

## 2021 Virginia Humanities Conference

Sponsored by Virginia Tech

March 24-25 and March 31-April 1, 2021

### Theme

"Democracy, Technology, and Social Justice: Humanities in an Unequal World."

### Summary

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?

### *Proposals*

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.

### *Participants*

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 January 15, 2021. Direct any questions to Sylvester Johnson, [saj240@vt.edu](mailto:saj240@vt.edu).**