Watson Conference 2021:

Racial Equity and Inclusion at the Conference

Andrea Olinger, Conference Director
andrea.olinger@louisville.edu

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to the Watson 2020-2023 Assistant Directors—Alex Way, Caitlin Burns Allen, Michael Benjamin, and Annika Reitenga—for their contributions to this report. Caitlin and Alex, who co-led the conference, contributed to drafts of sections; Michael and Annika, who joined subsequently, provided further research and feedback. Caitlin, Michael, Alex, and I presented some of the material in “Antiracist and Inclusive Conferencing: Co-Constructing Access, Attending to Power, and Practicing Accountability,” a pre-recorded roundtable at the 2022 virtual Conference on College Composition and Communication.

# Table of Contents

[Introduction 2](#_Toc146295928)

[About Watson 2](#_Toc146295929)

[Purpose of this Report 3](#_Toc146295930)

[Racial and Ethnic Demographics of the 2021 Watson Conference 4](#_Toc146295931)

[Presenters and Moderator Demographics 5](#_Toc146295932)

[Registrants 6](#_Toc146295933)

[Presenter Identities an Integral Part of the Proposal Review Process 9](#_Toc146295934)

[Local Black-Owned Businesses Supported 9](#_Toc146295935)

[Preparing against Microaggressions and Hate Speech 10](#_Toc146295936)

[Uninvitations for Bad Behavior 11](#_Toc146295937)

[The Need for Sustained Practice in Microresistance 11](#_Toc146295938)

[Accessibility: Co-Creating Access 12](#_Toc146295939)

[Ask Attendees if/when ASL is Needed, rather than Hiring Interpreters for Every Session 13](#_Toc146295940)

[Organize Access Copies on Website 13](#_Toc146295941)

[Streamline Email Communications, Especially to Presenters 13](#_Toc146295942)

[Schedule Rehearsal with Presenters, Captioners, and ASL Interpreters 13](#_Toc146295943)

[Accountability: Approaching Our Missteps as Opportunities for Growth 15](#_Toc146295944)

[Importance of Transparency 18](#_Toc146295945)

[Opportunities for Participants to Reflect on How They are Enacting Collective Conference Values 19](#_Toc146295946)

[Compensation for Emotional and Intellectual Labor Expended by Members with Marginalized Identities to Educate Organizers 20](#_Toc146295947)

[Further Feedback? 22](#_Toc146295948)

[Works Cited 22](#_Toc146295949)

# Introduction

## About Watson

The Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Composition is a biennial event hosted by the University of Louisville English Department and funded by the [Thomas R. Watson Endowment](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/history). The 2021 conference, held April 21-23 over Zoom, was titled “Toward the Antiracist Conference: Reckoning with the Past, Reimagining the Present”; it was preceded by three days of workshops (April 14-16) for graduate students on topics related to writing, research, and professionalization.

At the conference, we strove to interrogate existing academic conference policies and practices and reimagine them to foster antiracism in how conferences are conceived, organized, and staged. The conference theme issued from a series of compounding harms, fueled by and inflected with white supremacy, committed by a Watson invitee in 2018 and Watson organizers in 2018 and 2020. In our statement “[Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/commitments/watson-and-anti-black-racism),” we narrate the events and reflect on how the Watson Conference has perpetuated white supremacist culture. Specifically, we recount a racist incident at the 2018 conference and its aftermath in 2020, and we analyze, account, and apologize for the harms we inflicted. We then articulate commitments to fighting anti-Black racism at the 2021 conference and all subsequent Watson events.

*Additional Resources:*

* Conference exigence: [Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/commitments/watson-and-anti-black-racism)
* [Website for 2021 Watson Conference](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program)
* Conference deliverables: [Resources for Antiracist Conference Design](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/public-archive) and [special issue of *Writers: Craft and Context*](https://journals.shareok.org/writersccjournal/issue/view/4)

## Purpose of this Report

In “[Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/public-archive),” we pledged the following for the 2021 Watson Conference and all Watson Conferences thereafter:

* We will support and amplify Black scholars through our speaker invitations and honoraria while being mindful not to burden them with the expectation that they must, or that their participation does, absolve Watson for our past.
* We will prepare and follow guidelines for Watson participants on recognizing and countering microaggressions, acts of racism, and hate speech.
* We will support local Black-owned businesses whenever possible.
* We will assess our actions on these initiatives as part of our post-conference review process in order to weave these practices into the fabric of the conference.

As part of the final promise, we committed to preparing “**a public post-conference report** that discusses the lessons we have learned from the mini-conference, makes recommendations for future Watson conferences, and revises our commitments to future Watson conferences as needed.”

