that information. So I was always an outsider and I still feel like an outsider in that space even though I was visiting constantly and trying to connect with people.

([12:34](#)):

I think while I was at VSW, I think I had this pile of work and I knew that, one, I wanted this idea of... this intermixing of different types of materials, both these runaway slave ads, these portraits that I made, these landscapes, along with these maps. I also had all this archival basketball imagery that I was super interested in from Kinston and I was trying to figure out a way to weave all these very different materials together. I think also around that time I was also finding the framework that I began to think about this concept of the portal as a way of looking at the landscape or me looking at the landscape for these magical portals of movement. And I came to the portal idea just from African-American folklore, this idea of flight and ... movement through space that you can find in folklore. People just taking off, walking into the forest and disappearing or taking flight to avoid being a slave. And I wanted to take that folklore and sort of create a framework of how I'm looking at the landscape, taking all my materials, this concept of the portal and trying to figure out how to overlap them. So that required me making prints, like quick prints, me playing around with sequencing a lot. Can this work as a book as well? I made probably five different dummies while I was there. So I had these physical books to leave there with which eventually became the thing I used to show people about the concept for the project. The last thing I did was to begin the process of thinking about black landscapes. I was trying to do some research on just African-American photographers using landscape photography as a practice, which is weirdly enough, not really a thing much.

Hernease Davis ([14:31](#)):

That's interesting. You had some photographs of yourself in the landscape in your studio.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([14:37](#)):

Yes.

Hernease Davis ([14:39](#)):

So did that kind of come from the photographs you'd already taken or you're kind of seeing that as one of those threads to follow through on?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([14:47](#)):

I think when I appeared in the landscape was again the first I was trying to, before I was working, it was still me looking at the space, but I didn't want to figure out a way for me to directly engage with the space too. And I was beginning to figure out that this is my project, it was about me. I wasn't really thinking that until I made that photograph and began to consider that image, that self portrait of me in the cotton field I think was the only image I had at the time. In the finished work, I kind of only appeared in the project

twice, in that picture and I made one other image after VSW in which I was making actual portals in which I appear in the work itself.

Hernease Davis ([15:29](#)):

And I want to say, because usually when I say things like portraiture or landscape, I ask people to explain what they mean by that. Just so that we're all on the same page. I asked that question and I kind of cut you off from talking about black photographers who you are looking to, who are landscape photographers. So for you, can you talk about how you're describing landscape and then continue on from there about the photographers that you were actually able to find?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([15:55](#)):

Yeah, no, I mean that is a really good question. How do I describe landscape? I mean for me landscape is, it's hard. It's a space that you come to in front of a camera. Oftentimes I think of landscapes as spaces that had multiple histories in them. So whatever you see is never what you see. It's the idea of looking at a forest and you see it as a tree with a base that's only 10 inches and you may think that's what wilderness is supposed to be, but really these trees should be five feet across if they were truly had always been this way or natural in a way. So in the way when I look at landscapes, it's always like this mediated space where humans have touched it, even though you can't tell and most people don't look that hard. So for me, a landscape is like a mediated space in which people have touched it in some way. As far as, what was the second part of the question?

Hernease Davis ([16:54](#)):

Well, talking about the photographers who you were looking for.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([16:59](#)):

The first time, I think, I picked up Deb Willis' (a black photographer) book. I had bought the book and it was sitting on my shelf for a long time and then all of a sudden I was like, I'm interested in landscape, so let me find these other photographers, who are African American, who have used the landscape as a way of making their work. And that section of the book is real short, super small, and it's just like, oh, this is it. This is really all that's there. The work that I was super, I actually had found years before, but I found again, was this work by this English black woman whose name is Ingrid Pollard.

([17:34](#)):

And I actually found her work back in grad school briefly when I was doing research for my Appalachian ghost project. And at some point I found this copy of the book Postcards Home about being black in the English countryside. And this book has been, I guess pretty influential for me in just thinking about black folks in the landscape even though it's in England, but still taking inspiration from this work as well. But I don't have the book in front of me to list the photographers, but I hadn't found a lot. And I also went to go look for more academic articles trying to look at people who had looked at African-Americans working with landscape photography and that is also very thin. So it's a space that there might be resources, but I haven't found them yet out there that talk more about this as a genre. But of course there are photographers now, not just me, of course, of course Dawoud Bey and there are photographers who are using the landscape as a way of talking about the black experience. I still feel like it's underdeveloped.

