

ACMRS First Book Institute 2024 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.

The 2024 RaceB4Race First Book Institute program director is Dr. Patricia Akhimie and was led by Dr. Cord J. Whitaker. The 2024 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.

This evaluation report details the following:

- Program descriptive information
 - Participants
 - Evaluation Methods
- Evaluation findings
 - Initial Perspectives
 - Experiences
- Summary and recommendations

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Participants

Twelve early-career scholars participated in the 2024 First Book Institute. Of the nine participants, six took the evaluation survey for a response rate of 67%.

Evaluation Methods

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

- 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 that 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 evaluation findings, some words in the participant responses are **bolded** within this report. 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 said they heard about the First Book Institute from the RaceB4Race listserv, and one of these three also said they heard about it from a former advisor. One said they heard about the Institute from the ACMRS website, one said they heard about it from ACRMS emails, and one said they heard about it from one of the Institute's organizers.

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 it being focused on pre-modern critical race studies, it being geared toward early career scholars, and the type of guidance it would provide them.

- *The opportunity to meet other BIPOC premodern studies scholars at the **early career stage** and discuss work in progress and navigating academia/publication industry.*
- **Getting guided, compassionate, knowledgeable, and sustainable help from a leader in the field of race in the early modern period, Cord J. Whitaker.** *I was a previous participant in ACMRS's First Book Institute, and it was literally life-changing. So, I really wanted an **opportunity to work with Dr. Whitaker** again. Also, knowing that he would read my manuscript and offer feedback was immensely important.*
- *The fact that it was organized under **RaceB4Race and its mission** drew me to the Institute*
- *That it would be a **collaborative space for early career scholars** working specifically on first books on premodern race.*
- *I use critical race studies as a central framework for my research and book project. I was **motivated to participate in such an important group of interdisciplinary scholars who are collectively working on creative projects to recover lost or erased narratives** from early modern studies.*
- *Since the texts I work with are not always explicitly about race, the idea that the **institute was open to scholars working "broadly" on race was especially appealing to me.***

When asked about what made them think they would not be a good candidate, two participants left comments. One noted, "I was concerned that given my early stage in the preparation of my monograph, the institute would not be a good fit for me. I managed to gain much from the experience." The other said, "[I] wasn't sure what stage of the book project I should be at in order to allow me to get the most out of the program."

Participants were asked to reflect on what they were most nervous about encountering during the Institute and if these things happened. Five responded to this question. One said what they were nervous about was realized. This person felt they did not receive constructive content-level feedback as shown in their comment below.

- *I was **nervous that my work would not be received well**, which is a common worry. But once we began and met everyone, I was also **worried that given our disparate interests and expertise, I would not get the content-level feedback** I was hoping for. The most useful feedback I got was about style and technical matters, which did not seem very meaningful. I think a program where we either 1) focus on ironing out early-stage drafts/ideas, or 2) have an expectation of sharing more polished work -- not both -- would have helped everyone know what to expect and how to engage with each other's work.*

For the other four, they responded that their fears were unfounded as they did not occur as evidenced in the following comments:

- *I was very nervous about my own lack of knowledge, and that people would think that I was not smart enough to be there. I was also nervous about whether I could contribute meaningfully to the other participants' work. However, this Book Institute like the previous cohort was such a supportive and diverse community of scholars that I soon came to see that my fears were groundless. I was able to provide help and knowledge to others, and they were also very beneficial to me. I am so grateful for this community that words can't fully convey my gratitude.*
- **Un-constructive feedback and feeling attacked.** *None of those things happened*
- *I was nervous that my project would meet with pushback, but it was not.*
- *Probably about having my methodologies challenged in ways that are unhelpful or dismissive.*

Personal Goals for the First Book Institute

Five of the six (83%) survey participants said they were able to meet their goals during the First Book Institute. Participants said the deadlines, feedback, and discussions were helpful in assisting them meet their goals. The participants responded with the following comments (below) when asked what components of the Institute helped them to meet their goals:

- *Having the **deadline for distributing and sharing my work helped give me some external accountability** so that I would be sure to complete something to send out. I did not ultimately complete the full chapter, but I did complete a portion of the draft for sharing with the group.*
- ***Reading other people's work and learning to believe in myself and that I have valuable insight to offer to others.** Those exercises of **reading and giving feedback helped me to have confidence in my work.** However, what was most valuable was **Dr. Whitaker's response and written feedback** to my work, as well as to the work of others. Hearing Dr. Whitaker's feedback and suggestions for others demonstrated ways of thinking through my writing.*
- *The Zoom discussions and the **written feedback on my draft** were immensely helpful*
- *The **detailed feedback from both the leader of the institute and my cohort.***
- *The **framing of each workshop with conversations about our own experiences with writing and race in relation to our individual projects; thinking about the relationship between the personal and the public in writing and scholarship; explicit discussions about the differences between a chapter and imagining the book as a whole; explicit conversations about the challenges of working on race & white supremacy; being challenged to provide feedback on work outside of my expertise and receiving feedback from others.***

The one participant who was not able to meet their goal expressed that this was due to unexpected workload changes at their institution.

