Antiracist and Inclusive Conferencing:

Co-Constructing Access, Attending to Power, and Practicing Accountability

Roundtable Presenters: Andrea Olinger, Caitlin Burns Allen,

Alex Way, & Michael Benjamin

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SCRIPT for VIDEO 1

# Roundtable Introduction & Background on Watson & Anti-Black Racism

# Andrea Olinger, she/her/hers

Thank you, all, for listening to and watching our roundtable today. I am Andrea Olinger, Associate Professor of English at the University of Louisville and Director of the Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, and I’m here with Caitlin Burns Allen, Alex Way, and Michael Benjamin, who are PhD students in Rhetoric and Composition and Assistant Directors of the conference.

Slide 2

In her call for papers, Staci Perryman-Clark wrote that QUOTE “as representatives of a discipline, we bear tremendous responsibility for the gatekeeping practices we employ and who we decide to and decide not to invite to our disciplinary conversations. Now is the time for us to hold ourselves accountable for the gate entry and gatekeeping we practice with our students and each other.” END QUOTE Today, we are responding to her call for accountability in relation to conference organizing by sharing lessons we learned about inclusive and antiracist conferences from our planning and execution of the April 2021 Watson Conference.

The Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition is a biennial event hosted by the University of Louisville’s English Department. The April 2021 conference, held over Zoom, was titled Toward the Antiracist Conference: Reckoning with the Past, Reimagining the Present. We strove to interrogate existing academic conference policies and practices and reimagine them to foster antiracism in how conferences are conceived, organized, and staged. It was therefore a response to this urgent moment in global, national, and local history. It was also occasioned by institutional and personal history--namely, as part of the repair work that the organizers have undertaken to address the conference’s own role in enabling anti-Black racism. I will talk a bit more about that in a minute, but first, a quick overview of the three lessons we will be sharing today.

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These lessons are based in the Conference Commitments, a document we drafted before and discussed and circulated during the conference. We will focus on three commitments in particular: co-constructing access, attending to power dynamics in conference interactions, and practicing accountability. We’ll draw on our own reflections, notes from the breakout rooms during the conference, and responses in the anonymous post-conference survey.

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First, I will provide a bit more background on Watson Conference history and its role in perpetuating anti-Black racism.

Second, Caitlin will describe how we sought and struggled to enact access as Margaret Fink and colleagues describe it--QUOTE “not a one-way transmission of information but [as] involv[ing] all members of the communicative situation” (Fink et al. 104). END QUOTE.

Third, Alex will discuss the value and challenges of naming and interrupting power dynamics in participation.

Fourth, I will explore ramifications of the commitment to be accountable when participants make mistakes and cause harm.

And then lastly, Michael will summarize some of what we learned from the presentations at the conference that we hope to apply to the next event.

So first, I wanted to give some context on where we are situated. The University of Louisville occupies the ancestral homeland of the Shawnee, Eastern Band of the Cherokee, and Osage nations. And native people are very much present in Kentucky today--over 27,000 native people live here, according to the 2019 American Community Survey. Louisville is also home to a city with deep-seated disparities between white and Black residents, disparities in such aspects as wealth, employment opportunities, health outcomes, and police killings. It was in Louisville that Breonna Taylor was shot to death in her apartment by police offers bearing a no-knock warrant. It was in Louisville where David McAtee, a community leader and owner of a BBQ restaurant, was murdered 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. Along with George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Daunte Wright, Sandra Bland, and innumerable other Black and Brown individuals, Taylor and McAtee had their lives stolen by agents of a system that insisted they don’t matter. We affirm that they do.

But we would be unfit to take up the challenge of dismantling white supremacy in our communities and different spheres of influence if we failed to perceive how whiteness infects the academic spaces we occupy. As I mentioned at the outset, drawing on Staci Perryman-Clark’s CFP, academic conferences 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 everyday microaggressions during hallway, meal, and bus interactions.

