THE WISCON CHRONICLES
VOL. 12

The WisCon Chronicles

VOLUME 12

Boundaries and Bridges

Edited by
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Preface

It was almost one year ago that we began working on this volume of the WisCon Chronicles. During that time, we have looked forward to and imagined just how this volume would turn out. We imagined how much fun everyone would have at our launch party at WisCon 44. We even planned the food and décor for the party. What we didn't think about, what didn't even occur to us to plan for, was a pandemic bringing the world to a halt.

The COVID-19 virus, or novel coronavirus, has turned our world upside down with astonishing speed. Experts have projected that by the time this pandemic is over, millions of people will have contracted the virus, and many thousands will have died. In the United States and elsewhere, despite an alarming shortage of personal protection equipment such as masks, gloves, and gowns, health care workers, grocery store employees, sanitation workers, and other service workers have been declared "essential" and expected to report to work.

In order to stop the spread of the disease and "flatten the curve" to avoid overwhelming hospital systems all at once, everyone the world over has been asked to practice "social distancing," in which people are to have at least six feet of distance between individuals, and where gatherings of even a handful of people are strongly discouraged. Cities, states, and even entire countries have closed down schools and "non-essential" businesses, encouraged self-isolation, issued "stay-at-home" orders, and even instituted mandatory two-week (the possible transmission window of time) quarantines on foreign visitors or closed

their borders to international travel entirely. We now find ourselves in a world where physical boundaries are being enacted to literally save lives.

Avoiding physical interaction with random persons on the street might be possible without much effort, but given the health risks involved in holding a large convention, WisCon and many other science fiction conventions have been cancelled this year. WisCon, however, is more than just a convention— it is a family reunion. However much we might understand rationally that this is a necessary boundary to put in place for the safety of our friends, our families, our communities, and ourselves, we feel deeply the loss of connection with our loved ones, many of whom we only get to see once a year at WisCon.

The theme for this volume was originally meant to explore some of the many ways and reasons that we create or tear down boundaries as well as the bridges we build to cross from one side of a boundary to another. Social distancing was not a boundary we had expected to encounter or overcome, but in true WisCon spirit, we will build bridges to connect with one another in new ways.

Even as we write this, the convention committee is exploring ways to overcome the social-distancing by turning the convention into a virtual event. Just because we may be self-isolating physically does not mean that we need to feel alone. Social media has allowed us to come together: whether we use Facebook or Twitter to post updates on how many items on our to-do list we've gotten done, Tik Tok to made videos of our daily dance parties, Zoom to chat about the latest book we've read, or Netflix to share movie night in several locations simultaneously, we have found ways to connect. Some of us have even gone old school and picked up a telephone to have a conversation

in real time. We will do whatever it takes to connect and cross the divide that separates us.

As we go to print, we do not know whether WisCon 44 will be a virtual event or if it will be cancelled or postponed, but whatever the case, we offer this volume of essays by WisCon attendees as a way for you to experience even a small part of what WisCon is and means to attendees who love it. Perhaps you will find a way to share the experience with others.

We hope to see you at the next WisCon, whether online or in person.

Isabel Schechter
Michi Trota

March 29, 2020

Crossing Boundaries and Becoming a Bridge

Isabel Schechter

In 2000, I attended my first WisCon, WisCon 24. This year is the 20th anniversary of the year I found this wonderful, life-changing convention. Twenty years of learning, growing, building relationships, all while having lots of fun along the way. While for others, WisCon has helped them create healthy boundaries, it has helped me cross boundaries that were holding me back, as well as look ahead and build bridges I could not even conceive of 20 years ago. I would not be the person I am today without having found WisCon.

When I first discovered WisCon, I was overwhelmed by all the smart, funny, and even famous people I met there. They were clearly out of my league, I felt, and I would never presume to think that I could cross over into their rarefied circles. Those people reached out to me, however, and are now close friends and family.

Having grown up in a very patriarchal culture, I resented the women who were a part of a system that oppressed me and told me my thoughts and feelings were irrelevant and of no consequence. I chose to not open myself up to other women because I didn't feel I could trust them to value me or have my best interests at heart. It wasn't until I felt welcomed at WisCon, really, truly welcomed, that I could relax around other women. It wasn't until I felt accepted and valued by other women

that I could open up to other women, and feel safe doing so. Today, my women friends sustain me, and I could not imagine my life without them.

As a child-free person, I never wanted or expected to have children or grandchildren, yet I am now a WisCon "Mom" and "Abuelita" to a wonderful group of young women who value and let me share with them what wisdom I have gained these past 20 years. I am inspired by their passion and determination to live their lives on their own terms, and the successes they have achieved.

Twenty years ago, I considered myself lucky just to be able to attend such fascinating programming. Over time, I felt comfortable enough to speak up about the need for representation of a religious person on a panel that included a religious perspective, and Latinx and other POC on all kinds of programming, and was put on programming at future years' conventions. Joining the convention committee followed soon after that, and I went from enjoying programming to helping to shape it and the rest of the convention as well.

When I first started attending WisCon, it would never have occurred to me that I would one day be a published writer or editor. And yet, I have had several essays published in the WisCon Chronicles and elsewhere, including a Hugo Award-winning SF/F magazine, and am honored to be an editor of the volume of the WisCon Chronicles you hold in your hand (or read on your screen) right now.

I have benefited from the boundaries WisCon has helped me cross and the bridges I have built within the WisCon community, and I wanted other people to share their experiences and, hopefully, inspire others to do the same. My experiences over the 20 years I have been attending WisCon were part of the reason I choose the theme "Boundaries and Bridges" for this volume. I wanted

to include essays that would reflect a variety of ways that WisCon has often been a place to explore the boundaries (both good and bad) that separate people, as well as create bridges between people.

