

Building an Environmental Humanities Hub at the Humanities Research Center, VCU

Rapid Grants - Summer 2022

Project Title, Mission and Request Amount

Project Title*

Name of Project

Building an Environmental Humanities Hub at the Humanities Research Center, VCU

Requested Amount*

\$5,000.00

Project Narrative

I. Description of Funding Request*

Please describe the project your organization is seeking funding for, including its relation to your mission. Is it a new project or does it build on existing work?

Climate change has been created by human action and climate solutions must remain attentive to the many ways that histories, cultures, and ways of life transform our world. Our project at the Humanities Research Center, VCU, brings the broader VA community into crucial conversations about climate change--locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. It centers humanistic inquiry to interpret, contextualize and actively shape broader societal efforts to address this most pressing challenge of our time. The broad field of Environmental Humanities (EH) helps fill an important gap in sustainability and environmental thinking, bringing fresh perspectives and a deep ethical commitment to weaving equity and justice into all climate change engagements. To this end, the Humanities Research Center at VCU is launching a transdisciplinary Environmental Humanities Initiative in Fall 2022 that will bring our broader community into dialogue with humanistic scholars and other environmentally-oriented researchers. We request funding from Virginia Humanities to fund the public engagement component of this project, which will provide ample opportunities for the broader Virginia community to engage with humanities-centered, interdisciplinary environmental scholarship through a series of public lectures and community workshops held at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in Richmond.

As a field, Environmental Humanities (EH) entails a diverse range of humanistic engagements with questions about our relationship with the more-than-human world. EH scholars address historic, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of environmental relations (Emmett and Nye 2017; van Dooren 2018), operating with the conviction that ethical decision-making skills, storytelling ability, and historically-grounded knowledge of complex social, cultural and economic systems is foundational for effective collaborations aimed at "solving" problems associated with climate change. These collaborations may take the form of transitioning away from fossil fuels, offering equitable and just conservation strategies, or addressing other overlapping social and ecological issues that threaten humanity along with the broader terrestrial web of life (Bristow and Ford, 2016). As such, EH scholarship offers a unique opportunity to create openings for a wide array of people to enter into conversations about climate change; instead of just being pummeled with scientific facts, models and projections about the state of the world, EH offers a variety of

opportunities to make sense of what is happening as a lived and experiential phenomenon with deeply ethical, cultural, and political implications for us all.

As part of our long-term effort to bring visibility to Environmental Humanities on campus, this past year the HRC, in collaboration with School of World Studies, proposes to build connections between the Richmond, VA community and the university through the creation of an EH Incubator, which aims at catalyzing research conversations that include both humanist and natural sciences researchers. Our EH initiative will convene around three themes over the course of the 2022-2023 academic year. For each theme we will host (1) a public lecture, (2) a community workshop, and (3) an interdisciplinary research workshop. We have applied for an internal VCU grant to fund the research component of this initiative (3) and we are seeking funds from VA Humanities to support the two public-facing and community-oriented aspects of the initiative: (1) a public lecture series and (2) a series of community workshops.

Our three themes and proposed events are as follows:

Opening lecture: Our opening keynote will be delivered by Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, distinguished professor of Environmental Biologist and author of the best-selling book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*.

(1) Climate Narratives: Scenarios, Models, and Visions for Alternative Futures. Bringing together scholars and community members, we ask whether expanding our understanding of climate narratives to encompass multiple pasts and divergent futures can also advance our understanding of the current climate crisis.

Public Lecture: Phoebe Wagner is an emerging writer, academic, and co-editor of *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk & Eco-Speculation and Almanac for the Anthropocene: A Compendium of Solarpunk Futures*.

Community Workshop: Phoebe Wagner, "Climate Change Futures and Imagining Abundance Otherwise." This interactive workshop offers participants the opportunity to experiment with eco-speculation and solarpunk narratives.

(2) Rising Tides: Developing Coastal Adaptation Strategies for Virginia. The mid-Atlantic shoreline is experiencing significant flood impacts from global sea level rise and local land subsidence, with matters only likely to intensify. How can we address the political, economic, cultural, and ecological challenges that adaptation brings?