The Watson Conference participates in this 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, which I did after a Black scholar whom we had invited inquired about it, 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; the URL is in our References. In the statement, 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 of our new event. We decided to focus it on 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, that is the April 2021 conference that we are discussing today. As an all-white planning team, we are especially conscious of our internalization of what Tema Okun has described as white supremacy culture and we are continually working to extricate ourselves from its grip. This roundtable is of course an opportunity to synthesize ideas for our own future conference-planning and offer guidance to other conference organizers, but most of all it represents an ongoing and of course imperfect and incomplete effort to uproot white supremacy in one tiny corner of academic spaces—that of the conference.

So without further ado, I will pass it on to Caitlin Burns Allen, who will talk about lessons from the conference relating to access.

# Co-Constructing Access

# Presenter: Caitlin Burns Allen, she/her/hers

CBA: Hi everyone. I’m Caitlin Burns Allen, one of the assistant directors of the 2021 Watson conference. My portion of our panel will cover our team’s work to uphold one of our conference commitments. This commitment reads, “We will co-create a culture of access while recognizing that this work is never complete.” My short talk will unpack our efforts to make the 2021 virtual conference inclusive and accessible. Like my other panel members, I’ll be drawing on my own experiences planning and organizing the conference, the data from our post-conference survey, and our reflections and conversations as a team.

First, I want to acknowledge that access is contextual and situated in specific spaces and places; our conference was not automatically accessible because it was online. As Tara Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argue, access and accommodation can be understood as “recursive projects that exist before, throughout, and even after” an event—a classroom in their article, but a conference in this case. It’s important to consider the specific needs and environment of each new situation, class, or conference. With this in mind, I will discuss our work to improve accessibility in one specific context, the 2021 Watson conference.

Our goal was to co-create a culture of access at the conference (see Brewer et al). This goal was rooted in and inspired by Hubrig and Osorio’s Cs symposium, “Enacting a Culture of Access in Our Conference Spaces.” In their introduction to the symposium, Hubrig and Osorio describe the four principles that undergird their definition of access: (1) access is dynamic, (2) access is relational, (3) access is intersectional, and (4) access is political (91). In their contribution to the symposium, Fink et al. expand on this definition of access, writing that “access is not a one-way transmission of information but involves all members of the communicative situation” (104). Informed by this scholarship, as well as other resources such as the Composing Access Project and the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators’ guidelines for presenters, we worked to make the conference accessible and inclusive for as many participants as possible. Unfortunately, while our stated commitment and goal was to *co-*create a culture of access, we often missed out on opportunities to collaborate with presenters, attendees, and captioners and interpreters. Instead of working with others to determine what access meant for all of us in this specific context, we tried to take care of everything ourselves as organizers. As we’ve reflected as a team, we’ve highlighted a few moments where more collaboration would have been beneficial and allowed us to frame access more effectively at Watson 2021 as dynamic and relational.

First, out of concern for asking attendees to self-disclose access needs, we did not ask attendees to indicate if they required CART captioning or ASL interpretation. Instead, we hired ASL interpreters for every session and workshop to accompany the CART captioning. Later, we learned that for some Deaf scholars, this was not productive and led to our hiring interpreters that were not actually needed for some smaller sessions. In the future, we will consult attendees and presenters to determine if ASL is needed, while still not asking anyone to disclose more personal information.

Second, we did not have a set time before the conference for presenters to rehearse. During the conference, there was a misalignment between our stated commitment to “strive to speak slowly—and…ask one another to slow down as needed” and the reality of the pacing of presentations. Some speakers—especially myself—struggled to maintain a slower pace of speaking. This can impede understanding for all presenters, and can make it difficult for captioners and interpreters to keep up with the presentation. A rehearsal in the weeks before the conference would have provided time and experience for presenters, organizers, captioners, and interpreters to practice working together, to agree on a suitable pace, and work out any technical or other issues before presenting for real. Moreover, a rehearsal would be a chance to make sure that access copies are available and able to be viewed, to review access practices like visually describing images on slides and reading text aloud instead of asking audience members to read to themselves. In the future, we are likely to organize a rehearsal like this to make sure that all participants are on the same page.

