

WSA Dissolution Deliberations: Two Excerpts from WSA Board Members' and Officers' Correspondence, October 2020

(See also the resignation letter from Lorna Jowett and Kristopher Woofter, posted separately.)

Emailed comments from Board Member Stacey Abbott:

The thought that keeps coming back to me is that I am unclear what the purpose of the organization is now. Not only in the light of these complaints and fraught discussions (an understatement I know but I can't begin to articulate how to describe this situation) but in the light of what we discussed. The world of television and popular culture was a very different place when we started the organization and the WSA came to represent a place in which to talk about seemingly cutting edge work that was, perhaps, not recognised in other academic venues. The work of Whedon (by him and his collaborators) stood out as distinct and innovative. But as we noted last week he has not produced anything new and, even more importantly, the landscape of television and popular culture has changed so much that what seemed innovative now seems standard. As important, an organization founded on the work/named for a white cisgendered man does now seem anachronistic.

Emailed comments from Past President Cynthia Burkhead, responding, in italics, to words of other officers, in quotations:

“The officers concluded that disbanding 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 minorities and people of color.”

This seems to be like an either/or position rooted in an idea that the WSA either can't be better or doesn't want to be better, and I disagree. Responses by our members to the various emails and social media posts this summer indicate a desire and willingness to work toward all of the goals brought forth from the Samira and Mary Ellen's statement. To not acknowledge that desire and willingness, to not give people an opportunity to demonstrate growth in anti-racist scholarship and minority support, reads to me like an statement on the part of the WSA Leadership that it doesn't believe it's members are capable of that growth. The officers' letter speaks of the mentorship role of the WSA over the years; if we really believe that to be the case, then that mentorship must extend to the whole scholar. Other scholarly groups have faced the same ethical and moral dilemmas, those focusing on white Medieval, Renaissance, and Victorian authors come to mind, but I have seen through my own faculty's scholarly involvement in those groups the kind of work being done that we would all like to see happen in the WSA. I know from my own experience administering a large endowment for Shakespeare events that a major part of that scholarly community is working specifically on issues of race – 5 of the last 6 invited

lectures we have hosted by major scholars have focused on some aspect of race or other minority representation in Shakespeare. These lectures have given our undergraduate and graduate students an interest in investigating these issues, which seems to be what we would like to see in WSA scholarship, it seem disingenuous to say that is the work folks should be doing but then say that closing that space is the only way to deal with the issues.

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Admittedly, Whedon has not produced anything in a while, but we know he has projects in the works. More significantly, we seem to be highlighting the need for a very particular area of Whedon scholarship, that which takes on issues of representation. Additionally, we know that with other authors, time provides an opportunity to discover “stages” of an author’s work (for instance, Yeats’ three very distinct stages), and even if we only look at problems with minority representation, we see an evolution from BtVS to Firefly/Serenity. Do we know that we won’t see further evolution and even innovation in “Nevers”? And I go back to our literature colleagues as comparison to say that at some point Jane Austen may have been innovative, but that certainly stopped, yet scholars still find interesting things to say about her work. To not see a potential for the same from Whedon seems to reduce our work of the last 20 years to a question of overall worthiness.

“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 white supremacy in the media industry and in its representations.”

Yes, it does, but in my opinion if the only folks taking this into consideration are the producers (with dollars as the end game), then nothing will every change. The WSA can’t contribute as a voice for change if it doesn’t exist.

“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.”

By this logic, then any American university (I can’t speak for schools in other countries) that is not an HBC should not ethically be taking up the work of anti-racism???? And by

this logic, then there is an ethical problem with doing feminism in any organization (school, corporation, government) primarily made up and run by white males????

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

Perhaps the problem rests with those of us who have been in leadership, then, and I will take my own responsibility here? There is an alternative to disbanding; we invite our scholars of color to assume the leadership positions (I don't mean nominations and a vote, I mean ask them to take the positions and hand them the mantles of leadership).

“Yet, 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 disband.”

Please see above. I don't see this as an either/or proposition.

“As elected representatives of the organization, we believe that the decisions we make in discussion with the WSA Board Members will be respected by the organization, as long as proper context, clarity, and support are offered to the organization's members in the wake of a decision to disband.”

Perhaps the decisions will be respected, but I'm not confident that disbanding without a vote of the members is ethical. I'm personally terrified of any action taken by elected representatives without considering the will of the electorate.

“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 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.”

This is true, but again, I am having trouble understanding how we can create a space for current or potential members of color, with disabilities, who are gender non-binary, or neurodiverse if we erase the space. To admit that we have not been as welcoming as we should be is to admit that there are scholars wanting to engage in Whedon Studies who have not been welcomed in the way they should be. To disband, it seems to me, ignores their scholarly desires and is akin to saying, “we can't figure out a way to build a wheelchair ramp, so you'll have to take your scholarship elsewhere.” Instead, we should be fighting to get that ramp built.

“We think it important to offer a chance for members to celebrate what was good, but also to acknowledge what was not, and to consider how to move forward in their research and communities as active anti-racist allies of people of color and other marginalized groups.”

Yes, we should, but disbanding would eliminate one community in which members could move forward as “active anti-racist allies of people of color and other marginalized groups”

“Accordingly, we propose the idea of reconceiving SCW9 as a time to process and debrief, guided by supportive anti-racist activist-scholars, through a variety of workshops, training, and discussions on antiracist organizing, pedagogy, scholarship. Beyond the opportunity for debriefing, such activity might inspire new projects, and new collective efforts.”

Yes, but this sounds very much like “we’re going to train you to be better people, but your collective efforts will need to happen elsewhere.”

I hope my responses haven’t sounded too rigid, but I have been in battle mode since August. I’ve had as many as four contingent faculty members in quarantine at a time, with some eventually testing positive for COVID, and my efforts to redress some of the problems are often met by administrators above me with “we just don’t see how we can fix it.” This not reaching for potential fixes is, for me, the most problematic, and that may be reflected in many of my responses above. My own history, which some of you may or may not know of, is one in which reaching for change is the only reason I am here today. And I’m sharing only to put my position here into context. Before John (who is truly a saint), I had been in three very abusive relationships. Not only was I convinced that things couldn’t change, but my “community,” including religious leaders, military superiors, and friends, reinforced that idea tied to the very patriarchal constructs in which it was rooted. My only model of any salvation came from media, where in the 70s and 80s, television was beginning to tackle domestic abuse in its programming. I eventually was able to envision something different for myself, and it was somewhat like clawing my way out the grave. And while it is sorely deficient in representation of race, etc., and often wrong when it does represent, and while I was by that time “safe,” Whedon’s work became a lesson book of sorts to help understand what I had experienced and how I could continue to grow going forward. I know the “Buffy strong female model” discussion seems old to many of us because we’ve lived with it in our research for so long, but in addition to considering the potential for good the WSA may hold for scholars from other marginalized groups if we were to go forward thoughtfully and intentionally, I think we need to continue thinking about the those for whom the “strong female” is perhaps still only a novelty. We cannot and shouldn’t discount now those “testimonials” from our members over the years about how these shows and this community of scholars have helped them in their own personal journeys. There aren’t many Shakespeare or Austen scholars making that claim.