I encourage you to read the essays in this collection and find the experiences and identities you share with the contributors. Look for the ways other WisCon attendees found the courage to cross or set boundaries. Feel like a part of the community when reading about a time when a long-time WisCon attendee extended a hand to a first-time attendee who didn't know if they would be shut out or welcomed. WisCon can be a wonderful community, even (and perhaps especially) when we must fight for or with it — whichever is needed at any particular time-to make it so.

This collection includes essays from first-time WisCon attendees and former Guests of Honor, fans and Tiptree/Otherwise Award-winning authors and editors, cis het and LGBTQ+ attendees, affluent and less well-off, abled and disabled, white and POC, young and old, parents and childfree, English speakers and Spanish speakers, and hopefully more than just these categories can capture.

Their essays cover a wide range of experiences with and thoughts about WisCon. Structural changes in the convention that break down barriers to attendance and participation are important, and some of the essays recount the process and struggles of creating space and programming for POC attendees, access for disabled attendees, and affordability for all attendees. The words we use matter, as essays that talk about feminist terms, gendered language, and even the name of the Tiptree/Otherwise award (which is almost inextricably identified with WisCon) demonstrate. The definition of "community" is also examined, both within WisCon and beyond, as it spills out into the wider world — including online spaces.

I must make a special mention about Gabriela Damián Miravete's Tiptree/Otherwise award-winning story, "Soñarán en el jardín." Although it has been translated into English, I felt very strongly that it was important to include the story in its original Spanish. While the 2018 Mexicanx Initiative brought 50 Mexicanx fans and professionals to the 76th World Science Fiction Convention in San Jose California, it was the first time many US fans were exposed to the richness of the Mexicanx community and to Spanish-language science fiction. The WisCon Chronicles has never included an essay in a language other than English. That was a boundary I wanted this year's volume to cross, and a bridge to the Mexicanx and Spanish-language community I wanted to build.

I am grateful to the contributors who shared the impact WisCon has made in their lives. When Aqueduct Press invited me to edit this year's volume of The WisCon Chronicles, I was honored by their trust in me and aware of how important it was to put together a collection of essays that would represent the experiences of a variety of attendees. Thank you to everyone at Aqueduct Press for giving me the opportunity to showcase some of the various voices within the WisCon community.

I also want to thank my co-editor, Michi Trota, for working with me to put together this collection. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to have a co-editor to share my vision as well as help bridge the gaps in my WisCon experience. I was thrilled when Michi accepted my invitation to be my co-editor. This volume is proof of how right I was to want to share this experience with her. Michi brought a different set of experiences and point of view to help shape this collection of essays, and it is richer for it.

I hope these essays provide a glimpse into what WisCon is, how it has grown through the hard work of dedicated at-

tendees, and what impact it has had on those lucky enough to attend. Looking back on the past 20 years, I would never have guessed the impact WisCon would have on my life today. Looking forward to 2040, I expect I will feel the same way about the 20 years between then and now. I wish the same for you.

Isabel has been active in science fiction fandom for more than 20 years. She is a frequent panelist at science fiction conventions and has had essays about race and representation in science fiction and fantasy published in *Invisible 2: Essays on Race and Representation in SF/F*; *Uncanny: A Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*; and multiple previous volumes of The WisCon Chronicles.

Building Bridges and Establishing Boundaries Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Michi Trota

Although I didn't start attending WisCon until 2014, I had been vaguely aware of the convention, its focus on feminism in SF/F works, and its place in the SF/F community. I knew a few folks who regularly attended the con, but for reasons I can't remember, I had somehow come under the impression that WisCon was only open to academics and published creators. Certainly not an unpublished casual fan who'd made it into her 30s without having read Le Guin, McCaffrey, Butler, or a host of other luminary women writers in the genre. Although I had been a fan of SF/F since childhood, most of my geeky interests had been focused in comics, movies, and TV shows. I was still struggling to understand exactly what feminism meant to me, much less how it could be used to explore SF/F. I perceived a boundary based on professionalism, expertise, and celebrity around WisCon that I didn't see a way to break into, so like many marginalized people, I shrugged and self-selected out. I was only able to cross that boundary because someone enthusiastically invited me in, making herself a bridge into what has become a much-loved annual experience.

So it seems fitting that after Isabel Schechter welcomed me into WisCon six years ago, she invited me to collaborate with her on this volume of The WisCon Chronicles, choosing a theme that almost perfectly encompasses what the

con has come to mean to me: a place where establishing boundaries and their uses can be explored and where building bridges among individuals and different communities is encouraged.

WisCon holds a special place in my heart because it was at my very first WisCon that I received the offer to become *Uncanny Magazine*'s first Managing Editor, and it was Isabel who all but shoved me through yet another boundary I wasn't sure I could cross. Her confidence and belief in my abilities, along with the love and support of my friends (many of whom were also attending their first WisCon that year), were enough to build a bridge into an opportunity that literally changed my life. I would not be a four-time Hugo Award winning and British Fantasy Award winning editor, nor the first Filipina to win a Hugo Award, without those supports, and because of them I've been given the opportunity, and responsibility, to become a bridge for others looking for connection and to help break more boundaries.

It's easy enough for me to talk about bridge-building among individuals and communities. It's one of the things I love the most about being a writer, editor, and communicator. Facilitating connections among people, creating friendships, and nurturing professional relationships are all deeply rewarding experiences for me. These are skills that were borne out of learning how to survive trauma, when keeping myself safe meant learning how to anticipate people's needs and meet them before being asked, making myself as useful and "low maintenance" as possible. Being able to turn survival skills from a painful time in my life into something positive and enjoyable that encourages me to connect with and trust others on a genuine level has taken a great deal of work that I'm proud of.