Hernease Davis ([18:44](#)):

Of course we, you've spoken about Dawoud Bey's work and particularly his ongoing series Night Coming Tenderly Black, which I had to write down. I always say it a different way, but that work very, very dark. But it's essentially night photographs of the Underground Railroad in Ohio and it was first shown in Ohio at a photo triennial there. And well, even thinking about this genre, because I always struggle with genres,

especially when you're working so integrated-ly or when you're working with so many different types of materials, and I really like this word that you're using about weaving... and or also just not necessarily trying to weave these threads but leaving them as they are. But even how you describe landscape is really beautiful. And also an observation of projecting your imagination into the space. And we were talking sort of off podcast about you wanting to know what is around you, being able to identify plants, flora, fauna, being able to know what it is and thinking about looking into a space and not necessarily having that, I'll say for me, not always knowing what the trees are or what's on the ground or even what the birds I'm hearing are, but also that there is a lot that's not seen or in terms of time and history or even thinking about what could have happened there.

[\(20:20\)](#):

But also thinking about when you were talking about your encounter with a cousin, so who you're describing, this person is a cousin. So even having that likeness, being able to recognize them and having multiple types of feelings of this connection, but not necessarily a kinship, but they're in the gap in between... is this loss of a possibility that there could have been a connection... but also that there's this reality that blood and relationships are different, in that there is this longing for this connection, but also this reality that's not necessarily something that you can weave together and sort of letting that just hang there. I kind of think that as well in terms of how you think about these landscapes, that there's a lot of this relationship going on there. There's something else that came up with that. And so I know there's a book that... in terms of thinking about this SPE panel that we did, and just kind of to shout out the panel, so the panel was called Improvisation as Technology.

[\(21:35\)](#):

And so as a brainchild of Aaron Turner who has been on this podcast and was a resident at VSW before. The two of us, and Dionne Lee, who is someone who also works very complexly with time and space, but thinking about this enormity of time, this enormity of space, almost just this overwhelming realization of how you are in a small spot in terms of this monumental piece of history and time space that's going on. And so thinking about your work and what you're trying to do with that and calling all these things together, I also think about speculative histories and speculative historians who are working that way. And we've spoken about Saidiya Hartman. Yes. And we've talked about her book *Wayward Lives*, but there was another book, I don't know if you've read it, called *Lose Your Mother*.

Raymond Thompson Jr. [\(22:31\)](#):

Yes, I have read that.

Hernease Davis [\(22:32\)](#):

Okay. That book came to mind when you were talking about going back to North Carolina trying to find, and then being found on... this woman coming out and looking at, it's like, what are you doing on this corner?

[\(22:46\)](#):

Oh, okay, you go down this way. I'll call. So-and-So, and thinking about Saidiya Hartman's experience in West Africa and people rejecting her and being like, who are you? You're not African essentially. I'm really, really dumbing it down. But essentially her going back and anticipating some kind of connection and being met with such profound rejection that you can feel the pain in this book. And for you it's similar in a way with you kind of going back and sort of having this push and pull, it's a pull because you're black in this space. I don't want to say all black people, but I'll say my family's from Louisiana. And it's like that down there. People can look at you and go, oh, you look like so-and-so so you must be related. And usually it's right, even if you're a stranger, then they'll notice that you're a stranger, but this still feels like there's this care and especially with your story and going back and just kind of having this moment of just

yes. And then also no at the same time. Yeah, I don't know. Does that resonate at all or do you have any thoughts on that.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([24:00](#)):

It does resonate because I mean it's like being in that space. I think I went to a Juneteenth celebration there one year and that's when that really hit me really hard, just how there's so much blood in this space between the people. Cause I was looking around, it felt familiar, people felt like I was like, I've seen these facial structures before in my own family. And so it was definitely feeling that connection but then feeling very outside of it and even the way in which I navigate that landscape because I'm just like a baby essentially. I'm going places that other black folks probably don't go? And I'll put one of the questions that asked them, so where do black folks not go around here? Do y'all swim in the water? No, we don't swim. And all kinds of reasons. There's reasons for it that they don't. Even navigating through the downtown space in downtown Kinston, like folks don't go to this space, but I was cause I was a stranger, I'm going to go eat this restaurant because whatever, I'm not from here. Everyone in there knew I wasn't from there, just from the fact that I was in certain spaces. So in some ways it's like I totally relate to what you're saying.

