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New Visiting Professorship at UCSB Honors Legendary Activist Ella Baker

In the mid-1960s, African-American civil rights activist and teacher Ella Baker helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as well as its network of Freedom Schools, which were designed to teach literacy and economic and political skills to African Americans, mainly in the segregated South.

It makes sense then that the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara would name its new visiting professorship in undergraduate research for the great advocate of education. And the inaugural visiting professor is Shana Redmond of the University of Southern California.

An associate professor of American and Ethnic Studies, Redmond is a nationally recognized leader in African Diaspora, music and social movement studies. Her monograph, “Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora” (NYU Press, 2014), explores the powerful and unique role of cultural productions such as anthems in creating political subjectivities.

“Shana Redmond perfectly fits our expectations for the Ella Baker Visiting Professor,” said Jeffrey Stewart, professor and chair of Black Studies. “She is very enthusiastic about working with undergraduates. Indeed, her personal embrace of the spirit of the Ella Baker Professorship and her sense of the larger possibilities of collaboration with students that the professorship embodies made her a clear choice for the position.”

While at UCSB, Redmond will continue the researching and writing of her current book project, an excavation of the uses of popular benefit song collaborations such as “We Are the World” as rallying cries and fundraising efforts for causes around the world. During winter quarter she will teach the honors course in Black Studies, which she said will have contemporary social justice as its primary focus. The course requires undergraduate majors to conduct original research and complete an honors thesis.

During spring quarter Redmond will work with students to produce a special edition of the department’s undergraduate journal “BLST Review,” the content of which is drawn from research papers completed in the previous quarter’s honors course.

As part of the Ella Baker Visiting Professorship, Redmond also will give a public lecture in the spring highlighting her own research.

“The professorship was appealing to me for a number of reasons,” said Redmond. “I’ve been watching the growth and expansion of the Black Studies unit here at UCSB for a while now. It’s a wonderful site of inquiry.

“The other major reason is the person for whom the professorship is named,” she continued. “Ella Baker has been an icon for me in my thinking as well as in my activist work. It’s been really important to consider her in relationship to the social justice works and practices that are happening in the contemporary movement.”

Stewart acknowledged UCSB Chancellor Henry T. Yang for his support in establishing the visiting professorship. “Over the next four years it will bring to campus powerful young scholars who want to engage with undergraduates on serious methodological and interdisciplinary questions,” Stewart said.

Stewart also noted that students from UCSB’s Black Student Union played a crucial role in the creation of the new professorship, which was designed to address the interests of undergraduates — particularly black undergraduates — in working closely with faculty members on research and social justice projects. “Student interest and support made the difference,” Stewart concluded. “Which is what Ella Baker believed was true of the Civil Rights Movement.”

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.