ACMRS First Book Institute 2023 Evaluation Report

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INTRODUCTION

The First Book Institute offers support structures for early career scholars of premodern critical race studies who are in any stage of writing their first book. The Institute is part of the RaceB4Race Mentoring Network, a Mellon-funded initiative based at Rutgers University-Newark.

The goals of the Institute include:

- Make progress on the writing of a first book, starting from any stage.
- Discuss what is unique about the first book, and how it differs from a dissertation.
- Discuss publishers' expectations of a first book project.
- Discuss the unique challenges of writing a first book at a busy stage of professional life, and explore strategies for meeting those challenges.

All Institute attendees are expected to attend all Institute sessions, read and discuss the work of fellow members, and write and present their work at an Institute session.

In 2023, the First Book Institute ran from February through June. Participants met virtually twice per month via Zoom to discuss and workshop their writing. During the Book Institute, participants also received mentorship and insight into publishing. Participants in the 2023 RaceB4Race First Book Institute program's director is Dr. Patricia Akhimie and the First Book Institute was led by Jonathan Hsy and Cord J. Whitaker.

This evaluation report details the following:

- <u>Program descriptive information</u>
    - Participants
    - Evaluation methods
- <u>Evaluation findings</u>
    - Initial Perspectives
    - Experiences
- <u>Summary and recommendations</u>

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Participants

Twelve early-career scholars participated in the 2023 First Book Institute. Of the 12 participants, 11 took the evaluation survey for a response rate of 92%.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation survey included open and closed ended survey questions on the following:

- how they heard about the First Book Institute
- what about the description of the program made them feel like they would be a good fit
- if there was anything in the description of the program that made them worry they would not be a good fit
- what they were most nervous about encountering during the Institute
- their expectations when they enrolled in the Book Institute
- if their expectations were met, and what they would have preferred to have happen if their expectations were not met
- their goals for themselves during the Institute
- if they met their goals
- if anything could have been done differently during the Institute to help them meet their goals
- what components of the Institute helped them to meet their goals
- what they liked about the Institute
- what they wish would have happened during the Institute
- their overall rating of the Institute
- if they had any additional comments

To draw attention to the core of the elements of the comments provided, some words in the participant responses are **bolded** within this report. When reviewing numbers, please note that the percentages in this report are rounded to the nearest whole number.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Initial Perspectives

Learning about the First Book Institute

Participants were asked to explain where they had first heard about the First Book Institute. Three provided multiple sources while the remainder provided just one source. Three specifically mentioned Twitter and two other noted "social media" without specifying the source. Three said they found out through an e-mail listserv. One said they found out through an ACMRS newsletter, one found out through the ACRMS website, and one said they found out through RaceB4Race. One of those who said they found out from Twitter said they also heard about it from the RaceB4Race Mentorship Network.

First Book Institute Description: Participant Assessment of Fit and Concerns

Participants were asked open-ended questions about what in the First Book Institute description made them feel they were a good fit for the program, if anything about the description made them feel they may not be a good candidate, and what they were most nervous about encountering during the Institute and if those things occurred.

Regarding the description of the First Book Institute and assessing their possible fit, participant comments focused on the first book aspect, mentorship, feedback, and pre-modern critical race studies.

- *Yes, it was clear and made me want to **be a part of it**.*
- *That it was an institute for **writers working on their first books**.*
- *I'm working on a **first book**, my work is adjacent to pre-modern critical race studies. I **hesitated to apply because I'm white** and it seemed like the workshop was intended as a supportive space for scholars of color but I decided to apply and let the organizers decide if I fit or not. Glad they did!*
- *As someone who just finished a dissertation and started on the TT, I was most excited by the **mentorship aspect of the institute** and found the two sessions we did on questions about the publishing process to be very helpful.*
- *Getting structured help, constructive criticism, and supportive **feedback.** Getting the knowledge about book editors and presses, etc.*
- *I liked the way it framed both the theoretical scope (people working on PCRS) and also seemed like a space that would be **supportive** and make it **comfortable to be vulnerable** sharing feedback.*
- *I wasn't sure since my work does not touch on race in the ancient world per se, but then Patricia Akhimie gave me **an encouraging nudge** and said that Jonathan Hsy's recent work would be a great model for me and that he would be a wonderful mentor.*
- *I really **wanted a community**, and I wanted to **focus time and attention** to thinking about my book with people with whom I don't have to make the case that race/gender/etc. are important.*
- *I thought the **collaborative aspect** of the institute would be appropriate, as well as the emphasis on pre-modern critical race theory.*