Hernease Davis ([25:11](#)):

That is so interesting. Well, okay, so my next question is sort of where, and we've kind of gone into that, but just talking about how the work is developing, where the work is now because it's ongoing, and also I have another question that I forgot to ask earlier. The title, did you have the title when you were at VSW? And also the title is in quotations, so I'm wondering if it is an excerpt from something else.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([25:45](#)):

It's an excerpt. There's an essay by HLT Quan called, "It's Hard to Stop Rebels that Time Travel: Democratic Living in a Radical Re-Imagining of Old Worlds". It's an essay that talks about marronage primarily in the contemporary sense, but connecting it to the past. And that essay was definitely informative to my thinking or the framework that I chose to use for this project. And I'm of course terrible at titles, so I just tend to borrow titles. But I put quotes around it, and always whenever I speak about it, always try to reference it, that I got the title from, how that influenced my thinking. There's a lot of African-American diaspora thinking and thought that I use to inspire how I approach my practice as well.

Hernease Davis ([26:38](#)):

One of the other things that interests me is the introduction of portals into your work. So can you talk about the significance of portals and how you see them in relationship to how you're working with time?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([26:55](#)):

So I think one, is just this way in which African-Americans have developed sort of a technology to survive these spaces. A lot of it is in understanding of where you are in the space, understanding of how to move through that space, understanding how not to be seen, thinking a lot about Simone Browne's work on surveillance and sousveillance. And one of the ways in which you could not be seen was to know your landscape well enough to move through it, to understand the rhythm, the flow of space; to understand the animals and the plants, to understand, to escape a dog. You could lose someone by swimming or other elements, like how to hunt in that space, how to feed yourself. Combining that with this sort of religious spiritual belief, that other kind of spiritual technology of believing that you can transform yourself into another animal or disappear into a tree or through flight.

([28:04](#)):

And I like to also believe that this is temporal. It isn't just in the past, but this is something that are... things that folks can use now and today to move through time and space in that way. And also was trying to connect the past, present, future, that all these things that have happened over time are related and connected and not so different as you move through space as well. And the portal for me is that element that captures the spirituality, the magic, and also just the reality of contemporary times as an objective way of thinking of moving between these spaces. I didn't want to flatten it, [to place] this story in the past, I wanted it to create overlaps between past, present, and future. We get to think about some of these things.

[\(28:56\)](#):

I mean a lot of it, when I think about Afrofuturism and trying to figure out a way... It's always this question with Afrofuturism, it's like can you have Afrofuturism in the past or even present? And I think the portal is one of these things, these tools I could use to help make this connection. And it also became really just framing for my thinking, for my searching and looking for this little strange things in the landscape that is slightly off that could feel like something's happening over here. Somehow light has shifted, time has shifted, material has shifted in a way that could be a portal. It was also making portals too. I mean actually sometimes there are objects in the photographs, like the sun's reflected in the window early in the morning. That's a circle on a church is a portal versus someone's leftover pathway in the landscape from a vehicle could be a portal or sun reflecting off something, some shimmering could be a portal, an animal could be a portal, a snake, fish, these ways in which stuff that I found in the folklore which African Americans used, I try to view those as portals as well.

[\(30:07\)](#):

But also maybe I'm stretching out here, but I also thought about lynching locations as portals, of sites of great violence. Also as places in which folks would've moved through even spiritually if they had passed away in that space. There's still some of them in that space. And I would thank Christina Sharpe for thinking about a lot of this story about black folks in the American environment starts in this very dark place, but there has to be a light or looking for another way to reframe it. I don't know. I think too, so the idea of the portal, the light, the magic, the going to the sites of great violence and trying to live with it, but then see that these are places of transition.