Public Lecture: Dr. Olufemi Taiwo, Philosophy, Georgetown University, will introduce the audience to ways that climate solutions must actively grapple with a global history of uneven ecological exchanges, with implications for coastal adaptation strategies in Virginia, as we face imminent sea level rise.

Community Workshop: Mary-Carson Schiff of Wetlands Watch will host a workshop that brings participants into the complexities of sea level rise adaptation planning, with a focus on the everyday threats and challenges that coastal residents face.

(3) Energy Futures, Energy Democracy: From Virginia to the World Transforming energy systems will be crucial if we are to maintain global climate conditions suitable for life as we know it. How can we think through the cultural narratives that have normalized energy as an interchangeable, thermodynamic source of work?

Public Lecture: Dr. Cara Daggett, Virginia Tech, will historicize the category of energy, showing how its history reveals social and political ideologies at the very core of scientific conceptions of thermodynamic work and energy as a universal, interchangeable entity.

Community Workshop: Stephen Fong (Associate Professor of Chemical Engineering, VCU) on how fossil fuels shape our social, political, and cultural lives. Participants will point to everyday aspects of their daily

lives and then work to unearth all of the energetic inputs and flows that it requires.

II. What are the key outcomes or deliverables of the project?*

Our goal with this project is to build broad interest and participation in urgent conversations about climate change, and to use the lens of Environmental Humanities to help demonstrate the vital role that the humanities can (and must) play in these conversations. We see this project as an opportunity to demonstrate the salience of humanistic scholarship in addressing climate change and to "translate" some of the research findings in several interdisciplinary fields to wider audiences beyond our disciplines and classrooms, and into the community. Leaving such matters solely in the hands of STEM researchers abrogates a crucial responsibility to attend to the ethical, creative, and speculative dimensions of these grand challenges. Our lectures and community events will involve students, faculty, staff, and community members, as we collectively try to answer questions about our planetary future both locally and globally.

Besides public-facing events, this project will also help launch our Environmental Humanities lab and Transdisciplinary Research Incubator at the HRC. Having this seed support from VA Humanities will solidify the first year of this project and will put us on track for future development and capacity building. As we envision it, the Transdisciplinary Research Incubator will offer public-facing workshops over the course of the academic year led by an Incubator/Lab director, with planning, recruitment and promotions initiated this summer.

Measurable Outcomes: Attendance at culminating public engagement events, subsequent development of extra-mural funding proposals, and collaborative initiatives (including one with a local high school, currently in the works).

III. Statement of need or opportunity*

Please explain the need or opportunity this project serves, including why it is important or especially timely now.

The Humanities Research Center is excited to initiate a programmatic focus on Environmental Humanities (EH) beginning in the 2022-2023 academic year. This will coincide with the University's development of their master sustainability plan, presenting a unique opportunity for EH scholars to make a major impact at VCU and to shape the future of our university. Our humanities research center at VCU is also on track to become a university-wide center; a grant from VA Humanities supporting this initiative will be extremely helpful in this endeavor, validating the good work we are trying to accomplish both on campus and in the community. As our new Public Humanities Lab is taking shape this year, more public-facing events and projects are likely to follow this series of lectures of workshops focused on Environmental Humanities.

This is a timely project because ethical decision-making skills, storytelling ability, and knowledge of complex social, cultural and economic systems is a necessary foundation for effectively "solving" problems associated with climate change. For instance, transitioning away from fossil fuels is not just a technical and technological challenge, but also requires us to understand how deeply embedded fossil fuels have become in modern life and therefore the cultural and psychological barriers (or what some EH scholars would call "petro-subjectivity" or "petro-modernity") that such a transition will have to surmount. The same could be said about transitions away from a meat-dominant diet, or the need to effectively communicate the impending reality of a 6th mass extinction event. These are not 'just' natural science or technological questions; they are matters that run to the very heart of the human condition. EH equips us with the tools we need to devise the imaginative solutions necessary to build a more sustainable society and to thrive in an uncertain future

IV. Humanities Focus*

Describe in what ways the proposed project is grounded in humanities disciplines. What are its expected contributions to the humanities?

