

ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES
IN PRACTICE

Campus-Community Collaborations and Public Environmental Humanities on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia

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Abstract The tidal Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, USA, presents a waterscape at once singular and uniquely local while also typical of a novel ecosystem. Heavy with centuries of legacy pollutants from coal and oil refining, the river water presents a liquid archive with few finding aids, catalogs, or guides. Propelled by a fundamental paradox (if "wisdom sits in places," how do we know "forgotten places"), this article considers a series of collaborative learning experiments animated by insights from academic and community researchers about Black ecologies. It traces a series of public environmental humanities experiments undertaken over a five-year period in and with the river's historic wetlands and their various communities. Sharing insights from insurgent learning practices, the article aims to further the environmental humanities' transformational premise and promise to envision and foster more just futures. As we, academic researchers, have learned with and from community partners, we have sought to make mutually beneficial work, including much that hardly resembles conventional academic outcomes. A "living" digital river archive offers a compendium to the article.

Keywords: public environmental humanities, community engaged scholarship, environmental justice, Philadelphia, urban rivers

Kingsessing (or Chingsessing, place where there is a meadow), Tinicum (or Tinnachkonck, next to water), Weccacoe (peaceful place): these and other toponyms from the

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Lenape (original people) name contemporary places in South Philadelphia.[1] While Tinicum remains next to water, Kingsessing's meadow and Weccacoe's peace have been swallowed up by heavy industry and turned into residential areas for vulnerable populations, after more than four centuries of the settler colonialism and racial capitalism that reclaimed wetlands for use. Today, South Philadelphia's former creeks, marshes, and meadows are almost gone and forgotten. Simultaneously, local climate impacts—including sea level rise, storm surge, and heavier and more frequent rains—are returning water to these low-lying areas. Heavy with centuries of legacy pollutants from oil and coal refining, the water presents a kind of liquid archive, one with few finding aids, catalogs, or guides. While we live in the river's watery wake, we have forgotten what and who has been put there.[2]

In this article we explore how place- and community-based learning experiments might remember and re-story this postindustrial river. Throughout, we unpack a vexing paradox: If wisdom sits in places, as anthropologist Keith Basso learned from his collaborators among the Western Apache, how can communities of research and learning come into being to apprehend what sociologist Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls forgotten places?[3] Such places, Gilmore explains, "are not outside history. Rather, they are places that have experienced the abandonment characteristic of contemporary capitalist and neoliberal state reorganization."[4] The tidal Schuylkill River in South Philadelphia, flowing past Kingsessing and debouching into the Delaware River, offers but one example of a forgotten place.

We began these learning experiments along and on the tidal river to probe how "in the midst of ruins" we might "maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying."[5] We challenged ourselves both to be with water and to think with and even to literalize water-y metaphors, including the river as a watery archive. Thus, together with community-based researchers, we have begun building a "living" river archive.[6]

Not only do the materials we collect help to remember this forgotten place, but community contributions provide witness to the historical processes and structures that have distorted river life, including the extractive logics subtended by anti-Black racism and carbon intensive economies.

Building and guiding these place-based experiments has also provided us sustained opportunities to reflect on the animating friction between "critique and action" that generates environmental humanities.[7] We believe more work in the environmental

1. Hingston, "Twenty Local."

2. Sharp, *In the Wake.*

3. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*.

4. Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning," 31.

5. Swanson et al., "Bodies Tumbled into Bodies," M7.

6. Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://www.schuylkillcorps.org (accessed November 7, 2025).

