

16 June 2020

Dear fellow members of the WSA,

In June of 2020, amidst global outrage over the murder of George Floyd and world-wide protests against racism and police brutality, the editors of the *Slayage* reached out to us wondering whether we might be interested in editing a special issue of the journal focusing on race and ethnicity. Specifically, we were asked two things: whether we thought such an issue might be a good idea, and whether we would want to be the editors.

Our response to those editors is the same as it is to you, our WSA community. With regards to the former question—whether we think that such an issue of *Slayage* is a good idea—this is part of a larger conversation the WSA should be not just having but centralizing. In keeping with the same spirit which prompts cities all around the world to be reconsidering statues, logos, and mascots, we want to use this as an opportunity to face some hard truths about how the WSA participates in systemic racism and white supremacy.

We would ask, what would the purpose of publishing a themed issue on race and ethnicity be? Would it be to show that the WSA cares about ending racism and white supremacy? Because if those are the goals, more needs to be done than publishing a single issue of an academic journal. We need to be asking why it might be that race and ethnicity is rarely addressed in the WSA's work and why whiteness is somehow never positioned as raced. Ask why *Slayage* features so few rigorous discussions of interrogating white supremacy in Whedon's works, and ask why *Slayage* has actively worked to uphold white supremacy in the recent past. Ask why there are so few BIPOC in attendance each *Slayage*. Ask why, of those few BIPOC who do attend, so few choose to attend more than once. There are reasons, and WSA leadership needs to pause to consider them.

The truth is, the WSA has a whiteness problem that can't be properly addressed through a special issue alone, and while such an issue would raise discussions worth having, the underlying cultural issues would still be there. The problems lie not only with the whiteness of Whedon's works, but also with the whiteness of Whedon Studies, whether its members or its publications. It lies in the processes of whiteness that invisibilise itself—from the keynote speakers hired, to editorial processes of the journal, to the membership of the WSA, to the topics discussed, to the tone of the discussions.

The following pages frame specific WSA events and our lived experiences that we can draw from as upholding white supremacy. While we are aware that this might be hurtful to hear, we hope that the questions that follow lead all of us to pause and confront the ways in which the WSA is not separate from these systems, and is, in fact, deeply enmeshed in them.

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Many of these issues are ones we have raised previously with the WSA, though we have struggled to have them noticed. Much as we care for the community itself, the

WSA is exclusionary, and it is something we have both struggled to reconcile ourselves with as we see the toll it takes on certain members. Before we see more people fall away, or before we fall away ourselves, we ask once more for this reckoning.

It is important to note that there is a difference in naming problems in Whedon's work (which may sometimes be an issue in itself) and problems within the WSA. On the one hand, the WSA names itself as committed to change, but on the other, it often reproduces the structures it intends to critique. Many of us have been the target of enough overt or unintentional micro-aggression that we know this is a more systemic problem than any single individual. An easy example of this is the WSA's emphasis on kindness. Kindness has long been weaponised as a system of tone policing for people of colour, and it is telling that during several discussions of race and racism, the WSA's emphasis on kindness has been one that penalises those that need this kindness most. Often this is bookended in how one is simply taking something "the wrong way" or "bless your heart" when oppression is named. On the one hand, scholars of colour face this in almost any academic circles of this nature; at the same time, it is deliberately pushing them out the door, whether this is intended or not.

By insisting that everyone be "nice" and constructive with criticism, the WSA fails to leave open space for anger from anyone marginalised whose humanity is being called into question as though it is up for debate. For example, at Slayage in California in 2014, more than one person asked Samira why she was so opposed to reading the Hulk (a white man coded with anger issues) as a person of colour and how his presence in a Kolkata Indian slum (incredibly falsely depicted) wasn't hugely problematic from a cultural/ national/ racial hierarchy perspective. During the same conference, a white woman in the audience asked if people of colour shouldn't be grateful that they were now included in Hollywood, that she saw nothing wrong in most people of colour being demonised by these productions. At each stage it is impossible not to note that the context of politeness within the WSA does not position the racist remark as an infraction, but rather positions the naming of racism as impolite.

During EuroSlayage in 2016, we sat through a paper that compared Nikki Wood's coat to the skin Hercules took from a lion. And when placed in those situations, people of colour have to so carefully frame their responses so as to educate but not offend. Samira noted that it was impossible not to be conscious that she wasn't *allowed* to be obviously angry, even though we had to sit through hearing that, because Whedon Studies prides itself on being nice no matter what. She wasn't allowed to be angry, to be genuinely and visibly hurt by the idea of a Black

woman dehumanised in this manner. But that sort of niceness also allowed those concerns to be dismissed, and the conversation became about the politics of civility in audience comments rather than the racism of equating Black characters with animals and rejoicing in their demise.

