

Wordplay

T ENGLISH

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Iliana Rocha

POETIC JUSTICE FOR TRUE CRIME

Assistant Professor **Iliana Rocha** has been obsessed with true crime ever since she was a child.

“Every week I would want to skip ballet because it was on Wednesday nights,” she said. “And that’s the night *Unsolved Mysteries* was on.”

Rocha’s interest in the genre stems, in part, from an unsolved murder within her own family. Rocha’s grandfather, Inocencio Rodriguez, was shot to death in Detroit, Michigan, in 1971. Officially, her grandfather was shot and killed by a Detroit police officer, but little is known about what really happened or why.

The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez (2022), Rocha’s second book, re-examines her grandfather’s death through poetry. She grew up hearing countless stories about the death of her grandfather, many of them contradictory.

“It was New Year’s, and he was shooting guns, and the Detroit police officer took him as a threat and shot him,” said Rocha. “Or, no, it was a bar fight. Or, no, it was a drug deal gone wrong. Or he owed money to a cartel. Or it was a jealous husband.”

Rocha wrote a poem for each of these many versions.

The collection’s focus on true crime gave Rocha an outlet for exploring another aspect of her interest in true crime: the fact that women, though not socialized to express violence, are so often the victims of it. Interspersed among poems about her grandfather are others about cases of missing women.

Rocha believes that the process of writing the book ultimately changed her relationship to true crime.

“I can’t consume it in the same way I did,” she said. “Because when you watch so much of it, you start to recognize the entertainment value of it, and the way that narratives are constructed as to further generate enthusiasm, excitement, suspense, at the expense of the victim—most of whom are women.”

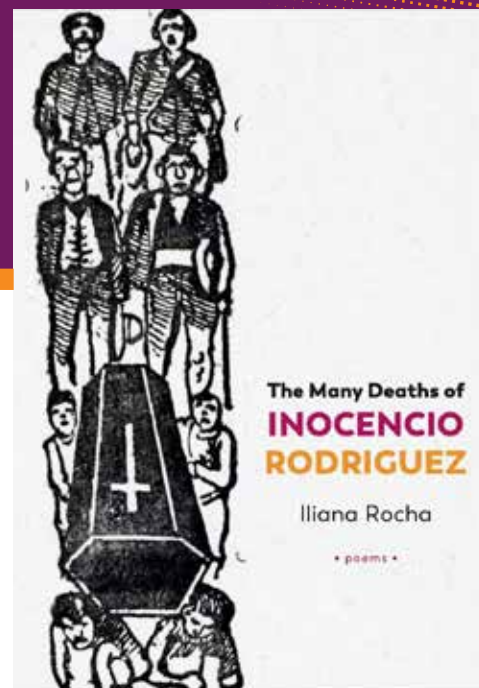
Women are particularly overrepresented when it comes to domestic violence, something Rocha has experienced personally.

“It’s consoling to be in a community with these women, but at the same time, I’m so angry that there’s nothing stopping these cycles of violence,” she said.

That’s among the reasons why domestic violence, including familicide, will be the subject of Rocha’s third poetry collection, currently in progress. Since COVID, her home state of Texas has seen an explosion of such violence, and Rocha plans to examine how it has specifically affected the Latinx community there.

“Along with that comes an ethical responsibility, too,” she said. “What’s been on my mind lately is: How do I do justice to these women without it perpetuating the same cycles of victimization?”

Read a poem from *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*: tiny.utk.edu/Rocha.



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MISTY ANDERSON
Professor and Head
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

MESSAGE FROM THE **DEPARTMENT HEAD**

With each passing year as department head, I become more grateful for our incredible alumni, who support our work through an array of partnerships and gifts. Our website is full of your success stories, which inspire our current students to connect the major they love to exciting careers and fulfilling lives. From law to video games, from business to teaching, from medicine to publishing, our alumni really do it all, and they help to pay it forward.

Chris and Watty Hall established a new professorship in American literature, and Kirby Davis established a new chair to honor his former professor of poetry, Bob Leggett. Their generosity ensures that we will be able to recruit fantastic new professors for the future who will inspire, challenge, and mentor generations yet to come.

