

movement

Colleagues Fulfill Late Alumna's Research Legacy with New Book



The Department of Sociology lost a cherished alumna when **Regina (Gina) White Benedict** passed away suddenly on March 31, 2021. She was assistant professor of criminal justice and coordinator of the Criminal Justice program at Maryville College in Maryville, Tennessee, having earned her PhD in sociology at UT in 2009.

Benedict was loved and admired by her academic and home communities (including a softball community) and especially by the hundreds of students she taught through the years—with deep respect for the students and for their subject matter in all its complexity.

Benedict's knowledge and wisdom live on in her research. Her dissertation, based on in-depth interviews with women in prison in Kentucky, was motivated by a desire to understand how people make meaning of their lives while living in captivity. Benedict had always intended to publish the dissertation as a book. In the past year, a communal effort made the book a reality.

Lois (Lo) Presser, Distinguished Professor of the humanities and professor of sociology at UT and Benedict's advisor from 2005–2009, teamed up with Beth Easterling, visiting associate professor of criminal justice at Roanoke College,



to find a publisher, adapt Benedict's original work to its specifications, and prepare, with heavy hearts, the foreword and afterword. Presser and Easterling had been close both to Benedict and to the project: They knew its potential. So, they conferred with Benedict's husband Travis, her daughters, Zoe and Mia, and her parents, Mickey and Cookie White. The group set a plan in motion.

Incarceration and Older Women: Giving Back, Not Giving Up was published by Bristol University Press in the summer of 2023. The book is built on Benedict's rigorous research, Presser and Easterling's editorial efforts, the steady encouragement of Benedict's family, and the intelligent and compassionate stewardship of the publishers. Most of all, the book owes its existence to the candor and generosity of the women who agreed to be interviewed by Benedict.

These women spoke of hardships that began early in life and were compounded by incarceration. However, they also spoke of making positive meaning of their circumstances. They told stories of helping and supporting, now and in future, fellow prisoners, family members on the outside, and others. Benedict understood these stories as inspired by an impulse toward generativity, of guiding and nurturing generations to come.

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MESSAGE FROM DEPARTMENT HEAD,
STEPHANIE BOHON

Ten Years of Progress

“A wonderful pocket of joy and a place where you go to breathe,” is how our department was described in the first line of a recent report to the university as part of our decennial Academic Program Review (APR). This description, which came from interviews with our graduate students, perfectly encapsulates how I feel about our department, so I was delighted to see this reflected in our APR.

An APR is an intensive dive into our department’s progress over the last ten years and our current condition, conducted by a team of highly esteemed sociologists from other research-intensive universities and faculty leaders from within UT. The team spent two days on campus in March 2023 talking to our undergraduate and graduate students, staff, faculty, heads of other social science departments, and leadership in the College of Arts and Sciences as well as the Provost’s Office. They also reviewed a 151-page self-study that our department conducted last fall under the direction of Michelle Brown.

In April, they produced a report to the provost and dean highlighting our significant contributions to the university, profession, and community. The report provides external validation for something that I already know: UT’s Department of Sociology is a special place where scholars—both established and in training—work every day in a collegial, caring, and conscientious way to make the world a better place.

In a recent address to the state, our chancellor confirmed that UT has been ranked as one of the top producers of student Fulbright scholarships, and our sociology and global studies students are among these recipients. The report highlights how we provide high-quality educational opportunities by noting that undergraduate students in the program “are trained to think as change actors, with skills and critical perspectives appropriate for entry-level workforce positions across multiple domains.” They note how excited these students are about what they study and how prepared they feel for their future. That our undergraduate students in both sociology and global studies are first-rate is hard to refute. It is a joy for me to interact with our great students.



The report also underscores how we conduct research that makes life and lives better, calling our research record “impressive” and making the following assessment:

The faculty and graduate students in the Department of Sociology are a highly productive group of scholars by virtually every metric. [Their work] demonstrates an interdisciplinary contribution to our understanding of the pressing social issues of crime, the environment, racial inequality, and the global political economy. This has also served to strengthen the department’s recruitment and retention through a growing reputation across multiple communities.

