

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Determined to Learn

One quarter shy of an economics degree from UCLA, Daina Ramey Berry took a course that would change her academic trajectory — and shape her career.

It was a class in African American history, a subject Berry knew well from her upbringing by parents with an affinity for history. When a visiting professor used a pejorative slur in a lecture, it didn't sit well with her, and she said so in her midterm exam. For that she received a D, and a request to visit the professor in his office. Their ensuing conversations soon sparked a passion for history and elevating unsung voices.

Adieu, econ.

Berry changed her major to history, requiring an eleventh-hour “change of plans” phone call home and a fifth undergraduate year to get the degree. Then came a master's degree in African American studies, a doctorate in U.S. history, faculty and leadership positions at esteemed national universities and a fellowship at the National Humanities Center. Also: six books.

All of which brought her to UC Santa Barbara, where Berry is the new Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts. As a native Californian who grew up in Davis and got all of her degrees at UCLA, it's a homecoming as much as a natural next professional step. She was previously the Oliver H. Radkey Regents Professor of History and chair of the history department at University of Texas at Austin, where she also served as associate dean of the graduate school.

“I wanted to think about what it would be like to return to California. And I loved the idea that this position serves both the humanities and fine arts departments,” Berry said. “We each have a language — whether in written form, in a painting or in performance, we are all communicating something about our culture and our lives. To have the opportunity to be the dean of a division that covers all of that feels right. I am my whole person in this position. All of the career experiences I’ve had culminate in me being here and being able to serve as the HFA dean. And it’s very exciting.”

As a “scholar of the enslaved,” Berry researches, writes and teaches about the lives of the enslaved as well as the long-lasting repercussions of slavery on society. She is a specialist on gender and slavery, and on Black women’s history in the United States, and is a sought-after consultant for public-facing projects offered by museums, historical sites, K-12 educational initiatives, syndicated radio programs, online podcasts and public television.

An award-winning author and editor, her most recent publication, “A Black Women’s History of the United States” (Beacon, 2020), co-authored with Kali Nicole Gross, is an empowering testament of Black women’s ability to build communities in the face of oppression, and their continued resistance to systemic racism and sexism.

It all started with a single question that kept coming to her — in those fateful conversations with an undergraduate history professor, then in her graduate studies, she recalled: “What was a young woman like me doing two hundred-plus years ago?”

“It was that question, and also the book ‘Aren’t I A Woman?’ which was life-changing for me,” Berry said. “It was about the experience of enslaved women, and people really had never looked at female enslaved experiences.” Enslaved women became the focus of her dissertation, and has remained at the forefront of her work ever since.

Berry first left UCLA for Arizona State University, where she helped build what was then a new Black studies program. After 10 years as a professor of comparative Black studies within the history department Michigan State University, she spent two years in North Carolina, where she completed a fellowship at the National Humanities Center. During that time, she did much of the research for her book, “The Price for Their Pound of Flesh” (Beacon, 2017). An invited talk at UT-Austin

resulted in the job offer that landed Berry in Texas for 13 years, training dozens of Ph.D. students and growing and honing her skills as an administrator.

“I have a good long game, but I also can think of the short steps necessary to get there,” she said. “Supporting and shaping the student experience, serving the university in that different way, is really very gratifying. Now that I’m here, I want to learn from faculty and staff and students about how the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts can help them achieve their goals and elevate them to the spaces they want to be in — wherever those are, I want to help them get there.”

That fierce determination comes naturally to Berry, who ran four years on the UCLA track and field team — as a walk-on. Training alongside Olympians like Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Gail Devers and Florence Griffith Joyner, she competed while pursuing a degree, which she said was formative for her.

“I had to earn my spot every single year, but I did it, and it was a great experience,” Berry said. “I always say that being a Division I athlete helped me manage my time, manage my schedule, and manage my stress. Sports probably were the biggest foundation for me and my success.”

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.