Similarly, we received feedback that it is helpful for CART captioners and ASL interpreters to have access to scripts and other presentation materials before the conference begins. Academic conference presentations can be heavy with jargon, names, acronyms, or other language that can be unfamiliar to people outside the field (or inside it, for that matter). Because of this, our interpreters and captioner requested lists of unfamiliar terms or other field-specific language so that they could prepare ahead of time. While our presenters provided this information for the most part, we did not allow enough time before the conference for the interpreters and captioners to review the material. In the future, we will be aware of the network of individuals that make access at online conferences possible and provide them with the information they need with more time.

 These are a few issues with access and coordination that we encountered during our conference in April 2021. We will take what we have learned and make changes for the upcoming Watson conference next year, recognizing the second part of our commitment: “this work is never complete.” Because access is dynamic, the next Watson conference will require us to work with attendees, presenters, organizers, interpreters, captioners, and other stakeholders to make a culture of access possible for the specific needs of that context. Thank you all for listening, and now I will pass things along to Alex Way.

# SCRIPT for VIDEO 2

# Attending to Power Dynamics

# Alex Way, he/him/his

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Hi everyone, I’m Alex Way, and I was an Assistant Director for the Watson Conference. I will be talking about the value and challenges of naming and interrupting power dynamics in participation.

The 2021 Watson Conference Commitment I will talk about is this one:

We will actively attend to power dynamics in participation—and we will name and interrupt these dynamics as needed.

We support presenters using no more than the time allotted and attendees asking questions that are succinct and generative. We encourage as many people to be involved in the Q&A as possible. This work can also involve the following strategies:

• Being mindful of our own tendencies to participate or withhold.

• Reflecting on our own purposes for asking questions.

• Rejecting and responding to microaggressions.

We created this part of the Watson Commitments by referencing a wide variety of scholarship including Tuck’s Indigenous academic approach to Q&As, Dr. Sherita Roundtree’s and other scholars’ stories/experiences, Diab et al.’s work on responding to microaggressions, McGee and Kazembe’s “Entertainers or Education Researchers?”, and Cheung et al. on Microresistance. We also consulted other groups' commitments, which are cited at the end of the Watson Commitments. We received feedback from a consultant and the Watson committee on the commitments as well. And finally, we asked our presenters for feedback.

Slide 6

The commitments were distributed prior to the conference, and presenters and the audience were reminded about them when each presentation began. We also discussed the commitments with the audience in the opening and closing session breakouts to get feedback on them.

Slide 7

When the 2021 Watson Conference wrapped up, we solicited feedback via an online survey from attendees about various aspects of the conference. In response to the survey question: How did organizers, presenters, and attendees do in meeting the commitments? Attendees in general responded that they thought we did a good job of meeting the commitments. But two attendees asked for improvement on power dynamics in particular.

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One responded: “[I thought you did fine] although I don't really think the part about actively attending to power dynamics in participation was actually done all that consistently in my sessions. Not sure it's possible to always be "on" in this way when everyone is tired and overworked and in the middle of a pandemic, though.”

Slide 9

The other responder said, “With the commitment called ‘We will actively attend to power dynamics in participation—and we will name and interrupt these dynamics as needed’ I thought this was a bit under-emphasized in my experience. The times when I felt this commitment adhered to most strongly was during the sessions that Dr. Kirschbaum [sic] chaired panels and called specific attention to it, but I was thinking that this is a complex conversation maybe even worthy of its own session at a conference about anti-racist conferencing.”

We are glad to have received these critiques, although we wanted to know more about which specific instances of microaggressions flew under the radar. Perhaps we could design future survey questions to ask for these details. At the same time, we agree wholeheartedly that interrupting power dynamics could be its own conference session.

