

Society, Struggle, Scholarship

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Since their birth in the turbulent late '60s, UCLA's four ethnic studies centers have made waves far beyond the campus. Now, as they celebrate their 50th anniversary in a divided America, their mission — to use advanced research to bring about social justice — takes on added urgency.



Danielle Dupuy, assistant director of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and co-lead of the Million Dollar Hoods Project. Photos by Bret Hartman.

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Under the administrative hub of the Institute of American Cultures (IAC) for the last seven years, UCLA's four ethnic studies centers today survey a society racked by conflict over race relations, anti-immigration rhetoric and headlines about white nationalism. Understandably, people are thirsty for insights and scholarship that address the unsettling tumult between whites and nonwhites in the United States. The centers' leaders recognize this as a deep and ongoing struggle in the American story.

"At this political juncture, it sometimes seems we are taking two steps forward and six steps back, with populations that are most vulnerable under attack by political figures. It's up to us in ethnic studies to explain unequivocally what is happening and why," says Shannon Speed, director of the American Indian Studies Center and professor of gender studies and anthropology.

David K. Yoo, vice provost of the IAC and professor of Asian American studies and history, encapsulates the situation: "Before long, the United States will no longer be a majority white nation, and the ethnic studies centers are well-situated to track this emerging America because we have been doing this work for nearly 50 years. Furthermore, the place of the United States in the world is shifting as other countries like China are on the rise."

Ethnic center scholars interpret America's changing culture through the lens of their work. Some fear that a recent rise in racial animus toward people of color has already done significant damage; others see it as part of an ongoing struggle. In the current political atmosphere, "We've seen the erosion of the norms of democracy, which especially hurts the lives of marginalized populations who lack an equal voice," says Karen Umemoto M.A. '89, director of the Asian American Studies Center and professor of urban planning and Asian American Studies, who has spent more than 25 years studying racial conflicts.

From the Chicano Studies Research Center comes another perspective: "We once thought being American was based on values, principles and a code of conduct; it wasn't about your family tree," says Chon Noriega, longtime director of the center. "But a mobilized part of the country now claims that being an American is racially defined." Noriega is concerned that while the UCLA ethnic studies centers were organized during the 1960s social movements, the country is now in the middle of another movement to undo any progress made. It's up to the ethnic studies centers to "integrate research about their communities" into the institutions of the nation, he insists.

Ethnic studies research can also bring a sense of context to a country plagued by political drama. Kelly Lytle Hernández, interim director of the Bunche Center for African American Studies and professor of history and African American studies, recognizes the tendency toward myopia. "It may seem to many people that we are in an unprecedented crisis, but this moment is not crisis — it is clarity," she says. "The contemporary tone of American

politics is an unfortunately familiar chord in the context of U.S. history. The extraordinary histories of indigenous and racialized communities in the United States have much to teach about how to live through this moment. It's a distraction to understand the contemporary situation with Trump as a new frontier. It's not new. This is just the most recent face of a long struggle."

Jerry Kang, vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion, says the IAC's work has never been more essential to UCLA's mission to produce "relevant knowledge" useful to our communities. "In the context of divisive national politics, our ethnic centers' fearless curiosity and rigorous research produce a critical knowledge base, which is necessary to build equity for all," he says.

All of the centers' leaders come together on one point: They rise to the challenge of their shared mission by using data, research, archives, art, storytelling and any other tools to move the understanding of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and Native people from the margins into the mainstream of our diverse society. With that understanding they can build the framework of a more socially just society. Here is some of the intriguing work that is taking them there.



Chon Noriega, director of the Chicano Studies Research Center and professor in the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media.

CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

In more than 16 years as director of the Chicano Studies Research Center, Chon Noriega has built a reputation as a scholar, archivist and curator. "Art has the capacity for provocation; it is a way of reaching people," he says. A professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media and an adjunct curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Noriega says he likes "to take universal concepts that everyone understands" to

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communicate the Latino/ Latina story. Last year's LACMA exhibition about the meaning of home, which he co-curated, was a prime example.

The center organized and co-sponsored 70 public film screenings, book talks, lectures and other public programs from July 2017 to June 2018. Together, they were seen by more than a half-million people in the U.S. and Mexico. The center also lent historical material to eight major museum exhibitions and uses its YouTube channel to archive and provide free access to its programs and classroom events. It also regularly posts videos of its programs and classroom events to YouTube. "For 50 years our center has collected resources and archived information," says Noriega. "Now it is time to use all that information."