The need to break boundaries, to redefine and reshape them, is similarly something that I'm at ease with exploring. In my experience, boundaries existed to divide and separate for arbitrary reasons: not American enough, not Asian enough, not the "right kind" of feminine, having the "wrong" accent, having seen the movie but not read the book (or vice versa!), being from the wrong neighborhood, wearing the wrong kind of clothes. Boundaries were exclusionary, created feelings of inadequacy, made me feel lonely when I shouldn't have had to be. Boundaries were *mean,* and I wanted to tear them apart.

But *creating* boundaries, now that's something that's altogether a completely different experience. It had never occurred to me that boundaries could be beneficial, that just as with any tool, its use and implementation depended on the intent of the user. Much of what I've learned about when and why boundaries are necessary, and how they can contribute to the health of a community (as well as individuals), can be traced to WisCon. Experiencing the freedom and joy that came with being around other POC at the POC Welcome Dinner and in the POC Safer Space crystallized the utility and need for affinity spaces within even ostensibly "welcoming" and "diverse" communities. Conversing and interacting with other POC without navigating White Fragility, where the default centered POC experiences and voices, brought home just how much mental and emotional weight those external pressures and expectations really carried.

The conversations I am privileged to take part in at WisCon involve people sharing often deeply personal stories about struggling to learn and reconceptualize the role that personal boundaries have played in their own lives. They help provide the framework and vocabulary for me to recognize how not setting boundaries is as much of a

response to trauma and survival mechanism for me as building bridges has been. I've learned about Geek Social Fallacies, and how calls for accountability are in fact a result of deep empathy and care for the health of whole communities and individuals. Watching the WisCon community's failures, as well as its successes, in implementing anti-harassment policies, has greatly influenced my own approaches to drafting and overseeing similar policies in other communities I am active in.

At WisCon, I've seen how both the thoughtful implementation of boundaries and necessary breaking of them, can create space for connections to grow and become bridges to deeper knowledge, greater understanding, and stronger communities.

The essays Isabel and I have collected for this anthology reflect WisCon's spirit of questioning and re-examining what we know—or what we think we know—about how boundaries and bridges function and what they can mean to us. There are essays on the need to challenge our perception of what "affordable" and "accessible" actually looks like in order to lower or eliminate those barriers to entry. Some writers share how WisCon introduced them to updated feminist vocabulary and frameworks that deepened their understanding, while others share how they've taken what they've learned at WisCon and applied it to their lives outside of the convention and SF/F. No matter their background, each writer provides a valuable window into the myriad ways WisCon has shaped both our professional and personal lives. I particularly appreciate Katherine Alejanda Cross's reminder that WisCon's community includes the staff of WisCon's host hotel, The Concourse, and how their efforts and care make the con possible in the first place.

Running through all of these essays is a common thread of appreciation for WisCon's community: for the challenges to their perceptions and assumptions, for the dedication and effort of WisCon's volunteers, for the openness and empathy of attendees in conversations that aren't always easy, but often needed. This is particularly brought home in the discussions surrounding the necessary renaming of the Otherwise Award (formerly the Tiptree Award) and what it means to grapple with a legacy that has provided inspiration for many while compounding harm toward the disabled community. Our understanding of the power of words we've grown used to and how they shape boundaries and build bridges is changing all the time. As writers, creators, and community members, it's our responsibility to be open to those changes, to listen to voices that we had previously ignored, and to learn how to do and be better.

I'm grateful to Aqueduct Press for giving us the opportunity to curate this anthology, and to act as bridges to the writers whose work populates this collection. To the writers of these essays, I'm so thankful to you for entrusting your work to Isabel and me, and for sharing what WisCon has meant to you. I'm humbled by the passion, thoughtful analysis, and deeply personal stories you've all shared so beautifully. It was a pleasure to work with each of you, and I'm so pleased to have had the chance to include your voices in this volume of The WisCon Chronicles.

I don't have enough words to thank Isabel for her efforts in bringing this collection to fruition. Her determination and vision were integral in shaping this anthology. I'm especially grateful for her emphasis on including Gabriela Damián Miravete's Tiptree/Otherwise award-winning story, "Soñarán en el jardín." As Isabel mentions in her introduction, it is the first non-English language work to be included in a volume of The WisCon Chronicles. Not only

is this another boundary broken, it is also a bridge to another perspective of SF/F, and I'm so glad that Isabel advocated for its inclusion. So much of what I've been able to accomplish in SF/F is because of Isabel, and I would not have become a part of WisCon's community without her generosity.

So it is my hope that these essays will inspire you to consider: what are the boundaries you need to break, or redefine, or create in order to make space for growth and understanding? What are the bridges you can build to spark greater connections and provide avenues to opportunities for others? Above all, I hope that these pieces will inspire you to find a way to do for others what Isabel did for me.

Michi Trota is a four-time Hugo Award-winner and British Fantasy Award winner. She is Editor-in-Chief of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), Senior Editor for the national media platform Prism, and the first Filipina Hugo Award winner. She was Managing Editor/Nonfiction Editor of *Uncanny: A Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2014-2019) and is also an essayist, public speaker, and fire performance artist in Chicago.

I Didn't Always Live in the Castle

Alexandra Erin

If I told you that I learned most of my adult social skills through a science fiction convention, would you believe me? That's not the way the story normally goes, is it?

It's true, though.

WisCon taught me about boundaries.

Boundaries can be big, imposing walls like a castle, but a wall isn't necessarily just there to keep people out. Walls can provide support! There's a reason why "load-bearing walls" are a thing. Walls can be a partition that divides a space. In a grand old house, it's walls that divide the front parlor, where guests are received, from the drawing room, where one can withdraw to be among one's closer friends.

Sometimes, what people really lack when they are alone in a crowded room is a sense of the structures around them. What is expected? What is allowed? Where can I find the things I need? What can I do to meet the needs I have? To a first-timer, a convention can be too big and too noisy and too fast to take in, but WisCon is structured in many ways around meeting needs, with things like the ConSuite, organized first-time attendee dinners, quiet rooms, safer spaces, designated social spaces, and accessibility accommodations.