Hernease Davis [\(30:51\)](#):

Yeah, thank you for that. I didn't want to assume, and it is more expansive than I'm thinking of it, but also because I see so much room for even this time travel, these transitions in your work. But I also want to ask you about the text that you're using. So you mentioned before that you're using ads looking for runaway slaves, but there are also some excerpts from readings or writings that are included in your work. And I kind of thought of that as well as time travel. I think that there's a lot of time and history in language. So can you talk about the text and how you're using it and if you also see that as being some way of talking about time travel as well?

Raymond Thompson Jr. [\(31:39\)](#):

Yeah. Well, I mean there's two major pieces of text that I use that are African-American folklore that first, that sort of focus on this idea of transitioning or moving through space across time. One of them talks about hiding from the patrolmen. Another one talks about why all Africans could fly. Because of salt intake and they have to come back every year to visit. So both of those pieces I think hint at this idea of transition and moving through space across multiple dimensions in really interesting ways.

[\(32:20\)](#):

The other ways in which I use texts in the runaway slave ads, which have two functions. One is as verbatim, the ad itself is, I use it to point to where I go in landscapes. A lot of the times if ... I see Swift's Creek in this ad, especially if the ad says, this is where I think this person went, I will then look at a map,

find Swift Creek and go photograph along points of Swift Creek. So I use it in that way. The ads also have a lot of physical information about what the slaves look like and who they were and also wanted to point out how ridiculous these ads are.

[\(33:01\)](#):

And also the fact that this is history one, the few places we may be able to find out is in this ad written by someone who's looking for the person is a form of surveillance. And the way I sort of wanted to pushback at that [is why I'm] using the whole ad verbatim, but inserting a line of my own thought, my own looking for this slave too. And so I would add some other detail about this person that I imagined, but then also split note that with another line about my looking. So I wanted to insert my own looking into the ad as well to both circumvent the initial purpose of the ad, which was to be surveillance, but then add a bit of humanity into it as well. Very... like Carrie Mae Weems' practice has been inspiring me forever, but taking archival material and flipping them.

Hernease Davis [\(33:53\)](#):

Yeah, there is the piece about someone named Millie. There is all this very phenotypical physical description, very objectifying characterization, not even a characterization, objectifying of this object that they're... this property that they're trying to reacquire and your intervention says Millie often wears roses in her hair. And then the footnote says, I imagine that Millie would sneak up to the fence of the master house and snatch a rose while no one was looking. And so I think it's a very beautiful and subtle intervention, especially the way that you've kind of highlight and also work with... I see it as a kind of cropping. And so yeah, I think it's really, really beautiful. It also makes me think, because what came to mind were other, there are these images that are in the works that are very close croppings of people's faces and they're also quite dark.

[\(34:53\)](#):

And I'm still thinking about time travel and I think about the time travel and the text where what you're doing with that piece about Millie, I think it brings it forward. There's just wonderful stuff that's happening there. And there's another piece that I think it's about the flying. There's a couple of text pieces that you have on your website in particular that's about black people flying. And this one is written in vernacular. There's a way it's written phonetically. And I'll just say that there's a lot that I've been learning about language and history in language, and particularly right now I'm learning Portuguese.

Raymond Thompson Jr. [\(35:32\)](#):

Okay, very cool.

Hernease Davis [\(35:33\)](#):

I'm learning Brazilian Portuguese specifically and learned that Brazilian Portuguese is essentially the Portuguese that slaves learned when they were brought to Brazil. So the national language of Brazil and the most popular way of speaking Portuguese is filtered through various African vernaculars. Being forced to speak this language and then, by way of the slave trade, spreading it across the country.

[\(36:00\)](#):

And so in that language are remnants and... I will not say remnants, I'll just say it's filtered through African languages, Portuguese is. So when I learned that, I was thinking like, oh my gosh, what would it have been like if that's what happened to English in the US? And so thinking about black vernaculars, which are different depending on the region, having that same filter, all language holds history, but thinking specifically about how this shows this time. And so then even with your intervention there, this is your language, this is you, this is your way of thinking, imagining, dreaming, speculating about Millie. That's a very roundabout way of talking about these other portraits that I see as connecting with Dawoud