Slide 10

One example of how we grappled with this commitment was when an attendee asked an unrelated question in the chat to a black presenter that seemed to treat them as a spokesperson for their race in the Zoom chat towards the end of the session (I was reading questions aloud to the presenter). One of the conference planners flagged the message and asked me to not read it.

If my colleague hadn’t alerted me to the issue, I would have likely asked the question in the moment because I was single-mindedly focused on my task of identifying and asking questions. This experience demonstrates that it is a team effort to meet the Watson Commitments (there is a lot going on for organizers during both online and in-person conferences, so keeping track of everything at once is exceedingly difficult. This also points back to what the first presenter said about the difficulty of attending to power dynamics on the fly). In addition to ignoring the question, the conference planner talked with the scholar about the incident after it happened. However, one thing we didn’t do was explain in the chat why we ignored that question, and we wish we would have.

Slide 11

Our experience with this unrelated question demonstrates the need for practice in attending to power dynamics. We are specifically thinking about creating opportunities in future conferences for bystander intervention training, which encourages the intervention in situations involving microaggressions. There are sources out there to gain this practice, including a CCCCs workshop on bystander intervention for WPAs last year, Diab and Godbee’s use of forum theater based on Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed,” the Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance (AORTA), and others.

Slide 12

Other ways we attended to power dynamics include the fact that we didn’t schedule concurrent sessions, so the more well-established or senior scholars didn’t take everyone’s attention at the expense of grad students, for instance. Furthermore, registrations were not accepted from people who have, at previous events, ignored the values and actions described in the commitments.

For the future we are thinking about some guidelines for responding to people who violate the commitments during in-person conferences and we would also like to further develop our guidelines around microaggressions.

Andrea will now talk about accountability.

# Practicing Accountability

# Andrea Olinger, she/her/hers

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Disability and transformative justice advocate Mia Mingus (2018) points out that causing harm is inevitable: “We will hurt, misunderstand, and harm each other. We are human and we live in an incredibly violent and harmful world. The point is to learn how to be accountable *when we inevitably mess up,* so that we know what to do” (“The Four Parts”).

Slide 14

This idea grounds the final Conference Commitment, which I have a screenshot of on this slide: that “We will approach our missteps as opportunities for growth. When we make mistakes, we will urge one another to do better. When we do something that causes harm, we will recognize the difference between intent and impact and will take responsibility for the harm.”

Slide 15

Mingus articulates four parts of accountability: self-reflection (which needs to occur throughout the process but is an essential first step to understand the harm and the impact); apology (“to demonstrate to those you have harmed that you understand what you did and what the impact was”); repair (which “includes making amends and rebuilding trust” and “must be done in relationship and cannot be done alone, unlike changing one’s behavior”), and changed behavior, which is made easier with people you can talk to and process with.

The theme of the conference itself is part of the accountability work we have undertaken, and our statement on Watson and Anti-Black Racism describes this in more detail; the link is in our References handout. But, to reiterate Mingus’s statement, “We will hurt, misunderstand, and harm each other.” And indeed, the Watson Conference continued to do this, from small ways, like the comment in the chat that Alex described, to larger ways, in the roundtable that I planned for the first day of the conference, titled “Beyond the Land Acknowledgement: Decolonial Actions for the Watson Conference and UofL.” In these remarks, I will elaborate on how we are practicing accountability in relation to the roundtable on land acknowledgements, and I argue that developing a practice of accountability should be essential to conference work if we want to create a conference that is truly inclusive and just and where no space is given for white supremacy.

In terms of the roundtable, I want to recognize and thank the two people who emailed me during the conference, both members of the American Indian Caucus of CCCC, to call me in and educate me about the harm of the roundtable. I discussed in detail what happened in my closing remarks in April, but I will summarize what happened briefly. When I began planning it, I reached out to two groups: native scholars outside of University of Louisville, which I’ll refer to as UofL, who are experts in conference planning and other kinds of decolonial work, and UofL colleagues, both native and settler, who do decolonial work in their own disciplines and who I knew wanted to be in the conversation about what it means to decolonize the UofL. I gave the same prompts to everyone: recommendations for academic conferences generally, and recommendations for University of Louisville that the Watson Conference could connect to.