When the early draft of the conference report for EuroSlayage was being framed, those issues or the discussion that followed weren't mentioned, despite the provision of a summary of the paper. It did not mention audience pushback at all, nor did it reckon with the racist content of the presentations. Instead it normalised the argument's racism by not finding it worth comment at all. The implicit message communicated by this action was that safe spaces would tolerate racism and never name it as such.

Samira knows this, as she acted as a stand-by reporter to fill in (and therefore was on the email chain before it was published) and had to bring it up again. When pushing back against the erasure of naming racist content, she offered the fact that any young academics reading the WSA conference report to discover if *Slayage* is a safe space for them may see the unchecked racism being touted as scholarship and conclude it is *not* a safe space for them. However, what went unnamed was her own hurt and anger at racist scholarship being enabled yet again alongside of the erasure of her labour—moreover, labour she had provided “nicely” under trying circumstances. Yet again, she had to be constructive when explaining why the dehumanisation of Black women could not be allowed to stand without response, while wondering herself why those that had so willingly admitted that it was wrong would not only dismiss this knowledge, but enable its propagation.

We have to wonder what else might have been allowed to pass had we not been present—in the conference, in the email chain, in this space. Within the WSA, niceness, constructive criticism, and a woman of colour teaching a white woman—all of these failed to account for the woman of colour herself. The person writing up the report within these contexts understood that in that situation, a priority was not to hurt the white presenter's feelings and their learning, but it took no account or priority of the fact that at least three scholars of colour were in the audience of that panel, that people of colour might read this report and be hurt as well, or that they were part of a process of actively erasing the work of a woman of colour defending against the dehumanisation of Black womanhood. Intentional or not, this is white supremacy.

This wasn't facilitating learning; it was being nice to a presenter by dismissing a very carefully framed and non-aggressive point made about their paper using racist comparisons. The question of who people are being nice to within these structures and hierarchies is integral to this. This is the difference for us as well between the single person (the presenter), the group (the audience who did not point this out until a woman of colour hurt by this ideation had to), and the institutional power of the WSA (who were putting out the report while erasing or

defanging that objection). It also made clear who this report was for, and it was not for everyone: it was for white people.

The same panel included a paper on Drusilla and queerness that did not account for how this theorisation of white queerness as described included an extended section on the killing of Kendra, one of the few Black women on the show. Samira noted during the panel that any discussion of this scene solely as empowering erased the racial undertones present (on which there is pre-existing work by Lynne Edwards) and refused to consider the realities of how white queerness in that scene preyed on Black womanhood. She noted that the paper's reading, framed as it was, refused to acknowledge its own raced bias towards whiteness.

At the time, she was assured by both the panelist and those that knew them that this was something they would reconsider. The paper has since been published in *Slayage* without the reconsideration of this aspect, despite both editor and author present at the time having specifically assured Samira that they would take account of her note (an assurance which never resulted in action). In the erasure of work that calls out the dehumanisation of Black women in particular (and people of colour more broadly), in the refusal to reconsider even within the preconditions of "niceness" and constructive criticism, is this not, inevitably, the systems of white supremacy? As the very basic labour of naming racism is erased, at what point could antiracism even begin? How are scholars of colour in these contexts expected to trust that their labour will not be wasted, leading them to acknowledge that the space does not want them, is actively not listening while providing a performance of acknowledgement? Is this not making clear that this space is not for them: a space that does not care that they named dehumanisation and chose to proceed regardless?

We must pause to question: how many people did that paper go through who either did not see this or chose not to address it? How many of them were in that room when racism was named? How many felt like this was something that didn't matter because they had the privilege for this not to impact them personally? Ask as well, what happens when people of colour no longer bother to name these incidents because they number too many and nothing has changed, when they decide they should reserve their strength for somewhere they can be heard, when they choose instead to leave, exhausted and resigned. This is a reality the WSA has to acknowledge and grapple with if it truly plans to engage with the realities of Juneteenth or #BlackLivesMatter, or systemic whiteness.

This is not a single incident. Samira has noted numerous incidents wherein she has pointed out places in papers that require racial analysis during requested peer review, only to have few—if any—of these comments addressed in the final copy. When questioning this, she has been told that it wasn't seen as essential to the paper in its current form. Again, intentional or not, this is

the work of white supremacy. Whiteness is not named in those papers, but exists in its every space: from its contents, to the systems of its production and publication.

