

## Humanities Symposium 2024 Feb 5- 9: Program

# What is Real?



Adobe stock free image

Headlines ripped from our current times – “We are in a knowledge crisis,” “The Dangers of AI,” and “Don’t go Down that Rabbit Hole”– indicate that modern technologies are amplifying long-standing problems of human discernment of what’s real. If “the medium is the message,” social media seems to promote both instantaneous photojournalism and duplicitous algorithms, trustworthy local reporters and shallow echo chambers. The stakes couldn’t be higher as false narratives, deepfakes and AI pose devastating risks to our intimate lives, societal harmony and international security. How can we navigate these pitfalls while staying open to the elevating experiences of the irrational and the re-creation of reality? Afterall, our singular human capacity of blending the real, be it with the supernatural, hallucination, storytelling or visual art, differently enriches our understanding of our world. From classical times, Indigenous practices, digital spaces, psychology, to historical fiction and journalism, this is your opportunity to explore these ideas at the 2024 Vanier College Humanities Symposium, Feb 5-9!

All presentations are in person in the Auditorium, A-103. Open to the public.

For questions, please contact Sheila Das: [dass@vaniercollege.qc.ca](mailto:dass@vaniercollege.qc.ca)

Schedule below.

## Monday

1:00 – 2:30

### **The Wixarika Mara'kame & the Peyote: learning to see what is real**

**Jimena Marquez**, EMSB Project Development officer for Indigenous education and Indigenous student support

Within Indigenous Wixarika cosmologies, the spiritual leader, the mara'akame undergoes a long and rigorous training. We will explore how his healing powers come from his interaction with Hikuri, or Peyote, the hallucinogenic cactus sacred that is "hunted" once a year in the desert of San Luis Potosi and is the main doorway to seeing the true nature of reality.

4:00 – 5:30

### **Stealing the Real: Truth and Lies in Fiction**

**Michael Crummey**, award-winning Newfoundland historical novelist, poet, essayist

Fiction is a lie that goes out of its way to look and feel like the real world. (It's a bit like the news that way.) Where is the truth in it? What does it owe the world it steals from? Place, language, history, and people all come into play.

## Tuesday

4:00 – 5:30

### **Lightning Talks**

**Vanier College Humanities teachers**

Short, fast, incisive: a kaleidoscope of 5-minute perspectives on what is real?

Katie Rose: The Stories We Tell

David Koloszyc The Importance of Being Irrelevant

Tim Budde: How Plato Ruined the Western Mind

Sean Gauthier: Swimming with Sharks

Stephen Block: Reality is a Crutch

Sevak Manijikian: White Supremacy and Misinformation

Brandon Spray: What is "Real" Human Nature?: fighting against the standard narrative

Maggie Katharwoon: Transphobia

Sheila Das: Everyday Ethics

## Wednesday

8:30 – 10:00

### **Paranoia for the People: the rise of conspiracy theory, disinformation, and propaganda in the 21st century**

**David Robert Grimes**, KEYNOTE SPEAKER, award-winning Irish science journalist, best-selling author of *The Irrational Ape/ Good Thinking*

Since the turn of the millennium, we have witnessed a staggering explosion in false information, bleeding into everything from geopolitics to health care, with serious consequences for all of society. This talk delves into the fascinating reasons why fictions hold such powerful sway, the psychology that renders us susceptible, the motivations of those crafting such falsehoods, and how we can protect ourselves from disinformation in 2024.

10:30 – 12:00

**Panel on Nationalism: real vs imagined communities**

Language as a Collective Action Problem

**Daniel Weinstock**, Law, Chair in Civil Society and Public Policy in the Faculties of Law and of Arts, McGill

Let's Talk: how we use conversation to create our shared worlds

**Shane O Mara**, Experimental Brain Research, Trinity College Dublin, (Zoom)

Learning from Narratives of Nation and Citizenship: The Case of Rastafari and Ethiopia

**Erin MacLeod**, English, Vanier College

Thursday

8:30 – 10:00

**Credibility and Trust in Journalism**

**Ian Brown**, The Globe and Mail, award-winning journalist and author, (Zoom)

Newspaper journalism traditionally has been regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, serving society with rigorous and free-wheeling investigations of our world. We will explore how the role of the journalist is being challenged in a landscape where freedom of the press is under attack, AI is infiltrating, revenue is declining and loud voices are shouting, "Fake news!" Is there hope for complex stories that describe the world as it is, not as it should be?

12:00 – 1:30

**When Seeing is No Longer Believing: the wide-ranging impacts of deepfake technology**

**Abby MacDonald**, Canada Global Affairs Institute

This talk will look broadly at the effects of deepfake technology from national security to gender impacts and pornography to social media, and how this technology contributes to the challenges we see with eroding trust in society and institutions.

Friday

10:00 – 11:30

**Cyberdelia**

**Sabrina Ratte**, Digital artist, Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art collection, winner of the Sobey Art award

Through the lens of digital art and creative approaches to technology, we will discuss the notions of speculative futures, materiality and virtuality, technologies as projection holders for utopia and dystopia and how our increasingly mediated relationship with reality alters and transforms our perspective of it.

**VANIER**  
C É G E P / C O L L E G E

Many thanks to the Faculty of General Education, the VCSA, the VCTA,  
and the A'nó:wara Indigenous Student Centre.