Bey's work, primarily in talking about, again, this time travel and the way you photograph them, low light, very dark shadows. Dawoud Bey's work [is] photographed from, I think, a first person perspective, which makes that work very haunting because they're huge pieces. And even thinking about "traditional ways" of shooting landscapes like Manifest Destiny kind of genre of landscapes. His photographs to me feel like the perspective of a person and also someone who doesn't want to be seen. There's a lot of context going under, a lot of danger, a lot of being covered, but also showing. And for you I think about that and how close you're getting to people's faces and also the lack of light there.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([37:35](#)):

No, totally. Yeah, I mean all those choices, I mean the portraits are doing two things again. One is because they're so dark, they almost begin to function like landscape, but they're also, it represents me sort of connecting, making face landscapes, seeing someone's pores in the way in which I'm lighting it, and then purposely burying below these cloaks of darkness, I'll bring up a couple of details. They function as a landscape, so they also function as making people work really hard to see the faces. And I'm really cautious about how I use the black figure now in my work just because the history of photography and it's as spectacle. I didn't want to make more pictures of black people as spectacle. I'm like, I am going to make you work if you want to look, you got to work hard to look and it's all because of Dawoud Bey. So I went to see a show I think in Pittsburgh at the Carnegie, and at the time the show was in a dark room and I watched people go in there and I was fascinated. I was like, this is so cool. But I watched people go in there and get so frustrated and walk away and I was like, I want to do that.

([38:47](#)):

They didn't want to do the work. They wanted something easy. So I wanted to take that forward. And so there's that part of making folks work to see these facial landscapes. But the pictures also represent me looking for myself in these people's faces because everyone in all the faces are from the counties in which I was working.

Hernease Davis ([39:07](#)):

I really love that photo language that you're using. You can talk about language because looking at the photographs, it does feel like one of those threads that you were talking about before and a way of portraying that there's a closeness, but then there's not necessarily an intimacy. And I think that's sort of what I was thinking about, letting those threads go and getting a yes and a no from someone who looks like you. So in terms of the intimacy, there's an openness in how you've cropped your faces. So I'm looking at a photograph of an older person who looks like there's some kind of tear in one of their eyes, and it could just be because people have tears and I have older relatives as they get older, their eyes are just kind of wet. But I can also imagine that being some type of response to an emotion.

([40:04](#)):

It could be happiness, it could be sadness or whatever, but it's sort of filling in a bit of that intimacy, but it's not necessarily tied in with, it's tied in mostly with this intimacy that's allowed for the viewer to be a part of this photograph. So as you're talking about the whole people walking out of this darkened room with Dawoud Bey's work, I'll say that I first saw that work at this photo fair and it felt really out of place to be at a fair. And then I saw him speak about it, and some of that work was first installed in one of the churches that was on the Underground Railroad, and he put the photographs in the pews and I thought, oh, that's perfect. That's why it felt so off seeing these photographs outside of their context, because I think these photographs need to be contextualized in a particular way, but hearing them, your experience about them in a darkened room, I'm just like, oh, that's another great space, another great place to see these photographs.

([41:07](#)):

Because in a way I think about, there's always this struggle for me in my work in particular, but translating emotion or translating an experience perhaps, and we know a little bit about the, and I don't want to say we know everything, but we kind of know what Dawoud Bey is trying to get at with those photographs. And so when you're in that room, it is a very hard thing to get at. It's an emotionally challenging thing to be with. And so I think it's really interesting to think about those who are, for whatever reasons, not interested in or not able to, willing to spend that time to let your eyes adjust or to contend with, I can't see anything. What am I doing here? It could be as benign as that. I'm looking at your photograph here and you're making me work hard looking at that and the things that are happening in the shadows, they're like little flecks of those things where I can kind of project an imagination, build this intimacy with the image.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([42:12](#)):

Yeah, yeah, no, because the process is like they're lumen prints. So most of the project is digital except for these portraits which are sort of like a mixed digital analog. It's digital analog digital, actually back to analog because I just recently started printing them on silver, which I think is probably the way of the work now when I do show those, they'll be on silver paper. So it's like -- shot with digital camera, contact lumen prints, toned, and then scanned again, and then reprinted on silver.

Hernease Davis ([42:54](#)):

Wow.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([42:56](#)):

I'm really not sure I'm doing anything, but that's the process in which I have undertaken to do it. So putting 'em back on silver ads another, it blends it in a really nice way.