As the two colleagues who emailed pointed out, the UofL portion with settler scholars should *not* have been part of the conference. My settler UofL colleagues are experts in decolonizing work in their own disciplines, but not everyone works with native communities or does so in their current role here. When I invited them, two of them expressed concerns that they were not a good fit and did not have the expertise that I was looking for, but I insisted that their perspective and questions were valuable, so they agreed to stay, even as their qualms persisted. I, also, was afraid to rescind my invitations once I offered them. In that, I see a number of characteristics that feed what Tema Okun calls white supremacy culture—fear of open conflict, right to comfort, and feeling defensive about my own decisions.

I should NOT have invited the three of them to share in this particular conversation, to speak alongside Indigenous scholars with direct experience in conference planning and other issues. Having them all on the same panel leveled everyone’s expertise, a potentially dehumanizing experience for native colleagues who have dedicated their careers to these concerns. That the settler speakers were given the prime position of closing the roundtable, and that the last of the three was a white man, only compounded the humiliation for some.

In this case, accountability first meant reflecting on the hurt and harm I caused and understanding how and why it happened. The why included characteristics like my sense of urgency and a fear of conflict, which, as I mentioned, feed a culture of white supremacy—and my remarks in the closing session discuss this more. Second, accountability meant apologizing to my Native colleagues and those on the AIC. Obviously, this apology may not necessarily be accepted.

Slide 16

As Mingus writes, in her discussion of apologies, QUOTE “Let go of outcome and control.…You cannot control anyone else, only yourself. Your apology may not be received well or the person may not want to be in relationship with you anymore.”

The third aspect of accountability is repair. One kind of repair is to compensate the two scholars for their time and labor in educating me about the damaging impact of the roundtable. I will discuss this more in a bit. In addition, I had thought that as another kind of repair, the conference could offer funding for graduate students on the AIC to attend future Watson conferences. However, it was relayed that we have not yet demonstrated that Watson can be a safe space for Indigenous graduate student scholars. If all we do is create these scholarships, and make no other changes, or only surface changes, without doing some serious self-education, that is not enough.

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As Mingus (2018) points out, “Repair can take a long time and usually demands consistency and a level of faith in the face of fear that we are often not taught. It takes a lot of work to rebuild trust and to mend a broken relationship, especially when compounded by past trauma (for everyone involved)” (“The Four Parts”).

When we are ready to start planning the next Watson conference, we will be reaching out to colleagues on the AIC to see if any would like to serve as consultants, whom we would compensate for their time and labor. However, we recognize that many may not be interested in continuing this relationship, given the broken trust.

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So that was a brief summary of how we are striving to be accountable after the harm of the roundtable. I now want to share some practices that have helped to facilitate accountability in conference planning and staging. These are in no way complete, and I recommend perusing the Policy and Practice Archive, which is listed in the References section of our handout, because some of the presenters shared materials there, and they have so many great ideas. In addition, Michael will be discussing some of what the presenters have shared that we are especially taking to heart.

**One practice is a commitment to transparency.** As I shared at the beginning, it was my lack of transparency with my initial planning team, as well as the lack of information on our website to begin with, that compounded the initial harm of what happened in 2018. Now, however, there is detailed information on our website about what happened and what our commitments are, as well as a report that we will be posting that assesses how we did with those commitments to fighting anti-Black racism. And for the Land Acknowledgment Roundtable, we also tried to be as transparent as possible. I discussed what happened in the closing session, circulated my remarks, and posted them on the website, although the file needs to be easier to find. Having a place to publicly archive these kinds of experiences, along with how the conference responded, is important so that everyone is fully informed about what kind of spaces they are entering and what changes conference organizers have made.

