LIBERAL ARTS AND HUMAN SCIENCES
CENTER FOR HUMANITIES
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CENTER FOR HUMANITIES

College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences

A Message from the Director, Sylvester Johnson

For more than one year now, our world has been challenged by a pandemic of unprecedented proportions due to the SARS-CoV-2/novel coronavirus. For many of us, life before COVID-19 has become a distant memory, given all that has ensued in the past year. In a recent conversation with some of our students at Virginia Tech, I was reminded that pressing questions about the human condition and human flourishing remain as salient and practical as ever. Barely a day passes without news of consternation concerning the opportunities and impact of technology on our unequal world or the state of democracy and fundamental issues of equity and justice.

This spring semester, the Center for Humanities is honored to host the annual Virginia Humanities Conference. The year's conference invites a broad range of participants to share their work in panels and workshops focused on the implications of humanities for connections among technology, democracy, and the immense challenges of an unequal world. It is not enough to identify problems and explain risks to societal well-being. It is equally important to invest in comprehensive approaches to understanding our world and to devise strategies that can support equitable outcomes. As we uphold the inherent value of knowledge and education, it is no less imperative that we embrace the commitments embodied in Virginia Tech's *Ut Prosim* motto ("that I may serve") to conduct our work in service to our communities and our world.

We have been reminded that democratic institutions are fragile, that public interest is vital, and that our global world is intricately connected in profound ways. In these times especially, the Center for Humanities remains deeply committed to supporting and advancing humanistic, human-centered scholarship to help ensure that Virginia Tech can continue to fulfill our mission in service to the vital needs and interests of humanity.

2021 VIRGINIA HUMANITIES CONFERENCE
"Democracy, Technology, and Social Justice: Humanities in an Unequal World."
March 24-25 and March 31-April 1, 2021

Hosted this year by Virginia Tech, the Virginia Humanities Conference will be held ONLINE over two two-day periods. For decades, our global society has treated technology as essentially an issue for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) experts. Today, it is becoming increasingly evident that technology is a comprehensive issue that demands leadership from humanists to secure democratic institutions and democratic outcomes. The growth of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and cybernetics (human-machine combining) demonstrate the social, ethical, cultural, and political dimensions of technology. From facial recognition software used by law enforcement to the influence of digital media on elections to autonomous weapons systems in the military to synthetic biology in healthcare, our world is increasingly forced to confront the human side of technology and its impact on equity, human rights, and formation of a just society. Kai-Fu Lee, the former head of Google China and author of *AI Superpowers*, has cautioned that the greatest challenge that AI will bring in the future concerns human identity and wealth inequality. Ruha Benjamin (*Race After Technology*) and Achille Mbembe (*Necropolitics*) have warned that the digital future of humanity will be shaped by the global history of racism. Yuval Harari (*Homo Deus*) has predicted humans will willingly surrender democratic institutions to embrace the benefits of algorithmic governance.

What is the role of humanities in an unequal world whose uncertainties and possibilities are especially heightened and influenced by technology? Can global humanities traditions offer any insights? Do existing and emerging technologies prompt us to reimagine how humanists might conduct their work? Witnessing the historic social issues exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, how might academic humanists advance the mission of public humanities? As the modern world faces a deepening of inequality and systemic attacks on the humanity of vulnerable populations, what relevance might humanities have for social justice in our current world?

We invite proposals for individual papers and panel presentations on any topic that engage with humanities. We especially encourage proposals that engage with the sponsored theme of "Democracy, Technology, and Social Justice: Humanities in an Unequal World." We also welcome proposals that engage with humanities topics beyond the sponsored theme.

The Virginia Humanities Conference encourages participation from a broad audience to explore the role of humanities for technology and democracy in an unequal world. We welcome participation from academic institutions, civic organizations, government, non-profits, private industry, and unaffiliated experts to present papers, discussions, and panels based on their area of specialization.

Please submit a 250 word abstract online at http://vahumanitiesconference.org. Deadline for submissions is February 26, 2021. Direct any questions to Sylvester Johnson, saj240@vt.edu.

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TECH4HUMANITY LAB

As part of the Tech for Humanity Initiative, the new Tech4Humanity Lab is a transdisciplinary laboratory at Virginia Tech, focusing on the impact of technology on the human condition. The lab, currently housed in the Center for Humanities, emphasizes issues of human security broadly constituting political, medical, social, economic and environmental securities. The lab utilizes transdisciplinary research, combining practices from political science, law, computer science, humanities, engineering, business, biology, public health, and area studies.

