Conferencing toward Antiracism: Reckoning with the Past, Reimagining the Present

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Conferences can be incubators of academic writers' personal and professional development—and of disciplines themselves. At their best, conferences are opportunities to learn about and discuss new ideas and collect feedback on our own works-in-progress, and they offer time and space in which to renew our sense of connectedness and belonging—to parts of ourselves, to old and new friends and colleagues, and to our disciplines and professions. And academic fields themselves are built through the kind of dialogue, between individuals and groups, that conferences can foster; consider, for instance, how many publications begin as conference presentations, roundtables, and keynotes.

Yet in our predominantly white fields of rhetoric, composition, writing studies, and technical and professional communication, the conference-as-usual is a space in which white supremacy reigns and historically oppressed groups continue to be dehumanized. Under such conditions, the experience for scholars of color can be an incongruous one: alternately dispiriting and fulfilling, alienating from the disciplines as a whole but bonding to subcommunities of color therein. In "Academic #BlackLivesMatter: Black Faculty and Graduate Students Tell Their Stories," Sherita Roundtree attests to this duality:

> Although the somewhat racial monolith of writing center conferences helped me grow accustomed to being the only Black person in any given space, I found myself standing in the middle of the CCCC [Conference on College Composition and Communication] hotel floor questioning how the space accounted for me. Perhaps, more immediately, I recognized a mistrust that developed in me toward the conference, the field, and the folks in it.

> After wandering around for a while and attempting to make sense of the massive conference program, I noticed a Black woman with her edges slicked back into a large afro puff, walking with a small group of other Black men and women into one of the conference rooms. At the time, there was only one Black woman professor at my undergraduate university and I was unaware that there were Black women professors in the field of Composition and Rhetoric because the writing center scholarship that I read up until attending the CCCC did not make this information evident. While I did not know this at the time, the Black woman with the afro puff was Dr. Elaine Richardson (Dr. E). (Botex et al., 2020)

For Eric House, the robust ties formed at CCCC with other Black scholars "helped [him] recognize and name the damaging effects" of the isolation he felt as the only Black graduate student in his department:

One [moment] was my first CCCC experience, where I was introduced to Black excellence in our field when I was sitting in a larger conference room as Dr. Elaine Richardson grabbed the mic and sang down the gospel song "Never Would've Made It" in her talk that almost made me break down. That moment and my first Black Caucus meeting at that same CCCC made it clear that there is a community that I might not always see in my own department, but can absolutely connect with even if only to inspire and motivate through our existence. (Botex et al., 2020)

Roundtree and House point to not only the importance of Black spaces within CCCC as places of connection and renewal for Black rhetoricians and compositionists across the country but also, more generally, the power of conferences to both alienate and unite.

Because conferences shape the trajectories of individuals and disciplines, and given the need for our field(s) to root out white-supremacist practices in every aspect of our work, we felt it was important to publish the conversations that began at the April 2021 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, a virtual event we titled "Toward the Antiracist Conference: Reckoning with the Past, Reimagining the Present." As the "call for consultation" described,

> The exigence for our theme is global and local. This year's uprisings for Black liberation have only reaffirmed the need for institutions of higher education to confront their roles in perpetuating a white supremacist system and, with the BIPOC students, faculty, and staff who have endured this violence and marginalization, to create just and equitable structures in its place. Moreover, we seek to extend the repair work the Watson Conference has undertaken in addressing its own history of enabling anti-Black racism by forging a way forward. (See Watson and Anti-Black Racism for a complete discussion.)[1] ("Watson 2021: Call for Consultation")

Inspired by the *College Composition and Communication* symposium "Enacting a Culture of Access in Our Conference Spaces" (Hubrig & Osorio, 2020), we hoped the conference would serve as a forum to "interrogate existing conference policies and practices and reimagine them to foster antiracism in how conferences are conceived, organized, and staged" (ibid.). Held across three days and offered for free, the conference had 344 registrants from 162 colleges and universities. It featured two keynotes, two workshops, four panels, one roundtable, and opening and closing sessions with facilitated breakout groups. Presenters received honoraria for their work and were asked to contribute to an online Policy and Practice Archive, which showcases a variety of handouts, scripts, and slides both to document conference activities and to provide resources for future conference planners (e.g., Michelle Grue's script for her presentation, "TheFeministsAreComing: But are They Anti-Racist?"; Sumyat Thu's handout "Questions for Antiracist Conference Organizing," which was based on her presentation, "Antiracist Conversations and Organizing: Reforming Academic Conference Genres").