The first time I came to WisCon was in 2010, a fact I can never remember for sure and must check by looking up Guests of Honor. There won't be many mentions of specific years in this story, because it would all be guessing. I

can pin down some of the important dates early on based on what else was happening in my life, though.

By May of 2010, I had been writing and publishing my work online for a couple of years, and was doing well enough at it that I could just barely afford plane tickets, one-fourth of a hotel room, a con registration, and food.

I justified the expense by telling myself it would be a good move professionally, that attending a convention would move me into the next phase of my career, but in truth, the big attraction the convention held at that point was a chance to hang out face-to-face with people I only knew from the internet. You see, my social world had been almost entirely online for most of my adult life up to that point.

Experiences in middle school had left me raw and scarred around the whole concept of friendship and in-real-life socialization. People I had thought of as friends all through elementary school were starting to avoid me by fifth grade, especially when others were around.

At one point, a sixth-grader stood up in our shared study hall and went around the room asking every fifth-grader present if they were friends with me. We went to a small school, so this was roughly half of the entire fifth grade, and it included a boy who had slept over at my house and stayed up late playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with me. He said no, very quickly, and then added a homophobic slur in my direction.

A few people said nothing, keeping their heads down and pretending they couldn't hear the question.

Nobody said yes.

Through that incident and others like it, I learned not to trust people in real spaces, which at that point in my life were the only spaces in which I could encounter other people. I learned not to trust my own senses and memories

when they said someone was being friendly, that someone enjoyed my company or shared my interests, or more especially that they enjoyed sharing them with me.

This was around the time that my disability diagnosis was resulting in accommodations for accessibility that set me apart from my classmates. It was also a time when I had a growing awareness of my own queerness, even as I lacked the vocabulary to articulate it. My classmates had many suggestions on that score, though they weren't particularly helpful ones.

I built walls in my life and walls in my head. What had been a satisfying social life became one of isolation. I spent hours playing video games, messing around on the computer, or just hanging out in the backyard, lost in vivid fantasies about roleplaying games I no longer had anyone to play with.

It was a fertile time for me creatively, in some ways. My daydreams and planned gaming campaigns would become the basis of many of the stories I would go on to write in my twenties.

But I was horribly lonely and very much alone.

Then in the 1990s, the internet came to my town, and all at once I could…connect…to whole communities of people who didn't know me, people who didn't know that I was weird and socially toxic, or people who might believe I was the cool kind of weird, their kind of weird. Maybe it was even true.

My desperation for a human connection led to some unhealthy patterns. I basically became addicted to chatrooms and to the emotional rushes I could experience there. As someone among the top percentiles of typing speeds, I found that I could dominate a conversation online if I wanted to. I went through a really obnoxious "debate me" period in my teens, a little high on suddenly having

some kind of power over others. But heady as that was, the positive attention I found was even more intoxicating.

The walls…didn't really come down. They just opened up sometimes. And I didn't have a healthy model of moderation for that. Like a castle with a drawbridge that was either up or down. When I found someone I related to, someone I trusted, they got full access.

There were people I clung to too hard, pinning years of pent-up yearning and loneliness on without a thought for them as an actual person. There were people I let in whom I shouldn't have. I didn't know how to set specific boundaries with specific people, because when you hole up in a fortress in your head, there's no reason to.

Like I said: deeply unhealthy.

But unhealthy beats dead, which is what I really think I would have been without the internet.

In my twenties, my fascination with chatrooms gave way to Livejournal, and Livejournal helped launch my writing career. I'd been trying to get attention for my writing online for years but didn't have a clue how to actually get people I didn't know to read it until I discovered Livejournal's social features. If my Friends read my work, it would show up in their Friends' Friend feeds, and if those people also subscribed…well, by 2010 the fandom that brought me to WisCon was my own. I went there for the first time with a fan who had become my friend, and other people I knew through my writing, like Sumana Harihareswara, took an active hand in introducing me to the wider circles of the convention.

I always blink a little when I hear some members of more established convention-going generations complaining that WisCon or another con no longer feels like it belongs to them, like it's no longer for them. What must that

feel like, I wonder? To have that feeling enough to be able to lose it. To walk into a space and know it is for you.

I did not have that. I never had that. I walked in for the first time expecting that most people there wouldn't know who I was, wouldn't know my work, wouldn't be sure that it "counted" as real writing, whatever that meant. I was prepared to defend my legitimacy and my right to be there if it was questioned (which it wasn't, much), but that wasn't the same as being prepared to believe in it, deep in my heart.

My first few years of ongoing congoing were much like my life outside the convention: periods of loneliness where I sat there doing my own thing punctuated by moments where I found or tried to find a feeling of deep connection. I clung to people I knew like they were lifelines. When someone opened up to me, I opened up to them. It was…less unhealthy than my internet addictions, I think, because my uncertainty in navigating a real physical space with other people present made me a little hesitant to take big leaps of faith or put myself forward to aggressively. I learned a skill that helped mellow me out online: how to take a reflective pause, sit on my hands, and learn the score before barging in and flooding the space with my words.

I don't think this lesson would have been as easily learned at any other convention, but even before we had color-coded interaction flags or pronoun stickers on our badges at WisCon, there was an emphasis on consent and respect. I arrived on the heels of Racefail '09, meaning I missed a prime chance for my poorly socialized self to show the world my backside and had the benefit of learning from the mistakes of others. I learned the concept of staying in my lane (and that I had lanes to stay in) by reading the public discourse around people who didn't stay in

theirs, and I went to my first convention with at least that much guidance.

