

THE WISCON CHRONICLES
VOL. 9

The WisCon Chronicles

VOLUME 9

Intersections and Alliances

Edited by
Mary Anne Mohanraj



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The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 9
Intersections and Alliances

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Introduction: Towards a More Welcoming War

Mary Anne Mohanraj

In this volume of the WisCon Chronicles, we find ourselves considering what it means to live at the intersections of various identities, some of them more privileged than others. We ask how we can function as good allies to each other in often challenging situations. We're living through an intense time of social change, and a variety of questions arise as we have these often difficult conversations about feminism, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and more. Among them are questions about what leads to positive social change and how best to effect such change in our communities.

During the past months of soliciting and reading and re-reading, I've often found myself in internal dialogue with the essays, stories, poetry—the issues the authors present here. I hope the following paragraphs offer a contextual framework for understanding the pieces to follow.

Here's what's not in this book: any direct discussion of the most controversial and contentious imbroglios that have plagued speculative fiction in the last few years. No piece directly addresses the specific harassment cases at WisCon, though some come at them sideways, obliquely. None address larger genre conflicts, such as the series of incidents involving the person who calls herself Requires Hate, or the Sad/Rabid Puppies and their effect on the Hugos. I asked various people if they'd be willing to discuss those topics, but in the end, they all refused. Some felt they didn't have time to do the subjects justice, some felt like they didn't understand

events thoroughly enough, some were simply afraid—afraid of what would happen if they said something wrong.

A friend recently said in an online discussion, “Every WisCon I find out that something I was taught to say *last* WisCon is now an unforgivable slur.” (Elliott Mason) We are having a hard time with language these days—ironic, since our fandom’s main concern is talking about stories. We are having a hard time deciding which words are effective, which are hurtful and damaging. Some words, such as “queer,” have shifted from pejoratives to badges of pride and community identity; those who see a younger generation cheerfully using a word that was once hurled at them as a hateful epithet, like a brick to the head, may find it difficult to adapt. It’s not easy, having your natural language stripped away, or feeling like the culture has moved on, leaving you stranded.

Social justice terms have also become more difficult to use, words like “privilege” and “tone.” Recently Robin DeAngelo said:

I think we get tired of certain terms. What I do used to be called “diversity training,” then “cultural competency” and now, “anti-racism.” These terms are really useful for periods of time, but then they get co-opted, and people build all this baggage around them, and you have to come up with new terms or else people won’t engage.

And I think “white privilege” has reached that point. It rocked my world when I first really got it, when I came across Peggy McIntosh. It’s a really powerful start for people. But unfortunately it’s been played so much now that it turns people off.¹

Many people are “turned off” by social justice discussions today, to the extent that some of them use the term SJW, or social justice warrior, pejoratively. Some of my students have

1 <http://www.alternet.org/culture/why-white-people-freak-out-when-theyre-called-out-about-race>

called those discussions “toxic” and see them as something to be avoided entirely. One might argue that much of the force behind some of the more reactionary movements, such as the Sad Puppies, is generated through resistance to what they see as jargon: exclusionary language that reflects an exclusionary liberal elite. Perhaps it’s unsurprising that science fiction and fantasy readers, many of whom, myself included, were something of outcasts in childhood and adolescence, find ourselves sensitive to exclusion.

Many of us are no longer excluded, if we ever were. Many of us are now in less precarious positions, and having finally landed in a position of some stability, we find ourselves reluctant to lose that newfound social status.

As the culture evolves, people who benefitted from the old ways invariably see themselves as victims of change. The world used to fit them like a glove, but it no longer does. Increasingly, they find themselves in unfamiliar situations that feel unfair or even unsafe. Their concerns used to take center stage, but now they must compete with the formerly invisible concerns of others.²

The ways in which we have been disenfranchised (I am brown, female, queer) are always more obvious to us than the ways in which we are privileged (I am upper-middle-class, mostly able-bodied, young-ish, cisgendered). Even when we are trained in looking at the world through a social justice lens (and that training is long and ever-ongoing), keeping our various privileges in mind can be so hard. And for those of us who have been engaging in these conversations for twenty years or more, it’s tough to remember that there are always new people coming into the argument, people who have just walked in the door.

2 <http://weeklysift.com/2012/09/10/the-distress-of-the-privileged/>

Even if you begin to suspect that your privileged background has led you to make an error in judgement, that you may, in fact, have hurt someone with your words (or actions), it's particularly hard for most people to walk back from a publicly held position, especially if they originally stated it with some vigor. I've known a few people who have done it with grace, but it isn't easy. And when you're being called out in public, there's *such* a temptation to dig in your heels.

