



Uniquely Positioned

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Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

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Killer Mike said, *“I hope we find a way out of it, because I don’t have the answers. But I do know: **we must plot, we must plan, we must strategize, we must organize, and mobilize.**”*

In this moment of triple-pandemic, the story of the Wabash Center aligns with Killer Mike’s message for agency, imagination, and cunning, as we support faculty and administrators in religion and theology. I read the many, many statements, treaties, and proclamations written by school administrators, corporate chiefs, government officials, and preachers. Each statement, in its own way, condemned the deplorable activities of racial injustice. I suppose making a statement declaring one’s values in a moment of social strife is better than leaving us to guess about institutional commitments concerning racism. But, most statements, from my vantage, while noble, did not provide a clarion commitment to the work and sacrifice needed for sustainable change. Killer Mike’s statement, simple and elegant, was a call to gather together and design the America which is dreamed about, but which goes unrealized.

Michael Santiago Render, better known by his stage name Killer Mike, is an American rap artist, songwriter, actor and activist. He is also the son of an Atlanta police officer. Killer Mike was called to speak on camera the day after the social uprisings began in response to the public torture and execution of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. The tape of the police

torturing and murdering George Floyd has gone viral and has ignited, again, the outrage of those of us who are against police brutality. Police terrorism is one of the many forms of white supremacy which infest and infect the U.S. democracy and keep racism an integral part of capitalism. Now, months after the day George Floyd was killed while calling upon the ancestors, the marches, protests and rebellions continue. Additional police executions caught on camera since the murder of George Floyd has served to increase the anguish, fear, anger and terror which grips the USA people. White America is coming to terms with what Black Americans have known and survived for 400 years, i.e. African American citizens, and other racially marginalized communities, are systemically terrorized by police forces in towns and cities all over the country as an accepted means of white supremacy and structural oppression. Ending this scourge will take all of us plotting, planning, strategizing, organizing and mobilizing for meaningful change to the infrastructures of America.

We, all of us, are in the throes of reckoning with the exposed fissures of racism made vivid by the flagrant police terrorism caught on cameras. We are depending upon good-hearted white people to shed the flimsy veneer of "I did not know," and work to redesign the social systems broken by white supremacy. Complicating this work, is the national economic upheaval for which we have no map and no solution. Beyond white supremacy and impending economic disaster, we, all of us, are grappling with a global pandemic caused by the novel corona virus for which we have no vaccine, no medicine cocktail, and little federal leadership. The triple pandemic heightens the need for our best minds to collaborate, partner, and find new solutions for these mammoth problems. If we are to survive, we must plot, plan, strategize, organize, and mobilize.

While there has been emancipation in the USA, there is not yet freedom for all.

It's almost difficult to remember my job as director before the pandemic, before the rebellions, before the skyrocketing U.S. unemployment rate. I started my new job as director on January 1. Then, along with the faculty, administration, and students of Wabash College, the Wabash Center staff began working remotely on March 17. Orientation to my new responsibilities and role, new house, new town, and new staff colleagues quickly shifted to a kind of triage where we asked ourselves, in every way we knew how - What can the Wabash Center do to support faculty of religion and theology in this moment of confusion, remote learning, and economic uncertainty?

The Wabash Center's nimbleness, willingness to be flexible and tireless work ethic, girded-up in March when our work went remote. My blue-ribbon staff and I immediately made the following pivots to the Wabash Center programming:

- • all late spring and early summer activities went online or were rescheduled
- • produced topical podcasts and webinars - to date we have more than 4000 downloads
- • created Digital Salons for fall 2020 (See: <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/programs/digital-salons/>)
- • spoke with more than four hundred workshop and colloquy participants for care and check-in
- • spoke with grant holders to extend deadlines of reports
- • created new resources for website on topics of remote teaching and racial justice
- • created the Teacher's Art Corner for expressions in this moment

We are currently in conversation with the colleagues of Lilly Endowment, Inc. to develop new programming for 2021 which will focus on issues directly related to the triple- pandemic. In this proposal, we would build partnerships with the Fund for Theological Exploration, In-Trust, Collegeville Institute and several Historically Black Colleges and Universities plus African American seminaries.

A grace of this moment for the Wabash Center is that our story, since its inception, has been a story of justice, activism, and teaching toward equity. Twenty-five years ago, Raymond Williams proposed a center for teaching and learning to strengthen teaching by teachers of religion and theology in colleges, universities, and theological schools in the United States and Canada. Raymond, to this day, is on the frontlines fighting for issues of racial justice and equality. Under the leadership of Lucinda Huffaker, the Wabash Center offered its first workshop in 2002 exclusively for African American faculty. I was a participant of that workshop. It is not an overstatement to say that that experience saved my career. Colleagues in that workshop have served as Deans, Department Chairs, and Presidents for theological schools and universities. Our contribution has been significant and I would like to think that Wabash Center had a part of our strivings. Dena Pence deepened and expanded the offering of support for racial/ethnic particularity. Dena expanded the grants for racial justice, created the Peer Mentoring Program, expanded the Consultants Program which, among many issues, sends colleagues to schools to discuss issues of diversity and inclusion.

The programmatic archive of the Wabash Center speaks for our commitments to resisting racial oppression and the challenge of redesigning the higher education enterprise as a place of racial equity:

Racial/Ethnic Diversity - Teaching Workshops and Colloquies

- 2019-2020 Colloquy on Race Critical Consciousness for Transformative Theological Education

- 2018-19 Teaching Against Islamophobia
- 2017-18 Asian/Pacific Islander Faculty
- 2015-16 Faculty of African Descent
- 2012-13 Workshop for Latino/a Faculty
- 2011-12 Asian/Asian North American Faculty
- 2009-10 Faculty of African Descent
- 2008-09 Colloquy for Latino/a Faculty
- 2006-07 Asian/Asian North American Faculty
- 2006-07 Fostering Effective Teaching and Learning in Racial/Cultural Diverse Classrooms
- 2004-05 Teaching in Racial/Cultural Diverse Classrooms
- 2002-03 African American Faculty
- 2019 Asian Theological Summer Institute Workshop on Teaching
- 2018 Hispanic Theological Initiative Workshop on Teaching
- 2017 Asian Theological Summer Institute Workshop on Teaching
- 2016 Hispanic Theological Initiative Workshop on Teaching
- 2015 Fund for Theological Exploration Workshop on Teaching Fund for Theological Exploration Workshop on Teaching
- 2014 Asian Theological Summer Institute Workshop on Teaching
- 2013 Hispanic Theological Initiative Workshop on Teaching
- 2012 Fund for Theological Exploration Workshop on Teaching Fund for Theological Exploration Workshop on Teaching
- 2011 Hispanic Theological Initiative Workshop on Teaching

Beyond our programming, the Wabash Center has funded several hundred grants and fellowships supporting the work of racial ethnic scholars, as well as supporting projects which boost the scholarship of teaching for diversity, inclusion, and equity.

The Wabash Center is uniquely positioned to respond in this peculiar and unprecedented time. We, staying true to our own DNA, are working hard to assist with issues of remote teaching, stand with those who teach against white supremacy, and support schools who are in the throes of the economic downturn. This work is our mission, our legacy and will be our future. Our greatest asset is our constituency. We are uniquely positioned to nurture sustained social change because of those scholars who have participated in our workshops, colloquies, conferences, podcast and webinars; those scholars who have received grants and fellowships; those who have written for the Journal on Teaching and received support and mentoring through a consultant's visit - have created a vital network.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/07/uniquely-positioned/>