For some, the 2021 Watson Conference was productive and energizing; for others, Watson reinforced the marginalization that we—especially as an all-white planning team in a predominately white department—were trying to combat. During the conference, two Indigenous scholars, members of the American Indian Caucus of CCCC, emailed Andrea to share how the roundtable she planned, "Beyond the Land Acknowledgment: Decolonial Actions for the Watson Conference and UofL," was deeply hurtful and disrespectful. (For a detailed account, we refer you to a forthcoming report on the Watson website based on our 2022 CCCC presentation. We also recommend an essay by Andrea Riley-Mukavetz and Cindy Tekkobe [2022], which offers a bracing discussion of what settler scholars need to know when working, or seeking to work, with Indigenous scholars and community members; Riley-Mukavetz's experience at the Watson roundtable was the jumping-off point for the piece.) We entered Watson with the understanding that uprooting white-supremacist and settler-colonial habits and impacts from the Watson Conference would be a permanent project and not something that could be achieved in short or discrete periods of time. The experiences of those Indigenous scholars affirm the vast amount of work that remains to be done.

Because, as Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins (2013) remind us, "Equity work is always incomplete and always striving" (p. 6), our use of the term "conferencing" in our title is a deliberate one. The progressive aspect (conferenc*ing*) foregrounds the ongoing nature of the labor and activity entailed here. But this does not only refer to the intellectual labor of conference design (Almjeld & Zimmerman, 2021) and of presenting at and attending conferences. Rather, it also speaks to the larger, continual process of reflection—on our racialized assumptions, habits, policies, and practices—and then action toward justice. In understanding this process, we draw on Diab et al.'s (2013) framework, which articulates two "interdependent rhetorical moves that have the potential to re-design, transform, and move us closer toward racial justice," (p. 6): (1) "articulating (and re-articulating, regularly) our commitments" by asking ourselves questions about our values, emotions, relationships, and conditions for our work (pp. 6-7) and (2) "making our commitments actionable" through "self-work" and "work-with-others" on both interpersonal and systemic levels (pp. 7-14). The "care-full, processual, reiterative, and

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1 Our statement "Watson and Anti-Black Racism" analyzed the Watson Conference's role in perpetuating white supremacy. We recounted a racist incident at the 2018 conference and its aftermath in 2020, and we analyzed and apologized for the harms we inflicted. We then articulated commitments to fighting anti-Black racism at the 2021 conference and all subsequent Watson events.

self-reflexive" (Diab et al., 2013, p. 14) qualities that should characterize all social justice work must also be brought to bear on the act of conferenc*ing*.

The articles in this special issue seek to spur reflection and action on our individual and collective antiracist practices and policies at every stage of the conference experience. In this goal, we join a small but vital body of scholarship that rethinks conferences, including Ada Hubrig and Ruth Osorio's (2020) symposium on accessibility, Victor Del Hierro, Daisy Levy, & Margaret Price's (2016) essay on negotiating allyship at cultural rhetorics gatherings, Ebony O. McGee & Lasana Kazembe's (2016) empirical study "Presenting while Black," and a 2019 issue of *Religious Education* (volume 114.3) that offers eight different essays on problems with the 2018 Religious Education Association annual conference, "Beyond White Normativity," and potential antiracist solutions.

