**2021 Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition**

**Introductory Remarks: ACCESS COPY**

**April 21, 2021**

Hello, all. I’m Andrea Olinger, an associate professor of English and Director of the Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition. I’m speaking from Louisville, KY, and I’m so honored and grateful to be here with all of you today. We know that there’s so much else going on right now, including other conferences this very week, so thank you for sharing *this* experience.

Strange times like those we’ve been living in since last March call for strange introductions, and what I will share in the next fifteen minutes is a mix of service announcements, context on the conference theme and design, and declarations of intent. So please bear with me!

(ACCESS SLIDE)

In the chat, Lauren Fusilier is posting a link to the CART captions ([https://www.streamtext.net/player?event=WatsonConference](https://nam11.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.streamtext.net%2Fplayer%3Fevent%3DWatsonConference&data=04%7C01%7Cwatson%40louisville.edu%7Ccb7462fef9a741a2c81d08d8fdb258cf%7Cdd246e4a54344e158ae391ad9797b209%7C0%7C0%7C637538289720090131%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=vK97R9Owhg8aHxqfcx2elFPEYfUP8ufSc13iFBeUKng%3D&reserved=0)), as well as an access copy of these announcements. Our CART captions are provided by Michelle Houston; we’re so lucky to be working with her for the entire conference. It’s also a treat to work with our ASL interpreters—today they are Lisa Weems, Rodney Lebon, and Kaylee Teixera; we met them all through Cheryl Henderson of CDJ Interpreting. And lastly, we’re grateful for Hank Enright, who is providing Spanish-English interpretation for some later sessions today, starting with the keynote. If you have additional access questions or needs, or would like someone to re-send you a link, please message us on Zoom—anyone who has Watson in their username--or email us at [watson@louisville.edu](mailto:watson@louisville.edu), and we’ll be keeping an eye on that throughout the conference.

(RECORDING & SOCIAL MEDIA SLIDE)

We are recording the conference, but we want to stress that we will NOT be making the videos public. We’ll be sharing copies with the presenters, but if they post them they we’re asking them to edit out any segments where attendees are featured. But even so, of course, feel free to adjust your name or turn off your video. Please do not make your own recordings. If you want to post about the conference on social media, however, we certainly invite you to; you can use the hashtag #WatsCon21.

(PARTICIPATION SLIDE)

Some ground rules for participation—we’ll go over these at the start of every session. Please keep your mic muted; if you want to ask a question or make a comment during a Q&A period, you can put it in the chat or raise your hand, and a moderator will call on you and you can unmute. Please announce your name before you begin to share.

(COMMITMENTS SLIDE)

In addition, I wanted to draw your attention to the Watson Conference commitments (<http://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/2021-watson-conference-commitments>), which we emailed to you. We want to create a different kind of conference environment, a brave space that, to quote Arao and Clemens, “emphasizes the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety” (p. 141). ENDQUOTE. Hopefully you had a chance to read them on our website, but if not, there will be time to discuss them in the breakout groups. We hope that they will be a resource that we can all explicitly refer to as we interact during the conference.

[STOP SHARING SCREEN]

Before I go any further, I want to thank Alex Way and Caitlin Burns, who are the assistant directors of the conference and are PhD students in Rhetoric and Composition here at UofL. This conference would not be possible without them, as you will see! They are busy assigning moderators to breakout rooms now, but you’ll get a chance to interact with them, and enjoy for yourself their smarts, savvy, kindness, and warmth.

And speaking of enjoyment, the mug cake. You can see by the size of my mug that I really, really like cake. Forgive the cliché, but the best part about conferences is the people—making new friends and catching up with old ones. And food tends to be involved. You might be gathering with grad school friends over dinner, or chatting with people you don’t know at a reception as you all fill a teeny tiny plate with as many free hors d’oeuvres as you can. We can’t literally break bread together today, but we wanted to do *something* communal with food. Hence, the mug cake idea, and thanks to Dr Adela Licona for that. So if you made a mug cake, and if you have your camera on, could you show it to everyone? If you are keeping your camera off, could you give a thumbs-up or other reaction to show that you are enjoying one? There’s a reaction button at the bottom of your Zoom screen that should give you some options. I’m going to switch to gallery view on my end so I can see how many people were able to assemble them.

So please dig in and enjoy your cake as you listen to me or read the captions or follow along in the access copy. I’m going to speak for about 10 more minutes, and then we’ll join moderated breakout rooms to meet one another. Following that, we’ll briefly share some highlights from the breakouts, and then we’ll close with a pet parade, which I will explain.

So who is here? Over 340 people registered, most live in the United States, but we also have a handful of people who live in Canada, and one or two from Mexico, Norway, the UK, Greece, Venezuela, and Oman. The majority of you come from writing, rhetoric, and English departments, which is Watson’s core audience, as this is a conference for the fields of rhetoric and composition. However, we’re really delighted that people from other areas are participating, too, including teacher-scholars from education, chemistry, communication, criminal justice, public affairs, religious studies, sociology, theater, and women’s and gender studies; and not just from academic departments but also from libraries; professional associations, and publishers, among other groups. And we were pleased to see that a bunch of people who are here are also planning conferences—folks mentioned 33 different conferences in the registration form.

