

movement

Standing up for Critical Race Theory *by Michelle Christian*



May 25, 2021, Governor Bill Lee signed into law a General Assembly bill banning teaching related to race and racism and gender in K-12 education. In collaboration with former UT Psychology Professor Jioni Lewis, Michelle Christian, associate professor of sociology, co-wrote an op-ed in the Tennessean challenging the bill and highlighting the importance of teaching race and racism. The legislation is part of the nationally coordinated and highly-funded conservative project to stop any form of racial equity pursuit in the United States that has achieved greater urgency in the last year due to murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Arbury and the dynamic activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Members of our sociology department are dedicated to continuing teaching, research, and advocacy related to racial justice in multiple ways. Below are a few of our commitments.

BUILD OUR CONCENTRATION AREA IN CRITICAL RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES

We are deeply proud of the teaching, research, and student engagement emerging from our latest concentration area Critical Race and Ethnic Studies launched in 2017. We will continue to strenuously support this concentration and the work faculty and students are conducting. Each year the number of undergraduate students choosing this concentration grows and we are recruiting top graduate students from across the country who are pursuing cutting-edge and rigorous scholarship

on the production and forms of racism. The undergraduate and graduate course pedagogy we developed centers a critical race approach that incorporates interdisciplinary scholarship that explores the historical, structural, and changing nature of race and racism. Our undergraduate courses give students a strong foundation in understanding how racism emerged, how it shapes people's lives chances, and how it is built on the foundation of white supremacy. Similarly, at the graduate level, our courses highlight the foundational texts to critical race and Critical Race Theory, the global contours to racism, and how to best methodologically pursue empirical studies on racism. Students are learning, synthesizing, and applying the tools learned from a critical race approach to pursue a more racially just society.

SUPPORT OUR FACULTY WHO TEACH ON RACE AND RACISM

We are committed to support the teaching and scholarship of our faculty, particularly, junior faculty and non-tenure track, who are teaching courses, supporting students, and conducting research on race and racism. We have recruited several faculty over the last several years whose expertise centers on race and racism and its intersection in other domains. Our amazing faculty are conducting research in the areas of racism's impact on families, environmental racism, The Movement for Black Lives, global racism, intersectionality and Black feminisms, Black place-making, racism and finance, race and policing, race and immigration, and many more. These faculty members

have helped turn our department into a hub of cutting-edge critical race research that we continue to cultivate and grow.

WHY CRT IS AN IMPORTANT SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

We will fight against the false and manipulative narratives against critical race scholarship and CRT specifically by using our social media platforms to highlight why CRT is important, what it tells us, and to spotlight the scholarship and work of our faculty and students.

SUPPORT OUR KNOXVILLE COMMUNITY FIGHTING FOR RACIAL EQUITY IN KNOXVILLE

At the heart of our department is a commitment to social justice. Several of our faculty and students are using their expertise and are working in partnership with community groups who are fighting against racism in Knoxville, including in the areas of education, policing, politics, and in the quest for transformative justice. Several are also working in collaboration with faculty across UT to create more racially just practices throughout campus. Faculty are also working directly with allies and community partners speaking out against and challenging the wave of anti-CRT legislation. We are proud of this social justice work and will continue to practice public sociology and advocacy in pursuit of racial justice.

Essentially, we will continue to be who we are, do what we do, and fight for a more racially just campus, city, state, country, and world.



Joys and Success Despite Difficult Times

MESSAGE FROM **STEPHANIE BOHON**, DEPARTMENT HEAD

GREETINGS FROM ROCKY TOP!

In many ways the letter I was hoping to write this year is not the one I am writing now. We had hoped that by now we would have weathered the worst of the COVID-19 storm and all would be back to (relative) normal. I was looking forward to getting together with all of you and pursuing great new directions in our department, led by a strong cadre of energetic and innovative assistant professors. In fact, I am still looking forward to our future, but sadly, we find that we cannot yet safely come together unmasked. As I write this, I worry greatly about the devastation that we are about to experience with the spread of the Delta variant, and I encourage everyone to stay as safe as possible.