In conjunction with this vital published scholarship on conferences, there is a growing recognition of the conference itself as a work or act of scholarship (Almjeld & Zimmerman, 2021). As one recent example, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Donnie Johnson Sackey, and Kristen Moore, chairs of the 2022 Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) annual conference, drew inspiration from Natasha N. Jones and Miriam F. Williams's "The Just Use of Imagination: A Call to Action" (2020). For the conference, which was titled "Taking Action: Reimagining Just Futures in Technical Communication," the chairs write that "[f]or technical communicators invested in change-making, the current structures for gathering (e.g., traditional conferences) are limited in their potential to enact change across the field, our communities, and the world. Rather than stand-and-deliver opportunities, **we change makers** require spaces to build coalitions, to conduct meaningful research, to analyze mounds of data, and to make meaning" ([ATTW 2022 CFP](), bold in original). In response to this need, Sano-Franchini, Sackey, and Moore created "action-oriented," "participant-centered" spaces that "help us re-imagine what conferences can and should be" ([ATTW 2022 CFP]()). Our special issue participates in this ambition: to be in conversation with both published scholarship on conferences and with the conference-as-scholarship.

Because *Writers: Craft and Context* spotlights not only "the work [writers] do" but also "the contexts in which they compose and circulate their work, how they are impacted by policies and pedagogies (broadly conceived) and how they develop across the lifespan" ("[Writers: Craft & Context]()"), we thought it was an ideal venue for our special issue. The contributors herein practice antiracist work with honesty, creativity, and care. Whether this takes the form of personal narratives that reflect on and theorize micro- and macroaggressions experienced in conference spaces and beyond (Tellez-Trujillo, Grayson) or lessons learned from efforts to build antiracist programs and conferences (Byrd et al., Johnston et al., Pettus et al.), the scope of work in this issue is wide. Other contributions lay out pragmatic approaches to ensuring accessibility in conference spaces (Allen and Kerschbaum)

and use a fictionalized case study to invite readers to consider how to move conferences and institutional spaces beyond deeply entrenched whiteness (Croom). Finally, one article applies decolonial critiques to academic institutions and settler-colonial epistemologies (Cariño Trujillo; Cariño Trujillo & Montelongo González). We therefore begin with articles situated specifically in conferencing work and transition to articles that extend beyond conferences.

ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The special issue opens with Karen Tellez-Trujillo's "What Am I Doing Here? When Conference Acceptance Doesn't Mean Conference Inclusion," in which the author examines how her expectations of national conferences contrasted with the realities she encountered. Tellez-Trujillo recounts being met by microaggressions and outright racism while attending conferences as a Chicana graduate student. Drawing on a framework of feminist rhetorical resilience, Tellez-Trujillo asks readers to consider how we can work to create more inclusive and welcoming conference spaces for all scholars and offers suggestions for accomplishing this transformation. She proposes that we address tensions between attendees' worries and realities, extend greater care to ourselves and other conference-goers, work against public and private exclusion, and increase access and compensation.

Next, in "Sharing Lessons Learned: Intersectional Collaboration, Collective Accountability, and Radical Care in Antiracist Programming," Emily Rónay Johnston, Amanda Solomon Amorao, and Jonathan Kim demonstrate some of the ways conferences can begin to enact positive changes like those suggested by Tellez-Trujillo. The authors draw on their own experiences with academic conferencing and conference planning—specifically, piloting a Certificate in Antiracist Writing Pedagogy and launching the Inaugural Learning and Teaching for Justice Conference at the University of California, San Diego—and call for change and reflection in our conference-planning practices. The authors introduce three guiding values that they argue are central to antiracist work in higher education: intersectional collaboration, collective accountability, and radical care. To conclude their essay, the authors provide questions for reflection and actionable takeaways based on these values for the audience to consider in their own antiracist work in higher education.

