

Tulane Global Humanities Center launches annual symposium

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Keller Easterling of Yale University (center) discussed conservation and colonial heritage with Aarthi Janakiraman (left) and Dean Iñaki Alday (right) of the School of Architecture and Built Environment at the inaugural Global Humanities Center Symposium.

At a moment when many institutions are scaling back investment in the humanities, Tulane University is doubling down. Bringing together academics from six universities, the new Tulane Global Humanities Center launched its inaugural symposium, focused on its biennial theme: Global Port Cities.

The Jan. 22-23 symposium convened scholars, artists, architects, writers and

musicians at Tulane to explore how port cities, past and present, offer critical insight into movement, power, culture and change. Across disciplines and historical periods, panelists examined how ports shape everyday life, creative expression and political ideology.

The event also served as a public introduction to the Global Humanities Center's mission: strengthening Tulane's humanities community, expanding global and transnational research and highlighting New Orleans and the Gulf South's connections to the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America. The center will support innovation through funding, fellowships and collaborative working groups, helping faculty and students build partnerships and pursue new research questions across regions and disciplines.

"The humanities are varied, of course, and include multiple disciplines and areas, but what they have in common is an emphasis on people, cultures and forms of expression that are often missed," said Tulane School of Liberal Arts Dean Brian T. Edwards. "The human and societal challenges we face seem especially great, and it is a moment when the world is both more complex and more interconnected than ever."

Port cities offer a particularly powerful lens for humanities research because they concentrate the forces that shape human experience: migration and diaspora, labor and trade, colonial histories, cultural exchange and artistic innovation, Edwards and other speakers said.

The symposium opened with a conversation featuring Vyjayanthi Rao of Yale University, Brent Hayes Edwards of Columbia University and Edwards, framing port cities as dynamic spaces shaped by constant movement and exchange. Speakers emphasized that ports are not only infrastructures of trade but also complex cultural environments where multiple languages, histories and forms of creativity intersect, often producing new social arrangements and ways of belonging.

Drawing on examples from New Orleans, Mumbai and Marseille, the panel explored how shifts in port technology and global trade have reshaped urban life. As ports become less visible — physically and economically — many cities have experienced transitions from industrial labor to real estate development, often displacing working-class communities while obscuring the port's ongoing global role.

Additional panels examined how economic free zones and heritage conservation function as tools that shape postcolonial port cities, raising questions about whose histories are preserved and whose are marginalized. Fiction and storytelling also took center stage, with writers discussing how port cities serve as spaces of arrival and departure, uncertainty and possibility — places where identities are continually reimagined through migration and diaspora.

The symposium turned to antiquity with archaeological and historical perspectives on ancient Mediterranean port networks. Archaeologist Justin Leidwanger of Stanford University challenged top-down models of imperial control by showing how sailors, merchants and local communities negotiated connectivity through informal, bottom-up practices. Allison Emmerson of Tulane offered new research on Pompeii, reframing the city as an active port economy shaped by seasonal trade and hospitality infrastructure.

The symposium concluded with “Musical Confluences,” presented in collaboration with the New Orleans Jazz Museum, where musicians Mahmoud Chouki and Victor Campbell traced how musical traditions move across port cities through encounter, fusion and reinterpretation. By blending conversation and live performance, the closing event underscored how cultural exchange is not only studied in port cities but also heard and felt.

The Global Port Cities Symposium builds on earlier Global Humanities Center programming and signals a sustained commitment to interdisciplinary, globally engaged scholarship at Tulane.

“When students, researchers, artists and community members from different backgrounds come together and leave thinking differently, that’s a meaningful measure of impact,” Edwards said. “The strong turnout for our inaugural symposium — and the wide range of people it attracted — was particularly gratifying.”