This is where I start thinking about what makes an effective community intervention. This is where I wish I knew some people well enough to pick up a phone. When John Scalzi discovered RaceFail '09, he initially dismissed those discussions as a complete waste of time — until two people he knew and trusted (Justine Larbalestier and Tempest Bradford) contacted him directly and convinced him that he was wrong.³

In 2010, I was on a convention panel where I said the n-word. This is not a word that comes naturally to me. I was trying to be academic as I defined different types of racism, perhaps trying a bit too hard, overcompensating for my own discomfort, and I said the word out loud, rather than using the euphemism. As soon as I said the word, in the midst of a definition of racism, I winced internally, and wished I'd chosen a different phrasing—I didn't need to actually say it to make my point. And then an audience member, a black woman, raised her hand and said that she understood that I'd used it as an example, but the use of racial slurs made her deeply uncomfortable, regardless of the circumstances.⁴

Ironically, the panel was called "The Language of Fail" and was *about* how we handle it when we say objectionable things in public. When she called me out, I agreed with her assessment, but I was also confused and embarrassed and

3 <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2009/03/11/walking-myself-back/>

4 My blog entry from that day, where I discuss that word and appropriate usage in more detail: http://www.mamohanraj.com/journal/show-entry.php?Entry_ID=5527

defensive enough that my initial response was mostly incoherent. I think my brain was freaking out that “oh-my-god-a-black-woman-thinks-I’m-a-racist.” Which is actually not what she said at all — she was pointing out that something I’d said was problematic, but she wasn’t making any accusation against me as a person. It was hard to feel the truth of that in the moment, though.

The panel moderator thanked her and redirected to another commenter, which I appreciated—it helps having a moment to think when you’re under the spotlight and have screwed up. But a few minutes later I took back the mic, when I’d had the chance to blink back my humiliated tears and think about what I’d said. I said that I’d messed up, and I was *really* sorry.

Recently, I was hosting a political discussion on my Facebook wall. Someone wandered in, someone who has posted there before, but whom I don’t know in person. As an author, being in contact with my readers is important to me, so I use Facebook in a very public way; I accept most friend requests initially and only delete people who cause trouble. As the day went on, he posted and posted and posted a whole host of tired, reactionary, bingo-card comments, the kinds of comments that tend to show up over and over again when someone is new to social justice conversations.

A friend asked me, somewhat outraged, if we really *had* to have 101-level conversations on my Facebook wall. She is used to my hosting more advanced conversations around social justice issues, involving people who know what I mean when I refer to “bingo-card” comments,⁵ or “the tone argument,”⁶ people who have seen the standard reflexive comments over and over again. Many of them are, understandably, tired of having that

5 http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Bingo_card

6 http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Tone_argument

conversation, tired of bearing the responsibility to educate. They frequently say, “being an ally means educating yourself.”

And I would agree that no one should bear the responsibility to educate (outside an academic or parental context)—certainly those who are already socially battered shouldn’t be expected to educate the more fortunate. But educating yourself isn’t easy, and the process is made infinitely easier if there is someone willing to hold your hand through the process. For that moment on my wall, I had both the energy and the time; I was willing to be a guide for that new-to-these-conversations individual. On another day, I might not be able to.

I’ve been involved in social justice conversations for a decade now, since the day in my late 20s when two new friends (one white, one black) sat me down and gently explained to me just why some of the things I’d been saying were a mite... problematic. It took years for what they were saying to really penetrate, even though I had no intent to be offensive. And today, though I would like to be an ally to trans folk, to people with disabilities, to working-class people, I still have so much to learn before I am even minimally educated on their issues. I try not to use the problematic words, the ones seen as pejoratives, because that is relatively simple (though even there, I forget, and of course, the problematic words keep changing). I try to use preferred pronouns (and again, I forget, over and over, hurting my friends). I have a stack of recommended reading to get through, books which sit on my shelf, along with all the other books. Someday.

I will misstep. I do and will make mistakes. And being called out on it is humiliating, but that is not sufficient reason to withdraw from the conversation. I shouldn’t have to—no one should have to. I’d like us all to think about what kind of conversations we want to have. What kind of conversations we demand. Cory Doctorow asked me recently about how we get to a better place in these discussions. We had been arguing politely but vehemently, and had gathered a small circle

of listeners. When he asked, I said, “Like this.” Gesturing with my hands, inviting the others into the circle of conversation. We make change like *this*, by talking about the issues and talking about *how* we talk about the issues.

Many of us were raised to be polite, to be civil, to be so almost to the exclusion of everything else. Yet making headway in social change is incredibly difficult if one is only civil.

Privileged people claim that if only marginalized people would ask politely for social change, it would be granted, [yet even] the most measured, dispassionate request for social change to benefit marginalized people is by definition uncivil, transgressive, and impolite, because it’s asking to subvert the bounds of “polite” interaction. (Kat Tanaka Okopnik)

I would add that even polite requests for social change are often *perceived* to be much more aggressive than the words actually reflect.

Note that the word “civil” is connected to “civilized,” and both of those are put in opposition to “barbaric”—as someone who teaches post-colonial literature, I’d be careful of whom we call barbaric, and why. Words like barbaric and childish are used to reduce the Other, to strip people of their humanity—it is easier to justify continuing to abuse people who don’t have full human status, or at least continuing to overlook (or even enforce) their subordinate social situation. It becomes easier to claim that their disenfranchisement doesn’t matter that much, that they shouldn’t disturb the social order, shouldn’t rock the boat.

Sometimes, you need to get angry. You get angry for yourself, because bottling that earned anger up can be poisonous, a cancer eating you from the inside out. You express yourself loudly and angrily in order to get people’s attention, to break them out of their socialized ruts.