As we developed this issue, we prioritized offering tangible resources for fellow and future conference planners. Many of the pieces in the issue take up this call, including the two previous articles and Caitlin Burns Allen and Stephanie Kerschbaum's contribution, "Conference-Session Moderation: Guidelines for Supporting a Culture of Access." Allen and Kerschbaum examine ways moderators can encourage and model a culture of access and can attend to the intersections of disability and other marginalized identities in conference spaces. Emphasizing that creating a culture of access relies on adapting to specific contexts and

situations, Allen and Kerschbaum offer suggestions and recommendations for moderators to tailor to their own conference events, instead of providing a checklist of universally applicable practices. The guidelines are compiled and expanded from materials used and shared at the 2021 Watson Conference and focus on three different stages of conference organizing: before a conference begins, immediately before and during a session, and during the Q&A. We hope this article will ignite a rich conversation about the role and responsibilities of conference-session moderators.

The next two articles center large, national conferences in rhetoric and composition and the efforts made by organizers to create inclusive and antiracist conference environments. In "Social Justice Conference Planning for Writing Studies: Frameworks, Triumphs, and Challenges," Antonio Byrd, Maria Novotny, Michael Pemberton, and Vershawn Ashanti Young share personal reflections on their roles in planning CCCC between 2018 and 2021 as members of the Social Justice at the Convention Committee and the Local Arrangements Committee. The authors recount the challenges of organizing social justice programming as CCCC has changed over recent years. Through a combination of text and video, Byrd, Novotny, Pemberton, and Young offer both a conceptual framework and a series of guiding questions for readers to consider when planning their own social justice-related events at conferences.

Next, Mudiwa Pettus, Sherita V. Roundtree, Ruth Osorio, Jen Almjeld, Patrick Thomas, and Jessica Enoch wrestle with the labor of putting on the Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference in their article, "Non-Negotiable Inclusivity: Chronicling the Relational, Embodied Work of Antiracist, Accessible Conferencing." Detailing the work of the Workflow, Format, and Processes Task Force of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, the authors reckon with the fact that the organization and conference are populated overwhelmingly with white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied women. Their six individual sections grapple with the unifying question, "How should our conferencing practices change if we treat this kind of inclusive work as nonnegotiable, as something planners are not only accountable for but something that energizes and improves our conference, our organization, and our discipline?" Pettus, Roundtree, Osorio, Almjeld, Thomas, and Enoch offer hope in the recursive nature of conference planning, presenting a preliminary blueprint for a better imagined future.

In "Peer-Reviewed Article: Conferencing toward Racial Literacies from the Post-White Orientation," Marcus Croom continues the work of creating equitable conferences by forwarding what he terms a "Post-White Orientation" to conference planning. Contrary to racial orientations grounded in White ways of thinking and perceptions of BIPOC inferiority, the Post-White Orientation rejects philosophies depicting Whiteness as superior to "BIPOC(ness)." To help readers practice Post-White conference design, Croom includes a template that asks readers to "identify and reject" ideas, practices, and rhetorics that ascribe deficiency in all its forms and, among other recommendations, "designate paid or unpaid roles for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to co-design conference gatherings." Concluding with a case study that asks the reader to apply the Post-White Orientation to a fictional conference situation and an analysis of Croom's own article using it as a lens, Croom's work is the sort of interactive piece that encourages readers to reenvision conferencing as antiracist work.

Moving us beyond conferences and highlighting how conferences reflect the institutional structures they represent, Mara Lee Grayson weaves together two stories in her essay "Antiracism Is Not an Action Item: Boutique Activism and Academic (Anti) Racism." Incisively describing her work both at a nonprofit and in the English department at the pseudonymous South Lake State University, Grayson highlights the relationship between the microaggressive everyday interactions between colleagues and the larger structural issues of racism. Further, Grayson offers a sharp critique of the "liberal boutique activism" and white saviorism common in academic and nonprofit settings alike. She calls out the "DEI work" of many academic institutions as "mere costume" or "mak[ing] us look the part without embodying it." Noting that the performativity of antiracism is not accidental, Grayson challenges readers to consider if real antiracist activism is possible within their institution, ending with a powerful call: "What are you doing on a daily basis, *in praxis*, to decenter, destabilize, delegitimize, and dismantle white supremacy in your organization?"

