

Spring 2011 Newsletter



Josh Bloom – Charles E. and Sue K. Young Graduate Student Award Winner 2011

This year is the second in a row that a sociology graduate student has won the coveted Charles E. and Sue K. Young Graduate Student Award. Four awards of \$10,000 are presented to exceptional graduate students who have achieved distinction through outstanding scholarship, teaching and University citizenship. Josh's award was presented at the College Awards Ceremony held at the Beverly Hills Hotel on March 29, 2011.

Josh's dissertation "Pathways of Insurgency: Black Liberation Struggle and the Second Reconstruction in the United States, 1945-1975" investigates why, in three phases in the postwar years, such different practices mobilized widespread insurgency by blacks: the black anti-colonialist movement in the late 1940s; the civil rights movement in the early 1960s; and the revolutionary nationalist movement in the late 1960s.

Earlier this year Josh published, "Working for Justice: the L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy" (Cornell University Press), co-edited with Ruth Milkman and Victor Narro. The fruit of a multi-year collaborative project involving about thirty scholars and activists, the book features eleven substantive chapters which analyze cutting edge campaigns of low wage worker organizing and advocacy in Los Angeles.

Josh will also soon publish "Black Against Empire: The Political History of the Black Panther Party" with second author Waldo E. Martin, Jr. a project which early reviewers, including Doug McAdam, have said may become the definitive scholarly treatment of the period. The book draws extensively on archival sources including two sets of previously fugitive documents: the only near complete run of the Panthers' own newspaper; and the H.K. Yuen Collection, including thousands of underground flyers and newsletters, and 30,000 hours of audio recordings from meetings, rallies, and debates of social movement organizations in the Bay Area in the late 1960s.

Awards & Honors

Sociology major **Ghaleb Attrache** was accepted into the 2011 American Sociological Association's Honors Program, and is invited to attend the ASA's Annual Meeting in Chicago.

Congratulations to **Gustav Brown** who was recently awarded a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award (2010-11)

Professor **Patrick Heuveline** has been elected to the Board of Directors of the Population Association of America (PAA). The PAA is a non-profit, scientific, professional organization that promotes research on population issues.

Thought and Action Awards from UCLA's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) go to **Rahim Kurwa** (2010) and **Gary Yeritsian** (2011).

Contents

Awards and Honors.....p1

Letter from the Chair.....p3

Undergraduate Program Update.....p4

Graduate Program Update.....p5

Meet the 2010-11 Graduate Students.....p6

Donations.....p9

SUA Update.....p10

SGSA Update.....p10

Faculty Member in the Spotlight: Tanya Stivers..... p11

Publication in the Spotlight:
“Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States” p12

Sociology Summer Sessions.....p15

2011 UCLA Alumni Day.....p16

Letter from the Chair

Bill Roy



These are uncertain times, especially in California. But the UCLA Sociology Department continues to thrive. This year we have hired three assistant professors, some of the best young scholars anywhere. Edward Walker is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University and specializes in social movements and organizations. His theoretically rich and policy-relevant research on corporate funded social-movement-like organizations that some people have dubbed “astro-turf” organizations (phony grassroots) helps us understand why some organizations are better able to attract public attention than others. In the next academic year he will teach courses in social movements and organizational sociology. Stefan Bargheer is a graduate of the University of Chicago who specializes in the growing field of the sociology of morality. His fascinating comparative and historical work examines how such seemingly quirky activities as bird watching give rise to highly abstract moral values. This is a radically novel approach that turns on its head

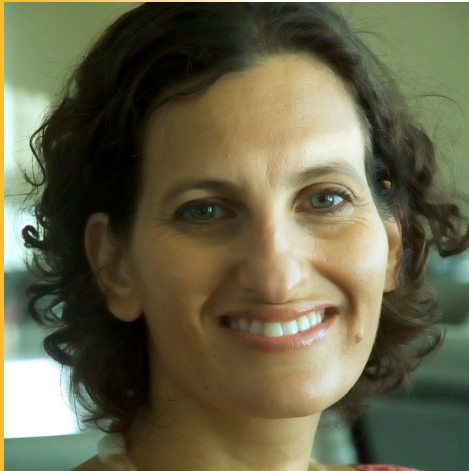
the conventional view of morality which treats moral reasoning as a process that trickles down from the abstract and general to the mundane and specific. He will be joining us in 2012 after completing a post-doc at the Max-Planck Institute in Germany. Ka-Yuet Liu is a graduate of Nuffield College, Oxford. Her research on the social dynamics of the perplexing epidemic of autism has already garnered considerable media attention. She uses state-of-the-art quantitative techniques to tease out how much of the increase is due to social influence over how autism is diagnosed. She too will be finishing a post-doc, hers at Columbia, before joining us in a year.

