AWP 2024 Event Outline

EVENT TITLE: Only This: Running a Themed Journal in an Era of Distraction and Specialization

Event Description: Jacqueline Woodson says, “The more specific we are, the more universal something can become.” Does this apply to a themed magazine? Starting and running a lit mag is hard. Why make it harder by restricting its theme to something deeply specific? In this intellectually lively session, the editors of Slag Glass City, After the Art, Consequence Forum, and Past Ten will discuss the pleasures and challenges of running themed lit mags. Come for inspiration and practical advice! This panel will help anyone thinking about starting or running a lit mag, whether specifically themed or not. It will provide both practical advice (how to find submissions, the necessity of spreadsheets, managing money, etc.) as well as realistic encouragement. The panelists represent a range of backgrounds, both personally and career-wise, and the magazines they edit show various models – independent, university-affiliated, print, and digital.

EVENT CATEGORY: Publishing, Editing and Technology

Event Organizer & Moderator: Parisa Saranj is an Iranian-American writer and Persian translator. Her writings on contemporary Iranian politics and culture and translations have been published in several publications, including Ms. Magazine, Defunct Magazine, Your Impossible Voice, and Two Lines. She is the translator of two books, Empty and Me: A Tale of Loss and Friendship by Azam Mahdavi (Lee & Low, 2023) and Women, Life, Freedom: Our Fight for Equality and Human Rights in Iran by Nasrin Sotoudeh (Cornell University Press, 2023) and two documentaries, Nasrin (2020) and Sansur (2023).

Event Participants: Randon Billings Noble is an essayist. She is the author of the collection Be with Me Always and the editor of the lyric essay anthology A Harp in the Stars. She is the founding editor of the literary magazine After the Art and teaches in the MFA programs at Goucher and West Virginia Wesleyan.

Timothy J. Hillegonds is the author of the memoir The Distance Between (Nebraska, 2019). He has published work in The Guardian, The Daily Beast, Salon, Brevity, and other publications. He is a contributing editor for Slag Glass City, a digital journal of the urban essay arts.

Matthew Krajniak earned his Ph.D. from the University of Houston. He co-edited the anthology Wendy Battin: On the Life & Work of an American Master (Unsung Master Series, 2020), and his writing has appeared in Gulf Coast, Poetry Foundation, Willows Wept Review, The Avalon Literary Review, The Wax Paper, and other publications. He was hired as the Executive Editor of Consequence Forum in 2020.

Donald Quist is the author of two essay collections and one fiction collection and co-editor of an academic anthology. He is the creator of the online nonfiction series PAST TEN and teaches for the MFA in Writing at Alma College. Donald is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Missouri.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements
Good morning, and welcome to “Only This: Running a Themed Journal in an Era of Distraction and Specialization.” We are delighted to be here and thank you for being here too. It’s very early
in the conference, and I hope that everyone has a wonderful experience and is able to keep up their energy til the last day. Before we begin, here are a few reminders:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along with a written text, please let the panel moderator know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please ensure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals, and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Also, a couple of administrative notes: We have a limited number of handouts of what’s on the slides that contain our bios and more information about our journals. Please feel free to grab one, take a picture, or share it with the person next to you. We will also be available outside after the panel if you want to talk further. Consequence has a table at the book fair. Matthew, our fiction and nonfiction editors, and I will be there throughout the conference and can always answer more questions about the ins and outs of running a literary journal. Please stop by, make new friends, and get inspired.

I’m curious how many of you have thought about starting your own journal or are in the process of starting one. Can you raise your hand? Can I have a few, 2 or 3 volunteers who would stand up and say what you would call it and what the theme would be?

[The audience will share a few examples.]

For those who haven’t but like to, we hope that this panel inspires you. Please tell us at the end if you are going to and what you imagine the journal to be.

Let me introduce our panelists now.

[The moderator will introduce the panelists in the order they are sitting.]

Before asking the panelists what the theme of their journal is and how they came up with the idea for its theme, I want to tell you how this panel came about. I have been working as the translation editor at Consequence for two years now, and I LOVE the work I do. I am so proud of the work we are doing, but let me tell you, it is HARD work, especially when it comes to solicitations, more than other editors because translation is a growing genre in America. And if that wasn’t difficult enough, our theme is very specific (and somewhat not uplifting since we strictly focus on the human cost of war and geopolitical violence that not many translators like to pick up such heavy and emotional topics to translate.) So, every reading period, I have a small number of submissions to work with. Then, I got talking to the incredible Randon Billings Noble, and we both wondered why restricting a journal’s theme to something deeply specific when it is already hard work.

Participant Initial Remarks:
On that note, let’s hear what from our panelists. Randon, please start by sharing how After the Art came about and why.

[All four panelists will share their journal’s original story]

- **Randon Billings Noble:** My reasons for starting *After the Art* were both romantic and practical. I had always loved the idea of starting a literary magazine and helping to put good work out into the world. (That’s the romantic part.) But back in 2018, I was on the job market, and someone told me it would be good for my CV to have something completely “mine” – a conference, a reading series, or a lit mag. That was the boost I needed to start *After the Art*.