You may have read one of the many think pieces about the decline of the English major and wondered what that means for English at UT. It's true that the overall number of majors are down, a consequence of students feeling pressured to choose more obviously pre-professional fields. But in the midst of those national trends, we're proud to report that we are second among our peer institutions in the percentage of undergraduates majoring in English. We're working hard to become first.

Our Director of Undergraduate Studies Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud has brought energy and innovation to reaching prospective students. Our new Director of Student Careers and Internships Erin Elizabeth Smith is helping students and alumni to connect our majors with career opportunities. This fall's Big Orange Give campaign raised over \$10,000 to provide additional paid internships for our majors, so that we can make good on a bold initiative: to help every English major who wants one to find a paid internship before they graduate.

Many of our current majors are already involved in internships as tutors in our highly successful Flagship High Schools College Admissions Essay Tutoring program. To date, we've helped over 1,200 students apply to college; 46 of the 47 early admissions offers to East Tennessee's Flagship Schools seniors came through our program. In short, we're making a difference in the community by showing the importance of great writing, creative storytelling, and critical thinking.

These skills are at the core of what we do. As you know, the world needs thoughtful readers, critical thinkers, and writers with clear, creative voices now more than ever. Thank you for every student you send our way and for helping the next generation of English majors find their way by contributing to scholarships and serving as mentors. Please keep in touch and share your good news with us. You never know who might find inspiration in your story.

Sincerely,
Misty G. Anderson



Analyzing Literature

(TAYLOR'S VERSION) Photo: Ashley Jackson, *The Daily Beacon*

What do megastar Taylor Swift and the UT English Department have in common? For the 100 students who showed up for the inaugural meeting of the Taylor Swift Literary Club in September, more than you might think.

Sponsored by the English Department, this brainchild of Lecturer **John Han** and literature major **Laura Snyder** brings the tools of literary analysis to America's most popular songwriter.

The idea for the club came up in one of Han's literature classes. To teach his students the importance of close reading he invited them to practice this activity using one of Swift's songs. Their response convinced him that a club devoted to the singer's lyrics would engage students by combining the skills taught in English classes with their passions outside the classroom. When he asked for someone to join him as a student assistant, Snyder was quick to sign on.

Taylor Swift, it turns out, is an ideal subject for a literary club. "She tells a story the way a novelist tells a story, or a poet," said Snyder. "She thinks of herself as a literary mind. She engages with words in a way others don't."

The songs on Swift's 2020 album *Folklore*, for instance, are linked as part of an interconnected story, while the final track on the deluxe edition, "The Lakes," refers to the Lake District associated with William Wordsworth and the English Romantic poets.

The inaugural meeting in the Nursing Education Building on September 14 opened with participants singing along with Swift's music while getting to know each other. The discussion that followed addressed what it means to be

"literary" and how literary terms and concepts apply to songs like "Getaway Car" and "Dear John."

Han and Snyder worked with a detailed PowerPoint presentation to trace the uses of imagery, symbols, themes, figurative language, tone, and references to literary works in individual lines and stanzas. Students contributed their own insights as experts on Swift's music and life.

Han is excited by the idea that they're see themselves as Taylor Swift scholars.

"They know the lyrics so well, and they're basically analyzing it all the time," he said.

Students clearly love the discussion and the chance to be together talking about their idol.

"I'm really hoping this club creates a community on campus," says Snyder. "Especially one that celebrates women's empowerment and the things that words can accomplish."

As the semester progressed, their activities extended beyond the classroom. In October, members were invited to attend a UT Volleyball game in Taylor Swift Eras attire, and the club co-hosted a Swift trivia night with the UT Pride Center.

Watch a Vol News video on the Taylor Swift Literary Club: tiny.utk.edu/SwiftEnglish.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Rodney Thompson



For multi-award-winning video game designer **Rodney Thompson** ('04), computer science was the obvious answer for his degree path at UT. Obvious, but not very satisfying.

"After three years, I got to the point where I was like, I don't think I can spend the rest of my career sitting and staring at code on a computer screen," he said. "I couldn't handle the lack of human interaction."