(SHARE SCREEN; MAP SLIDE)

We’ve also just concluded three days of pre-conference workshops for graduate students on writing, research, publishing, and professional identity—please check out the amazing presenters on our website to learn more about what they do. 129 grad students registered, from 62 universities and 5 countries.

(STOP SHARING SCREEN)

For obvious reasons, we decided to stage this year’s Watson Conference virtually. Although it may *seem* that we’re in a free-floating webspace, the Watson Conference is usually held in-person at the University of Louisville, in Kentucky. It’s imperative to declare that our conference is made possible only through our continued occupation of this land, which is the ancestral homeland of the Shawnee, Eastern Band of the Cherokee, and Osage nations. Also, native people are very much present in Kentucky today--over 27,000 native people live here, according to the 2019 American Community Survey. But our acknowledgment of these realities must be just the beginning of our work to undo our colonial impacts. What must *follow* are concrete measures to support native communities. Today at 3:30, we will be convening a roundtable called “Beyond the Land Acknowledgment: Decolonial Actions for the Watson Conference and the University of Louisville” to begin that conversation.

Indeed, for too many in our country, state-sanctioned violence forms a daily reality. Louisville, of course, has been the home of horrific, avoidable tragedies in the past thirteen months: to name just two, the murder of Breonna Taylor, shot to death by police officers in her apartment; and the killing of David McAtee, a community leader and owner of a BBQ restaurant, by the Kentucky National Guard as they enforced a curfew against protesters—even as no protesters could be found near the restaurant when the killing occurred. Like Sandra Bland, Ahmaud Arbery, Daunte Wright, George Floyd, and innumerable other Black and Brown individuals, Breonna Taylor and David McAtee had their lives stolen by agents of a system that insists they don’t matter. We affirm that they do.

We gather this morning less than a day after a murderous police officer was held to account for his evil. But even as we stand relieved, we are sobered by the recognition that the institutions that enabled him and so many like him, the system that has allowed almost all others to escape the consequences of their brutality, and the white supremacist ideology that suggested he would face no punishment: these things prevail. To those who suffer at the hands of the state, our grief and affirmations are meaningless if unsupported by action. And we would be unfit to take up the challenge before us, to dismantle white supremacy, if we fail to perceive how it infects the academic spaces we occupy. Academic conferences are no exception. They are oppressive in their very design: from how much it costs to attend; to whose research is deemed worthy of being presented and featured; to the heavily policed downtown areas of the conference hotels where people often stay; to the lack of childcare; to the power dynamics of Q&As; to assumptions made about what is accessible; to everyday microaggressions during hallway, meal, and bus interactions.

The Watson Conference participates in this shameful reality. In 2018, the conference was also the site of a very public moment of racism, when a white keynote speaker used the N-word in reported speech, and no one in the room—no member of the Watson team, no would-be white ally—spoke up. As ever, the work of accountability began not of our own initiative but from scholars of color calling us out for our silence, including through an open letter sent to Watson by joint CCCC caucuses.

The harms inflicted at and after the 2018 Watson Conference actually compounded as I became director and began planning the 2020 event. I moved forward with my theme, different from the one that brings us here today, without talking with the scholars I was inviting about what had happened in 2018 and what we had learned. After I revealed the history, many resigned. People rightly felt betrayed by my lack of transparency, and many of the scholars of color rightly felt exploited, as if we were using their participation to absolve us of our past. We again were brought face to face with the serious work that had yet to be accomplished.

Our reflection—spurred by the insights and suggestions generously offered by some of the very scholars we had wronged—culminated in a statement of account, published on our website. In the statement, which Lauren can put in the chat (<http://louisville.edu/conference/watson/watson-and-anti-black-racism>), we describe and analyze the harms we caused and make specific commitments to antiracist work for future Watson conferences. It was clear to us that this work of uprooting white supremacy from our present and future practices needed to begin immediately, with the theme, or meta-theme, of our 2021 event—namely, how to reimagine conferences so they would affirm and sustain all present, particularly multiply marginalized scholars, and not just the most privileged among us. So now let me share what these commitments are and why we designed this conference the way we did.

For this event, we wanted to very deliberately invest the funds available in people who had expertise in antiracism and conference design. That means that every presenter, not just the keynotes, is receiving an honorarium. We are thinking of everyone as essentially consulting for the Watson Conference. In this role, many are contributing a resource to our Policy and Practice Archive, and Lauren will link to that too (<http://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/conference/public-archive>).

So for this conference, in our call for consultation, we invited people to present on some of the following:

* Approaches that exist, or should be developed, to combat the inveterate whiteness of conferences. Watson has always been very white, and this year’s conference is no exception—our planning team and Watson committee are all-white. And of the 232 people who noted their race and ethnicity in the optional question on our registration form, 70% identify as white.