One participant commented on why the description made them feel like they may not have been a good fit. They said, "It did not seem like a good fit for me because the description is aimed at **concerns of early career scholars,** and, indeed, I was the odd person in the group who is writing my first book post-tenure." This participant drew attention to this again in the questions about what made them think they would not be a good fit by saying, "I do not fit the repeated mention of 'early career scholar,' nor was I working on revising a dissertation."

When asked about what made them think they would not be a good candidate, two participants stated they did not have any worries, and one made a note to see their prior response on the description in which they said they hesitated to apply because they are white. Two noted concerns over whether their

work would qualify, and the others noted concerns over being helpful or smart enough, concerns over not being tenure track, and not knowing how far along their project needed to be. The remainder had the following to say:

- *My only concern was that my **work did not touch on race** in the ancient world per se, though it does focus on racialization of the ancient world in modern times.*
- *I worried that my **field would not be represented** and that my work would be too far outside the interests of participants and moderators.*
- *I was worried [about **not being] helpful enough** to the other participants giving feedback every week.*
- *I know that there is so much amazing work happening in first books in medieval studies, so there wasn't anything about the description that made me feel like I wouldn't be a good candidate, but **I was worried that I wouldn't make the cut!***
- *I just thought that **I might not be smart enough** to get chosen. But, I really wanted the help, so I decided to apply.*
- *I guess **I wasn't sure how far along in my book I needed to be** but I think the description made it seem like you were welcome regardless of career stage so that encouraged me.*
- *I initially thought the institute primarily **targeted tenure-track faculty** rather than contingent ones.*

Participants were asked to reflect on what they were most nervous about encountering during the Institute and if these things happened. None of those who mentioned items that they were nervous about said any of them actually occurred. Three answered "N/A" to this question, and another person said they were "not nervous about encountering anything in particular." The others had the following to say:

- *Being a **transdisciplinary scholar** not formally trained in one of the traditional academic disciplines primarily associated with PCRS.*
- *I guess I was nervous that **scholars of color would question my positionality** to do the work I am doing, but that says more about me than anything. It didn't happen.*
- *I was worried that it would be **such a diverse group of specialties that we wouldn't have super productive conversations** about our individual work or even the publication process, but none of that happened. Everyone's projects were INCREDIBLE and I learned so much from each person.*
- *I was **nervous about sharing my work and getting constructive feedback**. Ultimately, the feedback I received was really supportive and encouraging and helped me move the project forward.*
- *I was **nervous about not being smart enough or good enough**. I was nervous about not being able to **contribute meaningfully** to our discussions. I was nervous that people would think that I was stupid or something. None of that happened. It was a uniquely generative and profoundly uplifting experience. The FBI made me fall in love with my scholarship again. I wish with all of my heart that we could reprise it again.*

- *I was **afraid of not being a valuable member** of the Institute. No, I did not feel it actually happened.*
- ***Not being prepared** /not having thought through enough etc./**not being advanced enough.***

Personal Goals for the First Book Institute

All survey participants said they were able to meet their goals during the First Book Institute. Participants said the leadership, feedback, support, and structure were helpful in assisting them meet their goals. The participants said the following when asked what components of the Institute helped them to meet their goals:

- ***Community and accountability.***
- *Signing up for a **specific workshop day gave me the deadline I needed** to draft the proposal.*
- ***The structure** was especially helpful, as was the chance to feel some **external motivation** for once--this was a really welcome change to my home institution that is not very concerned with junior faculty success.*
- *It was helpful to **see examples of book proposals** from the leaders and from fellow participants so I could see the different stages of putting together a book proposal. **The session where I got to workshop my book proposal was of course extremely helpful.***
- *The **feedback** from my peers really helped but also the initial weeks where we discussed the publishing process more broadly was very helpful!*
- *The **feedback on my specific chapter** but also hearing the kinds of feedback given to other projects and formulating my own feedback on other work. The organizers' wisdom was helpful too.*
- *The **feedback** and critique given to me and the other participants about their work helped me to meet all my goals. Because we had different scholars in the group, the feedback that they received helped me to understand the process of scholarly book publishing. So, everyone's feedback was unique; however, their feedback attended to the questions that I had. Also, Cord and Jonathan always gave **concrete examples** to our questions and their explanations. Finally, **Jonathan faithfully wrote down Cord's and our comments in the chat**. But, it wasn't just our comments that Jonathan highlighted in the chat. He also **synthesized, amplified, and clarified Cord 's comments as well as our own.***
- *The **support** I received and the **insights of the two mentors and the participants**.*
- *1. **Reading each other's work**; 2. **Hearing others** describe the process, struggles, and particular stage they are at; 3. **Discussing book proposal, press, and editor negotiation strategies**.*
- *Jonathan and Cord were exemplary in their **gentle, collaborative style of leadership**. They created an environment that was both challenging and welcoming.*

Participant Expectations

The survey asked participants to reflect on what their expectations of the Book Institute were. Key themes were expectations of support, writing workshops, community, feedback, and information on the publishing process. All comments on expectations are below.

- *I wasn't sure, but I was **hoping to workshop pieces and learn** from talented early career scholars.*
- *I wasn't entirely sure, but I thought it would be a mix of sessions about general **publication process** and what we might expect, and some workshops of our individual material.*
- *I didn't really have expectations: I was just hoping for a nice **community** and some **structure** and my expectations were more than met. Cord and Jonathan are amazing.*
- *A **supportive community** that would push, affirm, **challenge**, and provide generative criticism.*
- *I had high expectations that the group would **challenge me** in a good way.*
- *To find **support** and **information** about how to write a book proposal.*
- *I expected to get **feedback** and critique on my book chapter, and I expected the process of scholarly publishing to be explained and clarified with examples.*
- ***Accountability** (for myself and for all) and **super practical "take away" advice** for writing, revision, and press choice/communication.*
- *I thought we would do **writing workshops** and talk about our book projects and learn more about the **publishing process**.*
- *I was hoping to get **advice on the writing and publishing process** (e.g. best practices, what to avoid, etc.).*

Participants were asked if their expectations about the Book Institute were met. Seven of the nine (78%) who answered this question **said their expectations were met**. The two who said they were unmet said the following:

- ***Meet-able deadlines to give written feedback** to a handful of other participants on their submitted writing. That is, expected assignments in subgroups so that everyone comes away with trenchant, detailed critiques on their writing (or organization or whatever issue they ask for help on).*
- ***We shared our questions on the writing and publishing process in the first few meetings, but we did not return to the questions in later sessions to discuss them. I would have liked to have more opportunities to get the leaders' perspectives, as well as those of other participants, on those questions we raised.** Perhaps if we spent less time workshopping (e.g., not the whole session and left about 30 mins to discuss those questions), that would have been helpful. That way, each session would be useful for everyone rather than just one person (although it is helpful to see other people's works workshopped, but this would make each session even *more* helpful on a general First Book level).*

Participant Experiences

Overall Rating

Participants were asked to rate their overall experience as a participant in the First Book Institute on a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent). The average and median were 9 out of 10. Five (50%) of the 11 responding participants rated their experience as 10 out of 10. Three (27%) participants rated their experience as a 9. One (9%) rated their experience as an 8 out of 10, and two (18%) rated their experience as a 7 out of 10.

First Book Institute Environment

Participants were also asked a short series of closed-ended questions about the environment of the First Book Institute. All questions began with "I have…" and centered on feeling welcome, feeling accepted, benefitting from working with those from different backgrounds, and feeling challenged. Response choices included strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. As shown in the chart below, all participants agreed or strongly agreed with each of these statements. All participants strongly agreed they felt welcome and accepted, 73% (n=8) strongly agreed they benefitted from working with people from different backgrounds, and 64% (n=7) strongly agreed they felt challenged to extend their abilities as a Book Institute participant.

