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Cut ‘n’ Mixed

Picture a DJ splicing two songs together on two turntables, making a new but still deeply rooted cultural expression of music. Imagine a YouTube enthusiast mashing video with unexpected yet surprisingly appropriate audio. The media may be relatively new, but the practice of melding one form of expression with another is as old as art itself.

To explore the forces and attitudes behind what is often described using terms such as pastiche, remix or mashup, the UC Santa Barbara Graduate Center for Literary Research (GCLR) announces its second annual literary research conference, a symposium covering a diverse, interdisciplinary range of topics and themes in the humanities. This year’s conference, “Cut ‘n’ Mixed,” takes place Friday, May 22, at the campus’s Multicultural Center Theater and in the State Street Room of the University Center (UCen). Presentations will be given from 10 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. on issues of cultural reappropriation, articulation and hybridity.

Sohail Daulatzai, an associate professor of film and media studies and of African American studies at UC Irvine, will give the keynote address, “The Afterlives of Malcolm X.”

“We hope this conference will bring together people from all fields connected to arts and humanities,” said Dominique Jullien, a UCSB professor of French and of comparative literature and director of the GCLR. “The focus on hybridity as a creative principle — Cut ‘n’ Mix — should allow us to think outside the box, see the community not only between disciplines, but also between scholarly inquiry and

popular literature.”

Much has been made lately of the perceived decline of the humanities as a relevant field of study in the academic world. In an age in which technology and science are viewed almost as guarantees for a successful post-college career and in which STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) courses are growing in popularity, how will there be room for the artists, readers, communicators, dreamers and other creatives?

If you ask Jullien however, it’s not that the humanities in academia are declining, it’s that they are evolving. And not only that, they are poised to undergo a resurgence, finding strength in numbers in places like UCSB.

“Interdisciplinary studies are the way humanities departments and programs are headed,” said Jullien. In universities all over the country, humanities scholars are banding together to teach across departments, to think across disciplines and to communicate across fields of interest.

“Some of it has to do with the reality of academia changing,” she said, explaining that shrinking departments can no longer afford to hire many new professors with single specialties. But just as importantly, students these days have a growing intellectual hunger for more than a single field of study in the humanities, while scholars find it more meaningful to integrate their areas of specialization within a broader and more global context.

Fortunately, students at institutions like UCSB are ahead of the curve. Amid an interdisciplinary environment that was in place long before it became fashionable for research universities, it seemed the natural thing to create the GCLR, an organization that enriches and enhances the experience of graduate students in the literary studies by giving them access to some of the best of humanities in academia, as well as promoting interdisciplinary dialogue and encounters at various levels.

“People genuinely enjoy working together across departments on this campus,” Jullien said. “And so we wanted to build on that, for our faculty, and for our students.”

Largely student-run with oversight provided by Jullien, the GCLR promotes the exchange of ideas and networking between grad students of the humanities,

through a series of encounters and dialogues. Some of these events come in the form of twice-yearly roundtables where students are called upon to present their work in progress — such as a paper, or chapter of a paper — or the annual conference.

More than just a free flow of ideas, however, the GCLR events — as well as the affiliated events that the center co-sponsors — encourage the participants to flex their communication skills, skills that need to be honed in virtually all stages of academia, from job search to research and teaching.

“Scholarly research in the humanities is often solitary work; in my experience, colleagues in the humanities tend to be guarded and even shy about their personal research interests,” said Michael Grafals, GCLR board member who, as a student, has taken full advantage of the network and the body of knowledge represented by the organization. “The GCLR helps scholars out of this solitude. When I presented my own work on Caribbean national allegories, I got feedback from students in the film and media studies, religious studies and even Chicano studies departments that changed the direction of my own research in positive ways.”

Once a year, the center brings in a visiting scholar, preferably a mover and shaker with broad appeal in the humanities, to teach a seminar, give a lecture and expose the students to ideas and leading-edge trends in the field. Last year's distinguished guest professor was Michael Fried, renowned art historian and art and literary critic from Johns Hopkins. Aside from his weeklong stint at UCSB where he interacted daily with students and faculty, he also gave a guest lecture at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Next year, the GCLR will welcome philosopher and intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss (Cornell University and CUNY Graduate Center).

Only in its third year, the GCLR has made great strides in bringing students and faculty together, offering both intellectual learning and practical training for those interested in teaching and research collaborations, said Jullien. The fact that the young organization has already hit its stride, and the students remain engaged and enthusiastic about participating and organizing, meeting and networking speaks to how important the humanities still is in today’s academic world.

“We’re the ones who know how to read and decipher, decode and explain,” said Jullien, adding that new interest in the humanities has been growing, particularly from the fields of medicine and neuroscience. “We’re the ones who know how to read closely and communicate.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.