We are small but mighty. Although we have a much smaller faculty and graduate program than our peers, in the last decade we have collectively published nearly 200 journal articles, more than 100 book chapters, and 52 books. Our faculty members have submitted 157 research proposals and amassed \$4.2 million in funding. Additionally, last year we tenured four of our highly productive assistant (now associate) professors, and two of our professors were named distinguished professors, joining the two who already hold this title.

Finally, the report highlights the ways in which we demonstrate that diversity and community are enduring sources of strength as well as the way in which we serve as role models for other departments “at a time when such role models are desperately needed.” The reviewers conclude, “The Department of Sociology is a wonderfully vibrant, consciously cultivated community, dedicated to a liberation-centered sociology.”

I am proud to be part of this community—a community that has grown this fall with the addition of three new faculty and 13 incoming graduate students. We plan to grow our faculty more this year as we search for three new assistant professors. We are strong because we all work together, and together we will face an even brighter future.

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Benedict passed away at 44, the same age as Evelyn (a pseudonym) when she and Benedict sat down for an interview. Evelyn was serving a 70-year sentence for murder and attempted murder. When Evelyn met Benedict, she had recently learned that she would not be considered for parole for another 20 years. But Evelyn worked hard on personal growth while in prison and envisioned the contributions she might one day make: “I think I’ll be a good influence when I get out, even if I’m 100 years old. I’ve set a goal. I’ll do it.”

Prison researchers before Gina Benedict have illuminated how people “cope with” or “adapt” to prison life. They have illuminated resilience in prison, and hard-won desistance and reintegration after release. Yet, these studies and perspectives could never adequately depict the resolve to make a difference held by people like Evelyn.

In her book, Benedict wrote that she had motherhood in common with most of her research participants. We, her community, would state the matter differently: Both she and her participants had an unshakeable will to give to others. We received Benedict’s care and will pass her legacy of care further on.

ALVARO GERMÁN TORRES MORA *Investigates Social Inequalities*



Alvaro Germán Torres Mora is specializing in political economy and globalization as well as concurrently pursuing a master’s degree in statistics through the Intercollegiate Graduate Statistics and Data Science Program. His research interests are on the impacts of colonialism, land inequality, land use, and land grabs, and he is currently collecting dissertation data in Colombia on a McClure Scholarship and the Dr. Wanda Rushing Sociological Research Award.

Torres Mora earned a law degree in 2007 from the National University of Colombia. He then worked as a licensed attorney, first for the National Prosecutor’s Office, then in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, where he documented cases of forced displacement and land dispossession. In 2019, he earned a master’s in development studies with minors in data science and

French from the University of Helsinki in Finland. He speaks four languages. Since coming to UT, Torres Mora has published four journal articles and book chapters.

In the US, he has presented papers at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, the Southern Sociological Society and internationally he has presented in conferences in Finland, the Netherlands, and Colombia.

Torres Mora received our department’s Excellence in Research Award in 2021. He is currently teaching social inequalities and has taught introduction to sociology and social justice/social problems. He has also served as a lecturer at the Nueva Granada Military University in Colombia, where he taught international criminal law and juvenile criminal law.



Destine Appointed Humanities Center Fellow

Assistant Professor **Shaneda Destine** has been selected for the Humanities Center Faculty Fellowship Program. Destine has a joint appointment in sociology and Africana Studies, and her courses also contribute to UT's program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality.

Destine earned her PhD in 2017 from Howard University. Since coming to UT, she has been remarkably productive while navigating the challenges of maintaining faculty positions in two departments—challenges made more difficult by COVID-19 and attacks both in the state of Tennessee and nationally on Black lives and the teaching of critical race and ethnic studies. Destine does work that is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, focused on Black safety, Black joy, and Black care. Her work emphasizes the theoretical approaches rooted in intersectionality. Destine's focus on "safe" environments for Black Americans for protection and equitable treatment is a thread that runs through all of her work, past and future.