I made lasting friends that first trip. I spied a *City of Villains* shirt on a group meal excursion and bonded with Tanya DePass over an interest in superhero MMOs. Five seconds into our conversation it was obvious her knowledge and experience outstripped mine, but she never made me feel like a newbie or neophyte for it. It was just a nice moment of connection, and a very different vibe from that of the fandom chats I had been in, where someone once declared my knowledge of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* didn't count because I referred to episodes by their names instead of their production codes.

Even with moments like that…I left the convention for the first time feeling a bit like I had paid several hundred dollars out of my own pocket to spend a lot of time alone in crowded, noisy rooms. I had thought that going to a convention might, in some unspecified way, help my career. I would meet people who could be helpful to my work. I would introduce new audiences to my writing. I would "network"…whatever that means.

I left the con feeling like I had failed, and failed badly, but I had made friends, and I wanted to see them again, and make more friends. So I talked the experience up, to myself, and my friends and family. I went back, again and again, and each time it was about the same. Each time I focused a little less on the idea of "networking" and admitted a little bit more that the con was actually a vacation, a chance to go to a fancy hotel with a good discount and hang out with people I love.

As I did, I became more comfortable with introducing myself to people. Social interactions became less and less all-or-nothing for me. I watched as panel moderators and members laid out clear boundaries; some panels were dis-

cussions that welcomed audience participation and some limited it strictly to Q&A, and either way, it worked out better when the boundaries were clear and expectations made explicit.

I learned the value of being up front about my physical and cognitive limitations, that I cannot easily process or remember faces and that I lack the upper-body strength to safely manage a lot of external doors.

It was a lot of little bits of progress over time, punctuated by moments of deeper insight. One year when I had arrived a day ahead of the rest of my family, one person saw me sitting alone in the lounge while her party was planning to head out for dinner, and on an impulse she asked me along. We knew each other at least by name on my part and sight on hers; I had enjoyed her work on panels in previous years, but we weren't really socially connected beyond being fellow convention members.

I think any year previous to that one I would have demurred. It wasn't so much that I feared some kind of trap. My youthful bad experiences with friendship had not left me paranoid that people were out to humiliate me in some kind of mean-girls-from-*Carrie* fashion, but rather afraid that my presence was unwanted, and if I inflicted it on people it would cause them discomfort that would eventually boil over in a way that was as painful and humiliating as that long-ago study hall scene had been.

Being a trans woman in this society meant that those feelings had been reinforced in some pretty toxic ways long after my middle-school years were behind me.

But WisCon felt enough like my place by that point, if not in the sense that it belonged to me as much as in the sense that I belonged there, that I accepted. Because of that invitation, I learned more about WisCon and the larger convention scene, but more importantly, I learned how

powerful that kind of act can be. I thought back to my first year, when Sumana had taken me in hand at the Gathering and introduced me around to so many people it became a blur, and then asked me if I wanted to have a meal with her and a few other people, which was how my first proper con meal had been with a dozen other people including a Guest of Honor.

That year, I crystallized a new theory of socially navigating a space like a convention, a very Franciscan notion that it is in welcoming others that we are ourselves made welcome. When we make space, we are not crowding ourselves out but making the space bigger and richer.

WisCon didn't teach me how to open up to people; it showed me better ways of doing so. It taught me that it's not a question of being open or closed, of a drawbridge being down or up, but of providing meaningful boundaries and clear paths of approach. I don't remember who I first saw make a "care and feeding" post to explain their boundaries and limits to other congoers in advance, but the concept quietly blew my mind.

The kind of amazing thing is that when I started approaching the convention space as a place I could not only navigate but also make more navigable for others, it actually did start helping my career. What is networking? It's apparently making connections, without any goal or agenda as sharp and pointed as angling for a bit of a promo or a personal favor from someone you don't, in fact, personally know.. Through my convention connections, I have met people who have invited me to collaborate on projects, contribute essays to their magazines or other publications. I have met people whose careers I could help and discovered that there's no more rewarding form of exposure than being the person who helps to make the essential connections *happen*.

The *really* amazing thing, though, is that somewhere along the line, my convention experiences began to translate into real life. I no longer avoid social situations. I have a circle of adult friends I didn't meet through the internet and I don't only see once or twice a year at conventions. I have become involved in the local arts scene here in my new hometown of Hagerstown, where I do my best to help others make connections and to make things happen for them. After more than a decade of having no occupation that takes me away from the internet and out of the house, I have found myself managing a specialty bookstore attached to a jazz bar and literary cafe in the downtown arts district of my town, which gives me a space in which I can promote other local authors and artists.

It's quite the turn-around for the little girl who once learned that the key to survival was building walls in real life and then pouring her heart out online.

I missed out on a lot of social development growing up queer and disabled in a small town, but through the magic of WisCon, I seem to have grown into a confident, mature adult who knows how to set boundaries and extend bridges the way a character in a John Green novel falls in love: gradually, and then all at once.

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The Affordability Team:
Building a Better WisCon by Reducing Barriers

Jess Adams

Building bridges to cross boundaries or to reduce barriers is a metaphor at the heart of social justice; intersectional feminism,[1] by taking into account all of the various factors of identity and experience that impact how people are affected by discrimination, is in many ways about bridge-building and making connections. There is limitless variety to the types of boundaries and barriers we encounter in the world and in our communities. Sometimes, boundaries themselves are largely good; they help us to protect ourselves and others, and when respected, they foster healthy engagement with one another. It's really when boundaries become barriers that troubles start.

Often, we don't realize that a boundary exists until we run up against it. This was my experience more than a decade ago, when at WisCon 29 I attended a panel entitled "Trailer Trash and Unrighteous Rebels: Human Beings in Space." During that panel, participants sometimes spoke with apparent authority on working-class people and experiences; the trouble was that so much of it struck me as based on stereotypes or overused tropes from *outside* that experience rather than within it. Some of this was outright offensive (like the term "trailer trash" in the title). Some was just too simplistic, discussing this type of character in a generic or categorical sense rather than as fully

1 A term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989.

developed, three-dimensional people. As the panel went on, more folks spoke up from the audience to provide counter-point or call out these things, which helped, but I left the panel riled up and with a *lot* to talk about.

