December 10, 2018

I thank the NCTE/CCCC Black, Latinx, American Indian, Queer, Asian/Asian American Caucuses for their open letter addressing ongoing systemic racism within our profession. The 2018 Watson Conference focused on amplifying marginalized voices and concerns, whether those center on racial minorities, people with disabilities, migrants or many other groups who may be under- and/or misrepresented. Discussions of educational and social justice permeate the conference’s edited collection, *Making Future Matters*, and infused the conference itself. As I’ve argued, supporting these conversations means providing a space for people to learn from each other, encouraging the building of alliances for this work, and calling out those causing harm. These are ways we can work toward better futures. I believe that is the goal of this open letter, and I thank you for that.

Personally, I have been re-reading and sitting with this public letter. I have been listening and thinking about how I can do better. I start by offering a heart-felt apology for what has been described as my silence-as-complicity in regards to the quote with a racist slur repeated by a Keynote Speaker at this year’s Watson Conference. In no uncertain terms do I find racist language acceptable, nor do I find it acceptable for institutions or organizations or conferences to give cover to such language. I applaud the Caucuses’ work to publicly challenge those who do.

As a conference organizer, I wish there were a playbook for creating structures that encourage deliberation and engagement for when we make mistakes. Although at the Watson Conference we juggled many variables that come with running a 487 person, three-day conference, I am left with many questions about how to respond better to the problems the Caucuses raise: When a clearly problematic issue arises that we had no way of anticipating, how can we make sense of not a single person (including me) calling out the mistake, whether in that session’s Q&A or in the closing session that is designed to address the explicitly social justice issues raised by the conference theme, the edited collection, and many conference presentations? If the immediate moment passes, when is the right time to respond? How can we provide a safe, anonymous space for people to share their concerns so we can listen to and learn from their views? How do we honor folks who need time to think about the ethical and responsible ways to respond before we call them out in public for silence and complicity? What if we learn that on social media there has been a rich, important conversation, but that conversation is largely over and seemingly addressed (with apologies offered and accepted) before we hear the details, because we are not on that platform? How, in short, can we do better?

In sitting with these questions, I understand how silence can be tricky to read. It was for me. Although not a single person contacted me (via phone, text, email) about this issue prior to this open letter and although only two people used the anonymity of the conference evaluation to raise this issue in any form, this silence was not indifference or complicity. Instead, rich, important conversations were happening in other spaces, one of which brought forward this open letter, which, as I see it, is highlighting the need to redress trenchant problems in our field surrounding white privilege and racism. This open letter states that my previous email—addressing my language surrounding what I call the legitimate concerns over the offensive language of quoting of a racial slur as well as my actions of amplifying the apology and acceptance of responsibility by the speaker restating the racist remark—was not enough. The letter explains why, and I will do better next time. I will not wait a month until the survey is closed, but rather will address concerns closer to the event. I will encourage future Watson Directors (I step down at semester’s end) to tap the resources of our field, such as the Caucuses. And, I will share the actions already underway prior to the open letter to engage in anti-racist work structurally (e.g., next year’s Watson Seminar foregrounding scholars-of-color and anti-racist theoretical and methodological frameworks). Although the open letter implies that my not publicly talking about these things was read as if nothing was happening, I want to be clear that I have been wrestling, listening, and trying to do better in working to redress deeply entrenched racism in our field, and I will impress upon future Watson Conference Directors to take these lessons into their own conference planning.

From these reflections, one lesson I would add to a disciplinary playbook would be to continue thinking about how to best foster open, deliberative spaces that invite dialogue and action so that we may better avoid or redress future mistakes. Sometimes those spaces are public social media letters. Sometimes conferences. Sometimes classes. Sometimes disciplinary protocols or best practices (e.g., *Composing Access*). We need all sorts of thoughtful, generous and generative engagement that both challenges and supports people to do better, moves which are so lacking in our nation’s public discourse that it seems easy to forget their importance.

I thank the Caucuses for their role in this work, particularly in relation to continuing to address systemic racism within our profession. I look forward to continuing to learn from them, and from all of us in the profession as we accept our responsibility to meet this challenge and to support others to do this work as well.

Mary P Sheridan Director, 2018 Thomas R Watson Conference