As Destine moves forward with work on historical Black landownership, this fellowship at the Humanities Center will be invaluable, for she will have the opportunity to seriously devote her time to this project, which will move her beyond her dissertation work as she approaches tenure.



Jones Recognized for a Career of Service

Professor **Robert Emmett Jones** earned the Outstanding Service Award from the College of Arts and Sciences. Jones is a pioneer in our environmental sociology concentration, as only the second faculty member in that area. In this role, Jones was a crucial leader in designing that concentration, building the curriculum and attracting undergraduate and graduate students alike.

Jones's pioneering research in human dimensions of ecosystem management, in environmental values and public opinion, and sustainable rural and urban community development influenced the curriculum and energized too many students to count. Yet, Jones's curricular contributions extend well beyond building his field. He has been a key actor in integrating the Sociology Department's four concentration areas not just as individual pillars contributing to a robust academic program, but particularly as they provide essential knowledge needed for the pursuit of social justice-oriented scholarship.

Jones has long contributed to the Rural Sociological Society and the Society of Human Ecology. Perhaps most notably, he served as a charter member and organizer of the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management. Jones has played multiple roles in this professional association, from student awards chair, to working on the steering committee and the recruitment committee. The organization's mission is to build and develop the subfield of environmental sociology as well as promote and engage in collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts to advance societal understanding of the socio-ecological dimensions of environmental degradation and environmental injustice.



Shefner Named College's First-Ever Herbert Family Professor of Excellence

Professor **Jon Shefner** was named the Herbert Family Professor of Excellence in August 2023. He is the first scholar in the College of Arts and Sciences to hold this endowed professorship, which recognizes a distinguished career of teaching, research, and service.

He served as head of the department for ten years and has held the title of Betty Lynn Hendrickson Professor of Social Science. He was the founding director of the Global Studies Interdisciplinary Program. He is also a Fulbright Scholar whose long and remarkable research record in social justice, social movements, globalization, political economy, and green economic development has made him an internationally recognized and trusted scholar in these areas of sociological inquiry. Much of his research in Latin America and in Southern Appalachia is motivated by his life-long commitment to fairness, diversity, and democratic principles needed to create public policies and educational programs that are effective and just.

Shefner is an award-winning teacher, editor, and author who has written nine books and scores of journal articles and book chapters. His published work is often collaborative, helping graduate students with their professional socialization, and always seeks to highlight the political message in his scholarship. He is also a public-facing scholar, publishing editorials and serving as subject expert for many news stories.

Shefner currently serves as the founding director of the Community-University Research Collaborative Initiative (CURCI), a university and community-wide program that fosters community-engaged research. Now in its second year, the program provides support for faculty across the university to collaborate with community organizations to bring university expertise to meet local needs.



Jalata Named Betty Lynn Hendrickson Professor

Professor **Asafa Jalata** was named the Betty Lynn Hendrickson Professor by the College of Arts and Sciences in August 2023. This endowed professorship is given biannually to a faculty member in the college with an exceptional record of research and teaching in the social sciences. The professorship recognizes Jalata's 32 years on the faculty of the Department of Sociology, along with his affiliations with Global Studies and Africana Studies.

Jalata is originally from Oromia, a region of Africa under the control of Ethiopia. The oppression of the Oromo people and the banning of the Oromo language, followed by years of heavy repression from state forces, left a lasting impression on Jalata, who has dedicated his career to exploring the possibilities for genuine democracy in the nations of the global South.

Jalata works and teaches in the areas of critical race and ethnic studies and political economy and globalization. His research record is substantial, including publishing 15 books—nearly one every two years across his scholarly career. He has also published more than 70 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and works of public sociology explaining social movements, violence, and war in Africa. Works like those produced by Jalata are significant to the American public, which hears too little about Africa and knows little about US-African relations and policies. His ability to dig deeply into Africa's political, social, and cultural conditions lends to our understanding of the lasting impact of colonialism, imperialism, oppression, and democracy's frailty.