Our relative prosperity is due to several factors. Most importantly, our earlier misfortune of faculty separations, tragic deaths, and numerous retirements meant that we have already downsized before the cuts that have debilitated some parts of the university. After a year with no new hires across the entire social science division, Dean of Social Sciences Allesandro Duranti has recouped resources to replenish departments like ours. Secondly, we continue to use the resources available to us wisely, looking for opportunities, for example, to streamline processes and take advantage of technological advancements while maintaining our highest standards of excellence in the delivery of services to our students. Finally, the collective wisdom of our faculty, staff, and graduate students, refracted through their profound dedication to a scholarly vision has provided a beacon to follow. As the rest of this newsletter validates, we have an exceptional corps of talented researches, teachers, service providers, and apprentice professionals.

The uncertainty remains. It is clear that the university will change. Not the least of those changes is a transformed relationship between the people of California and the world class university that bears the state’s name. The state government is a less reliable mediator, so direct support, unmediated by taxation will be necessary. To put it bluntly, the people that care about UCLA and its mission will have to take some of the burden on their shoulders through donations. We hope you will heed the call.

Update from the Desk of the Vice Chair of Undergraduate Studies

By Abigail Saguy



Congratulations to the class of 2011! Our majors will leave UCLA with strong background in critical analysis and reasoning, as well as an appreciation for how social context shapes individual behavior and attitudes. This training equips our majors for careers in law, social welfare,

urban planning, business, education and public health, among other professions. Some will pursue graduate studies in sociology or related fields. Regardless of their ultimate career track they choose, their undergraduate training prepares them to be active citizens and community members who question the status quo and work towards positive social change.

Of course, no one plays a more important role in our undergraduate program than the undergraduate counselor. This year, Simbi Mahlanza has taken over that important role, becoming the person our majors turn to for advice and guidance about what classes to take, how to get in, and how to negotiate the bureaucracy of a large university. Simbi arrived to the Sociology Department from the School of Arts and Architecture and we're very glad to have her!

I would like to conclude by sharing some of the original empirical and applied research projects conducted this year by our students. While students conduct research as part of a wide-range of courses, I focus here on two exemplary programs. These include Sociology 195, *Ethnography in Los Angeles: Corporate and Community Internships* and the Sociology Honors Program. Rather than a comprehensive list of projects, I hope to provide a flavor for the range of exciting work undertaken by our undergraduates.

Ethnography in Los Angeles: Corporate and Community Internships fuses analytical training with civic engagement, as students are given the opportunity to "practice" sociology beyond the

university setting. Throughout ten weeks, under the supervision of graduate student ethnographer Molly Jacobs, students learn ethnographic methods that enable them to observe, record, and analyze the phenomena they find most compelling. This work has culminated in a number of exceptional empirical papers this year. In one such project, a student analyzed the strategies used by a local government environmental project to persuade the public of the importance of environmental enhancement. He found that the office often faced increased opposition by groups who challenged the value of such projects. By using a collaborative approach, where multiple stakeholders were brought in to increase participation, and making the LA River a symbol of renewal, the office was able to influence the public's perception of the importance of environmental revitalization. Another student, interning for a Democratic Senator's office, examined the way that employees managed the conflicts they encountered when they did not align themselves with the Senator's views. By interviewing several coworkers and observing their behavior throughout the quarter, she discovered that although employees verbally maintained a line consistent with the office, they used nonverbal gestures to indicate their personal opinions on a topic. This allowed the employees to implicitly show their true feelings without explicitly contradicting the Senator. In a third paper, a student examined the symbolic importance of fashion at an event-planning corporation. She found that fashion shaped the identity of the organization's employees as well as their conduct and interactions with coworkers and clients. Thus, although everyone was required to wear business attire, the style and fashion of employees mirrored the hierarchy of the work place. Moreover, employees dressed differently for various clients, in a way that both mimicked those clients' style and reflected the type of event they were planning.