- **Tim, since you are the only one (besides me) who doesn’t have their own journal, please tell us how you joined *Slag Glass City*. **Tim Hillegonds:** *Slag Glass City* was founded in 2014 by essayist and memoirist Barrie Jean Borich. It was a project she had been thinking about for a long time, dating back to her days teaching in an MFA program in Minnesota. It was launched during her early days at DePaul University in Chicago, the city that both she and I grew up in, a city of steel and glass and slag that had left an indelible mark on her and inspired much of her writing about place. The central question of the project has always been: What is a city? It’s a central question that intrigues me as well and one that I found myself thinking about often in my own writing over the years. As it happened, I had the privilege of taking a memoir workshop with Barrie in the Fall of 2012, and much of her advice and feedback, and her approach to essaying, stayed with me after the workshop was over. We became friends, and when the opportunity came up to help her edit the magazine and be a small part of it, I jumped at the chance. The city is such a fundamental aspect of who I am and how I’m made that being able to put it under a literary microscope was an opportunity I absolutely had to jump on.

- **Matthew Krajniak:** *Consequence* started in 2008 when George Kovach, a Vietnam Veteran who struggled with PTSD, returned to school to get his MFA in Poetry. He found literature to be a salve for this trauma. An assignment in one of his classes was to create a journal, and he created what was then called *CONSEQUENCE Magazine*. He published one journal a year for the next twelve years, slowly growing an impressive roster of contributors and a dedicated readership. George unfortunately passed in April of 2020, and I was brought on. Since then, I’ve continued with George’s mission but also tried to grow the organization in terms of readership and financial stability. We’ve seen our ups and downs, but so far, we’ve been successful on both fronts.

- **Donald Quist:** I launched past-ten.com in January 2017. *Where were you on this day ten years ago?* This question saved my life. The question of who I was ten years ago led me to think about progress and encouraged me to float on, if only for the simple fact that now would someday turn into a *then*. I started asking others about their own voyage over the
last decade. At first, I found it interesting how everyone approached the question differently. I’d ask them to be as specific as possible, encouraging them to fish through the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of that day. Most agreed. They became researchers of their own lives. They scanned through old social media posts, searched through photos, and sorted through letters. I began keeping a blog to keep all the reflections I was getting in one place. Soon, I noticed trends between these stories. There was an underlying hope, reminders that change can bring ruin but also rescue. Through it all, my commitment to receiving, reading, and publishing the variety of recollections for *Past Ten* buoyed me. *Past Ten* taught me to signal for help from others, to reach further.

### Moderator Questions

1. Thank you for sharing your stories. However, I must ask WHY?! Why make it harder by restricting its theme to something deeply specific? Don, can you go first, please? Don

- **Don Quist:** There is universality in specificity. The task of narrowing can be an act of expansion. We are wired to recognize and be attracted to what resonates with us as true. I often think folks conflate this with “authenticity,” but I kind of hate that word. Rather, I believe what’s ringing true for us is vulnerability and honesty. We are attracted to sincerity. And when we’re prompted to get specific, it provides us opportunities to offer more vulnerability, more truth. The narrowing, the specificity, gives us fewer places to hide from ourselves and others.

- **Matthew Krajniak:** In short, because that’s conceivably what anyone who starts a journal focuses on the thing(s) they are most interested in. For most folks, that might simply be quality poetry and prose, hence a more general journal. I know that Consequence’s founder, who was a Vet, had a drive to bridge the chasm between what people thought the war experience was to what soldiers actually experienced. This is true for me, too, as my father is a Vet, but from an artistic standpoint, I’m also captivated by the limitless ways specific themes can be interpreted and represented. This is especially true for us as the consequences, experiences, and realities of war and geopolitical violence are infinite.

- **Tim Hillegonds:** Don touched on this earlier, and his idea of universality in specificity is a good one. Building on that premise, specificity makes it easier, not harder. As writers, there are lots of places to submit and lots of writers who are submitting. But if you’re a writer who, for example, explores ideas related to place or identity—or in our case, cities—the specificity of a journal makes figuring out where to submit that much easier. We want to publish the best work about what it means to engage with living cities, and grapple with the big, perplexing questions that cities bring up for us, and having a journal that does just that means writers who are also interested in this can find us with their very best writing.
- **Randon Billings Noble:** There are already so many great nonfiction magazines out there (hello, *Brevity, Fourth Genre, River Teeth, Hippocampus, Under the Gum Tree*, etc.) that I thought I needed something a little different. I’ve always loved essays that draw on a variety of sources. One day, I saw an exhibit at the Renwick in DC – *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* – and it made me think of William Maxwell’s novel *So Long See You Tomorrow*, and I vaguely thought I should write an essay about this. Then, I more concretely thought I should get many other people to write essays like this.

2. Again, I’d like all of you to answer my next question: If this is so hard, what makes this worthwhile for editors, publishers, and readers? Let me start with Don again. What makes it worthwhile for you?