The lab's mission includes investigating the impact of technological advances on a broad spectrum of security issues. Early research initiatives include surveillance, censorship, data manipulation and misuse, and misappropriation for the purposes of impacting human security across and within multiple disciplines. The lab provides access to resources including High Performance Computing; mobile and IoT technologies; servers, software and simulations for modeling infrastructures; augmented and virtual environments; and a range of digital devices. The lab places concerns of human security at its core and seeks to develop technical- and policy-relevant research that might guide future innovation in ways that minimize negative impacts and enhance a comprehensive approach to technology and human security.

Recent Guest Speakers

Last semester, The Center for Humanities brought E. Patrick Johnson to Virginia Tech via our online YouTube channel. Sweta Baniya was another guest speaker that we recently featured.

E. Patrick Johnson: Making Sweet Tea: Film Screening and Conversation

Making Sweet Tea is a documentary film that chronicles the journey of southern-born, black gay researcher and performer, E. Patrick Johnson, as he travels home to North Carolina to come to terms with his past, and to Georgia, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. to reconnect with six black gay men he interviewed for the book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History*. E. Patrick Johnson was joined by Center for Humanities Director Sylvester Johnson for a conversation about making the film.

Sweta Baniya: Networked Communities, Crisis Communication, and Technology: Rhetoric of Disaster in The Nepal Earthquake and Hurricane Maria

Dr. Sweta Baniya presented a comparative study of Nepal's and Puerto Rico's networked communities, their actors, participants, and the people who used their local crisis communication practices to address the havoc created by the disaster by engaging with the global community.

Completion of ESL Classes for Migrant Laborers

Last fall, the Center for Humanities teamed up with the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC) and the Coalition for Justice in offering virtual ESL classes for migrant farmworkers. This past harvest season, 20 Virginia Tech students and community members provided virtual English language instruction as part of a larger project on religion, ethics and technology at the Center for Humanities, supported by a grant from the Luce Foundation's Theology Program.

LAJC's Virginia Justice Project for Farm and Immigrant Workers advocates for better labor and living conditions for agricultural workers across the Commonwealth. For the past six summers, LAJC organizers have moved to the Eastern Shore, where they develop relationships with H-2A visa holders from Mexico who come to Virginia. These workers live in isolated labor camps, and, as such, one of their primary requests is the opportunity to learn English so they can interact with the local community. Learning English not only puts farmworkers in a position to have meaningful interactions in the community, but also to have fruitful relationships with their employers and supervisors, with whom they rarely have a common language.

This collaboration was a great success and mutually benefitted both the farmworkers and the organizers. This interactive, forward-thinking model can be replicated across student bodies and worker communities across the Commonwealth and beyond.

Center for Humanities Faculty Research Associate Colloquia

The Virginia Tech Center for Humanities presents a series of talks by faculty research associates who will discuss their work. These talks are free and open to the public and we invite anyone to attend. There will be a brief question & answer session with viewers following each presentation. Please join us LIVE on our YouTube channel for these presentations.
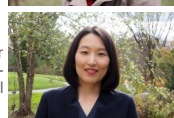
UPCOMING COLLOQUIA

Audrey Reeves: "Affect and World Politics: Governing Hearts and Minds at War Museums and Memorials" - February 15, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Reeves is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and core faculty for the ASPECT doctoral program. Her research draws on feminist perspectives on world politics, with emphasis on conflict and peace, memory and culture, and migration. Dr. Reeves is currently working on a book manuscript in which she explores how museums and memorials intervene in security governance by orchestrating visitors' bodily movements and emotions.
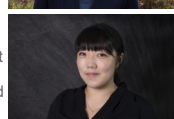

Clara Suong: "Information in International Politics" - February 22, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Suong is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and Deputy Director of the Tech4Humanity Lab for Computational Social Science Initiatives. She studies the role of information and technology in International Relations, using computational, formal, and experimental methods.

Koeun Choi: "How do we perceive and learn from robots?" - March 1, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Choi is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Science at Virginia Tech. She directs the Cognitive Developmental Science (CoDeS) lab. Her work connects cognitive development and technology to explain and support young children's learning. Technological innovations impact our everyday lives, including young children and their families. Her research focuses on cognitive and contextual factors that influence children's learning from technology, with the goal of supporting children's active learning through technology.

Christopher Campo-Bowen: "Visions of the Village: Opera, Ruralness, and Empire in Central Europe" - March 15, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Campo-Bowen is Assistant Professor of Musicology in the School of Performing Arts at Virginia Tech. His research focuses on music in the Habsburg Monarchy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially on the relationships between music, ethnicity, gender, and empire. He is particularly interested in how conceptions of ruralness in Czech operas structured notions of subjectivity and identity.