7. Rose et al., "Thinking Through the Environment."

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humanities needs to engage communities beyond the academy if the field is to make good to its transformative premise and promise. We hope this article might contribute to ongoing efforts to nurture public environmental humanities (PEH) and community engaged scholarship.[8] Many of the outcomes from our shared learning experiences can be viewed in the living river archive. Here, we spotlight a few examples created as part of a summer field school and a multiyear campus-community collaboration called Futures Beyond Refining. We hope they and the living archive they both drew on and fed might provide resources for other teachers, communities, and environmental activists seeking to engage in place-based learning with and for their own local communities.[9]

Practicing Academic Insurgency

Since its emergence over the past two decades, the environmental humanities has sought to contend with the mixed and multiscalar temporalities and geographies of the ongoing ecological crisis by situating itself as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry. Its purchase lies less in defining itself as an established field than in its ability to catalyze the crossing of fields and encourage transdisciplinary inquiry. PEH further moves academic practitioners outside or beyond the conventions of academia in order to forge new approaches to environmental thought and action and to encourage sustained methods and modes of inquiry attuned to multiple scales of time and of place. PEH sometimes recalls Isabelle Stengers's slow science in the shared aim to cultivate methods that create refuge: recognizing, supporting, and sustaining mutuality.[10] Our learning experiments have hybridized methods from the natural sciences with the humanities.

We have come to understand PEH as a form of "academic insurgency"—a set of practices that queer, cross, counter, and undo conventional disciplinary structures.[11] These insurgent approaches include interdisciplinary scholarship, experimental genres of writing, engagement with diverse audiences beyond the university, and a focus on how theory affects communities that have long faced marginalization.[12] Our own insurgent commitments are shaped by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's critique of how the university diminishes empathy and curtails true learning through grading and other mechanisms of intellectual and social control. They offer an alternative vision rooted in collective study—as a mode of being with others, of talking, walking, suffering,

8. Various terms describe publicly engaged scholarship in the humanities. Here we have chosen "public environmental humanities" in line with current practices in environmental humanities journals, including *Environmental Humanities* (van Dooren et al.). Gordon da Cruz provides an excellent discussion of various terms and urges the adoption of the term community engaged scholarship (CES) for research and teaching, which centers practices and products of co-learning "to address pressing social issues" (Gordon da Cruz 149). CES is the term chosen, for example, by Macklin and Wiggin to describe work that has emerged out of and extended the campus-community collaborations this article analyzes.

9. Burton, *Archive Stories*.

10. Stengers, *Another Science Is Possible*.

11. Risam, "Academic Generosity, Academic Insurgency."

12. Risam, "Academic Generosity, Academic Insurgency."

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dancing, and working in copresence—where the intellectual is inseparable from the social and embodied.[13] Their vision calls for turning toward sites of sociality not regulated by the university, places where knowledge can flourish differently. Working along the tidal Schuylkill and with communities in South Philadelphia, we have come to understand this landscape through the framework of Black ecologies—a concept that names not only sites of ongoing injury, toxic exposure, and environmental violence but also spaces where Black life endures and redefines knowledge. Following J. T. Roane and Justin Hosbey and their dialogue with Nathan Hare's "Black Ecology," we embrace the plural form of *Black ecologies*, which insists on attending to the continued reverberations of slavery, the Middle Passage, and systemic harm while also foregrounding creativity, survival, and resistance within threatened and dispossessed geographies.[14]

While life in Philadelphia is marked by systemic injuries, lives in these places also carry particular, individual histories. Roane and Hosbey's plural term helps locate "sites wherein ordinary Black people articulate alternative maps—dissonant and heterodox ecological grammars as well as vision for a different order."[15] Black ecologies, in other words, name forgotten spaces and spaces of slow, systemic violence, but also places where people endure, resist, and envision and generate tools for different orders. We have been fortunate to learn from Black leaders and call them our community partners. Their tools and visions exceed conventional academic fields, and we have found them vital to be with, think with, and learn with—both in and outside the academy. We have become increasingly mindful, when working in community, that value-laden terms—even those aiming at neutrality, like "novel ecosystem"—can be difficult for residents to hear and bear. For this reason too, we have found the concept of Black ecologies generative to think with.[16]

