**2021 Watson Conference**

**Closing Remarks by Andrea Olinger**

**April 23, 2021, 12:45-1:30 pm EST: Closing Session**

Thank you so much for coming to the closing session. It’s been a draining week on so many levels—the roil of feelings brought up by national events, the inherent stress of engaging with antiracist work for so many hours. We’re grateful that you are here.

In 2018, after Laurie Gries uttered the racist slur in her keynote, no opportunity was taken to address it. Processing happened on Twitter, at meals, in the hallway, but none of us, conference team included, brought it up at the closing session the following day of the conference. So I want to use this closing for us to debrief.

I think of this as a truly valuable session of the conference. We want to find out what everyone learned, what everyone will be taking away with them. But we also want 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?

As we think through these questions, it’s helpful to refer to the commitments we laid out. One of these reads, “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.” We deliberately say “when,” not “if,” we do harm. Because we participate in a system founded on and fueled by white supremacy, failing our marginalized colleagues, however good our intentions, is a tragic given. And yesterday, I learned that I deeply hurt many native colleagues. I want to recognize and thank the two colleagues who wrote me, both members of the American Indian Caucus of CCCC, who called me in and educated me about the damaging impact of how I set up and executed the Beyond the Land Acknowledgment roundtable, staged this past Wednesday. Even as one of them suggested that I didn’t need to fully account for this at this moment lest I take away from the conference focus on anti-Black racism, I feel it is important that we be transparent about what happened without delay, and as reflective as the short time since the roundtable permits us.

According to Tema Okun on dismantlingracism.org, one of the [characteristics of white supremacy culture](https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf) is “a continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences. It frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people.”

After my team had completed our acceptances in late February, a colleague asked, “Are there any native voices?” I was embarrassed to respond “No.” I sat with that and thought about how to rectify it. I knew that I wanted us to write a land acknowledgment for Watson, and I was determined that it shouldn’t be empty words, but I wanted help thinking about what actions we—Watson and, by implication, UofL—should take. But with just a month or so to put something together, I was not being nearly thoughtful enough about who I was inviting to the roundtable and how I was structuring it.

In my haste, I reached out simultaneously to two groups. The first group was 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 UofL. The second group was native scholars outside of UofL who are experts in conference planning and other kinds of decolonial work. I gave the same prompts to everyone: recommendations for academic conferences generally, and recommendations for UofL that Watson could connect to.

As the colleagues who wrote me yesterday pointed out, the UofL portion by settler scholars should *not* have been part of the conference. My three 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 other characteristics of white supremacy culture—fear of open conflict, right to comfort, and feeling defensive to myself about my own decisions, among other characteristics. I should NOT have invited my UofL friends 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 their 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 short, these were two discrete conversations that should not have been together on the same roundtable; and, the UofL conversation, while necessary and worthy, should *not* have been part of the Watson Conference at all. This inapt conflation risked tainting the professional integrity of all involved. I want to apologize to my settler colleagues for putting you in the position of doing harm by inviting you to share the space and encouraging you to stay in despite your misgivings. Mostly, however, I want to apologize to my Indigenous colleagues for disrespecting and betraying you. In my haste to plan something, I ignored what one who wrote me reminded me—“the long history of white scholars taking up space regarding these issues and the ongoing harm that academia has committed against indigenous peoples.”

I’ve reached out to the two caucus members about ideas for compensating them for their labor in educating me. I also want to commit to funding several indigenous graduate students to attend for free the next Watson Conference—and hopefully beyond that. I’ve also told the two caucus members I’m open to other ideas. Next year, as we finalize our report on what we learned, I will update the American Indian caucus on how we have fulfilled these pledges and others.

[PAUSE – QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?]

With this in mind, I want to invite you to now join the moderated breakout groups to introduce yourselves and debrief on the conference. For these prompts, think back on the entire conference and the sessions you attended. Here are our suggested prompts:

* Watson Conference commitments (<http://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/2021-watson-conference-commitments>)
  + How did organizers, presenters, attendees do in meeting them?
  + Are there are any (other) call-outs, so we may be called in to better ways of being? (credit to Dr. Timothy Oleksiak for this question; he asked a version of it when moderating the recent Queer Caucus roundtable at CCCC)
* Other reflections
  + What are your biggest takeaways for the conference setting?
  + How might you apply what you’ve learned to different settings (e.g., classrooms, other disciplinary spaces)?
  + If there were more time, what else would you have liked the program to include?
  + What policies and practices for antiracist conferences weren’t raised, or deserve more attention? What would we need to put in place to realize those?

Your moderator might suggest that everyone freewrite for 5 minutes before talking. You’ll have 15-20 minutes (specify). Your moderator will take notes, and when we’re back in the main room, I will call on a few of them. We’ll close out with some levity through a final pet parade.