However, in some ways this is the letter I anticipated writing in that it celebrates all our joys and successes of the last year despite the challenges of navigating a worldwide pandemic. While we were scrambling to move our classes online, teach via Zoom, figure out how to have a research career without access to participants, and learn how to work while being constantly interrupted by spouses, children, and pets, we still managed to amass awards, be elected to important positions in professional associations, be invited to apply for prestigious grants and fellowships, publish great work in top journals and elite academic presses, and continue to show why we are one of the best places to work and learn in this country. I am reluctant to call out any one success by name, because there are too many to list and I wouldn't want anyone to feel slighted, so I encourage you to read all about them in the pages of our newsletter. The one great success I will mention is that Enkeshi El-Amin, alumnae and lecturer in our department, is on the verge of opening the Center for Black Appalachian Studies of which she will be the director. The opening of the Center much sooner than we had planned has been made possible by a generous donation from our alumnae, Wanda Rushing. We thank her and wish Enkeshi great success in this important endeavor.

Last year was difficult, but after coming out of lockdown, we emerged to find babies everywhere! If I count correctly, we have eight(!) babies among our faculty and graduate students, and we celebrate the impending arrival of Hazel to Alex Moulton and his wife, Rose. Adding to that joy are two marriages: Alex (Pellegrino) Szmuto was married in June in Dallas, Texas, and AJ Knowles was married in July in Knoxville. We wish them great happiness.

While we are welcoming new babies and husbands into our home families, we also have some terrific new additions to our department family. Joining us in the front office is our new administrative and graduate program specialist, Nicole Stephens. She comes to us from the Office of Research and is already making everyone's job easier. Joining the ranks of our full-time lecturers are Emily Landry, who started in spring, and Jeremy Smith, who will begin work this fall. You may recognize both as recent graduates from our PhD program. We are delighted to have them with us. Also joining us this fall as professor of sociology and africana studies is Derrick Brooms, former professor and head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Cincinnati. His work examines Black men in urban environments with a special focus on education. He is coming to UT as part of the transition of Africana studies from a program to a department, and we feel very fortunate to have him here among us.

Also new to the department is a shiny white refrigerator! After 30 years, our old one expired in a most dramatic fashion, and we are grateful to Jill for jumping through the many bureaucratic hoops required to replace it. Last year was my first year as head, and I am so grateful to be in a department with supportive, hard-working colleagues and students who made the transition to my new position—which would have been difficult in the best of times—so easy. We have a strong and vibrant program, and we have shown that the worst of times doesn't break us. I look forward to what this year has to bring, and I wish every one of you a safe and healthy 2021-2022.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Understanding the Needs of Her Community

by
Alexandra Szmuto

Maria Urias received her BA in sociology from UT this spring. Outside of her studies, she was involved with a wide variety of organizations on and off campus during her time at the university, including the Honors Leadership Program, SGA, Alpha Kappa Psi Business Fraternity, as well as SAA, and the VOLbreaks program through the JCLS. She also worked at the Garza Law Firm and some performed undergraduate research during her time at UT. Most notably, Urias received the Torchbearer award, UT's highest undergraduate award, in March.

Urias was initially attracted to sociology as she believed it would provide her with an avenue to better understand the needs of her community.

"Sociology opened my eyes to the many structural issues we face in the United States today, as well as how to tackle these issues through listening to those impacted by them," she said.

In the fall, Urias will be attending Vanderbilt University to pursue a Master's of Education in Community Development and Action. This new path was shaped directly by her study of sociology, as she believes that community development is "an extension of how we understand society and community." Ultimately, Urias hopes to work in nonprofit management, possibly specializing in rural issues. She desires to continue helping others and believes that what she has learned in sociology has given her the first set of tools needed to do so.

"What I've learned through Sociology at UT has shaped the way I view the world," Urias said. "This degree equipped me to be a critical thinker of all the systems around me, how they impact people, and how our social systems form. I am so grateful to have attended UT, as the involvements I was in as well as the classes I took prepared me to think of the world in a sociological mindset."