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**Another practice is to build in time during the conference for all conference participants—organizers, presenters, and attendees—to reflect on how they are enacting our values.** Given that conferences are oppressive in so many ways, and given the prevailing whiteness of conferences, we need to be continually thinking about how we engage with one another and how we are accountable to one another. Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins might call this “self-work with others” in their article, “Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable.”

They write, “Doing self-work with others involves ongoing care-full self-reflection that takes place, in part, through courageous dialogues. As we c*ourageously* confront our own prejudiced assumptions on our own, we need equally to learn from and listen to others (both within and across racial groups) who can help us realize these assumptions” (11).

Our closing session, which included breakout discussions, was designed to be a chance for people to not only reflect on what they learned but also to get meta: How did this conference live up to its commitments? What worked, where did we fall short, and how can we do better next time? When I received the critique from my two Native colleagues, therefore, there was already space for conference participants discuss these harms and other missteps.

Slide 20

**A third practice is to compensate people for the emotional and intellectual labor they expend to educate conference organizers.** I’ve now been through two conference-experiences where I and the conference caused harm and where people involved in the conference shared important feedback as or after this was happening. Feedback that drastically shaped our plans. As I sought to compensate these scholars for their labor, I faced a few roadblocks from my university.

During the first instance, in summer 2020, I was initially told that I could only pay honoraria to people who had speaking roles, even though at this point many people had resigned and there was no new conference yet. The only way I was told I could get around this was by having a “day symposium” to discuss, e.g., the future of the Watson Conference. I received suggestions of ways to make the activity of this meeting as minimal as possible, but the arrangement still required people to do extra work for labor already performed, which compounds the harm.

After the April conference, as I sought to compensate the two Native colleagues who educated me over email, I got some help from our then-Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Dr. Cherie Dawson-Edwards. She learned from someone in charge of our college’s finances that a speaking role was not needed for an honorarium as long as the information shared, whether shared over email, in person, etc., shaped the conference in some way. All I needed to provide was an email exchange that said “thank you for the consultation.” So I was then able to pay the two people who provided critique on the roundtable without asking them to do extra work and participate in yet another meeting.

In our conversation, Dr. Dawson-Edwards noted that information you didn’t realize you needed deserves compensation just as much as information you know you need and seek out before the conference. This point illustrates feedback on the conference itself as an important scholarly contribution.

Crucially, however, she pointed out that although many people give feedback on a conference, there’s a difference when, because of one’s lived experience, the act of giving feedback can exacerbate the harms one experienced. This point is essential for conference organizers to remember because in seeking compensation, you may hear the response, “we can’t afford to pay everyone who gives feedback on the conference. Compensating those few people is not fair to the others who gave feedback.” That mindset does not reflect the difference that lived experience makes.

In addition, compounding this additional emotional labor is what Louwanda Evans and Wendy Lee Moore call the “process of emotional management” that people of color experience when considering whether to point out racism.

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They write, “white institutional actors engage in color-blind racist practices, but at the same time deploy a dominant discourse and ideology that include an inherent notion that if people of color in the space reveal that they are outwardly offended by such racist practices it is indicative of their being overly sensitive or not capable of understanding the true dynamics of the situation. This, then, puts the pressure on them not to respond, and, if they do, they become the problem.” White conference organizers especially need to be aware of how they are responding to scholars of color who call in, or out, instances of racism.”

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They continue, “Thus, these incidents require a process of emotional management that includes the decision of how and when to respond, an understanding of how one’s response will be co-opted into a white frame, and a conscious decision about how one will feel about that process after responding—all before even making the decision to respond to white racism.” (452).

These are just a few of the practices that have helped us be accountable for the harms, large and small, that we caused—a commitment to transparency, creating designated time for reflection and making that a continual practice, and then developing a policy for compensation for the emotional and intellectual labor of people who draw on their lived experience to take the time to educate conference organizers about harms. Ultimately, practices of accountability should be essential to conferences that are striving for antiracism. Now, Michael Benjamin will discuss some of what we have learned from the conference presentations that we hope to apply to the next conference.

