AWP PANEL: WRITING IN WRITTEN-OFF STATES
OUTLINE

EVENT TITLE: WRITING IN WRITTEN-OFF STATES

Event Description: This panel will discuss the importance of literary arts organizations in states with often-hostile political climates, what problems (from funding to program security) they face, and their current initiatives and future goals to foster a more inclusive community and uplift marginalized voices. So-called “red states” tend to be overlooked, if not shunned, by the wider literary community, and viewed as incapable of outreach and inclusion. Our panelists challenge that perception. This discussion will shed light not only on the struggles they face but on the successes and support they enjoy. This conversation, guided by moderator questions and then a Q&A from the audience, will raise awareness and encourage future programming within “red” states.

Event Organizer & Moderator
Ed Southern: Ed Southern grew up in Winston-Salem, NC, and Greenville, SC, and was educated in their public schools. He is the author of Fight Songs: A Story of Love and Sports in a Complicated South (2021, Blair), a finalist for the 2022 SIBA Southern Book Prize. His shorter work has appeared in The Bitter Southerner, storySouth, the North Carolina Literary Review, the Asheville Poetry Review, and elsewhere. Since 2008 he has been the executive director of the North Carolina Writers’ Network.

Event Participants
Ashley M. Jones: ASHLEY M. JONES is the Poet Laureate of Alabama (2022-2026). She is the first person of color and the youngest person to hold this position in its 93 year existence. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Florida International University, and she is the author of Magic City Gospel (Hub City Press 2017), dark / thing (Pleiades Press 2019), and REPARATIONS NOW! (Hub City Press 2021). She is the co-editor of WHAT THINGS COST: An Anthology for the People (University Press of Kentucky, 2023). Her poetry has earned several awards, including the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers Award, the Silver Medal in the Independent Publishers Book Awards, the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize for Poetry, a Literature Fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Lucille Clifton Poetry Prize, and the Lucille Clifton Legacy Award. She was a finalist for the Ruth Lily Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship in 2020, and her collection, REPARATIONS NOW! was on the longlist for the 2022 PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry. Jones has been featured on news outlets including Good Morning America, ABC News, and the BBC. Her poems and essays appear in or are forthcoming at CNN, POETRY, The Oxford American, Origins Journal, The Quarry by Split This Rock, Obsidian, and many others. She co-directs PEN Birmingham, and she is the founding director of the Magic City Poetry Festival. She is the Associate Director of the University Honors Program at UAB, and she is part of the Core Faculty of the Converse University Low Residency MFA Program. She recently served as a guest editor for Poetry Magazine. In 2022, she received a Poet Laureate Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets.

Meg Reid: Meg Reid is the Publisher of Hub City Press and Executive Director of the Hub City Writers Project in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Comprised of an acclaimed literary book publisher, an independent bookshop, and a literary programmer focused on education and outreach, Hub City’s mission is cultivating readers and nurturing writers to foster an inclusive literary arts culture.
Opening Remarks and Announcements
My name is Ed Southern and I’m here as the Executive Director of the North Carolina Writers’ Network, a 1400-member nonprofit founded in 1985 to connect, promote, educate, and serve creative writers all across our state and beyond.

I’m going to open today’s discussion, though, by telling a story about a different literary nonprofit, the one my wife is executive director of. Bookmarks is best-known for its independent bookstore and annual literary festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the city where Camel cigarettes, Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and I were all born.

Bookmarks also hosts a Drag Queen Story Time on Saturday mornings. They’d done so for years without incident, until the summer of 2022. A keyboard warrior went on Facebook to call for “prayer warriors” to show up at the bookstore and protest and prevent the storytime from happening. Bookmarks got the threats and vitriol you’d expect, online and on the phone, including a man who promised to bring his AR-15 to stop children from hearing a storybook.

They also got the overwhelming support of our community. For every caller threatening them they got two from locals - including self-identified “rednecks” - offering to come “stand between those protestors and them kids.” When story time arrived a literal handful of protestors - five of them - were met by more than 200 counter-protestors, standing between them and the bookstore. What the “prayer warriors” couldn’t do, the fire marshal had to, when the bookstore exceeded its maximum capacity, filled with parents who’d brought their children to show them that fear and hate, that silly people with their silly guns, don’t have to win.

I know of no example more stark of the struggles that literary organizers in some communities face, or the support and successes they enjoy. That will be the theme of this discussion: Yes, serving writers and readers in so-called “written-off states” offers particular challenges, and even actual threats, but it also offers its own rewards.

Participant Opening Remarks
Ashley M. Jones: Contrary to popular belief, nationally and internationally, the American South is a place of profound artistic merit, innovation, and joy. Yes, joy—that’s what I think about when I think about being a poet, nonprofit leader, educator, and poet laureate in the deep South. Although we face a lot of challenges, I think many Southern writers will tell you that they wouldn’t trade the South’s culture and magic if they got the chance. Yes, funding can be difficult here. Yes, people take us far less seriously than our northeastern and midwestern counterparts. Yes, there are some hurdles when it comes to more conservative leaning government and the threat of censorship and book banning. But on the whole, I have been so heartened by the way my community shows up for one another, and the way we make things happen here despite all the issues. In my own work and writing life, I have found a true space of support and possibility in the South, and I’ll be glad to talk to you about that today.

Meg Reid: Hub City Press is a part of the Hub City Writers Project, a larger nonprofit organization dedicated to building literary community. We see our work as being a very intentional corrective to the long-term erasure of diverse Southern voices in publishing. We’re working in a region that’s really quite huge—it reaches from Arkansas to Kentucky, from Virginia to Texas and encompasses over 110 million people! It’s also the nation’s most diverse region. This is what makes us special and I wouldn’t want to dedicate my time and energy anywhere else. But it does come with a certain level of logistical and systemic hurdles. A lot of our peer
presses are in cities with deeply established literary cultures, like New York City and Minneapolis. We don’t have the same kind of ecosystem in the South. We work out of an old wagon warehouse in a small, post-industrial city in South Carolina. Our success is proof that there’s no one correct way to make a literary culture—it absolutely doesn’t require wealthy arts benefactors or corporate underwriting or even an immense population center. Every place has a story to tell.

**Moderator Questions**
1. Ashley, could you tell us a little more about your work as Poet Laureate of Alabama, and as the founding director of the Magic City Poetry Festival? Meg, could you tell us more about the history and the work of Hub City?

2. What would you tell someone who was looking to start a literary organization in the South or anywhere outside of the well-established “literary centers”?

3. What are your goals, not only for your organizations but for the literary arts and literary community in the South?

4. As someone invested in the future of writing and reading in your community, what’s your biggest worry, or even fear?