The Honors Program is a 4-quarter sequence, run by Professor Zsuzsa Berend, during which students conceptualize, research, analyze, and write-up original empirical research. Students who complete this program graduate with departmental honors and present their findings at the end of the year as part of a one-day conference. This is truly an exceptional

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academic experience, which has led to some exciting projects over the years. This year, drawing on participant observations in the Family Law Self-Help Resource Center in downtown Los Angeles, one student found that people who sought free help with legal paperwork in conservatorship and child custody cases had a consistently different understanding of the law than the legal professionals who helped them. This divergent definition, rather than lack of competence, was at the heart of all the interactions. People seeking legal help understood law as justice and told moral stories to support their claims. Legal professionals, on the other hand, defined law as procedure and were uninterested in stories of why people thought they deserved to win the case. Interactions were often frustrating for both sides: lay people felt they were disrespected and not given proper advice, and lawyers felt they could not get straightforward information. This study reveals that people's definition of the situation had far-reaching consequences for social practice. Other research projects included a study of a Zen mediation group, the life trajectories as well as the social networks of undocumented workers in a Los Angeles factory, an exploration of beauty- and plastic surgery practices among Vietnamese-American women, and an examination of new, more health-conscious shopping practices among Latinas in a low-income section of Downey.

Congratulations Class of 2011!

Update from the Desk of the Vice Chair of Graduate Studies

By Steve Clayman



The graduate program remains central to the scholarly and pedagogical life of our Department, and our graduate students are once again making their mark both within the Sociology Department and across the discipline at large.

The Department has continued the tradition of funding a diverse range of working groups, this year in the areas of Bourdieu, conversation analysis, family, migration, and quasi-experimental and practical research. These groups, which are organized by enterprising graduate students in collaboration with key faculty members, provide a forum for the exploration of common scholarly interests. Under the auspices of the working groups together with the comparative social analysis seminar, leading scholars from the U.S. and around the world have come to UCLA to share cutting-edge research, and many of our own graduate students and faculty have presented works in progress.

Economic conditions in California and nationwide make this a challenging time for our students on the job market, and for the Department in recruiting a new cohort of students for the coming year. Both processes remain very much in progress, but on the recruiting front the Department is clearly meeting the challenge. Despite the austere fiscal outlook for the state and the University, a combination of effective stewardship and revenue from summer school is keeping us competitive. We continue to receive applications from truly extraordinary candidates, and we are especially pleased that this year we will be able to support a more globally diverse cohort than in recent years. A large proportion of these prospective students converged on UCLA for our annual visiting day event (Wednesday March 9th). I fully expect to see many of them again this fall, as new members of our Department, when the 2011-2012 academic year begins.

Meet the 2010-11 Graduate Students!



(from left to right)
Xi Song, Ariana Valle, Phi Su,
Marian Meux, Christopher Rea,
Karina Chavarria,
Anne White, Casandra Salgado,
Whitney Richards-Calathes,
Karra Greenberg, Rebecca
DiBennardo, Rahim Kurwa,
Andrea Lee, Aaron Crawford,
Jay Johnson, Nicole Iturriaga,
Brian Biggs, Gary Yeritsian,
Ashley Gromis, Winston Chou,
Diya Bose (not pictured).

We'd like to introduce you to the twenty-one 2010-11 Sociology graduate student cohort, now in the final quarter of their first year. These students have come to UCLA from locations as far away as China, Korea and Peru to cities as close as the Montebello, Huntington Beach and, yes, Los Angeles itself. While their outside interests match the diversity of their hometowns, these students have been brought together to our program only for a relatively short time before again embarking on their diverse journeys throughout the world. We invite you to get to know our newest students...

My name is **Xi Song**, and I completed my B.A. in Sociology at Renmin University of China, and my MA in the Social Science Division of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. My academic interests revolve around social stratification and mobility, demography and quantitative methodology. My previous research includes transition of housing inequality in China, ethnic stratifications in Xinjiang, and I am now interested in multigenerational study in societies such as South Africa, China and the United States.