The report offered here is our attempt to accomplish this pledge. Drawing on registration data and Watson’s business records, we document the racial demographics of presenters and attendees, with particular attention to the proportion of Black scholars who presented against that of all presenters; identify the Black-owned businesses we supported; and describe and review our preparations against microaggressions and hate speech and for accessibility. Lastly, we detail how we responded to an offense we incited and the accountability work we subsequently undertook. Throughout, we note strategies we found helpful and areas for improvement. Our self-assessments are driven by post-conference survey replies from the attendees, notes from breakout sessions from the facilitators, and individual and collective self-reflection from the organizers, as well as conversations with scholars and our readings of scholarship, referenced below.

We hope this report will serve several groups: (1) past and future Watson Conference attendees, who may be interested in how we have approached and the extent to which we have met our commitments; (2) future Watson Conference directors, for whom this report can serve as a benchmark; and (3) organizers of other academic conferences, who could use this report as a resource for ideas about antiracist and inclusive conference practices.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Lastly, this report is meant to be not prescriptive but suggestive. The criteria by which we assess the Watson Conference are ever evolving, and the questions we ask ourselves here are not the only questions we will ever charge ourselves with asking, nor are they the final form these questions will likely take. Our answers derive from the data that we have and from the perspective, inherently limited but always expanding, that past experiences and the interventions of scholars of color have inspired us to undertake.

# Racial and Ethnic Demographics of the 2021 Watson Conference

Historically, the Watson Conference has reflected the composition of our fields— namely, it has been overwhelmingly white. Scholars of color have been a limited presence among keynotes, presenters, attendees, and organizers. Indeed, the director and assistant directors of the 2021 conference are ourselves white. With an eye toward making Watson more inclusive of and meaningful to BIPOC scholars, we sought to address this population imbalance by collecting racial and ethnic demographic data for 2021 conference participants. These data will serve as a baseline by which to track the racial and ethnic makeup of presenters and attendees over time. Moreover, it will pin us to our commitment—not among the pledges made explicit in “Watson and Anti-Black Racism” but one that animates our work nevertheless—to progressively expand Watson’s engagement and collaboration with scholars of color at each future conference.

At the same time, as the impact of the “Beyond the Land Acknowledgement” roundtable makes clear (described below), the mere presence of scholars of color does not mean that the conference was not experienced as oppressive. Neither does the absence of reported micro- or macroaggressions mean that none occurred. Securing a diverse population and seeking to minimize harm are only the first steps in creating an inclusive conference experience. Too narrow a focus on demography, a scholar of color reinforced to me as the 2020 conference folded, is exploitive and superficial: using scholars of color to project a handsome façade without acting to uproot Watson’s white supremacist foundations. As we craft and deliver future Watson Conferences, scholars of color must be co-creators in the effort.

## Presenters and Moderator Demographics

For the conference and pre-conference workshops, we obtained demographic data in different ways. To identify the 36 presenters’ and moderators’ races and ethnicities, we adopted the language they used in their bios and, when race/ethnicity was mentioned, the image descriptions they wrote for their photos. **Fifty-five percent of presenters and moderators identified as people of color (20 people); 44% identified as white (16 people)** (Table 1).

In “[Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/public-archive),” one of our commitments is to “support and amplify Black scholars through our speaker invitations and honoraria while being mindful not to burden them with the expectation that they must, or that their participation does, absolve Watson for our past.” To identify Black speakers who might have been interested in presenting, we corresponded with three of the four Black scholars who had been invited to the 2020 Conference[[2]](#footnote-2); we also emailed the leaders of the CCCC Black Caucus (as well as leaders of other identity-based caucuses) and relevant conference-related task forces and committees, such as the CCCC Social Justice at the Convention Committee. As noted in Table 1, **9 out of 36 (25%) of the workshop and conference presenters and moderators identified as Black.**

**Table 1. Demographics (Race/Ethnicity) of Workshop and Conference Presenters and Conference Moderators**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Race and/or Ethnicity** | **Number of People** |
| Asian and Asian American | 3 |
| Black/African American | 9 |
| Indigenous (U.S. and Mexico) | 5 |
| Latinx | 1 |
| Latinx and White | 2 |
| White  | 16 |
| TOTAL | 36 (55% people of color; 44% white) |

## Registrants

To identify the race and ethnicity of registrants of the conference and pre-conference workshops (i.e., everyone but presenters and moderators), we looked at an optional question from the registration form that invited people to identify their race and/or ethnicity. There were 301 people who provided this information. (Out of 415 total registrants, 113 did not answer). **Thirty-five percent of registrants identified as people of color (106 people); 65% identified as white (195 people).** (Table 2.)