Propelled by the idea of study as embodied movement through the world, our learning experiments happened in labs and classrooms that included boats, docks, streets, conservation wetlands, Superfund sites, as well as in traditional settings on campus.[17] Together, over several years and in shifting constellations of participants—faculty from several universities, students, neighbors, staff from community organizations, and visiting artists—we wrestled with conceptual vocabulary while also engaging the "troublesome knowledges" that emerge by welcoming methods considered "counter-intuitive" or even "intellectually absurd" when assessing environments, particularly embodied art practices, literature, and storytelling.[18] By moving ourselves off campus and shifting the location of learning from the familiar customs, dis/comforts, and logics of power of the classroom to sites of Black ecologies, we sought to welcome perspectives marginalized by academic ways of knowing, whether in the arts or in the sciences. We were

13. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 110.
14. Roane and Hosbey, "Black Ecologies"; Hare, "Black Ecology."
15. Roane and Hosbey, "Black Ecologies."
16. Marris et al., "Perspective."
17. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*.
18. Felten et al., "Developing Learning Partnerships," 70.

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aware that in this contact zone, "whatever one said was going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we were neither able nor entitled to prescribe."[19] Here, teachers and students alike became active learners. We coauthors learned to interrogate the disciplinary ruts and mindsets academically based researchers are conditioned to inhabit. Our common site of escape to follow undisciplinary modes of thinking was of course the Schuylkill River itself. It enabled us to escape the time-space of the university and to engage, as we discuss below, questions of social and environmental injustices in a place deeply marked by living legacies of racialized colonial and colonialist power and practices. Our public learning experiments aimed both to make visible the river's use as a test site for toxic practices that put racialized and vulnerable populations "in harm's way" and to show it as a place where transformative, sustaining practices can be codeveloped in and with its historic and contemporary communities.[20] The river has been an important mentor for the shared learning experiments.

The Urban River as Public Environmental Humanities Lab

The tidal Schuylkill River in Philadelphia has long been shaped by industrial activity. Beginning in the 1860s, its banks became the site of an oil refinery that expanded over time to become the largest on the US Eastern Seaboard—until it was permanently shut down following a major explosion in 2019. Across the river from Bartram's Garden, the continent's oldest botanical garden, the former refinery lands are being rapidly redeveloped as a warehousing and logistics hub. A section of the tidal river is traversed by a popular trail connecting center city Philadelphia upriver to its green lung, Fairmount Park, and stretching downriver toward South Philadelphia. When it hasn't rained so much that the city's old combined sewer outfalls overflow with a mixture of runoff and household sewage, the tidal river is dotted with kayakers and the occasional motorized boat. When it rains significantly, an ever more frequent occurrence in the climate-changed city, no data is available about the bacteria levels caused by the presence of fecal matter. And extreme rainfall occurs more often as climate impacts in Philadelphia grow more severe.

Philadelphia is sometimes known as the "largest poor city" in the United States, and the neighborhoods along the tidal Schuylkill—Kingsessing, Southwest Philadelphia, and Eastwick on the western bank, and Grays Ferry, Point Breeze, and South Philadelphia on the eastern bank—are among the poorer areas of a city marked by deep racial, educational, and health inequalities with clear links to an ongoing history of environmental injustice.[21] The demographics for race in these neighborhoods resemble the city as a whole; Black and African Americans make up roughly 42 percent of the city's total population, estimated at of 1.584 million in 2019. Roughly one in four Philadelphians suffers from poverty.[22] In the neighborhoods adjacent to the tidal Schuylkill, income

19. Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," 33–40.

20. Anand et al., "Enduring Harm."

21. Taylor, *Toxic Communities*.

22. "Quick Facts," United States Census Bureau, last modified July 1, 2023, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/philadelphiacitypennsylvania,US.

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levels are very low, with average household income less than $38,900 and per capita less than $19,944.