# Looking Ahead

# Michael J. Benjamin, he/him/his

Hi everyone, I’m Michael J. Benjamin, a second year PhD student at the University of Louisville. I’m an assistant director at the Watson conference with my tenure officially starting in Fall 2021.

In a different format, we’d take the time to ask you about how you’ve seen these commitments enacted or not enacted in your own conference experiences and how these lessons could be adapted to other conference settings. Back in June when we constructed our proposal we were hopeful we’d be face-to-face, able to facilitate a discussion at one of our field’s grandest stages about what additional policies and practices deserve attention and the systems that ought to be in place to implement them. But instead we’re operating out of a different medium and, frankly, 10 months removed from our conference, looking towards the future.

I want to start by discussing who the Watson team is. From a labor standpoint, we are staffed by a rotating faculty member, this go around (and next go around too!) by the exceptional Dr. Andrea Olinger, and two graduate students. Dr. Olinger is provided a course release each academic year. Meanwhile, those graduate students are contracted to work five hours per week and are provided a course release. This is simply to say that Watson is a much leaner, more streamlined operation than imagined.

From an identity standpoint, Watson is reflective of the institution of the University of Louisville. We are four white scholars from a PWI and we would be irresponsible to not acknowledge how our whiteness has inherently shaped Watson. Due to our whiteness and the blind spots that our identities lead to, we believe strongly in intersectional collaboration as offered by Emily Johnston, Amanda Solomon Amorao, and Jonathan Kim. As we go forward, we plan on including additional consultants and collaborate even further with scholars of color in the field. We believe that the best work is borne out of collaboration and we want to ensure that we are following and involving and engaging all voices.

Now, earlier I mentioned that I was not the assistant director during the April 2021 Watson Conference. As the oncoming Watson Conference Assistant Director, the wonderful scholars that spoke before me provided me the privilege to work on a special issue of *Writers: Craft & Context* which has been completely borne out of our conference in April 2021. So much of my interaction with the conference has occurred through the lens of the special issue and as a team we are so very excited to share the work that our scholars have been honing for at least a year now. A major part of what has been so illuminating about the special issue, which we hope you’ll all check out in the coming months, is how rare these conversations are in the front stage. We were inspired by the absolute dearth of scholarship that existed in examining our conferencing practices as a field and the way that conferences replicate and perpetuate racism and marginalization on the whole. As we provided feedback to our authors over the last few weeks, we were collectively struck by how these presentations have grown and developed into written pieces that we hope will shape Watson’s in the future.

While I could absolutely shout out all of the dynamic contributions to Watson, I want to specifically reference Dr. Marcus Croom’s Post-White Orientation which rejects the deficiency philosophy’s idea that whiteness is superior to “BIPOC(ness).” In order to practice Post-White conference design, Croom includes a template with the following steps: identify and reject the deficiency philosophy wherever it appears, identify forms of race practice, de/reconstruct processes and practices that perpetuate the deficiency philosophy; establish processes and practices that perpetuate the post-white orientation; designate paid or unpaid roles for black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) to co-design conference gatherings.

We are still chewing over Dr. Karen Tellez Trujillo’s presentation where she recounts the exclusionary practices of national conferences and the microaggressions she faced as a graduate student. Dr. Trujillo advocated for avoiding scheduling graduate student presenters at the same time as well-known scholars due to the way power dynamics lead to poor attendance. Dr. Trujillo also highlighted the exclusion which occurs through inaccessible CFP language and through the lack of accessible of these documents to all scholars.

We are also still very engaged with Dr. Antonio Byrd’s discussion of feeling like a tourist in whatever city the conference was hosted in. Provided that Watson provides a biannual glimpse into Louisville, we are excited to use our conference as a way to create a deep engagement with the city.

Thank you for attending!

# Conclusion

**Andrea:**

So thank you all for watching our presentation, and we obviously wish we had time to have a discussion with everyone who was here, but this is a recorded presentation, so please email us with questions and comments- because we would love to hear from you. Thank you so much, and have a great Cs.

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