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Presser Named Distinguished Humanities Professor

We are proud to highlight a UT sociology first: **Lois Presser** was named Distinguished Professor in the Humanities. The professorship recognizes “extraordinary and ongoing achievements by senior scholars in the humanities.” Presser, who serves as the department’s director of graduate studies and teaches in the area of criminology, has been at UT for her entire academic career and was promoted to professor in 2014.

Presser is a pioneer in the field of narrative criminology, which unites a growing interdisciplinary and global community of scholars. Narrative criminology considers stories as shaping—legitimizing, motivating, and potentially defying—harmful actions and patterns. Narrative criminologists note the behavioral and ethical consequences of individuals’ and societies’ engagement with narratives. They mount humanist inquiries into those narratives and their constituent elements. Harm is a topic that winds through nearly all of Presser’s work, with her most recent book, *Unsaid*, focusing on how silence contributes to harm.

Presser has published six books along with dozens of journal articles and book chapters. Her work has been cited more than 2,300 times. She has earned much critical acclaim, for example, for her 2018 book *Inside Story*, which interrogates the emotional sway of stories that motivate masses of people to endanger and kill others—and look the other way in the face of such harm.



Read more about our outstanding faculty online. sociology.utk.edu



RESEARCH ACTIVITY



UT Establishes Appalachian Justice Research Center

by Michelle Brown

UT established the Appalachian Justice Research Center (AJRC) in July 2023, co-directed by sociology Professor **Michelle Brown** and Professor Wendy A. Bach, College of Law. The AJRC is a trans-disciplinary research and training collaborative dedicated to advancing just and equitable community visions in Appalachia and the Mountain South.

Modeled after clinical legal education, the AJRC leverages university resources to address urgent, protracted, and historically under-addressed issues in the region. The center does this through a community-driven non-extractive research model. Projects begin and end, and begin again, around community priorities and legacies of resilience—specifically those communities most impacted by histories of poverty and violence.

The first wave of the center’s projects will focus on such topics as coal mining reclamation and regulatory law, housing precarity, community safety and participatory defense, as well as just economic transitions in place of prison siting in Appalachia. The center will offer innovative pedagogy, including a core community justice lab, where students work in small teams with multidisciplinary faculty on specific aspects of these problems. The AJRC will bring advanced undergraduates as well as law and graduate students from across campus into the same classroom space around community projects for the first time at UT via this new interdisciplinary program in justice studies, developed collaboratively between the College of Law and the College of Arts and Sciences.

The AJRC is already planning a number of related events in collaboration with departments and colleges across UT. Sociology has long been a campus leader in community engagement initiatives, and the department is excited to be working closely with the College of Law, where the AJRC is housed, to extend that work across the region. Keep your eye on the AJRC!



Social Research Workshops

by Tim Gill

Over the past three years, Assistant Professor **Tim Gill** developed and organized the UT Social Research Workshop. The purpose of the workshop is to cultivate a space where professors and graduate students can engage in open and constructive discussion about their works-in-progress. The result of such discussions is that scholars can enhance their work and move towards eventual publication.

Students and faculty in the department have attested to the effectiveness and helpfulness of the workshop. Graduate students report that the workshop has been instrumental in assisting them in making sense of the writing and analytical process. Indeed, the demystification of the writing process is one of the guiding principles of the workshop. No book manuscript or research article is ever complete after the first draft. Writing is a process, and we aim to show this through our workshop discussions.

Over the past three years, we have hosted a range of internal and external guests from such places as the University of Michigan, University of California-Los Angeles, the University of Pittsburgh, Yale University, and elsewhere. In addition, we have hosted our own graduate students who have received thorough feedback on their works in progress. For the ensuing two academic years, Gill received a Haines-Morris Grant to continue funding external guests to present and discuss their work, and we look forward to future conversations.



