

Wednesday October 6, 2021

Dear, Kansas Board of Regents:

I hope this letter finds you with coffee and comfort. The last 2 years have come with unprecedented changes. What few things do we do the same as we did 2.5 years ago?

In August of 2016, I entered the Peace and Conflict Studies Program through the Humanities Program and the African and African American Studies Department through the College of Liberal Arts and Science. I walked into the side door of Bailey Hall, and up 3 flights of stairs. Passing each floor, I picked up on the conversations people were having here; which classes they were most looking forward to—sharing their book lists.

I felt I was in the right place. For the first time, in a very long time.

I walked into office 308, and was invited down another hallway. Dr Janzen jumped right in. “What books are you reading right now?” *“How would you facilitate a lesson that weaves together Peace and Conflict Studies with the books you are reading?”*

Over the next two years, I enrolled in various courses through the Humanities Program, as I investigated how violence is reproduced over time and space, focusing on spaces of captivity in Kansas. Dr Marwa Ghazali and Dr Marike Janzen provided to me unparalleled guidance as together we imagined new pathways to investigate and elevate how women go about reasserting their histories, accessing inclusive rehabilitative opportunities, and constructing alternative historical narratives from within a space that has been transformed from the second Black college in Kansas—the Topeka Industrial and Education Institute—to the only women’s prison in Kansas.

In Bailey Hall, I was introduced to unique ways to conduct research—finding biennial reports stored in Chicago—ethnographic fieldwork, and phenomenological methods. These skills are interlaced into the work that I do— as a Social Studies Teacher at an alternative middle school in Oregon, a Program Manager for a nonprofit increasing tree canopy and access to STEM education in south Los Angeles, and as a Grant Writer for an international nonprofit that centers neurodivergency in science, art, and technology.

People are the lifeblood. Researchers are the hands and feet, which increases the reach of the lifeblood. The Humanities Program at the University of Kansas builds the foundations of the hands and feet, and therefor serves as a catalyst.

Recently I emailed Dr Janzen, inquiring into any philosophical texts that reference the merging of sense perceptions, like tasting and smelling. She responded, *“It’s interesting to hear you talk about the connection between taste and smell, particularly in the time of Covid, when the loss of taste and smell seems to be an important/ noticeable symptom. Why is it so heartbreaking to lose these senses?”* To which I responded, *“These two senses cause deep feelings of nostalgia for me, COVID probably makes many of us feel nostalgic for past times, but what does it mean if the effects of this virus re-wire how we interpret nostalgia and revisit the past?”*

I add this final piece to my letter, because even years after graduating, the Humanities Program at the University of Kansas continues to light new paths for me. New paths of thought, and further how to put these paths into praxis.

Thank you,
Jenna D’Ottavio