Hi, I'm **Ariana Valle**. I was born and raised in

Los Angeles, California and I received my BA in Economics from UC San Diego. Prior to UCLA, I worked at a non-profit organization promoting social and economic justice in minority and inner-city communities of Los Angeles. I am interested in identity formation amongst US born generations with ties to Central American and the Spanish Caribbean. Outside of academia I love dancing, and I enjoy the beach and cooking in my free time.

Hi! I'm **Phi Su** from La Puente, 30 miles east of Westwood. I'm interested in political sociology, international migration, and diaspora. I love good food, sunny days in SoCal, traveling, watching Korean dramas (allegedly to tease out themes of race, class, gender, and sexuality) and being happy. I especially enjoy the company of food and movie enthusiasts and social justice advocates—luckily, there's no shortage of any of the above in this cohort :-)

My name is **Mirian Meux** and I am from Chinchua Alta, Peru. I got my BA at the University of California, Berkeley in Latin American Studies and Film Studies. My most fulfilling experience conducting research was on Peruvian women

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migrating to Santiago, Chile. My current broad interests are in immigration, gender and health. Outside academia I love making documentaries about social justice issues in the Latino Community and Latin America. I also enjoy dancing, photography, cooking Peruvian food and drinking Pisco sour.

Hi! I'm **Chris Rea**; it's good to "meet" you. I majored in physics at Clark University, and despite my hard-science focus also developed a strong interest in government, political economy and political theory—the seeds that would eventually lead me to sociology at UCLA. Education and science was my focus at the time, however, and after a master's degree in teaching I moved back to California to teach physics and math at a charter school in San Francisco and then Midland School near Santa Barbara. It wasn't too many years before academia called back to me, and I've reluctantly if also excitedly traded in my teacher hat to become a student once again. My interests are focused on environment, social movements and economic sociology (and also inequality in political representation), so if you have ideas or want to talk, I'd love to hear from you.

Hi, I'm **Karina Chavarria**. My research interests are education inequality, race/ethnicity, and undocumented students. I received a B.A. in English and Sociology so besides reading articles from a variety of sociology subfields, I also love to read novels and short stories. I also love to go to museums. I love walking to places and if I were not in a Ph.D program, I would be teaching English at the high school level. I have been working with Latino students for 10 years now and would love to continue doing so.

Hi, I'm **Anne White** from La Grange, Texas. My school interests are ethnography, conversation analysis, the sociology of work, and rural sociology. My non-school interests are kayaking, backpacking, and biking around LA.

My name is **Casandra Salgado**, and I was raised in Montebello and Pico Rivera, CA. In 2009, I received my bachelor's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. My research interests are in race and ethnicity and education. In my spare time, I enjoy exercising at UCLA's Drake Stadium, watching

drama and historical movies and spending time with family and friends.

Hi, I'm **Whitney Richards-Calathes**. I am from New York City. The Bronx to be specific. I moved to LA to begin the sociology program, so I am new to the Los Angeles area. I like to eat a lot of yummy food. And I like to hang out with people who like yummy food too. I also like cats. I am interested in doing social justice research, specifically with young women. My background is in gender studies and sociology, as well as in teaching. I spent the past few years doing popular education and working with young folks in NYC around issues of privilege, power, gender, dating violence, feminism, the criminal justice system, and all other topics that can lead to empowerment and change. I am currently working on trying to bring these topics, and the flavor of my teaching experience, into my research. It's still a work in progress. This summer I will be conducting research in the Bronx around issues of urban planning, public space, and gender. I'm looking forward to it.

Hi. I'm **Karra Greenberg**, and I'm from El Paso, TX, have lived (volunteering) for a year in Uruguay, and worked for a few years for different non-profits in New York. I really enjoy out-doors activities, independent film, latin dancing, cooking, and spending lots of time with my friends! But, when I'm not doing those activities, I really enjoy doing all of my work for this program. All kidding aside, I am so happy to be here in LA and in the Soc department at UCLA. My interests are econ soc and sociology of the family.

Hi, I'm **Rebecca DiBennardo**. I'm originally from New York and I miss the snow! I hold a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies and Hispanic Studies from Vassar College and a Master of Public Administration in Health Policy from New York University's Wagner School of Public Service. My previous research addressed issues of health and sexuality amongst young females, issues of food availability in urban neighborhoods, and health access for low-income individuals. During my time at NYU, I worked as the Health Policy Program Graduate Assistant, a Teaching Assistant, and a Research Assistant. My current research focuses on gender and sexuality, particularly experiences of stigma in gay families, but I'm always interested in exploring new areas of study. I like running,

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riding my bike, baking delicious desserts, and using public transport.