For two centuries, land along most of this stretch of the river was made from marsh, reclaimed, and then sacrificed to heavy industry. The tidal river has witnessed multiple energy transitions, from wood and wind to the anthracite coal, hard, or stone coal, first mined upriver in Schuylkill County at the northern edge of the Ridge-and-Valley Appalachians, and to petroleum, first commercially developed in Titusville, Pennsylvania, in the state's northwest.[23] Since the late nineteenth century, oil refining increasingly dominated the tidal river. The "cradle of global petromodernity," the tidal Schuylkill has long been an unwitting lab for barely controlled experiments in intensive carbon consumption.[24]

Experiments on Water

Our work to establish and cultivate a living river archive began with a collaboration between two newcomers to the river, artist Mary Mattingly and coauthor Bethany Wiggin, with Bartram's Garden, a botanical garden and public park and historic house perched on the western bank's high rolling hills since the 1700s. Today, the garden offers one of only two public access points onto the tidal river. Together, we collaborated to maintain and expand *WetLand*, a floating, habitable sculpture created by Mattingly to catalyze communities for ecological futures. While the reengineered houseboat was eventually sunk by extreme rain and river debris from one of the extreme hydrological events that climate change brings to the region, it animated a series of conversations in which participants were invited to help shine a light onto the river's past and present in order to imagine just and verdant futures.[25]

With modest grant support to seed "Ecotopian Tools for *WetLand*," coauthor Wiggin hoped to spark a series of informal conversations about our aims. Our first public meeting, held in a conference room at Bartram's Garden, hosted some sixty people from academic and nonprofit institutions active in the lower part of the river's watershed. The meeting's open invitation indicated the agenda: "Consider how collaborations . . . might augment what you're already doing, i.e., how can we as a collective hold up and support your initiatives. Please indicate what kind of data, in that word's broad meaning as information, perhaps about the watershed's history, present, or future, that you would find useful to build on what you already know about the [Schuylkill]."[26]

Following this first meeting, seven working groups formed to generate proposals for shared projects, and we rapidly settled on the complementary goals of building an

23. Jones, *Routes of Power*.

24. Wiggin, "Uses of Environmental Inhumanities."

25. Farquhar, "Figuring *WetLand*."

26. "May 2016 Working Groups' Visions for River Corps," Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/items/show/160 (accessed November 7, 2025).

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open-access digital repository for materials about the river and its multispecies community and then leading tours on foot and by kayak that were meant to share archival materials with wider audiences and to encourage further data creation.[27]

We next formed the Schuylkill River Corps Research Seminar, hosted primarily in university settings. It was co-convened by the River Programs Manager from Bartram's Garden and two university-based environmental researchers; a scientist from neighboring Drexel University, Peter DeCarlo; and a humanist from the University of Pennsylvania, coauthor Wiggin. Invited presentations were recorded so that they, too, could feed the fledgling archive. Meanwhile, Bartram's staff drew on materials from the research seminar to create and lead tours with high school student interns,[28] and university faculty designed courses whose assignments contributed to the archive. University students carried out summer research projects to seed collections of oral histories from long-term residents of the river neighborhoods of Eastwick[29] and Grays Ferry[30] and to document and explore the history of siting and running Philadelphia's oil refinery.[31]

One deeply collaborative learning experiment coalesced in the summer of 2018 in a field school called the On-Water Intensive. This two-week immersive research experience functioned as a cross-institutional collaborative effort organized by the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities with Drexel University and the Academy of Natural Sciences. For ten days, we—faculty, artists, graduate and undergraduate students, and "Community Fellows" (i.e., staff from informal environmental educational institutions and one artist)—met at various sites in, on, and along the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers as well as the Wissahickon Creek. To conduct this immersive, embodied research, we improvised on-water classrooms (floats, wooden boats, kayaks, and motorized launches), walked in creeks and marshes, and visited various marine-related institutions across the city of Philadelphia. Together we cocreated a public curriculum of educational materials and creative arts-science experiments designed for continued river engagement, historical and environmental literacy, and stewardship. Our aim in this summer field school was to advance both the "right to research" and the need for public scholarship in the climate-changed city.[32]

27. Records of the series of visioning and planning meetings that led to the creation of the archive are included as a collection in the digital archive. See "River Corps Visioning Meetings," Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/collections/show/12 (accessed February 19, 2024).

28. "River Intern Center City Voyage," Bartram's Garden High School River Internship, Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://pennds.org/lsrlivingarchive/tours/show/4 (accessed November 7, 2025).

