Event Title: The Art of Building and Sustaining Writing Communities
12:10pm - 1:25pm, Saturday, February 10, 2024
Room 2215B, Kansas City Convention Center, Street Level

Event Description: Writers' conferences are collaborative efforts with the shared mission of fostering writing communities. Conference and festival directors and staff will share their challenges and successes when creating, sustaining, and growing writers' conferences. This panel will candidly address establishing partnerships, seeking institutional support, cultivating inclusivity and equity, and selecting and managing speakers, faculty, and participants.

Event Category: Writers Conferences and Centers

Event Organizer and Moderator
Alyse Bensel: Alyse Bensel is the author of Rare Wondrous Things: A Poetic Biography of Maria Sibylla Merian and three poetry chapbooks. She is an assistant professor of English at Brevard College, where she directs the Looking Glass Rock Writers’ Conference.

Event Participants
Joanne V. Gabbin: Joanne V. Gabbin is the Executive Director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center and Professor of English at James Madison University. She is the author of Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition and a children’s book, I Bet She Called Me Sugar Plum.

Jeremy Jones: Jeremy Jones is the author of the memoir Bearwallow. His essays appear in Oxford American, Garden & Gun, and The Bitter Southerner, among others. He serves as an associate professor of English at Western Carolina University, where he also directs the annual Spring Literary Festival.

Amber Taliancich: Amber Taliancich's essays and stories have appeared in numerous publications, including Creative Nonfiction, Ninth Letter, and The Pinch. She teaches creative writing at Washington College, is the Managing Editor of Cherry Tree, and is the Assistant Director of the Rose O'Neill Literary House.
Event Outline

I. Welcoming Remarks and Panel Overview
Welcome, everyone, to “The Art of Building and Sustaining Writing Communities.” My name is Alyse Bensel, and I’ll be serving as today’s moderator. Myself and the wonderful panelists beside me represent a wide range of backgrounds from literary conferences, festivals, and centers. We look forward to sharing our experiences, insights, and practical advice with you today.

Before we dive into this panel, printed copies of the panel outline and our remarks are available and should be accessible on the AWP conference app. We will also be using the projector to show conference and center websites and additional materials. At any time during our discussion, you are welcome to write down a question to ask later, or, if you’d like to drop off a question for me to read, you can do so. I’ll also repeat questions when they are asked.

Writers conferences are important. I think we are all well aware of this fact since we are all present here in Kansas City for the largest annual writers' conference in the country. But there are so many more conferences than just AWP, conferences that focus on specific regions, themes, populations, experiences, and so much more. How do these conferences start? How do they find funding? How do they keep or grow their funding? How do they find their audiences, participants, and faculty? How do they staff their events? How do they engage with their communities? And how do they keep it all going even after the conference ends? Each of us will attempt to provide as many answers to these questions as possible from our perspective in leadership roles within the literary conference world. I’ll first introduce us all, let everyone share about their specific conference or festival, and then we’ll open up for questions and discussion.

II. Panelist Presentations and Remarks

Alyse Bensel:
a. Overview of role: I serve as the Director of the Looking Glass Rock Writers’ Conference, a four-day annual writers’ conference in the Blue Ridge Mountains of
Western North Carolina. We have a total of three workshops led by a notable writer, each limited to 12 participants, so 36 participants in total. In this role, I plan, budget, promote, and facilitate the entire conference. My co-leader, the Director of the Transylvania County Library, assists me part-time, and I hire a few undergraduates to assist me with social media and serving as RA in the dorms.

b. Mission and history: The conference was founded in 2016 after two years of planning between my institution, Brevard College, and the Transylvania County Library Foundation (TCLF). The conference theme is “A Sense of Place” and is “a unique creative experience for writers which aspires to foster reading, writing, creativity, and a sense of place in Transylvania County.” The TCLF funds the faculty fees, conference swag, and other faculty-related expenses, while the College provides administrative support (me) as well as food and housing.

c. Successes and challenges: A major success has been the continued support of the TCLF. We are a very financially stable conference for such a small rural area. Furthermore, we have a positive reputation, being rated highly by participants and faculty. We can recruit dream writers as faculty, and we have a range of participants, from emerging writers to established authors. We also have communities and groups that continue long after the conference ends—I recently heard that some have monthly online meet-ups! A challenge is always going to be the kinds of workshops we offer; some participants just want critique, others just one generative work, or sometimes the participant and faculty personalities don’t match. It is also difficult coordinating so much on my own, especially at a smaller school with a higher staff turnaround. I have to be very proactive and plan far ahead for contingencies, but still mistakes happen.

d. Future conference plans and advice: If you are interested in building a conference, start small and build up. We went from a three to four-day conference when I was transitioning into the role, and even that was significant. You also want to know exactly what funding you have (grants, foundation funds, tuition, etc.) and know how and when you can use those funds. Learning the financial rules is paramount for continued success. Know what is possible within the early years while dreaming big for later events.
Joanne V. Gabbin:
   a. Overview of role
   b. Mission and history of the conference
   c. Successes and challenges
   d. Future conference plans and advice

Jeremy Jones:
   e. Overview of role
   f. Mission and history of the conference
   g. Successes and challenges
   h. Future conference plans and advice

Amber Taliancich:
   i. Overview of role
   j. Mission and history of the conference
   k. Successes and challenges
   l. Future conference plans and advice

III. Moderator Questions and Discussion
1. What do you think is the biggest value of mid-scale to smaller literary conferences and festivals, and why? What role do they play in your local and larger communities?
2. What do you feel has been the most important factor in making your conference a success? How did you go about ensuring that success?
3. How many parties/invested groups would you say are involved in your conference? How do you go about coordinating those various groups? What does your conference structure look like?
4. What kinds of events happen at your conference, and how was that schedule decided upon? Has it changed over time, or would you like to make changes in the future?
5. What is the biggest piece of advice you have for those interested in planning or starting a writers' conference or similar event?