

May 27, 1999

Dear Wiscon Committee Members,

The first thing we'd like to do is thank the committee for the work they're doing to foster a dialogue around race and access. As far as we know, SF3 is the first organization to make a concerted effort to address in a real way the low representation of people of colour in sf. Other conventions usually gloss over diversity without ever wrestling with the more difficult aspects of it. We don't know of any other convention that has taken on that task so forthrightly - and the whole science fiction community can expect to reap the results of these efforts for some time. It makes sense that Wiscon would take this on because Wiscon recognizes that the position of people of color within fandom today parallels the position of women within fandom several years ago: both groups are working to create safe spaces for their own discussions.

A little bit of history about how this all came to pass: In August 1998, Samuel Delany wrote an article in the New York Review of Science Fiction about systemic barriers to people of colour in sf. In it, he called for sf events to provide dedicated space where people of colour could meet and strategize for change. The article caught the attention of Nalo Hopkinson. Nalo's a writer, a black feminist and a Wiscon volunteer. Wiscon's part of her community, so it was the first place she invited to take up Chip's challenge. Debbie Notkin and Jeanne Gomoll responded with understanding, enthusiasm and the will to act. Out of those initial discussions came our small group of longtime--some of us for more than 12 years--Wiscon volunteers of colour. Ian K. Hagemann and Victor Raymond have been involved in fannish communities and are experienced activists around racism, sexism, and homophobia, just to name a few issues. Nalo's spent six years as an arts grant officer dealing with equity and access issues for artists. Also involved in these discussions have been Cecilia Tan and Mary Anne Mohanraj, who are writers, small press publishers and vocal advocates in the realms of gender and sexuality.

We understand that one aspect of the hours of programming about race and access is causing a problem; namely, the brief Sunday focus group for people of colour and our request that that temporary space be for people of colour only to discuss our issues and strategize on ways we might increase our representation in our community. Apparently, there's a chance that the local Equal Rights Commission could see this as exclusion (rather than as the inclusionary activity it is) and could in a worst case scenario endanger SF3's non-profit status. Unfortunately, whether it's withholding women's vote or the race segregation laws that were still in place a few decades ago, the law is not always the same thing as the right thing to do. We're told that the Committee has devised wording that will bridge the gap between the law and the right thing to do. We welcome this language change as an appropriate way to deal with the issue, in view of the pressures of time and planning.

Regardless of the legalities, there may be committee members who have reservations about the appropriateness for a brief time dedicated to discussion by people of colour only. We'd like to address that. Talking about issues of race and access makes everyone uncomfortable. There's a particular expression of that discomfort in the sf community, where we have the hope that race is one of the differences between humans that will cease to matter in our brave new future, and that the best way to hasten that future is to act as though we don't 'see' race. But, as Chip Delany has said, someone who can't see something that threatens his life is not going to be his best ally. Our experience in sf is that when anyone tries to talk about race in a 'mixed' forum (i.e. non-white and white people), everyone hastens to shout down the people who have raised the issue by coming up with every exception to the rule that they can think of. For a really clear illustration of this in action, check out the thread titled "Blacks and Sci-Fi" in rec.arts.sf.written. It is illuminating and fairly depressing how quickly those posting ended up talking about anything but the subject header.

This high level of discomfort squashes dialogue and leaves people feeling that race is still an issue, but it's somehow shameful to even speak about it. As feminists we've had a parallel experience in trying to raise awareness and organize around issues of feminism. Feminism has developed a time-tested way of dealing with such silencing, which is to first take a little private time and discuss the issues amongst ourselves, without the need for constantly allaying the dominant group's anxiety at every step. In a space where we can hear ourselves think for a moment, we can get some clarity on what each other are experiencing, and we can return to the larger group and renew the dialogue there. This is caucusing, and it is not exclusionary. It is in fact a strategy for continuing discussion, not cutting it off. It is an activity in which ideally the whole group participates through stepping back when necessary, and being open to dialogue when asked to. It only becomes exclusionary when that does not happen. Then, people do splinter off entirely because it's the only way they can get anything useful done. Feminist

philosophy around doing equity work has informed our discussions and planning with our liaisons on the committee from the very beginning.

Clearly, there is a need for greater work around issues of race within fandom and sf as a genre. There are a lot of important lessons to be learned from more careful reflection on this issue - and it's been the Wiscon Committee's historical willingness to take on such challenging issues that is another part of the reason why it's not surprising that this came up at Wiscon. During and after the con, we would appreciate hearing from committee members regarding the issues involved in adding a multi-cultural track to Wiscon 23's programming. We all look forward to chatting with con organizers about what problems they see and how they would like to tackle them. We hope that people on the committee will be able to find the time during an already busy con to attend some of the programming that has come out of these discussions and to hear directly what it's sometimes like for us as people of color in this community.

And in the best Wiscon tradition, we would like to leave you with several questions in hopes of furthering the discussion:

Was there a problem, other than the legal concerns? It seems from some of what we've heard that there was indeed something other than those concerns. If so, it would seem to be a mistake to "whitewash" it and not uncover deeper disagreements. How are any such concerns going to be addressed?

What can be learned from this experience so far about what this issue means to people? What sort of collective reflection would the Wiscon Committee like to engage in around the issue?

Is there anything the committee would like us (the signatories of this letter or fans of colour more generally) to do to help them work through the issue?

How can we continue to work creatively with the committee to present and explore these issues in ways which work for the con and also for us -- politically, ethically, legally and harmoniously?

Sincerely yours,



Ian K. Hagemann



Nalo Hopkinson



Mary Anne Mohanraj



Victor Raymond



Cecilia Tan