29. "Eastwick Oral History Project: Margie Cobb and Nancy Cobb," interviewed by Mary Cerulli, July 7, 2017, Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/items/show/1.

30. "Grays Ferry Oral History: Charles Reeves," recorded by Maggie McNulty, February 27, 2020, Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/items/show/311.

31. Jacob Hershman, "Witnessing Philadelphia's Oilscape," Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/exhibits/show/witnessing-philadelphia-s-oils.

32. Appadurai, "Right to Research," 167–77.

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The On-Water Intensive explored the river through interdisciplinary lenses and sets of questions: What is the Anthropocene as we have made it and experience it on the tidal Schuylkill? How can environmental history and science meet at the confluence of the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers? What role can arts-driven inquiry play in exploring the story of our tidal river? Mini-lectures, collaborative experiments, and civic dialogues—presented and guided by faculty from the Academy of Natural Sciences, Drexel University, and the University of Pennsylvania, and guest artists—introduced and elaborated each topic. Students received intensive mentoring by the seminar instructors and collaborated closely with one another to develop their own final interdisciplinary projects designed to generate still more possibilities and opportunities for analytical, critical, and creative work along, on, or in the water itself.

One such final project, designed by teaching artist Jacob Rivkin, focused on creating floating, purposefully temporary monuments to commemorate the river's past. Participants were coached to document these monuments' ephemerality with short videos that their creators called "love letters."[33] Attuned to the ideas that monuments operate as symbols connected to public memory and systems of power, Rivkin asked students to create site-specific works using found materials in order to envision new icons for the Schuylkill River. Students responded with the creation of physical conversations with the landscape and its multispecies inhabitants. The Floating Heron monument, for example, paid homage to the great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*)—the species of bird named by several local anglers as their favorite animal to spot along the Schuylkill riverbanks (fig. 1). Commonly found across a range of wetland habitats, the great blue heron is known to be a highly adaptive and resilient species of wading bird. Inspired by this resilient species, participants recreated a heron sculpture using materials—both human-made and natural—found along and within the banks of the Schuylkill River. The mixed composition of the sculpture thus acted as both a kind of physical micro-archive of the river, recording the various plastics and pollutants that contaminate the waterway, and as a testament to the heron's ability to adapt to and survive in the Anthropocene's sacrificial landscapes.

This creative project, along with the other interdisciplinary science and history learning experiences built into the intensive program and documented in the archival collection, gave the university students and the Community Fellows the opportunity to generate an encompassing picture of what the Lower Schuylkill has been and of its history and the making of that history, and to imagine creatively and in public how the river could be remade. Teachers and students were prompted to experience the river in unexpected ways by engaging with the river in unfamiliar and intimate modes and by collaborating both by design and by chance with locals from the community who shared what they valued about the river and why.

33. Records of these vanishing monuments are available in the digital archive as part of the On-Water Intensive collection. "On-Water Intensive Summer Seminar (Philadelphia, 2018)," Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/collections/show/8 (accessed February 19, 2024).

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Figure 1. The Floating Heron monument, composed of wood, leaves, bottles, and tape, overlooks the Schuylkill River. Photograph by Martin Premoli, 2018.

One year after this summer field school, in the early hours of June 21, 2019, Philadelphia's refinery erupted. Huge pieces of the plant catapulted from one side of the river to the other, after a series of explosions started in the refinery's alkylation unit. Only four miles from iconic Independence Hall, the explosion shook the ground and shook up the sleeping residents of South Philadelphia's neighborhoods. As refinery worker turned documentary filmmaker Bilal Motley explained, a lethal mass disaster that night was prevented only by the quiet heroism of the control woman overseeing unit 433, the refinery's alkylation unit.[34]

Several days later the refinery's operator at the time, Philadelphia Energy Solutions (PES), declared bankruptcy. In February 2020, the bankruptcy sale was completed, and to the dismay of the refinery's well-paid union members and to the delight of a coalition of fenceline residents, public health advocates, and climate change activists, the

34. Motley, "Midnight Oil," interview for podcast *Data Remediations*, episode 8.

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new owner had no apparent plans to continue refinery operations on the 1,300-acre site that crisscrosses the river.