GRADUATE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Living a Healthier, Productive Life

Rachel Ponder, a PhD candidate in sociology, is the founder of Academy in Motion (AIM), a program designed for graduate students to come together to put their bodies in motion and focus on healthy habits to live healthier, productive lives.

"Graduate school is an incredibly exciting time, but a time that is taxing on the mind and body," Ponder said. "Often life for a graduate student is full of long hours reading and writing, skipped meals, and unhealthy coping strategies to the stresses and pressures of the program...our bodies are neglected, and our work suffers. Nearly 39% of graduate students are at risk of depression or other mental health conditions, and 75% report lower back pain. Graduate school is difficult enough without these challenges."

Ponder conceptualized AIM after starting graduate school.

"During my first year in the PhD program, I started suffering mentally, emotionally, and physically," Ponder said. "I began to gain weight, experienced pain, and began to feel sluggish. I discovered the realities of depression and PTSD. I began an exercise routine in attempt to mix up my days at the desk and suppress the feelings of depression. That plan backfired when I landed in physical therapy. I learned that this is not uncommon among graduate students. Which leads to the ultimate question...How can this be productive?"

After being cleared from PT, Ponder jumped into the world of endurance racing as the drive to support herself through the program. Since, she completed several obstacle races, long distance triathlons and her first marathon.

"I felt less pain and fatigue, more confidence, and the structured days allowed for increased amounts of productive work time," she said. "I want to share that with you."

With signs of depression, anxiety and chronic illness soaring among graduate students and faculty even before the pandemic, Ponder's work offers more than an "academic" contribution. She inspires and guides us in health and hope.



A New Path of Sociological Knowledge

Christopher Rogers is currently working on two projects. The first is a critical methodological paper with Michelle Christian, associate professor of sociology, that discusses researchers' ethical obligations to their participants. The second project is for a special issue on media histories of care, which will discuss how organizations hold coercive power over various care resources and people's response as an act of liberation and autonomy is to build care-webs in their communities to meet the needs of the people. Furthermore, as currently titled "The Hospital Won't Save Us: An Exploration of Racism and Care as an act of Liberation," Rogers's dissertation exists in the duality of exploration and imagination. Rogers explores how and why hospitals are sites of racial violence in which Black and Brown people will always experience various mistreatment, inadequate care, and death because racism is a permanent fixture in society. Secondly, he imagines newer healthcare infrastructures by developing a concept around care. Theoretically, reimagining what care is and how it should be administered to not only save lives but one day lead to our collective liberation from hostile systems of power.

"Chris is set to make immense contributions to sociology through his various projects," said Christian, Rogers's dissertation chair and mentor. "First, by challenging scholars to re-think the field as a site to build intimacy rather than distance with participants; second, by centering critical race theory tenets to understand hospitals as sites of racial harm and the need to build new forms of care outside of traditional forms. Chris's depth and compassion run through everything he does. Chris is marking a new path in the cultivation of sociological knowledge."

Rogers is also working with the UT Legal Clinic on racial justice listening project, where he helps the legal clinic map various forms of racist practices in Knoxville.



Sociology in a Pandemic: Reflecting on our losses and our hopes

In March of 2020, the Department of Sociology moved nearly all of its classes, meetings, and work life into a largely online environment, a massive technological shift for us and our students. We developed multimodal courses and curricula, studying up as quickly as possible to the urgency of the moment. That shift was accompanied by one where we and our students learned to teach, learn, and work from home, with our families and lives in the Zoom background and in isolation far away from friends and loved ones. We did the exhausting work of triage: teaching (our students and our children), caregiving, research, service, advocacy. We monitored the physical and mental health of our students, colleagues, and those around us and adapted on the ground to those needs as best as we possibly could. In the Fall of 2021, we returned to our classrooms, with the battle scars - more exhausted, more skeptical, but also more compassionate, more flexible, attuned to organizer and Black feminist scholar Mariame Kaba's reminder: "Hope is a discipline." In this year's newsletter, we want to honor the losses and celebrations of all of our lives in the midst of what was undoubtedly one of the toughest years in the history of this department and university.