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 expected to build a **network of other BIPOC early career scholars working in premodern studies**. In addition to **feedback** on my work, I also expected to have **opportunities to talk about things we were all commonly facing in academia and in the publication process**.*
- *I expected to **have my work commented on by others**, and to gain invaluable knowledge and feedback from Dr. Whitaker. My expectations were exceeded.*
- *For myself: **to begin working and thinking about my book** (I'm on my first year on the job)
For others: to **offer meaningful and careful feedback on works in progress***
- *To receive **advice on publishing**, as well as feedback on my chapter.*
- *To **advance and receive feedback** on my project and research.*
- *I hoped that this it would provide a new and much needed **intellectual community**.*

Participants were asked if their expectations about the Book Institute were met. Five of the six (83%) who answered this question **said their expectations were met**. The one who said their expectations were unmet responded with the following:

- *We needed more consistency in meetings. It was **very difficult to have a constantly changing meeting schedule during a very busy semester**. I would have also preferred a bit **more time to read colleagues' work**. Having it sent out on Monday (if that) for a Friday meeting makes it difficult to include dedicated reading/feedback into an already planned schedule. Also, **having firm expectations for work** would have also been helpful. If the expectation is 10-15 pages, and everyone is sending in 20+ pages, it makes it hard to allocate time/energy to offering feedback. Finally, I think a **rotating theme for the program would work well so that every participant has some overlapping work, or a common text to reference**. As it was this time, **the work felt way too varied to feel a sense of cohesion in the group or to offer meaningful feedback on the work itself**.*

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. Three (50%) of the six responding participants rated their experience as 10 out of 10. Two (33%) participants rated their experience as a 9. One (17%) rated their experience as a 4 out of 10.

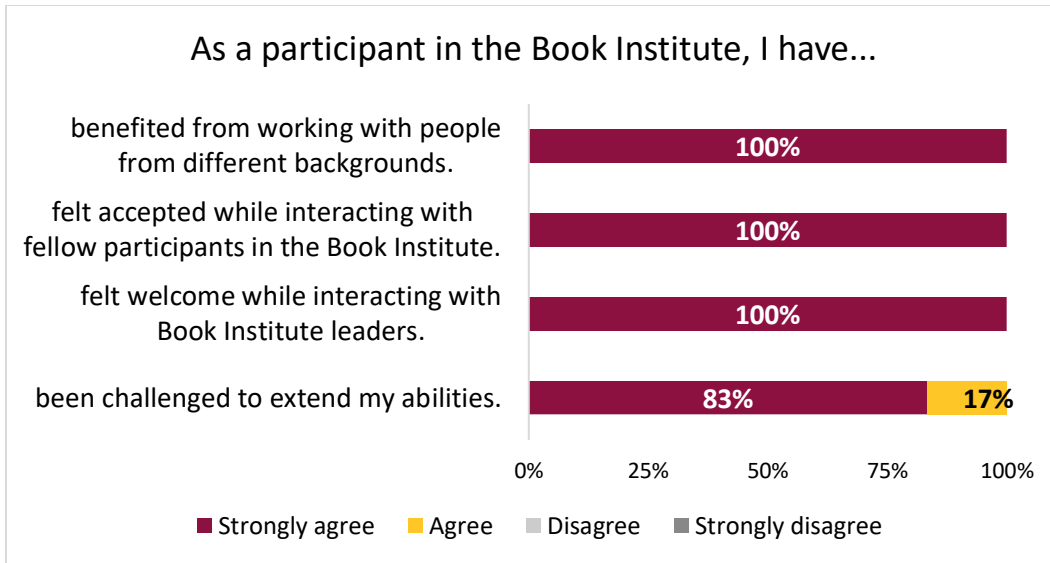
The person who rated their experience as a 4 out of 10 said, “I love that this exists. I just want it to be the best that it can be, especially for pre-tenure faculty trying to juggle many responsibilities while focusing on the book.”