There's a distinction between an atmosphere where people who disagree can still be pleasant toward each other and even be friends and an atmosphere in which you ignore things a person does or says that are actively hurtful to you or the people you know in order to get along/not rock the boat/are scared that speaking up will get you ostracized personally or professionally/would put you in real physical danger. (K. Tempest Bradford)

People often reference Dr. Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi as examples of non-violent protest—but both men were clearly angry, even furious, as you can see in their speeches and actions. When Gandhi sat on a rooftop, starving himself to death in full sight of the city, in protest of the erupting ethnic conflict, that was not some polite gesture. When he took his people on the Salt March, to fall under British fire and be dragged out of the street so that others could keep marching to the sea, that was a deliberately angry, visible move, meant to be seen on the world stage, meant to shame the British into leaving India. Those were intensely provoking actions, and as much a “calling out” as any angry social justice warrior might invoke today.

A subset of people seem to genuinely feel that anti-oppression work around language, depictions, etc., is, in itself, a form of censorship, ideological policing to be fought at all costs. They deny that racist/sexist/etc. language is part of the same system as more overt racism/sexism (such as separate lunch counters, or paying women lower wages). So even folks who were and are ardent progressives on overt social justice issues—to the extent of putting themselves and their careers at risk to fight such battles in the past—don't see the language aspects as being important. Or even if they do think language matters, they think the danger of groupthink (etc.) is more significant.

Some people see what's happened in the last several years regarding RaceFail, Elizabeth Moon and the WisCon GOH situation, and other such incidents as something of a “witch hunt”—a small group of extremist leftists who are very loud, who are shouting down the moderate and reasonable center. They see it as leading to a climate of fear, where regular, reasonable people are now afraid to speak freely for fear of being labelled as sexist or racist or some other-ist, with the consequence of the internet falling on their heads.

An internet pile-on is a terrible thing and can escalate very quickly. If even a single critical comment (however accurate) stings, brings tears to the eyes, how much worse must it be to have hundreds, thousands of critical comments hurled at you? If we are committed to social justice, it is only fair, only *just*, that when we stand in the role of critic, we try to manage our reactions, to keep our responses proportionate. The internet magnifies criticism, often quickly escalating it beyond all reason. Death threats and doxxing are never okay.

Yet it is not just those extreme responses that we fear—we fear any criticism at all. If we say something that someone calls out as racist, for example, we tend to respond emotionally as if we've been accused of joining the KKK, of burning crosses on the lawn and being one step away from lynching. We need to de-escalate our own reactions if we're to have these conversations at all. We need to learn how to accept the criticism, experience the emotion of embarrassment or even shame, and then move on from it. If you can see and agree that you've done something hurtful, then apologize for it. It's not easy to apologize for a misstep—but it is possible. It gets easier every time. And if you can't see that you've been hurtful, that you've done damage, but people are insisting that you have—at least consider the possibility that they may be right, and that you may want to take some time to think about it.

(With my students, I've compared it to having a booger hanging from your nose—if you did, wouldn't you want a

friend to point it out, so you could clean yourself up? Embarrassing in the moment, but far worse to walk around with that hanging off your face. On the same theme, Jay Smooth has a great short video, “How to Tell Someone That Something They Said Sounds Racist,” which he expanded into an even better TED talk.⁷ It’s not the end of the world if someone tells you you’ve said something racist; Smooth wants you to internalize the understanding that saying something racist doesn’t mean you *are* a racist.)

Many of us have found second homes in various communities—science fiction, queer activism, etc. Sometimes our entire social network is based on those communities, and the thought of being cast out is, understandably, terrifying. No one should need to fear that a single public gaffe will result in a witchhunt.

One thing we can do to make these conversations easier for our communities, to make progress easier, is to lower the stakes. To build (and re-build, as needed) communities that trust each other, that give people second and yes, third chances, if they are willing to actually engage with the issues and to apologize when they get things wrong. We will all get things wrong. We need to de-escalate in both directions—learning to admit our mistakes and apologize, but also learning how to call people out appropriately, without demonizing them or diminishing their humanity. We are all in this mess together.

In the end, I don’t want to say that *this* or *that* is the correct way to talk about these issues. When I spoke with Cory at the convention, we managed to find a productive place to disagree, one that might lead to agreement in the end. The conversation could easily have gone differently, could have ended in anger and frustration and walking away. And that might have been productive too, eventually.

7 “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>

In the end, we'll need a diversity of tactics⁸ to enact lasting change; each tactic will successfully speak to some people (some of the time) and not to others. Sometimes "civil" discourse, i.e., calm and rational argument demonstrating the worth of our position, will prevail. Sometimes anger will shock the reader into openness and out of entrenched, unconsidered positions. Sometimes personal stories will move the listener to tears, will let them understand the Other's pain with their hearts. Sometimes listening and not talking is the tactic that matters most.

The spear in the Other's heart is the spear in your Own:
You are He. (Surak of Vulcan)

The poet Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha talks about how making space physically accessible is an act of love for our communities.⁹ That applies to our words as well; when we can, when we have the mental fortitude and the energy for it, we should try to be gentle with each other, to advocate for social change from a space of respect and affection and even love. Note that I am not asking for "civil" discourse, or even politeness. Sometimes it is necessary to say things that are uncomfortable, to actively provoke discomfort, and even to do so loudly and angrily. But speaking out of love makes a difference.