I understood that the intent of the panel was to be more inclusive: to see more characters representative of working-class, working poor, or rural characters and experiences, more media focusing on class issues and class struggle. Many conversations with friends ensued, and eventually we determined that a different approach to conversations about class was needed. Out of all this grew a kind of activism that eventually became the organization Friends of Dennis.[2]

Between 2009 and 2013, Friends of Dennis worked as a grassroots organization to help foster and encourage conversations about class and classism at WisCon and elsewhere. We collaborated with folks on panel proposals and descriptions, and with those same people to staff panels and moderate them carefully to help ensure and encourage respectful, productive conversations around class. In 2013, the WisCon Convention Committee approached us to ask if we would be interested in taking on an advisory role to assist in developing convention policies and efforts to help make WisCon more affordable to all attendees, in particular to members of limited income or means. And so the Affordability Team was born.

As a department, Affordability has worked on multiple initiatives that have helped to reshape and reframe elements of WisCon most closely connected to socioeconomic class and income. I will note here that of course "class" as a structural notion is far more complex than just the issue of income; that's a central tenet within Friends of Dennis.

2 The origin story of Friends of Dennis, along with more details on that panel and those that followed, appeared in *WisCon Chronicles*, volume 6.

However, economic access is one concrete area we can focus on to encourage equity and diversity among WisCon's membership. (And hey—who among us doesn't want things to be more affordable?)

Affordability works to improve messaging around options that can help bring the cost of con-going down, such as rideshares, roomshares, and taxi vouchers. We've been involved in discussions about ConSuite and how to improve its usefulness to attendees. Affordability administers the "sixth floor discount,"[3] which helps make the hotel stay more affordable for some attendees each year, and we advocate for continuing features such as $1 childcare and sliding scale pricing for the Dessert Salon.

In 2017, the WisCon Member Assistance Fund (WMAF) became a part of the Affordability Team. The WMAF is a long-standing institution at WisCon which provides grants of up to $500 for members who apply or are nominated. These grants are specifically meant to cover the costs of attendance, including lodging, food, and travel. There are no requirements for receipt of the grants, aside from being nominated or applying, and grants don't require repayment of any kind. The main purpose—and benefit—of WMAF grants is to open the doors of WisCon to folks who would otherwise not be able to attend, for any number of reasons. WMAF is perhaps our most direct means of increasing the inclusivity of WisCon and to bringing in a broader range of voices.

Perhaps more subtly, Affordability has also worked with other departments toward shifting language and messaging around class and other issues of social justice and identity. This has also been a goal and focus of Friends of Dennis. The words we use, language not just around

3 Details can be found at http://wiscon.net/6th-floor-discounted-rooms/

class and classism but in general, can be emblematic of barriers and bridges as well.

One example for WisCon is moving away from panel titles such as "Timely Topic 101" to "Timely Topic Basics." Our sense was that the "101" label assumed a certain type of cultural capital or educational background that would not be shared by everyone—not just in relation to class background, but also for those not familiar with US-centric collegiate course titling practices. (Which, by the way, are in constant flux within higher education, over time and across institutions, and are by no means a universal standard.)

As another example, for many years the WisCon Member Assistance Fund was known as the WisCon Scholarship. In most every respect, it worked then just as it does now—there was no means testing, no requirement to prove need or provide reasoning for why one "deserves" to go. What we found, however, was that folks sometimes self-selected *out* of applying for assistance even when they really needed it. One often-cited reason for this was that the term "scholarship" carried the implication that a recipient was required to somehow "bring something of worth" to the WisCon experience. That they must be presenting a paper, or running a panel, or somehow otherwise "contributing" to the con.

The truth is, all members contribute something to the con. WisCon is about that mixture of voices within conversations on social justice, intersectionality, *Doctor Who*, the *Final Fantasy* game series, fanvids—the wide variety of things that make WisCon such an exciting place to be. Helping to bring in folks from as many backgrounds and experiences as possible means that more of us find points of connection, people to relate to; it may also mean that we hear more voices in general because people feel less alone

or singled out and so are more comfortable contributing to our conversations.

Boundaries, barriers, and bridges are sometimes physical, sometimes financial (a kind of physical, to be sure), sometimes metaphorical, and of course it's possible to create barriers without fully realizing it or when thinking you're actually building bridges. I think that often, people intend on building or being bridges, trying to bring a perspective that is often glossed over or silenced, but end up creating a barrier instead. This is not just something that happens within SF/F or fannish communities—USians frequently claim to ignore class, and our cultural products often assume that everyone is the same class, has the same access, or experiences class the same way, unless it suits them thematically. This is part of why it can feel so touchy to bring up class and classism in the first place. Combine this with the discomfort that many feel around discussing money and finances, and you start to see how and why there are so many "invisible" barriers in the first place.

"Affordability" as a focus for a department is, in my experience, an unusual role. It is an easy thing to dismiss as a concom, because you may feel that as long as you keep memberships affordable, for example, you're doing what you can. But it's been our goal to take a big-picture kind of view because if you can't afford to even get to WisCon, or to eat while you're there, then you can't participate. All of those factors come together to shut out voices that our community needs to hear and that deserve to be heard. As I have seen both in my everyday working life as an educator and at WisCon, giving people the opportunity to have their voice heard and to participate on equal footing can be life-changing

I am sure that many regular attendees at WisCon feel that this community has positively affected their lives in

some way. Certainly the conversations I have had over the years at WisCon as a member, and those that we worked to develop as Friends of Dennis, have shaped my own thoughts in significant ways. I know, too, that these conversations have led directly to the work I'm doing now and to this advocacy within the WisCon community.

