

THE QUEER SPECIAL ISSUE

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Hotsheets

Since I've started writing, the literary community has been having more and more conversations about diversity (although fewer seem to translate into action). One initiative many magazines employ in an attempt to promote diversity is creating "special issues" to centre writers of particular identities or from particularly marginalized groups.

As a queer and transgender writer, I've seen a lot of special issues for queer writers come and go. I've submitted to them, been published in some of them, and I've followed along with controversies and discourse surrounding others.

Here, I'm going to explore five theses for you should you be considering creating a special issue for queer writers.

THESIS 1: BEST INTENTIONS

There are many reasons to create a "special issue" to champion queer writing; some of them are good, but more are not. When it comes to devoting a special issue to queer writing, the biggest question your organization needs to ask itself is: what are our intentions in creating this space in our magazine?

Too often, these special issues feel like tools to improve how a magazine ranks on diversity surveys, or as a means to capture grant money, or because other magazines are doing them, rather than authentic engagement and platforming of a marginalized community (be they queer or otherwise).

Repeatedly, these issues attempt to position a magazine as queer friendly, when in fact the same magazine may rarely publish queer writers, or—most importantly—rarely do so after the special issue. If your magazine is hoping to get publishing queer writers "out of the way" by doing a special issue, I'd probably recommend that you not create the issue at all. Queer people don't need more institutions performing an interest in what we have to say, we need them to value our voices and *listen*.

THESIS 2: SPECIAL ISSUE AS FIRST STEP

If you find yourself in a position where you're disappointed by the lack of queer voices in your magazine (be that

through a survey or through feedback from readers) and you sincerely want to work to change that moving forward, then great! Putting out a special issue is not the solution, but it can be a great place to start. Personally, I believe the best reason to create a special issue for queer writing is as a way to create relationships with the amazing queer writers (and editors) working today; relationships that you can nurture in years to come, to mutual benefit.

Think of putting out a special issue as an opportunity to learn, listen and grow into a more dynamic magazine. It's a way to begin to engage with a community that has not as-of-yet felt like your magazine was a platform for them—to write for or subscribe to. By diversifying your pages moving forward, you diversify your potential reach.

THESIS 3: QUEERNESS IS NOT AN ISLAND

One of the most notable recent failures in "special issue" history was *Poetry's* attempt to create a special issue for trans and gender non-conforming writers in 2018. *Poetry* appointed a single non-binary writer as the editor for the issue—Christopher Soto—who was singularly responsible for screening thousands of poems that were submitted for the issue. Later in 2018, Soto tweeted a list of "Themes in TGNC poems" (including things like "bodies" and "families") and then wrote that their attention was only really captured when the poems were about something else. This tweet, which denigrated TGNC poets working in topics that—by the numbers alone!—are clearly important to TGNC people, spurred enough of an outcry that *Poetry* eventually (with no public announcement or statement) cancelled the issue altogether.

One of the most notable of the many ways *Poetry* failed TGNC writers with their attempt at this special issue was that they only hired one editor for the issue. As with many marginalized groups, queerness is not an island, but an umbrella that is as diverse as the non-queer world. This is why it is incredibly important to—ideally—assemble a diverse group of editors for the issue who can best represent the diversity of the community you're hoping to platform. Having a small group of editors (ideally at least three), who reflect as many facets of the queer community (racially, aesthetically, regarding disability, etc.) as possible, working in concert will help offset

implicit biases and give more writers confidence their work will be treated with respect and care. An added benefit is that you may meet some amazing editors who you may decide to work with again in the future.

THESIS 4: VALUE THE WORK

Short, sweet, but important: make sure every writer and editor is reimbursed at the same rate (or better!) than you would reimburse writers and editors for other issues.

THESIS 5: BEYOND SPECIAL ISSUES (A CONCLUSION?)

As stressed throughout these theses, the best reason to create a special issue is to create a relationship with queer writers and readers that extends beyond the covers of a single issue. In the same way that you should be publishing Black writers in months other than February, you should be considering and platforming queer writers beyond June. If you don't publish these writers beyond the special issue, you are effectively using the issue as fancy segregation.

One Canadian magazine that I've noticed who continues to publish queer people since putting out a queer special issue in 2018 (in which a poem of mine was included) that also had a team of three queer editors, is *The Malahat Review*.

Think of the special issue as a chance to see—and show readers—what your magazine looks like with different voices in it. Think of it as a way to begin the rewarding process of making your magazine better reflect the real world beyond those who have classically been platformed by the literary world.