My name is **Rahim Kurwa** and I'm from the Bay Area. My research interests are in discrimination and inequality in employment and housing markets. When I'm not in school, I enjoy reading, listening to new music, and exploring cities.

I am **Andrea Yewon Lee**. Friends call me Yewon. I just came from Korea. The things I LIKE here: sunny campus of LA with plenty of the outdoor benches and corners to rest, racing cars with my road bike down Wilshire Blvd., yoga, \$1.60 Greek yogurt from Trader Joe's, and always most grateful for coffee (and any caffeinated drinks) that accompany me throughout my day and night. I study inward international migration to Korea. I'm interested in migration + women + work + rights and mostly just interested in people, people, people.

My name is **Aaron Crawford**. I am interested in Sociology of Education and Conversation Analysis. Originally I'm from Syracuse, NY - where it snows in April - so in my spare time I love relaxing at the beach with a good book or some friends.

My name is **Jay Johnson** and I am a first year graduate student at UCLA from upstate New York. My research interests are in international migration with a focus on migration to South African cities. I did my BA at UC-Berkeley in Peace and Conflict Studies and have an MSc in Global Politics from the London School of Economics and MA in Forced Migration at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

I'm **Nicole Iturriaga** from Huntington Beach California. I went to UC Berkeley and majored in sociology. I am currently interested in issues relating to gender, the family and culture. More specifically I am interested in understanding the rising influence of female conservatives as well as female networking and solidarity among polygamist wives. I like running on the beach, hanging out with my husband and playing with our dog.

My name is **Brian Biggs** and I come from Pekin, Illinois. Academically, I'm into political sociology

(western European right-wing extremism; trade unionism; resistance to authoritarianism), social movements, and quantitative/historical sociology. Otherwise, I'm down with trying new coffees, beers, and whiskeys, playing a variety of sports (baseball, cricket, sculling, sweep rowing, rugby, ping pong), and listening to the three greatest bands of all time (Iron Maiden, the Dead Kennedys, and the Smiths). I'm currently looking for a non-religious homeless or animal shelter that doesn't demand qualifications of volunteers, so any help with that would be much appreciated!

Hello, I'm **Gary Yeritisan**. My primary areas of interest are historical and political sociology. I am currently involved in a project examining how labor unions use research in strategic decision-making. I am also the primary researcher and writer of a forthcoming report that explores working conditions for food service employees in higher education. I have been politically active in a number of antiwar and social justice organizations, and my interests outside of sociology include cinema and philosophy.

Hi, I'm **Ashley Gromis**. I hail from State College, Pennsylvania. I received bachelor's degrees in Sociology and History from the Pennsylvania State University in 2010 and completed a senior honors thesis on contemporary student protest. My research interests lie in culture, politics, and social movements, particularly the intersection of popular music and politics. In my free time I obsess over the Beatles, DJ on UCLAradio.com, collect vinyl records, and watch professional tennis.

Hi, I'm **Winston Chou**. I'm from Fremont, CA—a fun place to grow up if you enjoy being around Asian people. I went to UC Santa Barbara, where I majored in Asian American Studies. My interests are in ethnicity, nationalist politics, and conflict and violence. My hobbies outside of school include playing basketball and watching TV.

Hi! I'm **Diya Bose**. I'm interested in globalization, gendered bodies and ethnography. I am also a dancer, interested in social change through the arts.

Donations

With cuts to state funding continuing to impact the Department of Sociology and the university, access and achievement will depend more than ever on the generous support of our alumni and friends.

Giving back can be thought of in terms of citizenship. We must volunteer to sustain the institutions that enhance our quality of life. It can be thought of in terms of legacy. The students of tomorrow deserve the same opportunities and access to a top public university as those of today. And it can be thought of in terms of responsibility. By giving back and supporting the Department of Sociology, you ensure that the department continues to deliver a world class college education to the people of California.

If sociology teaches anything, it is that no person is an island; we all depend on each other. Please visit <https://giving.ucla.edu> and consider making a gift to the Sociology Department.