WisCon has shaped and improved my life in very concrete ways. In 2010, at WisCon 34, I took part in a panel called "Fighting Impostor Syndrome." The panel itself was moving,[4] but the real change came after, while talking with some good friends about the experience of sharing moments of failure or feeling like an impostor. Long story short, this led directly to my decision to apply to a Composition and Rhetoric Master's Degree program, which I started later that same year.

When the next WisCon came around, I was incredibly sad to realize that I probably couldn't afford to attend. I had wanted, very badly, to come back and tell folks what the previous WisCon had done for me, where I was, how my life was changing. I wanted to thank those people for what they helped to make possible and to let others know what WisCon can do. Thanks to panels and conversations on class like those I've mentioned, I was working toward a career in teaching writing and critical thinking to students attending community colleges. My goal is to support students, who are frequently working-class or first-generation college students, in developing their writing skills, their skills as students, so that they can complete their college education—and, hopefully, participate in conversations like these.

Fortunately, I was able to attend that year thanks to a friend who submitted a nomination on my behalf to the

4 A full panel write-up is available at: http://raanve.dreamwidth.org/715733.html

WMAF and the grant that resulted. Since then, I have taken the passion and ideas that always spark up while at WisCon and used them to help fuel the work I do with students. Providing as many people as possible with access to ideas, to community, to validation and conversation is (as I see it) the way to build communities that are more intersectional, more representative. This is one way to work toward real cultural and social change.

The work that many of us are doing within the concom, Affordability, and WMAF helps provide direct access to participation in our community. The ongoing work that happens within our conversations at large around language and inclusivity, in all venues and across worlds, allows all of us to hear, consider, and confront ideas and realities (or potential realities) we haven't thought of before. All of this builds bridges that help us cross boundaries, bring people in, expand our universe. This work moves us toward those futures and possibilities that are, at present, speculative — but that need not be fictional.

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Breaking and Respecting Boundaries

Inda Lauryn

How is respecting boundaries a part of responsible storytelling?

In the summer of 2011, I left Tennessee and moved to Wisconsin. I'd visited Madison once before, technically while still in grad school, and found an affordable place to stay once I saved enough to leave Tennessee for good. Physically, I had arrived. Professionally would take a lot longer, still a work in progress actually. But personally, I quickly connected to others I could relate to primarily via social media. By May of 2012, a Twitter account I followed, Angry Black Women, tweeted information about WisCon. I took a chance and decided to see if it was in town because otherwise I couldn't attend. Just my luck, it was. I sent the then $50 registration fee and dove feet first into something that would have the most profound impact on my professional and personal lives.

Since then, I have made it a point to go to WisCon every year. I'd been trying my hand at writing for a while (which was a reason I left my small-town life and family in Tennessee, to pursue my career in freedom and peace away from a life that no longer knew me and couldn't fit everything I continued to become), but this was the first time I met so many writers and fans like myself. The next year, I presented a paper on the academic track because I was still comfortable with presenting papers as I had done in grad school. But by the year after that, I was modding my first panels. Perhaps I felt safe to do so with the way the con

considers the needs and concerns of the most marginalized in its feminist space first. I felt safe enough to explore institutional boundaries that hindered me but simultaneously learned which boundaries applied to my privileges in both my writing and in social contexts.

Still so much opened up for me in terms of meeting writers who weren't cishet white males and, in my opinion, were breaking ground in the genre. I never thought I could actually write good SF/F or, well, good anything and truthfully still don't compare myself to them. But after a couple of years, the friends I made at the con became my primary community, not just in writing and SF/F fandom but also personally. Almost every friend I have now in my adult life is connected with WisCon in some way. It wouldn't be a stretch for me to say that I found a world further opened to me that had previously been unavailable either because of self-imposed walls or structural barriers that seemed impossible to cross without access to whatever resources were needed at the time.

One thing I soon realized about my community is that I have remained a little different from much of that community. I'm a Black cishet female who presents able-bodied and neurotypical. The majority of my closest friends share an overlap of marginalized identities including QUILTBAG, neurodivergent, POC (especially WOC), disabled, etc. Yet, I'm accepted and loved and supported. And I do my best to give that acceptance and love and support in return.

However, a couple of years ago, I began to notice a change in my writing and the stories I tell. I had slowly begun to let go of the hope that I could continue to do independent scholarship, which was where my heart still lay, and perhaps have a side career as a fiction writer. In that work, I staunchly centered the lives and experiences of Black women. Of course, this centering bled into my

fiction and is my primary focus no matter what stories I tell. That will never change. However, I've found that I'm including more characters who are not cishet, who are not able-bodied, who are not neurotypical, who are not Black but NBPOC. In other words, who are not me.

Much of my early writing tended to be more or less fanfiction of the media I consumed with Black women and girls self-inserted into these stories because it was a way of imagining a different reality not only for myself but also for girls and women like me who felt isolated and alienated. There were original creations, scenarios I came up with in a daydream and became plot bunnies that just would not leave me alone. But these Black women I centered were mostly alone, mostly navigating a world without healthy close relationships that they needed to be safe and well-rounded. Because, quite frankly, this was my reality: alone, not experiencing a world I felt passing me by with only a few vicarious pleasures here and there.

But as I made more friends from WisCon and even social media connections, I found myself inspired by many of the people around me. I once said that most of my characters now are based on the QWOC I've befriended within the past 10 years. And this is true and still stands. More of my characters resemble the amazing women and non-binary/gender non-conforming folks I've had the privilege of meeting since I've seriously pursued a writing career. In my earlier work, I inadvertently further marginalized characters who were gay or mentally ill or otherwise marginalized and mainly used them as plot points for my main characters. They were problematic because I was problematic.