"Civility"—in the sense of *an avoidance of discomfort*—is pretense, is the enemy of love; choosing lack of fuss over connection with each other is a failure of love, and fully going after connection with each other, fully believing in each other, may look sometimes gentle and sometimes playful and sometimes furious, but never loses sight of the Other's humanity—no, not

8 Interesting piece re: diversity of tactics, in the context of the WTO protests in Seattle: (<http://amorystarr.com/this-is-what-democracy-looks-like-letter-to-the-editor/>)

9 <http://creatingcollectiveaccess.wordpress.com/making-space-accessible-is-an-act-of-love-for-our-communities/>.

even *that* Other, the one whose humanity you're most justified in denying. (Benjamin Rosenbaum)

When I look at my colleagues' work in a writing workshop, I try to be generous in my interpretations, even if I can't immediately see anything worthwhile in the work. By initially assuming value, treating the writing seriously (and treating them seriously as writers), I often find the worth they intended, the ideas that might not have made it onto the page. Similarly, by acting and speaking as if I'm addressing an honored opponent who might someday be a friend (or who may be one already, in fact), I have a better chance at building bridges across chasms of misunderstanding.

That's what I hope the pieces in this book offer. Some are more academic, some more personal. Some are, seemingly, at odds with one another. Some approach their subject matter through poetry or fiction. A few are angry. What I think they all have in common is that they are honest, and open, and the authors are doing their best to reach out with their truth, hopeful for an open, respectful reading on the other side.

I hope they speak to you.

Mary Anne Mohanraj is author of *Bodies in Motion* (HarperCollins), *The Stars Change* (Circlet Press), and eleven other titles. *Bodies in Motion* was a finalist for the Asian American Book Awards, a *USA Today* Notable Book, and has been translated into six languages. *The Stars Change* is a science fiction novella and finalist for the Lambda, Rainbow, and Bisexual Book Awards. Previous titles include *Aqua Erotica*, *Wet*, *Kathryn in the City*, *The Classics Professor*, *The Best of Strange Horizons*, *Without a Map*, *The Poet's Journey*, and *A Taste of Serendib* (a Sri Lankan cookbook). Mohanraj founded the Hugo-nominated magazine *Strange Horizons* and was Guest of Honor at WisCon 2010. She serves as Executive Director of the Speculative Literature Foundation (speclit.org), has taught at the Clarion SF/F workshop, and is Clinical Assistant Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

*Hello babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer
and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded.
On the outside, babies, you've got a hundred years
here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies —
God damn it, you've got to be kind.*

— Kurt Vonnegut

N.K. Jemisin

WisCon 38 Guest of Honor Speech¹

Thanks to all the WisCon volunteers, members, and other supporters, who have given me the opportunity to speak to you now.

Trigger warning: I'm going to refer to rape, harassment, racism, and other forms of bigotry and abuse in this speech. Also, profanity warning. That's sort of standard with me.

I'm going to start this off with a quote from Chip Delany, writing in the essay "Racism and Science Fiction," which was published in NYRSF in 1998. It's online, you can look it up.

Since I began to publish in 1962, I have often been asked, by people of all colors, what my experience of racial prejudice in the science fiction field has been. Has it been nonexistent? By no means: It was definitely there. A child of the political protests of the '50s and '60s, I've frequently said to people who asked that question: As long as there are only one, two, or a handful of us, however, I presume in a field such as science fiction, where many of its writers come out of the liberal-Jewish tradition, prejudice will most likely remain a slight force—until, say, black writers start to number thirteen, fifteen, twenty percent of the total. At that point, where the competition might be perceived as having some economic heft, chances are we will have as much racism and prejudice here as in any other field.

1 Online at <http://nkjemisin.com/2014/05/wiscon-38-guest-of-honor-speech/> and the Continuum speech at <http://nkjemisin.com/2013/06/continuum-goh-speech/>

We are still a long way away from such statistics.
But we are certainly moving closer.

I'm tempted to just stop there, drop the mic, and walk off-stage, point made. Chip's a hard act to follow.

But it has been almost twenty years since his prophetic announcement, and in that time all of society—not just the microcosm of SFF—has ratcheted toward that critical, threatening mass in which people who are not white and not male achieve positions of note. And indeed we have seen science fiction and fantasy authors and editors and film directors and game developers become much, much more explicit and hostile in their bigotry. We've seen that bigotry directed not just toward black authors but authors of all races other than white; not just along the racial continuum but the axes of gender, sexual orientation, nationality, class, and so on. We've seen it aimed by publishers and book buyers and reviewers and con organizers toward readers, in the form of every whitewashed book cover, every “those people don't matter” statement, and every all-white, mostly-male BookCon presenters' slate. Like Chip said, this stuff has always been here. It's just more intense, and more violent, now that the bigots feel threatened.

And it is still here. I've come to realize just how premature I was in calling for a reconciliation in the SFF genres last year, when I gave my Guest of Honor speech at the 9th Continuum convention in Australia.