We know full well that a defensive response to this will suggest that Samira (or indeed, any scholar of colour) will use this to insist her ideas are added to everything; our response is that this, too is white supremacy in action. There is the implication that her unpaid labour in carefully laying out the very basics of postcolonialism or critical race theory—fields that are vast, complex, and well established—being seen as no more than a mobilisation of her identity rather than a learned and honed academic skill. There is the implication that her unpaid labour in an anonymous peer review that earns her no public acknowledgement can be dismissed simply by the claim of identity. Whether acknowledged or not, this is white supremacy in action. If defensive readers cry reverse racism, we would note that this is not only a false myth but a refusal to see how deeply a refusal to name race is entrenched in white world views. If defensive readers fear this is making things “political,” then we would point out that everything is always already political.

Ask again, how many other authors, peer reviewers, and editors are contextualising race in papers seen as not explicitly about race? How many papers refer to feminism without acknowledging that it’s white feminism being discussed? If we are in a moment acknowledging how deeply race is enmeshed in our everyday, does this not cause us to pause and reconsider?

These are a few examples. We have many. Too many, in fact, for us to easily dismiss as just a single person or a single event. We are entrenched in it, and addressing this entrenchment isn’t easy. And even there, we can see white supremacy at work. Was it not, for a while at least, an inside joke of sorts that “Samira is so cute when she’s angry?” As a result, when Samira has been publicly angry and ranted, people have positioned this as entertaining rather than contextually defensive: a way to articulate hurt while preserving herself within spaces of systemic whiteness. We ask that you pause and consider how often this is something that people of colour have had to do to ensure their inclusion and survival. We ask that you pause and consider how often this notion of entertainment has been used to dismiss the underlying anger and hurt, leaving only the performance for consumption.

As we push for scholars of colour to join the WSA, we need to engage with the realities of what this space means for those people. We are asking younger, less established and less connected scholars to occupy a space wherein speaking up against the status quo carries a variety of punitive measures. We are asking them to shoulder a burden alongside all the other concerns they have. Scholars of colour across a range of fields have noted that speaking against racism has seen them labelled “difficult”, their work less recognised or dismissed, their ability to make and use academic contacts at conferences diminished, and potentially their

own academic joy diminished as well. Forcing oneself through the constant crisis management of white anxiety masquerading as objectivity is exhausting, and it affects academic output. All of these are facts.

It is actively harmful to ask people of colour, or those marginalised in a variety of ways, to have to do the equivalent of education, or of displaying their metaphorical wounds over and over to make evident that these are truths, and many may feel discomfort at the idea of having to do this publicly only to be dismissed or condescended to—which is what has been the majority result so far. Those who do want to change will have to reckon with this as well—that to stand with people of colour, and Black people of marginalised genders in particular, will require that they educate themselves rather than assume that someone hurt by inaction will trust them to address it. This trust is earned, and currently the WSA does not have it.

We raise these issues not only so more people become aware of them, but because we are deeply indebted to and invested in these communities. These are our friends, our peers, and our spaces. We put in the very best parts of ourselves in the hope that we enrich these. But we cannot pretend anymore that these spaces are not harmful and hurtful. It is telling that much of this letter comes from an email that Samira wrote in 2017, tired and willing to accept the destruction of these personal and professional relationships if only to finally name racism and have this pain and anger acknowledged. It is 2020. So little has changed that the email still stands.

The reason we have struggled to articulate this here is not because we do not think people want to be inclusive or that the WSA isn't trying to do the work—quite the opposite—but that inclusivity at the WSA requires work that needs to be a community commitment rather than an opt-in. And as Mary Ellen has worked so hard to point out, even this requires the constant self-conscious work of refusing to frame oneself as a white saviour.

It is hard for us to discuss our experiences of the WSA as a non-inclusive space as this may not necessarily be the case for many, but the many conversations we have had over the years with other members who are variously people of colour, visibly and/ or invisibly disabled, and/ or of marginalised genders, suggest that in fact, we are not alone in feeling this way. We are welcome, yet only to a point, and only insofar as we are willing to conform to the existing exclusionary systems. To have our lives and our needs positioned as optional or the site of a problem is dehumanising. How long can we love a space that won't love us back in our entirety, or does not see our inclusion as necessary?

Though this letter comes only from the two of us, we carry the complexities of our communities with us. Any inclusion of people of colour cannot only open the door to cis abled people of colour of a particular academic background; it must include disabled people of

colour, people of colour of marginalised genders, queer people of colour, poor people of colour, and more. It must include a refusal of anti-blackness at every stage, even within marginalised global communities, and it must contain an acknowledgement of hierarchical complexities within communities of colour (such as caste and indigeneity). It must acknowledge that even people of colour can internalise and propagate oppression, and that their identities do not absolve them of this either. Our work both within and outside of the WSA has always been towards this purpose.

Ignorance in these matters cannot be equated with innocence, just as acknowledging privilege is not the work of addressing inequality. Ignorance is not innocence; ignorance is complicity that has not yet been reckoned with. These are only beginnings. The rest is the work.

Regards,

Mary Ellen Iatropoulos and Samira Nadkarni