Alumni and friends who are, or wish to become, Chancellor's Associates may now direct their annual gifts to the UCLA Department of Sociology and retain all of the benefits that have traditionally been given to Chancellor's Associates. For information, visit: <http://www.uclafund.ucla.edu/>

The Elena and Gregg Davis Gift

Elena and Gregg Davis recently made a gift to the department to support research on homelessness in America. Here Nazgol Ghandnoosh provides an update on her research which is funded by the Davis' gift.

My dissertation focuses on how individuals react to prolonged punishment for criminal offenses. The United States has become exceptional among developed countries not only in its high incarceration rate, but also in its willingness to allow punishment to continue long after formal sentences have ended. Focusing on people at both ends of the criminal justice spectrum – the minority who serve life-term sentences for serious offenses, and the majority who serve little or no prison time but face the life-long consequences of a criminal record – my research examines how people react to this experience. As part of this work, with financial support from Elena and Gregg Davis, I am examining the effects of California's expungement process. Expungement is a legal remedy available in California to prevent employers from learning about – and discriminating based upon – applicants' minor criminal convictions. Through participant observation and interviews at a legal clinic in South Los Angeles, I ask why, given the negative consequences of having a criminal record, some people refuse to offer the necessary redemption narrative to receive expungement. Instead of expressing guilt and rehabilitation, as usually required in a successful expungement petition, some of the clinic's clients insist that they were wrongfully convicted—jeopardizing their petitions. I have written a paper contrasting how workers at the legal clinic interpret this resistance – as a failure to win trust – with how these clients explain their decision – as frustration with the criminal justice system.

The Jane Rubin-Kurtzman Gift

Jane Rubin-Kurtzman, a graduate alumni and active research scientist, has made a generous contribution to the department in support of graduate fellowships. The department is grateful for the Dr Rubin-Kurtzman's gift and looks forward to her continued engagement.

Sociology Undergraduate Association Update



The Sociology Undergraduate Association (SUA) was founded in 1997 and has since been dedicated to uniting the students and faculty of the sociology department through numerous social and academic events. The organization works to represent the entire undergraduate Sociology department and strives to unite sociology students & faculty by encouraging involvement, social networking, and service. SUA's executive board of 2010-11 is committed to reinventing the organization and providing the Sociology Undergraduate Association with the accreditation that matches that of the Sociology Department at UCLA.

In collaboration with the Sociology Graduate Student Association (SGSA), SUA welcomed undergraduates and graduate student TA's to an event called "Tea with TA's" on Monday, February 28. Pastries and tea were provided and TA's were not only very helpful in answering undergraduates' concerns but along with both undergraduate and graduate department counselors, Simbi Mahlanza and Wendy Fujinami, were also very helpful in providing some insights into the world of graduate level education. We hope to see you for our next event in the Spring!

Best,
SUA Executive Board

Sociology Graduate Student Association Update

SGSA has been busy this year with job talks, creating a new graduate student website (<http://ucla.orgsync.com/org/sgsa>), and organizing workshops and social events. We expanded this year by creating an executive committee with members spearheading efforts on 6 major graduate students' priorities: sustaining faculty and graduate student diversity, representing graduate students' perspectives in faculty recruitment, building bridges to the undergraduate sociology majors, responding effectively to TA/RA concerns, running technical and professionalizing workshops, and, of course, having fun.

In most recent news, we conducted a survey to measure what qualities and expertise graduate students hoped for in a new faculty member (full results available upon request). Moving forward, SGSA is excited to welcome this year's newly recruited students and faculty into the UCLA program.

Sincerely,

Michael Stambolis and Andrea Dinneen

Faculty Member In The Spotlight



Tanya Stivers joined the faculty in July, 2010, but she is no stranger to UCLA. She was a graduate student in the interdisciplinary program in Applied Linguistics and later a post-doc in Pediatrics at UCLA. Her research focuses on social interaction and the rules and norms that underlie it in both everyday family and friend encounters and primary care medical encounters. Her medical research has focused on the role that physician-patient/parent interaction plays in making treatment decisions. Following her post-doc, she spent 7 years as a Staff Researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the

Netherlands, working as part of a research team in the context of a project on Multimodal Interaction. There she maintained work in both the medical and ordinary contexts, but she added a substantial dimension on culture and language. In one major study, using a ten language sample of question-response sequences that included both national languages and indigenous languages, she led a team in research published in PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) that shows that turn taking is much the same across very different languages and cultures. In this and other work, Tanya brings together a traditionally qualitative method, conversation analysis, with quantitative methods. Current work is also exploring children as patients and children in peer play contexts.