**Table 2. Registrants’ Self-Identified Demographics (Race/Ethnicity)**[[3]](#footnote-3)

Note: These numbers exclude conference and workshop presenters and moderators.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Race and/or Ethnicity** | **Number of People** |
| African American = Congolese, Irish, Minqua (indigenous American) | 1 |
| Afro-Latina  | 1 |
| American Indian and White | 1 |
| Arab | 2 |
| Asian | 12 |
| Asian American | 4 |
| Asian American (Thai Chinese) | 1 |
| Asian, Pacific Islander, Spanish | 1 |
| Asian/American, Filipinx/American | 1 |
| Asian/Hispanic | 1 |
| Asian/Korean | 2 |
| Asian/White | 1 |
| Black  | 11 |
| Black African | 3 |
| Black/African American | 18 |
| Caribbean/Black | 1 |
| Caucasian | 9 |
| Chinese | 1 |
| Chinese American | 1 |
| Choctaw-Apache | 1 |
| Filipino | 1 |
| Filipino American and Native Hawaiian | 1 |
| Hispanic | 2 |
| Hispanic, Jewish | 1 |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 3 |
| Indian (Asian) American | 2 |
| Indian (South Asia) | 1 |
| Japanese American | 1 |
| Japanese and White | 2 |
| Latina, Latino, Latinx | 7 |
| Latinx (Mexican) | 1 |
| Latinx/Chicanx | 2 |
| Latinx/Mixed race Tejana | 1 |
| Mexican | 2 |
| Mexican American  | 2 |
| Middle Eastern | 3 |
| Multiethnic | 1 |
| Nepali | 1 |
| Palestinian American | 1 |
| South Asian | 3 |
| White | 142 |
| White (Ashkenazi Jewish) | 1 |
| White & Pacific Islander | 1 |
| White and Half-Jewish, but raised Christian | 1 |
| White Hispanic | 1 |
| White Jewish | 2 |
| White mixed (Native American not tribally registered) | 1 |
| White, Chinese American, Native American | 1 |
| White, Mixed Ethnicity | 1 |
| White, Non-American | 1 |
| White, Non-Hispanic  | 14 |
| White, Non-Latinx | 2 |
| White, Salish 2nd generation | 1 |
| White/Brazilian | 2 |
| White/Cajun | 1 |
| White/Caucasian | 9 |
| White/European | 1 |
| White/European American | 1 |
| White/Greek American | 1 |
| White/Irish | 1 |
| White/Irish American | 1 |
| White/Korean | 1 |
| White/Latina or Latino | 2 |
| White/Scottish | 1 |
| TOTAL | 301 (35% people of color, 65% white) |

One strategy we plan to implement for future conferences is to identify minority-serving institutions with graduate programs in rhetoric, composition, literacy, and technical/professional writing and send administrators of those programs our CFPs to distribute. Further, as mentioned in “Accessibility: Co-Creating Access,” below, financial support—such as through grants and sliding-scale registration—might also increase participation from scholars of color at less-resourced institutions.

## Presenter Identities an Integral Part of the Proposal Review Process

In order for our panels to embody marginalized perspectives, we included in our conference proposal a request for a brief bio in which people could describe the expertise they were bringing to their presentation.

Related practices have been adopted by conferences such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (“Proposal Form Queries” in the 2024 [Fields Needed to Submit a Proposal](https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/conv/proposal-fields)), the Society for American Archivists ([2023 CFP](https://www2.archivists.org/am2023/program/call-for-program-proposals)), the National Council on Public History ([2023 CFP](https://ncph.org/conference/2023-annual-meeting/calls-for-proposals/)), and the Modernist Studies Association ([2023 CFP](https://msa.press.jhu.edu/conferences/msa2023/CFP.html)).[[4]](#footnote-4) For the Modernist Studies Association conference, panels can receive a “revise and resubmit” decision if there needs to be a greater range of voices in, e.g., race, gender, institution, or rank (Amy Clukey, personal communication).

# Local Black-Owned Businesses Supported

Another of our commitments to fighting anti-Black racism is economic: to “support local Black-owned businesses whenever possible” (“[Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/public-archive)”). Because the 2021conference was virtual, there was no occasion to pay for catering, hotels, or transportation; however, we did find other opportunities to engage several Black-owned businesses.

* Local Black-owned businesses supported through [raffle prizes](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/raffle):
	+ [F.L.Y Girl Candles](https://www.flygirlcandles.com/collections/frontpage)
	+ [Four Pegs Smokehouse and Bar](https://www.fourpegs.net/)
	+ [Garden Girl Foods](https://www.gardengirlfoods.com/)
	+ [Sweetee Pies Butterfly](https://www.facebook.com/SweetBFlyPies)
* Out-of-state Black-owned businesses employed:
	+ ASL Interpretation: [CDJ Interpreting, LLC](https://www.cdj-interpreting.com/)
	+ CART Captioner: [Michelle Houston, RPR](https://www.linkedin.com/in/michelle625/)

In addition, we suspended conference registration fees and instead encouraged attendees to donate to [local Black-led initiatives and institutions](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/black-history-creativity-entrepreneurship-in-louisville): Pocket Change, Roots 101 African American Museum, *taunt*, the (Un)Known Project, and the Western Branch Library. And the Watson conference team assisted the UofL writing center with the Western Branch Library’s revived [Cotter Cup storytelling competition](https://www.lfpl.org/cottercup/) by serving as [writing consultants](https://uoflwritingcenter.com/2021/06/09/reviving-the-cotter-cup-as-a-student-poetry-contest-with-western-branch-library/) and sponsoring prizes.