In the months following the explosion, the Office of the Mayor and the city council each held hearings. Based on his air monitoring work on the Schuylkill River and leadership of the River Research Corps, Peter DeCarlo helped to head up the mayor's task force, where Wiggin also testified, drawing on Eastwick community members' oral histories. Both DeCarlo and Wiggin also testified for the city council about the future of the refinery. River neighbors' powerful stories about the refinery's long-term harms, wrought on generations of Philadelphians well before this "last explosion" were also used by advocacy groups, ranging from the neighborhood level (the Eastwick Friends and Neighbors Coalition) to supraregional advocacy organizations (the Clean Air Council and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council) as well by faith-based groups (the Earth Quaker Action Team, People's Power and Light).

This 2019 explosion, terrifying as it was, was only the most recent of the Philadelphia refinery's explosions, a fact emphasized by Grays Ferry neighborhood residents and community researchers and organizers Charles and Tammy Reeves. Inspired by the Eastwick oral history contributed by sisters Margie and Nancy Cobb and their experiences of radical uncertainty about what to do amidst persistent flooding in the former marshlands of South Philadelphia, the Reeveses and the Penn faculty and students called their collaboration Futures Beyond Refining.[35] While officials had often told fenceline neighbors that refining operations were safe, the Reeveses, whose family has been organizing in the Grays Ferry neighborhood for generations, had serious doubts. As Mrs. Reeves pointedly asks in a video documentary we made together including footage of a coproduced community tour for school children, "If it's not hazardous, why are you wearing hazmat suits?"[36] We worked together to envision and then realize a mutually beneficial set of collaborative outcomes: community-led tours, workshops about energy histories and climate futures in our city's schools, organizational capacity building, policy statements, conference talks, academic essays and articles, and a temporary memorial to lives lost to refining. Our work together began in a series of listening exercises that created a modest archival collection of long-form oral histories.[37]

We often met at a school directly next to the refinery, a setting that perhaps cemented a shared desire to make sure our collaborations found ways to involve school-age children. Our community partners made vital connections to neighborhood schools' leaders and teachers, and we then created a workshop that invited eighth-grade science students to share their visions of Philadelphia's relationship to refining in 2100 with

35. "Eastwick Oral History Project: Margie Cobb and Nancy Cobb," interviewed by Mary Cerulli, July 7, 2017, Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/items/show/1.

36. Klein et al., "Futures Beyond Refining."

37. "Grays Ferry Oral Histories" compiled by Maggie McNulty, Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/collections/show/26.

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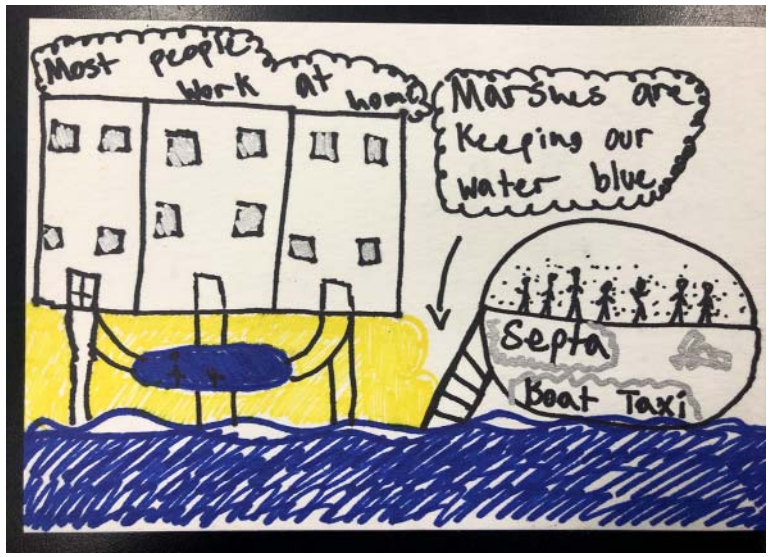