Concluding our special issue is sociologist Carmen Cariño Trujillo's "'Precisamos de conocimientos para la vida, una universidad libre de colonialismo': Reflexiones en torno a la descolonización del saber y de la universidad desde la experiencia," or "'We Need Knowledge for Life, a University Free of Colonialism': Reflections on the Decolonization of Knowledge, and the University, from Experience." Cariño Trujillo, a descendant of Ñuu Savi, the People of the Rain, moves us far past conferences into the colonial and racist roots of the university and then "beyond university walls" in order to "build forms and processes of decolonization of knowledge." Available in Spanish and in an English version translated by Alejandro Montelongo González, her essay defiantly pushes us to make not just an epistemic difference but also an ontological one by forwarding the concept of *sentipensar*, or reason combined with love. Cariño Trujillo sees the work of decolonization as a "life project" for all of us to fend off death from both inside and outside the academy. Her work argues for us all to become *sentipensantes* as a means of resistance.

EDITORIAL PROCESS AND USE OF THE HEURISTIC FOR ANTIRACIST SCHOLARLY REVIEWING PRACTICES

Before we close, we want to share some information about the process of putting together this special issue. Given that the authors'

presentations had already been selected for the 2021 Watson Conference, we understood our roles as special issue coeditors to be those of mentors, assisting writers in developing their work for publication. This approach aligned well with *WCC*'s own conceptualization of journal editing as mentoring ("Call for Involvement"). In addition, we were guided by the "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors" (2021), developed by Lauren E. Cagle, Michelle F. Eble, Laura Gonzales, Meredith A. Johnson, Nathan R. Johnson, Natasha N. Jones, Liz Lane, Temptaous Mckoy, Kristen R. Moore, Ricky Reynoso, Emma J. Rose, GPat Patterson, Fernando Sánchez, Ann Shivers-McNair, Michele Simmons, Erica M. Stone, Jason Tham, Rebecca Walton, and Miriam F. Williams. This guide details how the reviewing process can be "a system of inclusivity, rather than gatekeeping and disciplining." The heuristic contains five principles that we strove to tailor to our work; we also asked reviewers to consult it. Below, we describe ways that we attended to each principle.[2]

A. "Recognize a range of expertise and encourage citation practices that represent diverse canons, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing." As editors, we sought to respect the goals and purposes of the authors while offering guidance on how to contextualize essays in field-specific conversations. The articles include personal narratives, case studies, Spanish-language scholarship, and a translation. In addition, we asked reviewers to consider the extent to which each article is in dialogue with a diverse group of scholars and perspectives, including those of multiply marginalized scholars.

B. "Recognize, intervene in and/or prevent harmful scholarly work—both in publication processes and in published scholarship." When contacting Watson presenters about whether they wanted to develop their presentations into publications, we did not ask the settler scholars Andrea had invited to speak on the "Beyond the Land Acknowledgment" roundtable, given that that portion of the roundtable caused harm (c.f. the earlier discussion). In addition, as mentioned in §A, we asked reviewers to offer feedback on citation practices. Last, before copyediting, we did inclusive language checks, providing "another layer of protection against oppressive and anti-racist language ('catches' that are often too small for reviewers and too big for copyeditors)."

C. "Establish and state clear but flexible contingency plans for review processes that prioritize humanity over production." We were flexible with deadlines and greatly relied on that flexibility ourselves. *WCC* editors' own flexibility with their publication schedule made this possible!

D. "Make the review process transparent." We divided the articles in half and sent four articles to two reviewers each. Thus, each reviewer read four articles, and each article received two reviews. However, two articles received a third reviewer or different

reviewers because they required additional expertise (as explained in §F, below). Authors and reviewers decided whether to share their names in their manuscripts and feedback. Given the ways our lived experiences inform and infuse our writing, we wanted to make anonymity an option but not a requirement.