In the future, we plan to use the [Buy Black Lou](https://www.facebook.com/groups/2173031502743908/members) Facebook Group to find and hire local specialists, e.g., foreign-language interpreters. Poor planning compelled us to hire a non-Black Spanish interpreter on short notice.

# Preparing against Microaggressions and Hate Speech

Our third commitment to fighting anti-Black racism is to combat oppressive interpersonal dynamics by “prepar[ing] and follow[ing] guidelines for Watson participants on recognizing and countering microaggressions, acts of racism, and hate speech” (“[Watson and Anti-Black Racism”).](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/public-archive)

In the [2021 Watson Conference Commitments](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/2021-watson-conference-commitments) that we developed and circulated, we pledged to “actively attend to power dynamics in participation” and to “name and interrupt [them] as needed.” All participants were asked to “[be] mindful of our own tendencies to participate or withhold,” “[reflect] on our own purposes for asking questions,” and “[reject] and [respond] to microaggressions”; scholarship elaborating on these practices was summarized. As we “believe that attendance is a privilege, not a right,” we declared that we would “not tolerate hostile or harassing behavior, especially that which functions to oppress marginalized groups.” To enforce this, we promised that “[p]articipants who commit this behavior [would] be removed from the Zoom meeting.”

## Uninvitations for Bad Behavior

During the conference sessions, we did not witness and were not notified of conduct that would have warranted removal from Zoom. In advance of the conference, however, we preemptively uninvited someone who had behaved disrespectfully toward guest speakers at an unrelated lecture.

## The Need for Sustained Practice in Microresistance

In the notes taken by one of our facilitators during their closing session breakout group, the following observation was offered: “if the practice of the conference is derived from our white supremacist institution, then we can’t expect our habits to be better. Our bodies are used to coming to a conference and doing certain things, so can we come to a conference and have it be anti-racist?” This comment raises an important question: how well can particular new practices circumvent ingrained habits of conference-going?

Indeed, just before the end of one session’s Q&A, a white attendee addressed a Black presenter in the chat: “I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the breaking story of Howard shuttering its Classics program. As a scholar of [adjacent discipline to classics] I was wondering about this development.” This concern was not related to the topic of the session. As to exclude it from the Q&A, we intentionally did not read the comment out loud, but Andrea did begin to prepare a response for the chat. She was too deliberate, however, and time ran out. Although Andrea debriefed with the presenter and the poster later, her hesitation about the response—in how direct to be, in whether it would siphon from the otherwise positive vibe of the Q&A—is a testament to ingrained fear of open conflict and to the tendency to privilege the comfort of those in power, characteristics that can enable white supremacist culture (Okun, 2022).

Our experience, along with this feedback from the closing breakout session and post-conference survey, illustrates the importance of sustained practice in internalizing strategies of microresistance, both for presenters and for attendees (Cheung, Ganote, & Souza, 2016, 2021).

# Accessibility: Co-Creating Access

Access and accommodation can be understood as “recursive projects that exist before, throughout, and even after” an event (Wood et al., 2014, p. 148), and, as such, “access is not a one-way transmission of information but involves all members of the communicative situation” (Fink et al., 2020, p. 104). These principles drove the Watson Conference commitment to “co-create a culture of access while recognizing that this work is never complete.” Informed by accessibility scholarship, as well as resources such as [Composing Access](https://u.osu.edu/composingaccess/) and the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators’ [guide on virtual-conference design](https://gsole.org/conference/presenterguide), we sought to make Watson maximally accessible and inclusive.

Toward this end, we hired a Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioner and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters for all sessions. We also requested that presenters provide the captioner and interpreters with access copies and a list of unfamiliar and field-specific terms and that, during their presentations, they describe visual images and spell out names. In addition, the fact that the conference was free and virtual eliminated certain barriers to participation. (For future conferences, we anticipate using a sliding scale,[[5]](#footnote-5) but we also admire the [cost-share policy](https://socwomen.org/meetings/sws-cost-share-policy/) adopted by the Sociologists for Women in Society for their winter conference.)

Below, we have highlighted areas in which we could have improved the conference’s accessibility by collaborating more with presenters, attendees, captioners, and interpreters.

## Ask Attendees if/when ASL is Needed, rather than Hiring Interpreters for Every Session

Because we declined to ask attendees to self-disclose access needs out of concern for their privacy, we hired ASL interpreters for every session. However, we learned that for Deaf scholars, our concern about forcing people to disclose was misplaced: they expect to communicate with organizers around securing ASL interpreters. Had we internalized this point before the conference, we could have avoided hiring interpreters who were not actually needed for some smaller sessions. In the future, we will apply this lesson and collaborate with attendees and presenters to determine if and when ASL is needed.

