

## **Wendy Sharer: Background and Contexts**

In March of 2020, the Advisory Board of the Coalition voted to cancel the 2021 Biennial Feminisms and Rhetorics (FemRhet) Conference. This decision was made in light of COVID, but, more significantly, it reflected long-standing (and growing) concerns about the inclusivity of the conference: concerns about the whiteness of conference programs, concerns about accessibility, and concerns about the costs of attending (for graduate students in particular—a concern that was central to the establishment of the Task Force that Jane Greer will be talking about).

The decision to cancel the 2021 conference was followed in April 2020 by the Advisory Board's vote to establish a task force that would explore and recommend changes to the workflow, formats, and processes of the FemRhet conference. Jess Enoch will be talking more about the work of this group). In May of 2020, before such a task force could be constituted and begin its work, George Floyd was murdered by then-police-officer and now convict Derek Chauvin. The ongoing killing of Black people at the hands of police drove home the already felt need among Coalition leaders to upend “conferencing as usual.” One way the Coalition sought to do some upending was through a resolution, approved by our Advisory Board and circulated through our website and social media, that our next conference—FemRhet 2023—be focused on the work of BIPOC scholars and that its themes and events would actively promote anti-racist work. This was the first of several essential steps the organization has taken to acknowledge and begin to address our exclusionary past. Our panel today will explore other steps the Coalition is currently taking.

By way of background and in the spirit of openness and accountability that informs this Watson conference, I want to spotlight two aspects of the Coalition's history and of the 2019 FemRhet in particular that I believe (and others may disagree!) contributed in significant ways to the heightened urgency with which the Coalition has recently engaged processes for creating substantive change. I highlight these aspects not to point fingers or to diminish the hard and valuable work of the Coalition Advisory Board or FemRhet conference planners and participants (I include myself in all three of these groups). Rather, I am pulling these aspects out here to contextualize the work done by the task forces. By the way, I highly recommend that you all check out the article FemRhet 2019 site hosts Jen Almjeld and Traci Zimmerman published recently in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* (I will post the citation in the chat once I am done talking) about the intellectual labor of conference planning and the need for that labor to be recognized in tenure and promotion decisions.

### ***Aspect 1: Where & When the 2019 FemRhet Conference was Held***

Registration and travel costs to attend the 2019 conference surely contributed to the intensification of critiques of the conference, but these costs for FemRhet have been a subject of criticism for years, so what made this last conference a “tipping point”? I

believe that certain aspects of the location of the conference made the costs, understandably, particularly intolerable to a number of attendees. Most notably, the signs and marks of James Madison on the host site (James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA) were not welcoming for people of color. As historian Paris Amanda Spies-Gans notes, Madison "owned over one hundred slaves on his Virginia plantation, brought enslaved people to the White House, and ultimately sold them for personal profit." (<https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/james-madison>). Seeing Madison's name and image throughout the campus and in the Hotel Madison where the conference was primarily located certainly diminished inclusivity for Black scholars at the conference. The racist messages sent by the specter of James Madison were only intensified by the events of the Trump presidency and the concurrent enabling of White Supremacist Groups, many of which had participated in the hate-filled, violent gatherings in nearby Charlottesville, VA.

I believe that the Coalition should have done better in terms of recognizing the racist, slave-holding past of James Madison and, once Trump and then Charlottesville happened, we should have done more to centrally and directly address these issues prior to and during the conference. To speak for myself, I should have done more in this regard as chair of the "Conference Liaison Committee" for the Coalition. Instead, I focused on continuing the work of previous Conference Liaison Committees: trying to drum up advertisers for the conference program and publishers to sponsor booths and events. My choice to "continue what we've done before"—to see my sphere of accountability as limited to these things that the Conference Liaison Committee had done in the past—reflects the danger of the "as usual."

In retrospect, I also see a flashpoint in the "Town Hall" meeting that the Coalition hosted at the 2019 Conference. At the time, the high cost of registration seemed to be what the largest number of people were unhappy about. As I just mentioned, however, there were other—more frightening and ultimately dehumanizing—forces at work in that place, at that time. I suspect that these forces contributed substantially to the palpable frustration and anger of many conference attendees in the room, and the Coalition leadership's focus on explaining registration costs in that town hall suggested that those forces were not a priority. If I could go back in time, I would have urged us to say much less about the costs and to listen more. And I would have urged us to accept the fact that we would not find a resolution to "the problem" in that Town Hall because there were many intersecting, complex, and pressing issues in addition to costs.

If, at the time, the Coalition had had a clear "Shared Values Statement" to guide our planning of the conference and the town hall, we—particularly the white leadership—may have been better able to see and address the oppressive and even traumatic impact of the environment at the conference. This one reason, among many, why the work of our "Shared Values Task Force," which Heather and Gwen will be discussing, is so very important.

## ***Aspect 2: The Historical Whiteness of Coalition Leadership***

Of 15 Presidents since the organization began in 1990, 12 have been white women. Too, a majority of people on our 6-person Executive Board and our 25-30-person Advisory Board have been white women. I have witnessed calls from within these groups for the Coalition to increase the diversity of our leadership ever since I joined the Advisory Board over a decade ago. The predominantly white leadership has, in recent the past, implemented some initiatives in response to these calls. One example is the Shirley Wilson Logan Diversity Scholarship Award, which will be awarded for the first time this year. Additionally, the editors of the Coalition's quarterly journal, *Peitho*, have also made publication of work by and about BIPOC scholars a high priority, with a special issue, edited by Gwen Pough and Stephanie Jones on "Race, Feminism, and Rhetoric" which will be out this summer.

But there are many other sites, spaces, and strategies for promoting transformative change within the Coalition and the FemRhet conference. Writing in *Inside Higher Ed* in 2017, Dafina-Lazarus Stewart argues that creating transformative change must involve a shift from "diversity and inclusion rhetoric" to a rhetorical framework of equity and justice. Stewart provides a generative list of principles derived from this framework, and I will close by sharing four that strike me as particularly important for planners of academic conferences.

1. Diversity asks, "Who's in the room?" Equity responds: "Who is trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?"
2. Inclusion asks, "Has everyone's ideas been heard?" Justice responds, "Whose ideas won't be taken as seriously because they aren't in the majority?"
3. Diversity asks, "How many more of (pick any minoritized identity) do we have this year than last?" Equity responds, "What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?"
4. Inclusion celebrates awards for initiatives and credits itself for having a diverse candidate pool. Justice celebrates getting rid of practices and policies that were having disparate impacts on minoritized groups.

I believe the task forces you will hear about have taken these principles up in their work, and I look forward to hearing your ideas for how to more fully engage these principles in structuring academic organizations and in the related work of conference planning.

**Link to Almjeld and Zimmerman article:** <http://journalofmultimodalrhetorics.com/4-2-issue-almjeld-and-zimmerman>