Figure 2. This vibrantly colored postcard was created by a student in one of the workshops offered in eighth-grade science classrooms in Philadelphia. Students learned about wetland ecology, local environmental history, and climate change, and were also invited to picture the former marshlands in the year 2100 and to address messages on the cards' reverses (not pictured) to elected officials to whom the hundreds of cards were then mailed.

elected officials today. At the end of these workshops, the children were encouraged to draw on what they had learned about the city's energy history as well as current climate impacts and solutions and travel imaginatively to the year 2100. From their future perch, the students were asked to reflect back on the present and to write short speculative histories of the return of tidal waters to this former wetland. Some contributed stories offer bleak tales of uncurbed carbon pollution and shores awash with legacy pollutants as far as the eye can see. Others wrote of restored marsh and adaptive architecture and even of Philadelphians swimming alongside fish and fowl in the river. Gloomy or bright, realistic or utopian, all of the stories from our watery future were included in an online gallery before they were mailed to elected officials (see fig 2).

In these postcards, students crafted letters that were aimed explicitly at documenting and exploring experiences of living with the refinery and the river waters forgotten by the river's official history. Reimagining a mixed-income neighborhood in South Philadelphia, one postcard envisions the neighborhood as a floating community and extends greetings "from the houseboats of Girard Estates." This particular card, signed "with love from 2100" by "a future Philadelphian," offers a bright history of mitigation, remediation, and adaption. Its history of the river's future anterior, the past that will have become, was sent to Philadelphia's city council president, Darryl Clark: "I'm so glad they cleaned the land beneath the refinery site 100 years ago. Now when I stay in the Air bnb House Boats of Philadelphia, I can go swimming with my children off the side!"

Oral histories are perhaps the most powerful artifacts shared in the Schuylkill River archive. They refuse consignment to a "forgotten place" and have provided invaluable qualitative data that has already been put to work in a variety of settings by diverse users. The Grays Ferry oral history collection also featured in a large-format memorial to lives lost to refining in Philadelphia, *Area of Interest*, created by artist Amy Balkin in collaboration with the community and academic researchers who had shared and collected

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forgotten stories. As Mr. Reeves stated in his oral history, he had hoped that at least part of the refinery lands could "be a cemetery for everybody who can't afford to be buried."[38] Working with the Reeveses and in dialogue with others, Balkin created a billboard that was on display in the summer of 2021 next to the former refinery and visible by the hundreds of thousands of cars daily using the freeway and by pedestrians in the Grays Ferry neighborhood below the highway and along the former refinery fence line. As Balkin's website explains:

> As community activists demand transparency and raise environmental justice concerns [that may] impact residents of neighborhoods adjacent to the site, whose populations are predominantly Black and low income, and whose lives have already been shaped by proximity to the refinery and petrocapitalism's slow violence. In response, *Area of Interest: Former Sunoco/PES Refinery Site Billboard* incorporated four pieces of research data into a visual essay, pointing on I-76 towards alternative futures in a site-specific, rented, transient format.[39]

The collaborative work launched by Futures Beyond Refining is still unfolding, having led directly to new collaborative endeavors.[40] The project's durability and the participants' bonds were strengthened by regular meetings on campus and off during which we shared food and talked, celebrated milestones together, and made opportunities to check together that we continued to work toward shared and mutually beneficial goals, even as they did not always exactly overlap. Three years into our collaboration, as Wiggin sought to involve Grays Ferry neighborhood schools in a climate literacy and curriculum-building project, Charles Reeves wrote an email sharing reasons why climate education is not, and in his view cannot be, a first priority for him. His commitment is to the tireless work he does to bring food to his neighbors:

> I wanted you to understand better my feelings and why I feel so strongly about saving my children from everyday life. . . . [Y]ou can afford to worry about the world, the climate [, and] the future of the planet. But you have to agree when I walk outside my door my world is more like recovering from drugs. [O]ne day at a time, can't afford to look in the future[. L]ots of my neighbors don't have a future or a home and car, savings, mother, father. Some don't have a meal.