For those of you who don't stay on top of the latest news in the genre, let me recap what happened after that speech: I was textually assaulted by a bigot who decided to call me a “half-savage” among other things. (Whoops, sorry; he calls himself an “anti-equalitarian,” because why use a twelve-cent word when you can come up with a \$2 word for the same thing? Anyway.) He did this via the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's official Twitter feed, which meant that

he was using the organization as the tool for a personalized, racist, sexist attack; because of this he was later expelled from the organization. He was just the inciting incident, though; the really interesting thing is what surrounded this whole affair. I got the expected rape and death threats from this man's supporters and others, which I duly reported to various authorities, for whatever good that did. During the month or so that it took SFWA to figure out what it wanted to do with this guy, a SFWA officer sat on the formal complaint I'd submitted because she thought I had "sent it in anger" and that I might not be aware of the consequences of sending something like that to the Board. A SFWA affiliate member posted a call for civility on his website; in the process he called me "an Omarosa" and a "drama queen," but of course he didn't mean those in a racialized or gendered way. In a semi-secret unofficial SFWA forum there was intense debate—involving former SFWA presidents and officers, and people who weren't members at all—about why it was desperately important that SFWA retain its harassers and assaulters, no matter how many members they drove off, because their ability to say whatever they wanted was more important than everyone's ability to function in genre workspaces, and SFWA's ability to exist as a professional association.

Let me be clear: *all* of these were racist and sexist attacks, not just one on the SFWA Twitter feed. And let me emphasize that I am by no means the only woman or person of color who's been targeted by threats, slurs, and the intentional effort to create a hostile environment in our most public spaces. People notice what happens to me because for better or worse I've achieved a high-enough profile to make the attacks more visible. But I suspect every person in this room who isn't a straight white male has been on the receiving end of something like this—aggressions micro and macro. Concerted campaigns of "you don't belong here."

This is why I say I was premature in calling for a reconciliation. Reconciliations are for *after* the violence has ended. In South Africa the Truth & Reconciliation Commission came after apartheid's end; in Rwanda it started after the genocide stopped; in Australia reconciliation began after its indigenous people stopped being classified as "fauna" by its government. Reconciliation is a part of the healing process, but how can there be healing when the wounds are still being inflicted? How can we begin to talk about healing when all the perpetrators have to do is toss out dogwhistles and disclaimers of evil intent to pretend they've done no harm?

(Incidentally: Mr. Various Diseases, Mr. Civility, and Misses and Misses Free Speech At All Costs, if you represent the civilization to which I'm supposed to aspire, then I am **all** savage, and damned proud of it. You may collectively kiss my black ass.)

Maybe you think I'm using hyperbole here, when I describe the bigotry of the SFF genres as "violence." Maybe I am using hyperbole—but I don't know what else to call it. SFF are dedicated to the exploration of the future and myth and history. Dreams, if you want to frame it that way. Yet the enforced SWM dominance of these genres means that the dreams of whole groups of people have been obliterated from the Zeitgeist. And it's not as if those dreams don't exist. They're out there, in spades; everyone who dreams is capable of participating in these genres. But many have been forcibly barred from entry, tormented and reeducated until they serve the status quo. Their interests have been confined within creative ghettos, allowed out only in proscribed circumstances and limited numbers. When they do appear, they are expected to show their pass and wear their badge: "Look, this is an anthology of NATIVE AMERICAN ANCIENT WISDOM from back when they existed! Put a kachina on the cover or it can't be published. No, no, don't put an actual Navajo on the cover, what, are you crazy? We want the book to sell. That person

looks too white, anyway, are you sure they aren't lying about being an Indian? What the hell is a Diné? What do you mean you're Inuit?"

But the violence that has been done is more than metaphorical or thematic. Careers have been strangled at birth. Identities have been raped—and I use that word intentionally, not metaphorically. What else to call it when a fan's real name is stripped of its pseudonym, her life probed for data and details until she gets phone calls at her home and workplace threatening her career, her body, and her family? (I don't even need to name a specific example of this; it's happened too often, to too many people.) Whole subgenres like magic realism and YA have been racially and sexually profiled, with discrimination based on that profiling so normalized as to be nearly invisible. How many of you have heard that epic fantasy or video games set in medieval Europe need not include people of color because there weren't any? I love the Medieval PoC blog for introducing simple visual evidence of how people like me were systematically and literally excised from history. The result is a fantasy readership that will defend to the death the idea that dragons belong and Those People don't.

Incidentally, the person who runs the Medieval PoC blog estimates she has received something on the order of 30 death threats in recent months.

And let's talk about the threats—including the ones I'm likely to get for this speech. The harassment. The rapes. The child abuse. Let's talk about how many conventions have been forced to use disturbingly careful language to basically say, Don't assault people. Let's talk about how much push-back statements like that have gotten from people whining, "Aw, c'mon, can't I assault someone just a little?"

Worst of all, the violence has at this point become self-perpetuating. I can't tell you how many times I was told, with great vehemence and hostility, that there was no chance of

me having a career in SFF—by other people of color. Yeine, the protagonist of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, was almost a white man because I listened to some of what these people were saying. (Imagine if I'd listened to all of it.)

I have no idea what to do about all this. Just keep doing what I've been doing, I guess—just write, and try to improve my writing, and publish, and try to stay published. Every few months, pause to deal with some bigot's bullshit. Then get back to writing. For the first time in my life I was diagnosed with high blood pressure earlier this year. It's back down to normal, now, but bigotry kills, you know. Gotta be more careful of my physical and psychological health. Gotta survive. Because that's all anyone can do, if we're ever to make it to the point that reconciliation is possible. We aren't there yet.