This project is deeply committed to making Environmental Humanities, a key area in the Humanities, a staple of both public humanities events, scholarship, and teaching at the Humanities Research Center at VCU. As we develop our new lab in Environmental Humanities this year (starting in Aug. 2022, directed by Dr. Jesse Goldstein), we hope that it will offer fertile ground for future conversations and projects across the state of Virginia. Our Public Humanities lab, also launching in August 2022, under the direction of history professor Ryan Smith, will also combine efforts with the Environmental Humanities lab to bring EH projects into the community, and to facilitate conversations across disciplines. The conception of this project is deeply grounded in Humanities disciplines, as the slate of our speakers suggests, pointing also to the interdisciplinarity of Environmental Humanities, and the relevance of conversations about climate change, environmental disaster, depletion of resources, and resilience from several vantage points of humanities disciplines, from philosophy and history to literary and visual studies. At the same time, we also invite a few scientists into our discussions to demonstrate that it is impossible to communicate the urgency of EH issues to the larger public using STEM alone; the Humanities are key in this work of advocacy, education, and communication across fields, ages, and populations.

V. Impact and Evaluation*

What would success look like, and how will you evaluate impact and outcomes of your Virginia Humanities funded work?

Outcomes: Our goal with this project is to build broad interest and participation in urgent conversations about climate change, and to use the lens of Environmental Humanities to help demonstrate the vital role that the humanities can (and must) play in these conversations. We see this project as an opportunity to demonstrate the salience of humanistic scholarship in addressing climate change. Leaving such matters solely in the hands of STEM researchers abrogates a crucial responsibility to attend to the ethical, creative, and speculative dimensions of these grand challenges.

Project Evaluation: The evaluation of our project will primarily consist of attendance—both total numbers as well as diversity of attendees— with specific attention paid to the number and diversity of participants without affiliation to VCU. In addition, we will monitor the number of online engagements with videos resulting from these events, which will be posted on the HRC website. At the conclusion of each event, the attendees will be given access to a short google form survey (via QRC code link at the event and a hyperlink sent in follow-up email) asking them to reflect on the experience and to offer feedback and suggestions for future programming. An analysis of these surveys—qualitative and quantitative—will also factor into our project evaluation.

Promotions and Intended Audience: The events—4 public lectures and the 3 community workshops—will take place at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Richmond, VA, the Cabell Library, which seats over 200 people (public health protocols permitting), and the Rice Rivers Center. The events will be recorded and posted on our website for future use. The HRC and the ICA will promote the events to our regional audiences through email-lists, newsletters, and posters (both physical and virtual) advertising the series as a whole, as well as individual events. The current HRC mailing list goes out to over 700 members across Virginia. We will also advertise the events specifically to environmentally conscious audiences, promoting them through the Virginia Green New Deal Alliance (email and newsletter) and local environmental and social justice nonprofits and community initiatives (such as Southerners on New Ground, Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Racial

Ecologies of the South). With the workshops in particular, we are hoping to build on the ICA's success in public engagement, extending our reach into local climate justice communities. Promotions will also occur via regionally-active environmental social media accounts and promotions (posters, flyers) during environmental justice events. Our undergraduate student intern will do outreach work to local high schools and local libraries.

VI. Project Personnel*

Please list project personnel, their titles and the specific role(s) they will play in the project. Indicate who qualifies as the humanities scholar(s) and include a statement of the work they will be doing.

Phoebe Wagner will give one of our public lectures. Phoebe is an emerging writer, academic, and co-editor of *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk & Eco-Speculation* and *Almanac for the Anthropocene: A Compendium of Solarpunk Futures*. Wagner's writing and academic work in environmental criticism (2021) explores climate-fiction literature in which people confront the "environmental grotesque" and environmental tipping points with hopeful, transformative politics and visions of otherwise worlds.

Dr. Jesse Goldstein (Associate Director of the HRC and Associate Prof. of Sociology, VCU) and Wesley Taylor (Assistant Professor of Graphic Design, VCUarts) will facilitate a speculative design workshop titled, "Climate Change Futures and Imagining Abundance Otherwise." This interactive workshop offers participants the opportunity to experiment with eco-speculation and solarpunk narratives. Working in small groups, participants will be guided through a series of prompts meant to help envision alternative possible ways of living and the re-organization of social, political and economic infrastructures that might support these 'other' worlds. The exercise helps reveal the many hidden assumptions that shape adaptation planning, and demonstrates how a humanistic form of literary speculation can help open us to new and innovative ways of engaging with climate solutions.

