

**Office of the President**

**TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:**

**DISCUSSION ITEM**

*For Meeting of January 22, 2025*

**WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE: HUMANITIES RESEARCH TODAY**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

At the heart of the humanities is a commitment to understanding and expanding the history of the cultural ideas and political institutions that shape contemporary life. This item highlights innovative UC research in two areas: Shakespeare studies and California history. From new lives for classical theater to new histories for California, humanities faculty across the UC approach the past as an archive of creative resources and untold stories that can help students, citizens, and change-makers build a more informed, welcoming, and resilient California. In the words of Shakespeare, “What’s past is prologue.” History is conserved in libraries, explored in syllabi, and present in the stories communities tell about themselves.

**BACKGROUND**

The humanities disciplines include literature, history, art history, archaeology, film and media studies, philosophy, ethnic and gender studies, and foreign languages. These fields share a core historical component: how did today’s world today come to be? What events—from wars, mass migrations, and colonization to technological advances, social movements, and the advent of new cultural forms—led to the creation of the civic institutions that shape the lives of Californians as well as the nation and the world? What is the history of democratic ideas such as liberty, equality, and justice, and how might those histories be enriched by forgotten voices? What do the events of the past reveal about matters of great urgency today, such as humanity’s relationship to the environment, to technology, and to each other?

The UC Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI) was founded in 1987 by then UC President David Gardner to encourage conversations across the campuses around these and other questions. Each campus (except UCSF) also houses a humanities center or institute that addresses ideas that matter to scholars, students, and civic stakeholders.

The topics addressed by humanities researchers are numerous: from the history of pain and the politics of family planning to the development of new tools for bilingual narrative medicine and community archiving, to name projects recently funded by UCHRI. Today’s presentation will focus on two areas of intellectual activity across the state: Shakespeare studies, arguably the

most iconic subject area in English literature; and new California histories, which recover the contributions of diverse communities to the political culture and democratic promise of the state.

### Shakespeare Studies across the UC

The name “William Shakespeare” is practically synonymous with English literature. From star-crossed lovers and brainy princes to real housewives, witchy wives and spoiled children, Shakespeare’s works continue to resonate over centuries and around the world, thanks to the work of scholars, editors, librarians, and translators as well as actors, directors, and the audiences who love them. Beyond the classroom and the stage, Shakespeare’s plays show up on television, in video games, and on socks and t-shirts. Shakespeare is serious but Shakespeare is also fun. Across UC, faculty are continually finding new ways to share the joy of Shakespeare with diverse California audiences. UC libraries own several copies of Shakespeare’s First Folio, the collection of his complete works published in 1623, as well as other rare books and holdings that support scholarship and education. In the past four decades, many major works of Shakespearean scholarship have been published by UC faculty, such as Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* (UC Press, 1989), Julia Lupton’s *Thinking with Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), and Arthur Little’s *White People in Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Below are four campus-based Shakespeare programs that combine historical scholarship with creative activity in exciting new combinations.

#### *New Swan Shakespeare Center, UC Irvine*

The New Swan Shakespeare Center is a partnership between the School of Humanities and the School of the Arts at UC Irvine. 5,000 patrons visit the New Swan Shakespeare Festival each summer, and many of them participate in learning opportunities such as book clubs, seminars, and lectures. During the year, New Swan hosts events on topics such as Shakespeare’s women, global Shakespeare, Shakespeare and race, Shakespeare and dance, and Renaissance foodways. The Center also hosts an annual Shakespeare Trial featuring Erwin Chemerinsky, Dean of the UC Berkeley School of Law, and Bernadette Meyler, Professor at Stanford Law School.

#### *Shakespeare in Yosemite, UC Merced*

Founded in 2017, Shakespeare in Yosemite is a partnership between UC Merced and the National Park Service. Together, they produce a Shakespeare play every April to commemorate Shakespeare’s birthday and Earth Day. Cast and crew consist of UC Merced students, staff, and alumni, as well as Yosemite rangers and employees. The highly musical 90-minute productions are staged on campus and in Yosemite’s Curry Village. UC Merced students have contributed as actors, composers, designers, stage managers, and social media coordinators. Program alumni have gone on to pursue careers in both the arts and environmental fields. Faculty director Kathryn Brokaw has published a book about this and other projects, *Shakespeare and Community Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), for use by universities, schools, and theaters around the world.

*Shakespeare Workshop, UC Santa Cruz*

Shakespeare Workshop was founded as a research center of The Humanities Institute at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2013. Shakespeare Workshop offers research-driven performance opportunities such as “Undiscovered Shakespeare,” which brings professional actors and scholars together to build and share knowledge about Shakespeare’s lesser-known plays. Other projects include Shakespeare in American Sign Language (ASL), Shakespeare in prison settings, Shakespeare for and with veterans, and an annual community education symposium, Weekend with Shakespeare, held in conjunction with the summer season at Santa Cruz Shakespeare.