And this to me is the thing I have to confront whenever I write characters who do not share the same life experiences in their marginalizations: privilege. As I said, even though I am a (working-class poor) Black woman, I am

cishet. While that may not mean much regarding how I navigate the mainstream because others will always bring their conceptions of Black women with them no matter what, this privilege primarily plays out within my friendships and close community, particularly since many of them are also Black women and NBWOC who are queer, disabled, and/or trans or non-binary or gender non-conforming.

So while they inspire many of the characters as well as the stories I tell, I constantly think about the privilege I have and the responsibility to tell stories that reflect *and* respect their humanity. Because this is the truth of the situation: I am still telling *my* stories, and they are a part of those stories. I've gotten to the point where more of the characters centered in my stories may share multiple marginalizations; I know that I need to consider that Black women come in more varieties than the one I know best because it's my own. And, yes, there is fear that comes with writing outside the boundaries of your own experience. I never want to get it "wrong" when it comes to the ones I love most in this world. I already know I'm capable of it, and those are not mistakes I wish to repeat.

As I listen to the podcast *Ya Gay Aunties*, I hear the ladies mention that we want our representation to mirror our lives. This is true. Yet, I'm also reminded of my favorite quotation from Zadie Smith (yes, I know her politics are questionable particularly regarding race) from her debut novel *White Teeth*: "But Irie didn't know she was fine. There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land." Because of strides in representation within the past 10 years since Racefail '09, this "England" is no longer our only option for representation. We've found other mirrors, but we still fight to make them available to those of us who have been damaged by the reflections that previously failed to show

us our beauty and complexity. So it is necessary to take risks in our storytelling when we piece together the dominant mirror we had to shatter.

But those of us with even a small amount of privilege need to understand boundaries when we are "inclusive" or trying to get at a more accurate reality. This means not only respecting the boundaries of those whose marginalizations intersect in ways different from ours but also knowing when to break boundaries around what we thought we already knew or what stories we are willing to tell. That fear should not prevent us from exploring "others" in our work, but the trick is how to do this responsibly and with care and love.

I believe this is where I find boundaries complicated: navigating the need to respect boundaries on a personal level, while also working toward breaking institutional boundaries that have not only kept many of our stories in the margins but also sometimes excluded them altogether. For instance, I want to include other marginalized characters in my stories, but I don't want to speak over or overshadow those telling stories in their own voices. While I think we should work to be more inclusive in our work, I also believe that Own Voices[1] should be prioritized when it comes to who gets to tell what story. This means me as well.

The responsibility of respecting Own Voices and making sure they tell their stories first does not mean we never include other marginalizations in our work. But we must make efforts to understand time and place. For instance, my very first semi-pro work, "Venus Witch's Ring" was published in *Strange Horizons* in 2018. While working with the editors, I was asked to explain a relationship between two characters because one of them read a gay subtext in

1 Own Voices describes written works featuring marginalized main characters authored by writers who share the same marginalized identity.

this relationship. However, I couldn't make that a part of the story for one simple reason: one of the characters dies and it deeply affects the main character. Even though this would have been two queer Black women in the story, I felt it would have been too close to a "kill your gays" trope. And also given the age difference, I felt it was best to just keep them in a working, mentor-mentee relationship. I know this was disappointing for the editor who truly wanted to see queerness represented, but "kill your gays" is a boundary I personally should never cross. This is the reason queer Black women don't die in my stories.

Respecting those boundaries in my work is directly tied to respecting those same boundaries in real life with the people in my life. I can't imagine my life having only one type of person in my community, among those I'm closest to and care most for. How bland. And I'm not saying this in a way that means I seek others to add flavor to my life. I'm a people person in that I love to listen to others, their stories, their experiences, and, yes, as a writer, that will be incorporated into my own work. However, the responsibility is in not pretending this is a life I've had to lead or that I know anything beyond what I've written on the page. I know it's also tempting to include characters and make them marginalized "in name only," which is a form of tokenism that doesn't truly respect the lived experiences of the marginalized.

This is why "write what you know" is not good advice for writers. Write what you know is limiting in so many aspects and not just in subject matter such as space travel for people who are not astronauts. I don't personally know much about experiences beyond my own identity, but that should not stop me from including the realities and experiences of others in my work as best I can. Because after all, they are a part of my reality, and I appreciate everything my

friends and community have brought to it. As I often hear, if you can imagine orcs, aliens, and other fantasy creatures in your made-up worlds, what stops you from imagining Black people? Disabled Black people? QUILTBAG Black people? Neurodivergent Black people? Fat Black people? What stops you? Incorporating the marginalized into our imagined worlds is one way we fight the institutional and societal boundaries that confine us to dominant perceptions of who we are based on our marginalizations, so it's crucial we have access to these stories.

But I also know it is up to me to listen when someone who lives with a marginalized identity I don't tells me that something I've done is not OK. It is up to me to listen when I'm told this is a boundary I should not have crossed. And I do mean *listen*. And after listening, use that information to work through the issue to not only fix it but also not repeat it again in the future. While I don't experience many marginalizations, the ones I do experience tell me that the implications of not respecting boundaries goes far beyond hurt feelings. Trauma is more than hurt feelings, so personal boundaries are not to be taken lightly, even when we are trying to cross institutional boundaries to create more progress for all of us.

I've gotten better at working with boundaries over time. Spaces such as WisCon and my friendships and communities have helped me sort through them and find a language that helps me understand not only my own boundaries but also others' boundaries. Boundaries are always crucial in building anything healthy, whether it's a real-life community or a fantasy world. But breaking institutionalized boundaries is one of the only ways we will get there. I always consider this negotiation in my stories. We must. Our stories are crucial for all of us, and respecting

boundaries is one of the tools we'll need to tell better stories for all of us.

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