At UCLA she looks forward particularly to collaborations with colleagues in medical sociology, sociology of the family and conversation analysis. She is currently teaching Sociology 20 (Introduction to Sociological Research Methods) and co-teaching Sociology 124/244 (Conversational Structures). She is also interested in fostering undergraduate involvement with research.

Outside of work, Tanya enjoys spending time with her 9-year old son, horseback riding and hiking. She's also working on getting to know the Westside.

Publication in the Spotlight

'Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States', William Roy



American folk music's long and winding road to relevance, by Meg Sullivan

"We Shall Overcome" marks its 50th anniversary this year of, well, o v e r c o m i n g obscurity, for one thing.

In the case of "We Shall Overcome," said Roy, a professor of sociology and chair of UCLA's sociology department, "Doing music - especially in racially mixed groups - became an act of defiance against segregation." The song still manages to bring tears to the eyes of the sociologist who joined the civil rights movement as an undergraduate in the '60s at Atlanta's Emory University. "It's a powerful reminder of participating in history, of making a difference," he said.

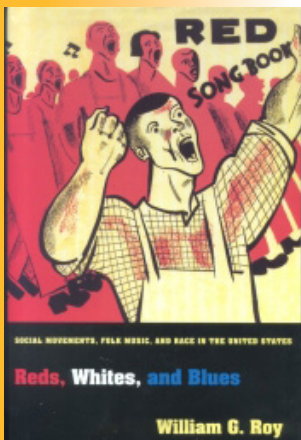
Writer Meg Sullivan spoke with Roy about the book that was his nine-year labor of love.

What is folk music and why have U.S. social movements embraced it so frequently?

There are purists who think folk music has to be ancient and anonymous. For others, folk is a style of music that springs directly from the people - something that's pure and innocent and not ruined by industry and modern life. But most leaders of progressive causes weren't purists. They just wanted to mine the music of ordinary Americans to rouse them. It didn't matter whether a folk song was truly old, newly written or a kind of hybrid that used the tune of an old song like the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and set it to new lyrics like "Solidarity Forever."

What was the first progressive cause in America to use what you'd consider to be folk music?

That was probably the American Revolution with "Yankee Doodle" and other songs spread by revolutionary soldiers. But the abolitionists were the first to use music that was embraced as authentic and moving because it came from common people. Abolitionists would bring slaves up from the South and have them sing spirituals at big meetings in the North. Many northerners had never met African Americans. Abolitionists



Written in 1901 as a church hymn, the ballad played an occasional role in the labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s. But by the spring of 1960, it had been pretty much forgotten except by a small circle of stalwart progressives.

Then in April of that year, a UCLA sociology alum who had taken courses in ethnomusicology here taught

the song at the inaugural meeting of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Raleigh, N.C. By the following summer, "We Shall Overcome" was well on its way to becoming the official anthem of the civil rights movement, reverberating at sit-ins, marches and other protests throughout the South.

UCLA sociologist William Roy, author of a new book on this theme, traces the long road to recognition for "We Shall Overcome" and other folk classics. Reaching back to the mid-19th century, "*Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*" (Princeton University Press) shows how one movement after another struggled to leverage folk music for social justice.

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were trying to vividly demonstrate the humanity of slaves, who had been compared to animals in the race-baiting imagery of the day.

These concerts featured such classics as “I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho” and “[Sing Low, Sweet Chariot.](#)” But even though slaves had sung these songs

in church, in the fields and in their homes, the abolitionists didn’t call them “folk music.” That recognition didn’t come until later.

When did folk music become recognized in America?

The first people to use the term “folk music” were 18th century Europeans, and they used it exclusively to refer to their own music. They contended that Americans had no folk music because we didn’t have that long a history. Then an English folk song collector went to Appalachia in the late 19th century and found such old English folk songs as “[Barbara Allen.](#)” He said, “Wait - America does have folk songs!”

So the first generation of folklorists went to the Appalachians to try to find other old English songs that had been passed down by generations from early immigrants from the British Isles. Fairly quickly, though, there was a counter-movement that said, “Hold on a minute! These old English ballads aren’t uniquely American! They’re English!” A second generation of folklorists started collecting African-American spirituals, which combined African and European sensibilities into a new kind of music specific to America.