We also invited people to present

* on systems to address microaggressions and hate speech at conferences;
* on feedback and reporting mechanisms to assess antiracist performance objectives;
* on approaches for engaging with local communities outside of the academy; and
* on compensation structures that should exist, or could be developed, for BIPOC scholars who expend intellectual and emotional labor to educate conference organizers or other groups about racist actions. The last of these is especially important for the Watson team. Our own self-examination and learning, and indeed the very foundation of this year’s conference, emerged wholly from the research and questions asked by BIPOC women whom I had invited to participate in the 2020 event.

In the statement on our website, we have also committed to several actions for all future conferences, although we’ll be reflecting on these and revising them as needed.

1. The first is supporting and amplifying Black scholars through our speaker invitations, while being mindful not to burden them with the expectation that they must, or that their participation does, absolve the conference of our past.
2. The second action is preparing guidelines for participants on recognizing and countering microaggressions, acts of racism, and hate speech. These guidelines exist as a portion of the Watson Conference commitments, which we’ve emailed to you. We hope you can give some feedback on them in the breakout rooms so that we can expand and update them for the future.
3. The third action is supporting Black-owned businesses, local when possible; we’ve done this in a few different ways: through the raffle, through most of the vendors we’ve chosen; and through the list of local Black-led historical and artistic ventures that our website highlights.
4. And the fourth action is to regularly assess how we’re doing on these initiatives.

After the conference, as I said, we will be revising the microaggressions guidelines. We’ll also be developing training materials for the next Watson director. Given that the directorship rotates every two years, these materials will help solidify institutional memory. We will also be writing and posting a report on our website in which we’ll discuss the lessons we have learned and make recommendations for future Watson conferences.

We very much welcome your feedback on any of these actions and initiatives, or your reflections about the events I’ve described, so please feel free to share during the conference or even to email us.

So that is all context for what we’re doing over these three days. There are amazing sessions lined up: two keynotes, two workshops, four panels, and a roundtable. There’s going to be a lot of material. That’s why we wanted to create space for some of the relational work that is so valuable, now and in the closing session on Friday. The purpose of the breakout rooms which we’ll enter soon is create a semblance of community that we can hopefully sustain over the conference. In a minute, we’ll invite you to join breakout rooms that will be moderated. Our ASL interpreters and captioner will remain in the main room, so if you’d like those services, don’t join the breakouts, just stay here. If you are not feeling up for interacting, feel free to leave the meeting and then return in fifteen minutes for the whole-group conversation and the pet parade, which you won’t want to miss.

(SHARE SCREEN; BREAKOUT ROOM SLIDE)

The moderator in your room will facilitate introductions, and then you’ll have some prompts for discussion, which we’ll put in the chat now. I want to thank the moderators for signing up to do this. Many of them thought they’d just be attending the conference but we roped them into helping out as the registrations mounted and mounted. So the prompts are:

1. What brings us here? What would we like to learn and contribute?
2. Do we have any suggestions for the Watson Conference commitments? As I said, we plan to revise them and use them at future Watson conferences.
3. What ideas do we have for creating and preserving an inclusive communal space over Zoom? Is there anything that we can do now that we’re here together to enhance this?

We’ve asked each moderator to take notes because we’d like to return to them in the closing session to see how we did. When we’re all back in the main room, I’ll call on a few moderators to share some tidbits from their breakout-room conversations.

Caitlin and Alex, are the breakouts ready? [Do all breakouts have moderators?] Okay, we’ll give you \_\_\_ (10-15) minutes, and we’ll see everyone back at 11:30 am (?) ET.

(STOP SHARING SCREEN)

11:15-11:30: BREAKOUTS

11:30-11:37: [Ask a few moderators to share what they discussed]

(SHARE SCREEN; RAFFLE SLIDE)

Okay, now, for a few minutes of whimsy. Earlier, I referred to our raffle, which you’ll find on our website, and Lauren will be putting a link in the chat (<http://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/raffle>); we’ll be purchasing some treats from some local Black-owned businesses, and you can sign up for what you’d like to receive. We’ll use a random number generator to select four winners. Unfortunately, this is for US folks only.

(PET PARADE SLIDE)

Second, we wanted to kick the conference off with a pet parade. The name and concept come from the Atlas Obscura Virtual Trivia Nights, which always end this way. If your pet is available or nearby, put them on camera for a minute and we will spotlight them one by one. This way, we can greet some of the unregistered participants that will hopefully grace us with their presence over the conference. Lauren Fusilier and Brittany Smart are going to be the hosts of the pet parade, so they’re going to be providing the commentary, so we’ll hand it over to them now! Okay, please put your pet on camera if you can!

[PET PARADE: until 11:45 am]

All right—that was fun! We’ll now take a 15-minute break, and we’ll be back at 12 noon for Dr. Cherie Dawson-Edward’s keynote.