## Organize Access Copies on Website

We shared access copies whenever possible by posting links in the Zoom chat at the start of each presentation. However, this approach made it difficult for attendees to keep access copies organized, particularly for those who were accessing Zoom on their phones. We appreciate the work of the Society of Disability Studies Conference in developing password-protected conference websites where access copies and links to the CART transcripts for each presentation are easily available.

## Streamline Email Communications, Especially to Presenters

The emails we sent to presenters were lengthy and crowded with action items; we failed to think much about readability. One survey respondent expressed that “shorter, more focused communications” would have been easier to process. We will honor this suggestion in the future. In addition, we will consider creating a webpage for presenters that archives all emails and other relevant documents.

## Schedule Rehearsal with Presenters, Captioners, and ASL Interpreters

Although we furnished presenters with some resources on accessible presentations and the captioner and interpreters with any available access copies and lists of technical terms, there was a lack of prior coordination between the two groups. The result, we found, created areas for improvement. Indeed, as one survey respondent wrote, “If you want presenters to do more in terms of accessibility…, we need training in how to do that and more preparation time.”A rehearsal in the weeks before the conference would allow presenters, organizers, captioners, and interpreters to practice working together and have some important conversations. Such a collaboration would enable them to accomplish the following:

* **Rehearse Pacing:** Although one of our stated commitments was to “strive to speak slowly—and […] ask one another to slow down as needed,” the pacing was occasionally quite fast. At times, this impeded both participants’ understanding and the captioner’s and interpreters’ ability to keep up. Time and space for presenters, organizers, captioners, and interpreters to practice working together and rehearse a suitable pace could avert this.
* **Discuss How Aspects of Spoken Language Will Be Captioned or Signed, and Provide Materials Well in Advance**
* **Unfamiliar or Non-English Words:** Presenters submitted lists of unfamiliar or field-specific terms and of words in other languages for our captioner and interpreters. However, we did not allow enough time for the interpreters and captioners to review the material and ask questions of presenters. Neither did we flag those areas we thought could prove especially tricky. Merely making the material available was not sufficient, especially when we had multiple interpreters.
* **Non-dominant Varieties of English:** Many CART “dictionaries” standardize presenters’ speech, and some captioners may not be familiar with Black Language or other varieties of English.[[6]](#footnote-6) We therefore realize that we should have arranged an advance conversation with presenters and the captioner about how the captioner works with non-dominant varieties of English and what presenters’ preferences are for how the captioner should spell particular lexical items (e.g., when a speaker is using Black Language, whether the captioner should use “yo” or “your,” “I’ma tell you” or “I’m going to tell you”). (Because our ASL interpreters knew Black ASL,[[7]](#footnote-7) familiarity with Black Language wasn’t an issue.)
* **Rehearse Other Access Practices**. A rehearsal would provide an opportunity for presenters to review access practices like ensuring videos are captioned, visually describing images on slides, reading text aloud instead of asking audience members to read silently to themselves, and spelling out names and other proper nouns.
* **Review Inclusive Representations.** Lastly, a rehearsal would enable us to collaborate with presenters to ensure that the visual, aural, and verbal material contained inclusive representations. At the 2021 conference, there were two images on presentation slides that two attendees indicated (via email and post-conference survey) they found inappropriate or gratuitous. A pre-conference rehearsal might have caught these.

# Accountability: Approaching Our Missteps as Opportunities for Growth

In the words of disability- and transformative-justice advocate Mia Mingus (2019), “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 of Accountability](https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability/)”).[[8]](#footnote-8) This idea grounds the final conference commitment: “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.”

I (Andrea Olinger)[[9]](#footnote-9) am grateful to the two Indigenous colleagues who wrote me, both members of the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s American Indian Caucus, to educate me about the harms of the roundtable that I had organized, “Beyond the Land Acknowledgement: Decolonial Actions for the Watson Conference and UofL.”

The purpose of this roundtable was to launch a discussion about what concrete reparative actions the Watson Conference—and by extension the university—could take toward local Indigenous communities present and past. In planning it, I therefore reached out to two groups: (1) UofL colleagues, both Indigenous and settler, who do decolonial work in their own disciplines and who I knew wanted to contribute to the conversation about what it means to decolonize our school, and (2) Indigenous scholars outside of UofL who are experts in conference planning and decolonial work. I gave the same prompts to everyone: recommendations for academic conferences generally and recommendations for UofL that Watson could support. Ultimately, the panel had five Indigenous scholars (two from UofL and three from outside) and three settler scholars from UofL; the moderator was a settler scholar from UofL. For the 105-minute roundtable, everyone was to speak for five to eight minutes, followed by a twenty-minute Q&A. (Because the roundtable was interrupted by a Zoombomber, there was little time for the Q&A.)