Jennifer Sano-Franchini: "Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as a Campaign Technology" - March 29, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Sano-Franchini is Associate Professor of English and Director of Professional and Technical Writing. Her research and teaching interests are in the cultural politics of design, Asian American rhetoric, UX, and the rhetorical work of institutions. She has published on a range of topics including the politics of Facebook's interface design, Asian American sonic rhetorics, and emotional labor on the academic job search in journals such as College Composition and Communication, Technical Communication, Rhetoric Review, and Enculturation.
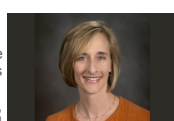

Gil Hersch: "Queuing is Scarcely Better than a Lottery" - April 5, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Hersch is an Assistant Professor at the Virginia Tech Department of Philosophy and the Program in PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics). Hersch's research examines the relationship between philosophical theories of well-being and the variety of well-being measures available in the social sciences, and the implications this relationship can have for public policy. While agreement on what measures represent well-being as philosophers think of it might be unattainable, Hersch argues that some agreement can be reached when treating well-being measurement as a practical problem for guiding public policy.

Danille Christensen: "The Art and Science of Preserving: Food, the Humanities, and Knowledge Regimes" - April 19, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Christensen holds a PhD in Folklore from Indiana University, where she learned to pay close attention to the patterned things people say, make, and do in the course of daily life. Her work explores why the taken-for-granted matters. Broadly concerned with rhetorics of vernacular performance, she combines archival and ethnographic research with close analysis of texts, objects, and technologies, focusing on the ways social hierarchies are maintained and refigured through discursive and material means.

Liora Goldensher: "Homebirth after COVID" - April 26, 2021 at 2pm
Dr. Goldensher is a postdoctoral associate in the Department of Science, Technology, and Society. Her research interests are in expertise and the professions, the afterlives of twentieth century constructivisms and feminist epistemologies, and legal heterogeneity. She teaches courses in women's and gender studies and STS with a focus on health and medicine. Her current book project examines contemporary homebirth midwifery in the United States.

RECENT COLLOQUIA

Ed Gitre: Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage: The American Soldier in World War II at the Intersection of Artificial & Human Intelligence
Dr. Gitre is Assistant Professor of History at Virginia Tech, as well as affiliated faculty with ASPECT, Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought, and Center for Human-Computer Interaction. His scholarly interests and publications focus on the history of the social sciences, war and society, interdisciplinarity, popular religious movements, and twentieth-century American culture. He has held fellowships at two interdisciplinary research centers, the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University as well as the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, where he remains an affiliated scholar.

Alexander Dickow: Isidore Ducasse: A Strategy for Literary Misrecognition
Dr. Dickow is the author of Caramboles, a collection of poems in French and English, and Le Poète innombrable: Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, a scholarly work. He lived in France as a Fulbright scholar in 2003-2004, and subsequently completed his cotutelle dissertation on French modernism in 2011. He has published scholarship, poetry and translations in many journals abroad and in the US, and teaches the language, literature and culture of France and Francophone countries at Virginia Tech.

Trevor Stewart: Developing Tools to Support Teachers: Embracing Wobble Through Reflection & Collaborative Dialogue
Dr. Stewart is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and the Program Leader for English Education at Virginia Tech. His scholarship is grounded in the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, and his research interests include the influences of educational policy and high-stakes testing on English teachers' instructional practices, making creativity a central element of the learning process, and the intersection between language and culture. In particular, his work focuses on teaching from a dialogic stance and making classrooms generative spaces that bring content into dialogue with students' lives.

Greg Galford: How Our Homes Control Our Behavior
Dr. Galford is a registered architect and an Assistant Professor of Residential Environments and Design. His research investigations involve the environmental and behavioral connections that exist within our homes. He is particularly interested in housing models that lie outside traditional norms of study. He has published works on sustainability, historical re-use, surveillance, and control. His doctoral work focused on the architectural attributes of solitary confinement environments to determine themes of dwelling and working for all stakeholders. His background in teaching covers a balance between design, theory, and construction within the built world.

Bonnie Zare: Narratives of Victim-Survivors: Fighting Rape Culture in India
Dr. Zare is an Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology at Virginia Tech. Her research focuses on discourses of identity, feminism and activism in contemporary India and in South Asian women's fiction. Her articles have appeared in Women's Studies International Forum, International Journal of Cultural Studies and the Journal of Commonwealth Literature among others. She is the founder of the Keep Girls in School Project which has been supporting low-income girls in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh since 2008.

Jim Kuypers: Framing Within Media and Politics
Dr. Kuypers is a Professor in Virginia Tech's School of Communication. His research efforts are devoted primarily to exploring and understanding how professional politicians and citizens publicly address pressing social and cultural issues as these issues are relayed through the mediating lenses of the press. He is a pioneer in the area of rhetorical framing analysis. This work has led to important discoveries concerning how original messages of political actors—professionals and citizens alike—are re-framed by the press before being transmitted to the general public.

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