Hernease Davis ([43:07](#)):

I really like that back and forth. That's really interesting, even thinking about, again, time in the process if you want to think about the evolution of technology and photography, all that stuff. I think that's great. Is there anything else about that particular body of work you'd like to talk about in terms of how it's developing or where it is now?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([43:30](#)):

I'm like 99... I'm like a hundred percent done shooting, but now it's how to exhibit. The project was always meant to be a book. So now I'm trying to figure out how to translate it to the wall. So that's where I'm in with my process of having done a couple test shows and none of it's quite there yet. And some other things I'm going to try with it just for exhibiting parts of it. There's a lot of pictures, but not all of it needs to be on the wall. So feeling like I don't love the glass. I'm like no glass. I don't even know if I like frames, I'm getting very like, this stuff doesn't feel right for this work. Unless it's like, I need to get tobacco barn wood or something, or somehow, maybe mounted to that or something else. But the traditional ways I'm not necessarily loving, even though that's expensive, I don't know.

([44:20](#)):

But maybe to figure out a small grouping of images in the way that I want them to be seen together is the next step. A contract in front of me for a book that I need to finish reading and sign, in 2025ish, there should be a book coming out of it. So in that way, just sort of wrapping up this chapter, but I feel like I'm going to continue looking at these things, the idea of maroons just in a different way in, different spaces and maybe more ecology attached to or thinking about the land and plants, animals around us.

Hernease Davis ([44:56](#)):

I am excited to see how that develops. It's something that I have been challenged to do from my mentors and something that I talk a lot. We talk to our students all the time about thinking about exhibition as another way of translating your practice and not necessarily thinking that frames and glass, that's not necessarily the form that needs to take. And so I'm really excited about that. And also I think it's great that you are figuring out what you don't want and trying to figure out what it is that you can do and toward creating an exhibition that serves the work.

([45:35](#)):

Because I have been looking to your work and I'm not really sure if it's related, but I had a dream that I was on a vacation on some kind of island, maybe in some tropical area, not really sure, but it very much was in a section that was very much, I was say in a commercial tourism type deal. And that there was a section of the island though that they told us not to go and it was a swamp and it was the kind of swamp that had a stable ground. You could walk on top of it and there are people there. And I remember in my dream hearing don't go there for whatever reason. And then I end up there and I'm walking around, I'm like, oh, I'm in the place where they told us not to go, but there are these other people who are essentially harvesting the best fruit, the best vegetables, the most amazing fish. There are things that are coming up from the ground that were gorgeous, beautiful. There was something so compelling about it where I'm like, but this is where everything comes from. It comes from here. And so I just thought about that when we first started speaking. I'm like, I have to tell Raymond about that dream because I'm not sure if it's connected, it's connected to other things I'm thinking about, but I thought of your work.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([46:52](#)):

Yeah, also, I mean this is swamps, and I often think of them ever since I read Tiffany Lethabo King's "The Black Shoals" began to look at the spaces in between plantations and these swamps as liminal spaces. Because even in maps, as she sort of shows that these are spaces that are marked on maps in which people kind of don't go or know... are marked that this place is dangerous, based by this little squiggly line and these little marshes that they've actually, someone would draw onto the maps. So I'm always like, yes, this is super, super fascinating, these liminal spaces in which these are the places, these are the marked places on maps in which maroons would've been, especially in between the plantations or these spaces. No go zones for people. So I think it's super fascinating. I also was thinking about the water, not going to the water. I think I was just in a show at HMAAC in Houston,

Hernease Davis ([47:50](#)):

Can you say what HMAAC stands for?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([47:52](#)):

The Houston Museum of African-American Culture. But the show was titled Mami Wata [Afrofuturism]. I didn't actually know what that was until the show, this was this water goddess, this folktale from African mythology, and apparently that was a part of the thing in Africa, especially folks who would have some version of this story about not getting in the water or going too close to the water. So I started thinking about this African-American cosmology when you said that, and this idea of why to fear the water or why to be wary of being in that space. But I don't know some of the pictures that I made for the project, I am thinking about renaming them Mami Wata because it's like this one picture in which... it's a piece of wood, but it feels like there's a hand lifting out of the water. And I'm just like, oh, that is, now that picture feels completely different to me. Or even the idea of the portal or circle, trying to understand the circle in African American mythologies. There's stuff I still need to study about, but there's these weird connections that are coming on the after side. I'm like, oh, where'd this come from? Where's this cosmology thing? How did some of these things come? I thought I was brilliant. I had a great idea, but

you come to find out that there's this whole other historical thing behind it. So I don't know. I'm forever learning.