*Diversifying the Classics, UC Los Angeles*

The works of Shakespeare have the power to foster interest in other plays from the period and in languages other than English. At UCLA, Diversifying the Classics promotes the vibrant, Spanish-language theatrical tradition developed on both sides of the Atlantic by playwrights such as the Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca from Spain and authors Ruiz de Alarcón and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz from Mexico. The project fosters awareness and appreciation of Hispanic classical theater in Los Angeles and beyond, expanding the canon to include the heritage of U.S. Latino communities.

**New California Histories**

As a land grant university, the University of California has a strong tradition of public history, defined by the National Council on Public History as “history that is applied to real-world issues.” Public historians write interpretive materials for museums and state parks, record and share oral histories, preserve local monuments and archives, and even consult on films and television. Many UC historians contribute to their campus branch of the California History-Social Science Project (CHSSP), a UC Davis-based statewide network of scholars, teachers, and teacher educators dedicated to K–12 curriculum and professional development in history and social science. Riverside, Irvine, and Santa Barbara have special programs in Public History that foster new knowledge and create employment opportunities for history majors and Ph.D. students. UC Press publishes a journal, *The Public Historian*, dedicated to advances in this growing field.

On January 23 and 24, 2025, UCHRI is convening researchers from around the state who are creating new knowledge about California’s diverse and vibrant past. Highlighting the expertise of public historians, geographers, K–12 teachers, and community and university archivists, participants will share their work, recovering stories and mapping the impact of immigrant and indigenous communities that have contributed to the political culture and democratic promise of California. The program features regional history projects from eight UC campuses that document the processes of migration, conquest, land use, integration, contestation, creativity, and renewal that shape the region. The event includes hands-on opportunities for teachers to explore unique primary sources from around the state.

*Featured project for Regents Presentation: Uncovering Diverse Histories of Yolo County*

Funded by grants from the UC Davis Public Impact Research Initiative and the UCHRI Engaging Humanities program, the project “Uncovering Diverse Histories of Yolo County” seeks to research untold histories of underrepresented groups in Yolo County and to develop K–12 curriculum from that research. Partnering with CHSSP and the Yolo County Archives, it pilots a collaborative model of historical research for undergraduate and graduate students pursuing careers in education and public history.

The project launched in the summer of 2024 with a team of six UC Davis graduate and undergraduate students conducting research in the Yolo County Archives’ extensive collections. Focusing on the history of the earliest Chinese immigrant and African American communities in the region, researchers combed through property records, court cases, census records, coroner’s inquest files, newspapers, maps, and photographs. They partnered with the Woodland Opera House, a local theater, and California State Historic Park to create an exhibit of the research. Next, the team will work with curriculum experts and teacher leaders to develop educational resources for local elementary and secondary school classrooms based on the group’s archival research. The work of this project has already generated enthusiastic support from members of the community eager to share their stories and to engage with local history in partnership with the University of California.

Additional projects that will be showcased at UCHRI’s Mapping New California Histories conference include:

*Reparative Memories: Communities in Crisis and Archival Care, UC Riverside and UC Los Angeles*

This working group of humanities scholars, community archivists, librarians, and cultural memory workers is engaging communities in crisis whose cultural heritage is threatened by the memory of war and militarized colonial displacement as well as the ongoing effects of police violence and incarceration.

*The Making of Monuments, UC Santa Barbara*

A collaboration between UC Santa Barbara’s Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, fourth- to sixth-grade educators in the Santa Barbara Unified School District, and the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, The Making of Monuments is a place-based education project that prepares students to become custodians of their local histories by learning how and why monuments come into being in the first place.

*Watsonville Is in the Heart: Mapping a Recuperative History of Filipino Farmworkers, UC Santa Cruz*

This multimedia mapping and curricular project is a collaboration between UC Santa Cruz and the Watsonville-based organization, The Tobera Project, which preserves and uplifts the narratives of Filipino(a) migrant farmworkers in California’s Pajaro Valley.

*Colorado Desert Education Collaborative, UC San Diego*

This educational partnership between the Imperial Valley Desert Museum and UC San Diego’s Making of the Modern World Program is creating digital content for schools in Imperial County and eastern San Diego County on the human and environmental history of the Colorado Desert region.

*Remapping Indigenous History, Culture, and Storytelling, UC Berkeley*

“Before You Are Here” will be an innovative Indigenous online map of the San Francisco Bay Area designed for educational and museum contexts. It uses the tools of geography to convey the history and contemporary realities of the Ohlone people.

### **CONCLUSION**

Humanities scholars in many fields are working together to understand the surprising entanglements of language, culture, politics, technology, and the environment to shape thoughtful public conversations that elucidate the meanings of the past for diverse communities and policymakers and the responsibilities people have to each other in a changing world.

### **KEY TO ACRONYMS**

ASL	American Sign Language
CHSSP	California History–Social Science Project
UC	University of California
UCHRI	University of California Humanities Research Institute