There are some signs of hope, I guess: SFWA did throw that one bigot out, though plenty more remain. Chip Delany's been honored as a SFWA Grandmaster some fifty years after one of his novels was rejected for serialization in *Analog* because its editors didn't think anyone could relate to a black protagonist. WisCon invited me here to be one of its Guests of Honor, five years after I ragequit the concom over the Elizabeth Moon affair. We are talking about what's happening. We are fighting back. But I am desperately afraid that Delany's prediction will continue to prove true, and that the violence will escalate as more of us step up and demand that our contributions be recognized, our personhood respected, our presence acknowledged. If that's the case, then we haven't seen the worst of it yet. And we need to prepare.

So. If they think we are a threat? Let's give them a threat. They want to call us savages? Let's show them exactly what that means.

Arm yourselves. Go to panels at WisCon and claim the knowledge and language that will be your weapons. Go to sources of additional knowledge for fresh ammunition—histories and analyses of the genre by people who see beyond

the status quo, our genre elders, new sources of knowledge like “revisionist” scholarship instead of the bullshit we all learned in school. Find support groups of like-minded souls; these are your comrades-in-arms, and you will need their strength. Don’t try to do this alone. When you’re injured, seek help; I’ve got a great list of CBT therapists, for any of you in the New York area. Exercise to stay strong, if you can; defend what health you have, if you can’t. And from here on, wherever you see bigotry in the genre? Attack it. Don’t wait for it to come directly at you; attack it even if it’s hitting another group. If you won’t ride or die for anyone else, how can you expect them to ride or die for you? Understand that there are people in this genre who hate you, and who do not want you here, and who will hurt you if they can. Do not tolerate their intolerance. Don’t be “fair and balanced.” Tell them they’re unwelcome. Make them uncomfortable. Shout them down. Kick them out. Fucking **fight**.

And maybe one day, when the fighting’s done, then we can heal. On that day, all of us will dream freely, at last.

N. K. Jemisin is a Brooklyn author whose works have been nominated for the Hugo, the World Fantasy Award, and the Nebula, and have won the Locus Award. Her new novel, *The Fifth Season*, comes out from Orbit in August 2015. Her website is nkjemisin.com.

Hiromi Goto

WisCon 38 Guest of Honor Speech¹

I would like to acknowledge the Ho-Chunk and Dakota Sioux Nations and their traditional lands. I am a guest, here, and I am grateful. Thank you, to the WisCon community and committee members, who have invited me as a guest of honor. I am deeply touched and so very chuffed the glow will travel to the far reaches of the outer universe when I leave this earthly plane with my Tiptree noion. Thank you, to my partner, Dana Putnam, whose love and support sees me through thick and thin, who reads all of my first drafts and provides thoughtful feedback and is willing to embark upon all manner of conversations including what would happen to our relationship if I turned into a cow. Gratitude to Kafryn Lieder who has been my WisCon liaison and has carefully made all the arrangements so that Dana and I arrived here comfortably. And deep gratitude to the many, many volunteers who have worked so hard, so generously, to make this Con happen every year. Greetings, to fellow guest of honor, Nora K. Jemisin, to everyone here; writers, readers, scholars, feminists, allies, badasses. Yoroshiku onegai shimasu.

Story is what has brought me here, today. Story is what has brought you here. We are alike and very unlike in many, many ways. Our bodies, our genders, our sexuality, cultural and historical backgrounds, class, faith, atheism, migration, immigration, colonization have had us experiencing our

1 Reprinted from Hiromi's blogpost here: <http://www.hiromigoto.com/wiscon38-guest-of-honour-speech/> The speech has also been reprinted in slightly revise form in *Ricepaper Magazine*, Issue 19.4 Winter 2014.

lives and our sense of place (if not home) in distinct and particular ways. These differences, at times, can divide us. These differences can be used against us to keep us divided. But here we find ourselves. Look around you. The faces of friends and the faces of strangers. We came here because of story. There is much power in story.

When I had my first nervous breakdown (I've only had the one, but having one when I thought I never would has opened up the possibility that I may have more, although let-the-spirits-see-me-through-the-rest-of-my-life-without-a-second-one!), I finally got into low-budget subsidized counseling after a year on the wait list. I have no true objective sense of what I'm like as a client. (Am I a client? Not a customer.... I wouldn't call myself a patient. Impatient, maybe.) Probably I was stiff and rather reserved. I spoke like Spock for several months. Why do you talk like that? My counselor once asked me. Like what? I said.

During one of our sessions I mentioned how I was very upset with someone who had called me controlling. I don't have control issues, I claimed. No more than anyone else, I amended.

I see a lot of artists, my counselor said. Artists and writers have to control their medium, don't they? she said.

Spock changed the subject.

Numerous years have passed since that exchange, and I can now concede that in writing stories I control what goes into them. At the same time, I'm informed by the world around me, and my first readers and editors have significant influence during the editing stage of the publishing process. Once the book is published, I have no control over how my stories are read. I can only hope that the content and the techniques I used (a form of control) has rendered a story that is near to what I had intended.

The best of stories I have read have led me to places I would not have journeyed on my own. Trapped within my own subjective reality, I'm often confounded by the limits of

my own thinking. I would like to be able to surprise myself, but I rarely do. I'm always utterly aware of what I think, if not why, and the banality of my own patterns can fill me with dismay. Of course I experience wonder in my engagements with other people, or in my interactions with nature or art, or music. But my own consciousness can begin to sound like Marvin the Paranoid Android. Not so much because I have the brain the size of a planet, but because I'm trapped within my own conscious self-consciousness.

