Norfolk, Virginia, exemplifies how local communities and polities are linked to multiple social, cultural, and physical ecologies. It is part of the larger Hampton Roads metropolitan area that includes the cities of Virginia Beach and Newport News, VA. The area contains one of the world’s largest natural harbors, where the Elizabeth, Nansemond, James, and other rivers empty into the Chesapeake Bay and then the Atlantic Ocean. As a major coastal watershed, Hampton Roads is highly vulnerable to climate change, which could affect coastal and marine ecosystems as well as the significant and growing tourist economy of Virginia Beach. Shipping and shipyards are major industries, which are subject to the vagaries and fluctuations of global markets, with resulting impacts on local communities. The region is home to a major naval base (Naval Station Norfolk), a major air base (Langley Air Force Base in Hampton), a significant shipyard (Newport News Shipyard), and a railroad terminal for coal to be shipped from the harbor to global markets. Hampton Roads has a deep history, reflected in the major colonial historical sites of Williamsburg and Jamestown and Hampton University, a historically black college/university. Its cultural richness is also manifest in historic African-American communities, a growing migrant Latinx population (including an influx of Puerto Ricans after the hurricanes), and nearby Nottoway and Nansemond indigenous communities. Norfolk and the Hampton Roads area are situated within the Tidewater region of southeastern Virginia and parts of North Carolina, which has been called one of America’s eleven distinct cultural regions.

Norfolk is therefore an ideal setting for anthropologists and other social scientists to engage in broad and multivalent analyses that integrate people, geography, and sociopolitical structures in domestic or international settings. What tools and methods can we offer to link these multiple spheres of action? Are local, global, and geographic factors implicated in economic precarity and health disparities? Has social science adequately addressed health issues relevant to military populations, including family stress, trauma, PTSD, and veterans’ health? If major social and economic nodes draw new populations into an area, how do they interact with groups that have been there for generations? How is immigration associated with community change? In what ways are different populations and economic interests treating the imminent threat of climate change? Are local cultures and languages being preserved in communities reshaped by global forces and trends? How do constructions and discourses of race and ethnicity play out in the interplay of social, cultural, and physical ecologies?

Tuesday, the first day of the meeting, will focus on Hampton Roads and surrounding areas, and will include sessions on such topics as: local responses to climate change; military health; labor migration and the interaction of migrants with longstanding populations; the impact of global markets and politics on local economies; the ramifications of tourism; and how the region’s deep historical roots intertwine with contemporary trends and representations.