Two of those who rated their experience as a 10 out of 10 explained their rating as follows:

- *Cord did an excellent job of encouraging community and a sense of shared responsibility for the success of the FBI. I enjoyed the balance of meetings focused on providing feedback on each other's writing as well as thinking together about the challenges of working on premodern race and balancing teaching/writing and other responsibilities. The discussion of bell hooks was especially helpful to me in terms of thinking strategically about how and when to insert myself into my writing. I feel more confident about why my research matters and about making an argument for how it is linked to the present. I am also now thinking about new texts and the possibility of an additional chapter for my book, ideas stimulated by the many conversations in the FBI. I do wish that I received more written feedback from other participants, but I understand that this was later in the semester. Overall, this was a great experience and I hope there will be additional opportunities for community building and sharing my research.*
- *This Book Institute is so invaluable. For someone who struggles immensely with writing because of enormous feelings of inadequacy, the Book Institute is a place that you can fail, and yet succeed. You will get feedback from your colleagues that will bolster your self-esteem and your confidence in your writing ability. And because of Dr. Whitaker's guidance, this Book Institute is not just a writing place, but a healing place. I cannot convey how grateful I am to ACMRS for this program, and to Dr. Whitaker for his impeccable leadership. He challenged my preconceived notions of what it means to be a writer, and because of that, I am writing more, and I am very confident now that I can be a writer who will contribute in innovative and meaningful ways to our scholarly conversations about race, sex, and gender during the early modern period. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.*

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 (100%) participants agreed or strongly agreed with each of these statements. All participants strongly agreed they felt welcome and accepted by the leader and participants, and all (100%) strongly agreed they benefitted from working with people from different backgrounds, and 83% (n=5) strongly agreed they felt challenged to extend their abilities as a Book Institute participant.