What can a body do?

We can read....

Stories are powerful devices. And like all powerful devices they are capable of doing great harm as well as great good. Traditionally published fiction in North America has been predominantly representational fiction. The stories are recreations of known or recognizable elements in our world, such as people, animals, plant-life, etc. in an environment be it urban, rural, or "wild," in some form of interaction that is relational. Science fiction, fantasy, and horror may bring in elements that are imagined, or yet to be invented or discovered, etc. However, the narratives are still informed by a world experienced through a human filter, and, often, the introduction of the fantastic can be a way of better understanding the existing workings and relationships with the experiential world of that moment. The best of science fiction and fantasy can cast a kind of bending light. We see the familiar in unfamiliar ways. We see the unfamiliar in familiar ways.

Writing story is the act of inscribing a specific vision. But in inscribing the specific story she'd like to share, the writer exerts her control. In doing so she eliminates the possibilities of other inclusions. So writing stories can be, simultaneously, an act of creating as well as an act of exclusion.

How important, then, that published stories come from diverse sources; from the voices, experiences, subjectivities and realities of many rather than from the imagination of

dominant white culture. For even as we've been enriched and enlightened by tales from Western tradition, stories are also carriers and vectors for ideologies. And the white literary tradition has a long legacy of silencing, erasing, distorting, and misinforming.

Social media has had an effect upon how writers think about representation. Blogs, listservs, Livejournal, Facebook, Twitter, tumblr...sometimes the messages are simple and/or simplistic (Really, how much critical deconstructionist discourse can be accomplished in 140 characters?), but what some of these forms lack in complexity they make up for it in outcomes because of the speed with which the message travels and how many it can reach. There is power in numbers. When enough people are hashtagging WeNeedDiverseBooks there is an effect. Publishers think about ways they can expand their sales. Writers who haven't much thought about diversity begin wondering what it's all about. They begin to research and reconsider. Writers who have been writing stories with diverse subject matter and subjectivities raise their fist high in the air and shout, YES!

Readers and fans now have the capacity, in ways they've never had before, to effect change upon what kinds of stories will reach the public sphere. The one-way control that traditional publishing has held is being eroded by the needs and the desires of a reading public that will not be defined by an older colonial ideological imperative. Diverse readers are demanding stories that represent far more than white middle-class North America. We want and need narratives of diversity not just set in our present, but in our past and far, far into the future. And not only because these narratives are in short supply, but, more importantly, these inclusive tellings are a part of every day reality for everyone. This is realistic representation.

Much of my writing has been informed by a keen understanding of missing stories. One of my rather simple strate-

gies has been to people my stories with main characters of, primarily, East Asian descent, from a North American context. Mainstream publishing does not in any way reflect the actual demographics of our society. And for such a very long time, the rich and complex lives of people of color, Indigenous peoples, have been reduced or simplified in the most racist of ways, if not entirely erased from literature arising from “the West.” There have always been people of color and Indigenous peoples in “Western” societies, ever since peoples have had the capacity to journey/travel. But if we turned to examples of this lived and historical reality, it was not to be found in literature. There is still much more left to be done to balance this imbalance.

My first novel was a heartfelt roar against a lifetime of experiencing the effects of distorted renderings of Asian women in North American popular culture. I was taking control of my own representation, on my own terms, in my own language.

It matters who and what is being focused upon in fiction. It matters who is creating a fictional account of these tellings. I don’t think the “burden of representation” rests upon the shoulders of those who are positioned as under-represented. If this were the case we would fall into an essentialist trap that will serve no one well. However, I’m okay with saying that it is my hope that white writers who are interested in writing about cultures and subjectivities outside of their own consider very carefully:

1. How many writers from the culture you wish to represent have been published in your country writing in the same language you will use (i.e., English) to write the story?
2. Why do you think you’re the best person to write this story?
3. Who will benefit if you write this story?
4. Why are you writing this story?

5. Who is your intended audience?
6. If the people/culture you are selecting to write about has not had enough time, historically and structurally, to tell their story first, on their own terms, should you be occupying this space?

Stories are wondrous devices. They can serve as time travel modules as well as being the most perfect empathy-generating operations with holographic capabilities. Stories can create imaginary simulations of experience so rich and dense they can feel like they are your own. We can live and die, mourn and rejoice; we can feel affinity for a fictional character in a more intimate way than we can feel for our dearest friends and lovers, because we are allowed access to a character's mind. Fiction can sometimes feel more real than our lived lives. If only in that moment of intense connection, when our physical world slides away, and the words casts another before your mind's eye.

This magic is not a bubble world that exists in a neutral space. The magic was wrought by the author who has a connection to the world she was born into, and she consciously and subconsciously carries those relationships into the story.

The second stage of relationship can be found inside the story—the relationships between characters and their settings as written by the author. The relationships between the fictional elements are modified representations of what the author knows and/or imagines. Writers are creating semblances of relations in order to create a simulation for a particular effect.

The third relational moment is when the reader connects with the narrative—when she willingly suspends disbelief and accepts the story experience into her consciousness. At that moment the reader is engaged in a relationship with the writer, mediated by story. The writer has guided the parameters of the relationship, but she never has absolute control.