- **Don Quist:** We get messages from our contributors consistently about how much the process of writing a Past Ten helped them. It’s not always comfortable. Sometimes, you have a contributor submit their piece with a brief message about how answering this question unraveled them. But it’s always accompanied by a deep sense of gratitude for the prompt, for having the opportunity to self-interrogate. We live busy lives. Even as artists, the realities of late-stage capitalism don’t incentivize us to slow down and ask ourselves if we’re okay. Am I happy here, like this? Is it better than before? So, it’s really encouraging time after time to see how a project like this can help others in some way. It feels like a kind of miracle when we receive a message from another writer/artist/human who tells us someone else’s Past Ten connected with them and gave them a reason to stay hopeful.

- **Matthew Krajniak:** One reason I’m glad I studied writing and literature at a university is because it taught me that the arts are wholly dependent on people fighting for them, that if people don’t try to make space for them in the world, there will be far less of it. I don’t want that world. I want to create a space where art can exist, a place for writers and visual artists to have. I also have a background in social service work, so having a venue for people to express their experiences with conflict via an art form provides additional motivation.

- **Tim Hillegonds:** One of the most interesting things about being involved with a themed journal is that it gives editors and publishers the ability to engage with a subject over a long period of time. Like all conversations, the longer you have them and the more often you have them, the more they change. They develop nuance and shift and expand and contract and become much richer. This is what, to me, makes it worthwhile for everyone involved.

- **Randon Billings Noble:** I’ll admit that sometimes it feels like more of a challenge than I’m up for. But I really love essays, feel almost evangelical about them, and want to hold more space for them in the literary community. And as
other lit mags close – some big ones, and some so unexpectedly – I’m even more committed to keeping our space open.

3. OK, now that you have convinced the audience to rush out of here and start their own literary journal, what are the three most important things to consider when launching a journal?

- **Don Quist:** I did not move forward with *Past Ten* until I could answer the following questions. A) What is your raison d’etre--why does this need to exist? B) If you can’t compensate writers/contributors with money, how can you make this “worth” it? And C) What measures will I take to ensure this does not become a vanity project?

- **Tim Hillegonds:** Consider the work and time it takes realistically. The time commitment is likely more than you think. It takes time to come up with special calls for submissions, to read submissions, to talk about submissions, to edit, to notify writers, and to follow up. It’s a labor of love, but it’s worth remembering that the labor part is real. If you’re a writer, then create the magazine experience you’ve always wanted to have as a writer. Nothing brings you up to speed on why decision-making wait times are as long as they are like turning the tables and suddenly being the one responsible for responding. But remember what it’s like to be a writer and use that empathy to try to uplevel the experience for your magazine. Make sure it’s sustainable. From money to submissions to marketing to publishing—it must be sustainable. Try to define processes early and stick to them if you can.

- **Matthew Krajniak:** Can you find editors and readers who’ll be passionate about your theme? Assuming you can’t pay people much, if anything, they’ll need a reason to continue to volunteer their time. Your theme can be that reason. Is your focus more on the theme or the art? It’s not entirely an either/or question, but it’ll determine if you lean more toward rhetoric or expression. How much do you care about your theme? You’ll be breathing it daily, so your passion for it must be deep.

- **Randon Billings Noble:** Have a long-term plan from the start that considers: A) How to make it relatively easy (and inexpensive) so you want to keep doing it. B) How to achieve stability and longevity (no sudden closure after only a few issues/years!) and C) How to launch strong and hopefully, therefore, get – then keep – some momentum

4. Thank you everyone! Before I open the floor for audience questions, I want to circle back to what I first shared about my struggles at Consequence with soliciting submissions. For me, it
is a lot of work (that I do gladly and will continue to do as far as I’m able), but it is specific to my genre, which is translation. I’m curious how it is for the rest of you. I know Matthew has a fairly large staff, and Tim (as a contributing editor) at Slag Glass City has people who can share the burden and help. How about you, Randon, and Don? How do you get solicitation/market/promote?

- **Randon Billings Noble:** For our inaugural issue, I solicited two writers I knew and two writers I didn’t. For the two I didn’t know, I tried to aim high – to give our fledgling magazine some credibility right from the start. I kept soliciting for the first few issues and then started to get enough submissions to keep us afloat. But occasionally, I need to round out an issue and will sometimes put a call out on social media. I was happy to announce that two of our recent essays made it onto the *Best American Essays* Notable list. I hope they act as tiny classifieds at the back of those books. And I feel like having more of a social media presence would help. That’s an area we need to work on.

- **Don Quist:** Past Ten is a project built on Literary Citizenship. The editors reach out to people whose work they like and admire. I’ve done the same. We send an email or a DM saying, “Hi, want to do this?” Many say yes. That’s the only system to it. It’s not too complicated. Marketing and promotion have been much harder. Our current editor-in-chief, Bailey Gaylin Moore (there she is in the crowd), has done tremendous work increasing our engagement across social media.

[Here, the moderator will allow the audience to ask questions.]

**The Closing Remarks**

Thank you, everyone, for giving us your time. I hope you have been inspired and were able to find helpful information. Please don’t be a stranger and reach out, read our journals, stop by the Consequence table at the book fair, and continue the discussion. Have a great day and goodbye!