Local Roles: An Interview with Kevin Wamalwa, Mellon Public Humanities Fellow

For more information, please contact:
Aaron Fai, Assistant Director of Public Humanities, fai@wisc.edu (608) 263-4783

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MADISON, Wis. (June 15, 2020)—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.

What is your position at Dane County Library Services and what is the Ripple Project?
I will be working with the Dane County Library Services as the Ripple Project Fellow. My primary role will be to support racial equity training for the DCLS staff. I will also support the library system's Beyond the Page initiative to develop and implement sustainability plans beyond 2021. The Ripple Project is a program under the DCLS’s Beyond the Page humanities endowment that will support racial equity and racial justice training for staff and facilitate sustainable local community programs that will 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 the 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. This understanding will then inform the kind of community engagement programs that will mitigate against racial inequity. Racial equity training and programming at the libraries will thus create a platform for a meaningful conversation with the communities of color about race and racism. Various programs and activities that will result 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 this work will be impacted by the pandemic and the public reaction to the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of Blacks Lives Matter?
Floyd’s murder, the subsequent national resurgence of Black Lives Matter, and perhaps the global protests against racial injustice has opened a Pandora’s box of issues related to racism. 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. For instance, we have seen 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. I would say that these occurrences around George Floyd’s death are timely and relevant to the Ripple Project endeavor. They offer an opportunity and the urgency to discuss issues of racial equity and racial justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic will impact my work. My duty as a Ripple Project fellow involves moving around to the libraries in Dane county. The uncertainty about the return to normalcy poses a challenge. If existing public health restrictions will be in place for long, face to face group training and various community engagement activities will be tricky. This is a huge problem, but it will also be an opportunity to think of more innovative ways of achieving our goals.

However, like Black Lives Matter protests, COVID-19 has 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.

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The Center is 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.