The reader always has the power to terminate the relationship at any time by closing the book. The reader is not a blank slate of appreciation. The reader brings with her her own experiences of the world she lives in, and this mediates her understanding and appreciation of the text.

Finally, when the story has been read and integrated into the reader's understanding, she carries that experience and learning back into her own experiential world, a little changed, perhaps, and it may affect her own interactions with people in her life.

Imagine this happening one hundred times. A thousand times. Ten thousand times. A hundred thousand times....

Stories are powerful engagements.

If you are writing stories with the intention of dispersing them to a wider public how great the responsibility that is placed upon your shoulders. No one has enlisted you to take up this responsibility. In the moment when the writer decides she will share her story with others, she has willingly engaged in an action that sets off vectors of expanding relations that move both forward and backward into time. For just as the writer has ties to lives, communities, history, the future, so, too, do the story and the readers who will interact with the representation.

This level of responsibility can be paralyzing. How can we ever know enough, be mindful enough, to be able, at the very least, to do no harm to others? How do we dare place words in the mouths not our own? Who am I to embark upon this engagement when what I know, what I have experienced, is such a tiny mark upon this planet?

Silence. In the space where your voice would have rang out with its distinct articulation. The moment you silence your-

self a gap opens up, and someone else, who may have no qualms in occupying that space, will leap in to speak out on their own terms. If you're a writer (a dreamer) from a people, a community, a history that has been long-marginalized, silenced, or misrepresented, we so desperately need to hear your story in your voice, in your own grammar of perception and articulation....

When the seed of desire to write stories first began germinating inside my chest I did not think about control, representation, ideologies, power systems, colonialism. I was a lonely child who was much confused by the workings of a hypocritical adult world, where adults said one thing, then did the opposite. When the people who said they loved me were also the people who hurt me the most. Where school was a blur of confusion, and uncertainty sat with me at the kitchen table every single day. I was in Grade Three or Four when the confusing array of consonants and vowels transformed from syllabic syncopation into the English language. I could read. And, suddenly, I could fly....

Flight is a crucial survival technique. For all that we imagine otherwise, without our weapons we are not an apex predator. Our nails are soft. Our teeth blunt. Our skin easily pierced. Children and women feel their vulnerability most keenly. I was child growing up with Christian parents who loved me, but were also dysfunctional. The rod was not spared and we were not spoiled. Any stability to be found was provided by my grandmother. But she was also an older woman, living in the home of my father. She was also a person of her generation, and she was a part of the administration of punishments for bad behavior.

"We got in trouble so much," I once said to my sister. "Why were we always in trouble or afraid that we were going to be in trouble. How bad were we? I don't remember. It's all a blur."

"We were being children," my sister said.

Reading provided an escape from the confusion of the adult-ruled world around me. Stories transported me to places far from home, where I could feel with my entire being, infused with passion, suspense, adventure, love, longing, magic, without there being a risk to my core self. I could feel without fear. Stories allowed for an engagement that opened my young sensibilities to experience a wider world, a wider imagination, a nuanced and subtle emotional range that could not be safely explored from inside my family dynamics. These childish explorations I embarked upon in fiction can be said to be controlled environments. I did not know this then. When I was a child I thought as a child, and my emotions were simple but keenly intense in that way children are capable of feeling. Reading allowed me to explore an emotional landscape that ranged far and wide, and this was possible through the growing powers of imagination. The more I read, the more my powers of imagination developed.

When I became an adult and a writer I thought as an adult with a wider range of historical and cultural contexts to understand the complicated world in which I lived. I could identify the oppressive systems that are used to govern and control, and I could think of ways I could destabilize these forces, in small ways, through actions. In my writing I could shape different kinds of story structures, cast focus upon different kinds of heroes, and illustrate dynamics that imagined alternate ways of understanding power and conflict. I thought as an adult, and wrote as an adult, but I did not put away all the childish things.

For all that vast swathes of my childhood memories have been lost or buried, I have not forgotten the sweet pain intensity of emotional engagement that can be felt through story. This is a feeling I still experience today. I have kept these feelings intact. Just as I have carried my imagination, or my imagination has carried me, from my childhood to where I am today. Here. In this very space in time. A brief and miniscule moment in

the great vast stream of the universe. An engagement between friends and strangers, bridged by words, carried by story.

There is a Japanese term: kotodama. Word spirit. When you invoke a word you animate it. It becomes. We see echoes of this in other religions/philosophies: e.g., the word is god. When writers try to imagine different ways of engaging—humans to other humans, humans with aliens, humans with animals, all these different relationships—we can make possible new kinds of engagements. To bring stories alive in this way is to try to make change in the workings and fabric of our world. If something is not of this world already, it first needs to be imagined. After it is imagined, it needs to be shaped by the parameters of language. And in writing, in the utterance, the story can begin its life. It can become.

And so we begin. With each telling. With every retelling. A slight skewing of the familiar toward a different plane. The perspective shifts, and the way the light falls upon the world casts it anew, ripe with possibility.

Thank you.

Hiromi Goto is the award-winning author of many books for youth and adults. Her YA novel *Half World* was winner of the 2010 Sunburst Award and the Carl Brandon Parallax Award. Hiromi is also a mentor at Simon Fraser University's The Writer's Studio, an editor, and mother of two grown children. She is at work on graphic novels and short stories.