LOSSES

Across these past few years, we have lost children, parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, friends, colleagues. COVID-related or not, the losses have ached that much more because so many of us could not be near our loved ones as they transitioned or access the support system we needed to heal in the aftermath. Because we study the social, we remain committed to building a world in which our social relationships build the infrastructure of health, justice, and hope we so desperately need. Here we recognize those in our sociology community, many of whom came and went too fast.

Troy Dowdy (BA, sociology '94) who rarely missed a Vols football game, died this summer, leaving behind his wife and children whom he loved to cook for.



Evan L. Weissman, associate professor in food studies and nutrition at Syracuse University's Falk College, passed away unexpectedly this spring. Professor Weissman earned his PhD in geography from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. His dissertation, "Cultivating the City: Urban Agriculture and Agrarian Questions in Brooklyn, NY," explored the tensions between the stated goals

and outcomes of urban cultivation. He earned a master of arts in sociology and minor in environmental policy from UT, and a bachelor of arts in environmental policy, administration, and law from Binghamton University. As an educator, mentor, scholar, and friend, Professor Weissman was committed to the human condition, always problem-solving to build better communities. He inspired those around him to advocate for equity in the food system and beyond. Alumnus Andrew Gunnoe wrote: "Evan was a significant influence on me during his time at UT and was a major reason I shifted to sociology. What a tragedy."

Our dear friend and colleague, anthropologist **Rebecca Klenk** passed in late fall of last year. Klenk was a key actor in our global studies program and the UT disaster, displacement, and human rights program. She did research and organized field study in Himalayan India and Appalachia around her research areas of critical theory, poverty, globalization, and environmental degradation. She offered courses that many of our students moved through, on such topics as gender and globalization, South Asia, Bollywood cinema, and the cultural anthropology of mountain environments. She loved being outside and hiking the lush landscape of East Tennessee. She raised a beautiful son Aaron with her husband Dan Klingensmith.



Longtime family member of the department, **Virginia Hood**, married to Professor Emeritus Thomas Hood for more than 60 years, passed in March of 2020. A physical educator with bachelor and master's degrees in physical education and an earned doctorate in educational administration from studies completed at Michigan State University, University of North Carolina, and the University of Tennessee, "Ginger" was well prepared for the variety of jobs she held over her lifetime - teaching in middle school and college, working in programs to recruit students to college, as a survey interviewer, as a UT Federal Credit Union teller, as director of the Girls Clubs of Knoxville, and her final job as superintendent of recreation for the City of Knoxville.



Regina Benedict (1976-2021) by Lois Presser

Our friend **Regina (Gina) Benedict** passed away at the age of 44 on March 31, 2021. She was a UT sociology alum (PhD, '09) and assistant professor of criminal justice and coordinator of the criminal justice program at Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee.

Prior to joining the doctoral program with a criminology concentration at UT, Benedict earned her MA degree from East Tennessee State University and BA from Mississippi State University. At ETSU, Benedict was honored as Most Distinguished Graduate Student in 2000. At UT she received the Excellence in Teaching award from our department in 2008. Rooted with her family in Knoxville, Benedict continued to teach classes to UT students for some time after she earned the PhD.

Benedict had every intellectual gift that the work of a professor demands. She was a superb instructor. She had, through her own careful research, absorbed a great deal of insight about patterns of harm. That insight, and her own manner of authenticity and dry wit, drew and resonated with students. Benedict was also a very talented writer.

For her superb doctoral dissertation titled "Giving Back Not Giving Up: Generativity Among Older Female Inmates," which I had the privilege of supervising, Benedict conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 29 women, most of them 40 and older, who

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were imprisoned in the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women in Shelby County, Kentucky. She found, in her own words:

“The women I spoke with reported engaging in generative behaviors during incarceration. Unable to guide their own children, older inmates often ‘adopt’ younger inmates. They pass on values, experience, and wisdom to the younger inmates in hopes of improving their futures and preventing them from coming back to prison. They offer cautionary tales – encouraging them to ‘do as I say, not as I did.’ Furthermore, generative inmates plan to continue giving back upon their release. The women in my sample were almost consumed by thoughts of community service upon release – seemingly stemming from a desire to give back and make up for what they took. The women I spoke with were also concerned not only with how they would be remembered, but also whether they would be remembered at all.”

