

FROM: Lorna Jowett, WSA President and Kristopher Woofter, WSA Vice-President/President-Elect

TO: WSA Board Members, Stacey Abbott, Tanya Cochran, Rhonda Wilcox

RE: Resignation and Support of WSA Dissolution in Light of Structural White Supremacy and Racism/Marginalizing Acts in/by the WSA

Monday, 19 October, 2020

Dear WSA Board Members:

We write this statement to respectfully tender our resignation as officers of the Whedon Studies Association (WSA). As you know, this decision follows a WSA Officers' meeting on Sunday, 18 October, 2020, with WSA Board Members present to address our recommendation that the Whedon Studies Association consider dissolution in light of two recent open letters from WSA members, one by Samira Nadkarni and Mary Ellen Iatropoulos (25 June, 2020), and the second—an email response—by Samira Nadkarni (29 June, 2020), both detailing the structural white supremacy and racism that marginalize WSA members of colour.

In what follows, we outline in some detail our support for dissolution of the WSA, as this issue lies at the crux of our decision to resign. Most of this explanation duplicates the content of our letter to WSA Board Members regarding our position on dissolution of the WSA, and we feel WSA members should have access to our reasoning.

We called the meeting of Sunday, 18 October, 2020, to address whether the Whedon Studies Association, devoted as it is to a sole auteur, could do the work of anti-racist restructuring, particularly given that Whedon is a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual male whose output and influence have shifted over the years from trailblazer to a role far better characterized as mainstream and institutional.

We brought to this meeting a statement (the text that follows) indicating that we find it necessary to reassess the relevance of, and need for, the WSA in the current field of television scholarship; to consider the responsibility of the organization to respond with action to the open letters by Samira and Mary Ellen and the ethics of doing anti-racist (along with anti-ableist, feminist, and queer studies) work with Joss Whedon as the focus of the organization. Our guiding question was: what can we in good conscience do in light of serious charges that the WSA is undergirded by racist structures that affect members of colour profoundly in ways that contradict our goals of inclusivity?

In a discussion on Wednesday, 15 July, 2020, we (Tanya Cochran, WSA Treasurer; Lorna Jowett, and Kristopher Woofter) agreed that to continue the organization under the current structures—which in addition to focusing study on a white artist, also center whiteness systemically in the WSA's two public-facing outlets, the journal *Slayage* and the biennial *Slayage* conferences—would be irresponsible and potentially unethical. To put it differently, the very fact of focusing on a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual male artist means forever relegating queer, race, or feminist scholarship to the margins of critique rather than centering those perspectives. The officers present during this discussion concluded that dissolving the organization and discontinuing the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, responsibly and with the appropriate support to bring closure for members, is the only response by the WSA leadership that would do justice to the statement made by Samira and Mary Ellen that the WSA and

its public-facing scholarly efforts in their current form create an unsafe and unsupportive environment for people of color and other marginalized folks. Because the journal *Slayage* operates independently as an adjunct to the organization, decisions about how it might move forward to address these concerns should, we felt, be left to its editors.

In what follows, we outline in more detail the reasoning behind our decision to resign as well as recommend dissolving the organization.

On the Current Relevance and Purpose of the WSA and “Whedon Studies”

The open letters by Samira and Mary Ellen have challenged us to evaluate the relevance of the WSA and the notion that “Whedon Studies” may now be an anachronism where it once was a radical and necessary force. Some of us have had conversations in recent years about whether the organization, conference, and journal focused on this single artist might have fulfilled their purpose.

It is clear to us (Lorna, Kristopher, and Tanya) that part of what we must reflect upon here is that our own relevance as an organization is tied up with Whedon’s potentially diminishing relevance as a creator as well as emerging allegations about his personal and professional conduct. Whedon’s texts themselves will echo forward, but the idea of “Joss Whedon” as an area of study has run its course. Leaving aside the scholarly relevance of a focus on “Joss Whedon,” this name itself centers whiteness, white artists, and mainstream television production that continually excludes people of color behind and in front of the camera or features them as token presences to supplement a narrative and thematic focus on white protagonists, perspectives, and realities, thus perpetuating whiteness and white supremacy in the media industry and in its representations.