NEW FACULTY

Natasha Patrice Ellis, PhD • Lecturer
Education: Doctorate, University of Tennessee (sociology with a concentration in critical race and ethnic studies and environmental sociology); master’s degree, Clark Atlanta University (sociology); bachelor’s degree (sociology and anthropology), Agnes Scott College
Ellis has studied and facilitated research in India and West Africa exploring social stratification, the transnational circuits of colorism, skin bleaching, and how digitization of imagery poses a sociological, psychological, and emotional detriment to one’s understanding of self and racial identity.

Joong Won Kim, PhD (he/him/his) • Lecturer
Education: Doctorate, Virginia Tech; master’s degree, DePaul University; bachelor’s degree, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
Kim’s work can be found in academic peer-reviewed journals such as *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Sociation*, *Sociological Inquiry*, and *Sustainability*. Kim also serves as a research assistant professor and the communications director at the Laboratory for the Study of Youth Inequality and Justice.

Anthony J. (AJ) Knowles, PhD • Lecturer
Education: Doctorate, University of Tennessee; master’s degree, University of Tennessee
Knowles’s primary research focus pertains to the social and economic effects of technologies and automation, and how the continuous pursuit of higher productivity and efficiency continuously changes the nature of labor in society.

Prashanth Kuganathan, PhD • Postdoctoral Teaching and Research Fellow in Global Studies
Education: Doctorate (Applied Anthropology), Columbia University
Kuganathan’s current book project combines the ethnography of education with applied linguistics, examining the role of the English language in postcolonial and postwar northern Sri Lanka. The project also studies people’s lives in the Jaffna peninsula who experienced the violent and displacing devastation of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009).

Bill McClanahan, PhD • Assistant Professor
Education: Doctorate, University of Essex in Colchester, England
McClanahan’s research seeks to generate questions surrounding visual and sensory cultures, police, and rurality by interrogating the intersections of violence, ecology, and power. He is a reviews editor at the journal *Crime, Media, Culture* and serves on the editorial board of *Critical Criminology*.

Steve McGlamery, PhD • Lecturer
Education: Doctorate, Virginia Tech
McGlamery’s work is in race, inequality, religion, whiteness, civil rights movement, religion and race, and race and sports.

Christine Vossler, PhD • Lecturer
Education: Doctorate, University of Tennessee
Vossler’s primary research interest pertains to sexual harassment, under the lens of narrative criminology and narrative victimology. Specifically, she studies how offenders communicate their experiences of harmdoing, how victims use narratives to explain and make sense of their experience in the aftermath of victimization, and the impact of sexual harassment on bystanders.

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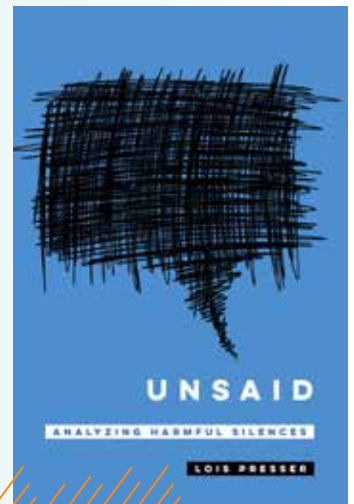
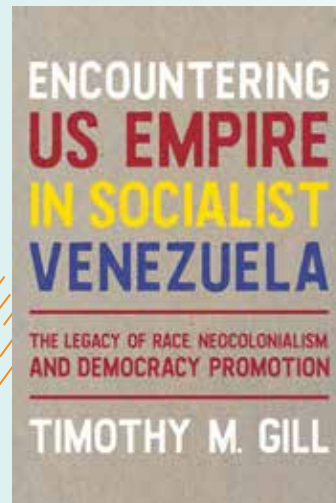
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CONGRATULATIONS!

...to Lois Presser on the publication of her latest book, *Unsaid: Analyzing Harmful Silences*, and to Tim Gill on the publication of his book, *Encountering US Empire in Socialist Venezuela: The Legacy of Race Neocolonialism and Democracy Promotion*.

Read more about faculty achievements and spotlights on pages 4-6.



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