He had enough credits for a computer science minor, and he left it at that. For a major, he chose English, concentrating in creative writing, even though doing so meant having to add two more years of coursework. It was worth it.

"When I switched to English, it was very much like, I'm doing this to fulfill myself," he said.

Thompson is currently senior design lead at video game company Bungie and owner of Scratchpad Publishing, where he produces his own tabletop role-playing games. In addition to being the creator of Spectaculars, Dusk City Outlaws, and Lords of Waterdeep, he was one of the creative minds behind Dungeons and Dragons Fifth Edition, Scoundrels of Skullport, and Star Wars Saga Edition.

Across the wide variety of games Thompson has worked on, there's one particularly noteworthy feature: a focus on storytelling.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've always loved stories and storytelling," he said. "To me that's been the most fulfilling thing. When I create a tabletop game, I use tools that are very different from the ones I use when working on video games. But it all amounts to the same thing: I'm putting the pieces in place so that when a player comes to the game, whether they're picking up a controller or rolling dice, they get to experience and direct a story."

He honed his storytelling skills in fiction and screenwriting classes at UT. Screenwriting taught him concision, how to "distill a narrative down to its most essential elements."

One of the most valuable things he took from his fiction-writing class was the art of peer review. In workshop-based classes like fiction writing, students produce their own work, share it with their classmates, and then get together as a group to offer constructive critique and feedback. In a collaborative industry like the one he is in now, being able to give and receive feedback is essential.

"I use those skills literally every day in my in my video-game design job," he said.

One of the biggest factors in Thompson's decision to work for Bungie was that the company would allow him the freedom to work on his own projects on the side. During the day he makes video games, staring at code all day, just as he once feared.

"But at night it's just me making the games I want to make and telling the stories I want to tell," he said.

A lot of his coworkers wonder how he leaves work and goes home to work some more.

"I think I just have more creative energy than an eight-hour-a-day job can contain," said Thompson.



Dionte Harris joined the department this year as an assistant professor in twentieth and twenty-first century African American literature, film, and cultural studies. His specialties include Black studies, critical theory, queer and trans theory, performance studies, and visual culture. Before coming to Knoxville, he earned his BA from the University of Maryland, College Park, and his MA and PhD from the University of Virginia. As a graduate student, he received a Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship, a Yale LGBT Studies Research Fellowship, and a University of Pennsylvania Provost's Predoctoral Fellowship.

Harris's current project, tentatively titled *Boyhood: Black Becoming, Queer Being, and the Question of Life*, examines black boyhoods and queer practices in African American literary and cultural productions. A chapter from this project—on Barry Jenkins' 2016 coming-of-age film *Moonlight*—appeared in the Spring 2022 issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*.

Harris is also at work on an interdisciplinary project that examines how Black artists mobilize mathematic and scientific knowledge to offer alternative understandings of and relationships to Black and queer life.

In addition to undergraduate and graduate courses in African American literature, Harris will also teach Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema, a recent addition to our undergraduate film offerings.



Also joining the department this year as a member of our Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics division is **Rima Elabdali**, an assistant professor specializing in applied and sociolinguistics. She comes to this position with an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from Portland State University and an MS in Linguistics and PhD in Applied Linguistics from Georgetown University.

Elabdali's research illustrates the dynamics of inclusion and inclusion that multinational learners navigate in universities and other educational spaces. Her dissertation, *Belonging, Conflict, and Race: A Critical Ethnography of Educational Policies and Practices in a Community Language School*, explores how the educational policies and practices at an Arabic language community school in the US impact the schooling experiences and feelings of belonging of immigrants affected by transnational conflicts. Earlier work explores how multilingual learners negotiate collaborative language learning interactions with peers and tutors. Her articles have appeared in *TESOL Quarterly*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Computers & Composition*, and the *Modern Language Journal*.

In addition to helping administer the department's English as a second language program, Elabdali will teach courses in sociolinguistics, American English, teaching English as a second/foreign language, second language acquisition, and pedagogical grammar for ESL teachers.