The Ethics of Doing Anti-racist Work: Why a Name Change Isn’t Enough

This last point above raises the question of ethically doing anti-racist work in an organization that is made up of, and run by, an overwhelmingly white group of scholars. Many would say that the WSA has done admirable work in terms of feminist studies, but how many can say that “Joss Whedon” is a critical site for intersectional analyses of race, gender, and class? The open letter by Samira and Mary Ellen identifies ongoing harm caused by both our actions and inaction as an organization, in the journal, and at conferences. The “Sineya Awards”—sponsored and funded by Samira, and itself named for problematic representation of a token Black character who represents the “primitive” first Slayer—was created to address the WSA’s very palpable weaknesses in supporting scholars of color, not just financially, but also emotionally and intellectually. That there are two such awards every conference is a direct response to this centering of whiteness in the WSA, for example, in that it is based on the idea that no person of color should have to stand up on stage alone.

As Samira and Mary Ellen made plain in their original letter, and as Samira indicated in her response to the WSA’s egregious error of forwarding her a racist response to that original letter, the WSA participates not only in systemic racism as an organization, but also perpetuates racism in more direct forms. That these more direct forms were the result of ignorance or bad judgment on the part of the WSA leadership past and present make them no less unconscionable. While the WSA, its conferences, and its publication

have always modeled themselves on principles of inclusion, and of encouraging scholarship on and by racialized minorities, we clearly have not done enough.

We must acknowledge that the WSA has always *seen itself* as inclusive, but that it has not effectively *heard* and uplifted voices of critique and dissent about the image the organization holds of itself.

We must acknowledge that the “sense of chosen family and community” frequently offered as a reason to keep the WSA going is not always and not always felt as inclusive, despite what efforts we have made, and also, significantly, despite generous critical comments over the years upon which we have failed to thoroughly act. Regardless of the genuine desire to create a welcoming ethos, the WSA family has *not* always been welcoming and comfortable for the members who need this feeling of welcome the most.

It is possible that dissolving the organization might seem merely a grand, ceremonial gesture, at best—and a convenient and quick response by a leadership sitting uncomfortably with its white fragility and unwilling to do the work, at worst. Neither is the case from our perspective. We believe that the only appropriate way to acknowledge that the organization is literally *stilled* by these accusations as it is currently structured, by a centralized administration of white scholars devoted to study of a white artist, is to dissolve the WSA.

Regarding the WSA as “Chosen Family”

We believe strongly that our conclusions about dissolution are informed and justified, and that 1) personal, emotional connections to the WSA community and 2) nostalgia regarding the support offered by that community are not sufficient reasons for us to continue the organization, even though they are reasons to continue our friendships. Many members have and likely will express their feelings of camaraderie and chosen family as a reason to continue the organization, but the “we” of Whedon Studies, as Samira and Mary Ellen have pointed out so strikingly, is not felt as inclusive of all members. In other words, the familial bonding experienced by many members of the organization has not extended to every member, particularly those of color, but also potentially members with disabilities, gender non-binary members, and neurodiverse members, among others.

We understand that many will feel that our thoughts do not represent their experience. However, the majority of members of the WSA are not representative of the members most harmed by our current organizational structure and practices. When members of the organization say “we,” we center whiteness, white experience, and white (“color-blind”) scholarship. In institutional terms, the WSA is white: centered upon a white artist, made up almost exclusively of white scholars, organized and run by white scholars, and largely publishing and presenting scholarship that fails to consistently investigate representations of race, whiteness, and white supremacy.

Many members also will cite the WSA as a source of mentorship for their scholarship, and they will be justified in doing so. We do not wish to minimize the important work the organization has done, including for ourselves and our own scholarship and careers. At the same time, this work is not a reason to continue the organization as it stands. Furthermore, as noted, this scholarship is traditionally a marker of centering and centered whiteness in academia and academic organizations. Globally, this historical moment demands that certain institutions and structures be dissolved so that together we can imagine and create new ones rooted from their inception in collective liberation.

It is for these reasons that we fundamentally disagree with a decision to continue the organization. We understand that our statement may alienate some members of the WSA. We respect these differences in perspective, even as we, Lorna and Kristopher, affirm our decision to resign. We have reached these conclusions and formed these suggestions after considerable thought, and out of respect for the organization's years of commitment to scholarship and community.

Sincerely,

Lorna Jowett, WSA President

Kristopher Woofter, WSA Vice-President/President-Elect