The center also collaborates on a national research project, "Latinos and Economic Security," funded by the Ford Foundation, that aims to improve public policy for retiring Latino baby boomers. Along with experts on aging and Hispanic communities, the project includes the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

RALPH J. BUNCHE CENTER FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES



Kelly Lytle Hernández, interim director of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and professor of history and African American studies.

The Million Dollar Hoods Project is the signature research effort of the Bunche Center for African American Studies and its interim director, Kelly Lytle Hernández. Under the lead of Lytle Hernández and Danielle Dupuy, co-director of the center, the project began in September 2017 with information about the high cost of incarceration in Los Angeles. It uncovered proof that L.A.'s nearly billion-dollar jail budget locks up many people from just a few neighborhoods, and authorities spend more than \$1 million per year in each. "Before this, no one knew how much money was at stake," says Lytle Hernández.

The project has since expanded to cover several California counties. It also led to and produced data about the inequities in the traditional cash bail system. In addition, the center compiled a report on policing the local homeless population, finding that one-fifth of those arrested in Los Angeles are "houseless" people, who were often arrested because they failed to appear in court after getting a citation, says Dupuy. "Essentially, people are being arrested for being poor," she says. With data largely crunched by graduate students, new Million Dollar Hoods reports provide facts about policing students and incarcerating women.

In October, a group from the center began to explore a new source of material, the Los Angeles Police Department archives, which were opened thanks to an ongoing lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union. To get the word out about its findings and potentially impact public policy, the center invites community organizations to help plan each report. "They then share the information and help us put it to use," Lytle Hernández says.

AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES CENTER

Los Angeles has the largest urban American Indian population of any city in the country, yet the Native peoples in L.A. are largely unseen. Only about 300 students from indigenous backgrounds are enrolled at UCLA. To help the university deal with tribal sovereignty and other issues, Mishuana Goeman, associate director of the American Indian Studies Center, was named special adviser to the chancellor on Native American and Indigenous Affairs in October. Goeman has been a force behind the center's Mapping Indigenous L.A. project, which speaks to the stories of sites in L.A. that are important to Native American and indigenous peoples. It includes stories from the first peoples of the L.A. basin, particularly the Tongva and Tataviam communities.



Shannon Speed, director of the American Indian Studies Center and professor of gender studies and anthropology.

The center is also making its mark on the global stage. Center director Shannon Speed, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, has extensively researched violence against female indigenous migrants. Her forthcoming book, *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants in the Neoliberal Multicriminal Settler State*, is due out in spring 2019. Many of the women Speed interviewed had been detained in the U.S. after seeking asylum for domestic violence, which will likely be denied, she says. Speed says that her research “disproves the idea that immigrants are coming here to take our jobs. That’s untrue for huge swaths of the immigrant population.”

Speed was also elected president of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association in June 2018. Her high-profile role in the large international, interdisciplinary professional organization will give worldwide attention to scholarship from the UCLA center.

ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER



David Yoo, vice provost of the IAC and professor of Asian American studies and history.

Asians are often seen as homogenous, but many don't fit the stereotype of doctors and engineers, says Karen Umemoto, newly appointed director of the Asian American Studies Center. The center devotes itself to the nuances of diversity and inequality among Asians. For instance, Melany De La Cruz-Viesca M.A. '02, associate director of the center, co-authored the first study of the assets and debts of Angelenos based on race and ethnicity.

The 2016 report, *The Color of Wealth in Los Angeles*, found that while some Asians — such as Japanese, Asian Indians and Chinese — ranked among the wealthiest, Koreans held only 7 cents and Vietnamese only 17 cents for every dollar of wealth owned by comparable white families. According to the report, studying wealth revealed more than studying income, because the accumulation of wealth is more likely to ensure financial security and opportunity for families.

Umemoto says the center also works to educate the public on pending policy issues. For instance, she recently joined legal experts on a UCLA panel addressing the arguments in the Harvard University affirmative action case (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard College*). Asians are split over the case, with some favoring Harvard's consideration of race in admissions and others suing the school to stop the practice. The Trump administration

supports the lawsuit. Umemoto warns of the ways Asians are used to undermine programs benefiting other minority groups through the manipulation and selective use of information.



Karen Umemoto, director of the Asian American Studies Center and professor of urban planning and Asian American studies.

At age 50, the centers and the IAC are shifting into a new stage in which they tap their valuable expertise not only to educate and build awareness, but also to improve the overall well-being of a city, state and nation struggling with their diversity and their identity.

Even with a new power balance in Washington, racial divisiveness will continue to be a major problem in America. "It's up to our centers to show how our resources and research fit into the larger picture," says Noriega, director of the Chicano center. "It's time to change the script."