The late Texas folklorist John Lomax was especially active in this effort. He’s probably best remembered today for discovering the iconic

American folk musician Leadbelly (Huddie William Ledbetter) in a Louisiana penitentiary. Leadbelly knew hundreds of African American folk songs, and he was responsible for introducing “[House of the Rising Sun](#)” and “[Midnight Special](#)” - among others - to American popular culture.

How did folk music come to be associated with the labor movement?

In the teens, a radical union called the Wobblies was active in the West. At union meetings, on picket lines and even on street corners, they turned American classics such as “The Sweet By and By” into biting satires like “[There Will Be Pie in the Sky When You Die.](#)” But the strong connection between labor and folk music didn’t occur until the 1930s and ’40s, when the Communist Party started to target trade unions. Labor organizers adopted folk music in a deliberate attempt to reach the common man.

Before that, the term “folk music” was used mostly by scholars. People like John Lomax’s son, Alan, and the Seeger family popularized the concept so that it was understandable to just about everybody. As Charles Seeger, a folk music champion and early UCLA ethnomusicology scholar, put it, “The main question should not be ‘Is it good music?’ but ‘What is the music good for?’” Labor-oriented songs from that period include “[Talking Union,](#)” “[Get Thee Behind Me](#)” and “[Which Side Are You On.](#)”

What was the vision?

Labor organizers hoped to launch a singing movement. They wanted people singing together, especially people of different races. They understood the power of music to bring people together at events like hootenannies.

Hootenannies?

The term was discovered in Seattle by Charles Seeger’s son, Pete, and the singer-organizer
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brought it to New York City. Basically, it was a participatory form of music. The idea was that union sympathizers would come together to sing and swap songs. People actually did come to the events, but unfortunately not the ones that the party was trying to organize. Instead of workers, organizers ended up attracting other people like themselves - urban intellectuals.

If you had to pinpoint one factor that killed the relationship between labor and folk music, what would it be?

Labor organizers were naïve about what ordinary people wanted. For example, they would go to a union meeting dressed up in overalls. The union members would arrive in coats and ties because the gathering for them was a special occasion. There was a social gap between the organizers and ordinary people. Organizers thought the people's music was folk music. But for the people, their music was Frank Sinatra and Tommy Dorsey... not heavy-handed ideological music. The Red Scare didn't help either. After the advent of McCarthyism, unions distanced themselves from the Communist Party and even Pete Seeger, who had been so popular.

Formed in 1871, the Jubilee Singers helped popularize the spiritual to American and European audiences and set the stage for expanding the definition of folk music from English ballads to include African American music.

How did the civil rights movement succeed where the labor movement failed?

While walking picket lines, sitting at lunch counters, riding on the bus, spending time in jail, civil rights activists joined in song. Music gave these people a sense of belonging and solidarity. African Americans were already used to singing together because of their culture. Especially in southern rural African American culture, singing is something people did when they got together. So it was culturally appropriate.

What role did the Highlander School play in this folk music renaissance?

The Highlander School was an organization in Tennessee that brought people together - mostly from the South - for instruction in community organizing. So say your town had a racist sheriff or failing schools or some other problem that seemed insurmountable. You'd go to the Highlander School to learn behind-the-scenes skills for effecting change - from running a mimeograph machine or a meeting to staging a sit-in and or a voter registration drive. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. number among Highlander alumni.

Another one of the skills that was emphasized at the Highlander School was how to use music in a social movement. One of the school's teachers was Guy Carawan, an L.A. native who got a master's degree in sociology from UCLA. As a song leader and a trainer of song leaders, he introduced classics like "We Shall Overcome," "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" and "We Shall Not Be Moved" at workshops for civil rights organizations. Those organizations then carried the songs into the field - and the popular imagination.

What is the prognosis today for folk music and social movements?

Folk music today is just a niche market that has a handful of followers - mostly singer - songwriters. The music contains a fairly mild critique of modern life and a certain amount of nostalgia about how life was before cities, big industry and big corporations, but it's pretty tame. Music plays a different role now that's much less powerful. I don't see that there's much potential to return to anything like the civil rights movement. One reason is we no longer grow up singing together. We grow up with iPods.

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