

Meet Dr. Kimberly Welch, Assistant Professor of English

What were you doing before you came to UMSL?

Before UMSL, I was a Visiting Professor at Ramapo College of New Jersey and taught African American Literature. However, I was only there for a year. Before that, I was a graduate student in the Theater and Performance Studies Doctoral Program at UCLA.

Interesting, so how does a theater/performance studies student become an English professor? Also, what inspired you to study theater?

I think it's partly a testament to our English Department's investment in curriculum diversity and partially due to the interdisciplinarity of my research and field more generally. The field of performance studies draws on a lot of disciplines including anthropology, literary studies, and theater. My own research focuses on intersections of performance, homelessness, and incarceration, and the ways in which constructions of gender, sexuality, and race affect how people navigate these sites so while I do turn to representations in traditional forms of performance like theater and film, I also examine people's day-to-day experiences living in these sites. I think one of the reasons the UMSL English department thought I'd be a good fit is because my approach to reading texts and the type of texts I teach match their vision for diversity and exposing UMSL students to works outside of the traditional literary canon.

To answer your second question, I came to performance completely by accident. The spring semester of my sophomore year of undergrad, I was an international studies major and needed to take an elective so I chose a theater course. Prior to taking that course I had never engaged in theater in a substantial way--it was cool and all but didn't seem like something I'd really be interested in. I wanted to make an impact and 19/20 year old me thought theater was fun, but ultimately superficial--for entertainment purposes only. Boy was I wrong. The class was a service-learning course in which students partnered with local theaters whose work emphasized activism. That semester I interned with Hidden Voices which was working with Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocate to help bridge the education gap between black and Latinx middle school students and their white peers in the Research Triangle Area in North Carolina. The summer after I continued to work with the organization on that project and helped facilitate a social justice arts-based summer camp with middle schoolers. After that, I was hooked. I continued to work with activist-orientated theaters throughout my time in undergrad (which included working on a project in Uganda) and graduate school. In fact, it is my work with the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a theater company in L.A. comprised primarily of homeless and formerly homeless individuals who live and work in Skid Row, that really fueled my research investments.

What are you working on right now?

I am currently working on a book manuscript tentatively entitled *Performing Black Death: Specters of Dispossession in California and Louisiana*, which is based on my dissertation. It looks at citational practices (so practices shown in performance, like in a play for example, that are related to real-life practices and experiences) to investigate how notions of race, gender, and sexuality condition spatial practice and prison and homeless spaces, as well as the creation and transformation of space through community-building.

What type of courses do/will you teach at UMSL?

This year I taught undergraduate and graduate courses on African American literature and performance, queer and black feminist theory, as well as prison spaces. In fall 2020, I will teach a course on black and Latinx contemporary literature as well as American Lit II, which will focus on work by American writers of color. Generally speaking, I will teach courses that center on African diasporic literature and performance. I hope in the near future to develop a service-learning course in which students will partner with local activist organizations that work with Missouri's homeless and incarcerated populations.

Speaking of teaching, how are you handling the COVID-19 crisis? Is there anything you'd like to share with students regarding this?

I am fortunate that I only had to transition one course and luckily, I've taught online before so the transition was fairly smooth. I know some of my colleagues have made use of the resources offered through the Center for Teaching and Learning--there's been a lot of support for faculty who've never taught online before as well as students (who are generally much more tech savvy than myself, and dare I say, most of my colleagues as well) who are not used to e-learning. To students, I'd like to say that I'm humbled by their resilience and the effort they continue to put in. As many of us know about the wonderful and diverse UMSL student population we serve, "just showing up" can take a lot of work on our students' part on the best of days. With financial insecurity, emotional labor, and fluctuations in family dynamics heightened because of COVID-19, it is a testament to our students' commitment to their education and the opportunities it will enable. They make me proud to be an UMSL educator and I want them to know that myself, other faculty, and administration recognize their efforts and we're here to support them.

What's your favorite thing about UMSL so far?

Definitely the student body. One of the reasons I was excited for the opportunity to work here is because UMSL has a large first-generation and nontraditional student population. I myself am

first gen. Also, now that I've taught here for almost two semesters I can happily confirm what the hiring committee told me during my interview last year--UMSL has the best students. In my experience teaching in higher education, UMSL students' passion, work ethic, and openness to trying new things (I was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm English majors expressed when I brought theater exercises into the classroom) are unmatched.

What do you think of St. Louis? I imagine it's quite different from California and New Jersey.

To be frank, I find the sharp housing and income disparities disquieting to say the least. But there are definitely things about St. Louis that I enjoy. I like the abundance of parks and mom-n-pops shops. People also seem generally and genuinely friendly, which reminds me of my Southern upbringing. I'm still adjusting to St. Louis's crazy weather, but the city is definitely growing on me.