Hernease Davis ([49:11](#)):

Yes. Yeah, I think there's such a richness there and it's really beautiful. But also I kind of am wondering about any kind of connection to Houston or to the Gulf.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([49:24](#)):

I think for me, as I expand on the project and sort of look for Texas connections, Galveston Island, these I think are going to come more into focus for me. And even thinking about here in Austin, thinking about Barton Springs, and it's... that site apparently used to be a plantation, I mean. Or like that area, there's a big plantation in that space... right where Barton Springs was. But then I'm like, okay, how should I shift my gaze to look at Barton Springs now? And Barton Springs is one of the most popular natural spring fed pools in Austin that's 67 degrees all year round. So people can go there all year and swim there. So it's very, people care a lot about it in this space, but it's through a very particular lens. So I'm curious if there's more there. And for me, water especially is super important just in that part of North Carolina. Water is everywhere. There's rivers every few miles coming out to the coast. So it's something you can't get away from. Definitely have to know how to navigate water in order to exist in the Eastern Carolina space, which is mostly swamps.

Hernease Davis ([50:32](#)):

Well, my last question is mostly about your current book project. And so you've just published a book and we haven't really gone into that body of work, but could you briefly talk about that book?

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([50:50](#)):

So the book is called Appalachian Ghosts, and it is a book about the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, which happened in Ansted West Virginia in the 1930s. And the project is again, me sort of trying to flesh out this story about Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, which primarily impacted African-American workers. There's very little to mark Hawks Nest, period, but very even less to recognize that there are a lot of black folks involved with Hawks Nest. So my project is a visual project in which I take archival records, I take texts, newspaper ads that I found, poetry, archival photographs, new photographs, and combine them all in the book space and create these overlaps to flesh out the story of the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster. I use reenactments in this project. I use observational landscape photographs. In this project I wrote a poem, I wrote an essay, and all these things combined with archival photographs and other materials, all into this book. I was creating a speculative archive about the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, essentially what the project is.

([52:00](#)):

And I feel like this book relates to my other projects in a really kind of close way. I mean, this is a project in which I was looking at a space that I didn't necessarily have a connection to and trying to figure out ways to tease out archival threads. And I feel like this work has informed my approach to my current projects and thinking about, like, how do I use this archival records to reenvision this landscape or space or story. But all of it tied together I think is at the core of my work, which I believe is ultimately about looking for black folks in the American landscape. That's at the heart of everything that I do.

Hernease Davis ([52:42](#)):

That's great. I think that's such a great place to stop, because then I have other questions, but we can continue later on. Well, thank you so much, Raymond, for sharing so much about your work, being so generous with your time. This has been really wonderful to kind of have a very concentrated amount of

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time to talk to you about your work after all of these sessions that we've had with panel planning and book launchings. So yeah. Yeah. Thank you so much.

Raymond Thompson Jr. ([53:16](#)):

No, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it. Great. Awesome.

Hernease Davis ([53:23](#)):

And there you have it. For more information about Raymond, his work, please visit his website. I've also included reference links to the works of Debra Willis, Ingrid Pollard, Dawoud Bey, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, Simone Brown, as well as a link to HLT Quans essay "It's Hard to Stop Rebels that Time Travel: Democratic Living and the Radical Re-Imagining of Old Worlds." To learn more about the Visual Studies Workshop, please visit us at vsw.org where we have information about the Project Space residency and our current artists and residents. And if you enjoyed this episode and are enjoying this podcast, please share it with your friends, family, loved ones, colleagues, the artists in your lives. We would also love for you to leave us a five star review on Apple Podcast. Keep following VSW on Twitch and Instagram at the Visual Studies Workshop, and feel free to send me an email at herneasedavis@vsw.org. This podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the New York State legislature. And thank you to the Philip and Edith Leonian Foundation for their support of photography artists participating in the Project Space residency. And thank you so much for listening to this conversation with the artist Raymond Thompson, Jr. In the meantime, take care. Bye.