As the Indigenous scholars who addressed me pointed out, my settler colleagues and I committed Indigenous erasure in a variety of ways. Most prominently, I invited a speaker who did not work with Indigenous groups, and I invited a speaker who was new to UofL and had not yet developed relationships with Indigenous groups here as she had done when she lived in the Southwest. When I invited them, both of these colleagues expressed concern 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. In my own fear of rescinding invitations, I see a number of characteristics that feed what Tema Okun (2022) has identified as white supremacy culture: fear of open conflict, right to comfort, and defensiveness about my own decisions. Given that I conceived and began to assemble the roundtable only about a month before registration opened, it bespeaks yet another characteristic, urgency, that can reinforce white supremacy.

The five Indigenous scholars and the three settler scholars should not have been made to share the same roundtable; the UofL-specific conversation involving the settler scholars, while important, should have been planned for a different occasion. Conflating these two disparate contexts leveled the expertise of the participants, a dehumanizing experience for Indigenous colleagues who have dedicated their careers to these concerns.

The unfolding of the roundtable did nothing to ease the harms. One of the settler scholars who had, rightly, protested her invitation openly wondered about the appropriateness of her presence. Further, some of the expertise demonstrated by another of the settler scholars, I was made aware, could easily have been represented by an Indigenous scholar had I invested the time to recruit one. Finally, the fact 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 my [closing remarks](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/files/closing-remarks-april-23-andrea-olinger-access-copy) at the conference (as well as in separate emails), I reflected on what happened and why, and I apologized to my Indigenous colleagues for perpetuating, to quote one of the colleagues who had emailed 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 also apologized to my settler colleagues for putting them in the position of doing harm through my invitations and encouraging them to stay despite their misgivings. I concluded the remarks by noting ideas for a few next steps.

Since the conference, the Watson Conference team and I have taken the following actions:

* **Compensation:** We compensated the two Indigenous scholars for their time and labor in educating me about the impact of the roundtable. (I elaborate on this policy below.)
* **Education:** We developed an annotated list of resources on [Indigenous Louisville and Kentucky](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/commitments/land-acknowledgement-and-resources-on-indigenous-louisville-and-kentucky) to inform our own learning and activism and to serve as a resource for others at UofL as well as for future conference-goers. We will continually update the document.
* **Possible Future Engagement:**In my closing remarks at the conference, I suggested that the conference could offer funding for graduate students on the American Indian Caucus to attend future Watson conferences. However, members of the American Indian Caucus observed that the Watson Conference has not proven itself a safe space for Indigenous graduate student scholars. If we create these scholarships but make no other structural changes (or only cosmetic ones) or fail to engage in significant self-education, the poisonous dynamic would be sustained.

As Mingus (2018) pointed out, apologies might of course not be accepted, and “[r]epair can take a long time…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”). Andrea Riley Mukavetz and Cindy Tekobbe (2022) offered a bracing discussion of what settler scholars need to know when working, or seeking to work, with Indigenous scholars and community members. In their essay, which used the Watson 2021 land acknowledgment roundtable as a jumping-off point, they shared teachings that articulate “some much needed boundaries in hopes to move forward in less violent, more affirming, and more sustainable collaborations with Rhetoric and Composition.” In what follows, I detail a few other strategies that helped promote accountability through reflection and repair.

## Importance of Transparency

As we discuss in “[Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/commitments/watson-and-anti-black-racism),” more transparency could have prevented the harm in 2018 from compounding. So when I received the critiques of the land acknowledgment roundtable during the conference, I tried to be as forthcoming and explicit as possible about what happened. I explained the intention behind and detailed the critiques of the panel in the closing session, circulated my remarks to attendees, and [posted them on the conference website](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/files/closing-remarks-april-23-andrea-olinger-access-copy). A public archive for responses like this will allow future presenters and attendees to learn about conference histories and changes that organizers have made or are working on.

## Opportunities for Participants to Reflect on How They are Enacting Collective Conference Values

Our closing session, which included breakout discussions, was designed for people not only to 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? Having this built-in space for reflection meant there was already a place for me to share the critiques from the two Indigenous colleagues and my response-in-progress and for attendees to process what happened (as well as share any other concerns or thoughts).

Given that conferences, like all interactions, professional and otherwise, can be oppressive in countless big and small ways, organizers and attendees must continually think about how we engage with one another and how we can be accountable when we hurt others. Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins (2013) might call this “self-work with others”: “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). In their essay on cultural rhetorics gatherings, Victor del Hierro, Daisy Levy, and Margaret Price (2016) describe this work as “negotiating allyship, both the moments it fails and the moments it is re-made in our everyday encounters” (n.p.), and they argue that conference organizers must “*hold space* for such encounters, remembering that they are a critical part of the ongoing practice of cultural rhetorics” (italics in original, n.p.). The imperative for organizers to engage participants in “critical reflection on what narratives [around white normativity] are being enacted“ is reinforced in Courtney Goto’s (2019) analysis of problems with the 2018 Religious Education Association Conference.