As a participant in the Book Institute, I have…
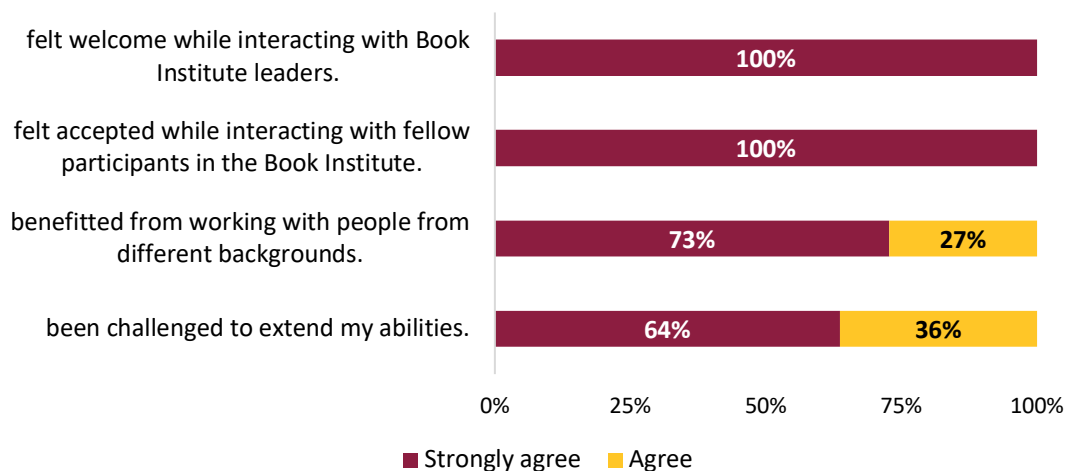
Participant Abilities

Participants were also asked to rate their agreement with several statements on their capabilities ("I can" statements) after the First Book Institute. The statements along with the distribution of responses are shown in the chart below. Respondents were provided a 4-point Likert scale for their ratings which included the options strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.
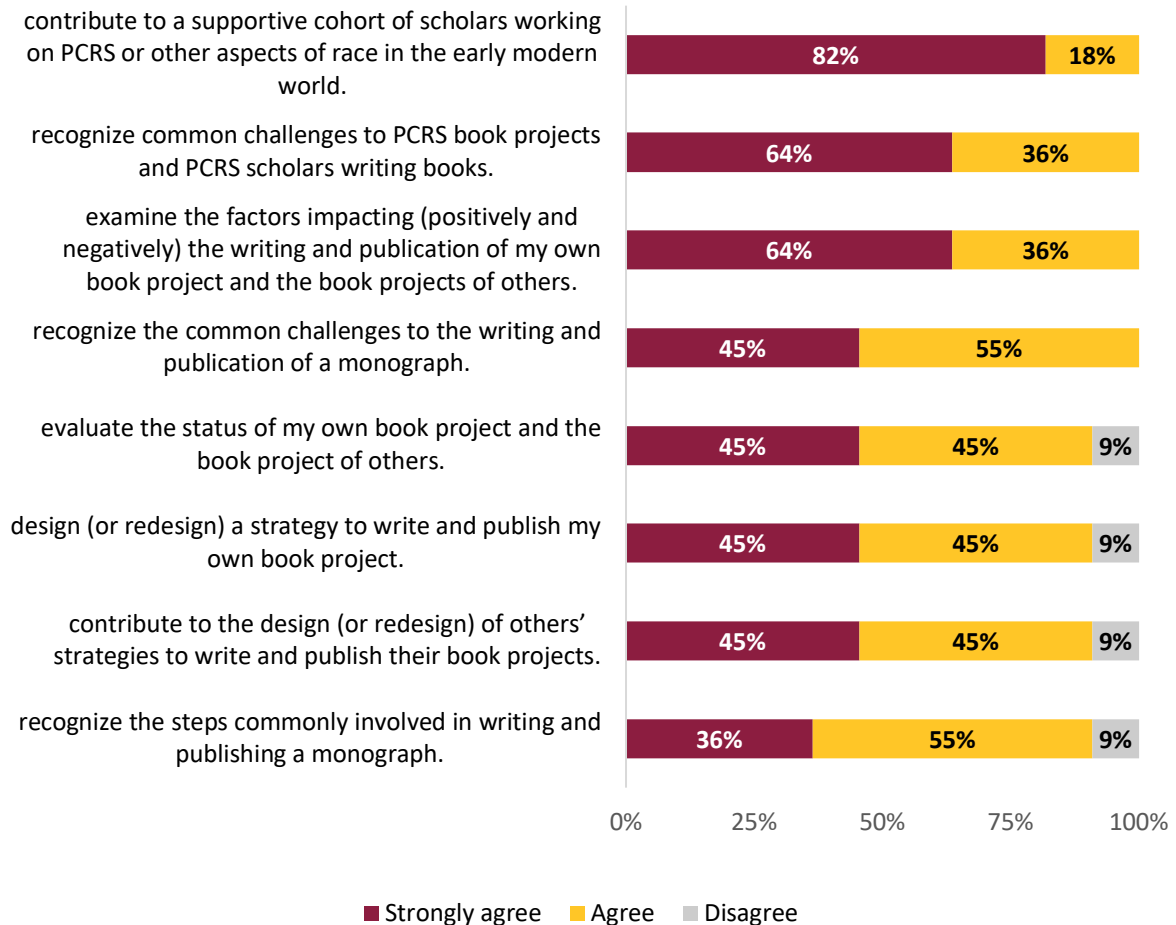
As illustrated in the chart below, strongly agree or agree were the predominate responses. No one strongly disagreed with any of the "I can" statements. As shown in the chart, 100% strongly agreed or agreed that they can:

- contribute to a supportive cohort of scholars working on PCRS or other aspects of race in the early modern world.
- recognize common challenges to PCRS book projects and PCRS scholars writing books.
- examine the factors impacting (positively and negatively) the writing and publication of my own book project and the book projects of others.
- recognize the common challenges to the writing and publication of a monograph.

The areas of weakest agreement where one person (9%) disagreed and less than 50% strongly agreed included the following:

- evaluate the status of my own book project and the book project of others.
- design (or redesign) a strategy to write and publish my own book project.
- contribute to the design (or redesign) of others' strategies to write and publish their book projects.
- recognize the steps commonly involved in writing and publishing a monograph.

After attending the First Book Institute I can…

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree
contribute to a supportive cohort of scholars working on PCRS or other aspects of race in the early modern world.	82%	18%	
recognize common challenges to PCRS book projects and PCRS scholars writing books.	64%	36%	
examine the factors impacting (positively and negatively) the writing and publication of my own book project and the book projects of others.	64%	36%	
recognize the common challenges to the writing and publication of a monograph.	45%	55%	
evaluate the status of my own book project and the book project of others.	45%	45%	9%
design (or redesign) a strategy to write and publish my own book project.	45%	45%	9%
contribute to the design (or redesign) of others' strategies to write and publish their book projects.	45%	45%	9%
recognize the steps commonly involved in writing and publishing a monograph.	36%	55%	9%

■ Strongly agree   ■ Agree   ■ Disagree

What Participants Liked & Wished Was Different

All survey participants were asked what they liked during the First Book Institute as well as what they wished happened during the First Book Institute. Ten participants left comments on both questions. The comments about what participants liked commonly focused on feedback and advice, community, support, and mentorship from the leaders. All comments about what participants liked are below.

- ***We created a space to be vulnerable*** *and to share our fears, hopes, and dreams! The community was so **supportive** and inspiring. I really liked how **we pushed each other** to find strength in our voices.*
- *I got such **constructive feedback** for my work, and that I got to know of so much excellent work that's in-the-making in PCRS.*