Respectfully Disagreeing



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In an age of social media, cable news, and hyper-partisanship, the act of engaging with those that one disagrees with seems harder than ever to practice. How, one wonders, can a democracy survive without a shared belief in civic discourse and its respect for different perspectives and a common good?

Questions such as this drive the teaching and research of **Jake Buller-Young**, a PhD student in the department's Rhetoric, Writing, and Linguistics division. Working at the intersection of composition pedagogy, religious rhetoric, and civil discourse, Buller-Young asks, "How do we strategically use language in ways that help us get things done collectively in a democracy?" Or, as he tells the hairdresser who asks him what he does, "How do we teach English 101 so that when we argue about politics, we don't kill each other?"

If rhetoric is the art of using language to persuade or influence others, Buller-Young teaches his students to understand this process in collaborative and deliberative terms. Central to this approach are the rhetorics of listening and empathy. In his words, "I can't persuade you if I don't understand you, and I can't understand you unless I listen to you."

One of the ways he demonstrates the value of this is by asking his students to come up with policies on attendance and late work for the course. After deliberating in groups and as a class, they formulate policies in these areas that are sometimes stricter than the ones he would have developed on his own. As for navigating political and other differences, Buller-Young's students report applying the skills he teaches them in relationships outside the classroom.

In recognition of his success in the classroom, Buller-Young was awarded the 2023 David A. Hambright Teaching Award for Graduate Students.

Having grown up in a Mennonite community in Kansas and spent four years as a missionary kid in West Africa, Buller-Young is also interested in exploring the issue of persuasion in the context of religious rhetoric. His 2022 journal article "You Are What You Love (to Eat): Mennonite Cookbooks and the Constitutive Rhetoric of Practice" looks at the way everyday activities such as cooking instill the values of communities in those who practice them. For this and other work, he received the John C. Hodges Award for Exceptional Scholarship by a Graduate Student.

Pursuing Passion



"It helped me see that there were other options than law," said Hall.

That class ultimately led Hall to one of her many current academic extracurriculars. As digital media editor for the journal *Early American Literature*, she's responsible for maintaining social media pages and posts and is working on developing the journal's companion podcast. In the spring, she will conduct interviews with early American scholars about their book publications.

Simultaneously, Hall is a tutor at the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center and copyeditor for the student-run newspaper the *Daily Beacon*. Last year she served as the paper's news editor, a job she loved, but decided to take a step back from to make room for other opportunities, such as an unexpected new internship at the Tennessee Valley Authority. She says the offer from TVA came out of the blue, but it's not hard to understand how she caught their attention.

"I've been leading meetings of fifty-plus people, and I'm a natural introvert, so it's definitely out of my comfort zone," said Hall of her TVA role. "But I think it's helped me to grow a lot. I've learned a lot of new skills that I wouldn't have learned in the classroom about interpersonal communication and leadership."

While leadership roles may not have been something she ever saw herself in, they've become more and more a part of who she is. As vice president of UT's Leading Women of Tomorrow, Hall has been instrumental in forging ties between female undergraduates at UT and professional women working in many different fields within the community.

This year she will participate in the National Humanities Leadership Council, a highly competitive program that annually selects around twenty top students nationwide who have demonstrated considerable humanities-based leadership skills.

How does Hall manage all this as a student—and double-majoring in political science, by the way?

"I actually consider myself to be a really disorganized person," she said. "I'm just really good at prioritizing the things I care about. So, I think a lot of it has to do with allocating your time to what you do find passion in."

"Try as much as you can," is **Autumn Hall's** advice for students trying to find their way in college.

"For me, finding my passion has come from trying as many things as I can and really learning what I want to do with my life," she said.

Hall was confident about her direction when she first arrived at UT as part of the prestigious 1794 Scholars Program.

"I was one hundred percent dead set on going into law school," she said. "Then I started talking to friends who are interning at law firms and started hearing from lawyers. I was in a law fraternity for a couple of years, and I realized, I don't know if that's actually what I want to do."

Then a freshman class in Early American Literature with Professor Katy Chiles helped open her eyes to a future in English.

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**JANE AUSTEN REGENCY
BALL PARTICIPANTS**

Photo: Taryn Ferro

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