
Dr. Stefanie Benjamin

Assistant Professor – Retail, Hospitality, & Tourism Management – University of Tennessee
sbenjam1@utk.edu

Emerging Scholar Profile

After graduating from the University of Florida in 2006 with a degree in Recreation, Parks, and Tourism, I started my career as a special events coordinator for the fashion company Burberry in New York City. However, after working in the industry for several years and living an unfulfilled lifestyle, I decided to move out of NYC and volunteer for a Global Trip with Habitat for Humanity in Hawaii. Thanks to this experience, I met a professor in my group who encouraged me to explore graduate programs. Coupled with her support, I searched for a graduate program that bridged my interest of tourism and sustainability, since I was impressed with the numerous sustainable initiatives implemented within environmental and historical touristic spaces in Hawaii. Looking to Google for the answer, I stumbled across the Masters for Sustainable Tourism program at East Carolina University (ECU) which luckily changed my career trajectory and most importantly, my epistemological and ontological perspectives.

I was part of the first cohort that graduated in the MS Sustainable Tourism program at ECU in 2011. During my tenure at ECU, I explored the interdisciplinary nature of sustainable tourism working with scholars in marketing, geography, sociology, interior design, economics, and anthropology. My research stream started under the direction of Dr. Derek Alderman (Cultural Geographer) around film-induced tourism and the politics of power and place, resulting in three publications based on my thesis work: *Mayberry Days Festival* in Mount Airy, North Carolina. My interdisciplinary interest led me to the University of South Carolina where I graduated with a PhD in Educational Foundations of Inquiry and was introduced to critical scholars and theoretical frameworks including critical race theory, feminist theory, and critical theory. Informed by CRT and bridging tourism and education studies, my dissertation explored counter-narrative enslaved performances at three Southern plantation museums in North Carolina resulting in publications in the journal of [*International Journal of Heritage*](#)

Studies (Benjamin & Alderman, 2018) and featured in *Tourism and Wellness: Travel for the Good of All?*

Currently, I am an Assistant Professor in the Retail, Hospitality, & Tourism Management department at the University of Tennessee, USA (see <http://rhtm.utk.edu/people/stefanie-benjamin/>). My research interests include social equity in tourism around the intersectionality of race, gender, sexual orientation, and people with disabilities. I continue my research and community outreach through the Tourism RESET (Race, Ethnicity, Social Equity in Tourism) Initiative. Tourism RESET is a multi-university and interdisciplinary research and outreach initiative that seeks to identify, study, and challenge patterns of social inequity in the tourism industry. My research agenda embraces RESET's main objective where I am currently collaborating with Dr. Alana Dillette around the *Black Travel Movement (BTM)* where we are interviewing BTM social "influencers." We also explored the trending hashtag #TravelingWhileBlack to understand Black travelers' lived experiences, challenges, and barriers to traveling while Black and were recently nominated for "Best Paper" at TTRA 2018. Furthermore, I am exploring how people with disabilities are marketed and represented in tourism marketing. Creating inclusive spaces with tourism marketing material is essential and I am working with industry professionals and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to help facilitate paths for inclusiveness, not just accessibility, within touristic experiences and destinations.

In addition to research with marginalized and underrepresented groups, I continue to work on film-induced tourism research and improvisation. For instance, I am exploring how film-tourists are consuming *Game of Thrones* tourism through Instagram posts and the effect it is having on "over-tourism" in Iceland. Additionally, I was mentioned in a [BuzzFeed article](https://www.buzzfeed.com/elisabethdonnelly/i-went-to-a-dirty-dancing-festival-and-it-made-me-weepy?utm_term=.pl4BYa3vnJ) (I Went To A Dirty Dancing Festival And It Made Me Weepy https://www.buzzfeed.com/elisabethdonnelly/i-went-to-a-dirty-dancing-festival-and-it-made-me-weepy?utm_term=.pl4BYa3vnJ) around my data collection with Dr. Whitney Knollenberg at the 2017 *Dirty Dancing* Festival where we explored how attendees helped to co-create the film-induced tourism experience through a qualitative content analysis of attendees' social media posts. Additionally, I continue to research how improvisation theater games can assist faculty, students, and industry leaders to become better communicators, collaborators, and creative/critical thinkers. As a trained improv theater performer, I was invited to several academic conferences, DMOs, and corporations to facilitate her improv workshops (<https://improvwithstefanie.weebly.com/>) to help increase self-efficacy, communication, and

creative thinking with faculty, students, and staff. I also received several internal grants to implement the workshops on campus and created a new introduction honors course, Improv(e) you! Lastly, I recently published an article exploring PhD students' well-being and mental health through the methodology of Volunteer Employed Photography in the *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* (Benjamin, Williams & Maher, 2017).

I'm also actively engaged in a variety of academic and industry activities including serving as an Associate Editor for *eRTR*, journal reviewer for numerous academic journals, U.T. Faculty Senate alternate, U.T. Teaching Learning Initiative Faculty Mentor, U.T. Educational Advancement Program's Summer Research Institute Undergraduate Research Mentor, serve on several interdisciplinary dissertation committees, and presented at several conferences including ICHRIE, TTRA, CIDER, CTS, and SECSA. Additionally, in March, 2018 at SECSA, I moderated the Industry Panel Session "*The Changing Tide: Women Leadership in Hospitality and Tourism*", co-facilitated a workshop titled "*Keeping it Real: Normalizing Failure and Promoting Transparency in the Classroom*", and won "*Best Faculty Led Presentation.*" Lastly, I am passionate about learning innovative pedagogies and helping my students become critical and creative scholars by implementing experiential learning activities that result in student led projects with community stakeholders. Lastly, I was recognized as a "*phenomenal teacher*" by the U.T. Philanthropy and Community Service for the Panhellenic Council in 2018.

In my time away from research and teaching, I perform comedy improv with my troupe, [Einstein Simplified](http://www.einsteinsimplified.com) (<http://www.einsteinsimplified.com>), every Tuesday night in Knoxville, Tennessee. My dog, Rory, is my best companion where we venture on hiking trails around Tennessee and visit local breweries. I also enjoy spending time going to the movies, practicing yoga, and laughing with friends and family.

References

Benjamin, S. & Alderman, D. (2018). Performing a different narrative: museum theater and the memory-work of producing and managing slavery heritage at southern plantation museums, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24:3, 270-282, DOI: [10.1080/13527258.2017.1378906](https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1378906)

Benjamin, S., Williams, J., & Maher, M. A. (2017). Focusing the Lens to Share the Story: Using Photographs and Interviews to Explore Doctoral Students' Sense of Well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 12, 197-217.