Benedict had compassion and respect for all people, for those who have suffered and those who have made mistakes that systems do not readily forgive, which she conveyed in her classes and in her research. We are truly lucky to have had Benedict in our midst.

Reflections and Memories of Professor Don Clelland by Asafa Jalata

Let me say a few words about my friend and mentor, **Don Clelland**.

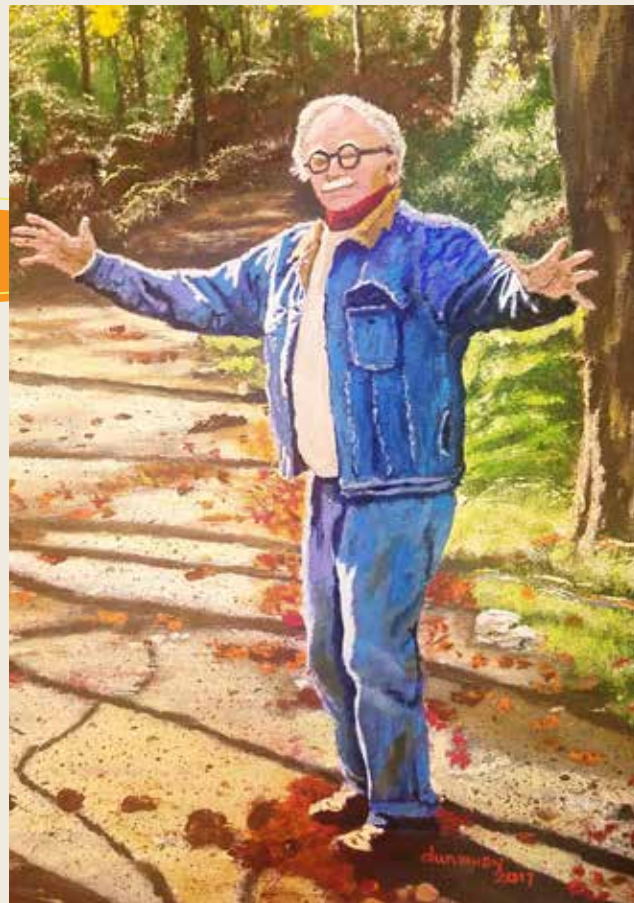
After I arrived at UT in August 1991, Don warmly received me and introduced me to the Department of Sociology and its culture. Since this period, Don and Wilma have remained my friends and the friends of my family.

Don and Wilma were the first family who invited my family and I to their home and introduced us to Knoxville. For almost three decades, I enjoyed stimulating and lovely discussions with Don on several topics from politics to social issues. His intellectual rigor, honesty, and his distaste for all forms of inequality and injustices, and his commitment for social justice impressed me. Furthermore, his deep and critical knowledge on world systems theories, and his understanding of all forms of Marxism were impressive. I enjoyed discussing with him and exchanging intellectual ideas with him.

Above all, Don was my faculty mentor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Although the head of the department assigned another faculty member to be my mentor, I convinced the head to assign Don to be my mentor. I liked and trusted him. He contributed to my professional development and success.

Don’s intellectual orientation was human-centric and egalitarian. He was anti-orthodoxy on intellectual, cultural, and social issues. I believe that these qualities enabled him to be a critical thinker and true internationalist. Don was truly a global citizen who refused to be limited by cultural and nation-state boundaries. Furthermore, as an organic intellectual, he tried his best to inculcate liberation knowledge in the minds of individuals through challenging knowledge for domination and maintaining status quo. In this sense, he was truly revolutionary.