38. "Grays Ferry Oral History: Charles Reeves," recorded by Maggie McNulty, February 27, 2020, Schuylkill River and Urban Waters Research Corps Archive, https://schuylkillcorps.org/items/show/311.

39. Amy Balkin, "Areas of Interest," Temporary Memorial and Documentation, https://www.amybalkin.com/work-1/areaofinterest (accessed November 7, 2025).

40. The Futures Beyond Refinery collaborative sparked the creation of The Community Grocery (TCG), a nonprofit designed to allow neighbors to use federal food support to purchase meal kits. Futures Beyond Refining also inspired the formation of the Intersecting Energy Cultures working group, a gathering of nine international campus-community teams together exploring how arts-driven research methods can drive just transitions. They document their work at "Intersecting Energy Cultures," https://intersectingenergycultures.org/ (accessed November 7, 2025).

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Across these various projects made on and along the tidal Schuylkill River, participants sought to document and explore the experiences of living with the refinery and the river waters long ignored or erased from the historical record. The postcard project, like the temporary monuments project, encouraged students of all ages to think and work in an undisciplined way: outside the space-time of school, across disciplinary divides, and beyond private/public divisions. Just as importantly, the artifacts of these research programs provide local communities with vital data about a crucial waterway that has long shaped the city of Philadelphia and its inhabitants and have been used publicly to memorialize forgotten lives and losses.

Reflections on Collaborative, Embodied Learning

By way of conclusion, we offer five short points reflective of mistakes we, academically based researchers, have made. It is our hope that the fruits of these lessons, learned sometimes the hard way, might catalyze more academically based researchers to make publicly response-able work—and in so doing also make good on the transformative promise of environmental humanities born of the friction between critique and action. Perhaps they seem obvious, and yet we have forgotten them on too many occasions.

First, when working in community, remember that academically based researchers are often seen—fairly or not—as representatives of their institutions. Even if we know nothing about past disputes between our university's real estate division and the city's parks commission, for example, we may still be held accountable. Avoid becoming defensive or pretending we are not implicated in our institution's missteps.

Second, community collaboration operates on a different timeline than the academic calendar. It doesn't pause for exam periods, conferences, or publishing deadlines. If students are involved, remind them of these mismatched time horizons and design assignments accordingly. Over the years, we've developed both realistic projects (e.g., curating social media content related to our projects) and iterative ones (e.g., refining existing Schuylkill River tours). The river archive also offers students a place to learn from and build upon past work.

Third, effective collaboration requires meeting in spaces where less-resourced partners feel comfortable. While this might occasionally include campus, it more often means meeting near partners' workplaces or homes—such as at schools or public meeting rooms, or outdoors. Many informal educators tire of campus settings, and some community members may not feel welcome in them. We often met outdoors in inclusive spaces like Bartram's Garden. It's also crucial to clarify from the outset what academic partners can realistically deliver and what community members can expect.

Fourth, successful collaboration relies on pursuing mutually beneficial goals. These should be defined candidly and iteratively. Listen more than you talk. Many shared goals may not yield traditional academic outcomes—but all involved should be able to commit to realizing them.

Finally, compensating community partners is essential for equitable and lasting collaboration. Whether through monetary payment or in-kind support, such recognition

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affirms their vital contributions and encourages broader participation. When we launched the On-Water Intensive Program, for instance, we paid Community River Fellows—Philadelphia-based artists who helped document the Schuylkill's liquid archive. We also compensated oral historians and tour guides for their labor and their co-creation of living archives.

Our research and public engagement, steeped as it is in Philadelphia's fraught racial history and ongoing issues of wealth disparity, thus requires attending to questions of reparation, compensation, and financial justice. By incorporating financial or other forms of compensation, academic institutions can build stronger, trust-based relationships that contribute to more impactful and meaningful research outcomes—as well as environmental futures.

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