UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

October 5, 2020
Andrea Estrada

Living Democracy

When the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center (IHC) at UC Santa Barbara selected a topic for this year's public events series, neither the coronavirus pandemic nor the Black Lives Matter protests had become central to the national narrative.

But given events over the last several months, the choice of "Living Democracy" seems almost prescient.

"What we've learned working to develop publicly engaged humanities programs for our campus in the past decade is that like democracy, the humanities are embodied practices; they are not abstract categories of understanding," noted IHC Director Susan Derwin. "The humanities are interventions into ways of thinking. They are the skills, the tools, the cultural experiences, the modalities through which people express themselves and connect with others."

The humanities provide spaces of community, she continued, where people join together on the basis of shared goals and aspirations. "They create spaces of representation and enable people to become visible and consequential. A democratic society is only as vital as its members are participatory and engaged. Without the humanities, we could not be agentive citizens."

Originally, the topic for the series was going to be "Democracy!" — with an exclamation point — but as the slate of fall speakers came together against the backdrop of recent, historical events, Derwin and the IHC staff began to consider how democracy is embodied. "A democracy is a living breathing thing, of which we

are all attendants," she said. "That's why our work in humanities is action."

All talks in the series are presented via Zoom and are free and open to the public. Registration is required to receive the Zoom webinar attendance link. In addition, to make the events more accessible, each will be presented with Spanish and American Sign Language interpretation.

Unless otherwise noted, events begin at 4 p.m.

The series opens Thursday, Oct. 8, with a talk by UC Santa Barbara historian John Majewski. He will speak on "Living Democracy in Capitalism's Shadow: Creative Labor, Black Abolitionists, and the Struggle to End Slavery."

"In this talk I explore why the relationship between slavery and literacy became increasingly important in the two decades before the Civil War," said Majewski, a professor of history and the Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts in the College of Letters and Science. "I connect the great interest in slavery and literacy to a new form of capitalism that I call creative capitalism. As the name implies, creative capitalism stressed innovation, imagination and invention; in the context of the pre-Civil War North, creative capitalism included widespread schooling, a booming print culture, and a robust civil society.

"As we will see, creative capitalism led to startlingly high levels of inequality and would eventually reinforce systemic racism," he continued, "but before the Civil War it was presented by Black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass with new rhetorical possibilities."

Majewski will conclude his talk by speculating how the creative labor of Black abolitionists has implications for today, as we try to live in a democracy under the shadow of a new form of creative capitalism. "I connect to the present because we are now living with a somewhat different form of creative capitalism in the 21st century that has also contributed to polarization," he said. "The elections of 2020 and 1860 are surprisingly similar in that the relationship between race and democracy is on the ballot."

The fall schedule continues at 5 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 20, with MacArthur Genius and award-winning author Jesmyn Ward in conversation with Derwin. Ward will discuss her creative process as a writer of America's South, and an audience Q&A will follow.

Primarily set on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Ward's novels are deeply informed by the trauma of Hurricane Katrina. She received the 2017 National Book Award for her latest novel, "Sing, Unburied, Sing," which centers on a poverty-stricken family living in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. "Salvage the Bones," winner of the 2011 National Book Award, is a troubling but empowering tale of familial bonds set amid the chaos of the hurricane. Ward's memoir, "Men We Reaped," deals with the loss of five young men in her life — to drugs, accidents, suicide and bad luck that follows people who live in poverty.

Ward also is the IHC's 2020 Diana and Simon Raab Writer-in-Residence, and she will meet with students from the two Writing Program courses to discuss the writer's craft.

On Oct. 22, Harvard University History Professor Lizabeth Cohen will examine the history of efforts — successfully and failed — to keep American cities vital. Her talk is titled "Struggling to Save America's Cities in the Suburban Age: Urban Renewal Revisited." Cohen's most recent book is "Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age," winner of the Bancroft Prize. In it she examines the benefits and costs of the shifting strategies for rebuilding American cities after World War II by following the career of urban redeveloper Edward J. Logue, who oversaw major renewal projects in New Haven, Boston and New York State from the 1950s through the 1980s.

On Oct. 29, in time for the 2020 election, Archon Fung, the Winthrop Laflin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government at the Harvard Kennedy School will give the talk, "From the Embers of Crisis: Creating Equitable and Deliberative Democracy." Fung will explore how American democracy's promise of inclusion, equality, deliberation and self-government requires more fundamental political reorganization, including political leaders with relationships of mutual understanding and accountability to the communities they are meant to represent; powerful new popular groups and organizations; and electoral structures that enable all Americans to participate meaningfully in politics. Fung's research explores policies, practices and institutional designs that deepen the quality of democratic governance. His work focuses on public participation, deliberation and transparency. An audience Q&A will follow his talk.

Concluding the fall line-up of "Living Democracy," Ruth Wilson Gilmore, professor of earth and environmental sciences and director of the Center for Place, Culture and

Politics at the City University of New York Graduate Center, will discuss abolition as a practical program for urgent change grounded in the needs, talents and dreams of vulnerable people. Her talk, “Making Abolition Geographies: Stories from California,” will take place Nov. 19.

Additional events are slated for fall and winter quarters, including a talk by Reuben Jonathan Miller on February 25. An assistant professor in the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, Miller examines life at the intersections of race, poverty, crime control and social welfare policy. His talk, titled “Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration,” will explore what he refers to as “carceral citizenship” — the laws, policies and administrative sanctions that govern the lives of the more than 600,000 people released from prison each year and limit their participation in the labor and housing markets, in culture and civic life and even within their families.

Questions about the IHC’s “Living Democracy” series can be directed to events@ihc.ucsb.edu or by calling (805) 893-2004. Additional information about the series as well as other programming offered by the center, can be found on the IHC website.

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.