## Compensation for Emotional and Intellectual Labor Expended by Members with Marginalized Identities to Educate Organizers

After the harms we inflicted precipitated the dissolution of what was to be the 2020 Watson Conference (“[Watson and Anti-Black Racism](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/commitments/watson-and-anti-black-racism)”), I entered into an invaluable correspondence with the lone scholar of color within my group of co-organizers. She conveyed the particular importance of compensating the Black scholars invited to Watson, both because of the reputational threat that associating with the conference had created and because of the labor—emotional, intellectual, or both—they had endured. (Notably, the correspondent was herself expending labor in educating me.)

For scholars of color, dehumanizing experiences at conferences can contribute to one’s “racial battle fatigue,” a term coined by William Smith to describe “the cumulative psychosocial-physiological impact of racial micro and macroaggressions on racially marginalized targets,” “the result of these toxic and persistent racialized microaggressions and the subsequent negative health sequelae[[10]](#footnote-10) on marginalized and oppressed people” (Smith et al., 2016, pp. 1192). To point out racism and educate conference organizers itself involves intellectual and emotional labor and can even have serious professional consequences when “resistance itself is incorporated into a white frame that characterizes people of color as unobjective or overly emotional” (Evans & Moore, 2015, p. 447). Louwanda Evans and Wendy Lee Moore described this labor as 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” (p. 452).

Compensation for this labor is, of course, not the solution to eradicating racist or oppressive conference practices, but it is a small way in which conference organizers can acknowledge both the tolls of this feedback as well as its intellectual value. Crucially, although many people may give feedback on a conference, there is an experiential difference: because of one’s lived history, the act of giving feedback can exacerbate the harms one has incurred. This point was raised to me by Dr. Cherie Dawson-Edwards, at the time of the 2021 conference my college’s associate dean of diversity, engagement, culture, and climate. If a white scholar gives feedback on how the conference was possibly harmful to scholars of color, for instance, that person is not re-traumatizing themselves by sharing the feedback.

Conference organizers must therefore think about how they might compensate conference attendees who are members of marginalized groups and expend emotional and intellectual labor to educate conference organizers about ways in which conference activities may be dehumanizing or hurtful. What followed my correspondence with the above-mentioned scholar of color was a process by which to accomplish this, first after the failed 2020 conference and then in 2021 after the land acknowledgement roundtable.

In summer 2020, I was advised by someone at my university that a conference invitee, whether speaker or consultant, could be paid only if they had a speaking role. To compensate the scholars, it seemed, would require a workaround like organizing a short “day symposium” where a topic like the future of the conference could be discussed—a poor solution because even more intellectual and emotional labor would be involved. Nevertheless, fearing this would be their only opportunity to receive payment, this was what I arranged for the Black scholars who had been invited and who were interested,[[11]](#footnote-11) in the form of a brief online meeting with me.

In April 2021, seeking to compensate the two Indigenous scholars who had sent detailed critiques of the roundtable that shaped the discussions in the closing session, I learned from Dr. Dawson-Edwards that the person did not need a speaking role as long as the information they shared, whether in person and synchronously or in writing, influenced the conference in some way. All I would need to provide to my university was an email to the feedback providers that thanked them for the consultation. If the critiques had been offered after the conference, I would have argued that this work was a form of consultation for the next conference.

This process affirms the urgency for conference organizers to investigate their respective university’s or organization’s approach to compensation, however much digging this entails, and for this information to be sought out in advance. Moreover, it demonstrates the value of compensating those with marginalized identities who offer guidance ex post facto. As Dr. Dawson-Edwards observed, there is so much information that conference organizers do not realize they need—until, of course, something happens. However, when this feedback emerges from a very large number of people, and given that most academic conferences—unlike, say, many corporations—have limited funds, a different, perhaps more systemic solution is probably warranted.

# Further Feedback?

Evans and Moore (2015) reminded readers of the ways in which “white institutional spaces, built on a history of exclusion, are embedded with white discourses and ideologies and subjugate the racialized experiences of people of color” (p. 452). Inevitably, there are ways in which whiteness was and has been operating at and after the 2021 Watson Conference that we and others who read this report are unaware of. And there may be approaches, strategies, or areas for improvement that seem off-base. We embrace further conversation and suggestions. Please email Andrea Olinger, 2020-2024 Watson Conference Director, at andrea.olinger@louisville.edu.

# Works Cited

Cheung, F., Ganote, C. M., & Souza, T. J. (2016, April 1). Microaggressions and microresistance: Supporting and empowering students. *Faculty Focus.* <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/equality-inclusion-and-diversity/microaggressions-and-microresistance-supporting-and-empowering-students/>

Cheung, F., Ganote, C., & Souza, T. (2021, April 7). Microresistance as a way to respond to microaggressions on Zoom and in real life. *Faculty Focus*. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/academic-leadership/microresistance-as-a-way-to-respond-to-microaggressions-on-zoom-and-in-real-life/>

Del Hierro, V., Levy, D., & Price, M. (2016). We are here: Negotiating difference and alliance in spaces of cultural rhetorics. *enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture,* 21. <https://enculturation.net/we-are-here>

Diab, R., Ferrel, T., Godbee, B., & Simpkins, N. (2013). Making commitments to racial justice actionable. *Across the Disciplines,* 10. <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/race/diabetal.pdf>

Evans, L., & Moore, W. L. (2015). Impossible burdens: White institutions, emotional labor, and micro-resistance. *Social Problems, 62*, 439-454. 10.1093/socpro/spv009

Fink, M., Butler, J., Stremlau, T., Kerschbaum, S. L., & Brueggemann, B. J. (2020). Honoring access needs at academic conferences through Computer Assisted Real-Time Captioning (CART) and sign language interpreting. *College Composition and Communication, 72*(1), 103-106.