In addition, we shared the reviewer guidelines with authors, but we did not develop these guidelines until after the authors began to work on adapting their presentations for publication. As a result, when any differences emerged between author and reviewer expectations, we felt that the author's aims should be primary. We shared the full reviews, along with editorial framing, with the authors. We did not share these materials with the reviewers, however, an oversight that made the publication process less transparent for reviewers.

E. "Value the labor of those involved in the review process." We used the Watson endowment to pay honoraria to our reviewers and cover designer, as well as to pay our Spanish-English translators and our Spanish-English copyeditor.

F. "Editors commit to inclusivity among reviewers and in editorial board makeup." We thought carefully about whom to invite to serve as reviewers, looking for scholars who have expertise in antiracist work and have been involved in conference planning or served on professional organizations. In addition, for a few articles in particular (Allen and Kerschbaum; Cariño Trujillo; Cariño Trujillo & Montelongo González), we sought reviewers who also had expertise in accessibility, decolonial theory and methodology, and/or reading knowledge of Spanish. We also did an accessibility check before we sent everything out for review (e.g., ensuring pieces had image descriptions, captions, transcripts) to make sure that manuscripts were as accessible as possible for reviewers. In addition, when it was time for publication, Haley Fulco, the *WCC* graphic designer and production editor at the University of Oklahoma, double-checked the inclusion of alt-text and ensured that all text was tagged and that there was a logical order for screen readers.

Overall, we found the process of consulting the heuristic generative—a way for us, as four white scholars, to examine our editorial practices both in advance and throughout for ways in which we might be excluding and marginalizing our authors, reviewers, readers, and/or other stakeholders. We also recognize that there are places where we have fallen short. We hope readers will provide us with feedback so we can learn from them and proceed differently in the future.

CONCLUSION & GRATITUDE

Our goal in compiling this special issue was to broadcast innovative thinking around what antiracist conferences can look like,

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2 Thanks to Neil Baird and Bradley Dilger (2022) for modeling this kind of discussion in their special-issue introduction.

as well as to delineate the difficulties that confront us in pursuing that end. We offer a range of voices: junior and senior scholars, conference-goers and conference organizers, those involved in new and established conferences. These voices differ in their approach, ranging from reflective narratives and case studies to guidelines for action. But the pieces deliver a common call: the academic conference must be uprooted from its white-supremacist foundations to be made inclusive, representative, and equitable. In short, the conference must be wholly reimagined, and superficial adjustments are not only not enough but also only perpetuate the very structures we seek to challenge. At the same time, the authors highlight the potential for conferences to build our disciplinary communities and renew feelings of belonging–-and the need to stretch our thinking beyond university walls.

The articles collected here showcase the creativity and incisiveness of their authors and exemplify the valuable work these teacher-scholar-activists are engaged in. We hope they inspire future reflection and scholarship. Whether this discussion continues in *WCC* or across other venues, we are excited to follow future conversations about antiracist conferencing–-and to witness how the initiatives, ideas, policies, and practices shared within these pages are enacted.

More than a year in the making, this special issue has taught us so much as we have crafted it, and we are deeply grateful to everyone who has taken part. We are grateful to our authors who took this journey with us and turned their powerful conference presentations into these essays. We are grateful to our reviewers, who supplied detailed, generous, and generative feedback to the writers and helped elucidate our own vision for the special issue. We are also grateful to Diamond Wade for designing such a remarkable image for our cover. Last but not least, we are grateful to *WCC* editors Sandra Tarabochia, Aja Martinez, and Michele Eodice for their support, enthusiasm, and patience.

The wise and courageous voices of our authors have forever changed the way we understand conferencing. We hope you experience the same.

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Alex Way is an assistant professor of writing and rhetoric studies at the University of Utah. He has served as an assistant director of the 2021 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition. He has taught English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at Kanazawa University in Japan and English composition at Washington State University and the University of Louisville, where he also earned his PhD. His research interests include the sociolinguistics of writing, translingual and transmodal orientations to composition, and translation as a pedagogical tool.