Mary-Carson Schiff of Wetlands Watch will host a community workshop that brings participants into the complexities of sea level rise adaptation planning, with a focus on the everyday threats and challenges that coastal residents face.

Dr. Cara Daggett (Asst. Professor of Political Science, VA Tech) will give a public lecture on "The Birth of Energy." Dr. Daggett will also co-facilitate a workshop with Dr. Goldstein and Dr. Stephen Fong (Associate Professor of Chemical Engineering, VCU) on how fossil fuels shape our social, political, and cultural lives.

Rani Sisavath, administrative and communications assistant at the HRC, will provide logistical and admin. support, including communications, outreach, and media campaigns.

Dr. Jesse Goldstein, Associate Director of HRC, will help moderate the community workshops. Dr. Cristina Stanciu, Director of the HRC, will moderate public lectures and discussions.

Undergraduate student intern, tbd, will work on outreach to local high schools.

POST AWARD NOTE: Speakers were adjusted after the award was granted - based on speaker availability. Full list of finalized speakers can be found here: <https://humanitiescenter.vcu.edu/events/speaker-series/>

VII. Partnering Organizations

Please list any partnering organizations and the role they will play in the project.

The Insitute for Contemporary Art (ICA)--will host public lecture

The Rice Rivers Center--will host keynote address and conversation with audiences

The VMFA and the local Native film festival, Pocahontas Reframed--will host public lecture Cabell Library, will host public lecture

Project Promotion

How do you plan to promote this project? Check all that apply.*

- Email
- Print Mailing
- Website
- Radio
- Fliers
- Other

Project Promotion. If "Other" is selected:

Please list other planned promotional methods

social media; student organizations on campus; local organization in the Richmond metro area; local high schools; the talks will be recorded and posted on our website for future viewing and use in the classroom.

Expected Audience

Expected Audience*

Check all that apply in these three categories and tell us how many people you expect to attend.

- In-person audience (people who came to live event, people at exhibit, etc)
- Virtual audience (Zoom or Facebook Live-type – in-person over digital medium)
- Media audience (TV, video, audio, etc)

If "In Person" is selected:

Please select expected in-person audience

Greater than 500

If "Virtual" is selected:

Please select expected virtual audience

Greater than 500

If "Media" is selected:

Please select expected media audience

251-500

Project Start and End Dates

Project Start Date*

Enter the date you expect the Virginia Humanities-funded portion of your project to begin. The funded portion must begin no earlier August 1, 2022.

08/15/2022

Project End Date*

05/01/2023

Grant Activity Locations

Please provide complete addresses, including zip codes, for each physical location where your grant-funded events and activities will take place. If the activities are digital and will be hosted on a website different than your organization's URL, please list website addresses and links. If locations are not yet known, please enter "Locations TBD."

- Humanities Research Center, VCU (community workshops)
- Rice Rivers Center (keynote/opening talk)
- Cabell Library, VCU (public lecture)
- Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), Richmond, VA (public lecture)
- VMFA--we hope to schedule one of the public lectures in conjunction with the Pocahontas Reframed Film Festival in November 2022, held at the VMFA

Budget and Cost Share

	BUDGET CATEGORY	GRANT	Cost-Share		TOTAL	NOTES
		REQUEST	CASH	IN-KIND		
2	Stipends or Honoraria* (list individually and itemize)					
	Note: VH contribution is capped at \$1,000 per person for Honoraria	4,000	-	-	4,000	\$1,000 X 4 SPEAKERS: 1 OPENING LECTURE, 3 PUBLIC LECTURES
		1,000		500	1,500	\$500 X 2 COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS
3	Travel and Travel-Related Meals					
		-		2,000	2,000	THE HRC will cover travel and travel-related expenses.
4	Supplies (Itemize)					
		-	-	500	500	The HRC will cover these costs.
5	Promotion (Itemize)					
		-	-	500	500	The HRC will cover these costs.
7	Venue Rental (itemize)					
		-		1,500	1,500	The HRC will cover these costs.
	TOTAL	5,000		5,000	10,000	

For Reference