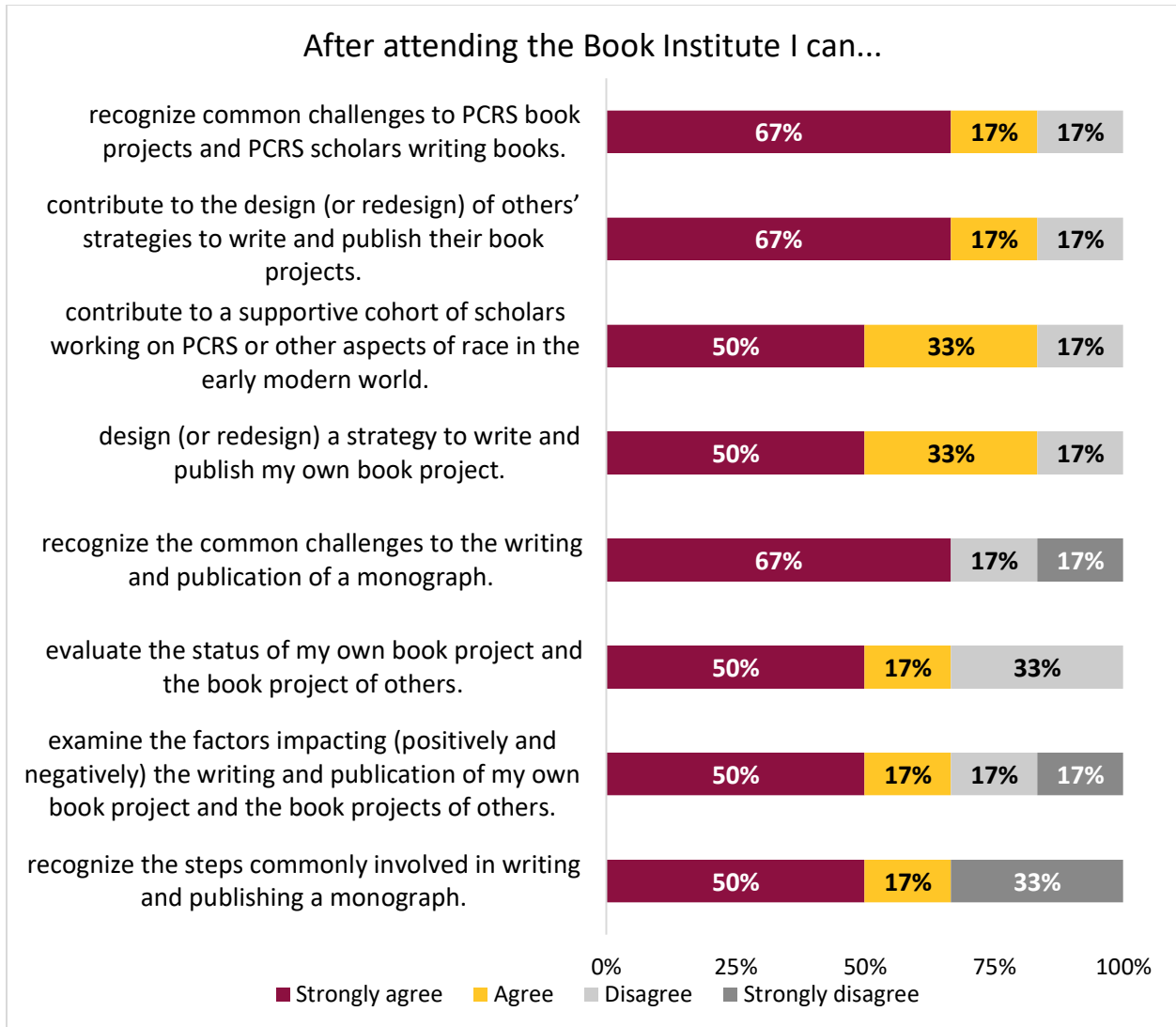


Participant Abilities

Participants rated 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, but there was at least one participant (17%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed with each of the “I can” statements. It should be noted that all disagreement with these statements came from two different survey respondents and the other four all strongly agreed or agreed with each of the “I can” statements. The areas of strongest agreement with at least 83% (n=5) indicating they strongly agreed or agreed included:

- recognize the common challenges to the writing and publication of a monograph.
- contribute to the design (or redesign) of others’ strategies to write and publish their book projects.
- contribute to a supportive cohort of scholars working on PCRS or other aspects of race in the early modern world.
- design (or redesign) a strategy to write and publish my own book project



What Participants Liked and Wished was Different

All survey participants were asked what they liked during the First Book Institute. Five participants left comments on what they liked. The comments about what participants liked commonly focused on the Book Institute being a safe, supportive space, receiving feedback, and including others who were at similar stages with their projects. All comments about what participants liked are below.

- *Everyone was generous and well-intentioned. Everyone was generally at a **similar career stage**. It felt like a **safe space for BIPOC scholars**.*
- *Miss Alexandra **took notes for us and that the sessions were recorded and have been archived!** Thank goodness! I like that Dr. Whitaker invited everyone to give their **feedback** first, and then he gave his feedback. I like that everyone had a different perspective, and that I learnt so meaningfully from everyone even when the focus was not on my work. I like that the Book Institute **worked with our schedule**. I like that Dr. Whitaker focused not only on our scholarly writing per se, but on our whole selves as writers. I truly wish that I could do this every semester or at least once per year!*

- *My leader and the cohort created a **welcoming and productive space**.*
- *We were able to **share our thoughts and anxieties freely**. There was a space to creatively think about our own role, our own personal background that connects to our project to the story we try to tell. To always feel sympathy and support from my peers.*
- *There was an expectation for everyone to contribute to the discussions and that Cord created many **opportunities for us to think put ourselves in the writing, to confront anxieties/concerns about doing so**.*

When participants were asked what they wished happened during the Book Institute, comments varied but generally included wanting more time, more structure, meeting consistency, more time for discussions about publishing, and more information on publishing. The comments were as follows:

- ***More consistency in meetings. More overlap in topics. Clearer expectations for sharing work.***
- *We had **more time**. The time was divvied up humanely; however, I just wanted more time. But that is just me. I don't think others feel the same way.*
- *The one thing I must mention is that I did not receive written comments from every participant of the institute, whereas I gave everyone written feedback. I don't know that policing the process is the answer, but perhaps some **more structure to ensure accountability would be appreciated**.*
- *Offered **more time to discuss** questions around publishing.*
- *There was **more information on the process of publishing itself**.*

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants of the First Book Institute found out about the Institute via an email listserv, the ACMRS website, and advisors. Participants reported they were drawn to apply to be part of the First Book Institute because of its focus on premodern critical race studies and for early career scholars. Participants expressed that accountability, feedback, and discussions helped them to meet their goals during the First Book Institute.

Most participants rated their overall experience with the First Book Institute positively. Most also expressed appreciation for the support they received and safe space the Book Institute afforded them. All participants found the environment of the First Book Institute welcoming and accepting.

Participant ratings of their abilities at the end of the First Book Institute were generally strong with most agreeing or strongly agreeing 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. At least one participant disagreed they could do each of these things, however.

Recommendations based on participant insights about their experiences in the 2024 First Book Institute, include:

- Encourage specific parameters for the feedback process to ensure all participants receive quality feedback.
- Establish as a group whether there is a need for a consistent meeting time.
- Encourage more dialogue about the publishing process as well as how to evaluate the status of book projects.