His legacy in the Department of Sociology is durable. As I learned from him and other colleagues, Don immensely contributed to the development of our three areas of specialization, namely, political economy, criminology, and environment. Particularly, he left his intellectual fingerprint on the area of political economy by creating and teaching courses such as the modern world system, political sociology, and comparative poverty and development.



Finally, it is disturbing to lose a valuable friend and a decent human being who affected our lives positively. My family members and I always remember Don’s friendship, decency, and humanity. In our Oromo culture, when our best friends like Don are taken away from us by death, we express our emotions openly. We lost our friend, and nothing we can do about it except remembering and celebrating his life.

HOPE: We are a department where, before the pandemic, babies and children were present every day in our hallways, offices, meetings, and classrooms. These are the kiddos we miss. These are the babies (and new faculty!) we have yet to meet and get to know. These are the gardens we planted, the new homes we made, the eggs from the chickens we raised, the people we fell in love with and married! And these, indeed, are our hopes. If the saying “An image is worth a thousand words” holds true, this montage is in the millions. We offer it in health and hope.

KEEPING ON KEEPING ON: We also continued to do research in our international areas of expertise, conducting zoom talks, dropping media comments and podcast presentations, participating in advocacy and defending and translating our work at a moment in which its contributions were of urgent importance. Key markers of the success include a set of hard-earned achievements.



Pursuing Sociological Truths

by Alexandra Szmurko

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Shirley Rainey-Brown received her PhD in sociology in 2003. She wears many hats at Fisk University in Nashville, serving as associate vice provost of online initiatives and distance education, professor of sociology, discipline coordinator, and director of the graduate program in social justice. She is a recognized expert teacher, researcher, curriculum developer, and mentor of African American students and is also a valued participant and consultant to many community organizations in the Nashville area. Rainey-Brown’s many accomplishments have recently been acknowledged by UT, as she is a winner of the 2021 College of Arts and Sciences Professional Achievement Award in Scholarly Excellence. The award recognizes outstanding alumni who have a high degree of success in their chosen field of endeavor.

Rainey-Brown had her interest in sociology piqued during her first introduction to sociology course, which she took during her course of undergraduate study at the University of South Alabama. She was impacted greatly by her instructor, who made the study of society real and exciting to her and to his other students. After taking that course, she changed her major from education to sociology.

Kasey Henricks received the Southern Sociological Society’s Junior Scholar Award. Asafa Jalata received the Oromo Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award. Jon Shefner was selected to be UT’s nominee for the Andrew Carnegie Fellows Senior Scholar and Deadric Williams, UT’s nominee for the 2022 William T. Grant Scholars Program. Stephanie Bohon took over as president of the Southern Sociological Society and was this year’s recipient of the College of Arts and Sciences Senior Diversity Leadership Award. Michelle Brown received the College of Arts and Sciences New Research in the Arts and Humanities Award. Junior faculty Christina Ergas published her first book, *Surviving Collapse: Building Community Toward Radical Sustainability* (Oxford UP) and Timothy Gill, an edited collection titled *The Future of U.S. Empire in the Americas: The Trump Administration and Beyond* (Routledge). We also found one of our areas of concentration at the center of a national debate, to which Michelle Christian responds in her article “Standing up for Critical Race Theory.”

Rainey-Brown credits sociology, and her experience in sociology at UT in particular, with preparing her to be an expert in her areas of interest and with teaching her how to use the sociological imagination to explain cause and effect, action and consequence, in social life. She is grateful for the analytical and research skills, leadership skills, and writing skills that the department engendered in her, and states that they have been greatly beneficial in her career over the years. Ultimately, Rainey-Brown believes that the pursuit of sociological truth has inspired her to work for change, as sociology has given her “the ability to understand, relate, communicate, explain, and provide solutions to social issues that exist in communities and neighborhoods.”

When asked if she has any advice for current sociology students, Rainey Brown stressed the importance of being “structured, organized, committed, hardworking, dedicated, and persevering. If you can do these things, you can succeed within the discipline of sociology.”

These are inspiring words from an amazing woman who has indeed achieved much success and has undoubtedly affected much change.

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to understand everyday social behavior and the
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