- *The **incredible support** we receive, the **community-building** and the fascinating **conversations about book projects.***
- *I could bring my whole self to the table without the shame** that I was used to feeling about being Black, being an immigrant, and being a Black woman who studies early modern literature. I like that we received **concrete examples and constructive feedback** of what we needed to do with our work in order to get it published. I like that we **received concrete advice** about how to overcome our fears about the publishing process. I like that we received **advice** about which presses to contact. I like that we received **advice about how to structure** our introductions, chapters, conclusions, and indexes. I like that we were taught that we didn't have to divorce ourselves from our inner selves in order to write. Is there anyway, please, that we can do this again? Please? Please?*
- *We could **discuss how the personal intersects with the professional**; we could discuss how institutions and our background training did not always set us up to prepare and **have confidence to succeed in a PCRS project.***
- *I met so many **supportive colleagues**.*
- *We spent some time **talking about how we might balance the pressure to publish** in ways that are legible to the academy and ways that allow us to be our whole selves. I also like that the group was big enough that when a few of us couldn't make a session the conversations were still robust and thoughtful. I absolutely loved **Cord and Jonathan's guidance, mentorship, and care.***
- *I felt that the **institute leaders were great models** of how to move the work forward and give **constructive feedback**. I think they set the tone for the space very well. I also loved learning about my colleagues' projects, that was so exciting and gave me a whole list of things to read!*
- *We were able to read bell hooks together, and really **share and reflect on our work.***
- *Participants were **open to learning from each other**.*

When participants were asked what they wished happened during the Book Institute, some wanted more feedback or more structured feedback while others wanted more meetings or a longer Book Institute experience. Two wished there had been more time to discuss publishing, and one noted wanting different assigned readings.

- *I think maybe there should be **more structured feedback** for the institute. What I mean by this, is that **I started out giving people written feedback each week but I didn't always receive that from others** (a couple didn't give me any feedback at all). I wasn't disappointed by this necessarily but I think it made me unsure about what sort of feedback was expected of me and what would be most useful. I know that everyone is busy and we all had to miss some sessions due to scheduling (myself included). I wonder if maybe a smaller group or the group broken into two or three cohorts could be more effective? I did get great feedback and was really appreciative of it, but we were reading a lot of writing I think if there was a structure (maybe like in conference **seminars** where you read so many papers and are told to give say a 500-word response, or less/more depending, to the work). That way everyone knows the expectations and then it's easier*

to have a piece of feedback to hold onto. I know it's really hard to manage with writing groups as everyone has really busy schedules, so I don't mean this commentary as criticism of the program (I think it was amazing and I really enjoyed my experience!) It was just a thought I had.

- *I wish everyone had had the bandwidth to show up and/or **give feedback on every paper** and every session. I attended every session and gave feedback verbally and/or separately via e-mail to everyone, but I received substantive feedback from less than half of the group.*

- *I had been able to **respond more helpfully to all presentations** (I missed a few and for some I gave written comments but I couldn't do it for a couple)*

- *We could have had **more time for meetings** sometimes. But I know that it was already a challenge to find time slots that most of us could make.*

- *We had **more time**. I wish that we could have met for two-three hours on Fridays. But, people's schedules made that impossible.*

- *That it would **last more than a semester!***

- ***I wish that we had more time together**. I think a year, and two rounds of presenting work would be so helpful and allow us to form an even more solid group. I know that's a ton of work for the coordinators, but it was so helpful even just to read other people's work and discuss it together. Already we've tried to move forward and organize ourselves, and I just don't think one semester is enough time to let a group coalesce, there are a lot of people who don't want to continue unless we have the same structure, some who can't commit, some who would if we used a different stature, and **without the organization and leadership of Cord and Jonathan, it's already fizzling out.** It would be great if we could maintain this on our own and I think it would be possible, but I do think we would have needed more time for this to happen well.*

- *I wish we had spent **more time talking about the publication process**. I think maybe it would have been good to set it up in a way that each workshop was an hour and then there was half and hour reserved for other sorts of group questions.*

- *We [could have] spent **more time discussing the writing and publishing process** and answered the questions we raised in the first few sessions.*

- *That **different assigned readings** were chosen. I didn't find the hooks excerpts helpful.*

Additional Insights

Participants were asked to provide any additional insights they wished to provide. Nine left comments, and all comments contained expressions of gratitude for the institute in general or specifically for the leaders. One participant also mentioned how some papers received more attention during the workshops than others. All comments are listed below.