Godbee, B. (2023, May 13). Can Registration Be Relational? How I’m Longing for Sliding-Scale Registration to Work. *head-heart-hands.com: Everyday living for justice.*  <https://heart-head-hands.com/can-registration-be-relational/>

Goto, C. T. (2019). On being caught enacting white normativity. *Religious Education, 114*(3), 349-361. 10.1080/00344087.2019.1602491

Mingus, M. (2019, December 18). *The four parts of accountability & how to give a genuine apology.* <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability/>

NC State. (2020). *Signing Black in America* [Documentary]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiLltM1tJ9M&t=54s>

Okun, Tema. (2022). *White supremacy culture characteristics*. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

Owens, C. (2019, June 5). Philly judges discuss language access following study of court reporters. *The Inquirer*. <https://www.inquirer.com/news/aae-aave-african-american-english-black-dialect-court-reporters-accuracy-justice-equal-access-20190605.html?outputType=amp>

Rickford, J. R., & King, S. (2016). Language and linguistics on trial: Hearing Rachel Jeantel (and other vernacular speakers) in the courtroom and beyond. *Language*, *92*(4): 948-988.

Riley Mukavetz, A., & C. Tekobbe. (2022). “If you don’t want us there, you don’t get us”: A statement on Indigenous visibility and reconciliation. *Present Tense, 2*(9), <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-9/if-you-dont-want-us-there-you-dont-get-us-a-statement-on-indigenous-visibility-and-reconciliation/>

Smith, W. A., Mustaffa, J. B., Jones, C. M., Curry, T. J., & Allen, W. R. (2016). “You make me wanna holler and throw up both my hands!”: Campus culture, Black misandric microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29*(9), 1189-1209. 10.1080/09518398.2016.1214296

Souza, T. (2018, April 30). Responding to microaggressions in the classroom: Taking ACTION. *Faculty Focus*. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/responding-to-microaggressions-in-the-classroom/>

Wood, T., Dolmage, J., Price, M. & Lewiecki-Wilson, C. (2014). Moving beyond disability 2.0 in composition studies. *Composition Studies*, 42(2), 147-150.

1. Conference organizers might also be interested in the [resources for antiracist conference design](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/2021-program/conference/public-archive) contributed by 2021 Watson Conference presenters and in the 2022 special issue of [*Writers: Craft and Context*](https://journals.shareok.org/writersccjournal/issue/view/4), which contains essays about antiracist conferencing written by conference presenters. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One of the Black scholars had asked to not be contacted after she resigned from the 2020 conference. We respected this wish and thus did not reach out to reinvite her. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There was some ambiguity in how some attendees represented their race and ethnicity. We counted the single adjective “Hispanic” as signifying a person of color, on the assumption that “white” would have been added if it was part of their identity. We counted “White/Latina/o” as white, but we acknowledge that it could also signify biracial or multiracial. We counted the single adjective “multiethnic” to indicate a person of color, but it could also signify a white person who has multiple white ethnic identities. These uncertainties reflect the challenge of including a free-response field to this survey question. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to Rebecca Pattillo and Amy Clukey for sharing this information. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. #  In her blog post “[Can Registration Be Relational? How I’m Longing for Sliding-Scale Registration to Work](https://heart-head-hands.com/can-registration-be-relational/),” Beth Godbee (2023) described the value of sliding-scale registration as well as the challenges and complexities posed by capitalist (and other oppressive) conditioning.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We thank Michelle Houston, our CART captioner, for sharing a news article about many court reporters’ miscomprehension of Black Language, the problems this causes, and various interventions that are being discussed (Owens, 2019). We also thank Michelle Foster for recommending Rickford and King (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on Black ASL, we especially recommend the NC State Language and Life Project’s 30-minute documentary [*Signing Black in America*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiLltM1tJ9M&t=54s)(NC State, 2020), available on YouTube. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 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 a support system (“[The Four Parts of Accountability](https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability/)”) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Because all of the experiences recounted in this section are personal to Andrea, the document shifts to the first-person-singular pronoun. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In medical terminology, results or effects. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As noted in footnote #2, there was a Black scholar who had asked to not be contacted after she resigned from the 2020 conference. We respected this wish and thus did not extend this invitation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)