

BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND INDIGENOUS BOTANIST ROBIN WALL KIMMERER (RIGHT) SHARED INSIGHTS ON HEALING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE NATURAL WORLD AND OTHER TOPICS DURING A THREE-DAY RESIDENCY AT BROWN LAST FALL, INCLUDING A LECTURE CO-SPONSORED BY THE COGUT INSTITUTE'S ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES AT BROWN INITIATIVE.

# Humanities Hub Prompts Critical Questions

By Debra Bradley Ruder '80

**Brown's Cogut Institute for the Humanities helps scholars deepen understanding of societal issues and partner across academic fields to build new insights.**

What can literature, philosophy, history, political theory and other humanities fields teach us about our rapidly warming planet?

A great deal, says Amanda Anderson, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and English and director of Brown's Cogut Institute for the Humanities.

"The humanities are absolutely central to all of the research being done to confront societal challenges such as climate change," she notes. Humanities perspectives "help us understand the human, social and cultural impact of climate change, and invite different ways of relating to nature."

To that end, the Cogut Institute's Environmental Humanities at Brown initiative brings together students, faculty and staff from many areas of study to think collectively about environmental justice and, more broadly, about how the humanities bear on our understanding of the more-than-human

world and our relationship with it. Through guest speakers, book discussions, conferences and other activities, participants examine how institutions, beliefs and practices have contributed to environmental crises — including climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss and pollution — and how they harm vulnerable communities, says initiative co-founder Mark Cladis, Brooke Russell Astor Professor of the Humanities.

"The humanities, working with the natural and social sciences, help us think about how we got to where we are, and solutions for moving forward," Cladis says, "so that future generations can live in a more sustainable world with respect to the natural environment and a more flourishing, just social environment."

The initiative isn't purely crisis-driven, he adds. "There's a lot of curiosity, wonder, hope and joy in the work, exploring the diversity and beauty of the more-than-human world and its relation to human communities."

## Fostering Collaboration

Environmental Humanities is one of several faculty-led initiatives hosted by the Cogut Institute, a hub for innovative research and education that transcends traditional boundaries in the arts and sciences. Established in 2003, the institute is named for donors Craig '75 and Deborah Cogut and stands out among humanities centers on U.S. campuses for fostering sustained research partnerships across fields of study, according to Anderson. Cogut's in-person and virtual public events draw attendees from around the world.

"Brown has been an ambitious and innovative player nationally through its development of distinctive collaborative programs," Anderson says. "We try to draw on the strength of scholars within departments and build visibility of the humanities across campus. There's something about the [smaller] scale of Brown that helps to catalyze these collaborations — which is wonderful."

One example is the Cogut's Doctoral Certificate in Collaborative Humanities, which enables Brown Ph.D. students to expand their collaborative research and teaching skills — experimenting with group projects and co-authored papers, for instance. The unique program helps nurture community among graduate students in an array of departments around campus.

The institute also hosts new undergraduate courses taught by pairs of Brown faculty from different academic fields, thanks to a fund supported by a generous donor. One class debuting in Spring 2023 applies

perspectives in cultural anthropology and public health to examining health care disparities around the world, a timely topic during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Invaluable Connections

The Cogut Institute's Fellows Seminar, meanwhile, convenes Brown scholars from various humanities disciplines and stages of career — faculty, undergraduates, graduate students and postdocs — for weekly discussions devoted to a participant's research project in progress.

"I found it electrifying," Cogut postdoctoral research associate Adrián Hernández-Acosta recalls of the insightful questions that seminar colleagues asked about his forthcoming book on the portrayal of religious mourning practices in contemporary Caribbean literature and art.

Hernández-Acosta, who also is affiliated with the Hispanic studies department, says the conversations with Cogut fellows, as well as with undergraduates in the classes he taught, have been invaluable. Speaking with others who approached the material with fresh eyes, he could step back, tease out broader themes in his research, "and sharpen the interventions that I would like to make in my work, to make sure I am asking the right questions."

"I will forever be grateful to the Cogut Institute, my department and Brown," Hernández-Acosta says, "for the opportunity to start my career here."

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