Anti-Racist Projects at the Center for the Humanities

For more information, please contact: Aaron Fai, Assistant Director of Public Humanities, fai@wisc.edu (608) 263-4783. Please sign up for the Center’s mailing list to receive further updates on the Humanities Responders. Send an email to info@humanities.wisc.edu and provide your email address and/or mailing address.

The Center for the Humanities and its staff strongly condemn white supremacy, police violence, and all forms of racism, interpersonal and structural, and we honor the pain that these forces have caused our Black students, faculty, and staff.

And, in turn, we want to make a simple but necessary affirmation: Black lives matter. We believe these words represent an important step in the long struggle for systemic change. We echo the words of Dean Eric Wilcots’s recent message: "As individuals, we must all speak out and act against racism and injustice, acknowledge our biases and prejudices and work actively to counter them. As a community, we must work to ensure that all of us are safe, welcomed, and included. Together, it is our responsibility to do all that we can to end racism and injustice."

We stand in solidarity with those protesting this country’s ongoing, centuries-long legacy of anti-Black violence and we write to affirm our support for the dignity of all our Black community members. As a unit committed to the public humanities, we pledge not only to continue our fight for racial justice, but to intensify that fight to meet the scale of the crises with which we are faced in the present moment.

We are actively seeking students to serve as Humanities Responders for anti-racist collaborations. These Humanities Responders will receive stipends and mentorship to use the broad tools of the humanities to support the work of Black Lives Matter and other issues of racial inequity, inclusion, and access in critical collaboration with community partners and agencies. Undergraduate students, please learn more about being a Humanities Responder and apply with our HEX-U program; graduate students, please visit the HEX program.

Mellon Public Humanities Fellows are prime examples of the role that our university and the public humanities can play in black and marginalized communities locally. The Center interviewed two 2020-21 Fellows to discuss the issues underlying the current protests in Dane County and how they see their public fellowship positions contributing to the fight for racial justice as well as their academic work.
Kevin Wamalwa, a doctoral student in Anthropology and African Cultural Studies, is the Ripple Project Fellow for 2020-21 at Dane County Library Services. Wamalwa will support racial equity training for DCLS staff as well as the library system's Beyond the Page initiative to facilitate sustainable local community programs that ensure social diversity and inclusion.

**How do you think racial equity training at libraries can impact local communities?**
Dealing with racial inequity starts with the ability to recognize the implicit and explicit forms of racial biases, especially against people of color. The library staff’s equity training is essential in identifying the existing racial gaps both in employment in the libraries and community programming. What results from this training will expand the opportunities for people of color to utilize library services and feel part of the library operations.

**How do you think your work will be impacted by the public reaction to the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of Blacks Lives Matter?**
Apart from police brutality against people of color, it has brought to the limelight many forms of historical, institutional, and generational racial injustices against the minority communities. We see Reebok revoking its contract with CrossFit, the Reddit cofounder resigning and rallying for a black person to replace him, and IBM stopping to sell its facial recognition technology to police departments. These occurrences around George Floyd's death are timely and relevant to the Ripple Project and offer an opportunity and the urgency to discuss issues of racial equity and racial justice.

COVID-19 has also exposed ways in which the black community has been disadvantaged, especially in accessing health services. This realization is an opportunity for us to also think of ways to improve on our existing efforts to engage the black community better and ensure racial equity.

Read Wamalwa's full response here.
Lauren Surovi, a PhD candidate in the Department of French and Italian, is serving as the Prison Education Communication Fellow with Odyssey Beyond Bars, a program with the UW Odyssey Project to teach UW-Madison courses to incarcerated students in Wisconsin state correctional facilities. Surovi will help establish a communication infrastructure for prison educators in addition to fostering relationships on campus with people interested in getting involved.

**How do you think education is changing in incarcerated communities?**

There continues to be an ever-increasing sense of hope connected to education in the prison system, following a real recognition of the power of transformative justice and the ways in which correctional facilities in the U.S. can engage with a moral imperative to rehabilitate and restore. While developing educational programs for incarcerated communities lies at the heart of these efforts, there's also a real need to educate the larger public about the importance and impact of prison education to grow support for these vital programs.

**How do you think your work will be impacted by the public reaction to the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of Blacks Lives Matter?**

Recent protests have brought these issues to the foreground, issues that Black Lives Matter has been fighting for since 2013.

We know that the systemic racism of the legal system has led to the mass incarceration of Black Americans, what author Michelle Alexander has called the "new Jim Crow." At Oakhill Correctional Institution -- where Beyond Bars offers its programming -- 37% of prisoners are African American, despite the fact that African Americans make up only 6.1% of Wisconsin's overall population. George Floyd's killing is symptomatic of this unequal, unjust, and racist treatment of Black Americans at the hands of our justice system.

At the same time, we know that prison education reduces recidivism. While prison education programming does not strike at the heart of systemic inequalities, it can help mitigate some of the impacts by providing incarcerated students with educational opportunities that will hopefully improve their lives.

For those interested in learning more, the Prison Studies Project and the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison are great places to start.

Read Surovi's full response here.