- *It would be amazing if people could sign up for the 1st book institute more than once--is this possible? I do think a yearlong option would be the most ideal. **Thank you so much to all for the time and the initiative and dedication that an institute like this represents**--I hate to ask for more, it's just so rare something so wonderful is extended to junior faculty...and so many of us had similar stories about being told not to work on*

race/gender/disability etc. by our advisors so this makes the Institute even that much more valuable and rare. Thank you!

- *I would just like to say **thank you to everyone who put such effort into organizing this important community. It felt like home once a week** and I needed that just as much if not more than I needed to ask questions about publishing that I was too insecure and embarrassed to ask my new colleagues.*

- *The **FBI was a life-changing, or life-transformative event for ME**. And, I still cannot believe that we won't be meeting again. Every time we met, Cord and Jonathan demonstrated their profound knowledge of our fields, their scintillating intelligence, their academic rigor, and their compassion. I still don't know how I was able to get into the institute, but I am forever grateful.*

- ***Endless gratitude** to Cord + Jonathan!*

- ***The leaders of the First Book Institute were stellar:** they consistently provided extremely good critique and, if possible, even better support to junior scholars.*

- ***Thanks so much to Drs. Hsy and Whitaker for leading the institute!** I really appreciated their work and learnt a lot from both of them and my colleagues. **I'd encourage anyone in PCRS to join this group.***

- ***I loved it**, from beginning to end!*

- ***Thank you for organizing this and welcoming me.***

- ***Jonathan and Cord were a brilliant team, a well-oiled machine, dedicated leaders, supportive mentors, and generous sources of advice.** They led by example, and their investment in younger scholars was both empowering and moving to witness. … Yes, scheduling is always going to be a nightmare, and everyone is always constrained by conference travel and myriad personal and professional conflicts, and no one can be expected to make it to every session. There's no easy answer to this!! However, **some papers got discussed for over an hour and a half, and others only got about 40 minutes of sustained attention**. And I must note again with frustration that 50% of people whom I gave feedback to did not feel the need to read, attend, or give feedback to me when my turn came, and some people who were absent repeatedly still received a great deal of critical feedback on their work.*

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants of the First Book Institute found out about the Institute via email, social media, an email listserv, the ACMRS website, or the RaceB4Race conference. Participants reported they were drawn to apply to be part of the First Book Institute because they were attracted to the prospect of mentorship and feedback as well as its focus on PCRS and because it was targeted toward first-time book authors. Participants expressed that the leadership, feedback, support, and structure of the First Book Institute helped them to meet their goals as they expected to receive support, feedback, and insight into the publishing process. Most (78%) had their expectations met.

Participants rated their overall experience with the First Book Institute positively. Most also expressed appreciation for the support they received and the ability to share their work and read the work of their peers. All participants found the environment of the Institute welcoming and accepting. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that they can contribute to a supportive cohort of scholars working on PCRS or other aspects of race in the early modern world, recognize the common challenges to PCRS book projects and PCRS scholars writing books, examine factors positively and negatively impacting the writing and publication of their book project and the book projects of others, and recognize the common challenges to the writing and publication of a monograph. Not all agreed they now can evaluate the status of their own book project, design or redesign a strategy to write and publish their book projects or contribute to others' design or redesign strategies, and recognize the steps involved in writing and publishing a monograph.

Recommendations based on participant insights about their experiences in the 2023 First Book Institute, include:

- Encourage all participants to provide structured feedback to everyone even if they did not attend one of the workshop presentations.
- Establish a means to keep the community "alive" even after the Institute ends such as an asynchronous discussion forum for former participants to participate in if they choose.
- Extend support outside of regular Book Institute meetings. Informally check-in with participants periodically during the Institute about their confidence in their abilities related to areas where participants should be growing. For example, in this cohort, not all felt strongly that they can now recognize the steps commonly involved in writing and publishing a monograph or evaluate the status of their own book project. An informal check-in at the midpoint of the program may have helped to identify gaps in participant learning.
- If feasible, provide individualized support from the leaders. For example, work with participants on a one-on-one basis to ensure they are sufficiently supported to meet their goals and challenged to extend their abilities.